

United Front in Syria Only Skin Deep

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On the surface, the Syrian government and its opponents have presented a rare unified front in response to the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip.

Yet while all parties have come together to condemn the bloodshed in Gaza, analysts say solidarity on this issue does not signify a deeper political reconciliation.

Israel's attacks on Gaza have resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 Palestinians – at least half of them civilians. The goal is to eradicate or seriously weaken Hamas, which continues to launch missiles into Israeli territory.

In the last three weeks, Syrian opposition parties have joined with regime supporters in holding daily demonstrations against the actions of Israel, which has also launched a ground offensive in Gaza. The protesters also condemn Arab nations including Egypt and Saudi Arabia which they accuse of standing idly by while Gaza residents suffer.

Opposition figures say this united front reflects widespread anger at the Gaza attacks, but not a thaw in relations between the political sides in Syria.

“With all of this blood and destruction, humanitarian solidarity is the only possible position,” said a young opponent activist who wished to remain anonymous. “Politics comes second.”

If the consensus opinion against Israel can be expressed freely, voices that are also critical of Hamas have been muffled.

“To come out and say that what Hamas did was wrong, and that what is going on is a part of bigger regional game, would immediately isolate a person or group from the rest of the Syrian population,” said the activist.

“I want to protest against Israeli aggression and support the people of Gaza, but I am not ready to participate in a demonstration where Hamas and Hezbollah are considered heroes and fellow Arab nations are branded as traitors.”

The response from opposition groups based outside Syria has been mixed.

A statement released December 28 by the Europe-based coalition the National Salvation Front urged the regime “to stop using the Palestinian issue as a bargaining-chip in its negotiations with Israel”.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Syria, issued a rare statement from London last

week announcing its decision to suspend all “activities against the Syrian regime in order to direct all efforts toward backing the diplomatic campaign”.

The group declared it would “fulfil its legitimate moral obligation to take part in any action directed at saving the Palestinians in Gaza”. It called on Arabs everywhere to “assist our people who are fighting on the front line in Gaza in any way possible, be it by prayer, donating money or blood, or through the media and internet”.

The Brotherhood’s statement went on to call on the regime in Damascus to “remove all of the barriers preventing Syria and its people from fulfilling their sacred duty to liberate the conquered land and support the Palestinian brothers’ resistance”.

Leading opposition figure Hassan Abdul Azim told Quds Press that he hoped Assad’s government would embrace the Muslim Brotherhood’s proposal.

However, other opposition politicians objected to the group’s statement, suggesting that by calling for solidarity with the Damascus regime, it was undermining their demands for change.

“I believe this statement should be seen as proof of the Brotherhood’s disloyalty to the cause of all Syrian opposition groups who are nobly pushing for democratic reform in Syria,” said Bashar al-Sibihi, deputy head of the Infitah Party, which is based in the United States.

While the diaspora opposition groups express their divided views publicly, analysts say their counterparts inside the country remain similarly fractured.

“There are extremist national parties whose positions are very close to the regime on regional and foreign affairs, and then there are liberal parties which have vastly different positions,” said a political analyst based in Damascus.

The analyst said these differences had often been deliberately highlighted and even encouraged by the regime.

He added that the fact that Israel and the US were engaged in wars served to unite Syrian opposition groups and deflect their attention from standing against the regime.

“These bloody actions by Israel and the United States always cause the opposing groups to come together and turn their anger outside the country,” he noted.

“Isn’t that what the United States and Israel really want?” he asked. “To keep our people paralysed by embarrassing those democratic movements which want regime change. The real fear for them is that true democracy in our country would lead to an Islamic government.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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