

# SYRIAN TURKMENS: POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND MILITARY STRUCTURE

## SURİYE TÜRKMENLERİ: SİYASAL HAREKETLER VE ASKERİ YAPILANMA

ترکمان سوریا: الحركات السياسية والهيكالية العسكرية

CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES  
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ  
مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية

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ORSAM-ORTADOĞU TÜRKMENLERİ PROGRAMI  
برنامج دراسات ترکمان الشرق الاوسط



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## CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

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### **History**

*In Turkey, the shortage of research on the Middle East grew more conspicuous than ever during the early 90's. Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) was established in January 1, 2009 in order to provide relevant information to the general public and to the foreign policy community. The institute underwent an intensive structuring process, beginning to concentrate exclusively on Middle affairs.*

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*It is certain that the Middle East harbors a variety of interconnected problems. However, neither the Middle East nor its people ought to be stigmatized by images with negative connotations. Given the strength of their populations, Middle Eastern states possess the potential to activate their inner dynamics in order to begin peaceful mobilizations for development. Respect for people's willingness to live together, respect for the sovereign right of states and respect for basic human rights and individual freedoms are the prerequisites for assuring peace and tranquility, both domestically and internationally. In this context, Turkey must continue to make constructive contributions to the establishment of regional stability and prosperity in its vicinity.*

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## **Oytun Orhan**

Completing his undergraduate education in Gazi University F.E.A.S. Department of International Relations, Orhan did his master's degree in Hacettepe University Department of International Relations by writing his thesis entitled, "Identity's Effect on Syria's Regional Policies (1946-2000). Orhan still continues his doctorate studies in Abant İzzet Baysal University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of International Relations. Working as an expert within the Middle East Research Programme of the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM) between the years 1999-2009, Oytun Orhan has been working as a researcher in the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) since 2009.

## PRESENTATION

As ORSAM, we published a report entitled, “Community Brought up to Agenda upon the Transition in Syria: Syrian Turkmens” some 8 months after 15 March 2011, when the popular uprising started in Syria. This report played an important role in terms of recognition of Syrian Turkmens, who were less well-known back then. The Syrian Turkmen movement has made great strides since then. Without any opportunity to become organized under the authoritarian Ba’ath regime, Turkmens strived to become organized in political, social and military terms starting from scratch.

Syrian Turkmens are still in the stage of being organized. However, it is possible to suggest for a community, which could not even find an opportunity to come together for many years, that they made great strides at short notice. Two Turkmen political parties were created for Syrian Turkmens to obtain their political, social and cultural rights in new Syria, and for them to struggle in political terms on behalf of Syrian Turkmens. In addition, a supra-political party initiative was launched under the name of Syrian Turkmen Platform. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu attended the meeting of Syrian Turkmen Platform, held in Istanbul on 15 December 2012, and he promised to support the Platform. These are all important developments for Syrian Turkmens.

Another important pillar of Turkmens’ organization efforts took place in military field. Unfortunately, the transition in Syria is strived to be made through armed methods due to the fact that the regime resorts to violence. The Syrian people, who used to express their demands through civilian demonstrations at the outset, had to resort to arms in order to defend themselves after a certain point. Concordantly, Syrian Turkmens formed troops in almost all Turkmen settlements to protect their villages and towns. Those troops, which were created especially in Latakia (Bayır – Bucak) and Aleppo, strive to topple the Assad regime by cooperating with armed opposition.

This paper, prepared by ORSAM Specialist Oytun Orhan, focuses on the aforesaid political and military organization process and structures. The fact that the paper is based on interviews with Turkmen politicians and military commanding officers further increases its importance. Our ultimate wish is for this report to contribute to the struggle of Syrian Turkmens.

*Hasan Kanbolat*  
*ORSAM Director*

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By: Oytun Orhan  
ORSAM Middle East Expert

# SYRIAN TURKMENS: POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND MILITARY STRUCTURE

## Abstract

- The biggest deficiency of Syrian Turkmens is the fact that they do not have any opportunity to become organized under the Assad regime. Therefore, a movement with political opposition tradition is lack of organization and leader/leading group at the head of the Syrian Turkmen community. Like all other Syrian opposition groups, also Turkmens found an opportunity to become organized abroad following the outbreak of upheaval in Syria.

- As from March 2012, two political movements under the names of “Syria Turkmen Bloc” and “Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement”, which carry out political activities on behalf of Syrian Turkmens, emerged. Those two political movements are different from one another in certain aspects such as the influence areas, ideologies, Turkmen troops they are in relation with. The Syrian Turkmen Platform, which is not a political movement and which is of Turkey originated, also started to carry out activities as a non-political party initiative in order to take on the leadership of Syrian Turkmen movement.

- The Syria Turkmen Bloc was created following the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, as a result of organizational efforts of Syrian Turkmens living in Turkey. They started their activities on August 2011, and establishment of the Syria Turkmen Bloc was declared on 15 February 2012. The Bloc is a Latakia- and Bayır – Bucak-based movement. It is mostly influential and active in Bayır – Bucak, where it has most profound relations with Turkmen troops; and the majority of its administrative body is composed of people from Bayır – Bucak origin.

- The Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement is the second political movement, which was created to represent Syrian Turkmens after the Bloc. The political party, which is called “Movement” in short, was created following the outbreak of uprising in Syria when Syrian Turkmens felt the deficiency of organization, and as a result of organization efforts of Syrian Turkmens in Turkey. First of all, Syrian Turks Association was formed, and then it was decided to politicize Turkmens in Syria. As a result of this, the establishment of Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement was declared in Istanbul on 21 March 2012.

- The idea of founding Syrian Turkmen Platform was come up with in 2012. The first goal was to create a public opinion on Syrian Turkmens in Turkish and world public opinion. It emerged as a civilian initiative. There are Syrian Turkmens within the Turkmen Platform initiative who climbed the ladder in business and trade life living in Turkey for years. The objective of this initiative is to form an assembly through delegates to be elected in Syria, and for the committee that would be designated by this Assembly to speak for and represent Syrian Turkmens. So what is wanted is for the aforesaid two Turkmen parties and a supra-political parties structure to take part in this initiative.

- The Turkmen military structure in Latakia province is composed of 12 troops and higher division of these troops called “Brigade of Turkmen Mountain”. The commander of Brigade of Turkmen Mountain, which is the higher division of Turkmen military troops in Latakia province, is Colonel Muhammad Awad.

- The vast majority of Turkmen troops in Aleppo province is under the command of Ali Basher, a Syrian Turkmen from Aleppo. The groups under the command of Ali Basher provide security of almost all Turkmen villages in Aleppo. Those troops state that they control an area of some 350 kilometers. Also in central Aleppo, the security of 6 Turkmen neighborhoods are provided by those troops. There are 6 Troops under the command of Ali Basher. 6 Troops are planned to be gathered under two major brigades.

- If the future Syrian regime wants to build a country where all ethnic and sectarian groups within the borders can live in peace and together, then it must recognize the presence of Turkmens and provide an environment for Turkmens to be equally represented in political field with other communities. It is critically important for both Syria and the region that Turkmens, who have suffered from the oppression of the Assad regime and human rights violations, equally take part in political and social life in new Syria with Sunni Arabs, Arab Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druses and Shias.



## Introduction

One of the consequences of single party regime, which has been going on in Syria for more than four decades, is the fact that none of the social or ideological groups in Syria – except for the groups holding the power – could find an opportunity to become organized. The authority gap caused by the events that emerged in Syria on March 2011 made it possible for the aforesaid groups being excluded from the power domain for many years to become organized in a short period of time. The power struggle in Syria started to spread from civilian and political sphere to military sphere some six months after the outset of the uprising. As a result, dispersed military groups, which do not have a hierarchical structure, which act independently from each other and which are in control of only the neighborhood or village where they are, emerged. The struggle between the regime and the opposition started to be maintained through armed groups. And this situation brought along a relationship between external political opposition and internal military opposition in which military structure is more powerful and has more say. The military opposition that became organized in the country felt the need for a means, through which it could communicate with abroad. The political opposition organized abroad, on the other hand, strived to establish its legitimacy through the connection it established with military groups. Thus, military groups, which are close to each external political opposition and influential political figure, emerged.

Another group that could not have found an opportunity to become organized in Syria for many years was Syrian Turkmen, and they experienced the aforementioned political and military organization process. In the first stage, they strived to become politically organized abroad, in Turkey to a great extent. As the military aspect of the uprising came to the fore, Syrian Turkmen started to form troops in Latakia and Aleppo in particular. Most of

the Turkmen settlements in rural areas are still under the control of troops composed of Turkmen. Besides, in certain city centers, they fight along with Arab troops against the Syrian army. This paper will deal with Syrian Turkmen's post-uprising efforts for political and military organization. First of all the formation process and positions of the two political movements and a supra-political party initiative that appeared within a year will be discussed. Then troops that appeared almost in all Syrian Turkmen settlements will be handled.

## 1. TURKMEN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN SYRIA

The biggest deficiency of Syrian Turkmen is the fact that they do not have any opportunity to become organized under the Assad regime. Therefore, a movement with political opposition tradition is lack of organization and leader/leading group at the head of the Syrian Turkmen community. Like all other Syrian opposition groups, also Turkmen found an opportunity to become organized abroad following the outbreak of upheaval in Syria.

The first attempt for political organization of Syrian Turkmen is the "Syrian Turkmen Movement" created by Attorney Ali Öztürkmen (Silo), who left Syria soon after the outset of the uprising in 2011 and settled in Turkey. The Movement, which became organized through social networking sites, strived for Turkmen in Syria to take to the streets under the name of "Turkmen".<sup>1</sup> Besides, the Movement attended the Conference for "Change in Syria", which was the first step towards the formation process of Syrian National Council and which was held in Antalya on 1 June 2011. Then the group also attended all Syrian opposition conferences held in Istanbul, and strived to have the "Turkmen" name written in the reports of the meetings.<sup>2</sup>

In the following period, as a result of the establishment of the Syrian National Council

and exclusion of Turkmens, along with Syrian Turkmen Movement, Syrian Turkmens living in Turkey or those who migrated to Turkey after the outbreak of uprising felt the need to take part in the Council and to maintain their struggle as a part of their ethnic rights like other groups. Turkmens were not given the right to represent in the Council for not being organized and for striving rather at an individual level despite the fact that they wanted to join the Council. So, the initiatives of prominent Syrian Turkmens and 180 Syrian Turkmens in Turkey came together and reached a consensus on becoming organized and defending the rights of the Turkmens.<sup>3</sup> Following this, “Syrian Turkmen Group” was formed. Syrian Turkmen Bekir Atacan, who has been living in Turkey for many years, assumed the leadership of this group. Then the group became a political movement on November 2011 by joining forces with Syrian Turkmen Movement led by Ali Öztürkmen, and its name was changed into the “Syria Turkmen Bloc”. The first Chairman of this Movement was Bekir Atacan, while deputy Chairman was Ali Öztürkmen. On January 2012, Atacan and Öztürkmen left the Bloc. On March 2012, on the other hand, those who left the Bloc and some other Syrian Turkmens established the Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement.<sup>4</sup>

As from March 2012, two political movements under the names of “Syria Turkmen Bloc” and “Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement”, which carry out political activities on behalf of Syrian Turkmens, emerged. Those two political movements are different from one another in certain aspects such as the influence areas, ideologies, Turkmen troops they are in relation with.

The Syrian Turkmen Platform, which is not a political movement and which is of Turkey originated, also started to carry out activities as a non-political party initiative in order

to take on the leadership of Syrian Turkmen movement. This initiative has been maintained by Syrian Turkmens who has been living in Turkey for many years, and are prominent figures in Turkish political and business life.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it can be suggested that there are three different “groups/political parties/power groups which strive to assume the leadership of Syrian Turkmen political movement, and to become the representative of Syrian Turkmens.

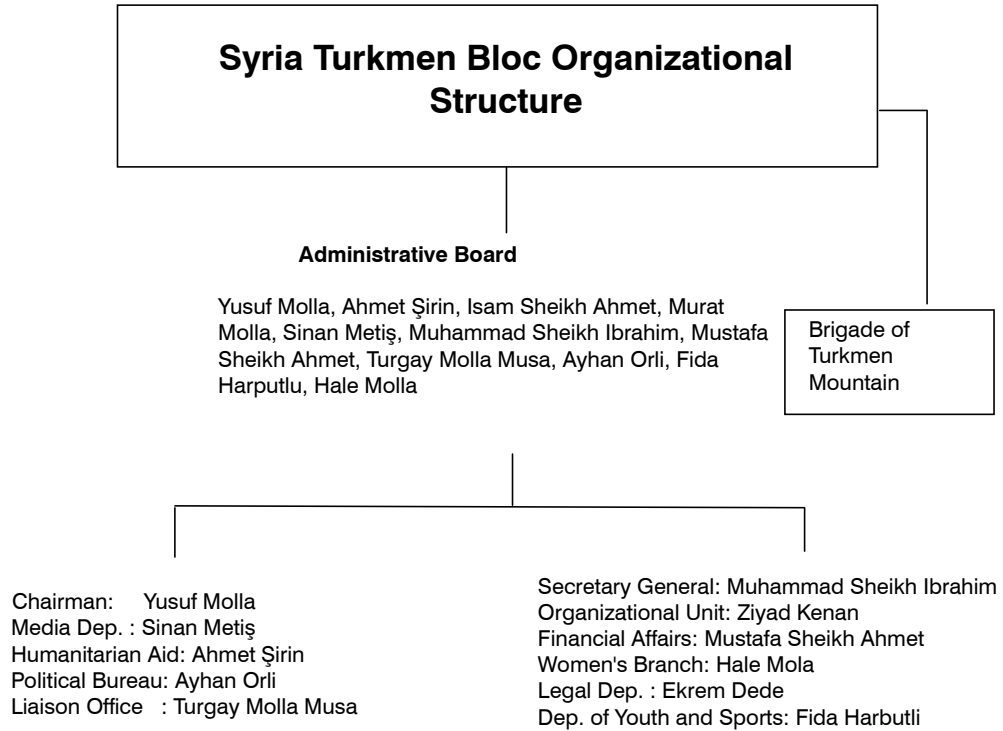
### 1.1. The Syria Turkmen Bloc

The Syria Turkmen Bloc was created following the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, as a result of organization efforts of Syrian Turkmens living in Turkey. Turkmens, who firstly fought for Turkmen rights within the Syrian opposition, came up with the idea of becoming organized with the name of Syrian Turkmens on August 2011 as a result of the fact that ethnic and sectarian aspect of the conflict in Syria increasingly came to the forefront. Within this framework, they launched the initiative on August 2011, and establishment of the Syria Turkmen Bloc was declared on 15 February 2012.

The Bloc is a Latakia- and Bayır – Bucak-based movement. It is mostly influential and active in Bayır – Bucak, where it has most profound relations with Turkmen troops; and the majority of its administrative body is composed of people from Bayır – Bucak origin.

The movement which is known as the “Bloc” in short has been led by Yusuf Molla of Syria Turkmen origin who has been living in Turkey for many years.<sup>6</sup>

The organization structure of the Syrian Turkmen Bloc is as follows:



The Bloc established liaison bureaus in Syrian border zones as the first step to become effective in Syria and within the framework of the strategy towards the field. Firstly Yayladağı, then Akçakale, and lastly Gaziantep bureaus were opened. Those offices provide a close contact between the Bloc and Syrian Turkmen areas. The Yayladağı bureau carries out activities for Latakia Turkmens, while the Gaziantep bureau for Aleppo Turkmens and Akçakale bureau for Turkmens in Al-Raqqah.

Regarding the problem of Syrian Turkmens, the Bloc considers the biggest problem of Turkmens as not being united in a single area. They believe that a post-Assad regional federation is not possible, and that Syria must be ruled on a citizenship-based approach. The slogan of the Bloc is “One Syria!”, and it strives for Turkmens to have political, social, economic, cultural rights in new Syria; and to live as equal Syrian citizens without any discrimination. The Bloc is against the split of Syria. They demand a civilized, democratic state, where central authority is protected but local authorities are further reinforced. However,

they limit the strengthening local authorities in a way to prevent federalism.<sup>7</sup>

The Syria Turkmen Bloc has a close relationship with the Turkmen troops in Bayır – Bucak district. Some 12 Turkmen troops, which are active in Latakia province, are close to the “Brigade of Turkmen Mountain” that is an umbrella organization of the aforesaid troops. In military terms, the Bloc is not active in Aleppo. They can only send humanitarian aid to Aleppo. However, they have strategies and also strive to be active in military terms in Aleppo.<sup>8</sup>

The Syria Turkmen Bloc agreed to form a new group with those who resigned from the Democratic Movement following the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Syrian Turkmen Platform that was organized in Istanbul on 15 December 2012. But the Bloc considers the situation as the Democratic Movement’s joining the Bloc. Only by changing the name of the party and including those who resigned in its administration, the group regards this new initiative as the same in practice, except for its name.

So that, the current organizational structure will be preserved and those who resigned from the Democratic Movement will be included in the group.

The Syria Turkmen Bloc plans to hold elections in Syria in the forthcoming process and thus to designate 200 delegates, and also for those delegates to vote to elect the leader and administration of the party. The number of delegates will be elected in proportion to the population of each Turkmen districts. Accordingly, the biggest delegate will be elected from Aleppo-Al Raqqah, then respectively from Latakia-Tartus, Homs and Damascus. Thus, the administration and leader of the Syria Turkmen Bloc will be designated by the aforesaid delegates. This effort is the result of ideas of Syria Turkmen Bloc to become a political party and to spread it among the party grassroots.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2. Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement

The Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement is the second political movement, which was created to represent Syrian Turkmen after the Bloc. The political party, which is called “Movement” in short, was created following the outbreak of uprising in Syria when Syrian Turkmen felt the deficiency of organization, and as a result of organization efforts of Syrian Turkmen in Turkey. First of all, Syrian Turks Association was formed, and then it was decided to politicize Turkmen in Syria. As a result, the establishment of Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement was declared in Istanbul on 21 March 2012.

The Movement was founded by a group of some figures who left the Syria Turkmen Bloc and young Syrian Turkmen who live in Turkey. First of all, representatives from each Turkmen district took part in the administration of the Movement. The Syria Democratic

Turkmen Movement was led by Abdulkерim Aga for almost a year. During the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of Syrian Turkmen Platform, which took place on 15 December 2012, the prominent figures of the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement and Syria Turkmen Bloc announced their decision to join their forces within the scope of their goal to gather Syrian Turkmen under a single umbrella. Although the majority of prominent figures of Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement resigned from the party and declared they would carry out their activities under a new joint party, the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement said they would continue their political activities with the rest under the roof of the same party. Ziyad Hasan assumed the leadership of the party, while Tarik Sulo Cevizci took office as deputy Chairman. The Movement formed a new administration, including representatives from different Turkmen districts, through a caucus held on December 2012.

The Democratic Turkmen Movement has a result-oriented approach by carrying out its activities in the field. After its renewed administration structure, the Democratic Turkmen Movement started to come to the fore as an Aleppo-based movement to a great extent. It carries out almost all political, civilian and military activities in Aleppo.

Since the very beginning, the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement has focused its attention on diplomacy efforts before Turkey and the Syrian opposition, besides establishing direct relations with Syria.<sup>10</sup> Within this framework, through the efforts of the Democratic Movement, 16 representatives within the Syrian National Council and 3 Turkmen representatives within the Syrian National Coalition were able to take office. They summarize their short-term plans in the following period as follows; to have a ministry in the provisional government to be formed, to concentrate on civil organizations in Syria, and to take part in local administrations in Aleppo and rebel zones.<sup>11</sup>

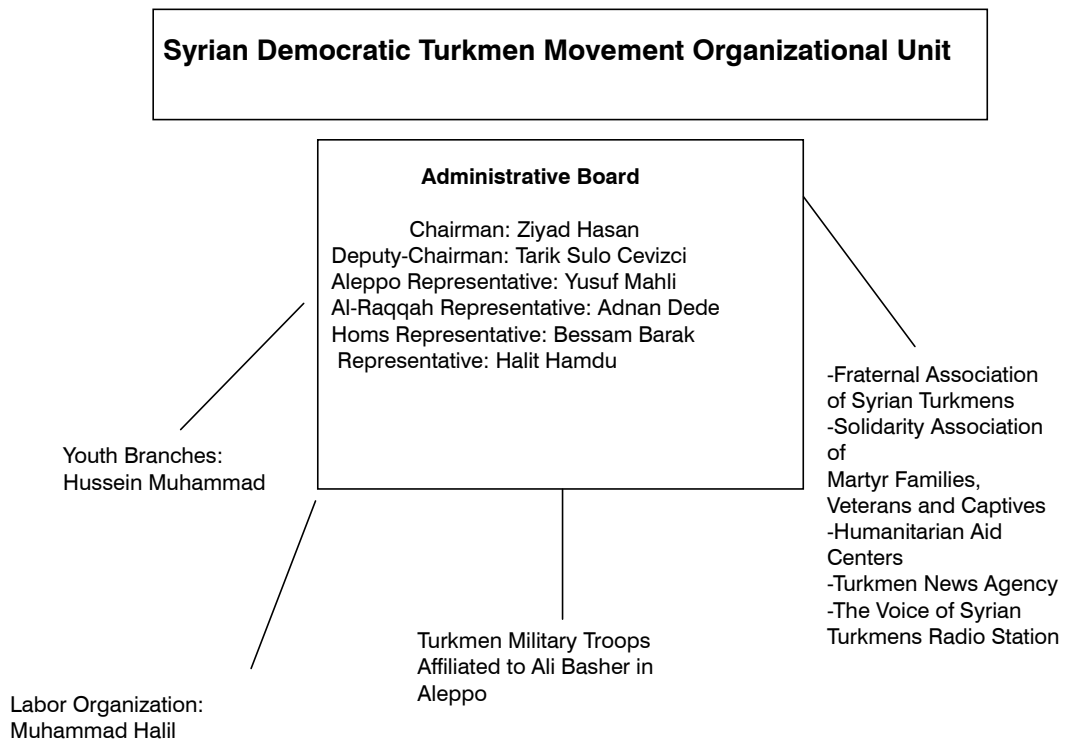
The Movement’s perspective on the solution of Syrian Turkmen’s problems is stated as follows: They believe that a split across Syria, due to the fact that Syrian Turkmen live in different cities and dispersedly in geographic terms, would give a big damage to Syrian Turkmen. Therefore, their primary objective is to maintain the unity and integrity of Syria. They ask for establishment of a new system based on citizenship in new Syria, and also they ask for free elections to be held under the supervision of world public opinion, for preparation of a new constitution in line with the world standards, and for the groups constituting the Syrian society to be provided with cultural, political and citizenship rights.

The organizations within the Democratic Turkmen Movement and the non-governmental organizations affiliated to the Movement within Syria are listed as follows: Youth Branches, Labor Organization, Fraternal Association of Syrian Turkmen, Solidar-

ity Association of Martyr Families, Veterans and Captives, Humanitarian Aid Centers, Turkmen News Agency. The Voice of Syrian Turkmen Radio Station is projected to start broadcasting, and also Turkmen magazines and newspapers are envisaged to be published. Two schools, in which language of education is Turkish, in Cobanbey and Bab Limon under the administration of Aleppo were opened through the efforts of the Democratic Movement.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement and Turkmen troops is limited with Aleppo. Ali Basher, Coordinator of Turkmen Brigades in Aleppo, state that they act in unison with the Movement.<sup>13</sup>

The new administration and organizational structure of the the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement is as below:<sup>14</sup>



### 1.3. Syrian Turkmen Platform

The idea of founding Syrian Turkmen Platform was come up with in 2012. The first meeting was held with 42 participants and a 5-person committee was formed. The first goal was to create a public opinion on Syrian Turkmen in Turkish and world public opinion. It emerged as a civilian initiative. There are Syrian Turkmen within the Turkmen Platform initiative who climbed the ladder in business and trade life living in Turkey for years.

The objective of this initiative is to form an assembly through delegates to be elected in Syria, and for the committee that would be designated by this Assembly to speak for and represent Syrian Turkmen. So what is wanted is for the aforesaid two Turkmen parties and a supra-political parties structure to take part in this initiative. This initiative achieved to receive the support of the Foreign Ministry to organize Syrian Turkmen Platform through its influence in Turkey. Concordantly, the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of Syrian Turkmen Platform was hosted by Turkish Foreign Ministry in Istanbul on 15 December 2012 with the support of the Prime Ministry.

The Syrian Turkmen Platform asks for a creation of Turkmen Assembly, and for this assembly to be a supra-political parties institution. It is projected to bring 350 delegates from Syria. After the election of those delegates, a 9-person committee will be formed. This committee will be the decision-making body of Syrian Turkmen.<sup>15</sup> The Platform considers it as a joint supra-parties initiative, not as a third alternative political party to the Syria Turkmen Bloc and Democratic Turkmen Movement. This decision-making body will represent Syrian Turkmen in every platform and will conduct all negotiations on behalf of Syrian Turkmen.

Even though Mersin MP Mehmet Şandır supports the Platform as “Honorary President

of Syria Turkmen”, he does not directly take part in the administration. The figures within the Platform and the administration are listed as follows: Esat Arber, Muhammed Ali Bardakci (Heysem Molla Ali), Mehmet Türkhan (Silo), Muhammad Ceren, Mustafa Sheikh Ahmet, Muhammed Arap, Zeki Turkmen.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to three major groups striving to be the representative of Syrian Turkmen and assume the leadership, there are also certain small-scale political and civil initiatives. Small-scale organizations started to be formed in refugee camps, located in Islahiye, where Syrian Turkmen live. Within this framework, Turkmen living in the aforesaid camp announced that they created a movement called “*Syria Turkmen Party*”. This group stated during the congress of Syrian Turkmen Platform that they would take part in the new joint front. Also, another small group, under the name of “*Islamic Union Party*”, was formed in the Islahiye refugee camp.<sup>17</sup> Another initiative called “*Latakia Turkmen Union*” in Latakia province in Syria has been striving to become a political party.<sup>18</sup>

Besides political initiatives, there are also Turkmen youth organizations which organize protest demonstrations, deliver civilian aid, and contribute men for troops. Those groups might be listed as follows:

- **Turkmen Youth Movement:** They are active in Yayladağı. They carry out activities both in civilian and political spheres.

- **Local Authorities Youth Movement:** This youth movement is active in Latakia Province in Syria.

- **Syrian Turkmen Youth Association:** They are active in southern areas of Damascus controlled by the opposition forces. It is an initiative that is composed of Golan Turkmen.

- **Syria Turkmen Youth:** They are affiliated to Syria Turkmen Bloc in Latakia.

- **Free Turkmen Youth:** They are active in Aleppo, and close to Ali Öztürkmen (Silo).

## 2. MILITARY STRUCTURE OF SYRIAN TURKMENS

### 2.1. Turkmen Troops in Latakia Province (Bayır – Bucak District)

The Turkmen population live in the area from the northern Latakia to the Hatay border. While Bayır district is located on the coastline, Bucak is located in hinterlands. The coastline that extends from the Hatay borderline to Latakia city center is under the control of regime forces. Bayır district, which is located in hinterlands, is under the control of opposition forces.

The majority of Bayır-Bucak in Latakia province is controlled by the Turkmen troops. A conflict border line was created between Nusayri villages, and Turkmen and Sunni Arab villages. On this borderline, composed of Kapakli and Gimam Turkmen villages, both parties mount guard and conflicts take place from time to time. The opposition has control over the majority of Turkmen villages. Only Buruc and Sulayip, which are Turkmen villages located on southern part of the borderline, are under the control of regime forces. Those villages are located in an extremely dangerous area due to the fact that they are surrounded by Nusayri settlements and are geographically distant from the areas controlled by the opposition.<sup>19</sup>

The Turkmen military structure in Latakia province is composed of 12 troops and higher division of these troops called “*Brigade of Turkmen Mountain*”. The commander of Brigade of Turkmen Mountain, which is the higher division of Turkmen military troops in Latakia province, is Colonel Muhammad Awad. Muhammad Awad also took part in the 30-person administration in Higher Military Council, formed by Syrian military oppo-

nents as a result of the congress that was held in Antalya. There are 12 companies under the Brigade of Turkmen Mountain. In addition, there is also another Turkmen military unit called Hezbollah al Galibu that is not affiliated to the Brigade of Turkmen Mountain.<sup>20</sup>

The troops constituting the Brigade of Turkmen Mountain are listed as follows:<sup>21</sup>

- **Nurettin Zengi:** It is active in Saray village and the neighborhood. The troop is led by Ferid Masri. And it is one of the three largest and strongest troops in Latakia.

- **Zahir Baybars:** It is active in Avanli district, and led by Ali Şehirli. It is one of the three largest and strongest troops in Latakia.

- **Al Huva Billa:** It is active in the area located between Kastav and Beyt Mılık. It is led by Heysen Topalca. And also, it is one of the three largest and strongest troops in Latakia.

- **Yavuz Sultan Selim:** It is active in Sheren district, and led by Tariq Sohta. The troop fights along with the Free Syrian Army in the ongoing conflicts in Aleppo and Ras al-Ayn.

- **Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror:** It is active in central Gimam and also in the neighborhood.

- **Memduh Colha:** It is active in Beyt Farez district. Mustafa Emin, the first leader of the troop, is the first Turkmen martyr. After the death of Mustafa Emin, Usama Kadı assumed the leadership of the troop, and then Emin Ibrahim. Ibrahim is still the leader of the troop.

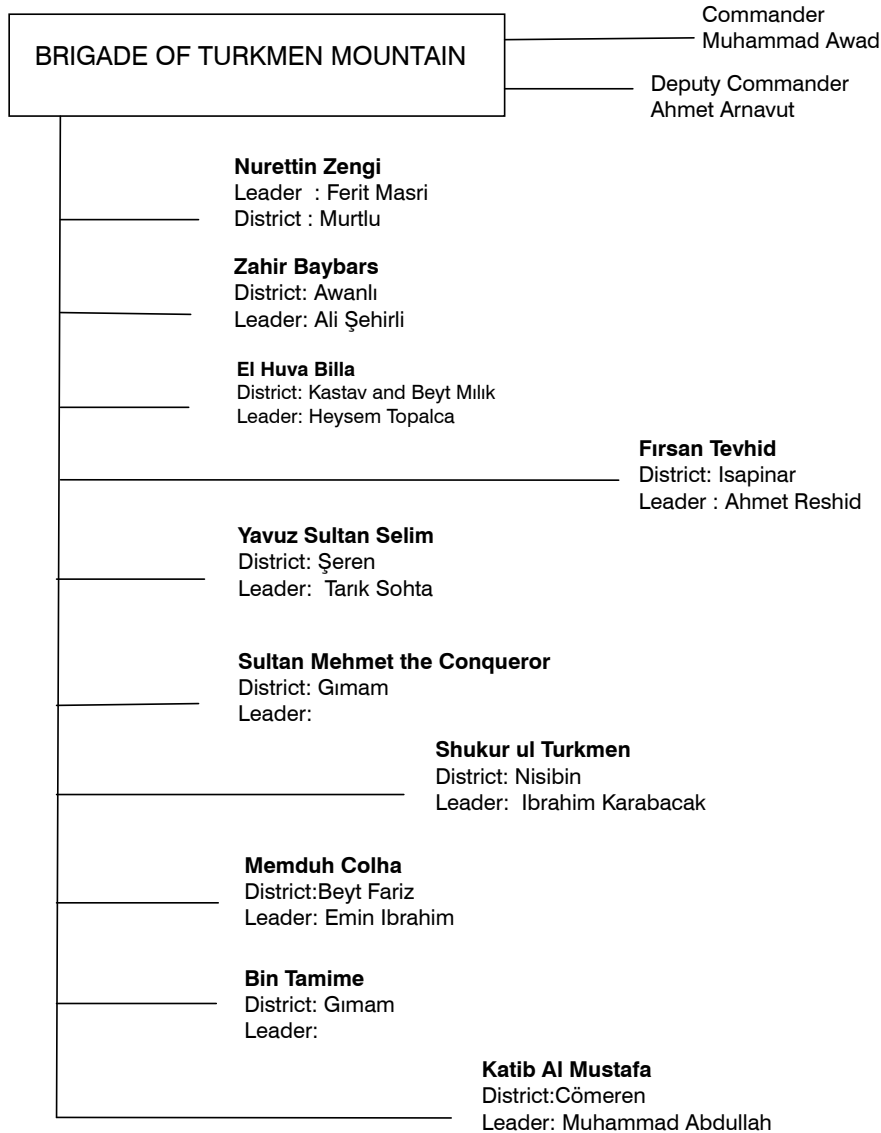
- **Bin Tamime:** It is active in central Gimam. The troop is deployed between Nusayri villages and the borderline. So the troop is found in the most dangerous location.

- **Katib Al Mustafa:** It is active in Çömeren district. The leader of the troop is Muhammad Abdullah.

- **Firsan Tevhid:** They maintain the security in Isapinar. The leader is Ahmed Reshid.

It maintains the security in Nisibin, which is one of the most important and dangerous conflict areas. Its leader is Ibrahim Karabacak.

- **Sukur ul Turkmen (Turkmen Falcons):** Even though it is not as large as the other groups, it is the best organized military troop.



## 2.2. Turkmen Troops in Aleppo Province

The vast majority of Turkmen troops in Aleppo province is under the command of Ali Basher, a Syrian Turkmen from Aleppo. The groups under the command of Ali Basher provide security of almost all Turkmen villages in

Aleppo. Those troops state that they control an area of some 350 kilometers. Also in central Aleppo, the security of 6 Turkmen neighborhoods are provided by those troops.<sup>22</sup>

There are 6 troops under the command of Ali Basher. These groups are planning to adopt



a new military structure. Concordantly, 6 troops are going to be gathered under two major brigades. The Aleppo Turkmen troops under the command of Ali Basher are listed as follows.<sup>23</sup>

- **Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror:** The leader of the troop is Mahmoud Suleiman, brother of Muhammad Suleiman who was the commander of Sultan Abdul Hamid Brigade before being killed. This troop control the 6 Turkmen neighborhoods in central Aleppo. It is one of the strongest Turkmen troops in Aleppo.

- **Zahir Baybars Brigade:** It is active in Jerablus, and led by Muhammad Genç.

- **Martyr Ali Yılmaz Troop:** It is active in Bab-1 Limon.

- **Buhari Troop:** It is active in Munbic district of Aleppo.

- **Imadettin Zengi Troop:** It is active in Munbic district of Aleppo.

Buhari and Imadettin Zengin Troops are projected to be merged under the name of Suleiman Shah.

- **Alparslan Troop:** This troop controls the Turkmen villages in the area between Azaz and Jerablus.

There are three other Turkmen military troops which act independently from the groups that are affiliated to Ali Basher in Aleppo:

- **Ahfad ul Fateh:** This brigade is not directly related to a Turkmen political movement or other Turkmen brigades. The command center of the brigade is Bab-1 Limon village. It is also active in Kerpikli and Başlıhoyuk settlements in Aleppo. They basically fight against the regime in central Aleppo. They

control two neighborhoods called Meydan and Bostanpasha. They control the aforesaid neighborhoods, and protect some eight other Turkmen neighborhoods located behind. Ibrahim Ahmed is the leader of the troop.

- **Yıldırım Beyazıt Brigade:** Halid Gokturkmen is the commander of the brigade.

- **Sultan Abdul Hamid:** Fighting against the Syrian army in central Aleppo until recently, the Sultan Abdul Hamid troop was a group under the command of Ali Basher. The commander Muhammad Suleiman, a military leader well-accepted by all Turkmens, was killed in a conflict. After his death, the troop withdrew from central Aleppo to rural areas, and left the groups commanded by Ali Basher.

### 2.3. Turkmen Troops in Homs Province

There are 43 Turkmen villages in Homs province. The opposition Turkmen troops in Homs are active in rural areas. There are a great number of Turkmen population in central Homs, and they fight along with Arabs against the regime. None of the troops in the center is completely composed of Turkmens, but in central Homs, Turkmens are settled in neighborhoods such as Babı Amr, Bab al Siba, Bab al Turkmen, Al Var, Al Karabis, Al Haldi. And many Turkmens, along with Sunni Arabs, within the troops in those neighborhoods fight against the regime.<sup>24</sup>

The Turkmen military troops in Homs are split up to several different groups. The headquarter of Turkmen troops are located in Zara. The Turkmen troops in Homs are listed as follows:<sup>25</sup>

- **Homs Shield Battalion (Ketibe Dıra Homs):** It is affiliated to the Homs Military Council, and financed by the Council.

- **Rahman Martyrs Battalion (Shuheda er Rahman):** It is financed by Saudi Arabia.

- **Shuheda al Hak:** It is financed by businessmen of Tel Kalaf origin who live in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

- **Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror:** It is affiliated to Al Farouq Brigade, one of the largest military troops in Syria.

- **Soldiers of Zara:** The troop, led by Colonel Osama Kenan, is active in Zara which is surrounded with Nusayri settlements.

- **Alparslan:** It is active in Tulluf, Kale, Semalil and Kızıl villages. The leader of the brigade is Abdulmuti Kahiye, a non-commissioned officer who left the Syrian army.

- **Homs Turkmen:** The troop fights within Al Farouq Brigade.

There is no other military troop, entirely composed of Turkmen, in Homs rural area except for the aforementioned ones. Nevertheless, many Turkmen soldiers take part in the military troops in villages and towns where Turkmen live such as Kusayr, Nizariye, Causia, Burç Kai, Tısnin, Hulaya, As Sabunin, Jibab el Zeyd.

#### 2.4. Turkmen Troops in Al-Raqqa Province

Turkmen population live in central Tel Abayad in Al-Raqqa Province, as well as in other villages affiliated to the same province. The total Turkmen population in Al-Raqqa is some 15.000-20.000 people. There's another Turkmen military troop in Al-Raqqa. The troop called Enver ul Hak is active in Tel Abayad district, located across Akçakale that is affiliated to Urfa, as well as in other Turkmen villages affiliated to the same province. The leader of the troop is Sheikh Abdullah Dede. Recently, another branch of Enver ul Hak was opened in Ras al Ayn. Enver ul Hak act in unison with the Syria Turkmen Bloc until recently, but lately it has been establishing close relations with the group led by Ali Basher.<sup>26</sup>

#### 2.5. Turkmen Troops in Damascus Province

Golan Turkmen constitute the Turkmen military organizations in capital Damascus. The most prominent one is Imam al-Zahabi troop. The leader of the troop is Halit Berket. It plans to change the name into "Turkmen Martyrs Brigade" soon. There is also a 12-person special operational unit in Damascus, which is composed of Turkmen, affiliated to Imam al-Zahabi.

This troop is also led by Golan Turkmen Abu Farouq. Aside from Imam al-Zahabi, there are also three other Turkmen troops called Amr Şubat in Damascus.<sup>27</sup>

#### 2.6. Turkmen Troops in Idlib Province

Turkmen have military and civilian organizations in Idlib. While the civilian organizations are led by Fadıl Talib, there is a close relationship between military troops and civilian organizations. Turkmen military troops in Idlib province are listed as follows:<sup>28</sup>

- **Rıcaül Allahul Ahrar:** The military leader of the troop is Munzır Abdullah. They act in unison with Ahfad ul Fateh, which fights in Aleppo. Some military forces of the troop are deployed in Hafsar village and its neighborhood in Idlib, as well as in Seladdin province in Aleppo. The troop also took part in an operation to lay siege to Cısr es Shukur.

- **Hananu Shield:** It is a military troop composed of Turkmen carrying out activities at the command of Halid bin Walid Brigade of Arabs. It is composed of approximately 80 people. It is active in Cısr es Shukur.

- **Independent Turkmen:** This troop, which is composed of Turkmen of Idlib origin, fights along with the Arab brigades in Seladdin, Aleppo, against the regime.

## 2.7. Turkmen Troops in Hama Province

There is no military troop in Hama which is completely composed of Turkmen. However, a great number of Turkmen are a part of the military troops, mostly composed of Arabs.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.8. Turkmen Troops in Tartus Province

There are 6 villages in Tartus where Turkmen population lives. Among those, the people of Al Mitras rebelled against the regime. Al Mitras, supported by Turkmen settlement Zara in Homs, formed a military troop to protect their area.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Syrian Turkmen population is of a key importance not only for Turkey, but also for the democratic future of Syria. If the forthcoming Syrian regime wants to build a country where

all ethnic and sectarian groups within the borders can live in peace and together, then it must recognize the presence of Turkmen and provide an environment for Turkmen to be equally represented in political field with other communities. Syrian Turkmen, who have courageously stood against authoritarian practices since the very beginning of the democratic demonstrations in Syria, are as good as all other communities in terms of maintaining the integrity of the country. As Syrian Turkmen have played an important role for the start of a new period in Syria, the Syrian opposition should enable Turkmen to come into their own. It is critically important for both Syria and the region that Turkmen, who have suffered from the oppression of the Assad regime and human rights violations, equally take part in political and social life in new Syria with Sunni Arabs, Arab Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druses and Shias.

## 1. AN INTERVIEW WITH ALİ ÖZTÜRK- MEN, SYRIAN TURKMEN ATTORNEY AND RESEARCHER

**ORSAM:** Mr. Öztürkmen, could you inform us about the Turkish population in Syria?

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Syrian Turkmens arrived in Syrian during the years between 1060 and 1070, when the Oghuz tribe migrated to these territories in Seljuk Empire period. After the Seljuks established the Seljuk Empire and appointed atabegs for the administration, Turkmens started to play an effective role in this geography. Especially during the Crusades and the conquest of Jerusalem, they played an important role. The presence of Turkmens in these territories dates back to 1000 years ago, starting with the Seljuks until the Ottoman Empire lost these territories at the end of the World War I. Coming under the French mandate, these territories constitute the current Middle East; Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The Turkish element is another component of these communities.

**ORSAM:** What is the current Turkmen population in Syria? Where do they live in the country?

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** They are densely populated in Aleppo province. They live in central Aleppo province, and approximately in 140 villages. These villages extend from the Jelavus borderline on east into Azez and Afrin. After Aleppo, the second province where the Turkmen population is densely populated is Homs. They live in central Homs and some 60 villages. Another province where Turkmen population live in density is Latakia. They are known as “Bayır-Bucak Turkmens” in Latakia, and we have more than 70 villages with Turkmen population. Besides, there are many Turkmens who settled in Damascus as they consider it as a “sacred city”. On the other hand there are 4-5 Turkmen villages in the rural area of Damascus. After the invasion of



Golan Heights, Turkmens who lived in some 20 Turkmen villages moved to central Damascus and suburbans. There are some 10 Turkmen villages in Al-Raqqah province, which is located on Turkish borderline, 10 villages in Hama, 5 villages in Idlib, and 5 Turkmen villages in Dar’aa. The Turkmen population is dispersed in a quite wide geography in Syria. Despite the population, the underlying reason why Turkmens cannot currently take part in Syrian political life is the fact that they lived under pressure for many years. As a result of these oppressions, which started during the French mandate period and continued in Ba’ath regime and nationalist Arab regimes, Turkmens grew away from the Turkic world and were assimilated. This independence wave, starting from Tunisia in the Middle East and spreading to Syria, triggered a motive for Turkmens to play an efficient role in this new formation process in Syria.

**ORSAM:** Do Turkmens also currently take part in popular movements in Syria?

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Turkmens do not act as a part of an organization, but individually. As Syrian Turkmens, our goal is to make sure our rights are protected in this new initiative, and to be recognized as one of the three main components of Syria (Arab, Kurd, Turkmen). According to current data, there are approximately 3,5 million Turkmens in Syria. 99% of Syrian Turkmens are Sunni, while only a few of them are Shia. They are of Anatolian Alawite-origin. In general sense, Syrian Turkmens preserve their tribal structure in Aleppo. They have a tribal structure. We cannot see it in other Turkmen districts.

**ORSAM: What are the largest Turkmen tribes?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The largest one is the Beydili Tribe and the second is the Ilbeyli tribe. Both of them are in Aleppo. They originate from Sivas.

**ORSAM: You said that the Turkmen population in Syria is 3,5 million. Are Turkmens who forgot their native language also included in this population? If so, how many Turkmens are there who still preserve their language and identity?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** There are some 1,5 million Turkmens who still use their language. This figure equals to approximately 5 per cent. The remaining 1 million people, on the other hand, forgot Turkish language but have not lost the Turkish identity. There are Turkmen families in Aleppo and Homs who forgot their language but who know and preserve Turkmen identity.

**ORSAM: What do you think is the cornerstone of the Syrian Turkmen identity? Which one is more determinant? Being Muslim, Turkmen, or Syrian?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The identity of Islam is on the forefront due to the oppression for years. Turkmens' forgetting their identity is

because of the suppression they were exposed to. The majority of Turkmens, especially those living in the hinterlands and in rural areas do not know what Turkmen means. This is the result of being ruptured by force from one's own culture and history.

**ORSAM: Do Syrian Turkmens have an umbrella organization? As far as I know Turkmens do not have a political party, but for instance, do you have an association?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The former Ba'ath regime did not accord any organizational right to Syrian Turkmens. They could not find any opportunity to found neither an association nor a political movement. Turkmens were not even allowed to sing their folk songs in certain districts. Under such a regime, Turkmens could not find an opportunity to become organized. But hopefully, in this new initiative, Turkmens will be able to protect their rights as a political and social movement.

**ORSAM: Do you think that a movement to defend the Turkmen identity has a grassroots?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The Turkmen people, especially the intellectuals, are in favor of it. The people ask for such a movement. The reason why it could not be realized by now is because of lack of education among the majority of Syrian Turkmens, and efficient Ba'ath propagandas. Besides, the religion factor is wrongly reflected. Recognition religion as the upper identity and the assimilation of Turkmen identity became one of the biggest obstacles. It came true through the propagandas of clerics supported by the regime. I believe that Syrian Turkmens long for such a movement. The new regime in Syria will be a civil democratic system. A modern, civil democracy is required to protect the rights of all communities in Syria. Another system would not look after the interests of Syrian populations.

**ORSAM: Where do Turkmen stand in the recent uprisings that took place in Syria? Do they have a common approach? Is there any group supporting the regime?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Turkmen have been waiting for this opportunity for years. Turkmen know that this regime will not last any longer under these circumstances. But, unfortunately, they could not become organized before the aforesaid uprisings. The only reason, as I mentioned before, is fear dating back years ago. The Turkmen support the opposition movements. For instance, the Turkmen population in Homs have been playing an important role in the uprisings. More than 15 Turkmen were martyred in Homs. Besides, there are hundreds of lost and captive Turkmen people. As two Turkmen villages on Lebanese borderline rebelled, they were attacked by Ba'ath partisans. As we do not have access to the area, I can only give ballpark figures. Today, approximately 100 Syrian Turkmen were killed. We have 2 martyrs in Damascus and Latakia. We do not have precise information regarding the death toll and captives.

**ORSAM: In such transition periods, it is quite important for a group to have a political movement. To that end, the members of the group might strive to have as much share as possible within the initiative. Do you believe that Turkmen cannot sufficiently make themselves heard in the Syrian opposition meeting currently being held in Antalya? What else could be done?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The biggest deficiency is the disorganized structure of Turkmen movements. It has been put off for a long time. Because Syrian Turkmen were the forgotten ones for years. We were brought up to world agenda only after the massacres committed by the Ba'ath regime in 1996. Besides, while Turkmen were not given a chance to become organized due to oppression, Kurds took advantage of the former system. They already prepared their organizational infrastructure

and today they have all means. Turkmen movement should become organized as soon as possible. To that end, it is required to found Syrian Turkmen Association and Syrian Human Rights Association; and those organizations should carry out activities in a way to form a party grassroots.

**ORSAM: What kind of political system do you envisage in case of a regime change? What do you think about the disputes on secularism and federalism? In addition, what are the demands of Turkmen?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** First of all, we expect that Turkmen take part in the new constitution as one of the main components of the Syrian population. Moreover, we demand the right of education in mother tongue and also other social rights. Arab fascism has been implemented and Turkmen have not been provided with any social right yet. Therefore, lots of Turkmen in Syria have lost their Turkmen identity. We aim to ensure that the Turkmen gain back their identity. As for other issues; I do not expect a federal structure in Syria. Because the Syrian people are well aware of situation they are in. None of the ethnic groups has ever been limited with a certain area. The people are intermingled with other ethnic groups. It is not possible for some of these groups to gather under a federal structure. The geographical distribution is not convenient either. For example, the Turkmen population is dispersed in different regions across Syria. It is also the same for Arab Alawites, Christians and Kurds.

**ORSAM: For instance, during the French mandate period, the aforesaid groups had different political structure in current Syrian territories. Is it possible today?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** No. It is not possible in current system. During the Republic period, the groups were quite dispersed. Formation of a federal structure is not possible under these circumstances. The Qamishli in al-Hasakah province where Kurds are densely

populated, for example. While central Qamishli is densely populated with Kurds, Arabs are densely populated in rural areas. It is by no means possible to consider city center separate from rural areas. Kurdish, Christian, Armenian and Assyrian people live in Qamishli. It is unimaginable to turn this into a federal structure. I believe that a democratic centralized structure to protect the rights of both those groups and Turkmens would be better. In terms of religion, on the other hand, I am completely against a theocratic political system due to the fact that 15 per cent of Syrian population is composed of Christians and people from other sects. Hence, we believe that civil democracy would be the best option for Syria. Also, secularism is also a part of this system. I think that today only a few groups would argue for Sharia in Syria.

**ORSAM: How do you assess the role of Muslim Brotherhood within Syrian opposition and in the congress that was held in Antalya?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** I do not think have much influence. Those from the Muslim Brotherhood did not attend the congress held in Antalya on behalf of the party, but on their own behalf. The Sharia propaganda was made but it did not take much attention among the participants. It was highlighted that it is not the right time to discuss secularism right now, and that it should be discussed if the uprising succeeds.

**ORSAM: We know that the Muslim Brotherhood is much more supported by the Sunni Arab population. What do you think is the main source that supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The people no more think the way they did before. The Syrian people put their strong religious perspective away, and they now think in parallel with the new world conditions. I personally do not believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is as influential as it was before.

**ORSAM: Don't you think that the Muslim Brotherhood would become prominent in case of a regime change?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The popular uprising in Syria is a civilian and peaceful movement. It is not at the helm of any political party. All current political initiatives are in parallel with this movement. It was also clearly seen in Antalya congress. It is also the same for Turkmens, Kurds and the Muslim Brotherhood.

**ORSAM: What about the relations between Turkmens and the other groups in Syria?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** We have good relationship with all groups. All groups respect the interests of one another. They are all aware of the fact that we are treated unjustly, and they ask why we waited too long to introduce ourselves. All opposition groups say good things about Turkmens, and they also add that our rights will be protected in the future.

**ORSAM: How do you think the opposition movement will be concluded? Should Bashar Assad keep his seat by making reforms? Or, is the regime change inevitable?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Today, we've arrived at a point where there is no way that the regime and the people agree and make peace. More than 2000 people have been killed in Syria. Furthermore, there are also lots of casualties who have not been identified. In a peaceful sit-in protest staged in Homs, the Syrian security forces opened random fire on protestors. Some friends collected 18 casualties. And the more than 50 of them were taken away in army vehicles. Many mass graves were found. We hear that corpses are not let out of many areas. There are mass graves in Latakia. Those corpses are put in containers and thrown into the sea. The regime finally showed its true color after years. A system to rule the people should receive its authorization from the people as well.

**ORSAM: Do you believe that the Assad regime can make a reform?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The Bashar Assad regime is the continuation of the regime taken over from his father. The love of the people is not real. If you love, you do not oppress. The regime had never showed its true color until recently. As Turkmens, we filed many applications in the new period. However, we were all rejected and friends who filed applications were blacklisted. It was said that amnesty would be granted to political prisoners. I also encounter obstacles in all state affairs. This regime has lost its legitimacy. The demands of the Syrian people can be fulfilled only through the change of regime in Syria.

**ORSAM: You say that the Syrian regime has lost its legitimacy, but unlike the regime in Tunisia, the Syrian regime maintains its integrity. The army takes sides with the regime. So, how will the regime change take place?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Considering the current situation in Syria, the country is on the verge of a civil war. The regime is doing it on purpose. The people have not resisted yet. But if it goes like this, they will. The reason why the regime can still survive is because of the family connections. It is the same for the army and intelligence. We see that conflicts take place among the low-ranking officers within the army. Some soldiers do not point their weapons at the people. It is known that those soldiers are executed by the regime forces right away, and the scars all over the corpses show that they were tortured to death.

**ORSAM: So, you argue that there will be factions within the regime itself. Is it likely that a foreign intervention could take place?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** Massacres will increase in the forthcoming period. In that case the people would grow stronger, and the army would get weaker. The army cannot get a di-

rect information from different regions anymore. It would have hard times as the factions within the regime grow stronger. I am not in favor of a military intervention in Syria. I just say that pressure should be applied on the regime.

**ORSAM: Is it possible that an armed group might lead the country to a civil war after the collapse of the regime in Syria?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** We do not want this to happen. Certain groups might react. There's such a risk. Syria is one of the most prominent countries in the Middle East, and it also played an active role in the formation of some policies. Certain terrorist groups might take advantage of a potential political gap in Syria, and carry out operations. For instance, the Shabiha organization in Syria. Armed gangs of the regime. But Shabiha is not that strong of an organization. The moment the support is cut off, it is nothing. The Shabiha can survive through the means provided by the regime.

**ORSAM: What do you think about Turkey's approach on current developments?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The Syrian people expect Turkey to play an active role. It is the same for both Turkmens and other groups. Furthermore, they do not rely on Western countries and Iran as much as they do on Turkey. Erdoğan's statements had a great impact on the Syrian people. In popular demonstrations staged in certain areas, Arabs hang lots of Turkish flags and hold Turkish banners. However, Turkey's current attitude is not sufficient. The Syrian people should further be supported. They should be the voice to massacres we are exposed to. What we are going through is not reflected on the public opinion. Turkey should bring what we have been witnessing up to the world agenda. We do not want to end up like the Libyan people.

**ORSAM: Is it possible that a civil war could break out among the Syrian people if the regime collapsed?**



**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** The Christian and Muslim population in Syria have never clashed with each other. But the pro-regime families might be reacted by the people. Druses were close to the regime in the past. Today, on the other hand, they approach with caution. The people perceive the Syrian regime as a Shia administration. Alawites are the ones who benefit from all resources of the government and national wealth the most. On the other hand, the Druse intellectuals support the popular uprisings and are in favor of the regime change. Also the Christian intellectuals support popular movements. But they do not play an active role. To sum up, the groups that suffer from the regime's cruelty are play a more active role.

**ORSAM: The opposition movements have spread to Damascus and Aleppo with a great influence. Is this because Sunni Arab elites support the regime?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** It is because of more effective security in Aleppo and Damascus. Mosques play the most important role in social movements. The people do not have a chance to meet in those places. It is forbidden to meet. Friday prayers and funeral prayers of martyrs provide an environment for the people to meet. Some clerics complained they could not perform their duties with ease. In certain mosques, identity check is made in the entrance. Mosques are filled with pro-re-

gime supporters, Ba'ath supporters, security forces. The people are not enabled to act as they wish. The regime exerts its pressure on these two large cities.

**ORSAM: What is the role of Iran?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** As we hear from some sources, it is asserted that Hezbollah has been sending militants to suppress the people. Besides, it is also suggested that Syrian security guards have been trained, informed and provided with weapons.

**ORSAM: Lastly, what should Turkey do for Turkmens in particular?**

**Ali ÖZTÜRKMEN:** We would like Turkey to make the Syrian Turkmen voice heard across the world. And also, we would like Turkey to support protecting Turkmen rights in the new system to be created in Syria in the forthcoming period. Nothing has been done for Turkmens yet. The name of 3,5 million Turkmen population is not known in the world public opinion. What we want is to take part in the new system, and to protect our rights.

**ORSAM: Thank you.**

*\* This interview was conducted by ORSAM Middle East Specialist Oytun Orhan on 1 June 2011.*

## 2. AN INTERVIEW WITH ZIYAD HASAN, CHAIRMAN OF SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC TURKMEN MOVEMENT

*(When this interview was conducted, Ziyad Hasan was the spokesperson of the Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement.)*

**ORSAM: First of all, could you introduce yourself?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** I am Ziyad Hasan from Aleppo, Syria. I graduated from University of Aleppo, Department of Civil Engineering. I lived in Libya and Iraq for my job. I have been in Istanbul for 8 months, and here I have been making attempts both before the Syrian opposition and Turkish authorities in order for Syrian Turkmens to have their political rights in the post-Assad system. To that end, I am the spokesperson of the Syrian Turkmen Community political movement, which we established along with some friends for this cause.

**ORSAM: You are from Aleppo. Could you tell us about the security, political, and economic situation both in central Aleppo and the rural area?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** In terms of the political situation, the Ba'ath Party, which has influence all across Syria, has reached both central Aleppo and rural areas. Currently, each office of the political party works as an intelligence unit. It is more occupied with intelligence services than politics. We see the most serious organization in Aleppo among Kurds. There are more than 15 Kurdish political parties, and they form a quite major power. In addition to this, the PKK terrorist organization has a considerable number of sympathizers, and they have a major power in the region.

In economic terms, Aleppo is the locomotive of the Syrian economy. However, unfortunately the industry of the city, which was severely affected by the closed economy policy pur-



sued by Hafez Assad, received a second blow during the Bashar Assad period as a result of the uncontrolled international expansion policy and high tax policies targeting producers. Therefore, the number of businessmen who quit production and started importation before the revolution was more than 50 per cent. Adding the recent developments and embargoes to this import-dependent economic structure, inflation hit the roof. And as a result, 1 dollar which was equal to 48 SYP 10 months ago started to be exchanged for 80 SYP in black market. Basic needs such as oil, fuel, natural gas cannot be found. There is more than 100% price increase in all goods. The people who were already poor became miserable.

As for the security; the regime, which maintained the security in Aleppo since the very beginning of the uprisings and which did not make any concession, started to show signs of weakness last month. The regime resorted to army troops in order to maintain the control in rural areas. Opening fire on Atarib district

for the last two weeks, the army also began to attack on Azaz for two days which is located near Kilis and 7000 troops were deployed to suppress the demonstrations in the area.

Increasingly rising demonstrations in central Aleppo started to be quite frequently seen especially in University of Aleppo and in certain neighborhoods where Arab tribes are densely populated. An unfortunately, the death toll in Aleppo in on the rise.

The PKK terrorist organization became apparent in areas with Kurdish population, and barricades were set up on the roads in some areas. According to the latest information, Assad talked to some Turkmen tribal leaders, and announced that he wanted to provide Turkmens with weapons to suppress rising events in rural areas of Aleppo. And the leaders who turned down the offer are still under pressure.

**ORSAM: Compared to other provinces, Aleppo witnessed relatively less action until recently. What are the underlying reasons? Is it likely that this situation could change?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** The reasons why Aleppo stayed out of those events until recently might be listed as follows:

- insecurity stemming from the presence of various ethnic and religious groups in the city,
- interpersonal communication problem caused by the metropolitan life style (the fact that demonstrations are mostly staged in tribal, rural areas and the university proves it),
- too strict and cruel security measures taken by the regime,
- a considerable number of regime partisans for various reasons.

Nevertheless, considering the recent devel-

opments within the last month and according the what we hear from the country, tension is increasing and things are reaching a point of no return.

**ORSAM: There are many ethnic and sectarian groups in Aleppo. Could you tell us briefly about the stance they take on the Syrian uprising?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** We can list the groups living in the city of Aleppo as follows: Sunni Arabs, Christians, Turkmens, Kurds and Armenians.

Although Sunni Arabs are those who launched the uprising in different cities and are in the forefront, it took too long for them to take action in Aleppo. They were mostly limited with rural areas.

Christians and Armenians fear that an Islamic regime could arise. Those groups support the regime across Syria or they remain neutral.

The vast majority of Turkmens support the uprising. Particularly Hama, rural areas of Aleppo, and Damascus Turkmens. Some of the Turkmen population, on the other hand, prefer to remain neutral for various reasons.

The Kurds' participation in the uprising is quite local and inefficient.

**ORSAM: What do you think the people in Aleppo preferred for the solution of Syrian problem? What do they think about military intervention, and establishment of safe haven? Do they ask for a radical change or a consensus-based solution?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** There has been major dissidences in Aleppo since the very beginning of the uprising. I can summarize this dissidence as below:

- 1- 70% of the people support the uprising. But for the reasons I already mentioned before, only 30% of them have risen against the

regime so far. Rural areas, some tribal neighborhoods of the city, and the majority of this group are in favor of a radical change, including a military intervention. The other 50% are ready to take to the streets in case of any security gap. They act more cautiously on solution, and they support establishment of a safe haven.

2- 30% of the people support Assad for a variety of reasons; and while some of them are in favor of consensus with certain opposition figures out of the national council, others argue for putting an end to this problem through military methods.

**ORSAM: What are the expectations of Syrian Turkmens as a result of this uprising process? Have Turkmens got what they wanted so far within the Syrian opposition?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** The post-revolution expectations of Syrian Turkmens, victims of assimilation policies and tyranny for more than 60 years, can be listed as follows:

- Making political and constitutional reforms, transition to a multi-party system,
- Turkmens' participation in the new constitutional drafting process,
- Recognition of Turkmen community as a primary component in the Syrian constitution,
- Recognition of Turkish language as an official language in the areas where Turkmens are densely populated,
- Teaching Turkish language in public schools, and removing all legal barriers on the way to education in mother tongue,
- Reinforcing local governments, and expanding their scope of authority,
- Laying the foundations of a sustainable eco-

nomical development process to improve economic conditions of the Syrian people and Turkmens.

Providing a considerable support to the uprising, Syrian Turkmens have unfortunately been excluded despite all efforts before the opposition so far. There is no Turkmen representative within the Syrian National Council, which embodies representatives from different groups. The Syrian National Council, which was established in Turkey that is the homeland of Turkmens, unfortunately excludes Turkmens in the presence of homeland.

**ORSAM: Could you inform us about your efforts, and the efforts of Syrian Turkmens to become organized in general?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** We did not have any Turkmen organization until the uprising. Our efforts to that end started after the uprising, and today we have 3 political groups. One of these groups is the Syrian Turkmen Movement, of which I am the spokesperson and which embodies representatives from all Turkmen districts of Syria. As we believe that working in separate groups would be very harmful for Turkmens, we talk to other groups and we are planning to act in unison soon within the scope of common goals.

**ORSAM: Finally, what do you think about Turkey's current policy on Syria? What could you tell us about Turkey's support for Syrian Turkmens within this framework?**

**Ziyad HASAN:** Turkey has pursued a stable policy since the beginning of uprisings. Firstly talking to the Syrian government and pressing them to make reforms, Turkey also received Syrians who took shelter in the country with open arms. This was a correct and very proper behavior of Turkey. The fact that Turkey let the Syrian opposition become organized during the same process resulted in the establishment of Syrian National Council in Istanbul.

And this comes to mean that Turkey will have a say in the future of Syria.

As for us, Turkmens; we have been excluded in all political processes so far. Both unorganized structure of Turkmen community and also Turkey's indifference in this respect played a major role in this exclusion. If Turkey carried on its current attitude, we would be completely excluded. Therefore, Syrian Turk-

men's message to Turkey is: Standing behind Syrian Turkmens is both political, historical and national duty of Turkey. Otherwise, history would not forgive this mistake.

**ORSAM: Mr. Hasan, thank you very much.**

*\* This interview was conducted by ORSAM Middle East Specialist Oytun Orhan in Istanbul on 24 February 2012.*

### 3. AN INTERVIEW WITH BEKIR ATACAN, FOUNDING MEMBER OF SYRIA TURKMEN BLOC AND SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC TURKMEN MOVEMENT

**ORSAM:** First of all, could you introduce yourself?

**Bekir ATACAN:** I am Bekir Atacan, a Bayir-Bucak Turkmen from Syria. I have been living in Turkey for 32 years. I am a Turkish citizen. I took part in political organizations and parties established recently. I am both founding member and also the first Chairman of the Syria Turkmen Bloc. We wanted to enlarge the Bloc, but when it failed I resigned from the group. Also with the support of Turkey, we established the Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement. I am both founding member of the Movement and also was Deputy Chairman of the Movement. Afterwards a friend of mine from the group and I resigned from the Movement due to the fact that we wanted to establish a political party in Turkey with a wide political spectrum on behalf of Syrian Turkmens. We've been laying the groundwork to that end. Hopefully, the hard core of our political party will have been formed by January. It was impossible for all opposition groups in Syria to establish a political party. Turkmens were the ones that suffered suppression most. Because they lived dispersedly. But lately, we've actively been maintaining our political life through the strengthening opposition, as well as through the support of Turkey. We aim to make a new initiative. This formation must be a political party. The primary goal is to defend the rights of Turkmens in Syria, and secondly, to act as a bridge for peace between Syria and Turkey. Another important goal is to provide an environment where all minority groups and other groups in Syria could establish friendly relations with each other. By this means, I believe that we will play a role in adopting a peaceful system for the future of Syria. And it will be possible only through Turkey's support. We are in a good relationship with all groups in Syria, but



we are weak. A Turkmen gets along with a Nusayri, Kurd, and an Arab. We live together with all groups. As Turkmens live dispersedly; while one of us has an Arab neighbor, another's neighbor is Kurd, or Christian. Thanks to our peaceful nature we inherited from our ancestors, we have developed good relations. Now is the time to make the best of it. This situation would be good for both the Syrian people and Turkey. It is necessary to strive to achieve it, and we also need Turkey's support.

**ORSAM:** Could you briefly summarize the Turkmen political movement in Syria from past to present?

**Bekir ATACAN:** When the revolution broke out in Syria, the Syrian National Council was established 20 months ago and Turkmens were not included at all. Then we thought that we were supposed to take part in the Council, and like other groups, we needed to make ourselves heard to defend our rights. So we started to make negotiations. First of all, they

asked us whether Turkmens had an organization or not. We did not have an organization back then. I gathered 180 Syrian Turkmens, who live in Turkey, in a dinner on the occasion of Ramadan through my own means. We discussed during this dinner that we had to become organized by all means, and that we could defend our rights only by doing so. Then we came together and established an association called Syrian Turkmen Association. On November 2011, we turned it into a political movement. And we decided to change its name, and call it Syrian National Bloc Party. I was the chairman and founding member of this group. We made some strides under the umbrella of this organization. However, in due course we realized that it is vicious circle. Hence, we resigned from that group and pioneered the establishment of Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement also through the support of Turkey. I was the deputy chairman and founding member of that group as well. We started to be represented under the name of Democratic Turkmen Movement within the Syrian National Council through the support of Turkey. We had 16 members to represent us in the National Council. Also, we achieved to be accorded some rights that would be accorded to other minorities as well. Even though the Democratic Turkmen Movement carried out relatively wider-scale activities than the Syrian National Bloc, it was insufficient in terms of number and efforts. A group of Turkmens including me and those from Latakia, Homs, Aleppo, Tarsus resigned from this group; and we argued for establishing a new political party. We had another political party called Syrian Turkmen Bloc, Islamic Party; so we decided to dissolve these parties and establish a new formation, and to gather under a single umbrella. We are planning to organize a congress in January. The decision to establish the new party will be taken. Its name has not been decided yet. But most probably "Turkmen" and "Democracy" will be used.

**ORSAM: What are your demands as Syrian Turkmens for the post-Assad period? What kind of Syria would you like to see?**

**Bekir ATACAN:** Turkmens have been present in each province, and each town of Syria for more than 1000 years. We want to continue our existence in Syria, as well as to take part in its restoration. We want to carry on living in Syria under a single umbrella. Of course, we also demand some cultural rights. We want to hold meetings, speak our own language, and spread our culture etc. But we never ask for a federal structure, or independence. We support the unitary structure of Syria, as well as its territorial and political integrity.

**ORSAM: What is the overall situation in Syria? What can you tell about the future of the regime?**

**Bekir ATACAN:** It is not possible to eradicate a dictatorship overnight. Especially in Syria, the Ba'ath dictatorship has been in power since 1963. Conflicts have been continuing for 21 months. We believe they will further continue. The regime lost its control in Aleppo, and Damascus is under siege. When also Damascus is entirely seized by the opposition, heads of states will go back to their hometown, like in Iraq and in Libya not long ago. It is likely that conflicts will continue over there as well. Bashar Assad was born in Kardaha, Latakia. Clashes will spread to those territories. I believe that eventually a federal structure will be adopted. Even if not in a near future, a federal structure will be established in the future. What Russia wants is the establishment of a Nusayri State. Thus, Russia would be able to protect its own interests. Approximately 600 thousand Turkmens live in those territories to stay within these borders. It equals to almost a quarter of the total Turkmen population. It is not acceptable for us. We will do our best to prevent it.

**ORSAM: If a federal system is adopted in the country, Turkmens might find themselves in the middle of clashes and go through big problems...**

**Bekir ATACAN:** Exactly. Turkmens have been living in those territories for 1000 years, but they have always remained in the background. The first martyr of Latakia is Turkmens. The Syrian media asserts that the revolution was launched by Turkmens. But unfortunately our name is mentioned neither in Turkey nor in the world. Because we have always said we are “Syrian” above all. We have seen us as a part of Syria, as a Syrian citizen at all times. Despite not being on the forefront, we have taken part in each stage of the revolution. The Turkmen community is the one with the biggest number of victims. 80-90% of the Bab-1 Amr population is composed of Turkmens. Turkmens live in most of the cities and provinces where massacres are committed today. We are Syrian in the first place, and Turkmen in the second place. However, others first say the name of the minority group they are affiliated to, and Syria in the second place. That’s the difference between them and us. We are the primary component living in these territories for more than 1000 years. Another thing we demand from the National Council is to be recognized as a primary component. Hopefully we see it in the constitution.

**ORSAM: What are the weak points of Syrian Turkmens?**

**Bekir ATACAN:** There are basically two reasons. The fact that we cannot be organized and we live dispersedly. Kurds, Assyrians, Christians, Circassians, Nusayris, and Druses live in certain areas; but we do not have a certain area where we live altogether. We live on every corner of Syria. 4 million Turkmens are dispersed across Syria. Because we inherited those territories from our ancestors. In the past the Seljuks and the Ottoman Empire ruled those lands.

**ORSAM: Lastly, what do you think about Turkey’s policy on Syrian Turkmens and Syria? What are your expectations?**

**Bekir ATACAN:** We believe that we serve as a bridge both among the communities within Syria, and also between Syria and Turkmen. Therefore, we want to act as a peace envoy in Syria. We expect Turkey to make it possible, and to support us becoming more organized.

**ORSAM: Thank you.**

*\* This interview was conducted by ORSAM Middle East Specialist Oytun Orhan in Istanbul on 17 December 2012.*



**4. AN INTERVIEW WITH YUSUF MAHLI, MEMBER OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL AND THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC TURKMEN MOVEMENT**

**ORSAM: Could you introduce yourself in brief?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** I am Yusuf Mahli. I am originally from Aleppo. I have been living here in Istanbul for a long time. I am currently doing Master's at Istanbul University. I've assumed the Coordination of Secretary General within Syrian National Council office in Istanbul for a year. Also, I am a member of the Assembly of Syrian National Council.

**ORSAM: You've been carrying out activities as the National Council for a long time. Recently a new initiative called Syrian National Coalition was established in Qatar. The Syrian National Council took part in this new initiative as a group. What does the establishment of Coalition come to mean for the Council? Will the Council continue to stay as a bloc within the coalition?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** It has been 1 year and 2 months since the establishment of Syrian National Council. The Council substantially contributed to the Syrian revolution. It maintained the Syrian politics in the international arena. The Council has always highlighted the fact that it is the representative of the Syrian people, and the legitimate representative of the Syrian people is the Council as well. However, the Council could not work in coherence. It has deficiencies and problems. But it is because of the fact that the world public opinion did not keep its promises. The world public opinion only give promises, and did not put them into practice. The Council was not supported in practical terms.

Being accused of its disunited structure and of not representing different groups, the



Council was reorganized and also increased the number of its members. It increased from 250 to 400. Besides, revolutionist movements, coordination committees, new political parties and initiatives were included from different groups. The world public opinion always asserted that the "Syrian National Council is not representing the entire Syrian people" as its justification. So a new initiative was established to refute this argument. The Council did not refuse this new initiative and cooperated. First of all, it was presented as a plan. The initiative is called the Riad Seif Plan, named after the Syrian opposition figure Riad Seif, as he was the one who proposed the idea. It was believed that Seif would be the leader of the initiative. Then he apologized, and said he would not be able to serve as the leader of Initiative because of his health problems. Then it was agreed to designate the President of the Coalition through election. As a result, Moaz al-Khatib was elected the President of the Coalition. The representation rate of the Syrian National Council within the Coalition would be 40%. The Council refused it, and asked for a larger quota. Because the Council

has gained a considerable experience in Syrian politics. It envisages to benefit from these experiences in the international relations, and to adapt it within the Coalition. For the time being, the relationship between the Council and Coalition has not yet become clear. During the meetings most recently held in Cairo, the issue of increasing the quota was brought up to the agenda. The Council maintains its structure, and it will continue like this.

**ORSAM: The Syrian National Council is already an alliance itself. As a matter of fact, it was not a quite unified alliance. Disagreements, ruptures took place within the Council from time to time. Given this already fragile structure, is it possible that the Council could maintain its integrity if they gathered under a larger-scale opposition umbrella?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** Actually, the foundation of the Coalition made it possible for the Syrian National Council to eliminate its problems and to become tight-knit. Should the Council preserve its structure within the Coalition and act in unison, it might be able to manage the Coalition. This is the belief in the Council. I believe that it will be achieved. The relationship between the National Council and the Coalition has not yet become clear. Disputes still continue. In the first place, the coalition had a council with 63 seats, of which 22 were Syrian National Council members. Then the seats increased from 63 to 70, and it will continue to increase. The Council wants to have at least 50% of the seats within the Coalition. Negotiations on the subject still continue.

**ORSAM: You were in Qatar during the formation process of the Coalition, so you are familiar with both the Council and Coalition. What is the thing that does not exist within the National Council, but within the Coalition? Besides, could you briefly inform us about the formation process of the Coalition?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** As much as I know, the Coalition plan was brought up in Qatar congress of the Council two weeks ago. It received worldwide media coverage, but still the Council carried on holding meetings and expanding. The recently expanded Council embodied all mosaics of Syria; but the world public opinion was not satisfied again due to the criticisms against the Council such as ruptures and disunity etc. Hence, it was suggested to gather some figures and political groups in Syrian opposition which refuse to take part in the Council. It had already been reflected in the press as the “Riad Seif Plan” before the meeting. Some prominent figures who joined the Coalition are those who left the regime. Those figures might be listed as; Former Ministers, Former Deputy Ministers, local council members, authors association representative, businessmen forum, individuals and opposition figures.

**ORSAM: What is the situation in terms of the representation of minorities?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** Minorities are not included in the Coalition. However, the groups living in Syria are demanded to representatively take part in the Coalition. Turkmens, Kurds, Assyrians, Alawites are included in the Coalition as political groups and national figures. Furthermore, the representative of the Druse community takes part in the Coalition as a member of local council. Christians were included from the Syrian National Council. Thus, the Coalition is not based on ethnicity.

**ORSAM: You are also Syrian Turkmen. Important developments have been taking place in terms of Turkmens. Recently the Syrian Turkmen Platform was held in Istanbul, and both the Turkish Government Spokesman Cemil Cicek and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu attended the Platform and addressed a speech. Within this framework, what would you like to say about the current situation of Syrian Turkmen politics?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** Turkmens were totally disorganized and weak since the beginning of the revolution. I attended the majority of Syrian opposition meetings held in Istanbul. Unfortunately, we witnessed a tragedy of 100 years. It was like Turkmen politics and Turkmen identity had disappeared in Syria. Turkmens considerably supported the revolution especially in Homs after the outbreak of revolution. Then it spread to Latakia, Aleppo and Damascus. Turkmen-populated areas with most conflicts. There was no group representing Turkmens within those political groups. I think that good developments have taken place for the Turkmen politics lately. The representation of Turkmens within the Syrian National Council and Syrian National Coalition points out that they will have influence in Syrian politics. The fact that Syrian Turkmen Platform was organized; Turkish Foreign Minister and Government Spokesman attended this Platform; and that Turkish President sent a message indicated Turkey's support to Turkmens. This is a major step for Turkmens. The Turkmen entity was seen both in Turkish and world media.

**ORSAM: What do you envisage for the post-Assad period? How do you think the transition in Syria will take place?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** The war still continues in Syria. The Free Syrian Army has had major achievements. The Free Syrian Army took the control of many military troops in Aleppo. The Army has been achieving major progress in Hama and Damascus. The transition in Syria depends on Assad's leaving power; if the war continues until the very last moment, the transition process will be very problematic, because the desire for revenge will grow stronger and will be out of control after a certain stage. Hence, the military units that are affiliated to the Free Syrian Army should be gathered under a single umbrella. Moreover, it is necessary to form a strong centralized government with an international legitimacy in order to be able to keep the situation under control.

**ORSAM: Do you think that political consensus is possible?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** What the regime says to the world public opinion is; "We are ready for a dialogue". But even the regime itself does not believe in such a dialogue. By doing so, the regime tries to put the opposition in a difficult position. However, it was the opposition itself which asked for a consensus in the first place. But the regime resorted to military force and tried to eliminate the opposition. The political consensus is possible only after Assad leaves the power. He can give his authorities to the Vice-President, and then a political dialogue might be established.

**ORSAM: Finally, what do you think about Turkey's policy on Syria?**

**Yusuf MAHLI:** Turkey has always said from the very beginning that it stands behind the Syrian people. It did not remain unfulfilled, but it was also put into practice. The authorities here say that "They are not Syrian refugees, they are our Syrian guests". The Syrian people also feel sympathy towards Turkey. Many countries have taken a stand against the Syrian revolution. Turkey has always responded to legitimate demands of the people. It is known both in the media and also among the people. Turkey has been supporting the recently-formed Syrian Coalition, as well as the Syrian National Council. While Turkey is in favor of continuation of the National Council, it also supports the Coalition. The Council has a substantial experience before the opposition and in the international politics. Turkey is in favor of Council's taking part in the Coalition before losing these experiences. Also, Turkey recognizes the Coalition as the legitimate representative of Syrian opposition.

**ORSAM: Thank you very much.**

*\* This interview was conducted by ORSAM Middle East Specialist Oytun Orhan in Istanbul on 18 December 2012.*

## 5. AN INTERVIEW WITH YUSUF MOLLA, CHAIRMAN OF THE SYRIA TURKMEN BLOC

**ORSAM: First of all, could you introduce yourself?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** I am from Bayır Bucak district of Latakia. I came to Turkey in 1982 after I graduated from high school. I graduated from the Department of Architecture at İstanbul Technical University. Then I did a master's degree in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Yıldız Technical University. I continued my career in private companies. As for my political life, thanks God, I have never supported the Ba'ath Party. Therefore, I never had a political life in Syria. I could not carry out any political activity when I came to Turkey either. Because my family was in Syria even if I was here. I love and search history. I have a command of Ottoman language. I translated many books on the history architecture for the University of Aleppo. I did not participate in active politics until the conflicts in Syria broke out. However, I explicitly stated which sides I took with on the very day of the outbreak of events, and I started to work on it. We were in it from day one. We felt the need of talking on behalf of Turkmens months after the start of our movement. Because the events in Syria started to be based on an ethnic and sectarian affiliation. Everybody began to seek their rights through this means. We also set our hands both to protect Turkmen rights and also to prevent Turkmens from canalizing towards the wrong direction. It was August 2011 when we initiated our activities. It took months for us to begin. Because we wanted to have a solid organization. We declared Syrian Turkmen Mass on 15 February 2012. I have been working as the Chairman of the Organization since its establishment. We were well received by the opposition. Soon afterwards, we created contact offices in Syrian border zones as the first step, as we preferred to carry out our studies in the field. So that we could establish close relations with the field.



Taking the means we had into consideration, we reached a considerable success. However, now also Turkmen name is found among Syrian opposition. We supported our insurgents, and helped the injured. Soldiers were provided with food, beverage and fuel. Our people were provided with food and medicine aid. Most of those aids are certified. We have been preparing a detailed report on it. We have accomplished great things thanks to everybody's support.

**ORSAM: Two Turkmen Parties (Mass and Movement) decided to join their forces in Syrian Turkmen Platform that was held not long ago. Could you tell us about the process of union between parties?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** Currently it is not an exact union. Some figures within the Democratic Movement resigned their offices. We will go restructuring with new friends. We already thought of restructuring for a long time but we could not have found an opportunity. The participation of our friends led us to go this restructuring. We are going to hold a con-

gress approximately in a month. We want to include more people from the grassroots. The regime was powerful in Syria in early stages of the uprising, and many people who could participate and be useful couldn't do so for fear of prison and execution. Therefore, a more limited group of people participated. However, things have changed a lot under current circumstances. Regime is very weak right now. There are almost liberated zones. We have been striving to reach all Turkmens wherever they are in Syria. We will establish local organizations, and we will work for delegations' being elected from those areas and for their participation in the congress. We are working very hard right now. There might be changes in current administration. We are willing to leave our offices in case those who deserve these positions come to office. Our friends who have been working so far have neglected their families. All of them have considerable contributions and good rights.

**ORSAM: You have mentioned that there might be changes in the new organization. What kind of changes are you planning to do?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** Free elections will be held. A major part of the executive board might change. We will carry on our activities with a new structuring along with those who recently joined us. Actually I argue for using one of the names of the two Turkmen parties. Those names are popular now. And the name of a new party to be formed would raise the question of "Who is this new movement?" among the people. The Turkmen cause was not already a well-known one. Most people do not even know about the presence of Turkmens in Syria. It doesn't feel right to come up with a new name all over again. However, we will be in accord with the decision to be taken. Most probably, we will be known under a new party name in the forthcoming process.

**ORSAM: What kind of organization do you have in Syria? What are you planning to do to expand the current organization?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** We established 3 offices between Yayladağı and Akçakale to communicate with inside. The office in Yayladağı works for Latakia Turkmens, the office in Gaziantep works for Aleppo Turkmens, and the office which works for Raqqa Turkmens is located in Akçakale. We are far from Homs and Damascus Turkmens for geographical reasons and due to the current circumstances, but we have been working on this. Reaching Damascus and Golan, on the other hand, seems quite difficult for now. However, we will carry on our efforts for organization in other areas. There are people who work with us in the areas that are close to border zone.

We aim at expanding it to the entire grassroots in Syria; organizing the grassroots; designation of delegates and participation of these delegates in our general assembly. Free elections will be held in the general assembly. We have a ballpark figure even if we do not have official figures of the population rate. There are former census results, as well as a research conducted by ORSAM.

**ORSAM: What do you think about the solution of the Syria problem as the Mass? Where do you place Syrian Turkmens within the framework of this solution?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** Turkmens in Syria are not concentrated in a single area. Therefore, there cannot be concrete solutions for Turkmens. For example, district federation is not possible. So, when we began, we wanted Syria to adopt a citizenship-based format. In fact, even before the national assembly was formed, we had prepared a press release. We stated in the release that the national assembly to be formed should not be based on national, ethnic structure, but on citizenship. However, nobody heard us, or even if they did, they did not take us seriously. Because what is being discussed right now is the division of Syria. This division can only be based on ethnic and religious basis. The assembly was formed, but things did not go as we wanted. The only

country showing sensitivity while distributing aids was Turkey. Turkey helped without making any discrimination among Arabs, Turks, Kurds. However, the aids coming from Arab states were not like that. They did not help us, because they said ; “You have Turkey standing behind you”. We did not say “We are Turkmen” only for nationalist discourse. We said it to protect the rights of Turkmen. Besides, if you leave a gap, somebody comes and fills that gap. We hesitated from other people’s misleading us. Therefore, we immediately set to work. We were active in Syria events from day one. However, we started to work for Turkmen after months. Because in the beginning, “Syria is one!” we said. We still hope so. But as nationalist and ethnic factions appeared, we decided to carry out our activities under the name of Turkmen.

**ORSAM: What are your activities in the field?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** In modern countries military, politics and humanitarian aid are different from one another. But now we are in a state of war. There is a war in Syria. All activities are related to and depend on each other. You have to send humanitarian aids to people. They both really need those aids and also it makes it possible to establish a dialogue with them. In the post-Bashar Assad period, those who have an armed force behind themselves would also have a say. Our young people took shotguns and left to go to hills in the first stage. Most of them had slippers on their feet. No one can let them be in that state. Besides, we will need those forces in the post-Assad period. The aids are not just about those who provided it. It is all our responsibility. Nobody can know what will happen. But you have to do what needs to be done to win.

**ORSAM: What about your relations with other opposition groups in Syria? For instance, besides the Council, also a Coalition was formed...**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** I sincerely say that; if there is a common ground in Syria, it is the Turkmen population. The Turkmen are an ethnic group which are loved most in Syria. Because we get along with everyone, we do not have excessive ambitions, we are in favor of unity of the country, and also we are a loyal community. In Syrian History, you cannot see any betrayal of a single Turkmen. Despite Arabs and Kurds who have become an extreme polar, we are the common ground in Syria. We treat equally towards everyone. While Arabs and we are in favor of the integrity of the country, Kurds wants faction. Nevertheless, we are not enemies of Kurds, we are not angry. Many people were killed during the conflict that broke out between Arabs and Kurds in 2004. Turkmen, on the other hand, have not been involved in such a conflict so far. When we first set off, nobody knew our cause. Because we had started from scratch and we used our personal means. Turkmen were ignored when the first Assembly was in the formation process. Their excuse was the fact that we were not in the political arena. So they stated it as an excuse. It was true in a way, but there were by all means other things behind the scene. After all, the share to be given to Turkmen would decrease the share of other groups. Besides, Turkmen oppose to the projects of dividing Syria. We wanted Syrian National Council to be successful. We stood behind it despite the fact that we weren’t within the Council. But the Council fell way behind the Syrian revolution, and almost became a burden. The National Council needed to be restructured to achieve a success. The Council was considered as a means to be used to spread the new structure to large masses. However, no result could be achieved. As we estimated, this situation led to the failure of an assembly and to the formation of a new structure. During the formation process of the latter, lessons were learned from the mistakes of the Council. As a matter of fact, it was decided to spread on a larger area, and Turkmen were included in the new Coalition. Currently, there are 16 Turkmen representatives in the Council and

3 Turkmen representatives in the Coalition. These representatives can be listed as; Ziyad Hasan, Huseyin Abdullah and Halit Hoca. We objected to Halit Hoca. Halit Hoca is a strong figure in the Syrian opposition. He could join the Coalition thanks to his popularity. And we could replace him with another Turkmen. So that, there would be 4 Turkmen in the Coalition. In other words, if Halit Hoca had joined independently from the contingent of well-known people, a fourth Turkmen could have sat in that seat. But it did not happen. Our friends in the coalition work actively and efficiently. And we have been working to increase the number of Turkmen representatives.

**ORSAM: What do you think the biggest problems of the Syrian Turkmen movements and of the community are?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** The problems of the Turkmen people are the same with the problems of the Syrian people. Turkmens also have their rights they could not have acquired before. They are being assimilated and dissolving with each passing day. Language is the key element in the existence of communities. If you lose your language, you disappear. Unfortunately Turkmens are slowly losing their language. The biggest problem of Turkmens is the fact that they cannot preserve their language. The regime in Syria pursued a conscious assimilation policy for years. In political life, on the other hand, a dictatorial regime prevailed in Syria. It was not possible for us to become organized as Turkmens. Therefore, our political existence is very weak. Besides, Turkmens have different structures. There is tribalism among Turkmens in Aleppo, Raqqa and Golan. It is lost in Latakia and Homs. Each region has its own characteristics. There is a commitment to tribes. In the other region, on the other hand, citizens are not affiliated to any tribe due to the lack of tribalism. Today, Turkmens in Syria appear like the subjects of Turkey. Therefore, they cannot receive the share they deserve ranging from the foreign

logistic aid to humanitarian aids. As Syrians suffered from Kurdish issue, those who do not now Turkmens approach towards us with hesitation. Some people have misdetections in their minds. We need to express our cause in a right way. We need to be strong in the media for the Turkmen issue to be heard by everyone, and to be understood correctly. We expect to be supported by Turkey on this subject.

As political movements, our major problem is the lack of experience. We were banned from politics in Syria. I am an architecture. I just practiced my profession, and I did not lean towards the politics. However, when turned out to be the case, we considered it as our responsibility and we went into politics. Unfortunately, there is no one who is experienced, popular, and someone who would lead other people. We have the deficiency of leader position. Besides, we also had the deficiency of financial opportunities. We still strive to handle it through our own resources. Large amount of money is needed to do it in real terms.

**ORSAM: Turkmens live in big cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. Nusayri state scenarios are mentioned and Bayır-Bucak Turks live within those borders. Besides, Turkmens also live all along the Turkey-Syria borderline. So, Syrian Turkmens are settled in strategic areas. Within this framework, what kind of problems are ahead of for Syrian Turkmens in the post-Assad regime period?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** As you also said, Turkmens live in strategic points. There is a risk of the establishment of a separate state in Western Syria. In Turkish border zone, Turkmens live together with Kurds. Today, a map called “Kurdistan map” encompasses almost the entire Turkmen area in north. The borders of Nusayri State are between Homs and Hatay

borderline. In case such a formation takes place, there is a risk of deportation for Turkmens. We have been living with Nusayris for centuries. Yes, problems took place from time to time. But we were always side by side. The regime in Syria played the ethnic war card, and triggered differences. After all this blood shed, it seems that it will be difficult to come together. As Syrian Turkmen Mass, we are against civilian people's (who are not involved in these events) being harmed. If 100 thousand people took part in these events, are they all going to be punished? This is a delicate subject. Is it possible to live together? In current circumstances, we can say that "it is not possible to live together", but I think it is possible. Most of us have seen and read blood shed, dead children and raped women. When we first see and read those news, people show reaction. But I think we cannot do it, we don't. Our anger passes away and we might think reasonable, but I think the other party does not accept it. Therefore, we might be deported.

**ORSAM: If a Nusayri State was established, Turkmens might be forced to migrate...**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** Yes, unfortunately. In Latakia, the regime firstly dropped bombs on Turkmen villages and their neighborhood, and thus, people in the area were scared away and they had to migrate. So, certain Turkmen regions were evacuated.

**ORSAM: Do Sunnis continue to migrate for security reasons? In addition to Turkmens, there are also a great number of Sunni Arab population who live in central Latakia...**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** People do not migrate from central Latakia. But people migrated from Bayır-Bucak to a great extent. Many people still live in villages in the area that is out of the shooting range. However, the primary policy is to lay siege to the area.

**ORSAM: Do you argue for a decentralized structure where Turkmens have a say in their own area? Or as Turkmens, do you prefer to live under a political structure with cultural and social rights but also with a strong central authority**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** As Turkmens, we are in favor of the unity of Syria. Of course, we do not mean a regime like the Baath Party by an authoritarian centralized state, but instead we mean a civilized, democratic state. We would like local administrations to be powerful in a civilized and democratic state. But we do not want a federal structure or very powerful local administrations. What we care about is the Syrian people's having equal rights with religious and ethnic affiliations of each individual. On the other hand, we want social and cultural rights of minorities and of those who have different religious and sectarian affiliations to be protected.

**ORSAM: Have ever had big problems in your relations with Syrian Kurds?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** We haven't had any problem so far. Some problems took place between Kurds and the Free Syrian Army, but Turkmens were not involved in that. We are still against resorting to arms to solve this problem. Hostilities are not eliminated easily. Establishing a dialogue must be a priority.

**ORSAM: Are Turkmens currently strong enough to defend their own areas?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** I think they are. We are strong both in terms of the structure and also in terms of the population. However, we do not have sufficient equipment if you mean armed struggle. If Turkmen units received more support, they could easily defend their areas.

**ORSAM: How do you assess Turkey's approach towards Turkmens? Syrian Turkmen Platform was held in İstanbul. The**



**Speaker of the Parliament of Turkey Cemil Çiçek and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu attended the meeting. Could you tell us about your expectations from Turkey and your assessments about the Platform?**

**Yusuf MOLLA:** We are glad to see that Turkey attaches more importance to the Turkmen issue with each passing day. Beforehand, we thought that Turkmen issue was not given much importance. It is quite important for Turkey to see us raising our voice, taking part in the opposition, and establishing good relations. There is no group in Syria with whom we are in fight. Turkmens have an important position in terms of securing uniformity in Syria in the future. We have a command of both Arabic and Kurdish culture. We understand both sides better, and we know how they approach towards each other.

Thanks everyone who contributed to Syrian Turkmen Platform. Our doors are always open to those who contribute. We complained about the lack of people who devoted their time and worked for this cause. We cannot make negative comment while there are people who work to this end now. What is important is to prevent any activity against the unity of Turkmens. Most of the people in the organization committee of this platform are our friends. In fact, we even sent one of our friends; Mustafa Sheikh Ahmet. Even though we say that we are not experienced politicians, we have been in this field for 2 years, and we have gained experience, even a little. Friends

carried out closed activities without sharing them with the outside. This situation caused reaction. We have fought against a non-transparent regime for years. Today, people seek for a more democratic and more transparent formation. This platform is a major step on Turkmen issue. With its pluses and minuses, it was helpful. Thanks for those who contributed. But the forthcoming meetings should have a broader participation.

Turkey now attaches clearer and more explicit importance to Syrian Turkmens. In training of Turkmen political groups and in organization; we would like Turkey to guide and make us feel that they stand behind us. It is necessary to provide financial aid to bring Turkmen name to the forefront in the media, and also for organization. In terms of the humanitarian aid, we do not expect more than it is provided for Kurds and Arabs. We have lived with this community so far, and we will continue to live with them. In fact, most of us are related to each other. We will never be divided. Therefore, we would like to please our friends. I believe that the current misunderstanding will be eliminated in time. We have a partnership with the Syrian people dating back to 1000 years. Therefore, we do not want very apparent aids to be provided by Turkey.

**ORSAM: Thank you very much.**

*\* This interview was conducted by ORSAM Middle East Specialist Oytun Orhan on 21 December 2012.*

## 6. AN INTERVIEW WITH TARIK SULO CEVIZCI, DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE SYRIA DEMOCRATIC TURKMEN MOVEMENT

**ORSAM:** First of all, could you tell us about yourself?

**Tarik Sulo CEVİZCİ:** My name is Tarik Sulo Cevizci. I was born in 1984. I am from Çobanbey Village of Aleppo. I have been living in Turkey since 2004. I graduated from the Department of Industrial Engineering. I am doing master degree in Engineering Management Program at İstanbul Technical University. At the same time, I am in executive board of the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement, and also I am Deputy Chairman of the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement.

**ORSAM:** Could you give us a general information about the Turkmen political movements in Syria, and the Democratic Movement?

**Tarik Sulo CEVİZCİ:** When the conflicts in Syria first broke out, we understood that Syrian Turkmens were lack of organization. We convened with our friends and talked about what we could do to overcome deficiencies. We foresaw that a crisis that could take place in Syria might have a major impact on Syria Turkmens in case of a failure of a political organization. I am one of those who launched political initiatives in Turkey. I was the Chairman of the Syrian Turks Association which is the first association. Then we took the decision of politicizing Turkmens in Syria, and I have taken part in all related-organizations since then. I joined the executive board of the Syria Democratic Turkmen Movement which was created in İstanbul on March 21<sup>st</sup>. Also, I also worked as the Deputy-Chairman of the organization. We assigned our new Chairman in the Congress that was held last week. I was assigned as the Deputy-Chairman responsible for foreign affairs and political units. During this period of time, we assumed role as the



addressees of the Turkmens in Syria before the opposition. Currently, we have 16 Turkmen representatives within the Syrian National Council. In the newly-established National Coalition, on the other hand, we have 3 Turkmen representatives. There are also independent political formations such as Syrian Turkmen Mass and Halit Hoca who work in cooperation with us in the Coalition.

**ORSAM:** Currently it is suggested that there are 1,5 million Turkophone in Syria, but what is more important than their number is the fact that the Turkmen live in extremely strategic areas. For instance, Bayır-Bucak Turkmens are settled in Latakia Province where Nusayris live in majority; and Aleppo Turkmens, on the other hand, are settled along the Turkey-Syria borderline. Within this framework, what are the major risks ahead of the Syria Turkmens in the forthcoming period?

**Tarik Sulo CEVİZCİ:** Syria Turkmens relatively protect their own areas. However, there

are certain problems in the areas where they live together with Nusayris. We have problems about the area in particular. On the one hand there is an effort to take part in the restructuring process, and on the other hand, there is a struggle for life; and on the other hand there is a risk of losing lands. For example, the priority of Bayır-Bucak Turkmens in Latakia province is to take their lands back. Their priority is to go back to their villages. However, Aleppo is considered as a partially liberated zone. The problem of the Turkmen people in that area is the fact that they cannot be represented within the institutions restructured such as security and municipalities. The priority in Aleppo is to receive right of representation. In Homs, on the other hand, there is a struggle to survive. The villages in the area are blockaded, humanitarian aid cannot be provided and people struggle for their lives. The aforesaid difference also goes for the Turkmen in Golan and Damascus. People in the area wait for bombs to be dropped on themselves. In other words, the problem in Aleppo-Raqqa and problems in Damascus-Hama-Homs are very different from each other.

**ORSAM: What kind of solution do you come up with on Turkmen issue in Syria as the Democratic Movement? In addition, could you inform us about your Movement's activities both in the international arena and in Syria?**

**Tarık Sulo CEVİZCİ:** As the Turkmen Democratic Movement, we will carry out result-oriented activities in the forthcoming process. In Aleppo, we will rather focus on civilian organization. Representation of Turkmens in the institutions in Syria is very important for us. We should obtain rights to do justice to those who were martyred in the field. In Latakia, on the other hand, we aim to stop the migration. Besides, we want those who took shelter in Turkey to go back to their country. The only aid we can provide for Homs is to provide them with financial

aid. There's nothing else we can do. We can sum up the new strategy of the Syria Turkmen Democratic Movement as follows; to carry on our struggle in the opposition, to win a seat as Minister in the government to be formed, to give weight to civilian organizations, to take part in local administrations in Aleppo and in liberated zones, and thus to let Turkmens in Syria have a say.

**ORSAM: What kind of solution do you propose for the Turkmen in New Syria?**

**Tarık Sulo CEVİZCİ:** Syria Turkmens live in different cities, and they do not have a geographical unity. Therefore, any faction to take place for that reason would harm Syria Turkmens to a great extent. Thus, our primary objective is to keep unity and integrity of Syria. Besides, we ask for a new system based on the citizenship in Syria. A new state that is not based on any party, any sect, any ethnic group; but totally based on citizenship. Besides, we ask for an election to be held under the supervision of the world public opinion, a constitution to be prepared in line with world conditions, and for groups constituting the Syrian community to be provided with both cultural, political and civil rights. I do not say minority, because we are not minority.

**ORSAM: Syrian Turkmen Platform was held in İstanbul not long ago. The Platform was hosted by the Turkish Foreign Ministry. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu also attended the conference and made a speech. During his speech, he made a commitment regarding that Turkey would support Syria Turkmens. What do you think about Turkey's approach towards you Syrian Turkmens? What are your expectations from Turkey?**

**Tarık Sulo CEVİZCİ:** Even before we came to Turkey, we already felt their support. This trust already existed. Arabs and Kurds always says to Turkmens that; "There is a state standing behind you. You are in a much better con-

dition than us.” However, we haven’t received as much support from Turkey as they say. Still, we have received a considerable amount of support and attention from Turkey. Even under current conditions, Turkey stands behind Syrian Turkmen. Turkey provides both political and humanitarian aid. Of course we expect much more support and aid. We are also aware of the fact that both the government and public opinion increasingly support us with each passing day. However, this is not

enough. More effort and more aids should be provided. Syrian Turkmen have not gained a place in the world public opinion yet. Turkey should be a voice to us in the world public opinion.

**ORSAM: Thank you very much.**

*\* This interview was made by ORSAM Middle East Specialists Oytun Orhan and Bilgay Duman in Ankara on 24 December 2012.*

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