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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 000477

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, DRL/NECSA BARGHOUT
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT/SHAPIRO
LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR MILLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/08/2019
TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PHUM, KDEM, SY
SUBJECT: MURKY ALLIANCES: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, THE MOVEMENT
FOR JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY, AND THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION

REF: A. 07 DAMASCUS 01156
B. DAMASCUS 00185

Classified By: CDA Raymond Maxwell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Syria Website published a "letter" on June 11 accusing external Damascus Declaration committees of violating the Damascus Declaration National Council's bylaws on electing members to the General Secretariat. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX explained the Muslim Brotherhood's protest stemmed from the external Damascus Declaration committees' failure to coordinate with the MB in setting up the external political structures meant to compliment the Damascus Declaration's internal structures. The rancor expressed in the MB's letter suggested a growing fissure between expatriate Damascus Declaration

representatives, especially between the MB and the small, but politically connected and increasingly active Movement for Justice and Development (MJD). More worrisome, however, is recent information suggesting the SARG may already have penetrated the MJD and learned about sensitive USG programs in Syria. End Summary.

Background

2. (C) Since 2005, internal squabbles among political parties signatory to the Damascus Declaration have stalled, but never obstructed, the organization's forward progress. Disputes ranged from how vocal the organization should be in condemning U.S. policies in the region (ref A) to whether the Damascus Declaration should distance itself from the MB. Nasserists and nationalists of varying stripes, especially those in the Arab Socialist Democratic Party, whose participation in the Damascus Declaration was permitted by the SARG as a wedge to create division among reformist ranks, proved especially adamant in their rejection of the MB. The Nasserists, XXXXXXXXXXXXX told us, insisted the MB's involvement provoked the SARG; for the Damascus Declaration to continue safely, MB participation would have to be jettisoned.

3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX

MJD vs. Muslim Brotherhood

4. (C) Since 2008, expatriates have formed Damascus Declaration committees throughout Europe and the United States. Initially, XXXXXXXXXXXXX remarked, little coordination existed among the nascent "external committees" in the U.S., Britain, Belgium, France, and Germany. The MB, despite having a developed network in Europe and being signatory to the original Declaration, was left on the margin. The MB did not comment on the formation of the committees, nor was the MB's input sought by those putting the committees together, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said. XXXXXXXXXXXXX added that the purpose of these committees was to put in place a temporary, seven person panel that could elect a small number of external representatives to the General Secretariat, an idea consistent with the founders intentions for the General Secretariat's structure.

5. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX asked the representative of the London-based Damascus Declaration committee, Anas al-Abdah -- who was also the leader of the Movement for Justice and Development, a self-professed moderate Islamic organization (ref B) -- to contact the MB

and invite them to participate in the formation and elections of the ad hoc political panel.

6. (C) "After a year," XXXXXXXXXXXXX lamented, "nothing has been achieved. Abdah claimed he tried to contact them, but this is hard to prove." XXXXXXXXXXXXX added that other external Damascus Declaration committee members had reported back that they too had attempted to contact the MB without success. XXXXXXXXXXXXX told

us XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX doubted attempts at contact commenced until it was effectively beside the point -- that is, after the MB broke with the NSF and disavowed opposition activities in response to the Israeli attacks on Gaza. By then, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said, it was too late; the MB felt slighted by the external committees. When the MB broke from the NSF, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said, "I tried to push XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX to contact them directly," to ask them to participate in the formation of the external political structure. "I said directly, not through (Anas) Abdah because I know competition among groups outside causes problems," XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX recounted. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

7. (C) According to XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, it was the external committees' disregard for MB participation that prompted the Brotherhood to draft and publish its incendiary letter. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said "some people are now saying the MB isn't serious about joining in the Damascus Declaration's work" and that the letter is just an excuse -- they have already renounced opposition activities and do not plan to resume them against Syria. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX cautioned, "I think this comes from outside, not in Syria," and that it is not true. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, "The MB is the largest Islamic group in the country; the MJD is just a few people."

MJD: A Leaky Boat?

8. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX had told us in the past (ref B) that the MJD (1) had many members who were formerly with the MB; (2) was at odds with the MB and sought to marginalize it abroad; (3) was seeking to expand its base in Syria, though it had not been successful; and (4) had been initially lax in its security, often speaking about highly sensitive material on open lines. The first three points speak directly to the ongoing feud and the MB's recent letter of protest. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

9. (S/NF) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us security services had asked whether XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX had met with anyone from our "Foreign Ministry" and with anyone from the Democracy Council (Comment: State Department Foreign Affairs Officer Joseph Barghout had recently been in Syria XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX; we assume the SARG was fishing for information, knowing Barghout had entered the country. Jim Prince was in Damascus on February 25, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

10. (S/NF) Comment: Born not as a political party, but as an umbrella organization composed of many different groups, the Damascus Declaration has been handicapped by internal divisions among unlikely allies: the Kurds, the MB, liberals, national socialists, communists and others. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX MJD's organizational successes so far might best be explained as the by-products of its relationship with the XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and the USG. Evidence the organization has a sizable, influential constituency inside and outside Syria is difficult to discern. Post has seen no reporting on the size MJD's base in Europe and the U.S. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX; therefore it would not surprise us if an external committee member like Anas Abdah, who heads both the Damascus Declaration's external London committee and the MJD, would drag his feet when asked to contact the MB.

11. (S/NF) Comment continued: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX report begs the question of how much and for how long the SARG has known about Democracy Council operations in Syria and, by extension, the MJD's participation. Reporting in other channels suggest the Syrian Muhabarat may already have penetrated the MJD and is using MJD contacts to track U.S. democracy programming. If the SARG does know, but has chosen not to intervene openly, it raises the possibility that the SARG may be mounting a campaign to entrap democracy activists receiving illegal (under Syrian law) foreign assistance. End Comment.

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