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TAGS: PHUM, PGOV, PREL, SY
SUBJECT: MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT SEEKING TO
EXPAND ROLE IN SYRIA

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: In an effort to assess the current activities of MJD in Syria and XXXXXXXXXXXXX, we met XXXXXXXXXXXXX with XXXXXXXXXXXXX has connections to the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD). XXXXXXXXXXXXX reported on the MJD's effort to expand in Syria and the current coordination between the MJD and the Damascus Declaration. XXXXXXXXXXXXX also explained the MJD's antipathy to the Muslim Brotherhood and its effort to participate in Damascus Declaration committees abroad. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

2. (C) The MJD, currently banned in Syria, was formed in London in 2006 and took the bulk of its initial membership XXXXXXXXXXXXX from exiled "liberal, moderate Islamists," some of whom were formerly members of the Muslim Brotherhood. MJD's approach toward democratic change in Syria is non-ideological, XXXXXXXXXXXXX. When Poloff pressed him to

explain this stance further, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, "They don't believe in Shari'a law, for example."

3. (C) In 2006 there was a sense among activists inside and outside Syria that the release of the Mehlis report on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, combined with increased U.S. pressure on the SARG, had made President Bashar al-Asad's regime vulnerable, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX recounted. "(Former Syrian Vice President Abdel Halim) Khaddam left in 2005 because he feared the government would fall and he's the kind of guy that wants to be on the safe side. Also, he thought he could gain followers if the regime fell," and he had political distance from it, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, adding that this wave of thinking was pervasive even among many Ba'athists. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX argued it was precisely this atmosphere Ba'ath party members were responding to when they had earlier pushed an economic and political reform agenda during the 2005 Ba'ath Conference.

4. (C) The MJD began as a small network, was not appropriately security conscious, and spoke openly on unsecured channels, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. As the organization began to grow and the SARG began targeting civil society activists, especially in late 2007, the MJD "backed away" from its organizational efforts in Syria and concentrated on operations in Europe and the U.S. "Now," XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX continued, "the MJD is trying to build back up. Still, 90 percent of the people in the street don't know anything about the MJD," XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said.

MJD AND THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION

5. (C) On its website the MJD states it is a member of the Damascus Declaration. (Note: the MJD is not an original signatory. "Membership" in the Damascus Declaration is essentially open to anyone who supports the Declaration's goals.) Over the past year MJD has participated in symposiums with XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX in Europe and the United States, including co-sponsoring the April 25, 2008 "Syria in Transition" round-table that included former high-ranking State Department guests. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX intimated, however, that some Syrian-based Damascus Declaration members felt uncertain as to how close they should be to the MJD.

6. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

7. (S/NF) While the MJD presence in Syria is small, it could become more significant in the future, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX stated, especially now that the MJD was coordinating with XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX on "satellite television." (Note: We understand this refers to a MEPI/MJD plan to broadcast television programming into Syria from abroad.) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX added, referring to the broadcasting, "They are saying the Ford Foundation is supposedly financing this." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX also revealed XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX had been contacted by the MJD and asked to help strengthen their network in the country. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

8. (C) According to XXXXXXXXXXXXX, the MJD does not enjoy a cooperative relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. XXXXXXXXXXXXX, MJD has tried to take an increasingly active role and endeavored to prevent Muslim Brotherhood members from being elected to any XXXXXXXXXXXXX committees. When the MJD first formed, XXXXXXXXXXXXX explained, the relationship was not as tense as it is now. XXXXXXXXXXXXX speculated that, with the Damascus Declaration's increased exposure internationally, competition for influence is fueling conflict between the two groups. Like the MJD, the Muslim Brotherhood has declared itself in support of Damascus Declaration goals. During the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza, however, the Muslim Brotherhood announced it would "cease" to be part of "the opposition" in order to promote Arab solidarity in the region (Comment: Our understanding is that the Muslim Brotherhood only suspended - vice "ceased" - opposition activities in light of the SARG's position on Gaza. End Comment.)

SIDEBAR: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE NATIONAL SALVATION FRONT

9. (C) The Muslim Brotherhood's announcement that it would suspend its participation in "the opposition" during the recent Gaza crisis, XXXXXXXXXXXXX noted, has divided the National Salvation Front (NSF), which was formed by Khaddam and Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni following Khaddam's 2005 defection from Syria. XXXXXXXXXXXXX continued, "The NSF is facing trouble from inside since Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted a stronger reaction from NSF -- to support Hamas." NSF did not comply, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said, and so the Muslim Brotherhood's announcement has hurt the leadership. In addition to the Muslim Brotherhood/NSF leadership split over Gaza, XXXXXXXXXXXXX opined the NSF was on the precipice of yet more internal strife and predicted more divisions, but XXXXXXXXXXXXX would not elaborate on either the cause or the personalities involved.

10. (C) When asked whether Khaddam and the NSF had a significant role to play in Syrian opposition to the Asad regime, XXXXXXXXXXXXX replied, "I think the NSF is important. Khaddam was a famous corrupted person, but there are 100,000 people like him in Syria." XXXXXXXXXXXXX stressed the importance of not attacking anyone who opted to defect from the regime lest this send a negative message to those contemplating a similar move in the future. XXXXXXXXXXXXX was that Syrians working within the regime needed to feel that switching sides was a safe option. XXXXXXXXXXXXX

11. (S/NF) Comment: MJD's effort to expand its base in Syria is noteworthy in that it is a moderate Islamist organization that publicly eschews any ideological agenda aside from ending the Asad regime through democratic reform. XXXXXXXXXXXXX That said, we have heard numerous unconfirmed rumors by very nervous democracy-reform advocates that the SARG may have penetrated the MJD. XXXXXXXXXXXXX MJD's role in organizing an opposition television platform for broadcasting into Syria would

make it a high priority target for Syria's security services.

End Comment.

CONNELLY