US-backed Syrian opposition appoints new leader

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The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) appointed a new leader Sunday, following the forced resignation of its former president, Burhan Ghalioun.

The SNC is a coalition of seven groups opposed to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Based in Turkey and sponsored by the United States and the oil sheikdoms of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the SNC and its allies in the Free Syrian Army are engaged in a foreign-financed and armed military campaign against the government in Damascus.

Abdelbaset Sayda, a 56-year-old Kurdish academic based in Sweden, was the sole candidate put forward for the presidency of the SNC. He was chosen to replace Ghalioun at a meeting of the SNC's 33-member secretariat held in Istanbul at the weekend.

Sayda, a professor of ancient civilizations and an expert on Kurdish history, has no known leadership experience and is not a member of any political party. He told a press conference after his election that his main task would be to "restructure" the SNC.

The removal of Ghalioun from the SNC's leading post comes after months of criticism from within the council and from its foreign backers that the opposition lacked cohesion and had failed to rally widespread support among the Syrian population.

Ghalioun, an academic based in France, was viewed as an ineffective leader with little, if any, authority among the fractious opposition militants fighting inside Syria. However, there is nothing to suggest that Sayda will prove any more capable of overcoming the SNC's deep political divisions and isolation from the Syrian masses.

Sayda was a compromise candidate, chosen, according to sources within the organization, so as not to disrupt the delicate balance between the SNC's rival factions. "Sayda does not have a lot of political experience, he doesn't have a long history in the opposition," Monzer Makhous, a spokesman for the SNC, told Al Jazeera.

It can be safely assumed that Washington, as well as the pro-US Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf and the Islamist government in Turkey, upon whose sponsorship the SNC is completely dependent, sanctioned Sayda's candidacy and appointment.

Apart from his low political profile and inoffensiveness to the SNC's foreign backers, the principal reason for Sayda's elevation is his Kurdish ethnicity. There have been long-running threats that Kurdish elements within the SNC could split from the council due to disputes over the status of the Kurdish region in the event of the overthrow of the regime of President Assad.

The Kurdish bloc walked out in protest at the sidelining of the Kurdish national question during the last meeting of the SNC in Istanbul earlier this year. In addition, there appears to be little support among the majority of Kurds inside Syria for the Sunni-dominated SNC and its associated sectarian militias.

While attempting to appeal to Syria's Kurdish minority, Sayda also hopes to present himself as an "inclusive" candidate for other ethnic and religious groups in Syria that remain hostile to the SNC. Speaking in Istanbul after his election, Sayda told reporters, "We would like to reassure all sects and groups, especially Alawites and Christians, that the future of Syria will be for all of us." He added, "There will be no discrimination based on gender or sects."

Despite such claims, Syria is sliding into an increasingly bloody sectarian civil war, with atrocities by pro-government and opposition forces being reported with growing frequency. Opposition militias have been implicated in numerous terrorist bombings,

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assassinations and kidnappings that have targeted religious minorities that traditionally enjoyed a degree of protection under the Assad regime, in particular, members of the Assad family's own Alawite sect.

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