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**From:** Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, December 2, 2011 3:29 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: WSJ Interview

Worth a read.

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**From:** Hof, Frederic C  
**Sent:** Friday, December 02, 2011 1:22 PM  
**To:** Sullivan, Jacob J  
**Subject:** WSJ Interview

This is quite good Jake. It will give S an idea of where this guy's coming from and will, I think, help her prepare. It's consistent with what he's been saying to us over the past few months and it's quite interesting. I highlighted a few passages. Fred

**Wall Street Journal**  
**Syria Opposition Leader Interview Transcript**  
**'Stop the Killing Machine'**  
**December 2, 2011**

Burhan Ghalioun, the leader of the Syrian National Council, Syria's main opposition group, spoke with The Wall Street Journal Wednesday at his home in south Paris. It was his first major interview as SNC president. Below, an edited transcript.

The Wall Street Journal: Do you feel there is momentum, despite criticisms that the Syrian opposition didn't organize as quickly as the Libyans, building for international recognition of the Syrian National Council?

Burhan Ghalioun: The SNC today is a key player in forming world opinion and policy on how to deal with the Syria issue. We are in continuous discussions with our friends and they consult us and ask for our opinion on every decision they make with regard to Syria.

We've agreed with the Arab League on including additional strands of the opposition. I think the SNC has made some major achievements in the past two months. And its presence encouraged Arab and international countries to chart a serious policy to stop the killings going on in Syria and putting a limit to the regime.

I feel there is a serious acceleration of events towards Syria and the measures that were taken puts the Syrian regime in the position of a fallen regime, a regime that is impossible to sustain its existence. We were asking our friends in Europe and the world to get to a point that illustrates to the public in Syria that there is no intention whatsoever in keeping Assad in power.

WSJ: Why haven't any governments formally recognized the council as an alternate government to Damascus?

Mr. Ghalioun: There are complicated legal issues that need to be resolved. They tell us that the situation in Libya was different because the Libyans had territory, an army, governance. They can recognize us politically as the representative of the Syrian opposition but not as the legitimate alternative yet, or else they have cut off the path of any relations with the regime.

WSJ: Are you modeling yourselves on the Libyan rebels?

Mr. Ghalioun: We believe the Syrian situation is completely different than the Libyan. We still believe we can count on the state agencies and ministries and their functions, and our civil servants.

WSJ: How is the SNC funding its operations?

Mr. Ghalioun: Up until now, the council has been funded by donations from generous Syrian businessmen. We have been promised help from several Arab states. We are open to receiving donations. Among them are the Libyans for example. They don't have the liquidity now but they have pledged. Even counting donations inside Syria, around 90% are from businessmen.

WSJ: What are you lobbying international governments for?

Mr. Ghalioun: We asked for economic sanctions; we asked for coordination between the Arab League, the EU, Turkey, and the West. We asked the support of these countries at the U.N. Security Council. I asked the Lady Ashton to create a financial fund to support the Syrian people. She replied that this is an important matter and would be discussed.

We asked them to send a message to the regime with warnings that there is no way out. We asked to apply pressure on Russia and China and to make use of all civilian protection measures. This is why foreign minister Juppe called for a humanitarian corridor.

WSJ: You've openly called for the protection of civilians in Syria. Can you clarify what proposals are on the table and where they stand?

Mr. Ghalioun: The main obstacle is the Security Council – the veto by Russia and China. All suggestions and proposals are ways to evade or bypass the veto and find a way to protect civilians. Our main objective is finding mechanisms to protect civilians and stop the killing machine. If a humanitarian corridor is able to achieve this, then that is important. We think the use of these mechanisms collectively will help in weakening the regime.

WSJ: How might a corridor or buffer zone be enforced without a Security Council resolution? Will all scenarios entail foreign intervention?

Mr. Ghalioun: We say it is imperative to use forceful measures to force the regime to respect human rights. **But this doesn't mean military intervention to topple the regime.** This is different than the organized military intervention that happened in Iraq for regime change. We count on Syrians to bring down the Syrian regime. We want the international community to stop the oppression of the Syrian people.

WSJ: Which scenarios are most viable now?

Mr. Ghalioun: These are measures that must be discussed collectively in the international community, between the Arab states, the Europeans, the U.S. The choices are tied to the capabilities of nations that are willing to help the Syrian people. The council will be discussing with all sides—the Arab League and the western nations and Turkey—to see which mechanisms are most viable and which can best serve the Syrian people.

There is no developed plan yet. There are options offered at the international level, we are discussing it with our friends, but nothing has been decided yet on the regional or international level.

WSJ: It seems like talks over civilian protection and other intervention options have picked up recently, over just the last week from French Foreign Minister Juppe and others. Have talks accelerated and where are they headed?

Mr. Ghalioun: Yes, there is a great acceleration. We are in contact with our friends; we will meet with the foreign minister of Turkey who is thinking of this with the Europeans to discuss the developments in what he mentioned as a no-fly zone. We don't still have sufficient information on these quick and many discussions between parties that are

happening on the Syrian situation between the Arabs, Turkey, and the West.

WSJ: Are there more threats than planned proposals at this point?

Mr. Ghalioun: These matters are still in negotiation. But threats sometimes develop into plans.

WSJ: Is a no-fly zone a possible resolution from your discussions in the past few weeks, as these talks continue?

Mr. Ghalioun: The decision is related to curbing Russia's use of the veto [at the Security Council]. The guarantee of Russia not using its veto would be the lack of foreign intervention. The matter is now one of extended negotiations: how to convince Russians to participate in some kind of intervention that would not transform into a Libya-style military intervention. The case must be made for this intervention to be one within the bounds of civilian protection, and create the necessary conditions for the Syrians themselves to decide and not make the decision on their behalf.

WSJ: Have the Russians indicated a shift in position?

Mr. Ghalioun: **We met with them ten days ago and I think the Russian position has evolved relatively and will continue to develop. We convinced the Russians that we do not want Syria to be involved in a full scale military intervention and that we want Russia to be involved in all decisions on humanitarian intervention, if it fears that it will be marginalized. We asked them to participate in the context of a Security Council decision that will ward off a NATO intervention in Syria.**

This is what I told the Russians: we came here to ward off foreign intervention, not to legitimize it. If we wanted military intervention, we wouldn't have come to Russia. We came to Russia to put pressure on your friends in Syria to accede to a negotiated, peaceful solution.

Negotiation does not mean settling or talks with the regime; it's a negotiation on a transfer of power. These are negotiations with the regime towards the government that represents the people, not a settlement with the regime.

WSJ: What are the prospects of a negotiated transition from the Assad rule?

Mr. Ghalioun: I think the Arab League gave the final chance for a negotiated solution. Unfortunately, the regime rejected this and closed the door on a negotiated solution for now. We are among a different set of options today.

WSJ: Has Mr. Assad been offered asylum?

Mr. Ghalioun: **Assad got several offers of asylum.** The Arab League and Turkey offered Assad to help find him a safe haven. It is clear that he wants to continue and I believe he is not mature and he doesn't have a grasp on reality. He is delusional.

WSJ: You met this week with the leadership of the Free Syrian Army. Have you decided to endorse the dissident army and what is cooperation like between the groups?

Mr. Ghalioun: We went there for two objectives; to coordinate its plans with the council to fulfill the council's strategy and the strategy of the peaceful revolution. We told them we want them to focus their operations on the protection of civilians and not to perform offensive attacks on the military. **We told them offensive operations can lead to two armies in the country and push us to civil war.. But defending innocent civilians is a duty of these defected soldiers.**

Our second objective was to help the army to organize all the forces carrying arms in cities and neighborhoods to avert the potential of armed elements that we don't have control over. We do not want, after the fall of the regime in Syria, armed militias outside the control of the state. They assured us that they will implement our agreement and abide by our request not to launch any offensive operation. They also assured us what happened recently [alleged attacks on state forces] may have been different groups. We will investigate this.

Let us be clear: there are no Salafist armed groups in Syria. Those carrying arms are mostly members of the dissident army. The armed groups are defected soldiers. But they are not all organized. After they defect, they often disappear into different neighborhoods as they struggle for their safety. They need salaries, they need guarantees for protection, they need livelihoods. That is the way everyone will be brought together.

WSJ: Would you help finance or arm the Free Syrian Army?

Mr. Ghalioun: There has been no arming of the Free Syrian Army, they are defecting with their light weapons. If they want arms, and if it is to protect themselves, then yes. But we are a political body, we are not going to get involved in arming the FSA despite the fact that we acknowledge that they need to protect civilians and themselves.

WSJ: How was the Syrian National Council formed and could it widen its base?

Mr. Ghalioun: The council was formed as a coalition between seven different political entities. These entities presented names of different people that would represent them. The representation in this way does not in fact adequately represent women and some minorities. We strive now, and we discussed in our last meeting, to open up the council to new political forces and personalities to improve the participation of minorities and of females.

**We are aware of the importance of minorities, even beyond proportionately, to ease their fears. We believe they should even be overrepresented in the SNC so they are assured they are partners in the future life of Syria. Syrians have a national identity beyond the sectarian divide. Syria's national identity would be weaker and poorer if it didn't have this beautiful pluralism between Arabs, Kurds, and sects.**

WSJ: What is the role of Islamist groups in Syria's opposition?

Mr. Ghalioun: I don't think there is a real fear in Syria of a monopoly of Islamists—not even 10%. In this regard, Syria is different than the other Arab nations. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been in exile for 30 years and their internal coordination is non-existent. The people who are protesting and society in general, are pious. But not every Muslim is an Islamist. This is a big mistake [in perception]. **Being someone who prays or fasts doesn't mean you want an Islamic state. Islam in the form of the Iranian state has been defeated in the Arab world. All Islamist movements now want to copy the Turkish model.**

The model we really need to look at is Tunisia. The Nahda party won the majority—but they went for a coalition government.

WSJ: The council's leadership is assigned for three months terms. When does the current term end and who will lead a transitional government?

Mr. Ghalioun: To respect democratic principles, the president has a three months term, and it can be extended. My term began in October for three months. Extension is something that will be discussed—it's a possibility.

The transitional government will be formed by the SNC and it will also include others from the opposition, technocrats, and military leaders who don't have blood on their hands. A transitional period of a year is needed to assure parties can prepare and organize, and also draft a new election law.

It should be clear that the regime and the state are separate. We don't want the state to collapse. We want to make use of the different agencies of the state and make them function. A national reconciliation committee will be formed during this period. Intelligence and security services will also be brought under control. There will be the release of all political prisoners. And prosecution will start for those who were committed and involved in crimes against humanity in Syria. They will be brought to justice.

WSJ: Have you attempted any negotiations with Alawites as part of a potential transition process? What has been the

feedback?

Mr. Ghalioun: Many lines of communication are open with many Alawites in Syria, and many strongly oppose the policies of the regime. But they're very scared, they fear double persecution; they are afraid because the regime's revenge will be hardest on them. The regime made the Alawites, as a sect, appear suspect or affiliated to the regime's atrocities; this is not the case. On the contrary, this regime treated the Alawites the worst and those from the Alawite community that benefited from this regime make only a tiny percentage. The worst thing the regime did is recruiting their youngsters and militarizing them.

Alawites should be equal before the law, to have jobs in the economy, and have the chance to be employed in various sectors beyond in the security or army apparatus.

WSJ: How will the council alleviate fears among Syria's religious minorities, beyond Alawites?

Mr. Ghalioun: We know there are major pressures on all the sects—even the Sunnis—from the regime so it can maintain the narrative it wants. They've essentially been held hostage by the regime. We are working hard with spiritual leaders on this. We recently met the head of international relations at the Vatican. We have requested a meeting with the pope. **We are also planning a meeting with the orthodox patriarchs in Russia.** We are in contact with various spiritual leaders on the grounds to boost the participation of minorities in the revolution.

The program of the SNC is built on criminalizing discrimination and that all Syrian citizens are equal before the law. There will be no discrimination between majority and minority on the base of religion in the new Syria; it will be a political majority.

The best assurance the role of minorities can be given is that they will not be viewed as minorities but as citizens. We want to avoid the Iraqi model and the Lebanese confessional model that emphasizes the sectarian divide.

WSJ: You're a native of Homs. Do you see Homs as already having slipped into civil war?

Mr. Ghalioun: **There is no civil war in Homs and there will be no civil war in Syria.** There are some negative reactions, there is great tension, but there is a huge will on behalf all parties not to slip into sectarian conflict.

Despite all the sectarian policies the regime used, Homs still maintains some kind of coexistence. The coordination committees inside keep raising banners 'no to sectarianism.' There is true resistance on the grassroots level to counter the regime's attempts. We need to stay aware.

In many cities where the sects coexist, spiritual leaders have created committees to work on this, in Homs and other places. We have called for the creation of local councils to try to extinguish the flame of any sectarian tension.

WSJ: Is a Alawite coup still possible in your view?

Mr. Ghalioun: It's very possible, these options are still open. The public is waiting for this moment to hear this good news.

WSJ: Will the state security apparatus be dismantled as part of a transition period?

Mr. Ghalioun: There are now several security arms and our plan is to gather all these agencies under the ministry of interior where they are all subject to the law. In their current form, they are now militias; at the foremost of them are the 'shabiha' who are paid mercenaries subject to no law and no order. All of these people will be subject to the law. **A new Syria will not be a revengeful Syria; we will follow the pattern of South Africa.** The most important lesson from that experience is the reconciliation council. **People will not be punished unless they are found to have perpetrated acts of shooting or killing.**

WSJ: What are your views on federalism and what will the nature of a new Syrian state be?

Mr. Ghalioun: All parties are calling for a civil, democratic pluralistic state treats its citizens as equal in front of the law. Civil is a version of secular -- secular in the way that it assures it is neutral towards religions and sects, and assures the separation of state and society. The exact term "secularism" has a negative connotation in the Arab world, so we prefer use the term "civil."

WSJ: Would Shari'a law be accommodated?

Mr. Ghalioun: The source of legislation will be the parliament, and if the parliament is made up of a majority of Muslims, it will reflect their culture or propensities. In today's Syria Shari'a is one of many sources of legislation. This is one way of satisfying religious sentiment of the people. We want a true democratic system that represents the wills and aspirations of its citizens.

WSJ: Syria currently has a strategic relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. How would a new Syrian government position itself vis-à-vis these governments? What would relations be like?

Mr. Ghalioun: **The current relationship between Syria and Iran is abnormal.** It is unprecedented in Syria's foreign policy history. A new Syria will be an indispensable part of the Arab League and it will work on improving the role of the Arab League and the role of Arab states regionally, specifically because they took a historic and unprecedented decision to back the Syrian people.

Syria is the center of the Arab Orient. It cannot live outside its relationship with the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf countries, Egypt and others. We need economic and investment support from our fellow Arabs the future. Our future is truly tied to the Arab world and the Gulf in particular. In the future we will need a lot of serious financial and economic support to rebuild Syria.

**Our relations with Iran will be revisited as any of the countries in the region, based on the exchange of economic and diplomatic interests, in the context of improving stability in the region and not that of a special relationship. There will be no special relationship with Iran.**

This is the core issue—the military alliance. **Breaking the exceptional relationship means breaking the strategic military alliance.** We do not mind economic relations.

WSJ: Is there a sense on how the support of Hamas and Hezbollah would change?

Mr. Ghalioun: Our relationship with Lebanon will be of cooperation, and mutual recognition and exchange of interests and seeking with the Lebanese to improve stability in the region. As our relations with Iran change, so too will our relationship with Hezbollah. Hezbollah after the fall of the Syrian regime will not be the same. Lebanon should not be used as it was used in the Assad era as an arena to settle political scores.

WSJ: Would there still be a major priority on reclaiming the Golan Heights?

Mr. Ghalioun: We hope that the political and geopolitical conditions will be more conducive to reclaiming the Golan through measures of negotiation. The Golan is a real indicator of Syria's sovereignty and stability; there is no doubt it will be returned. **We are banking on our special relationship with the Europeans and western powers in helping us in reclaiming the Golan as fast as possible.**

WSJ: Do you have open communication with Hezbollah or Hamas?

Mr. Ghalioun: Many opposition members wanted to meet with Hezbollah and Iran, and present their case and explain this wasn't a foreign conspiracy. But the continued position of Hezbollah, and the negative role their media outlets played, closed this door.

We do have channels with the PLO.

WSJ: Is there a concern over how the state's stockpile of chemical and biological weapons will be handled?

Mr. Ghalioun: This is an important matter and will be part of the general discussions on armaments in the country later in the future and how we progress in the negotiations on the Golan front. **As a principle, we are against the presence of any weapons of mass destruction and nuclear proliferation.**

WSJ: How long can the regime survive under the protracted unrest and sanctions, in your view?

Mr. Ghalioun: I believe the regime will be able to continue to finance itself up to a limit. The Iranians are helping and supporting Assad. We think the situation of those serving around the regime will deteriorate a lot. They will give up their support for Assad. That is the primary objective of sanctions: to force those around the regime to drop their support.

All of the businessmen are annoyed because of Assad's handling of the situation and bad governance. They blame him for what's happening.

The logical estimates for the government's foreign exchange reserves is between \$7 billion and \$8 billion. The economy has contracted by at least 10% this year.

**We're not fortune-tellers but I think the regime has entered a tunnel it can't exit. The matter will take months. There isn't even a 1% chance that Assad will survive. The only way he can carry on—if he does—is to continue the killing. They know if they stop killing they're over.**

WSJ: What is your view of the U.S. role on Syria?

Mr. Ghalioun: Only recently we started to see countries realize they are very late and have to support change. The Americans aren't far removed from what happens. **They are participating in creating Western, European, Arab, and Turkish public opinion. I believe they are choosing a back seat strategy of cooperation. This is a good strategy, and I think Syrians want international cooperation and cooperation among the Arab states and the international community to guarantee the stability and sovereignty of their nation. We want Arabs to have the first role.**

I think a big part of Syrian public opinion prefers that Arab nations lead the way on Syria. They truly fear what happened in Iraq.

The Syrian people will never forget those who extended their hand to help them rid of their dictatorship. The Syrian people also would love to be friends with all nations. I think the new Syria will contribute greatly to the return of regional stability and the birth of common development with Arab nations and the region. The only exception is those countries that still harm the Syrian peoples and take some of their rights. We are looking for a region where cooperation, prosperity, and peace flourish.

WSJ: Many were surprised to see protests sweep through Syria this year. Why do you think it happened?

Mr. Ghalioun: There's a deep change in the Arab psyche. No one can tolerate any longer the rule of regimes that have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of people. In the past ten years people's aspirations changed. The idea of an Islamic state or nation reached a deadline. The general trend in the population in the last ten years was towards democracy. All these attempts to democratize or reform brought no fruit.

People in Syria were terrified of the security services. Tunisia and Egypt brought new horizons, new light to the Syrian. When the volcano erupted it was clear there was an accumulation of disappointment that couldn't be quelled. This explains the courageous determinations of protesters today. Freedom for Syrians today comes before bread, before life.

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