



## **US: Recognizing Syrian Opposition Strengthens Fight Against Assad**

By Scott Stearns – 12/14/12

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STATE DEPARTMENT — Official U.S. recognition for a coalition of Syrian opposition groups is meant to isolate extremists and increase pressure on embattled President Bashar al-Assad.

With Syrian rebels gaining ground on Assad forces, the Obama administration says recognizing political opponents strengthens the fight against him.

"We have said all along that in the absence of any moves by the regime to end this, in the absence of any commitment to any kind of a transition, we are going to continue to support the opposition as we can," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

Nuland says recognition helps prepare for a Syria without President Bashar al-Assad.

"It also will give us the opportunity to better direct the non-lethal assistance that we are providing so that it can get directly to political leaders on the ground in the local coordinating councils, particularly in those areas of Syria that have now been liberated from regime control," she said.

That assistance may help local councils better coordinate with rebels. Their divisions have been exploited by Assad forces.

Washington-based analyst Malou Innocent says anti-Assad fighters increasingly appear better focused.

"Now you are sort of seeing influential leaders of these independent brigades now coming together and coalescing and working together to try and oust Assad," explained Innocent.

The coalition recognized in Morocco is more broadly representative than past

efforts at unifying political opponents. But it has not agreed on a transitional government.

London-based analyst Malik Al-Abdeh says deep divisions remain between secular and Islamist opponents in the group.

"The Muslim Brotherhood seems to be in the dominant position, which I don't think is necessarily going to make them any more attractive to the West," he noted. "However, the West feels compelled now to legitimize the Syrian opposition in whatever guise it may take, simply because of the fast pace of events on the ground in Syria."

Innocent says U.S. recognition is an effort to head off extremists.

"This is an attempt to legitimize more moderate rebel forces and see a post-Assad Syria that is less entrenched in its secular and ideological fissures," she said.

Even with recognition, opposition politicians taking charge in rebel-held areas is more difficult because of the devastation of 21 months of fighting. The United Nations estimates that about two million homes are damaged and thousands of schools and businesses have been destroyed.