Committed to Peace

forumZFD

# An Indispensible Need for a New Breath

## A Systemic Assessment of Syria's Future Peacebuilding Perspectives

# An Indispensable Need for a New Breath

## A Systemic Assessment of Syria's Future Peacebuilding Perspectives

## *Dedication*

Civil engagement is like a kitchen which brings people together. Within this kitchen, there is a broken cupboard. Rather than repairing it, individuals have decided to hold it up with their shoulders, dedicating their lives and embodying the broken leg. This is unfair. We always ask ourselves: are we doing the right thing? Is there a better way to do what we are doing? It is not enough to work on humanitarian projects, the system itself should be humane. It is not enough to believe in human values, dreaming of a better future for all people. We have to be fully aware that our work, in every single step, is not just to fill in the gaps on the basis of a temporary solution.

We dedicate our work to the exceptional individuals who had tried before 2011 to organize activities and events calling for the rights and dignity of their fellow Syrians citizens.

Peace be upon the memory of those who left us but are still there.

*Diala Brisly, Azzam Moustafa and Benedikt Brammer.*

**With financial support of the programme Civil Peace Sercive of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.**

Ziviler Friedensdienst
Civil Peace Service
We don't turn our backs on conflict.

Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung

## *Special Thanks*

To every center that hosted us in Beirut, Beqaa, Tripoli and Berlin for their great hospitality.

To the photographers, whose work we have used in the study: Nour Kelzi, Hamid Khatib, Alaa Hassan, Mohammed Badra and Antoine Antabi.

To every single participant in the study: we appreciate your time, experience and efforts. We are grateful for your contribution.

To the Arabic language editor for his great efforts and important remarks.

## *Disclaimer*

The opinions expressed in this publication may not necessarily reflect the opinions, or position or direction of forumZFD or its editors.

## *Legal information*

Christoph Bongard (ViSdP)
Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst e. V. (forumZFD)
Am Kölner Brett 8, 50825 Cologne, Germany
www.forumZFD.de/en

## *Project team*

Authors / Editorial team: Azzam Moustafa and Benedikt Brammer

English Editing: DocStream team

Illustration: Diala Brisly

Layout: Amy Chiniara

Artistic Consultation: Antoine Antabi

Arabic Translation: Alaa Hassan and Sary Shleweet

Arabic editor: Preferred to remain annonymous
Project Coordinator : Azzam Moustafa

Published in April, 2021.

100% recycled paper

# Executive Summary

- The study aims at providing a comprehensive overview of conflict factors and peacebuilding needs and a systemic understanding of the Syrian civil society in Syria, neighbouring countries and the diaspora.

- The findings reveal that violence and destruction are not exclusively the results of military strife, but are also linked to a rather long history of repeated human rights violations in Syria. As a result, one cannot isolate peacebuilding goals and objectives from the political, economic and juridical processes in the country.

- Taking into consideration the transitional justice as prerequisite, there is an inherent need to open up a dialogue process on accountability at the societal level. This will lead to a task of conceptualizing the meaning of peace at the socio-political levels in the Syrian context.

- At the local organization level: communication channels and internal hierarchies suffer from weakness on multiple levels. Also, identities of some of these organizations are heavily linked to specific groups, rather than an organizational structure and culture that is independent of any one individual. One can argue that some of these organizations cannot be distanced or shielded from the sectarian, region, and class problems in Syria.

- Some local organizations are adopting new strategies. Their focus has shifted from aspirations and objectives of direct political change to policy-based change through creating a common ground based on livelihoods needs and by providing support to independent groups inside Syria to learn, communicate and network.

- It is essential to create interactive and participatory spaces for Syrian civil society. These spaces will allow them to discuss their respective roles and responsibilities and strengthen the agency of the Syrian actors. Moreover, conflict-sensitive approaches and guideline should be strictly adapted and followed, and women engagement and participation should be fully enhanced at the strategic levels.

- The recommendations place an emphasis on the responsibility of International Non-Governmental Organization's to develop long term partnerships modules with their Syrian counterparts, provide constructive support to their teams, and build their capacities on different levels. They should be aware of not putting them at risk and the consequences of a short-term engagement that is not facilitated sustainably.

- Civil engagement in Syria is still one of the most promising projects for the betterment of the country, due to all the tools, creativity, and flexibility Syrian civil society can bring to bear. Building constructive partnerships based on mutual values is the sustainable road to effectively reaching the social peace goals for all Syrians in the country.

# Index


Part one: Background & Objectives 6

Background of the systemic assessment 6
How to use the systemic assessment 7
Objectives of the systemic assessment 8
Definition of "Syrian Civil Society" 8

Part two: Mythodology 10

Stages of the systemic Assessment 10
Systemic Assessment Methodology 13
Challenges Encountered during the Assessment 16

Part three: Analysis 18

Politics and the "Syrian Civil Society"– Brief History and Milestones 18
Actors Mapping – Bird's-eye view 25
Systemic conflict analysis -Syria 27

Part four: Key findings and recommendations 46

Key findings of actors mapping and systemic conflict analysis 46
Why Is Sustainable and Long-Term Support to Syrian Civil Society Important? 50
Raising Awareness of the Role and Needs of Syrian Civil Society 52
Strategic Programme Work of INGOs Inside and Outside Syria 55
Building Partnerships and Corporations with Syrian CSOs and Actors 56

Conclusion 58

Annex 59

# Part one: Background & Objectives

## 1. Background

- As we enter the tenth year of armed conflict in Syria, hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions forcibly displaced, both internally and externally. This has left the country's infrastructure and social stability devastated. What started in 2011 as a series of peaceful protests -an unprecedented uprising across the country- has become a bloody conflict involving regional and international actors. The Syrian population has paid the heaviest price of all. It faces unmeasured levels of violence and human rights abuses committed by the parties to the conflict, including the Syrian government; anti-government armed groups; and numerous radical and terrorist groups. As the government and its allies have reconquered most of the country, with the exception of Idlib, parts of eastern Syria, and northern Aleppo, some areas of the country appear to have moved into a low-intensity or even post-conflict phase.

- Yet the war on people lives on in indiscriminate killings and extrajudicial executions; arbitrary detentions and torture; starvation tactics; and the destruction of private and public property. All this has led to a scale of destruction and damage visible across the entirety of Syria. In addition to this destruction, the Syrian population faces the imminent risk of widespread poverty and insecurity, exacerbated by corruption and nepotism within political, commercial, and social circles. The regime has established a system which understands perfectly how to exploit the humanitarian, developmental, and reconstruction needs of Syrians, both within and outside the country, for its own benefit. Syria's war features a number of different conflict lines, and a variety of humanitarian risks. Its situation is correspondingly complex. The international community must work with civil society organisations (CSO) to develop sufficient knowledge about the diverse conflict lines and social frictions in Syria; the country's variegated cultural, ethnic, class, and religious affiliations; its geographical differences; and the specific dynamics of urban and rural differences which inform the nature of Syrian society.

- Forum Civil Peace Service (forumZFD) has decided to develop deeper knowledge of the present dynamics in the Syrian civil society, and of the different actors involved. The following study aims to create a better understanding of the possibilities of partnerships between relevant civil society actors (within Syria and without) who are working to establish peace inside the country. forumZFD wishes to bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds to discuss their experiences and formulate recommendations. This study is an attempt to create tools most useful in understanding the current state of Syria's civil society and its actors in their full complexity.

- This elaboration of field data is based on the efforts of a number of researchers from a variety of backgrounds. The field study takes a bottom-up approach, and begins by engaging Syrian civil society actors themselves in planning the methodology of the study, with the intention of building mutual trust, developing knowledge, and creating cooperation. The authors acknowledge that the assessment they present is not neutral. Their analysis of different sources, causes, and factors driving the conflict was often contentious during their internal discussions. The authors are aware that the data collection and analysis processes have the potential to exacerbate individual conflicts. Therefore, their assessment followed the principle of 'do no harm'[1] as much as possible.



## *Forum Civil Peace Service*

Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst e.V. supports people engaging in civil society, and those who are trapped in violent conflicts, with the aim of assisting their paths to peace. The organisation was established in 1996 by peace and human rights groups in reaction to the Balkan crisis. Since then, forumZFD has striven to help overcome war and violence. Currently, forumZFD works with peace consultants in Germany and t other countries in Europe, the Middle East, and South-East Asia. This professional work in conflict zones would not be possible without intense preparation. To that end, the Academy for Conflict Transformation offers specialised training to people in international peace work. Through campaigns, lobby work, and public relations, forumZFD actively advocates policies promoting civil peace. forumZFD is a recognised organisation of the German Civil Peace Service (CPS). It has signed the Transparent Civil Society Initiative (ITZ), by Transparency International Germany, and has financed this work through public and private grants, donations, and membership fees.

## 2. How to Use the Study

This assessment and its recommendations can be used to establish a baseline of civil society engagement in Syria. Interpreted systematically, it reflects an overhead snapshot of the current context, its dynamics, and its actors. It aims to help actors identify and develop the right questions and It does not claim to give exact answers. Therefore, the assessment combines analysis of diverse aspects of current dynamics as an example of conflict-sensitive conditions, conflict transformation aspects, community development, organisational aspects, peacebuilding needs, entry points, and partner mappings.

Based on the results drawn from the data, this report offers a timeline; a means of mapping Syrian actors; and what amounts to a systemic assessment of the present state of the conflict. Its recommendations are intended to support a deeper understanding of the Syrian war's dynamics, in order to develop further strategies for programs and projects. Based on these recommendations, it is hoped that readers will be left with the tools to strategise new programmes, adapt existing programmes, and develop distinct activities and projects. Its recommendations can also be further elaborated and discussed in order to support efforts to develop individual critical reflections of the situation on the ground. This might include both short-term and long-term perspectives. These efforts to increase knowledge will be useful in building civil society organisations. It is recommended that these findings be updated through regular discussions and reflections throughout the work of any programme and initiative. Establishing connections with strategic partners within Syrian civil society would certainly add value to any conclusions drawn.

This assessment and its results are limited to the perspectives of particular communities, groups, and researchers in Lebanon and Germany. Hence, the assessment does not cover the perspectives of those within Syrian civil society who are based inside Syria,[2] Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. In the event that new studies are undertaken along these lines, it would be strongly recommended to extend any upcoming

1- Considered the minimum standard of practice to avoid causing inadvertent harm. For more please visit:https://bit.ly/3n4elf4

2- Interviews and activities with researchers inside Syria have not been conducted due to security restrictions imposed by *forumZFD*.

systemic assessments to include these regions, in order to establish a more comprehensive picture of the Syrian context. This report features the results of field research intended to provide a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the material in question.[3]

## 3. Overall Goals of the Assessment

The assessment follows a participatory approach, which is intended to understand the context of civil society actors' engagement inside Syria and in the Syrian diaspora, and the dynamics which impact these factors:

a. The assessment gives a comprehensive overview of conflict factors, peacebuilding assets, efforts, and conflict-sensitive needs in Syria.
b. The study will further provide a systemic understanding of the complex situation of Syrian civil society actors inside Syria, by involving and connecting their ideas and capacities as early as possible with local and international actors.
c. Building on the assessment, the study will provide recommendations from the field, covering work at the programme and project levels, as well as the level of partnerships between international peacebuilding organisations and Syrian CSOs.
d. Ideally, the recommendations from the field will support a discussion on entry points to support local Syrian actors and communities, in order to strengthen and empower resilience, conflict sensitivity, and social engagement inside Syria.

## 4. Specific Objectives of the Assessment

a. Analysing different perspectives held by Syrian activists and partners (from Lebanon and the diaspora) of assets, needs, and limits of conflict-sensitive initiatives working on civil society engagement inside Syria and neighbouring countries;
b. Analysing existing actors and systemic relationships, taking into account ongoing work and efforts, as well as best practices and recommendations from actors working in the field;
c. Analysing the perceptions of necessary roles and responsibilities of Syrian civil society actors, especially the role of peacebuilding organisations;
d. Developing recommendations, based on the aforementioned analysis of local perspectives, to support a constructive discussion between local and international actors, focusing on building and strengthening different models of partnerships to work towards social peace in Syria;
e. Furthermore, the study will contribute to shaping public opinion by challenging ongoing discussions regarding the situation of local Syrian civil society actors and possible future peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive efforts of Syrian actors, activists, groups, and partners working towards social peace.

## 5. Definition of "Syrian Civil Society"

The study assesses the state of Syrian civil society as a part of wider Syrian society. It aims to examine the role, impact, and condition of Syrian civil society and its actors. First, it is necessary to define the term

3- A list of secondary resources is provided in the Annex.



"civil society" within the specific context of Syria. A preliminary literature review and interviews from the field revealed an ongoing discussion between various actors on the question of defining, determining, and agreeing on a specific framework reflecting what is needed and desired from the Syrian perspective. Laylaa Alodaat[4] describes the difficulty of defining Syrian civil society as follows: "There was a body that was established – it wasn't present before and it did get established [...] We can define whether it is a real civil society or a non-real civil society, but, nevertheless, it is an existing body that had its positives and its necessity, and the necessity for it to continue."[5]

Mazen Gharibah[6] emphasises the contextualised development of a civil society driven by outside actors: "A civil society existed in Syria after 2011," he says, adding that norms from elsewhere cannot necessarily be applied to Syria, for what exists in Syria "It is not yet mature; [it] arose in abnormal, incomplete conditions, but it does exist."[7] The following definition is an overview of the different levels and perceptions of what might describe Syrian civil society, acknowledging that the creation of a formal definition is still in progress. In general, an essential attribute of a civil society is the provision of important services to the public. CSOs act in the local public interest, without being motivated by profit or government agendas. The researcher Azmi Bishara[8] states that this definition of civil society is "characterised by the development of citizenship as a concept; a market economy which sustains itself independent of state control; and the extent to which free citizens make agreements based on their mutual interest, rather than their ethnic, sectarian, or tribal backgrounds".[9]

The following definition does not claim to be a scientific contribution to an ongoing theoretical and practical discourse, but rather reflects the discussions of participants during the workshops and interviews:

- the term "Syrian civil society" includes people, activists, and organisations at the local grassroots level (formal and informal) in Syria, neighbouring countries, and the diaspora;
- members of Syria's civil society work in and for the interests of citizens and local communities, operating outside of the governmental and business sectors;
- civil society is not affiliated to any extremist group or oppressive party to the conflict, nor networks of people linked to extremism by social ties and relations that can extend across multiple facets of social life, including trade, employment, worship, and marriage;
- civil society includes notable figures, including community leaders, and professionals, such as journalists, lawyers, and academics;
- civil society features groups both registered or unregistered under the Syrian government or local non-governmental control authorities (CBOs, NGOs, charities, foundations, associations, and unions)
- It works for communal and social wellbeing, and driven by human rights values and It is not in favour of the suppression or persecution of any Syrian citizen regardless of any specific background.

4- Laylaa Alodaat is a Syrian human rights lawyer and Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. For more please visit: https://bit.ly/3cz7yqr

5-Podcast 'AFKAR': Dialogue on the Syrian Civil Society, Fadi Hallisso, September 2018. Starting from the second minute: http://bit.ly/3oFVTsj

6- Mazen Gharibah is Research Associate at the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit in the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. For more please visit: http://bit.ly/36AjBjt

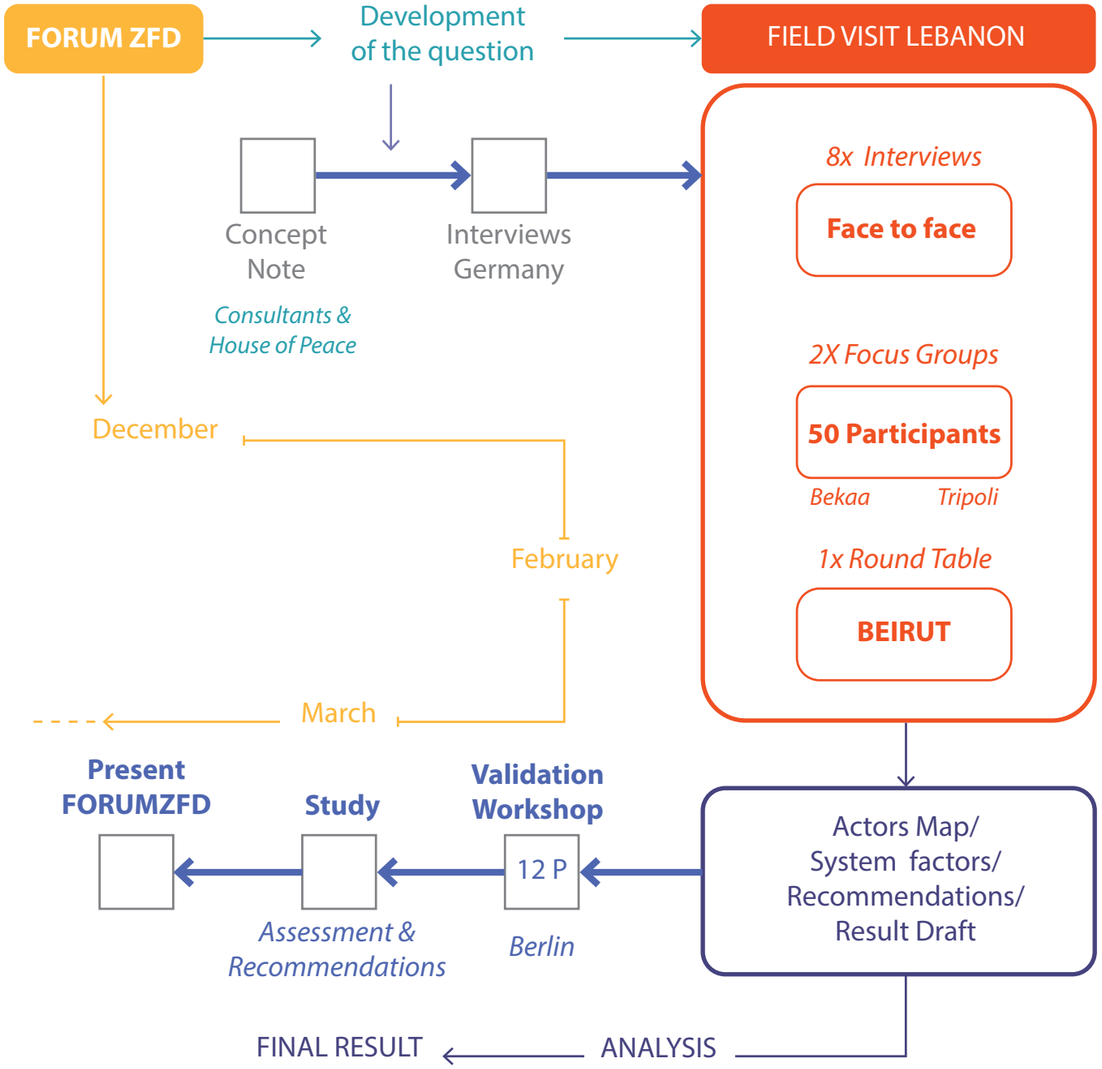
7- Podcast 'AFKAR': Dialogue on the Syrian Civil Society, Fadi Hallisso, September 2018. Starting from the fourth minute: http://bit.ly/3oFVTsj

8- A researcher and Arab intellectual. He is presently the General director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies.

9- A Lecture on 'Civil society in the Arab world' Dr. Azmi Bishara, Al Nahda Youth, April 2011: starting from minute 13: https://bit.ly/3cxW9Hf

# Part two: Methodology

## 1. Stages of the Assessment






The assessment is designed as a participatory data-gathering and validation process and was implemented between November 2019 and May 2020. The graph No. 1 shows an overview of the different steps taken during this period. The process comprised four consecutive phases: a preparation phase, followed by a fieldwork phase, then a drafting/validation phase, and finally a writing phase.

### I. Preparation phase

The methodology of the assessment was developed in close consultation and cooperation with "House of Peace",[10] a local partner organisation specializing in conflict transformation. "House of Peace" is a community-based social peacebuilding organisation that aims to enhance social peace within Lebanese and Syrian communities, by providing space, tools, and support to help humanitarian workers and local community groups develop a new understanding of their realities. "House of Peace" inspires their participants and target communities to act for positive change that fosters social peace. The authors decided to cooperate with "House of Peace" due to their local experience, extensive professional network and their deep knowledge in regard to the Syrian context.

The authors approached diverse activists and experts. Preparatory consultations and face-to-face interviews – ten of them – took place to shape the process and formulate adequate research questions (i.e., interview questions; tools; and discussion topics for workshops). The assessment process and goals of the study were introduced, discussed, and adapted based on the recommendations which arose during this consultation process. Finally, a concept note was developed, and field activities were planned.

### II. Fieldwork phase

Following preparatory consultations, the fieldwork phase was implemented through interviews, workshops, and roundtable discussions intended to collect, discuss, and validate actors, systemic factors, needs, assets, and limitations. The workshops and interview formats allowed for interaction and discussion, often resulting in a diversified understanding, and certain disagreements among participants.

The context of the Syrian crisis is complex and multi-layered, and the assessment was designed to reflect this. Primary data was gathered through qualitative methods over a period of four months, from December 2019 to the end of March 2020. Qualitatively, the assessment benefited from twenty one-on-one interviews, two half-day workshops in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and Tripoli, and two roundtables in Beirut and Berlin.

The authors note that there are contrasting views and perspectives in the systemic assessment. These contradictions and differences are documented, without any judgement, to display the diversity among the participants. The number of different views reflects the complex melange of actors and the multitude of visions, understandings, and strategies present within "Syrian civil society".

The interviews and workshops were conducted in Arabic or English to provide participants a comfortable environment in which to express their perspectives and thoughts without using or falling into a "donor language." Expressing themselves in their preferred language enabled them to take ownership of the discourse and their contributions to it.

10- HoPe is a local organisation which operates in Lebanon and is specialized in peace building. For further information, please visit: https://bit.ly/3sCGniT

SAMPLE OF QUESTIONS LIST[11]

1. Role of Civil Society in Syria

- How would you describe or define the role of "civil society" in Syria?
- Have you observed any changes within Syrian civil society in recent years?

2. Factors for Conflict, Limits, and Needs | Assets and Peacebuilding

- What are the peacebuilding needs and limits, at present and in future?
- What visions and recommendations are there for working towards social peace and stability inside Syria (recommendations for the international aid community or actors like the Civil Peace Service)?
- What positive things do you appreciate about civil society actors in Syria and the diaspora?
- Are there tensions, needs, and conflicts that are specific to certain groups of people?

3. Actors & Leaders

- What role do the government/municipalities/police/universities (we could add more actors for this question) play in communities and civil society?
- Who are leaders in communities (on the ground and in the diaspora)?
- Who is involved on the local level? Are there specific individuals or groups who create/fuel conflict or are able to mitigate?
- What NGOs/CBOs are working in your community, and what programmes have/are they advancing to address sources of tensions? What do they do and who are they helping?

The workshops were applied through different formats e.g., world café, workshops, interviews, focus group discussions and included diverse participants and groups. The workshops were delivered with the support of Elias Sadkni as their main facilitator, and with the support of "House Of Peace". Participants discussed its methods, which were assessed and adapted in reviews before and after taking action. The interviews were held with individuals of different perspectives and constituencies. For reasons of personal safety and integrity, all experts were asked to comment and critically review the assessment process, as well as the interviews' questions, to shape the depth and significance of the findings. The authors obtained the consent of the participants to use the information they provided in this publication. In cases where interviewees asked not to be named, the consultants dealt with the given information on an anonymous basis or refrained from providing identifying information. The consultants aimed to build trust with the participants, and gave priority to personal security, in order not to jeopardize work both outside and inside

11- Please note that we provide the full question list in the annex.



Syria. Participants included individuals of all relevant ages; people in different positions of authority, as well as those over whom authority is exercised; and both women and men.

### III. Drafting and validation phase

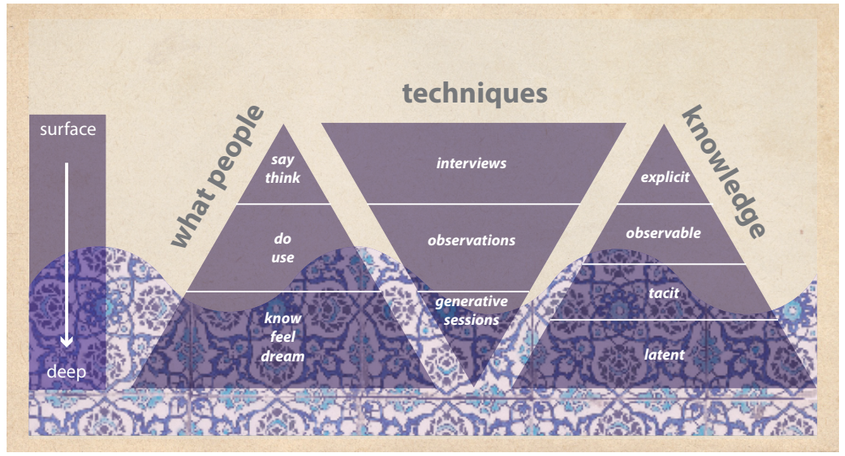
Following the findings and discussions, a timeline, mapping of actors, and analysis of systemic factors were drafted to visualize the data gathered and analyse relations. The discussion and development of this analysis was done in close partnership with Syrian activists and organisations, incorporating their feedback. As the data-gathering was restricted to Lebanon and Germany, the researchers included a validation process to refine the analysis, to make sure that the information was collected from different perspectives, and to ensure the results could be triangulated, and would not be skewed by biases. To be clear and transparent about this limitation, a validation workshop was implemented in Berlin with Syrian diaspora organisations to incorporate their perspective and reflect the draft findings.

### IV. Writing phase

During this phase a study paper was elaborated, emphasizing a visualisation of the systemic assessment, and the conclusions and recommendations. The recommendations that followed were limited to collect possible entry points of action, and opportunities for peacebuilding programmes and projects intending to engage with Syrian civil society actors.

## 2. Systemic Assessment Methodology

The assessment methodology was designed to include three consecutive steps intended as a foundation to generate conclusions and recommendations. Accordingly, the data and information gathered were transferred into a timeline, to understand events and developments leading to the situation under discussion. The next steps featured the actors mapping and a visualized systemic factor analysis. Both maps included mental models and leverage points for further strategic steps. Mental models are important additions to the map, as they describe the way people and groups behave and act to sustain systems. The maps are validated and shaped throughout a participatory process with different actors and experts.



The methodology includes four steps as the following:

## I. Timeline

The timeline provides a visual representation of important events to better understand the history, the development of conflict lines, and traditions of civil engagement in Syria. The authors decided to differentiate between political events and events in the civil sphere in Syria. The timeline is based on diverse sources, including:
- Internet research, literature reviews, reports (multiple websites, books, articles);
- Field visits and interviews with experts (academics, researchers, students, or activists);
- Radio and TV, podcasts, YouTube, and newspapers.

Based on the aforementioned resources,[12] the timeline provides a well-rounded overview of the historical development of civil society in Syria. The boundaries of the timeline are set from the moment of independence from France in 1946 until the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in Syria in 2020.

## II. Actors mapping-bird view

The actor map is a visual depiction of key figures, organisations, and individuals that make up a system, including those directly affected by its function, as well as those whose actions influence the system. The definition of important actors for this study includes decisive stakeholders who wield significant influence on development, social change, and the impact of leverage—positive or negative—with important constituencies for peace or conflict. Key actors are people or groups who are able to decide or strongly influence decisions or dynamics within the observed context.

The resulting map was developed following the discussions and data from fieldwork, and through a systemic scan that focused on relationships and interconnections between various actors. The actors mapping combines the following data:

- Visualisation of the context to understand the general environment e.g., key actors, organisations, initiatives;
- Surveying connections and affiliations to determine who needs to be involved. In addition, it explores various actors' roles in the system and diagnoses the strength of connections among actors;
- Determining patterns in the system and where there are gaps or blockages;
- Understanding motivations, needs, stated demands/positions, sources of power, influence and deeper interests of the various individuals, parties, and groups involved;
- It also helps to evaluate activities and relationships and visualize where potential allies are, and identify possible action points.

The geographical areas included: Northern Syria Azaz, al-Bab and Afrin district, the Kurdish regions; Hasakah and Qamishli; Aleppo and Idlib provinces; Damascus City and Rural Damascus; Daraa, Quneitra and Sweida provinces; Deir al-Zor and Al Raqqa province; Hama & Homs, and the Syrian coast.

On theoretical level this exercise helps to understand how people within the system are connected; identifies weak connections, oppression, or gaps; brings out ideas for possible partners; gives an idea about intervention points in the system; and helps identify ways of determining whom to address whether changes have occurred or not.

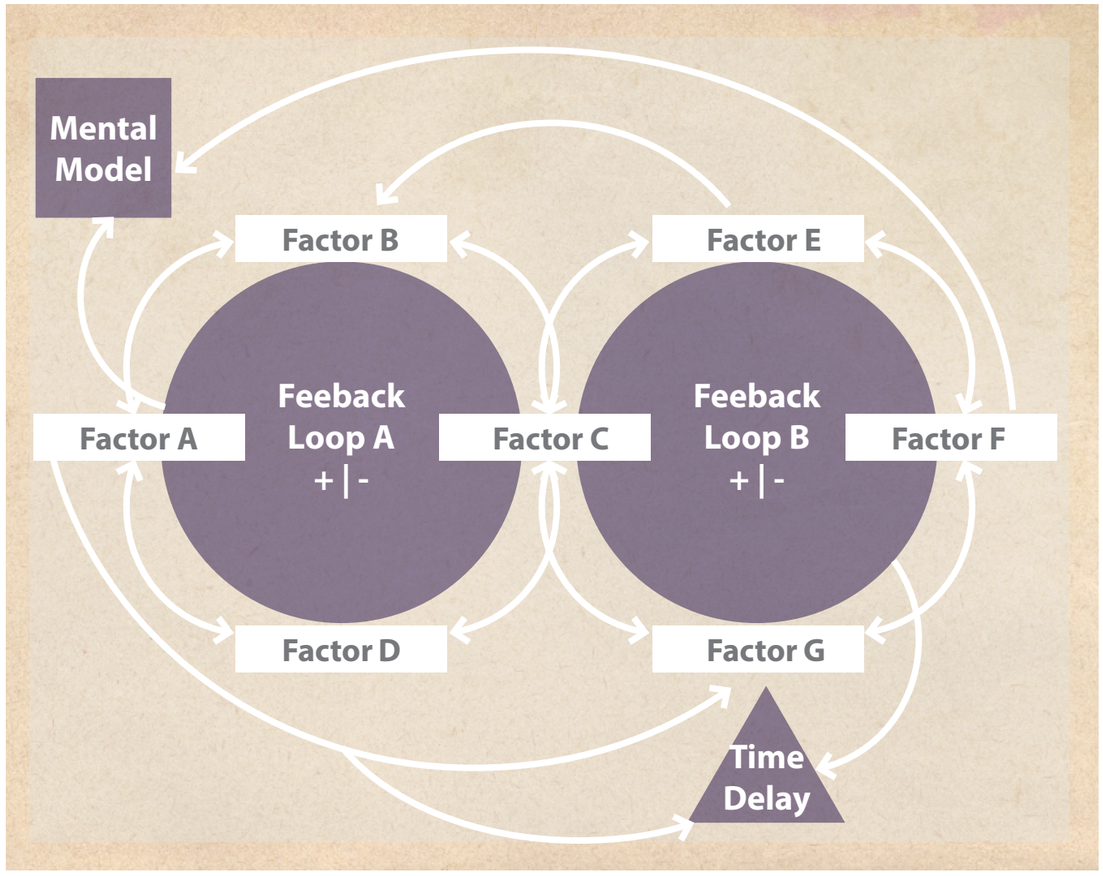
12- Sample documentation and interview and workshop guidelines, as well as literature reviewed, and additional web links are provided in the Annex.



## III. Systemic factor assessment

The system factor assessment visualizes how context factors of an observed system interact with each other. The results of the field work are brought together in a map to show the factors interacting with each other in causal loops. The systemic factor assessment is a tool to understand the dynamics of the environment in which "Syrian civil society", as defined in the working definition operates and exists. At this stage the purpose is to identify those drivers of system behaviour. A driving factor is a dynamic without which the context would change or would be completely different.

The system focuses on the dynamics and factors of civil engagement inside Syria, in neighbouring countries, or in the diaspora. The map helps to understand how the contextual factors reinforce or mitigate other factors of the system. In a system -all factors play a part- and everything is connected to everything else. There is no start or endpoint, and no hierarchy of importance within the system. To work with this complexity, a factor matrix has been developed based on the data and findings from the interviews, workshops, the actors mapping, and the timeline.



This system includes:

- Reinforcing factors regarding limits, needs, conflicts, threats and risks;
- Balancing factors regarding opportunities, assets, and strengths;
- Relationships and dynamics among factors and how the factors interact and affect each other;
- Actors and influence, power, relationship, network (link to Actors mapping);
- Impact delays in the system or dynamics where one factor influences or affects the other in a time-bound dependency;
- Mental models, visualizing implicit assumptions, reasoning, perceptions, images and stories people have that inform and underlie the decisions and actions that cause one factor to link to another.

The systemic conflict assessment is linked to the interviews and workshops and it coverse information and data pertaining to various societal and environmental levels, as well as personal experience, recommendations, direct quotes and feedback by the interviewers to triangulate the information gathered.

Based on the data, the systemic factor analysis looks at different dimensions of the system—structural dimensions (concerning systems, institutions, and underlying factors that can influence the system); attitudinal dimensions (perceptions, psychological dimensions, etc.); and behavioural dimensions (including fairness and equity, discrimination and favouritism, exclusion, etc.). The factors are further distinguished in dimensions of Communities, Economic, Political/State, Socio-Cultural, Organisational, Narratives, Environment, Attitudes/Values/Norms to cluster the information (CEPSONEA-Matrix).

### IV. System map

Finally, the factors matrix was transferred into a system map to understand the dynamics, connections, and linkages between different dimensions. The system map reveals important leverages or entry points for recommendations and puts them into the perspective of understanding the operational environment for international organisations considering working in the Syrian context.

The map brings together important factors from the matrix, and was organized by "feedback loops" which can be understood as patterns. A feedback loop is a chain of logical and causal connections from a factor to another. A "reinforcing loop" refers to a dynamic in which all factors tend to build on each other; each one contributing to or even augmenting the overall dynamic. A "balancing loop" tends to return to a state of equilibrium, or to counteract the dynamic of a reinforcing loop. It is important to analyse not only factors of a system, but also the interconnections among them: how they relate to and affect one another. An essential insight of systems thinking is that cause-and-effect relationships are not linear; the relationship between causes and their effects is neither unidirectional nor always direct.

## 3. Challenges Encountered during the Assessment

During the planning and implementation phase of the study, there was a significant escalation of the armed conflict in some areas in Syria. This escalation, and the further displacement and forced expulsion of the local population, may have affected the representativeness of the data gathered.

The study is limited to the perspective of the diaspora (in Berlin), and the particular situation of Lebanon. No visits inside Syria were conducted. The assessment explicitly covers the outside view of the situation on



the ground. For a deeper understanding and systemic perspective of the context, the authors recommend expanding the scope of the assessment to include Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan, and conducting further interviews with actors inside Syria. The field visit in Lebanon gave the authors the opportunity to interview experts who are based in Lebanon but have strong ties to and knowledge of civil society inside Syria, and in different areas. Some of these experts work in Syria directly.

The study is restricted to certain perspectives regarding Syrian CSOs engagement. The limited access has had an effect on the research process. It was not possible to reach out certain backgrounds i.e., loyalist groups; or actors following different funding regulations. It must be acknowledged that the study covers the overview level of the Syrian context, and only the government-controlled areas on the local level. They recommend using the study (in particular the actors mapping, systemic factor analysis, and recommendations) for further outreach to diverse actors to validate and discuss its findings. This could be an entry point for the set-up trust-building processes within network efforts and to articulate controversial and difficult questions. The fieldwork in Lebanon was conducted between February 9 and February 23, 2020. The data collection coincided with the ongoing uprising and accompanying economic crisis in Lebanon, and the early stages of the Covid-19 spread in Syria. In the interests of transparency, it must be acknowledged that the dynamics, narratives, interviews, and workshops were conducted against the background of Lebanese political, economic, and social dynamics. There can be little doubt that the discussions with Syrian CSOs and participants of Syrian background were affected by the Lebanese situation, as it had direct consequences for all experts and organisations visited in Lebanon.

# Part three: Analysis

## 1. Politics and the "Syrian Civil Society" – Brief History and Milestones

The authors decided to begin the discussion at the moment of Syrian independence from France, in April 1946. This was intended to lay down a basis for our field work, and to build up a background understanding of the major events shaping "Syrian civil society" in the years since. However, it is not the authors' intention to provide a holistic or comprehensive timeline, but rather to offer thoughts to start a discussion. Throughout the years, civil society actors and military and political forces have been in an open and interlinked struggle. Political instability, fragile nation-state structures, and shrinking spaces were key factors in the decline of opportunities for growing an institutionalized and active civil society in Syria.

With regards to a developing "Syrian civil society" today, the authors believe it is important to assume a starting point of "grassroots mobilization", which might be considered the roots of current civil society engagement. Simultaneously with the US invasion of Iraq, and between 2003 and 2004, three different locations -Daraya, Qamishli, and Aleppo- were experiencing various public political expressions. On March 12, 2004, a football match took place in Qamishli between two teams; one affiliated with Syrian Kurds, and the other with local Arabic tribes.[13] Fans of the two teams exchanged political chants in favour of and against the war in neighbouring Iraq.[14] This soon transformed into direct clashes between certain Syrian Kurdish groups and Syrian security and military units.[15] For the next six days, Syrian Kurds organized protests, and called publicly for the restoration of their civil rights, after decades of being deprived thereof. Elsewhere, in 2003, the "Daraya Youth Group" organized a series of activities campaigning for the cleaning of public spaces, and against bribery and corruption.[16] The protests also demonstrated solidarity[17] with the Iraqi people against the US invasion. On February 25, 2004, at Aleppo University, up to 300 students participated in a silent sit-in against a new law (Law No.6) which denied employment rights to those who had graduated from the engineering school.[18]

All of these grassroots movements promoted localized agendas aimed at improving livelihoods (e.g., employment; fighting corruption and bribery; extending or reclaiming civil rights), yet the events were influenced by regional occurrences. One could identify a lack of direct communication and coordination

13- This Footage documents some events of that day in Qamishli, north-eastern Syria, March, 2004: https://bit.ly/3aukviv

14- Various local newspapers, political parties, oppositions actors, and organisations reported and commented, please see here: https://bit.ly/2MRNMLQ

15- Hundreds injured and at least six individuals have been killed by the Syrian security services. Pervious recourse.

16- Footage documents activities organized by the group, Daraya, 2003: https://bit.ly/3p5mYoM

17- This video document the silent protest: https://bit.ly/3tHRd9a
Haitham al-Hamwi tells Amnesty about this march: https://bit.ly/2MOAfF9

18- The defending committee for student freedom published a report. See: https://bit.ly/3cCi3Jr



channels between and across each of these groups and their campaigns. They were distanced from the traditional political opposition parties. In Qamishli, Kurdish political parties led the struggle, whereas protests were led by individuals in other areas. The different, even conflicting, positions between Kurds and Arabs vis-a-vis the US invasion of Iraq may be traced back to some of the deep ideological and social divisions in Syrian society.

The history of these actions is a reflection of many heroic personal stories of activists, students, and people who paid a steep price for their engagement on the ground.[19] Pressed against the wall, the institutionalized processes of Syrian civil society were forcibly pushed out of the country, and resettled in various neighbouring cities, largely following the routes that Syrian were fleeing to and through. To be born under a repressive state was to be born into a difficult situation, and all Syrians were affected by ongoing military developments. "Syrian civil society" had no opportunity for natural and organic growth; rather, it was forced by history to be resilient, and to adapt.

The proposed timeline extends in two parallel paths: political and civic.

19- Yahya Shurbaji from Daraya, Mashaal Tammo from Qameshli, Mohammed Arab from Aleppo, and Razan Zaitouneh from Damascus -all of which, have participated in the aforementioned activities. Later on, and in 2011, they have played major role during the popular uprising against the Syrian government. Consequently, they were tragically and systemically targeted: Yahya was tortured to death, Mashaal was assassinated, Mohammed has been imprisoned and Razan has been abducted in eastern Ghouta. For more please see: http://bit.ly/2NaIQ50

# Syria timeline

Political sphere

Civil society sphere

**1946**

Political sphere: Syria gains its independence from France.[20]

Civil society sphere: Civil work is largely based on familial organizations. Large and wealthy families established associations to provide support to the poorer members of the family.[21]

**1958-1961**

Political sphere: Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt demands, as a prerequisite for the formation of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt, that all Syrian political parties be dissolved.[22]

Civil society sphere: Law No.93 regarding voluntary and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Syria legislated close control of any association which registered as subject to supervision and required prior approval by the security forces.[23]

**1963**

Political sphere: Assumption of power by the Ba'ath Party, followed by enforcement of Emergency Law No. 2 of March 1963.[26]

**1972**

Political sphere: Creation of the National Progressive Front and its sub-organisations by President Hafez al-Assad.[27]

Civil society sphere: All unaffiliated governmental associations are banned and required to be absorbed by the new organisational structure led by the Ba'ath Party.[28]

**1979-1982**

Political sphere: Hama massacre[29]

**2000**

Political sphere: Bashar al-Assad "inherits" the presidency in Syria following the death of his father.[24]

Civil society sphere: Around 550 organisations are legally registered; the majority being religious-based charities.
The "99 statement"[25] which was followed by the period known as the "Damascus Spring" enables the establishment of political discussion fora such as 'the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society' and 'the Friends of Civil Society'. These discussion fora called for political reforms and an end to the state of emergency. At this time came the first reappearance in Syria of the concept of "civil society" (al-mujtama' al-madani).

**2001**

Political sphere: GoNGOs Syria Trust for Development established under the patronage of Asma Assad.[30]

**2003**

Political sphere: US invasion of Iraq.[31]

Civil society sphere: The "Daraya Youth Movement" was shut down and its members arrested.[32]

**2004**

Civil society sphere: Aleppo University sit-in against a new law which denied employment rights to graduates from the engineering school.[33]

Qamishli Intifada: Syrian Kurds participate in large public protests demanding their civil rights.[34]

©forumZFD

20- Syria profile, BBC, for more please see: https://bbc.in/2YHi8U8

21- "We may consider the fifties is the golden age for the charities and associations, in which, it got three times increase from 73 associations to 203" for more please read: http://bit.ly/2YMCQSt

22- HRW Report on Syria 2007. Please read: http://bit.ly/3aT0ZN7

23- Previous recourse.

24- It was republished by Dr. Hassan Abbas on his FB account. The full statement: http://bit.ly/3jkoP7W

25- Damascus spring, Carnegie Middle East Centre, for more please read: http://bit.ly/2Z0cI6P

26- Syria profile, BBC, for more please see: https://bbc.in/2YHi8U8

27- On the Syrian National Front code of conduct. Please read here: http://bit.ly/3cQTTLA

28- Previous recourse.

29- Syria profile, BBC, for more please see: https://bbc.in/2YHi8U8

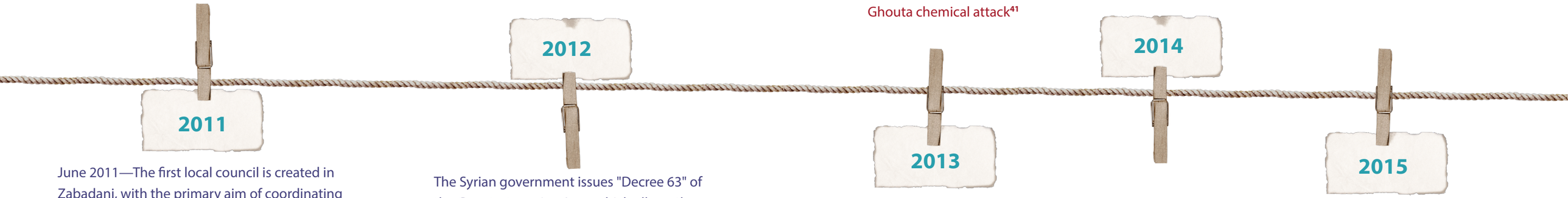
30- Al-Jumhuriya net, Karam Mansour, for more please read: http://bit.ly/3cOfiVs

31- BBC, Iraq War Timeline, for more please see: http://bbc.in/3cXXaZE

32. Obida Amer, On Daraya, Al-Jazeera net, for more: http://bit.ly/39O2fBL

33- The defending committee for student freedom published a report. See: https://bit.ly/3cCi3Jr

34- Human Rights Violation Documentation Centre for Northern Syria. For more please read: http://bit.ly/2LkJix9




Peaceful demonstrations against the Syrian government, sparking the Syrian revolution.[35]

June 2011—The first local council is created in Zabadani, with the primary aim of coordinating between civilians and armed groups. It then develops into a prototype of local governance imitated across the non-government-controlled parts of Syria.[36]

The Syrian government issues "Decree 63" of the Counterterrorism Law, which allows the government to freeze the assets and property of perceived opponents; and "Decree 66", which allows it to confiscate and redevelop property without providing residents with adequate compensation or alternative housing.[37]

Ghouta chemical attack[41]

Daesh declares the establishment of its caliphate and the creation of the "Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq.[42]

Russia intervenes militarily in Syria, supporting the Syrian government.[43]

Pro-regime forces recapture Aleppo from rebel groups. Opposition-controlled areas are retaken and the work of CSOs comes to an end.[38]

Turkey launches Operation Olive Branch against Kurdish forces in Afrin.[40]

Creation of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) to take part in the Geneva peace talks as a "third party".[39]

The Syrian Constitutional Committee (UN-facilitated constituent assembly process) kicks off, seeking to reconcile the Syrian government and opposition by amending the current Syrian constitution, or adopting a new one.

The Syrian government and its allies continue their offensive in Idlib, which causes a new wave of IDPs and refugees from the enclave. Heavy fighting with Turkish-backed rebels and attacks on the Turkish military provoke a swift retaliation by Turkey. A ceasefire is brokered between Putin and Erdogan in an attempt to de-escalate the tensions.

Syria experiences the start of its Coronavirus outbreak.[44]

35- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

36- Omar Aziz has drafted and developed the concept of local councils in Syria. For more please read: http://bit.ly/2MA6xDV

37- HRW on Syria new property law, 2021, for more please read: http://bit.ly/2LoiCLY

38- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

39- The Syrian centre for justice and accountability, for more please read: http://bit.ly/3atXPz2

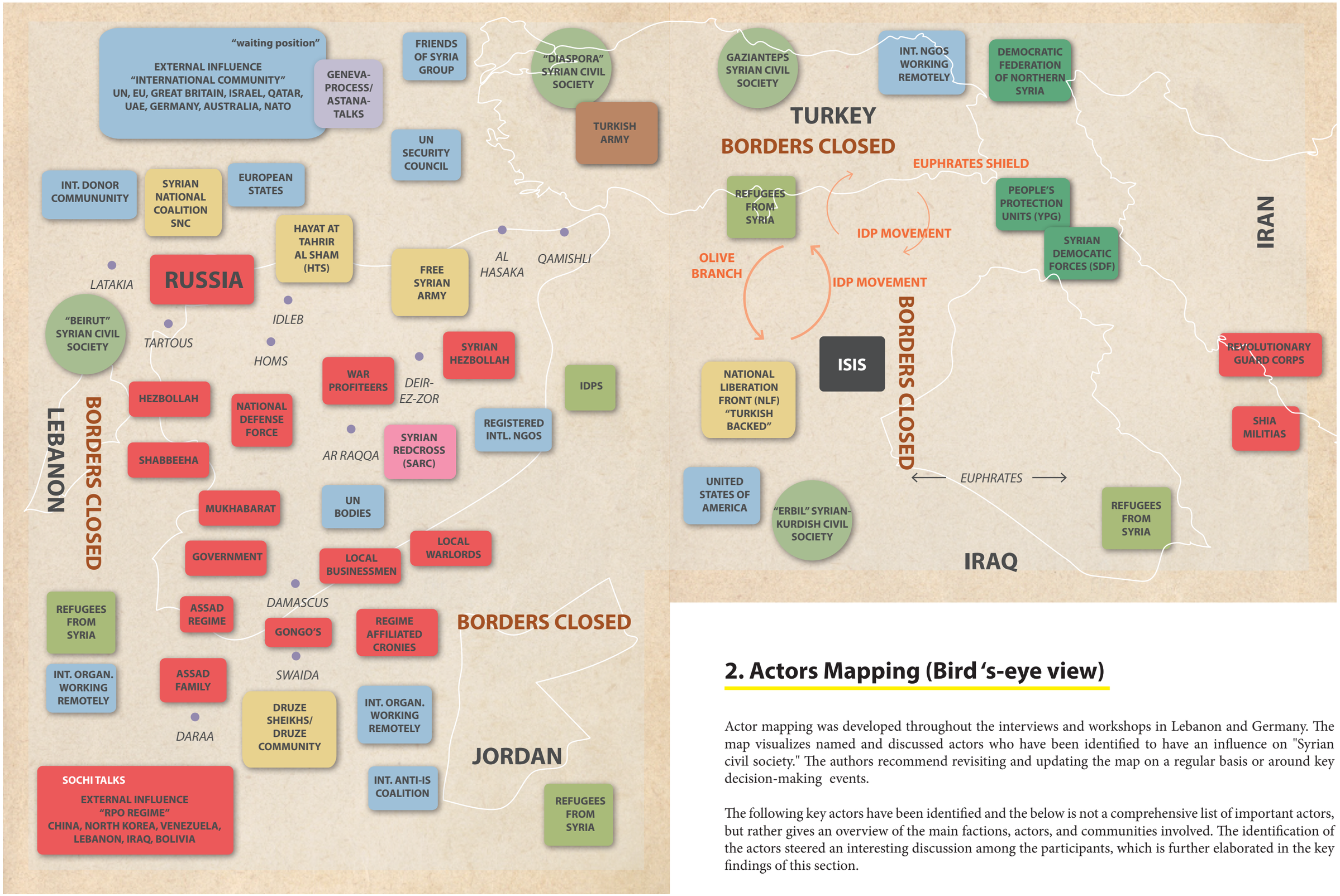
40- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

41- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

42- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

43- Reuters, Syria timeline, for more please read: http://reut.rs/3pQFl1Y

44- Previous recourse.




©forumZFD

## 2. Actors Mapping (Bird 's-eye view)

Actor mapping was developed throughout the interviews and workshops in Lebanon and Germany. The map visualizes named and discussed actors who have been identified to have an influence on "Syrian civil society." The authors recommend revisiting and updating the map on a regular basis or around key decision-making events.

The following key actors have been identified and the below is not a comprehensive list of important actors, but rather gives an overview of the main factions, actors, and communities involved. The identification of the actors steered an interesting discussion among the participants, which is further elaborated in the key findings of this section.

### Pro-regime actors:

- Political: Bashar al-Assad (al-Assad Regime), Ba'ath Party, Syrian state institutions (e.g., Ministries and governmental bodies);
- Civil Society: Governmental NGOs (GoNGOs—e.g., Syria Trust for Development, Massar, Shabab, Rawafed);
- (Former) warlords and military commanders;
- Security: Syrian Arab Army, security apparatus (e.g., Political Intelligence Directorate and Air Force Intelligence), Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah, and the national defending forces.
- Cronies: Russia, Iran, China, Indonesia, India, Belarus, and Brazil, local businessmen (linked to the regime, e.g., Samer Foz, Nader Qalei, Mazen al-Tarazi), al-Assad Family.

### Opposition (armed and unarmed) actors:

- Armed opposition groups (e.g., Turkish-backed "Syrian National Army", Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam);
- Free Syrian Army, Syrian Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the Syrian Interim Government.
- Turkish-backed rebels.

### Terrorist organizations and Jihadist groups:

- Terrorist groups like "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" and other jihadist groups like organization "Horras Al-Din."

### Syrian civil society actors:[45]

- Civil society in Syria: Women's leaders and women's organisations, charity organisations, cultural societies and fora (e.g., Sakeenah Forum, the Arabic Club, and Social Forum), Sada (Echo) Society for Music, the Kawkab (Planet) Nonviolence Forum, local activists, human rights organisations, local administrative units, youth initiatives, community leaders (clan leaders, religious figures, notables), local NGOs (locally registered), local communities;
- Diaspora civil society outside Syria: NGOs, associations, and activists in Gaziantep, Beirut, Amman, and Erbil.

### Kurdish actors in Syria:

- People's Protection Units (Kurdish YPG);
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF);
- Kurdish communities in Rojava.

### Turkish actors in Syria:

- Turkey (state), Turkish Army;
- Turkish NGOs.

### International community actors:

- Relief and development: UN agencies (UNDP, UNHCR, UN-Habitat, OCHA), UN Special Envoy to Syria;
- Political: European Union, USA, Arab Gulf states, Group of Friends of the Syrian People;
- International donor community;
- INGOs registered outside Syria;
- INGOs registered in Syria.

The following points highlight the main findings from the actor mapping. The findings are connected to systemic factor analysis, and can be linked to the main factors and their dynamics to understand the context.

45- For more please see here a mapping has been taken place by IMPACT: https://bit.ly/3cW4tRj



The mapping provides important access points for potential future strategic programme development and partnership-building.

- Geographical context and local situations are extremely complex, and play a major role in Syria. Each area has its own specific features of coordination, and distinct restrictions placed on civil society actors.
- There are four main hubs of "Syrian civil society" in neighbouring countries (Gaziantep, Turkey; Irbil, north-east Iraq; Beirut, Lebanon; and Amman, Jordan) in which CSOs have access to Syrian territory. The impact of each hub differs in influence, background history, target-group, target areas, and scope of work.
- Each hub operates with its specific political and economic dynamics. The political frameworks of the neighbouring states have a huge impact regarding the freedom of movement, legislation, and registration of "exile organisations".
- Because of differences in geography, access, and opportunities, there is a varying capacity between Syrians outside and inside Syria; for example, regarding knowledge and technicalities. Initiatives established in the neighbouring countries are able to develop advanced tools and approaches in areas of intervention.
- Limited and restricted cooperation or coordination between the hubs, and the diaspora community in Germany and Europe.
- The international community uses these hubs as access points for work inside Syria. International organisations (those with a field presence inside Syria) are registered and controlled by different authorities on the ground. Funding needs to be firmly coordinated with the respective authorities.
- The dynamics and performance of civil society are highly impacted by the areas of control and who is controlling what.
- Regional and international actors play vital roles in the Syrian context.
- Regardless of the location, a minimum role is assigned to the local-based-institution which suffers from ineffective performance, shortage of funding, etc.
- Complicated relations between communities and actors within the different areas following protracted and historical conflict lines (before and after 2011), or the impact of supra-national agendas pursued by regional powers.
- Distance "remote management" is a key factor in the relationship between exterior and interior "Syrian civil society" experiences.

## 3. Systemic Conflict Analysis – Syria

This analysis includes: the different narratives within Syrian society; ongoing military operations and oppression; the external interference of foreign actors; injustice and fear (e.g., tens of thousands of undocumented detainees, countless crimes committed against civilians, demographic cleansing as a strategy to maintain power); poverty and economic deprivation; the humanitarian situation of refugees and IDPs (as well as the lack of international strategies for their safe and voluntary return). These are some of the key driving factors which need to be understood and addressed before one can think about social and societal peace, reconciliation, or creating a new social contract in Syria.

To better understand all of these key dynamics influencing civil society engagement and participation in Syria, the following segment visualizes an extract of the researched data from the factor matrix (reinforcing factors, balancing factors, and mental models). The factors have been collected and discussed during the field-work phase. 128 reinforcing key factors and 16 balancing factors have been identified. The factors have been collected in a comprehensive factor-matrix. To reduce the complexity, the authors identified the key driving factors to explain the following feedback loops. A driving factor is "a dynamic, factor, or element, without which the system would not exist, would lose its stability, emerge into stability, or would be completely different".

*It is a baby girl. Everyone needs a lifejacket.*
Illustration and words by Diala Brisly. For further artworks pleas visit: https://bit.ly3sqXGU0

# Systemic Conflict Analysis - Syria

## Struggle for Power and Control

Institutionalised efforts to observe and document human rights violations, atrocities, and crimes committed by all armed forces in all areas of the Syrian war.

The instrumentalisation of sectarianism, tribal structures, local differences (urban areas vs. rural areas) and politics to preserve the regime's own interests.

Systematic repression and political violence by the state apparatus against opponents, communities, and stakeholders who are critical of the government.

Different means of division (e.g., sectarian, religious, class) are used as a tool to undermine local civil society activism and civic engagement.

An abusive intelligence and security system established an environment of fear, which forces local civil society actors to coordinate with them and prevents them from carrying out their work independently.

## War Economy

Many actors use affiliations to hijack authorities and exploit incoming funding for their own benefit.

Groups or individuals misuse or abuse power and weaken the state structure to pursue their own group's interests. The consequence is a boom of illegal trade and organised crime.

Reconstruction is used as a political tool by all sides in the conflict to try and achieve a range of widely differing (personal) objectives.

War profiteers take advantage of the absence of a functioning state and exert a large degree of control over the lives of Syrians living in all areas.

Selective and unequal permissions by the state to favour local humanitarian groups based on their loyalty to the government and not on the basis of their impact.

Resilient contribution to bridging gaps in service provision resulting from the absence of state institutions in some areas and providing humanitarian relief and health services.

## Trapped Society

The Syrian government and its allies use all means necessary to preserve power and control and to avoid activities which undermine their status by an empowered critical local civil society.

Complexity of different local circumstances and conflict lines, historical preconditions and varying development possibilities impact certain areas within Syria more than others.

Psychological stress and trauma affect people, initiatives, and civil society actors, and have an impact on health and psychological wellbeing

Forced displacement, lack of rule of law, and escalating ethnic and sectarian tensions lead to fear, insecurity, and trauma of local communities and individuals.

"Deep sense of defeat"

"We want to live in dignity"

People think about themselves and their families first"

Constant risk and possibility of detention, torture, and persecution contributes to organisations' and individuals' inability to take responsibility in social and communal life.

Available testimonies and memory through large documentation of the uprising, the narratives, and war crimes.

Decline in social networks, social (interpersonal) exchange, acceptance, and participation increase the degree of social fragmentation on the national level. There is a destructive impact on trust among individuals, which can be attributed to insecurity, arbitrary oppression, difficult living conditions, and extreme polarisation in society.

## Weak State Services

Lack of own funding for infrastructure, industry, and health will slow growth, reinforce fragmentation of industry, and reproduce the root causes of the conflict.

The resumption of public services and investment in regime areas depends on loyalty, and is reminiscent of pre-war sectarian politics.

Selective welfare system and access to institutions is managed on a sectarian and partial basis.

Rent-seeking state services and high levels of corruption within the system, enabled by the inefficiency of judicial, administrative, and political accountability mechanisms.

In some areas, Syrian civil society has transformed into an entity that acts as if it is itself an official authority (due to the absence of state institutions or neglect of state authority).

Weak centralised state hijacked by the authoritarian regime, profiteers, and foreign allies' interests.

## Regional and International Politics

International organisations often lack a complete understanding of the social, administrative, and linguistic contexts in which local Syrian civil society actors operate.

International organisations struggle to properly direct aid to Syria without cooperating with the Syrian government.

Unclear standards (impacted by different interests) of international humanitarian organisations and agencies operating in Syria often support (whether intentionally or not) the demands of the Syrian government.

Divisiveness of the international community on how to engage with the Syrian government and the regime.

"We are abandoned by the international community and no one cares about our situation"

The government requires all international organisations to partner only with local Syrian organisations that have been pre-approved by the security authorities, or with relevant ministries.

Lack of political pressure from the international community on the regime and its allies to follow humanitarian standards and international humanitarian law.

## Violence against Communities

"Peace means to surrender."

"How do you want to work on peace, when there is ongoing violence, torture, and conflict? What peace are we talking about?"

Active conflicts are ongoing, and the effects will continue to materialise long after open conflict and fighting end. The conflict has inflicted extensive damage on Syria's physical infrastructure (health, transport, electricity, economy).

Ongoing conflicts cause pressure on communities and local authorities through rural-urban migration and forced internal displacement.

An unstable security situation hinders local development processes and the freedom of work for CSOs in Syria and neighbouring countries.

High rates of displacement, asylum, and migration have led to significant changes in the structures of society and families, as well as a disintegration of social bonds and relationships.

## Individual and Collective Agency

Innovative creation of spaces for local dialogue on various issues of concern to the local population.

Innovative ability of Syrian civil society actors to take on a consultant role in negotiations on a local level as well as national processes (supported by the international community).

Developing platforms and networks that incorporate the views of local communities in negotiation processes, thus paving a way for a positive future in which civil society has a significant role in the development of civic life.

Endurance, responsibility, and motivation of Syrian civil actors to take part in political processes, mobilization, and advocacy to alleviate the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Fragmentation of civil society groups through diverse perspectives, and political and legal positions.

Civic abilities to mitigate the humanitarian crisis resulting from the armed conflicts and violence at the local level

Civilian groups have filled the void of an absent state in areas such as education, health, and basic public services.

Inclination to use violence as a means of dealing with conflicts. Individuals and groups tend to "dehumanise" entire groups, cities and communities.

Lack of confidence of local communities in the role of Syrian civil society and its organisations. Disinclination of Syrian society to accept a positive role of CSOs is leading to trust issues.

Lack of a unified and comprehensive vision for the role of Syrian civil society, as well as long-term plans that could shape the future of civil action in Syria. The role of Syrian civil society has not been solidified, and there is a lack of understanding of the various roles of civil society that should take place at all levels.

Many Syrian organisations are highly motivated to develop their capacity to independently manage grants by themselves, without assistance from large international organisations.

Vibrant and active exile and Diaspora community taking up responsibility to serve Syrian communities, and closely follow up necessary research topics and development efforts.

Development of creative mechanisms to raise awareness of transitional justice; civil and political rights; democracy; as well as issues related to the political and constitutional process and the foundations of good governance.

Significant impact of women leaders and women's organisations in raising awareness with respect to women's rights; political, economic, and gender empowerment of women; and enhancing their role in political and civil life.

Lack of understanding of traditional and historical developments of civic engagement in Syria and diversified knowledge of the different areas in Syria. Lack of understanding of local and historical fault-lines and conflict dynamics by the international community.

"The weaker you are, the angrier you will be."

"The question of funding continuity has become an obsession"

"You left Syria and you left us alone, how can you help us?"

## Civil Engagement and Struggle for Dignity

Some civil society actors and local initiatives are exploited as easily available access points for the work of international organisations inside Syria. Within this atmosphere there is a tendency toward competitive behaviour between CSOs, which try to maintain their funding and relationship with donors.

Shrinking space of civic engagement inside Syria through control mechanisms and oppression by the governmental structures and other militia groups.

Lack of expertise, scientific and academic knowledge, and an ongoing brain drain within Syrian civil society hinders the specialisation of expertise and a focus on long-term impact.

Pessimism and cynicism prevails among civil society actors. There is a broad feeling of powerlessness, due to the speed at which NGO work collapses after the takeover of opposition areas. Uncertainty is ubiquitous, as local Syrian organisations fear a decline in international interest in Syrian issues.

Lack of transparency and good governance practices within CSOs and groups has led to financial and administrative corruption as well as nepotism.

Services provided by CSOs have not been converted into positive perceived projects that might motivate the local population to engage in local activities.

Fragmentation of civil society actors and communities inside Syria leads to biased alliances of civil society actors based on political, national, or other backgrounds. Personal differences have a negative impact on the trust in civil action, harming cooperation among CSOs.

The risk of person-centred leadership styles leaves organisational structures highly dependent on individuals (a knowledge elite), as many CSOs are managed on a personalised basis.

Participation in local community development and provision of vocational training for many Syrian youth as well as women.

Given their experience with conflict, Syrian CSOs operate with a high level of flexibility to adapt to a constantly changing context and needs triggered by humanitarian disasters.

## Development Aid Industry

"Organisational management has become an industry of its own."

Predetermined work on projects dictated by the interests and agendas of funders.

Engagement and working for money have prevailed at the expense of volunteering within local civil society initiatives.

Industrialisation of the humanitarian and development sectors inside Syrian, as a lot of money is circulated without regulations and standards.

Incautious and poorly-structured funding overstretch the capacity of civil society actors to manage funding schemes according to the standards imposed by donors. This leads to a general use of "donor language" to please donors and secure funding for local initiatives, rather than demanding local needs and developing local adapted systems of support.

Lack of ownership in developing strategies for programming. Syrian civil society actors are used as "operational partners", while their knowledge of their country and how its needs might best be met are often ignored.

## Syrians outside Syria

Challenging and politicised working conditions for Syrian CSOs in neighbouring countries.

Different working environments and approaches of exile and diaspora CSOs and those working inside Syria lead to fragmentation of Syrian civil society actors.

Legal framework and political dynamics in neighbouring countries limit the work of Syrian organisations (working remotely).

Syrian exile organisations are under pressure to develop programmes compatible with highly changing and volatile situations inside Syria and in parallel serving Syrian refugee communities in neighbouring countries.

Spillover effect from conflicts inside Syria to civil society actors operating in neighbouring countries and the diaspora.

## System Borders

Interference of foreign states and groups based on regional interests, historical ties, sectarian divisions, influence, and power.

Rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic across the region; the weak health-care system cannot absorb the additional pressure.

Economic recession—a deteriorating economic situation creates additional pressure on all actors inside Syria.

Reinforcing factors

Balancing factors

Mental model

©forumZFD

## 1. Struggle for Power and Control

***Photo credits: Alaa Hassan[46].*** *Qudssaya, Rif Dimashq governate, Syria. 2009.*

The following loop describes the different actors (i.e., the regime, security apparatus, external allies, warlords, businessmen, tribes, armed groups, etc.) and the instruments (i.e., hijacking the state system for own purposes) used to preserve their power and influence through control and oppression.

Reinforcing factors:

- Systematic repression and political violence by the state apparatus against opponents, communities, and stakeholders who are critical of the government.
- An abusive intelligence and security system established an environment of fear, which forces local civil society actors to coordinate with them and prevents them from carrying out their work independently.
- The Syrian government and its allies use all means necessary to preserve power and control and to avoid activities which undermine their status by an empowered critical local civil society.
- Different means of division (e.g., sectarian, religious, class) are used as a tool to undermine local civil society activism and civic engagement.
- The instrumentalisation of sectarianism, tribal structures, local differences (urban areas vs. rural areas) and politics to preserve the regime's own interests.

Balancing factors:

46- Alaa Hassan is a Syrian photographer and filmmaker, published a photobook: "Cardboard castle". For more please visit his page: http://bit.ly/3qy8aAY



- Institutionalised efforts to observe and document human rights violations, atrocities, and crimes committed by all armed forces in all areas of the Syrian war.

## 2. War Economy

***Photo Creidts: Nour Kelzi[47].*** *Worker at a makeshift oil refinery. Al-Mansurah, Raqqa Governorate, Syria. 5 May 2013.*

The following loop describes how different actors (e.g., warlords, regime cronies, new businessmen, private persons, war profiteers) benefit from the military situation on the ground, in order to generate funding for the military machine or profit for their own interests. These actors are interested in keeping the system running for their advantage.

Reinforcing factors:

- Selective and unequal permissions by the state to favour local humanitarian groups based on their loyalty to the government and not on the basis of their impact.[48]
- Many actors use affiliations to hijack authorities and exploit incoming funding for their own benefit.
- War profiteers take advantage of the absence of a functioning state and exert a large degree of control over the lives of Syrians living in all areas.

47- Nour Kelzi a Syrian photographer based in Germany. For more please visit:https://bit.ly/32rcnM7

48- Interview with Syrian researcher, Beirut, February 2020.

- Reconstruction is used as a political tool by all sides in the conflict to try and achieve a range of widely differing (personal) objectives.
- Groups or individuals misuse or abuse power and weaken the state structure to pursue their own group's interests. The consequence is a boom of illegal trade and organised crime.

## 3. Weak State Services (Decentralisation v. Centralisation)

***Photo credits: Alaa Hassan.*** *Qudssaya, Rif Dimashq governate, Syria. 2009.*

The following loop addresses the problem of an ineffective and deeply corrupt Syrian state bureaucracy in regard to its organisations and structures; a bureaucracy which struggles to provide services to its citizens and is hijacked by the interests of individuals. The state system is designed to serve the regime and its allies. To this end, it controls and embezzles funds intended for development and humanitarian aid[49]. Functioning and capable state organisation is an important factor for future development in Syria, as it provides necessary services (health, infrastructure, education, agriculture, etc.) for all.

Reinforcing factors:

- Selective welfare system and access to institutions is managed on a sectarian and partial basis.[50]

- In some areas, Syrian civil society has transformed into an entity that acts as if it is itself an official authority (due to the absence of state institutions or neglect of state authority[51]).
- Weak centralised state hijacked by the authoritarian regime, profiteers, and foreign allies' interests.
- Rent-seeking state services and high levels of corruption within the system, enabled by the inefficiency of judicial, administrative, and political accountability mechanisms.
- The resumption of public services and investment in regime areas depends on loyalty, and is reminiscent of pre-war sectarian politics.
- Lack of own funding for infrastructure, industry, and health will slow growth, reinforce fragmentation of industry, and reproduce the root causes of the conflict.

Balancing factors:

- Resilient contribution to bridging gaps in service provision resulting from the absence of state institutions in some areas and providing humanitarian relief and health services.

## 4. Violence against Communities

***Photo credits: Nour Kelzi.*** *Reflection of free Syrian army fighter carrying his weapon is seen on a glass pane in Aleppo, Syria. 4 October 2013.*

This loop describes the dynamics of ongoing violence and open conflict, affecting civil society in a harmful way. Beside the personal insecurity precipitated by fear and harm on all levels, forcible displacement and loss of human life, as well as destruction of essential infrastructure, create an unstable and insecure

49- Previous recourse.

50- From dialogue session, Beirut, February 2020.

51- Interview with senior officer in a Syrian NGO, Beirut, February 2020.

environment for sustainable development and change. The question remains of whether a sustainable peace solution for Syria can ever be possible without ending the vicious cycle of violence.

Reinforcing factors:

- Ongoing conflicts cause pressure on communities and local authorities through rural-urban migration and forced internal displacement.
- Active conflicts are ongoing, and the effects will continue to materialise long after open conflict and fighting end. The conflict has inflicted extensive damage on Syria's physical infrastructure (health, transport, electricity, economy).
- An unstable security situation hinders local development processes and the freedom of work for CSOs in Syria and neighbouring countries.
- High rates of displacement, asylum, and migration have led to significant changes in the structures of society and families, as well as a disintegration of social bonds and relationships.
- Inclination to use violence as a means of dealing with conflicts. Individuals and groups tend to "dehumanise" entire groups, cities and communities.

Mental model:

- "How do you want to work on peace, when there is ongoing violence, torture, and conflict? What peace are we talking about?"
- "Peace means to surrender."

Balancing factors:

- Civic abilities to mitigate the humanitarian crisis resulting from the armed conflicts and violence at the local level.
- Civilian groups have filled the void of an absent state in areas such as education, health, and basic public services.



## 5. Trapped Society

***Photo credits: Mohammed Badra[52].*** *Douma in Syria. 06 January, 2015.*

As members of a "trapped society", Syrians are living in highly traumatized and fragmented conditions as a result of sectarian dynamics, social-state exclusion, and fear.[53] This loop describes how communities inside Syria are highly vulnerable (i.e., with poor living conditions, poverty, and exposed to violence), and to a great extent powerless, as they depend strongly on external service provision and aid from the international community. The ongoing conflict has exacerbated protracted local conflict lines, which often erupt, even if military ceasefires are in place. Mistrust, lack of engagement, and unclear roles and responsibilities are major obstacles to a better and more effective humanitarian and developmental response.

Reinforcing factors:

- Forced displacement, lack of rule of law, and escalating ethnic and sectarian tensions lead to fear, insecurity, and trauma of local communities and individuals.
- Constant risk and possibility of detention, torture, and persecution contributes to organisations' and individuals' inability to take responsibility in social and communal life.
- Complexity of different local circumstances and conflict lines, historical preconditions and varying development possibilities impact certain areas within Syria more than others.
- Psychological stress and trauma affect people, initiatives, and civil society actors, and have an impact on health and psychological wellbeing
- Decline in social networks, social (interpersonal) exchange, acceptance, and participation increase the degree of social fragmentation on the national level. There is a destructive impact on trust among individuals, which can be attributed to insecurity, arbitrary oppression, difficult living conditions, and extreme polarisation in society.

52- A Syrian photographer based in Paris. For more please visit: https://bit.ly/2P7KDt6

53- Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, A Syrian author engaged in Syrian affairs and criticism of contemporary Islam and culture. Al-Hayat newspaper, October 2011: http://bit.ly/3rt4ccN

Mental models:

- "People think about themselves and their families first"
- "Deep sense of defeat"
- "We want to live in dignity"

Balancing factors:

- Available testimonies and memory through large documentation of the uprising, the narratives, and war crimes.

## 6. Civil Engagement and Struggle for Dignity

***Photo Credits: Nour Kelzi.*** *Kurdish Syrian refugees crossing the Turkish-Syrian border near the southeastern town of Suruc, Turkey after Isis extremists' advance on Kobani. 25 September 2014.*

The following loop entails the dynamics and factors of Syrian civil society actors and organisations working inside Syria. It reflects the shrinking space for activism, engagement, and the humanitarian and developmental response on the ground. Actors find themselves criticised for gaps within its organisational structure, facing increased pressure to meet guidelines, conditions, and criteria for international funding, while, in parallel, they are searching for their role in society, dealing with the actual workload of fulfilling the needs of the communities they serve. Furthermore, Syrian civil society is exposed – in order to continue operating, it must work in an insecure and volatile environment, constantly threatened by an oppressive state and various armed militia factions. Funding, which is the only means of generating job opportunities, has pushed many individuals to work under CSO structures, creating great pressure to differentiate between grassroots initiatives and those who are interested only in the money.

Reinforcing factors:



- Lack of transparency and good governance practices within CSOs and groups has led to financial and administrative corruption as well as nepotism.
- Lack of expertise, scientific and academic knowledge, and an ongoing brain drain within Syrian civil society hinders the specialisation of expertise and a focus on long-term impact.
- Fragmentation of civil society actors and communities inside Syria leads to biased alliances of civil society actors based on political, national, or other backgrounds. Personal differences have a negative impact on the trust in civil action, harming cooperation among CSOs.
- Services provided by CSOs have not been converted into positive perceived projects that might motivate the local population to engage in local activities.
- Some civil society actors and local initiatives are exploited as easily available access points for the work of international organisations inside Syria. Within this atmosphere there is a tendency toward competitive behaviour between CSOs, which try to maintain their funding and relationship with donors.
- The risk of person-centred leadership styles leaves organisational structures highly dependent on individuals (a knowledge elite), as many CSOs are managed on a personalised basis.
- Shrinking space of civic engagement inside Syria through control mechanisms and oppression by the governmental structures and other militia groups.
- Pessimism and cynicism prevails among civil society actors. There is a broad feeling of powerlessness, due to the speed at which NGO work collapses after the takeover of opposition areas. Uncertainty is ubiquitous, as local Syrian organisations fear a decline in international interest in Syrian issues.

Mental model:

"The question of funding continuity has become an obsession"

Balancing factors:

- Participation in local community development and provision of vocational training for many Syrian youth as well as women.
- Given their experience with conflict, Syrian CSOs operate with a high level of flexibility to adapt to a constantly changing context and needs triggered by humanitarian disasters.

## 7. Syrians outside Syria

***Photo credits: Nour Kelzi.*** *Kurdish Syrian refugees crossing the Turkish-Syrian border near the southeastern town of Suruc, Turkey after Isis extremists' advance on Kobani. 25 September 2014.*

This loop describes the conditions of Syrian CSOs working from neighbouring countries or worldwide (in the diaspora). Civil society actors working remotely face particular challenges, ranging from dealing with the spillover from Syria into the neighbouring states, and operating in highly politicised contexts in host communities, to working under different funding schemes, to having disparate working approaches due to a lack of spaces for coordination and collaboration. The notion of distance is essential to these identities, which vary in each operational office. From Gaziantep, Beirut, Erbil, and Amman, and later Berlin and London, each city has its own political and economic context and historical background in dealing with the refugee issue. All of this makes it more difficult for Syrians to put in place institutionalised processes for internal policies and good governance.

Reinforcing factors:

- Spillover effect from conflicts inside Syria to civil society actors operating in neighbouring countries and the diaspora.
- Legal framework and political dynamics in neighbouring countries limit the work of Syrian organisations (working remotely).
- Different working environments and approaches of exile and diaspora CSOs and those working inside Syria lead to fragmentation of Syrian civil society actors.
- Challenging and politicised working conditions for Syrian CSOs in neighbouring countries.
- Syrian exile organisations are under pressure to develop programmes compatible with highly changing and volatile situations inside Syria and in parallel serving Syrian refugee communities in neighbouring countries.

Mental model:

"You left Syria and you left us alone, how can you help us?"

Balancing factors:

- Vibrant and active exile and Diaspora community taking up responsibility to serve Syrian communities, and closely follow up necessary research topics and development efforts.
- Many Syrian organisations are highly motivated to develop their capacity to independently manage grants by themselves, without assistance from large international organisations.
- Development of creative mechanisms to raise awareness of transitional justice; civil and political rights; democracy; as well as issues related to the political and constitutional process and the foundations of good governance.
- Significant impact of women leaders and women's organisations in raising awareness with respect to women's rights; political, economic, and gender empowerment of women; and enhancing their role in political and civil life.



## 8. Regional and International Politics

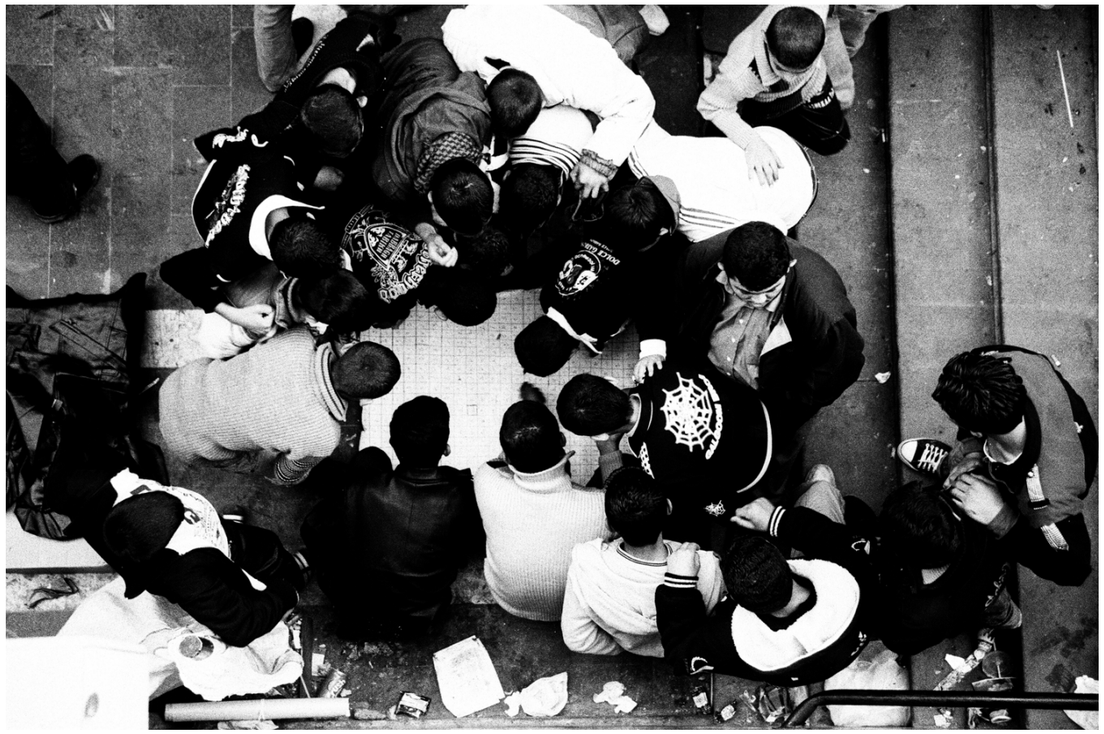


***Photo Credits: Alaa Hassan.*** *Damascus, 2008.*

The loop describes the influence and role of the international community approaching the Syrian civil society engagement. Furthermore, it illustrates the dynamics of dealing with the Syrian government as an actor controlling and channelling the humanitarian and development response. The absence of positive factors during the discussions with the experts may be read as a sign of mistrust within Syrian communities towards the international community. The identified mental model supports this dynamic.

Reinforcing factors:

- Divisiveness of the international community on how to engage with the Syrian government and the regime.
- International organisations struggle to properly direct aid to Syria without cooperating with the Syrian government.
- Unclear standards (impacted by different interests) of international humanitarian organisations and agencies operating in Syria often support (whether intentionally or not) the demands of the Syrian government.
- The government requires all international organisations to partner only with local Syrian organisations that have been pre-approved by the security authorities, or with relevant ministries.
- Lack of political pressure from the international community on the regime and its allies to follow humanitarian standards and international humanitarian law.

- International organisations often lack a complete understanding of the social, administrative, and linguistic contexts in which local Syrian civil society actors operate.

Mental model:

"We are abandoned by the international community and no one cares about our situation"

## 9. Individual and Collective Agency[54]

*Photo Credits: Hamid khatib:*A child is looking at opposition fighters while they were walking in front of his home in the old Aleppo district. 2nd Oct 2013.*

The following loop describes the historical developments of the role and perception of a "civil society" as a concept of civil participation and engagement. It highlights the fragmentation of civil society actors due to different understandings of the concept, and a lack of complementary visions regarding aims, methods, and common understanding. The participants highlighted the need for Syrian civil society to develop its own models of Syrian civic engagement so as to preserve its own agency, rather than adopting models from external actors.

Reinforcing factors:

- Fragmentation of civil society groups through diverse perspectives, and political and legal positions.
- Lack of confidence of local communities in the role of Syrian civil society and its organisations. Disinclination of Syrian society to accept a positive role of CSOs is leading to trust issues.
- Lack of a unified and comprehensive vision for the role of Syrian civil society, as well as long-term plans that could shape the future of civil action in Syria. The role of Syrian civil society has not been solidified, and there is a lack of understanding of the various roles of civil society that should take place at all levels.
- Lack of understanding of traditional and historical developments of civic engagement in Syria and diversified knowledge of the different areas in Syria. Lack of understanding of local and historical fault-lines and conflict dynamics by the international community.

Balancing factors:

- Developing platforms and networks that incorporate the views of local communities in negotiation processes, thus paving a way for a positive future in which civil society has a significant role in the development of civic life.
- Endurance, responsibility, and motivation of Syrian civil actors to take part in political processes, mobilization, and advocacy to alleviate the ongoing humanitarian crisis.
- Innovative ability of Syrian civil society actors to take on a consultant role in negotiations on a local level as well as national processes (supported by the international community).

Innovative creation of spaces for local dialogue on various issues of concern to the local population.

Mental Model:

"The weaker you are, the angrier you will be"

54- Living in the termporary, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, March, 2019: http://bit.ly/3tIi9pi
*A Syrian photographer based in Germany. For further please see: https://bit.ly/32yuEHj

## 10. Development Aid Industry

***Photo credits: Antoine Antabi*** [55]***.*** *A Boy holding a bread bag and looking at the advertisement of the icecream on the tent's wall. Lebanon, Beka'a valley, January 9, 2015.*

This loop discusses factors and dynamics which influence Syrian civil society as an actor involved in the mechanisms of international humanitarian aid and development. It shows the dependence of civil society actors and organisations on the ramifications of unstructured funding schemes, private agendas on the part of conflicting donor organisations, and the lack of internal development of a sustainable structure and, among civil society groups, of their own methods. As a consequence, one could observe a tendency to follow international standards rather than work on what is needed on the ground.

Reinforcing Factors:

- Incautious and poorly-structured funding overstretch the capacity of civil society actors to manage funding schemes according to the standards imposed by donors. This leads to a general use of "donor language" to please donors and secure funding for local initiatives, rather than demanding local needs and developing local adapted systems of support.
- Predetermined work on projects dictated by the interests and agendas of funders.
- Engagement and working for money have prevailed at the expense of volunteering within local civil society initiatives.
- Industrialisation of the humanitarian and development sectors inside Syrian, as a lot of money is circulated without regulations and standards.
- Lack of ownership in developing strategies for programming. Syrian civil society actors are used as "operational partners", while their knowledge of their country and how its needs might best be met are often ignored.

55- A Syrian graphic designer, photographer and filmmaker based in Germany. For more please visit: https://bit.ly/3aty7vW



Mental model:

"Organisational management has become an industry of its own"

## 11. Loop - System Borders

***Photo Credits:*** *Nour Kelzi. People sitting next to the Turkish-Syrian border near the southeastern town of Suruc, Turkey. 25 Sep 2014.*

The following factors describe dynamics which are influencing the system borders from outside, but still have a huge impact on the situation on the ground. The factors range from the unstable economic situation, which unfolds in the whole region and puts additional pressure on the internal development of the economic system, the depreciation of the currency, and living standards inside Syria. Furthermore, it shows the influence of foreign powers and allies engaging in the conflict with their own various interests and agendas.

**Reinforcing Factors:**

- Economic recession—a deteriorating economic situation creates additional pressure on all actors inside Syria.
- Rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic across the region; the weak health-care system cannot absorb the additional pressure.
- Interference of foreign states and groups based on regional interests, historical ties, sectarian divisions, influence, and power.

# Part four: Key Findings & Recommendations

## 1. Key Findings of the Actor Mapping and the Systemic Conflict Analysis

The following conclusions have been drawn based on the systemic conflict analysis. As one way to test whether the system map is applicable, the following segment outlines the key findings as a narrative basis for telling the story about conditions and dynamics which impact and influence Syrian civil engagement:

- Ongoing violence and destruction: "Syrian civil society" is largely influenced by an active and violent conflict, involving a multitude of external and internal actors with different aims and strategies. The effects of violence contribute to a high degree of social fragmentation on all levels, an extreme polarisation in society and a decline of participation for the common good.[56] The dire living conditions and lack of rule of law have also had a destructive impact on reciprocal trust among individuals, communities, and organisations, and contribute to the degradation of institutions.[57] The high number of casualties and destruction of physical assets have long-lasting impacts on the participation, sustainability, and social capital of Syrians engaging in CSOs. Nevertheless, aspects of Syrian civil society show resilience, creativity, and endurance—all demonstrated while operating in a rapidly shrinking public space, in an atmosphere of fear and a prevalent sense of insecurity. "The absence of bombing doesn't mean that we live in a post-war scenario. Syria is not safe and safety is not a geographical question but rather a personal one."[58]

- Accountability may not be restricted to punishment; transitional justice as a precondition: When talking about peace, several participants affirmed that "peace has a direct relationship to accountability for those who have committed crimes against humanity".[59] Because of the different levels of crimes in Syria, "It seems that there is a need to break down this terminology", one Syrian researcher suggested. "Accountability at the societal level may not be restricted to punishment",[60] but "rather we have to find a new understanding which can form the basis for establishing real local reconciliation processes",[61] she added.

- Different realities on the ground and a "Syrian definition of peace": During the assessment, participants of the interviews and workshops identified peace as the desired post-conflict result. Yet there were differences with regard to how participants understood and perceived peace and peacebuilding. It was discussed

56- According to a Syrian Policy Centre for Research report in 2017, Syria has lost 50% of its social capital. For more please read: http://bit.ly/37fPAWH

57- "Sometimes they don't trust a committee they -themselves- have already elected some minutes ago. One of the biggest problems of the oppositional entities is trust among themselves.", one peace-building consultant told us.

58- Interview with international program officer and activist, Beirut, February 2020.

59- Workshop, Beqaa Valley, February 2020.

60- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

61- Pervious recourse.



against conflict drivers, root causes, conflict consequences, and terminologies of peace (Selm Ahly vs. Mosalaha). The discussions proved to have a great influence on the preconditions which would have to be in place before working on sustainable peace. Definitions of peace were often described through war and violence, whereby peace is defined by "negative peace", meaning the absence of direct violence. Other participants argued that a positive peace demands overcoming structural and cultural violence, which includes economic, social, and political aspects as a precondition introducing structural change as an entry point for peace. Others argued that "peace means surrender" and would imply bringing Syria back to the pre-2011 era. Most of those who were interviewed in Lebanon repeated strictly and firmly that there could be "no sustainable future peace in Syria without political change".[62]

- Influence of international funding, the aid and development sectors, and the lack of Syrian agency and ownership: Much of the humanitarian and developmental Syria response would have been impossible without the international donor community. However, Syrian CSOs often need to adapt their approach to international funding schemes and standards. Despite the positive effect of the support provided, participants in the assessment expressed their "fear of an inevitable NGO-isation process taking place among Syrian CSOs". This term refers to "the way that external funding shifted the dynamic of Syrian CSOs away from their grassroots beginnings, often rooted in volunteerism, towards professionalised service-providers coupled with external visions and strategic directions", one interviewee said. This also refers "to the way CSOs are stuck in bureaucratic guidelines",[63] the co-founder of one local NGO told us. More importantly, "it required CSOs to be subjected, most of the time, to what donors consider as the priority work, which frequently doesn't align with what Syrian organisations' own perspective is for targeted communities".[64] It seems that donors' focus on funding activities with short-term results limits the ability of Syrian civil society to develop programme-work organically with communities they serve.

- Lack of understanding at the regional level vis-a-vis internal dynamics—every area has its own borderline, "Homs versus Sweida": Participants in the interviews expressed a "considerable lack of understanding of internal local and regional dynamics at the political and economic levels, which is leading to miscalculation and misunderstanding, and therefore building up wrong strategies". An example is the differences and similarities between the roles of Russians, Iranians, and the Syrian government in dealing with civil society initiatives in their areas of influence. This "may provide a false image of the reality on the ground", another interviewee added. Every area in Syria also has different limitations, opportunities, and risks. "Homs is considered highly sensitive to think about [in terms of] local peace building, whereas Sweida has many initiatives utilising arts and theatre and implementing activities on a regular basis as peace building tools",[65] one interviewee told us. Language plays a major role mirroring the history of the conflict for every area. "Every geographical area has its own story, and this is reflected in its usage of language accumulating the collective narrative of what happened post-2011",[66] one participant said.

- Possible shifted access points and changing strategies: Syria post-2011 is no longer "the kingdom of silence".[67] New access points were established through different and diverse channels. International funders tended to vastly favour sub-granting to downstream partners in neighbouring countries, as they had no chance to be present inside Syria. This has "provided huge leverage to Syrian CSOs to grow,

62- Cross articulation out of workshop, dialogue session, interviews in Beirut and Berlin, Feb and March 2020.

63- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

64- Previous recourse.

65- One peacebuilding and conflict resolution trainer told the authors: "One group out of 40 is working on reconciliation in Homs. Even this group was not comfortable enough talking about their projects and activities in public. Sectarian divisions play an important role."

66- Workshop, Tripoli, February 2020.

67- A common expression first coined by Riad al-Turk, a major opposition figure. For more see: https://bit.ly/2MJf1IR

develop, and gain a level of independence" according to one senior officer at one Syrian CSO. What has changed now is that "there is a different understanding of political change [...] It doesn't mean toppling the regime, but rather taking the indirect root of change, by creating a basis to build up mutual trust and cooperation between conflicting communities inside the country",[68] a senior officer at a local NGO told us. It seems that some Syrian CSOs in neighbouring countries are adopting new strategies. Their focus has shifted "from aspirations and objectives of direct political change to policy-based change through providing support to independent CBOs inside Syria to learn, communicate, network and reflect".[69] The objective of such projects and programmes is to "create inclusive grounding apart from political divisions and based on economic common needs", said one participant. "It is wasting energy when we want to enforce strategies on the UN and INGOs' bodies. Rather, we should think of providing good policies,"[70] one researcher added.

- Lack of complementary and comprehensive conceptualisation of Syrian civil society: A complementary understanding of the possible roles and responsibilities of Syrian civil society is largely absent, as are common long-term plans that could shape the future of civil engagement in Syria. The role of Syrian civil society has not been solidified, and "there is a lack of understanding of the various roles of civil society that should take place at different levels", one interviewee told us. Furthermore, interviews and discussions showed a perceived gap between the different civil society actors resulting in mistrust and separation within the activism landscape and the NGO community.[71] There are deep disagreements about a vision for the future and the (realistic) role of Syrian civil society, due to the following factors: the level of ongoing violence; differences in political opinions; strong religious and sectarian divisions; absence of trusted and elected representatives to facilitate the expression of opinions; social and national identity polarisation; and disagreements over a common definition of peace and development.[72] "In regard to Syria- we have to construct our own module".[73]

- Lack of conflict sensitivity standards and approach, doing harm and putting local actors at risk: Donor priorities address specific development factors (human rights, participation, peacebuilding, protection, etc.) through earmarking their funds and encouraging local civil society actors to take these on. This dynamic is perceived as a risk and threat to the autonomy and security of local groups. This flawed programme planning, without sensitive and adapted protection planning, creates a false impression that protection concerns are being addressed, while leaving major gaps in the security of local actors. Furthermore, there needs to be sensitive and thoughtful awareness on the part of international organisations regarding how to deal with the Syrian government. It is important to note that "he Syrian government firmly requires, as a pre-condition, that all international organisations partnering with local Syrian organisations must be vetted and pre-approved by the security authorities, and [work] with relevant ministries", one interviewee told us. "It is reinforcing the wrong structures because you lack an independent assessment. UN agencies adopt the Russian language, enforcing the regime's narrative".[74]

- Participation in public decision-making processes: This was already weak before 2011, but it has further deteriorated during the current conflict, especially in areas of military operations, where military and

68- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

69- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

70- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

71- An activist told us: "There is a need to create civil activism which oversees Syrians based on mutual interests, transcending familial, religious, and tribal relationships. Civil society should function, operate, and reach out to all Syria's geography and everyone." Interview, Beirut, February 2020.a

72- Multi articulation from interviews and discussions took place in Berlin and Beirut, February and March, 2020.

73- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

74- Interview, Berlin, March 2020.



security forces have replaced any remaining possibilities of effective participation with authoritarian governance and increased persecution of citizens. Frequent manifestations of violence, such as systematic shelling, arbitrary detention, killings, theft, and kidnappings are major factors contributing to a prevalent sense of insecurity, as are widespread poverty, deterioration of living conditions, expansion of conflict economy, forced displacement, corruption, and a culture of fear. Yet, against all odds, "what is left is bottom-up mobilisation aiming at putting increased pressure and creating influence on our individual and collective opportunities everywhere", one activist told us.

- Personalized organisations, weak hierarchical structures, lack of representation channels and leadership gap: CSOs and movements are often built from the engagement and motivation of individuals, which risks creating an NGO system dependent on individuals and personal relationships, rather than sustainable organisational structures. During the interviews, it was mentioned several times that "there is a dynamic of establishing gaps in representation and leadership, deepening the rifts between employers and volunteers working on the ground".[75] "The access of selected individuals to international networks, capacity building, the introduction to new (Western-liberal) concepts of advocacy and peacebuilding, as well as a lack of knowledge transfer mechanisms, might create elitist behaviour by some well-known activists", one participant told us. This might result in excessive dependency on individuals, and shape the public and collective perception of civil society actors as untrusted agencies working only for their own interests.[76]

- Overestimation and ability to influence: Syrian civil society mirroring the conflict: While dynamics on the ground have changed, the fact remains that Syrian civil society has continued to play an important role in nearly every area of Syria. Syrian civil society roles "initially focused on organising demonstrations against tyranny; claiming rights; demanding the establishment of a pluralistic civil democratic state, as well as accountability and fighting corruption", one participant said. However, other participants said that the "INGO community overestimates what Syrian civil society can really do, influence, or change [in terms of] the difficult internal dynamics". Additionally, "these unrealistic expectations lead to a heavy burden on top of the usual work".[77] One participant said that "Syrian civil society is part of the conflict and its expressions. There are organisations following different political and religious agendas, and hindering the creation of a national identity, while they are locked into religious, sectarian, or neighbourhood identities".[78] Furthermore, "there is a huge gap of knowledge, awareness, skills and capacities when you compare between those who are in Syria and those who left Syria earlier".

- Hostile and complex working environment: The working conditions for Syrian civil society actors in Syria, the neighbouring countries, and the diaspora are complex and follow diverse lines of actions and strategies. In particular, the local dynamics in different areas in Syria (see actor mapping) differ entirely and contribute to a highly fragmented civil society. These differences lead to considerable variations and separations between areas, rather than unifying efforts on the basis of existing similarities and common goals. The different working conditions, as well as the multiplicity of dominant military forces, are among the most important challenges facing the work of civil society. Further dividing factors include:
    - Unequal handling of different areas, based on the interests of the government, and loyalty triggers further segregation and fragmentation of communities and civil society operating on the local level.
    - Perceived thinking of supporting one's own community rather than building networks for a stronger society support across regions.

75- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

76- Interview, Berlin, March 2020.

77- Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

78- Interview, Beirut, Febraury 2020.

- Diminishing agreement as to the future of Syria, pointing to the disruption of social cohesion and integration at the local level.
- The particular conflict dynamics in each local area are determined by a specific pattern of administration and development, and result in a specific manner of dealing with the locals residing in each area.
- Serious and dangerous security threats faced by humanitarian workers and activists.
- The different levels of militarisation, and different influences by local armed groups and external actors prevent local civil society movements from working independently.
- There is a lack of a legal framework regulating the work of CSOs in some areas. Even where legal frameworks do exist, they often restrict and control the freedom of action of these CSOs.
- Differences in working conditions create a gap between the organisational structure and professionalisation among CSOs. Organisations in more stable locations, in terms of security and international support, were more likely to be able to operate with internal policies and regulations in place. In areas abandoned by the international community, where security is lacking, CSOs seem to be responsive and flexible in their approach, depending on the changing needs in the targeted areas.

## Recommendations

The following chapter uses the key findings regarding the condition and dynamics of "Syrian civil society" engagement to propose recommendations for interventions by local and international peacebuilding organisations working in the Syrian context. These recommendations address the spectrum of Syrian civil society and its actors' engagement: local Syrian civil society, the civil society in neighbouring countries, and Syrian civil society in the diaspora. The 29 recommendations have been identified by participants and are based on the findings of the assessment and observations during the interviews, workshops, and roundtable discussions.

These recommendations should be understood as possible entry-points to start thoroughly-planned field work. Furthermore, they attempt to give an overview about connecting points and preconditions for the establishment of safe and constructive partnerships and co-operations between local and international actors. It may be suitable to kick off strategic discussions about new operational approaches and tools, or to reflect on already-ongoing initiatives.

# 2. Why Is Sustainable and Long-Term Support for Syrian Civil Society Important?

Summarizing the systemic assessment, the recommendations will answer the question of the importance of long-term support for Syrian civil society engagement from international peacebuilding organisations.

- Expert for the context: "Syrian civil society" is the local expert of the context, most capable of dealing with current conflicts and frictions. Local civil society is the first responder to local needs, and has an important role in the reconstruction process, political reform, and the development of a Syrian new social contract. Civil society actors and organisations are able to reach out to civilians and marginalised groups, and to bridge their views and perspectives to decision-makers.

- Constructive engagement: "Syrian civil society" is an emerging actor, impacting and working on almost all societal levels within Syria, neighbouring countries, and the diaspora. The concept of civil society itself and its constructive role are still to be negotiated and advocated for. Although opportunities and the potential for a constructive civil society in the Syrian context might sound like an idealistic idea (in light of the current violence, atrocities, war crimes, and hate), it is in dire need of support, in order to develop its agency, responsibilities, and roles towards society in the coming stages.



- Sustainable engagement: As the Syrian context is dynamic and complex, it is important to support relentless engagement of Syrian civil society actors, not only by acknowledging the high cost paid by the Syrian population, but also by building on what has already been achieved over the past years and can be sustained in the future.

- Cumulative efforts: Civil and social engagement by local Syrian actors will be a long-term and cumulative effort to produce tangible results and substantial change for Syrian society. Civil and social engagement is closely related to social change and works directly to develop the structure of communities to enable them to contain this social change.

- Communication channels: In Syria, there is shrinking space for freedom, and independent and democratic expression. But civil society spaces may be considered among the few that provide opportunities for Syrian people from all levels of society, inside and outside Syria. Therefore, a constructive and engaged civil society and its actors are the main agents of change to develop and sustain effective communication infrastructure among all parts of society. A functioning civil society can act as a shield against tyranny, sectarianism, and extremist ideas. With their impact on the local level, CSOs have the ability to play the role of an observer of political parties and the military, and should advocate for transitional justice, with a particular focus on the issues of detainees, victims of gross human rights violations, Syrian refugees, and IDPs.

- Syrian common good: The perception and reception of civil society actors within local communities remain difficult amid Syria's conflict. Through civil society work, however, actors can develop mutual trust as a result of the services provided before 2001 and after 2011.

- Relationship with the international community: Syrian civil society is considered by the international community to be a point of access to local communities inside Syria. This brings great responsibility upon the international community: they should not exploit Syrian civil society actors for the purpose of obtaining access to the ground. Syrian civil society is a reliable and important partner to engage with international organisations as well as other influential actors in order to achieve peace and equality and to guarantee human rights for all parts of Syrian society and local communities.

- A possible future role in mediation: Civil society actors and organisations will become (and to a certain degree already are) important mediators between the Syrian government and the private sector, on the one hand, and within Syrian society on the other. Supporting these efforts can help all actors to enhance their work and allocate strengths and capacities successfully.

- There are many operational tasks to be carried out by a capable Syrian civil society, in the absence of a functioning state and in support of local communities. Local civil society actors and activists need to be included in local reconstruction and, especially in light of state institutions' limited capabilities, provide such services as:

  - Providing acute health and education-related services and relief (especially for Covid-19),
  - Building bridges of confidence in and between local communities, easing local tensions and countering hate speech,
  - Working on social cohesion and tensions between host communities and IDPs,
  - Social and psychological support for all victims of the war, to give them a chance to begin a life of dignity,

- Empowering Syrian civil society engagement, especially women and youth,
- An inclusive and even-handed reconstruction of the country's infrastructure and social fabric,
- Raising awareness among Syrian people on various topics, including civic culture, human rights, free and transparent elections, and nonviolent activism.

## 3. Raising Awareness of the Role and Needs of Syrian Civil Society

The following recommendations are intended to address efforts by international peacebuilding organisations and local Syrian civil society to work together on the advocacy level and raise awareness for decision-makers among the international community; for an interested public; and to strengthen capacities and skills for actors who will work in the Syrian context. These recommendations tackle INGOs and their efforts to work with Syrian diaspora organisations as they are often operating in a shrinking space and highly contested environment. INGOs can advocate within the international community and donor landscape to create and secure a conflict-sensitive environment.

- Build networks to combine capacities: Coordinate efforts between Syrian civil society actors in the diaspora or neighbouring countries to build platforms and spaces, to develop collaboration and foster the sharing of knowledge and experience. Furthermore, advocacy and lobbying for peacebuilding efforts should be supported to enhance joint networks, forging alliances to ensure greater benefit of available resources and higher impact of Syrian civil society activities. A possible activity could include the development or support of a database that includes information about Syrian diaspora and local CSOs, ensuring better internal governance for CSOs and newly established networks.

- Knowing the context: It was often mentioned during the interviews and workshops that it is very difficult to understand the context to its full extent; people tend to see the situation as "black and white". International organisations should learn more about the differentiated perspectives of the different geographical areas, the highly fragmented societies in Syria, the varied historical backgrounds, and the conflict lines and actors involved. This knowledge should be institutionalised and shared with international organisations planning to work inside Syria.

- Advocacy work and political efforts of Syrian civil society: During the field work and several discussions, participants and experts emphasised the need for more efforts by international organisations to partner with Syrian diaspora organisations to raise awareness for diverse merits, and to take account of the needs and demands of Syrian civil society on the international political level. These efforts should aim at developing common formats through ensuring effective communication with local civil society actors, and ensuring that funds are directed efficiently and local voices are accounted for and taken into consideration when designing intervention strategies and projects.

- Develop a plan for the future: It was mentioned that international organisations should support the creation of open, safe reflection rooms for Syrian diaspora organisations to develop long term visions for Syria peacebuilding efforts. IOs can facilitate processes, together with Syrian organisations in the diaspora, to discuss vision(s) for the development of Syrian civil society in its own form and context. It is important to conduct a discussion about the idea and perception of the possible role of Syrian civil society and how to adapt common concepts of civil society to the specific context in Syria.



- Talking about peace: International CSOs can facilitate honest discussions about concepts of peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction in the realm of the ongoing violence, atrocities, and oppression. Many participants raised concerns as to whether peacebuilding or conflict transformation are adequate answers or possible tools without first ending the violence in Syria. It should be taken into consideration; interventions without ending the war are possible, but will remain on a very basic impact level (mainly training and capacity-building on peacebuilding topics). Long term development towards social peace between the different groups needs stable security and a structural change as a precondition for future interventions. There is a need to step up the efforts by international CSOs to achieve justice and accountability in Syria (e.g., support transitional justice efforts and documentation of war crimes). Another useful intervention could be support for actors and organisations which are covering or pushing for war crime trials (as is happening in Germany).

- Increased media and outreach efforts: put emphasis on communication, outreach, and media efforts to facilitate the connection between the diaspora community in Germany and the local German civil society, national government entities, as well as other local and international CSOs and NGOs. The media, in all its forms, can expand its representation of the conflict to highlight civil society stories and the wider sense of solidarity – its wins and its challenges. Topics to advocate for could include:

  - Development of a funding consortium for peacebuilding programming in Syria and a standardised clearing process and quality check for local and partner organisations.
  - Measures against NGO-isation of civil society to allow space for Syrian CSOs to reclaim the role of traditional civil society, and adapt measures against the exploitation or dependency of civil society in Syria. These might include more support to social and political-driven projects rather than service-provision projects.
  - Developing an understanding for future funding of Syrian civil society, by shifting away from big-budget, complex programmes to smaller and localised projects. This will allow work to continue in both government and non-government areas.
  - Allocate funds in accordance with the local needs of local communities, and refrain from adapting pre-set strategies and one-size-fits-all approaches in interventions.
  - Encourage more data-driven research on the dynamics of Syrian civil society and on thematic areas of relevance, such as public perceptions of CSOs; relations to other stakeholders, including governance entities and the private sector; and the economics and financials of Syrian CSOs; among others.

## 4. Strategic Programme Work of INGOs Inside and Outside Syria

The following recommendations can be used as strategic inputs for INGOs and peacebuilding initiatives which plan to implement programmes or adapt already-existing projects by better understanding the context and work of Syrian civil society actors in Syria, neighbouring countries, and the diaspora. It was recommended for international actors and donors who plan to work in Syria on the ground or with organisations from inside Syria that they refrain from direct work as long as the context and realities on the ground are not fully understood. It was clearly stated as a precondition to establish access points into the local Syrian civil society and to avoid security risks for local organisations and their work inside Syria. Therefore, strategic programmes should be planned and implemented in close partnership with intermediary Syrian CSOs which already have established channels and impact on the ground. The need

to develop a long-term support mindset on all sides is emphasised. Long-term strategic support should be prioritised for Syrian CSOs, and peacebuilding interventions should refrain from short-term projects when possible. Nevertheless, all programming and development efforts need to be accompanied by a safe protection and monitoring mechanism whereby partners can monitor and report on human rights violations faced by beneficiaries, or expand humanitarian programming and empower actors to be able to do so.

- The right time to work on peacebuilding in Syria: Many discussions during interviews and workshops were critical of the prematurity of conflict-transformation programmes inside Syria. It was generally agreed to start with the basic empowerment of Syrian civil society actors (activists, volunteers, etc.), as many wished for more background knowledge about community work, their ability to participate, or methodologies in the field of peacebuilding. Here the INGO landscape could support Syrian organisations for capacity development, which could then be transferred to relevant actors and local organisations in the field.

- Red flags of peacebuilding: The regime avoids peacebuilding as a tool for foreign interference to empower local communities. As presented in the systemic assessment, the goal of the regime and its allies is to consolidate power and control, using violence and oppression as means to this end. Peacebuilding projects may thus become high-risk for local organisations and their members. For the time being, INGOs could support Syrian civil society to develop tools and methods to build trust between the Syrian people and overcome differences by getting to know each other. By doing so, foundations would be laid for local actors to prepare for localised and social change in a way that would not harm their work.

- Support citizen-oriented governance: Syrian society demands dignity and respect as core prerequisites of reconciliation, healing, and social peace. A further demand is curbing corruption on the economic, political, and personal levels. Training for organisations and individuals on technical topics (such as programme development, needs assessments, proposal writing, due diligence, etc.) is covered and implemented by various local and international actors. Yet there are hardly any citizen-centred programmes on the technical, relational, and social levels that could help local communities work for their own development. INGOs can empower and support Syrian civil society organisations to lay the foundations of more equal and citizen-oriented governance at the local level.

- Strategic programming: Identify and support localised designed intervention which could generate a sustainable dialogue process among and between Syrians. One ought not think too big, but rather start with small and feasible interventions on the local level. Break down the intervention into small areas of intervention to create easier scale entry points. Have in mind, however, to connect localised interventions, even on the smallest level, to the work which is done on other levels (national, political, international level) to combine efforts, success stories, best practices, and strengths. There are certain aspects to take into consideration for constructive strategies:

    - Enhance women's participation and involvement in project planning. Adapt measures and develop internal policies and procedures to ensure gender-sensitive planning and project design, and to facilitate participation in decision-making on the leadership levels.
    - Programmes and projects should be based on the most urgent needs of all individuals without discrimination or political considerations.
    - Conflict-sensitive programme planning, and the development and close observation of humanitarian standards need to be given priority to avoid supporting abusive mechanisms which are committing human rights violations.
    - Invest in capacity-building programmes on the individual and organisational levels, including training for staff in their respective fields of work, as well as training in the CSO's field of work, accompanied with general training modules on organisational structures and management, development of customised policies and procedures for various departments, and knowledge transfer.
    - Support CSOs in terms of technical support such as training, coaching, and internal development. It has also been recommended to allocate funds for internal development of Syrian CSOs in the form of financial support mechanisms, whether as an integral part of project-based funding or as stand-alone support.
    - Share technical expertise and support safe spaces to share and transfer knowledge within Syrian civil society. Collaboration could include the development of specific toolboxes containing adapted methodologies or developing new and innovative forms of partnership.



## 5. Projects and Activities of INGOs

The following recommendations collect suggestions for activities mentioned by experts and participants during the assessment process. The suggestions describe direct activities, capacity-building needs, and ideas to be included in a broader strategy or as a stand-alone activity. In general, INGOs could take up the role to suggest and initiate activities, provide space for Syrian CSOs to implement their own activities, and provide capacity-building resources or small seed-funds for activities. They could also initiate dialogue projects to understand different narratives regarding the Syrian conflict.

- Provide team building activities as means of organisational support and safe spaces for volunteers and employees of Syrian CSOs. The activities can be used to reflect different topics aside from the daily work routine.

- Include participants in activities from local grassroots groups to empower them and make them more productive. This includes activities to enhance mobility in order to build up constructive relationships between Syrians based on mutual interests and national agendas.

- Involve all parties to the conflict in activities to help those affected to restore security and safety; achieve civil peace; raise awareness among people to renounce violence and hatred; and cultivate the spirit of coexistence, for example through dialogue projects and dealing with the past.

- Activities to enhance the concept of human rights: monitor and document violations; raise awareness of rights, laws, and legislation; promote monitoring and accountability roles, which are the cornerstones for building a just society in which civil society is involved.

- Provide capacity building modules on diverse topics related to peacebuilding, which can generate peace initiatives reaching out to all parts of society:

    - How to use media as a peace-building tool,
    - How to develop other tools for emerging problems,
    - How to strengthen the participation of communities,
    - Conflict sensitivity - "Do No Harm«"as a tool for project work; lessons learned from Syria,
    - Project management (including analysis tools, project design, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge management, fundraising),
    - Tools and methods of nonviolent activism and communication (on different levels: community, politics, society),
    - Work on trauma and psychological support for CSO employees, volunteers and communities,
    - Team-building and organisational development methods.

# 5. Building Partnerships and Corporations with Syrian CSOs and Actors

The following recommendations examine opportunities and options for partnering with actors and organisations of Syrian civil society (as a local partner, a partner in neighbouring countries and a partner in the diaspora community). The recommendations highlight the need for ownership by Syrian partners.

- Working with Syrian partners: Work with "Syrian civil society" should be carried out in partnership (planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating) in neighbouring countries and the diaspora. Ownership should be in the hands of Syrian CSOs at the strategic level. Local organisations are well-connected, know how to work in their context, and can provide necessary protection for actors against the actions of security services. Partner organisations are aware of the geographical, historical, and politicised context of different areas in Syria. Activities and programmes with Syrian partner organisations could include common mentoring programs for Syrian activist groups, conflict-sensitive development of Syrian organisations' activities, training modules, organisational support, technical support, and capacity-building modules for NGO staff in neighbouring countries. INGOs should support Syrian civil society activists to work professionally, to coordinate and integrate the work of existing local civil entities at all levels, and open communication channels in order to find common ground for civil action.

- Hard-to-reach partners: Partner outreach should include Syrian CSOs and grassroots initiatives in areas controlled by different actors of the conflict, and areas which are disconnected or marginalised. By developing new partnerships, they will be encouraged to expand support to local initiatives and grassroots civil society actions, especially in areas where minimum support is provided.

- Recognise the impact of your strategic decisions: Whether it is an unexpected shift from one method to another, from one project phase to another, or a decision to exit the partnership. Significant shifts in operations undermine ownership by the local actors; leading to distrust of the international community and undermining the standing of these organisations in their community. All strategic steps should be developed, or at least well-coordinated with the partner organisation. Clear and sensitive communication is a key factor of a positive relationship.

- Leadership: Invest in the development of sustainable and innovative leadership models for partner organisations. Experts have mentioned that there is a tendency to strengthen an elite level within the management of Syrian organisations, as there is often a knowledge gap between senior management and their employees.[79] Employees should be included in capacity-building efforts and given equal opportunities to participate in different levels. This has strategic importance in order to enhance new leadership entities.

- Be aware: Personal ties are key in bridging between humanitarian workers, and this might be understandable under an insecure working environment, but it puts restrictions and limitations on newcomers to the senior level. Personal connections are important to build up partners inside Syria. Therefore, conflict-sensitive outreach is advisable.

- Humanitarian standards: Implement standardised criteria for compliance with human rights and humanitarian principles, and conduct due diligence of the operations of aid providers to prevent a

79- Interview, Berlin, March 2020.



backsliding in standards. Ensure that local partners are not subject to human rights sanctions, nor is there evidence that they have committed serious human rights abuses or are supporting entities responsible for human rights abuses, and that they are transparent, independent, and impartial. Consult on a regular basis with beneficiary communities and independent experts to get their feedback. Moreover:

- Ensure projects and programmes are not contributing in any form to forced demographic displacement policies or intentions or visions.
- Syrian organisations should maintain confidentiality of beneficiary lists; and insist on full, unimpeded, and regular access to different areas.
- Avoid contributing to serious human rights abuses by ending operations where risks are unavoidable, and the likely human rights harm outweighs the benefits of the programming. This would never mean that we advise to stop any needed and urgent support, but rather that decision-makers must seek better alternatives which place human rights values and the "Do No Harm" approach at the core of their interventions.
- Syrian organisations should be able to conduct demographic field studies in different regions inside Syria and to reach out to all people living on the ground.
- Syrian partner organisations and international organisations should be able to ensure together that programming is based on the most urgent needs of all individuals, without discrimination or political considerations.
- Ensure the freedom of movement and security of workers and volunteers in CSOs that provide services to civilians in all areas of Syria.

# Conclusion

We wish to highlight the support of the people in elaborating this study and we would like to express our deepest gratitude to every single participant, and interviewees, and to all the team members of "House Of Peace - Dar Al Salam" for their support. Since the beginning of the assessment, it was decided to develop a step-by-step cooperation with "House Of Peace" aiming at providing, not only to get a support for the actual field implementation of our work, but also to create a vital reflection channel for us. This was of great value.

Finally, the systemic assessment of "Syrian civil society" actors reveals their major potential role in the future development of Syria—but also their vulnerability. Syrian civil society, inside Syria; neighbouring countries; and in the diaspora, is part of all the events that have been taking place in Syria over the past ten years. As vulnerable as the conditions are for CSOs and activists operating in the Syrian context, the enduring support of the civilian population, despite open violence and fighting, shows a great resilience, and an admirable local ability to adapt and work under enormous pressure in an unstable and volatile environment. This makes civil society engagement a most important hub and institution for the support of Syrians.

Syrian civil society is active and reactive at the same time. For the international community, a pluralistic civil society is an important player granting access to the ground. There are tendencies to overburden the capacities of civil actors. There is wide support (mostly financial) for the work done by civil society, yet, at the same time, the scene tends to become dependent on sustaining these efforts. This means that, in regard to partnerships, there is a need for immediate efforts to empower the ownership, creativity, and independence of civil society actors and organisations.

Syrian civil society is in a difficult position. It is frequently criticized for the flaws and the gaps within its organisational structures, and under pressure to serve the guidelines and conditions of the international community, all the while dealing with the actual workload of serving the needs of Syrian society. Historically, the development of civil society in Syria has never had the chance for true organic development. It is characterised by ongoing control and repression by the totalitarian Assad regime, which has smothered each and every emerging sign of civil society engagement. The regime and its allies perceive a lively Syrian civil society as a threat to their power, and "an actor of opposition".

Nevertheless, in spite of all efforts at repressive control, Syrian civil society is growing. We witness many successful efforts and implementations of civil society activities (humanitarian assistance, bloggers' activities, documentations of war crimes, capacity building, human rights activism, and women's rights campaigns). Considering the developed experience, endurance, and needs of the society in which it operates, Syrian civil society is still capable of achieving sustainability in development and peacebuilding processes. Civil engagement in Syria is still one of the most promising projects for the betterment of the country, due to all the tools and flexibility "Syrian civil society" can bring to bear. Actors in civil society will need help, support, and space to develop and continue their good work.



# Annex

Map of Syria and neighbouring countries[80]

## *Systemic Assessment Interview - Guideline*

## General remarks

- The interview should not exceed 60 minutes.
- For reasons of data protection, the interviewee will be given the option of doing the interview on an anonymous basis, and of deciding how we are going to use the information for the study (signing a declaration for the use of data).

80- Credits goes to the nations online project.

- There should be a short introduction of the interviewers and interviewees, and an introduction of the purpose of the study and the interview (but very briefly).
- The interviews will be documented by the consultants (notes, recording) and transferred into a documentation matrix.
- The following questions are suggestions to steer the interview. The guidelines should be used in a flexible way, due to the nature of the interview.
- All interviews were conducted in Arabic or English. The interviewers explained the purpose of the interviews to interviewees and obtained their consent to use the information they provided in this study.
- In cases where interviewees asked not to be named so as not to jeopardise their security or their ability to operate in Syria, the interviewers have not named them or provided identifying information.

## Questions:

- Role of Civil Society in Syria
  - How would you describe or define the role of civil society in Syria?
  - Can we speak of a unified "civil society" in Syria (fragmentation vs. differences)?
  - What is important to know and to understand regarding the Syrian context and the social fabric?
  - How would you divide/categorise the political, cultural, economic, and social landscape of Syria (power, control differences, political influence) to better understand the local actors and dynamics?
  - What is the state of "Syrian civil society" and the current dynamics based on the social fabric?

- Have you observed any changes within Syrian civil society in recent years?
  - Current situation of different local civil society actors in Syria? (In relation to the political situation)
  - How would you describe the future role of civil society actors in the Syrian context?
  - What role can an active civil society play inside Syria/the diaspora?
  - How can we understand and work with the local, regional, and social differences?

- Factors for Conflict, Limits, and Needs | Assets and Peacebuilding
  - What are the peacebuilding needs and limits, at present and in future?
  - What needs regarding the impact of civil society actors would you consider as the most important to work on, taking into consideration ethnic diversity, class diversity, city vs. rural, gender diversity, religious diversity, reality on the ground for returning refugees?
  - What support do civil society actors (grassroots level) need to continue working towards social peace and stability?

- What visions and recommendations are there for working towards social peace and stability inside Syria (recommendations for the international aid community or actors like the Civil Peace Service)?
  - What are the possibilities and roles for civil society actors to actively participate in local shaping of Syrian fabric and towards a new social contract?
  - What are the facts and (political) implications and geographic realities inside Syria and the neighbouring countries which influence the work of civil society actors inside Syria or in the diaspora?
  - What positive things do you appreciate about civil society actors in Syria and the diaspora?

- What brings people together (looking for commonalities, common ground,...) to work for their communities?
  - Who usually deals with tension and the needs of the communities? How? (What do they do about it?)
  - What can civil society actors and communities do to improve dealing with tensions?
  - How does the diaspora engage with local NGOs (reflecting relationships and engagement on the grassroots level)?



- Who do they affect the most and how (What are the effects on people's lives in the communities and their daily lives)?
  - Which are the biggest/smallest/the causes?
  - Which is of most importance to you? Why?

- How are men, women, youth, and children affected by the context differently?
  - Are there tensions, needs, and conflicts that are specific to certain groups of people?

- Actors & Leaders
  - What role do the government/municipalities/police/universities (we could add more actors for this question) play in communities and civil society?
  - Who are leaders in communities (on the ground and in the diaspora)?
  - Who in the community is influential, and over which specific groups? (Name both individuals and general parties.)
  - Who represents local communities and civil society?
  - Who do you think has the experience to represent community needs? Name both men and women.
  - Who is involved on the local level? Are there specific individuals or groups who create/fuel conflict or are able to mitigate?
  - What topics and issues need to be assessed with the relevant actors?
  - How would you describe the relationships/interactions between different people in local communities?
  - Which individuals do you work with and recommend (or not recommend) to support the development of communities and civil society? Why/why not? Examples.
  - Specifically grassroots organisations.
  - Are there recent projects you really liked/think were very successful? How so?
  - What NGOs/CBOs are working in your community, and what programmes have/are they advancing to address sources of tensions? What do they do and who are they helping? What is your opinion of these organisations?
  - How do activists deal and work under the critical conditions (volatile perspectives and working conditions, fear of eviction, repressive security organs and policies) of the host countries?

- Who, in your view, are other actors we should take into consideration when we develop the assessment and the actors mapping?
  - How would you identify a constructive and applicable partner on the grassroots level?

Documentation:

- Interview - Matrix

| Time & Date | Interviewer | Interviewee | Position | Location | Organisation | Ideas & notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |

A. (-) Factors limitations, needs, conflicts, threats, and risks

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

B. (+) Factors opportunities, assets, and strengths

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

C. Actors and influence, power, relationship, network

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

D. Recommendations, aspirations, and expectations

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

E. Additional information and documents (personal experience)

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

F. Quotes

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

E. Feedback and review

| No. | Notes |
|---|---|
| | |

◆ Workshop - Bar Elias, Bekaa

1. Background
- Time: 19th of February, 11:00 - 15:00
- Hosts: forumZFD and partner organisation (House of Peace)
- Methodology: World café, plenary discussion
- Moderator: Elias Sadkni, House of Peace, and Azzam Moustafa
- Target Group/Participants: 20 (plus) participants (activists, academics, practitioners, journalists)
- Goals: Identify and address participants, develop the workshop, bring together people from a range of backgrounds to brainstorm and discuss recommendations

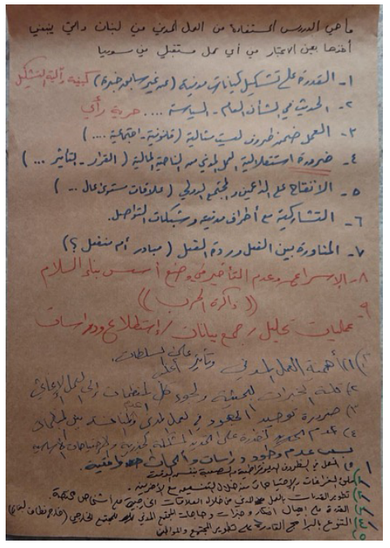


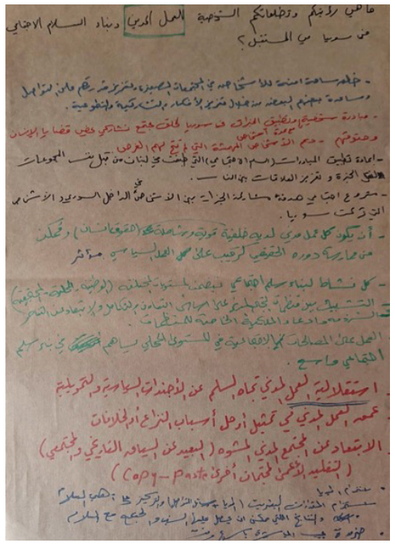
2. Methodology

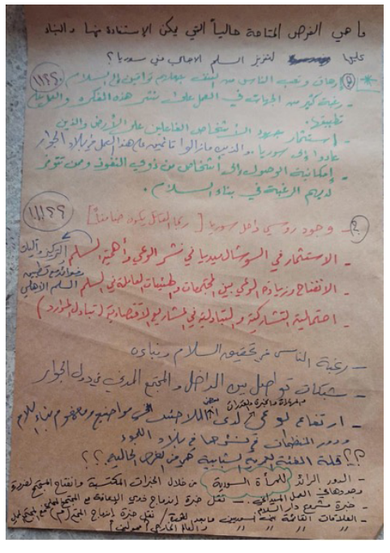
We conducted the focus group discussion as follows:

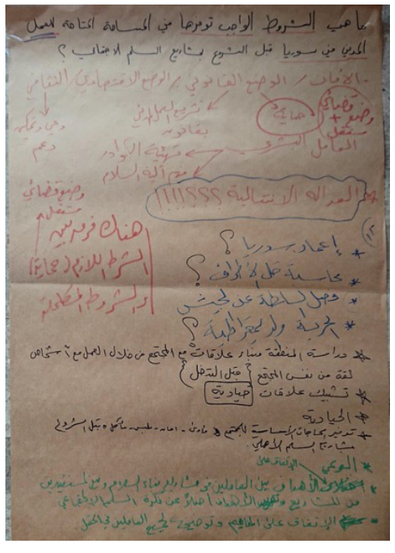
- The consultants started with a presentation explaining the background, process, and focus of the study.
- We divided the participants into four groups.
- Each group focused on a specific question.
- We did rotations in which all groups contributed to all questions.
- Every group presented the discussion and suggested their own recommendations.
- Through the presentation we generated discussions between all participants.
- Conclusion, wrap-up, and agree on how to follow up and communicate in further stages.

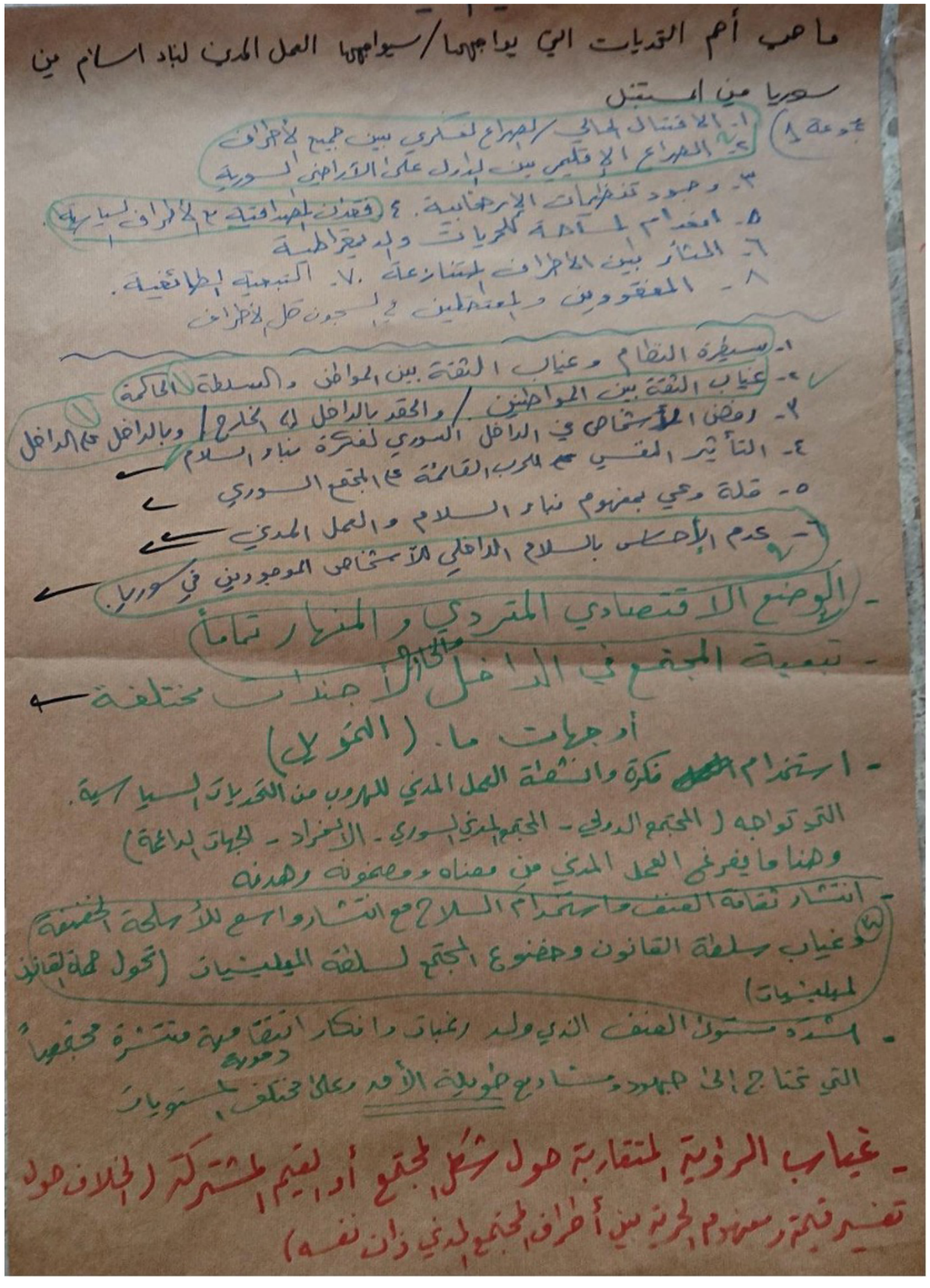
3. Results World Café













The results of the discussions are shown in the following table:

| Question: what are the lessons learned from the Lebanon experience which should be considered in future Syria planning for peace-building projects and interventions? |
|---|
| Local people take initiative to response their own needs and build up their own organisations which highlight the importance of ownership |
| It is crucial to have freedom of expression and that everyone is involved in public affairs and the political conversation. |
| Flexibility is key to be able to overcome legal and social conditions |
| The importance of financial independence at the decision-making level is reflected on the ability to influence on the ground. |
| Reach out to donors, supporters, and the international community to stress the importance of strengthening public relations capacities. |
| How to make use of partnerships and a participatory approach with different civic bodies to enhance communication channels between all of them for the common good. |
| The ability to maneuver and adapt: when to take an action and when to react. |
| Importance of establishing peace-building bases and common ground for all people (think of memory of war) |
| The need to collect data, conduct questionnaires and studies to build up proper understanding. |
| Most of the NGOs were concentrated on first aid and emergency relief response, rather than supporting research efforts. |
| Importance of cooperation and collaboration between all of the active civic bodies, and decreasing competitiveness between them. |
| Lack of field studies, field research, and proper information, which is leading to ineffective efforts to determine the essence of the problems. |
| Develop capacity-building programmes through support PR systems between actors inside and outside Syria. |

| Question: What are the prerequisites for implementing peace-building interventions in Syria? |
|---|
| Security measures, legal protection, and legalised civil society work. Better economic situation, and independent judicial system. Provide awareness, empowerment, and support on different levels.<br>Build capacities with regard to understanding peace processes and work on transitional justice. |
| We should differentiate between a “must basis” and a “complementary” one. |
| Make use of individuals active on the ground, those who have returned to Syria, and those who are living in the neighbouring countries. |
| Create possibilities to reach out to specific influential actors who share an interest in peace. |
| Russia’s presence in Syria (maybe the killer could be the guarantor). |
| Invest in social media by spreading knowledge and awareness of the importance of peace-building. |

| |
|---|
| Cross cutting partnerships, participatory involvement between economic and peace-building projects. |
| Available networks between those inside Syria and civil society in the neighbouring countries. |
| Rise of awareness, skills, experiences, and capacities between refugees in subjects and concepts related to the peace-building role of Syrian CSOs. |
| The role of Syrian women, and working to support disabled groups. |
| Strong relationships between Syrians and the outside world. |

| Question: What are the most important challenges facing peace-building efforts in Syria? |
|---|
| Ongoing military conflict between all parties. |
| Continuous and unstoppable conflict on the regional and international levels. |
| Existence of radical and terrorist groups. |
| Lack of trust in political parties. |
| Propagation of freedom and democracy in Syria. |
| Revenge and sectarian divisions between opposition and loyalist groups. |
| Detainees and disappeared persons in prisons from all sides. |
| Regime retaking control, and a lack of trust between citizens and government. |
| Sense of revenge and blaming between those inside and outside Syria. |
| Rejection of peace-building efforts by Syrians living inside Syria. |
| The psychological boundaries of the Syrian society. |
| Lack of awareness of peace-building and civic engagement. |
| Deteriorating economic situation. |
| Syrian communities inside and outside Syria are following and adopting conflicting agendas and donor interests. |
| Make use of civic engagement to walk away from the political challenges which are facing all actors from the international community, Syrian CSOs, individuals, etc., which negatively impacted civic engagement. |
| Widespread violence, and a culture and availability of weapons everywhere in Syrian territory. |
| Lack of rule of law, with all society controlled by militia groups. |
| Violence is much stronger, which recreates desire for revenge in which a long-term intervention is a must. |
| Lack of shared vision among Syrian CSOs on values, and such questions as "what form of state?" and "what does freedom mean?" |



| Recommendations: |
|---|
| • A need to work more on building up a concrete understanding of what we mean by "peace-building" on the conceptual level.<br>• No peace if we don't have social justice. Create an interest relying on peace-building and economic stability.<br>• It is important to work on the peace-building process on different levels; interest, behaviour, and culture.<br>• Neutral actors which can play the role of negotiating between conflicting parties.<br>• If it is dangerous to work with large pro-regime organisations, such as Syria Trust, we can think of small groups that receive support from them but do not fully adopt their vision and stances.<br>• Personal ties are key in bridging divides between Syrians.<br>• How can we not promote organisations that promote non-national agendas?<br>• How can we differentiate between direct involvement on the field, working with people, and the political background?<br>• How can we create dialogue between conflicting parties in which we put aside specific subjects because of their sensitivities?<br>• We should create shared spaces, common values, and mutual bases in order to create communication channels.<br>• Funding policies are obliging Syrian NGOs to take a neutral position in the Syrian context, which is not truly their position, but is rather an illusion of neutrality just to get more funding.<br>• Increase support for Syrian networks which can be utilised as communication channels between conflicting parties.<br>• Education should be the first priority.<br>• Think of programmes based on dealing with the past.<br>• Funders can be more influential on societies than local NGOs.<br>• Inclusivity should be the keyword in funding policies.<br>• Peace-building interventions should have their own budgets. |

Notes:

- During this session it was expressed that the timing of this study was very poor, given the military operation in north Syria's Idlib Province.
- One question pointed to the relationship between the ideas proposed for any given intervention and the funds available for such an intervention.
- It is important to mention that participants stated that a shortfall of such studies is that they »only reach out to specific target groups who share some kind of opposition background (with all its variations)«, meaning that the results, no matter what, will only reflect one side of the story.
- Different objectives and interests between people, workers, and organisations.

◆ Workshop - Tripoli

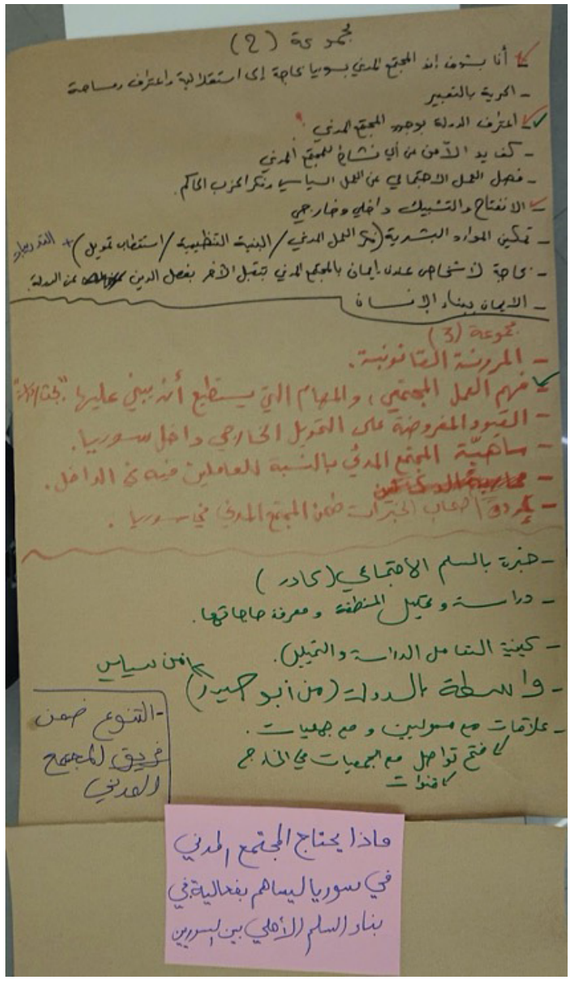
- Background:
  - Time: 20th of February, 15:00 - 11:00
  - Hosts: Azzam Moustafa, Benedikt Brammer, and Elias Sadkni (House of Peace)
  - Methodology: World-café, Plenary discussion
  - Moderator: Elias Sadkni, House of Peace, and Azzam Moustafa
  - Target Group/Participants: 20 (plus) participants (activists, academics, practitioners)
  - Goals: identify and address participants, develop the workshop, bring together people from a range of backgrounds to brainstorm and discuss recommendations
  - Language: Arabic

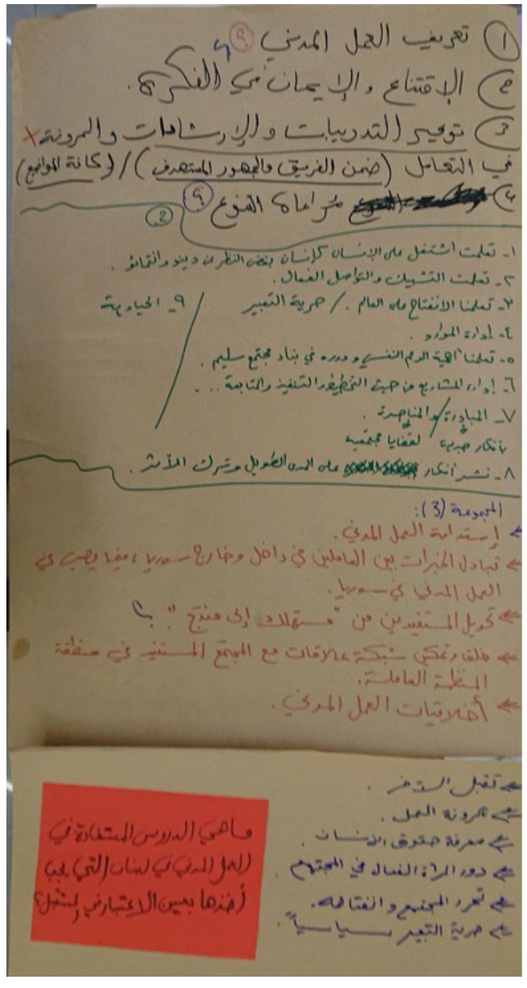
- Methodology:

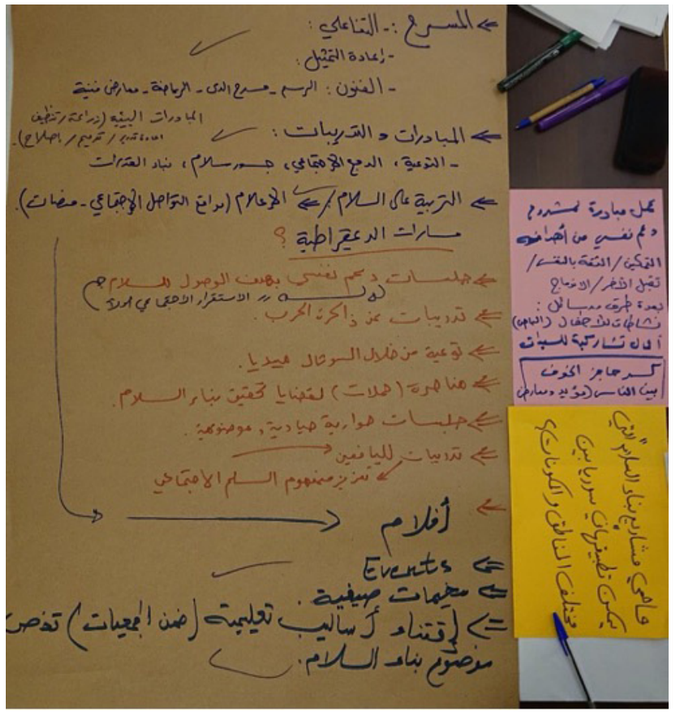
We conducted the focus group discussion as follows:

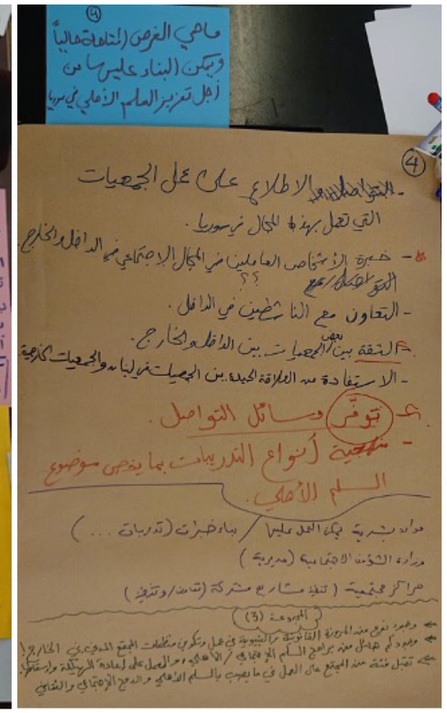
- The consultants started with a presentation explaining the background, process, and focus of the study.
- We divided the participants into four groups.
- Each group focused on a specific question.
- We did rotations in which all groups contributed to all questions.
- Every group presented the discussion and suggested their own recommendations.
- Through the presentation we generated discussions between all participants.
- Conclusion, wrap-up, and agree on how to follow up and communicate in further stages.

3. Results World Café




The results of the discussions are shown in the following table:

| Question: What lessons learned could be considered for future peace-building interventions in Syria? |
|---|
| Define the meaning of “civic engagement” and “civil society”, strengthen belief in peace-building concepts and values, and provide capacity-building training, taking into consideration the diversity of targeted groups’ needs |
| We should work with everyone regardless of their religious backgrounds and continually develop our networking skills and interpersonal communication capacities |
| We should be open to the world, highlighting the importance of freedom of expression, managing resources, and psycho-social support to build up a healthy society |
| There is a need for advocacy for social causes and initiatives which will create new ideas |
| Work on sustainable projects, exchange ideas between those inside and outside Syrians, transform the beneficiary into a producer rather than a consumer, create and empower networks with the targeted communities in the targeted areas, and build up clear ethics of civic engagement |
| We all need acceptance of others, flexibility, and familiarity with human rights. Also important are women’s role and freeing society and being open on all levels |

| Question: What are existing opportunities to enhance peacebuilding in Syria? |
|---|
| Networking and coordination with different actors, enhancing trust and collaboration between activists on the ground |
| Good existing PR relationships between local CSOs and international donors |
| Advanced use of social media by some Syrian CSOs |
| Developing methodology to build up peace-building practices |
| The existence of legal flexibilities on the part of the international donor community |
| Make use of other experiences which suit our context - transfer knowledge |
| Some parts of society accept the culture of non-violence and adopt it |
| Developed human resources and experience working with ministries or "governmental bodies" and local CBOs |

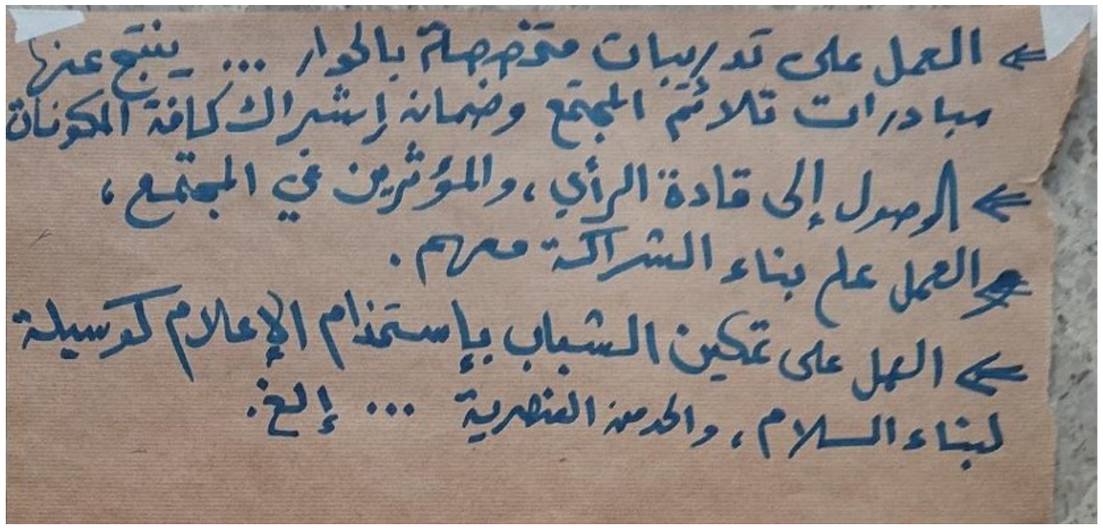
| Question: What kind of projects and programmes can be implemented in a future Syria? |
|---|
| Theatre: playback, interactive, and arts |
| Initiatives and training: e.g., up-cycling and recycling, which can utilise peace-building objectives from within |
| Awareness: social inclusion, peace bridges, and capacity-building for staff members |
| Make better use of social media and peacebuilding |
| Training on dealing with the past |
| Create awareness campaigns on peace-building concepts |
| Implement a series of dialogue sessions which are objective and neutral |
| Make use of film, summer camps, and participatory events to work with different conflicting communities |
| Create psychological support, concentrate on empowerment and trust relationships, and accept "the Other" |
| Participatory peace-building projects for women |
| Think of breaking down the fear barricade between people (loyalist and opposition) |

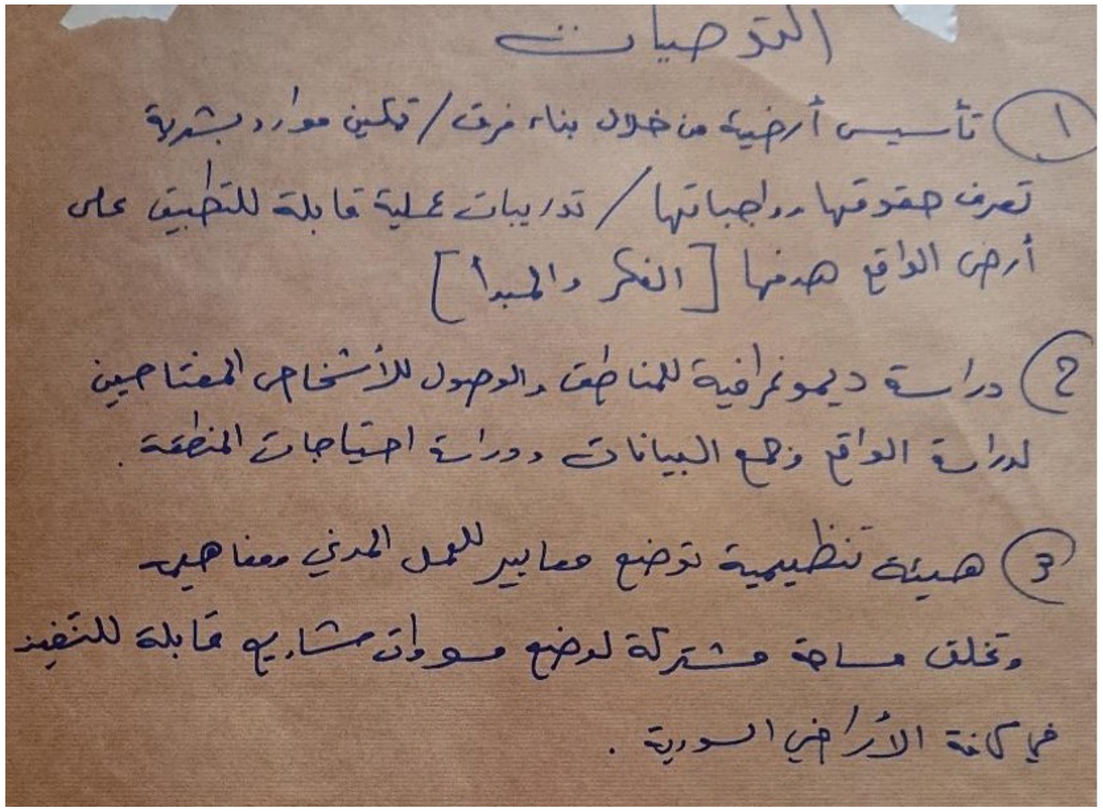
| Question: What do Syrian CSOs need to contribute effectively in local peace-building processes between Syrians? |
|---|
| Independence, recognition, and space |
| Freedom of expression |

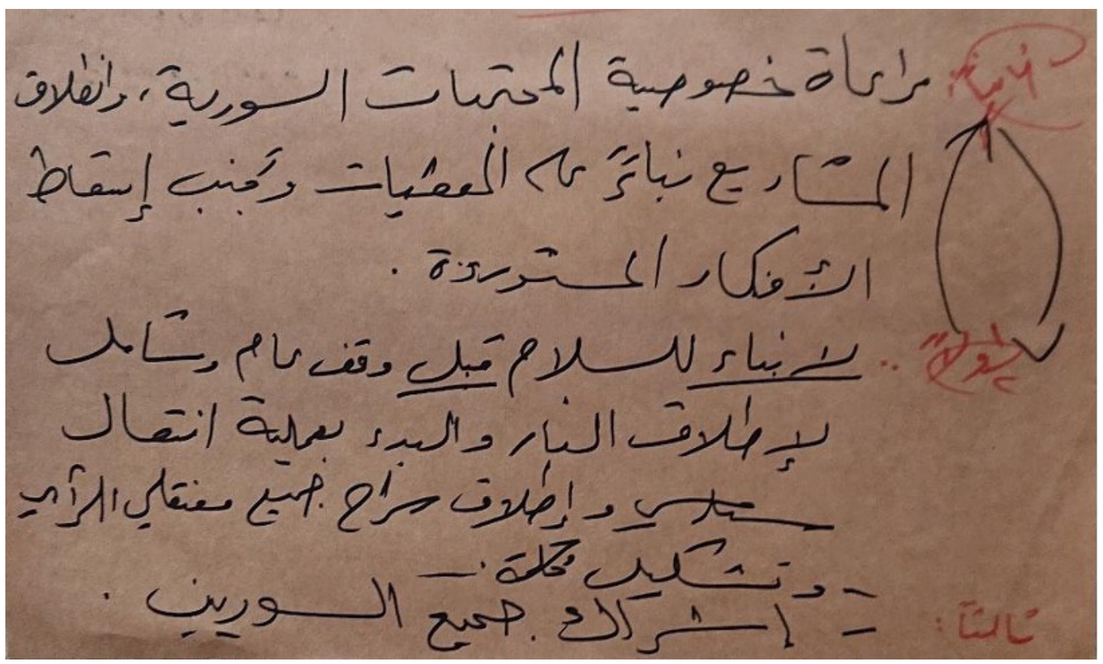


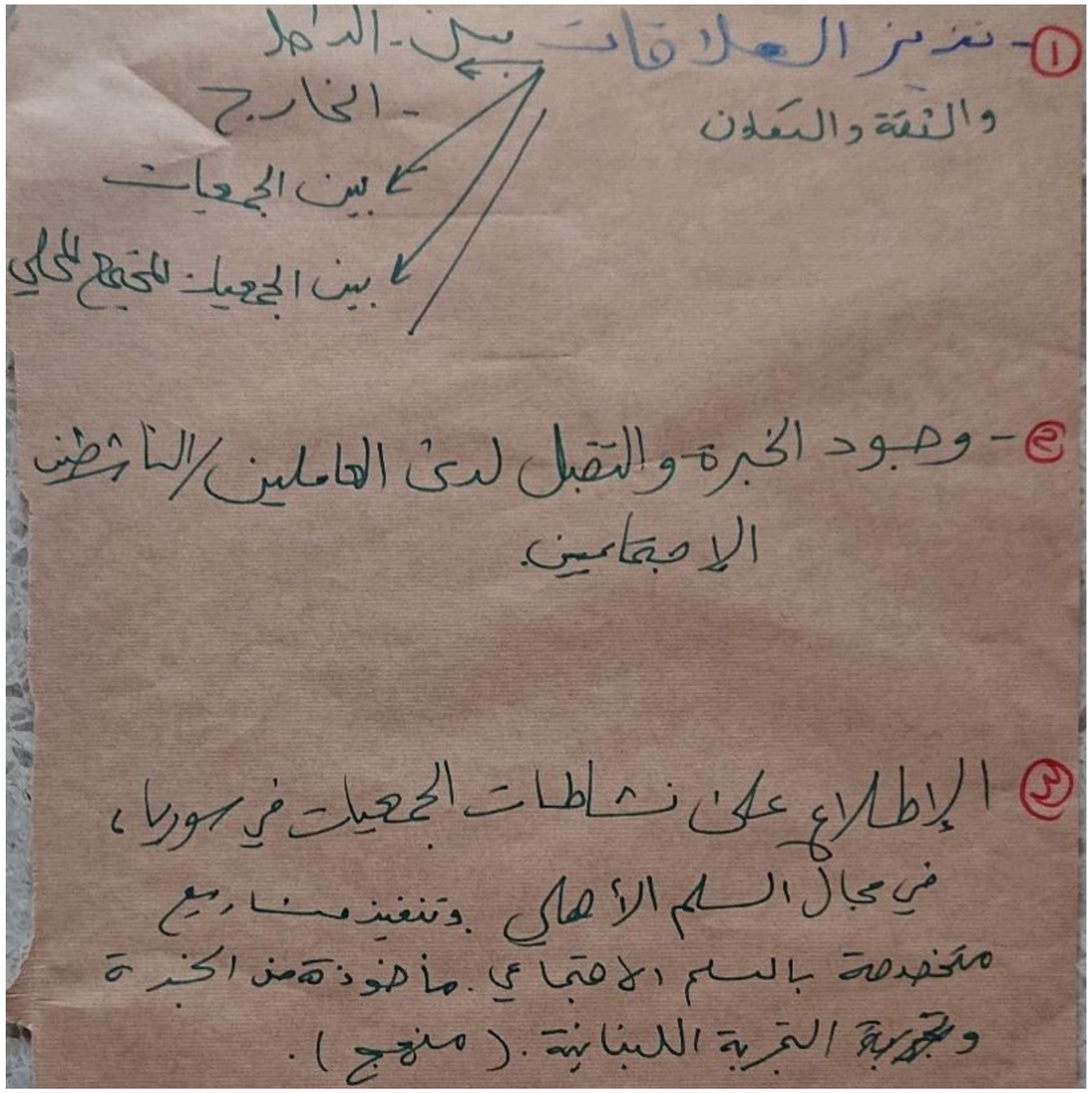
| |
|---|
| The state identifies the role and responsibilities of civil society |
| Security services are controlled and put aside |
| Social work is distinct from political work, and is not influenced by state ideology |
| Openness and networking between those inside and outside Syria |
| Empower human resources in regard to theory, and internal hierarchy for organisational growth and sustainable funding channels |
| A need to have individuals who believe in civil society, acceptance of others, and independence of the state in regard to religion |
| Available legal flexibility dealing with CSOs failing to fulfil all needed document requirements or standards |
| A need to deeply understand how the community works. |
| Lift restrictions on funding coming into Syria |
| Build up capacities and provide training to staff members working inside Syria. Develop capacity-building skills and knowledge. |
| Conduct field analysis, field study, and needs assessments. |
| Know how to make better use of available analysis. |
| Develop relationships with Syrians and associations and strengthen channels with international donors. |
| Create diverse team members with regard to backgrounds, ethnicities, and political and sectarian affiliations. |

-Recommendations






| Recommendations |
| --- |
| Provide specialised training in dialogue, which can generate initiatives reaching out to all parts of society |
| Reach out to decision-making actors and influencers, and create partnership with them |
| Provide capacity-building programmes in which media can be utilised as a peace-building tool |
| Provide team-building activities and support human resources |
| Conduct demographic field studies in every region inside Syria, reach out to people living on the ground, and collect data from the field |

| |
|---|
| Create a unit which can suggest standards and criteria for civic engagement. Create shared spaces and projects which can be implemented across all Syrian territory |
| Take into consideration Syrian social characteristics, and build on its own identity, and avoid using pre-existing programmes implemented in other countries |
| No peace-building without an end to military operations, the initiation of a transitional political process, the release of all detainees, and accountability for those who committed crimes against humanity |
| Include all Syrians |

| Recommendations and notes from the discussions |
|---|
| ◆ In Tripoli, four participants out of 15 visit and/or work inside Syria, whereas in the Bekaa, no one at all does so.<br>◆ A large discussion took place regarding the idea of whether peace can exist or be established before the political process.<br>◆ Civil society working inside Syria is under the radar: secret and on a micro-level<br>◆ Any idea you want to develop inside Syria needs an umbrella. This umbrella has two forms: security services or religion.<br>◆ This umbrella provides access and protection.<br>◆ Syria Trust, as a working umbrella, controls and absorbs all small groups which are established and try to continue providing their services.<br>◆ The context of Homs is distinct from any other inside Syria, for two major reasons: sectarian and regional.<br>◆ To a large extent, access goes through personal relationships.<br>◆ You have to speak the language of the targeted area. The conflict created a different narrative following the story of every single region post-2011.<br>◆ Peace-building can't be introduced in some regions as a red line.<br>◆ UN-led initiatives have their own protection background.<br>◆ Take into consideration the inter-generational question, and how to think of children from different conflicting groups. |

◆ Documentation Roundtable - Beirut

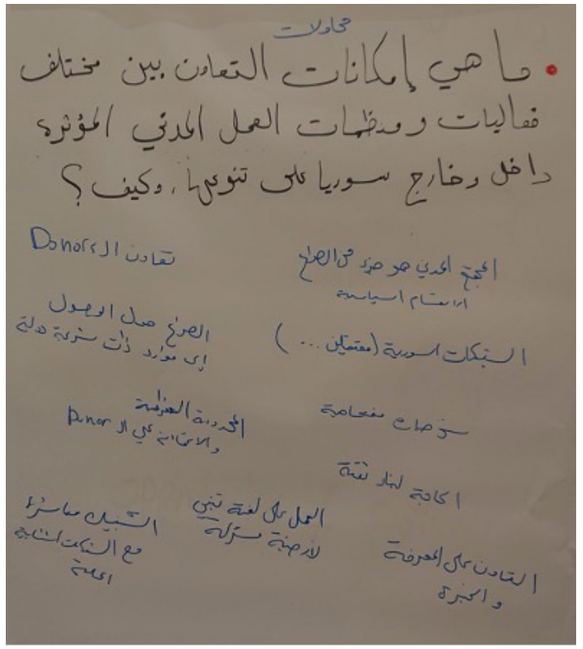
- Background

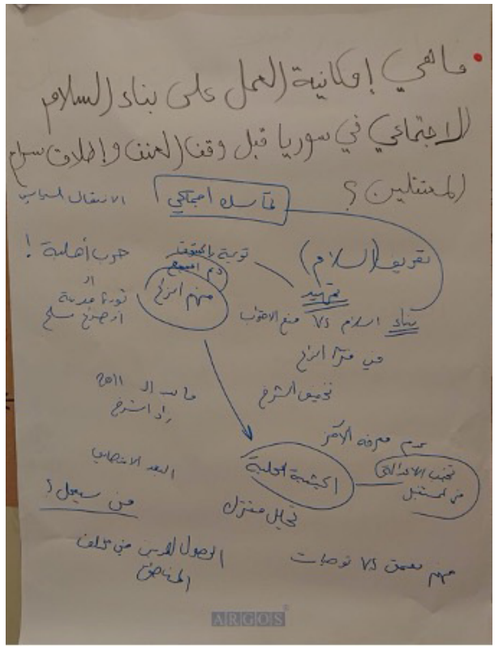
  • Time: 20th of February, 15:00 - 11:00
  • Hosts: Azzam Moustafa, Benedikt Brammer, and Elias Sadkni (House of Peace)
  • Methodology: Plenary discussion, 2 Questions, Presentation of the process
  • Moderator: Elias Sadkni and Azzam Moustafa, Documentation: Benedikt Brammer
  • Target Group/Participants: 15 (plus) participants (activists, academics, practitioners, journalists) working in the field in Syria and neighbouring countries
  • Goals: Bring together people from a range of backgrounds from the managerial level at Syrian CSOs in Lebanon to discuss possibilities and preconditions for working on peace-building in Syria.



- Discussion questions

| English |
|---|
| What are the possibilities for establishing peace-building efforts inside Syria before violence is stopped and detainees are set free? |
| What are our capacities as Syrian civil society actors to work with each other and cooperate both inside and outside Syria? |




- Documentation of the discussion

The discussion was translated by Nader Ahmed and documented by Benedikt Brammer. Every bullet point indicates individual contributions by the participants. To keep a safe space for an open discussion, the statements were not attributed to speakers by their full names.

| First Question: What are the possibilities for establishing peace-building efforts inside Syria before violence is stopped and detainees are set free? |
|---|
| Introduction by Elias Sadkni, presentation of the assessment process and the findings from the workshops in Bekaa and Tripoli. Today's meeting should discuss opportunities and challenges of peace-building initiatives inside Syria. |
| Clear statement that there is a need for an open and honest discussion about the concept of peace. The question remains whether peacebuilding is possible without an end to violence in Syria. Without ending the war, work will remain on basic levels; mainly capacity-building; with no long-term development towards social peace between the different groups. |

| |
|---|
| Provide capacity-building programmes in which media can be utilised as a peace-building tool |
| Participants raised the question of how to describe the Syrian crisis. Is it a war, a revolution, or a civil war? Is peace-building a method to overcome civil war? What is the opposite of peace? |
| It was mentioned that it is very difficult to describe the situation, as people tend to see it as "black or white". A more differentiated perspective and knowledge about the different areas, what is happening there, and the specific context, is very important. |
| The concept of peace-building is very complicated, and imprecise in the Syrian context. Peace-building could be a group of young people helping other people not to partake in military activities, for example. |
| On the other hand, there is no peace possible before the regime steps down, but what will remain in the experience of the young generation (both SAA and resistance), who are highly militarised and traumatised? We need to understand what people have been through. |
| The regime avoids peace-building, as there is ongoing violence and oppression. It is a question of the timing; maybe peace-building can be applied at a later stage of the conflict. In the meantime, we can help people and society to become empowered to prepare for change and peace. People need to get to know each other to overcome differences. |
| Peace-building can not be seen as a way to achieve peace (it can reduce war); there need to be more efforts undertaken. |
| Now, we can't work on peacebuilding; we first have to prepare the people, they don't even know their rights to participate. What could be our role as civil society actors in this? Finally, economics will matter a lot. |
| Some preconditions include a mutual ceasefire; the end of violence; and the release of all political prisoners. The latter is difficult, as it is a very political topic for the international donors (e.g., the EU), and a list of political detainees will be very sensitive. International organisations refrain from engaging in the political context. Practically, this means, working for the release of detainees could bring the risk of losing necessary funding. |
| The idea of peace-building indicates only one type of struggle, whereas in reality there are much more complex struggles on the national and local levels. Syrian civil society must be contextualised to local differences. |
| We need to think about the questions of where we are going to work, with whom, and on what issues. |
| I wouldn't describe it as a civil war. It is important to think about the awareness of one national identity, this will decrease sectarian dynamics. One thing regarding religious bigotry: in 2007, people stopped talking about religious differences, and moved on to discuss economic differences. Today religion is back on the table as a means to alienate each other. |
| We need to try to understand all different narratives and should learn to share collective experiences. I ask myself as a part of Syrian civil society, working from Beirut: what do we really know about the people living under the regime? There are a lot of different experiences of war, which we need to understand from each other. |
| I agree to the term "peace-building", as it empowers people to deal with their own issues. And we will learn about the root causes of the different conflicts inside Syria. But I also agree that there needs to be a ceasefire, which only will take place when it aligns with the interests of the regime. In the meantime, we need to understand the conflict lines before 2011 and after to understand better what we need to do. |



| |
|---|
| I don't see this as the time for the EU to do policy recommendations, as they should first understand why there is war in Syria. We need to sit and discuss together how to shape the situation in Syria. I see a big gap here. |
| Many concepts introduced to Syrian civil society in Syria coming from liberal societies. It made me feel like I was wearing a mask. I feel the need to raise awareness to tell my communities that we should look for the solutions in our local communities. |
| The work and perceptions of Syrian civil society are very Eurocentric; concepts are being applied without adaptation and knowledge of the highly-fragmented communities in Syria. |
| I am trying to localise my work, to keep it relevant to my community. But on the other hand I see that the civil war is even splitting families. There is separation, because of different views. Social work on the local level can make the difference. For example, the Russians don't see these local differences. So we need to be extra careful about the concepts and terms we use when reacting on social media, where people refrain from talking about political matters to be able to communicate with each other. |
| The Turks are conquering parts of Syria. There are different groups involved; different interests and goals. The Turks are not leaving Syria, they won't go back. So what kind of peace-building are we talking about? People start to think that the situation in 2011 was much better. |
| Peace-building can not be seen as a way to achieve peace (it can reduce war); there need to be more efforts undertaken. |
| People killing each other because of different opinions, and being in a violent conflict deprives the concept of peace-building of its meaning. |
| Every context has different causes; ethnic, urban-rural, religious, sectarian. We are aware there are different conflicts. |
| But our goal is to help the ones who are approaching us. Every person has their own perspective on peace. This is one more reason for us to understand the causes of the conflict even before the war. And then we need to anticipate people's needs and perspectives. |
| We can't do something only on the local level. We need a structural system change. The political structures need to be changed, in parallel to the social change. |
| You can't generalise; every area has its own dynamics (e.g., Idlib, Afrin). And due to the security situation, you can't work everywhere. |
| The transition will be a long process, and needs diplomatic and political pressure from outside. We will need to work in both regime-dominated areas and areas controlled by others. And we need to work as well with the sons and daughters of martyred soldiers from both sides. |
| We should look at Syria as a very diverse and complex context with different communities, narratives, and histories. |
| There needs to be a Syrian definition of peace-building. |

| |
|---|
| Second question: What are our capacities as Syrian civil society actors to work with each other both inside and outside Syria? |
| This is a very broad and ambitious request. It will need my imaginative skills. |
| At the moment it is difficult to agree and bring people around a table. I think it is not possible. The question is, how can donors collaborate with us and with each other? |
| Different areas have different levels of civil society engagement (e.g., Homs vs. Sweida) |

| |
|---|
| The regime has created a model in which CSOs can be licensed and ruled under the regime. There is no room for opposition anywhere (shrinking space for civil society). And the attitude of the donors - who will register in Damascus to fund projects. |
| It is already a problem that Syrian CSOs are divided amongst themselves (regime - opposition, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Europe). |
| At the end of the day, the funding will dry up for organisations working inside Syria |
| We need to build trust among us civil society actors, before we can build peace in communities between sects and different localities. UN organisations don´t understand the reality of a ceasefire and structural violence. For them a ceasefire means peace and they are not aware that structural violence goes beyond a ceasefire. |
| UN - Women bring women together, which is an important component, but the initiative has only a minor impact. There are too many different backgrounds, cultures, and discussions going on. And the concept of transitional justice means "justice for all", to recognise both regime and opposition victims. |
| We recommend bringing local groups into our projects, to empower them and make them more productive. They need support, given that most of the groups have to work through or will be funded by the regime. |
| Not everything is connected to the regime. |
| No, the regime took over, accept it! |
| I recommend working more with individuals, not organisations, as this might be more sustainable for the future development of projects. Organisations, especially in the Syrian context, are very vulnerable. Let's concentrate more on individuals inside organisations. |
| We need to take care that we will not exclude organisations as well as individuals in our networks. This will only stir further fragmentation. And be aware of the differences between formal and informal civil society actors (e.g., tribes and NGOs). |
| Syrian CSOs outside Syria will vanish and funding will dry out. We need to collect our knowledge gained from the past decade of our work, and pass it on to the organisations inside Syria (even on the regime side). |
| Civil society as a concept can be applied to tribes, church groups, families; the concept is large enough and can include several groups. But keep in mind not to neglect areas. Civil society in Syria and the neighbouring countries has been shaped by donor agendas, and has not grown organically. With this in mind, I am even more concerned that more money is floating into Syria, without concessions. |
| INGOs have to spend their money. They are under enormous spending pressure. Therefore, they have mostly decided to go the easy way, not working in regime-dominated areas. We need to work in these areas as well. You can't neglect places under regime control. |
| We should consider the work in the most needed sectors of the government (health system, education, infrastructure). |



- Literature review

| No | Author | Title | Year | Comment | Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 01 | International Crisis Group | Way out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum | 2019 | Middle East Report N°209 | http://bit.ly/3s1ITzD |
| 02 | Rana Khalaf, Oula Ramadan, Friederike Stolleis | Activism in Difficult Times<br><br>Civil Society Groups in Syria 2011 - 2014 | 2014 | Published in 2014 by Badael Project and Friedrich - Ebert - Stiftung | https://bit.ly/3rV6nX8 |
| 03 | Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Playing the Sectarian Card Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria | 2015 | Middle East Report N°209 | https://bit.ly/2P7OTYV |
| 04 | Voluntas | State of the Syria Crisis Response - Assessing Humanitarian and Development Challenges | 2019 | Third annual report | http://bit.ly/3rYzSHv |
| 05 | Jihad Yazigi, FES | Destruct to Reconstruct How the Syrian Regime Capitalises on Property Destruction and Land Legislation | 2017 | Study, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | http://bit.ly/2NtWNeR |
| 06 | Salam Said, Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | Local Economies in Syria Divisions and Dependencies | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/3cMjp2O |
| 07 | Kheder Khaddour, Kevin Mazur, Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | Local Intermediaries in post-2011 Syria Transformation and Continuity | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/3clYf5H |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 08 | Joseph Daher, Hrsg. European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies | The political economic context of Syria's reconstruction: A prospective in light of a legacy of unequal development | 208 | | http://bit.ly/3qW6sIH |
| 09 | Turkmani, Rim, Theros, Marika and Hadaya, Sami, Hrsg. London School of Economics, Conflict Research Programme, London, UK | Political economy and governance in Syria: presentations from the Political Economy and Governance in Syria conference organised at LSE 3-4 December 2018 | 2018 | | http://bit.ly/3eYgEOR |
| 10 | Bauman, Hannes; Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | RECLAIMING HOME<br><br>The struggle for socially just housing, land and property rights in Syria, Iraq and Libya | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/38SVm0S |
| 11 | Salam Said, Jihad Yazigi, Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | The Reconstruction of Syria - Socially Just Re-integration and Peace Building or Regime Re-consolidation? | 2018 | | https://bit.ly/38UJWKd |
| 12 | MIDMAR, Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | Reinventing State: Health Governance in Syrian Opposition-Held Areas | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/2P2dr5K |
| 13 | Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | The Conflict Impact on Social Capital - Social Degradation in Syria | 2017 | Social capital | http://bit.ly/3eR3iDO |
| 14 | Daad Mousa, Hrsg. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | Syrian Personal Status Law | 2018 | | https://bit.ly/2OC7Ao3 |



| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15 | Esther Meininghaus, Katja Mielk, Hrsg. BICC | Beyond Doha and Geneva - Peacemaking engagement of Afghans and Syrians in North Rhine Westphalia and Germany | 2019 | | http://bit.ly/38SgmFo |
| 16 | Eugenio Dacrema, Valeria Talbot, Hrsg. ISPI | Rebuilding Syria, The Middle East's next Power Game? | 2019 | | http://bit.ly/3eQTslg |
| 17 | IRC | Securing a safer future for Syrians - IRC's recommendations for the Brussels Conference on Syria | 2018 | Recommendations for Brussels Conference II on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'. | http://bit.ly/3s2ZTFJ |
| 18 | Steven Heydemann, Hrsg. Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East | Rethinking Stabilization in Eastern Syria: Toward a Human Security Framework | 2018 | | http://bit.ly/2NwNBXe |
| 19 | SIRF | Syria INGO Regional Forum recommendations pertaining to the Syria crisis for the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly | 2019 | UNGA Briefing Note, Situation of Refugees from Syria | http://bit.ly/39aAB1d |
| 20 | Worldbank | Economy Profile of Syrian Arab Republic | 2020 | Overview economical | https://bit.ly/3ltSPQ3 |
| 21 | Syria Study Group | Final Report and recommendations | 2019 | US think tank | http://bit.ly/3cO2hJU |
| 22 | Chrisitan aid | Syrian Civil Society - A Closing Door | 2019 | Very interesting and up-to date- study, timeline, actors, recommendations | http://bit.ly/2QcGDHH |
| 23 | Daher, Joseph; Hrsg. The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, AUB | Syrian Civil Society in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings | 208 | | https://bit.ly/3qTVnYV |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 24 | Syrian Network for Human Rights | A vision from Syrian civil society organisations about the general principles of the rebuilding process of Syria | 2018 | | http://bit.ly/3sbO3cg |
| 25 | Khalaf, Rana | Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict | 2014 | | http://bit.ly/38QMcC4 |
| 26 | Mattes, Linda | Syrian Civil Society Organisations in Lebanon: Assessment and Analysis of Existing Organisations and the Conditions under which they Operate | 2018 | | http://bit.ly/38TixbB |
| 27 | IPI - International Peace Institute | Against the Odds: Civil Society in the Intra-Syrian Talks | 2018 | | http://bit.ly/3tCZJW5 |
| 28 | Swiss Peace | Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace | 2016 | | http://bit.ly/3s5tkqU |
| 29 | Smaberg, Maria | Civil society in conflict A case study on the role of Syrian civil society in the ongoing conflict in Syria, seen in the light of Syrian non-profit organisations' bottom-up approach to transitional justice | 2015 | Lund University | https://bit.ly/2ONna03 |
| 30 | Petra Becker | Support for Syria's Civil Society – Misguided and Ineffective | 2014 | SWP | http://bit.ly/3s2TslW |
| 31 | Ignacio Alvarez-Ossorio | The Syrian Uprising Syria's Struggling Civil Society | 2012 | Timeline, explanation of the laws | http://bit.ly/3ls8aR6 |



| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 32 | Turkmani, Rim and Theros, Marika | A process in its own right: the Syrian Civil Society Support Room | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/3bXEbgL |
| 33 | Spitz, René | State-civil society relations in Syria : EU good governance assistance in an authoritarian state | 2014 | University Leiden | http://bit.ly/3r0I3BX |
| 34 | Impact | Changing Contexts and Trends in Syrian Civil Society - A report based on the mapping of Syrian Civil Society organisations | 2019 | Recommendations, actors | http://bit.ly/3eTxFt9 |
| 35 | Impact | Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society | 2019 | | http://bit.ly/3ls8Tli |
| 36 | Impact | Impact of Displacement Waves in Northern Syria | 2019 | Recommendations available | http://bit.ly/3s467Fm |
| 37 | Adopt a Revolution | Reconstructing Syria: Risks and side effects - Strategies, actors and interests | 2019 | | https://bit.ly/3s5vlDu |
| 38 | Karin Göldner-Ebenthal & Véronique Dudouet, Hrsg. Berghof Foundation | Dialogue with Salafi jihadi armed groups: Challenges and opportunities for conflict deescalation | 2020 | Research paper | https://bit.ly/38T5Qh7 |
| 39 | Marta Welander | Civil Society in Exile, Reconciliation and the Future of Syria: The Role of the Emerging Syrian Civil Society in Lebanon | 2015 | Masters Thesis | http://bit.ly/3tucQJ5 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 40 | Human Rights Watch | Rigging the System Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria | 2019 | Recommendations available | http://bit.ly/3eTyB0D |
| 41 | Swisspeace | Against the odds: Civil Society in the Intra - Syrian talks | 2018 | | https://bit.ly/3r3e4sV |
| 42 | Center for Civil Society and Democracy | Syrian Civil Society - As important now as ever | 2018 | Survey, Recommendations | http://bit.ly/3s4870k |
| 43 | Salam Kawakibi | Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia Special Bulletin | 2013 | | http://bit.ly/3bUjhix |
| 44 | The World Bank | The toll of war - The social and economic consequences of the conflict in Syria | 2017 | Research | https://bit.ly/3vChSVz |
| 45 | Center for Civil Society and Democracy | Public Accountability in Syria - Research to measure public accountability for institutions in ten local communities | 2016 | Study | http://bit.ly/3s0HQA7 |

**Committed to Peace**

**forumZFD**
Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst e. V.
Am Kölner Brett 8
50825 Cologne

Telephone: +49 (0)221 912732-0
Fax: +49 (0)221 912732-99
Email: kontakt@forumZFD.de
www.forumZFD.de

**Donations account:**
GLS Gemeinschaftsbank eG
IBAN DE90 4306 0967 4103 7264 00
BIC GENODEM1GLS