

Syrian Civil Society

A closing door

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Authors:

Dr Máiréad Collins, Christian Aid

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caid.org.uk

Contact us

Christian Aid
35 Lower Marsh
Waterloo
London
SE1 7RL
T: +44 (0) 20 7620 4444
E: info@christian-aid.org
W: christianaid.org.uk

Christian Aid is a member of

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Preface

In early 2018, as another anniversary of the conflict in Syria drew close, a group of UK-based INGOs discussed how this might be marked. After almost seven years of annual events to remind the world of the humanitarian disaster happening inside Syria and neighbouring countries, there was a definite air of resignation at what more could be said or done to make people listen and respond. We were told that people no longer wanted to hear about how dire the situation was there, that the scenes of death and destruction from this seemingly intractable conflict were too overwhelming and people preferred to look away.

The seeds of this report began here: how to make people aware that while the brutality of the war is undeniable, something else had emerged in this darkness, shining a light on what we had all been guilty of ignoring to a greater or lesser extent – Syrian civil society.

When we speak of aid being provided in Syria – of emergency medical response, food kitchens, basement schools, trauma counselling, rights awareness sessions, media training, and agricultural programmes – we speak almost always of the work of Syrians on the ground. Syrians who, more often than not, had no previous experience in this sector. Syrians who came from a society whose government allowed no space for civil society to grow: and yet it did.

This report is a testament to the fortitude of the women and men who against incredible odds, internal and external, have built up a powerful, albeit imperfect, civil society in Syria. It is a call to the international community – the donors, the media, the faith communities and the general public – to not forget Syria and the Syrian people.

Executive summary

Christian Aid has had a humanitarian and development presence across the Middle East for several decades. However, it wasn't until the outbreak of conflict in Syria, and the subsequent refugee crisis, that we started working inside Syria with local partners. Since 2012, we have responded with four partner NGOs across both government and opposition-controlled areas, funding partners to deliver humanitarian assistance, skills training, education, community centres and community empowerment programmes.¹

Funding this work has been extremely challenging. As a UK-based INGO, with a relatively new portfolio of partners, we face an ever-changing structure of due diligence relating to counter-terrorism. However, the bureaucratic and capacity headaches in the UK are nothing compared to the life-and-death situations that Syrian NGOs face, while also navigating the requirements and standards that typify an international humanitarian response in such a context.

Since March 2011 Syria has experienced one of the bloodiest and cruellest conflicts of recent times. There are no definitive figures of the dead, with bodies unfound, more disappeared and their fates unknown. In 2016, the UN gave its last formal tally of fatalities at 400,000, admitting it is virtually impossible to give up-to-date figures.²

Hundreds of thousands killed, and hundreds of thousands more injured: these grim figures are repeated every time we speak of Syria and its recent history. Less often told is the story of the Syrians who did everything in their power to counter this. During our research, Syrian civil society actors repeatedly expressed frustration at the media portrayal of the conflict: it focused primarily on the violence, but rarely on the sudden development of a plethora of grassroots NGOs. First with local and later with international funding, but often with no experience, these organisations have been the ones to respond to those most affected by conflict. As Salam Kawakibi and Bassma Kodmani write, the war has:

'inflicted scars on Syria's social constitution, but also generated an impressive level of mutual solidarity, new grassroots initiatives and unprecedented forms of collective action to cope under excruciatingly difficult circumstances.'³

Almost all the Syrian NGOs spoken to were concerned by how the western media in particular had largely ignored the positive work of Syrians in the war. The emphasis on reporting violence and the growth of armed groups had painted all

Syrians, particularly in opposition-controlled areas, as militants or extremists.

This growth of civil society during conflict is not unique to Syria. Social movements often become more robust and articulate in times of crisis – and are often overlooked. Social movements grew in Brazil under the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s, and are growing in critical response to its new right-wing government.

This report seeks to give a truer view of Syrian civil society, giving a voice to people who have often been mentioned only as a footnote to atrocities, as aid-workers killed in a shelling, or vilified as terrorists in the narratives of the government and its allies.

This report traces the development of Syrian civil society and the challenges it faces. It outlines where it is now and how the international community can keep it alive. And it shows why this support is important, not only in Syria, but for civil society movements globally.

Christian Aid seeks to strengthen the prophetic voice of the partners and communities we work with. This report affirms our justice-oriented approach by systematising the experiences of civil society actors in Syria: women and men who defend human rights and fight for justice for their communities, and for the democratic, open, pluralistic civil society they have been denied. It explains how, to realise this ideal, the international community must support them courageously, whether that is done financially, through solidarity or through giving this aspect of the conflict due coverage in the media.

The current and long-term approach to Syrian civil society will have repercussions far beyond the Middle East. Civil society's space is being squeezed worldwide, and these pressures are interconnected. Christian Aid's programmes in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, Brazil, and Myanmar are all facing challenges. The recent militarised response to Sudan's peaceful civilian demonstrations shows how fragile the civil society space can be. Nor is Europe immune: the rise of right-wing populist parties threatens civil society space and cannot be ignored.

To grasp the potential for Syrian civil society, we must act now. The door is already closing and it will slam shut, returning the country to the pre-2011 hostile environment for civil society, where civil society groups faced being shut down and their members and volunteers risked being arrested or imprisoned if they were perceived to challenge the state.

The international community's response will set a precedent. To ensure a global respect and a protected space for civil society, that response must be courageous, well thought-

through and responsible. It must recognise the extent of the challenge. Again and again in interviewees' accounts, there is a need for a radical, long-term view, expressed most passionately by one CSO worker:

'Who told you that every time you stick up to a dictatorship, it just falls because you wanted it to? That's not how it works – and Syrians get this!

It's going to be messy... and it's going to be arduous.'

This report is an appeal and a challenge. Will the international community support the Syrians who recognise the difficulty of the task they face?

Methodology

This research was carried out over several months. It involved semi-structured and anonymised interviews with 25 participants from Syrian NGOs, including Syrian church/faith communities, and diplomatic and state donor institutions. These were in addition to literature on the conflict, specifically on the development of Syrian civil society since 2011.

We intended to gather voices from across Syria, including both opposition and government-held areas. However, it proved very difficult to speak to organisations working in government-held areas. We reached out to NGOs working in government-controlled areas, and three were interviewed. However, attempts to contact more organisations failed because of fears that speaking to us would compromise their security. This reflects the environment for NGOs in these areas. We also had limited opportunities to speak to NGOs in Kurdish-held areas, or Syrian NGOs that specifically work with the Palestine refugee community inside Syria.

What does ‘civil society’ mean in Syria?

UN Guiding Principles define ‘CSOs’ as, ‘non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the State and the market. CSOs represent a wide range of interests and ties. They can include community-based organizations as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs).’⁴

Kawakibi and Sawah, discussing the evolution of Syrian civil society, use an operational definition which refers to ‘the active and voluntary participation of citizens in organisations (outside their families, friends and workplace) where they support their interests, views and ideologies.’⁵

For many decades, civil society in Syria scarcely existed. But in the past eight years, it has developed rapidly – out of the disruption of state authority, and the desperate need to act.

Civil society organisations have emerged without any strong historical base, and civil society has struggled to develop in the chaos in which it has had to function. For some, whether or not it is considered a civil society or not is secondary, what matters is that something necessary and important was developed. The Syrian human rights lawyer Layla Alodaat has commented:

‘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, this is an existing body that had its positives and its necessity and the necessity for it to continue.’⁶

In the same podcast discussion, Syrian researcher Mazen Ghareeba is more assured of the realness of the civil society that was developed: ‘certainly, a civil society existed in Syria after 2011’, but that norms of elsewhere cannot necessarily be applied to Syria, and that what exists in Syria ‘is not yet mature [it] arose in abnormal, incomplete conditions, but it does exist.’⁷

In interviewing Syrian civil society actors, it was apparent that there were differences in how Syrian NGOs perceived themselves and the wider Syrian NGO community, and differences over what makes an organisation a civil society organisation, as opposed to an NGO. Some interviewees saw a conceptual difference between organisations that focused primarily on service delivery, as opposed to those with a clear, rights-oriented approach and a desire to evoke change and democracy – the latter, for them, being true CSOs. It is possible that these differences reflect the relative newness of the concept in Syria, and the divisions between the various

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actors: on what civil society should look like, and who really represents it. They also reflect the grassroots volunteerism from which many of the organisations grew, and which many mourn the loss of.

In spite of some differences, the NGOs interviewed – in opposition and government areas – shared a view that a healthy, functional civil society organisation needed to be pluralistic, democratic, and independent from the government. They also agreed that nothing fitting this definition would have been allowed to exist in the country before 2011; nor is it allowed to exist now, in areas under the Government of Syria's control.

Syrian civil society before 2011 – a brief history

As the spotlight has fallen on the country for all the wrong reasons, there has been a rush of analysis on contemporary Syria. However, too little of this has focused on the evolution of Syrian civil society. To appreciate the hard-won gains of Syria's nascent civil society movement, and to understand the fears that these gains will be lost, we must understand its absence before 2011.

'The regime dealt with society as a whole as if it was its worst enemy'

Syria won independence from France in 1946. After a succession of leaders and coups, Hafez Al Assad became president in 1971, until he was succeeded by his son Bashar al Assad in 2000. By almost all accounts, under both Hafez and Bashar al Assad, Syria was ruled with an iron fist. Political opposition was mainly nominal, with little or no space for critical voices. The brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982 is the best-known expression of Hafez Al Assad's response to dissent.⁸

Under a government that insisted on absolute loyalty of thought and action, hundreds of people were imprisoned for political dissent and human rights activism of any kind. This environment left no space for an active civil society in the sense of one which is pluralistic and critical of the state. Interviewees across the spectrum agreed that there was no independent civil society before 2011.

A 2014 study traces this oppressive attitude to legislation passed in 1958, Law no. 93. This law followed what is described as a 'tradition of voluntary and non-governmental organisations in Syria that can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire.'⁹ Under the law, any association which registered was 'subject to supervision and approval by the security forces'. The Syrian penal code criminalised any organisation that cooperated with international organisations without prior approval – which was generally denied – accepted funds from abroad.¹⁰

One discussion of civil society in Syria, from the 1960s to 2000, considered that 'the regime dealt with society as a whole as if it was its worst enemy'.¹¹

Many pre-existing organisations did not seek to register under these conditions. With the arrival of the Ba'ath party to power in 1963 came state-run organisations to cover women, young people, farmers, journalists, etc. Any pre-existing organisations that had registered in 1958 were subsumed under these new bodies. New registration of organisations effectively stopped, replacing the previous pluralism with 'a unified, strongly ideological understanding of society'.¹² The few organisations that were tolerated were strictly charitable in

their objectives, covering the inadequacies of state-provided support, and tended to be faith-based.

Under emergency legislation, no charities were able to register throughout most of the 1980s and 90s. An interviewee from a Christian charitable organisation, which was allowed to register and work, pointed out that even they were watched by the security departments: 'Always there has been control.'

In spite of these stringent policies, some organisations continued to focus on human rights.¹³ And while only around 550 organisations were legally registered in 2000, this did not account for 'the existence of another civil society encompassing underground networks who supplied the population with social services, and militant organisations looking to promote a democratic transition'.¹⁴

Wrapped around all of these organisations were vaguely defined red lines, which Syrian civil society actors learned over time (with trial and error) to navigate, understanding that as long as their work did not interfere with the political and economic interests of the state apparatus, they could continue to exist. One former EU diplomat commented that 'some were willing to push (these lines), some were not...those who did get closed down' or were arrested and imprisoned.

As one interviewee described, the Syrian Arabic Red Crescent (SARC), while not an NGO, still offered an outlet for Syrians to be active in some form of community work. Many who volunteered with SARC went on to work in the new civil society organisations after 2011. One Syrian commentator, rejecting the notion that there had been no civil society in Syria, noted that 'even with the worst totalitarian state, people find spaces to work in.'

A brief hope – the Damascus Spring

When Bashar Al Assad came to power in 2000, there was early promise of a more liberal and open society. This period, known as the Damascus Spring, saw the term 'civil society' (*mujtama' madani*) enter the Syrian lexicon.¹⁵ For a few months, Syria saw a brief proliferation of civil society activity. Independent newspapers were given government licences, political prisoners of every hue were released, critical discussion of the government was encouraged, and civil society groups were established that focused on human rights.¹⁶

Even then, it was understood that certain lines could not be crossed. One interviewee had engaged in discussion groups on the economy with the Syrian Economic Committee. During public discussions, the Ministry of Economy would be represented, along with the infamous Mukhabbarat.¹⁷ If any

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lines were crossed, ‘you could be arrested and maybe disappeared.’

According to some readings, government figures were unhappy with the reforms – minimal as they were – and the Mukhabarat chiefs let Bashar al Assad know that they could not ensure he would remain in power if the reforms were to continue.¹⁸ This view has also been strongly disputed as a ‘get-out’ for Assad; it has been argued that, as president, he could have chosen a brave route and continued the path of reform.¹⁹

Whatever the case, thus began the end of the hopeful but brief steps towards an open civil society. With the crushing of these fledging civil society movements, the term ‘civil society’ came to be understood as meaning criticism of the regime and, thus used by officials in government, became a catch-all term for ‘opposition’.

‘The problem has been your existence’

Whatever form civil society took, its very independence from the state was a threat. In 2003, in the town of Daraya near Damascus, a group of young activists organised a series of peaceful events: a silent protest against the 2003 invasion of Iraq; a campaign for improved street cleaning services in the town; campaigns against bribery; and finally a campaign to boycott US goods in protest at the Iraq War.

The Daraya youth movement was rapidly shut down and its organisers were arrested and detained. One interviewee had been a pharmacist when the first demonstrations began (and so had access to medicine for those injured). They explained:

‘It’s never been about what you’re doing. The problem has been your existence itself. The existence of such a space was a threat for the regime. Having this space to discuss means they will ask for something more, which means that it’s the regime or government that tells you “this is what’s best for you” and you’ve no choices.’

In spite of this clampdown, the 2000s saw the slow continuation of a kind of civil society. A number of those interviewed who went on to work in Syrian NGOs had engaged with these fledging movements: taking part in the developing blogger community, in anti-globalisation movements²⁰ and women’s rights campaigns on issues such as child-marriage. In spite of the state’s opposition, multiple human rights organisations were formed. None were given licences to operate legally and, according to Kawakibi and Sawah, they were frequently plagued by inter-organisational disputes.²¹ This, as well as a very real fear for their personal safety, ultimately made them less effective than they might have been.

According to Ruiz de Elvira, from around 2004 the Syrian leadership shifted its tone. There was a sense that the '*mujtama'ahlil* (or civil society) was a necessary element of the state.²² Still, perhaps as Syria had waited so long for the opportunity to flex its civil society muscles, the enthusiasm was such that it became a greater threat as it became more popular. In 2005, the various forums (some with clear political opposition aims) which had been set up to allow dialogue within civil society were shut down. The opposition coalition, which called for political reform and democratisation through the so-called Damascus Declaration, was formed in the same year but faced demise and subsequent arrest of its members and leadership by the state in 2007.

A façade for the West

At the same time as this brief phase of hope for an open civil society, the government created a government-controlled alternative. The Syria Trust, under the patronage of Asma al-Assad, the first lady, was able to side-step the restrictions that the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs imposed on NGOs, and carry out some genuinely useful work.²³ Prohibitions against interactions with foreigners did not apply, and the Syria Trust hosted multiple foreign delegations, placing Asma al-Assad and the work of these organisations at the nexus of the international community and Syria's version of civil society.²⁴

Farcically, these organisations are known as GONGOs – Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations. Behind this double-speak was a double-edged reality. On one hand, these organisations were able to complete useful projects free from the usual restrictions on NGOs. On the other, they created a façade for the international community and presented Syria as having an active and open civil society. In reality, it was an oppressive state that disallowed the use of terms such as 'freedom', and that found expressions such as 'women's rights' objectionable.²⁵

As Kawakibi and Kodmani put it: 'The Assad regime surfed on a wave of civil society promotion, and basically extended the same rationale it had been applying to perfect its control over society.'²⁶

Why was the international community, particularly the West, happy to accept this? One interviewee, whose research organisation was closed during this period, said that the West turned a blind eye to the hypocrisies of this system because the image portrayed by the Assads suited their agenda: 'It was perfect for the Western countries to see a president go to the cinema and his wife want to talk to artists, to Western experts...building some NGOs.'

Now, the Government of Syria once again controls most of the country. It is seeking to promote a narrative of the Syrian state: open, and seeking only to defend itself against terrorism and extremism. There is the real risk that a palatable façade of civil society will again be promoted and accepted internationally: a regime with some of the trappings of civil society, but without independence from the government or freedom of speech to criticise the state.

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A civil society space emerges

'Capitalising on the chaos'

Of the 15 Syrian NGOs interviewed, only two existed before 2011. The rest were formed immediately after the events of March 2011. Most of the interviewees had been involved in the peaceful demonstrations against the Syrian government, some had previously volunteered with SARC, one had been part of a democracy blogging community, one was involved in Syrian economic committee discussions, alongside other activism around globalisation and gender issues.²⁷ All but one of those in the opposition areas had no previous experience of working in an NGO.

Despite many attempts, it was impossible to speak to more than two organisations that worked in the Government held areas. Of those interviewed, one was a faith-based charity with a long-term presence, albeit one restricted and kept under the surveillance of the state; the other was set up in a neighbouring country and focused on encouraging cross-community dialogue and training across Syria. Many in the latter organisation had either been underground activists or worked in one of the state-sanctioned charitable organisations.

The interviewee from this organisation said that the upsurge of CSOs in the early days of the uprising was civic-minded Syrians seeing how they could 'capitalise on the chaos'. Certainly, most of the NGOs started informally. Groups of like-minded citizens saw that those caught in the conflict desperately needed basic services – food, medical support, shelter – and responded by collecting donations locally and in neighbouring countries. At this stage, the approach had no longer-term vision and there was little or no international funding through official channels.

Freedom to operate

In what became the opposition-controlled areas, a vast number of new NGOs developed. Many eventually had the freedom to work on issues that would never have been allowed before 2011: rights awareness, democratisation processes, advocacy around accountability and calls for justice.

In spite of the limitations that continued to curtail the work in government-held areas, those interviewed from NGOs working there (as well as those who worked or work there in a diplomatic, donor or research capacity) report that the space for NGOs had also opened a bit further.

Various reasons are given for this; all tend toward the cynical. Some suggest that the government, recognising the huge

services gap, was happy for new NGOs to respond. Others consider that the government simply did not have the manpower or resources to maintain as much control of the NGO sector. Even with this limited loosening of restrictions, NGOs could not work on issues that were overtly critical of the government (including national or international advocacy). Projects were still closely monitored and reviewed by state bodies, in some cases down to the selection of individuals. Then, as now, the threat of arrest and detention hung over any NGO that would consider crossing the understood red lines of activities. While some interviewees worked with organisations that were active in government-held areas, none were prepared to even share the names of these organisations, never mind individual contact details, out of fear for the individual's personal security.

Funding quickly transformed grassroots initiatives into organisations managing multi-location, high-budget projects.

International funding starts to change NGOs

As the conflict progressed and the crisis deepened, international funding to Syrian organisations became more dominant. In the early days, INGO staff were still working directly in many opposition-controlled areas as well as those registered with Damascus, and responding in government-held areas. This was before border crossing from Turkey became more complicated, and before the proliferation of extremist Islamist armed groups in northern Syria in particular.²⁸ Over time, cross-border operations for INGOs were reduced, and reliance on Syrian NGOs increased.

The increase in funding quickly transformed these grassroots initiatives into organisations managing multi-location, high-budget projects. The international funding was both a boon and a curse: it brought operational standards and expectations that could not always be met and which overly influenced the trajectory of work inside Syria.

A high point of civil society

Much of the literature on Syrian civil society was written at the height of its existence, particularly in opposition-held areas, and describes a movement that covered a broad swathe of the country. Khalef *et al's* study focused on non-relief organisations in non-government held areas, and at the end of 2014 could cover civil society groups across five governorates – Aleppo, Idlib, Deir az-Zor, Raqaa and Hama.²⁹

Government takeover of areas and the control taken by various armed Islamist groups has quashed most CSOs in these areas. What is left now is predominantly civil society organisations in the Idlib governorate and Kurdish-held areas of north-eastern Syria. Support is slowly reaching Raqaa but is predominated by humanitarian response. Civil society as far as it exists in Government held areas is necessarily restricted.

In general, since 2014 the space for civil society has been squeezed beyond recognition.

Challenges faced by civil society

Acting on peaceful ideals

For many interviewees who had worked in what were opposition-held areas, their initial work was intermingled with involvement in the initial peaceful demonstrations.

The beginnings of their organisations had been marked by a very genuine sense of hope that a great change was coming.

This change was imagined as bringing greater civic freedoms and human rights, an end to widespread corruption and a shift towards democracy. It was believed that it was coming soon and the participants wanted to ensure they acted to enable this change. One interviewee, from an organisation that focuses on community building and social cohesion, explained that most in her organisation had not been involved in any civil society movements before, but that this was an occasion to 'exercise their civic muscle'.

In the opposition areas, it was genuinely hoped that the changes would occur through peaceful means. As one interviewee put it, 'it was really urgent' to make the movement 'stay non-violent and sustainable'. For all the interviewees from opposition areas, this desire was intrinsic to their NGO's existence.

Many had been part of the peaceful demonstrations, and saw the opening-up of this civil society space as a logical extension of that, describing it as an opportunity to support their community and, for some, to encourage within that community a sense of civic activity, volunteerism and a contribution to something greater.

Militarisation of the uprising

The challenge and impact of the militarisation was twofold: the growth of a movement that went against non-violent aspirations, and the role of various armed groups in squeezing the civil society space in opposition areas.

Phillips, in his 2016 analysis, describes the development of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its unruly, ill-defined structure of multiple militia groups (or *katibas*).³⁰ By mid-2012, US intelligence reported that there were over a thousand different militias, the Carter Center a year later identified 1,050 brigades and 3,250 companies.³¹ Militia groups received financial backing from outside Syria – backing which, like much of the aid that reached Syria, reflected the funder's strategies more than anything else: 'Each had a separate agenda within their desire to topple Assad, prompting them to back rival groups, exacerbating divisions among the rebels and facilitating the rise of Jihadists'.³²

As the armed groups grew and took increasing control, the aspirations of a peaceful movement were soon crowded out. This changed the direction of the uprising, and also the external perception of it – the focus shifted towards the armed groups and the increasing violence.

As one civil society actor put it:

‘When the militarisation of the uprising began, it was the first day that international actors had a role in Syria. [From this time] as Syrians we lost all control over what’s happening in Syria.’

In this interviewee’s eyes, it was the militarisation, and the financial investment this involved, that turned the ownership of all aspects of the uprising away from Syrians.

The military objectives of international donors took the upper hand over any other objective which did not turn a profit for anyone. Money that could have been used for development work and humanitarian aid was prioritised instead for backing the relevant militias that supported their intended policies in Syria:

‘We lost the decision, not just the opposition, all parties in Syria. When you’re talking about battles, you’re talking about huge amounts of money. This is not money I can collect from friends to buy medicines to send to field hospitals; here you’re talking about military operations that cost millions of dollars. This is something you need states to support, which means that the states that are paying have the upper hand in the military conflict... They’re there because they want something for different reasons, for different people - everyone has a reason for their presence in Syria.’

The militarisation, and the subsequent rise of extremist Islamist groups in opposition areas, bolstered the Government of Syria narrative: that it was primarily fighting terrorism, and that anyone working in an NGO in these areas was *de facto* in support of these groups. This was used later to justify the closing-down of NGO operations and the detention of NGO staff and other civil society activists when areas were taken over by the government and its allies.

Repression of civil society

The second impact of the militarisation was that these armed groups, in particular the extremist Islamist groups, did not want a free civil society in the areas they controlled. One Syrian NGO worker, who had taken part in demonstrations in the early days of the uprising in Damascus, explained: the ‘weaponising of the movement’ meant that ‘after seven or eight years we have lost much more of the freedom space that was gained in 2012-13.’

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More radical groups were 'destroying civic life in rural areas [and] killing any civil initiative', putting pressure on CSOs to toe the line.

Another Syrian NGO actor, originally from Idlib, had started working in grassroots projects and took part in the early demonstrations. They spoke of how the more radical groups 'were destroying civic life in rural areas [and] killing any civil initiative', putting pressure on CSOs to toe the line and closing down media outlets.³³

One member of staff from a Syrian organisation working on community empowerment described their experience of repression:

'We are for human rights, for women, for women's empowerment... Our work will step on the toes of any controlling authority that doesn't agree with that goal, or doesn't agree with the concept of a pluralistic democracy, so sadly in the government areas we've run up against that issue, in the opposition area with various armed groups we've sometimes run into that issue and with Kurdish groups, I'm sad to say, we've also run into that issue.'

Another medical NGO cited the significant increase in kidnappings by these groups in recent years. In 2018 alone, 12 health workers were kidnapped. These were the numbers they could verify, as they were their staff; the overall figure of civilians kidnapped by armed groups is thought to be much higher.³⁴

A Syrian researcher, critical of the direction the uprising took, noted that the growth of the militarisation 'killed the spirit' of the civil society movement. Another Syrian NGO worker, who co-founded his organisation, said that the extremist militant groups prevented the real growth of the civil society movement; it forced CSOs to focus on urban areas preventing the opportunity for a critical mass that could sweep the movement wider. This was particularly the case in the north, where Islamist groups gained greater control earlier in the conflict but was also the case in opposition-held areas of the south. He gave the example of Razan Zeitouneh, a civil society activist who was openly critical of both the Syrian Government and Islamist groups. In 2013, Zeitouneh was kidnapped in Douma, in the south of the country, along with her husband and two other activists – by, it is believed, *Jesh el Islam*. Her whereabouts are still unknown.³⁵

For these armed groups, just as for the government, the potential of a critical mass extolling democracy and rights was in direct opposition to their conservative, repressive ideologies and presented a clear threat to their control.

Impact of the donor community

International funding for Syrian organisations in all areas of Syria started early in the crisis. In the earliest days, this came

initially from the diaspora, and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood which had historical political links with the country. Before long, international government aid bodies were providing aid – along with INGOs, many of which launched public appeals. Some INGOs set up direct operations in Syria, in Government and opposition-held areas, early in the crisis.

Funding was, and still is, desperately needed. It has allowed organisations across Syria to deliver humanitarian aid, to provide education and medical services, to support women's organisations, to help build the capacity of communities, to teach skills, and to provide psychosocial support against the trauma of the conflict. Much of this would have been impossible without the international donor community and the millions sent to fund relief for the crisis in Syria.

However, while the importance of this aid shouldn't be forgotten, almost everyone interviewed, including diplomatic staff, government donor agencies, researchers and Syrian civil society actors, spoke about the negative impact of funding on Syrian civil society organisations.

'NGO-isation'

The impact of international funding on Syrian organisations, whether positive or negative, is hugely significant because less than 1% of all international funding goes directly to Syrian NGOs.³⁶ This is in spite of the reality that an estimated 75% of all aid delivered inside Syria is done by Syrian CSOs.³⁷ The particular influence of the international aid sector on CSOs, bringing them in line with their standards but also their vision and strategic directions, was most commonly referred to as 'NGO-isation' during the course of this report's research. This was used to refer to the way that external funding shifted the dynamic of Syrian CSOs away from their grassroots beginnings, often rooted in volunteerism. It also referred to the way in which CSOs became bogged down in the bureaucracy of due diligence related to counter-terror legislation. More importantly, it required CSOs to be subject, most of the time, to what donors saw as the priority work, which frequently did not align with what Syrian NGOs felt was most important.

From activists to workers

Many interviewees bemoaned the loss of the early days of activism and the sense of a movement motivated only by a desire to bring change. Over the years, that movement morphed into a professionalised response with all the trappings of NGOs. One interviewee, who had been involved in the non-violent, pro-democracy activism at the start, said: 'With good intention they [the international community] changed the civil society from activists to workers.'

Another interviewee, from an organisation that works across all areas of Syria, reflected on the change:

‘A few years back, civil society emerged by itself and it was probably more self-sustaining [meaning that it would see need and respond]. But then it became more of a business and people probably now see it more as work than an initiative.’

In the past eight years, Syria’s economic situation has grown increasingly desperate, with more than 80% of the population below the poverty line.³⁸ It is hardly surprising that people would take the opportunity to earn a wage for work that they had previously volunteered for.

The same analysis of NGO/activist work could be made throughout the world, where the motivation to help others is not always entirely altruistic, but rather may be seen as a career like any other.

However, in Syria, this shift from volunteerism to NGO jobs probably compounded the interviewees’ sense of the movement being wrested from them before they had time to make it their own – a situation worsened by the further curtailments placed on these organisations by those bodies that funded their work.

Fear of diverted funding

The vast majority of Syrians who went on to set up and work in CSOs and NGOs operating in Syria came to this work without prior experience, in an environment with no culture or history of these organisations. One interviewee was involved at a diplomatic level in reaching out to potential NGO partners in the opposition areas in the early days of the crisis. They reported that mistrust was a significant issue on two levels. These organisations were new and their experience unknown. More importantly, there were fears that the organisations were not who they purported to be and were instead ‘Ba’ath party clones’ that would divert funds back to the government; a concern they felt was legitimate based on the history of state infiltration of anti-government movements. This fear of diversion later expanded to a fear of diversion to terrorist groups, placing local organisations under greater pressure. As the same former diplomat put it, the CSOs ‘became caught both ways – it’s a tragedy.’

International standards, local actors

When the expectations of international standards in a humanitarian crisis were enforced, they were enforced on a community of actors with largely no prior experience, working under particularly difficult circumstances, and where a prevailing sense of mistrust coloured almost all funding.

This is not to argue that international humanitarian standards should not be adhered to. But these standards were rarely matched by sufficient capacity building or funding for staff to ensure resources were available to manage these standards.

This ran alongside the marked absence of any localisation agenda. Syrian organisations had significantly less control over the direction of projects and project selection than their funders, with only 0.2% to 0.9% of funding for work inside Syria going directly to Syrian organisations, in spite of them delivering around 75% of all aid.³⁹ Perhaps the most restrictive of standards relates to avoidance of corruption and diversion. Because of the severe restrictions around access to opposition-held Syria for international funding bodies, almost all monitoring was done remotely. This was coupled with the donor community's fears regarding corruption, misuse of funds, and the potential for aid funds to be diverted to armed groups. These fears were not unfounded. Syria had an array of armed militias included foreign state military groups and an underpaid state military.

Syrian organisations are not immune to this. But many international funders didn't take into consideration the capacity of the organisations. There are considerable practical challenges in providing multi-layered paper-trails of proof of money transfer, mileage of project vehicles, beneficiary names, and so on. There were also security risks for staff having certain documentation on their person or in the offices. These challenges were raised over the years with the donor community, without any substantive changes being made.

Funders' strategic influence

A second key challenge, emphasised by almost all the interviewees, was how their work was overly influenced by their funders. One Syrian civil society expert described the 'NGO-isation' as a 'killing point' for civil society organisations in Syria, as they began to work on projects predominantly based on what their funders wanted them to do.

As INGO and government donors' strategies changed, so did the work on the ground. If a given INGO or donor felt it was time to start livelihoods projects, because that reflected their internal strategy, then everyone they funded in Syria did livelihoods work. This increased the sense of lack of ownership, making CSOs essentially 'operational partners' and ignoring their knowledge of their country and how its needs could best be met.

This has been keenly felt in the past year. International donors have shifted strategies away from stabilisation funding in opposition-held areas, which provided support to longer-term, development work, and towards humanitarian funding only. This has been predominantly in areas controlled by Islamist

If a given INGO or donor felt it was time to start livelihoods projects, because that reflected their internal strategy, then everyone they funded in Syria did livelihoods work.

armed groups. One senior representative of a European INGO criticised the decisions by multiple donors to stop funding for non-humanitarian work based on the risk levels they perceived, and warned of the longer-term impact of fuelling distrust of the international community:

'I find it quite shameful how some of the donors have withdrawn money just because of who is governing the area. It's really sending the wrong signals, it's not about solidarity, and it's not about standing up for the values we purport to support.'⁴⁰

'Some of the donors have withdrawn money just because of who is governing the area. It's really sending the wrong signals'

Challenges in government-held areas

The environment for any civil society activities before 2011 was extremely small. This space has somewhat opened up. According to interviewees, the fact that the State's security apparatus is busy elsewhere, and that the state depends on services provided by NGOs that they cannot provide themselves, means that groups are given a 'free pass' – to a certain degree.

Small successes, bigger dangers

One Syrian NGO worker described the pockets of civil society activity, groups eking out space to work on reform:

'There are still movements inside government areas... that are not as, let's say, extreme or oppositional as those outside the countries but they are still trying to push for internal reform inside the system.'

In part, according to this interviewee, these small successes are due to certain actors knowing how to work the system; the remarks tally with the earlier discussion of how Syrians know to manoeuvre around their society's red lines:

'Some people are established enough, know their way around, know how to deal with the Mukhabbarat, keep them informed of what is happening and they actually manage to get by and do their things without anyone giving them a hard time. Some people just know how to work around the system.'

Another interviewee from a European government donor body gave an example of ways around the government's disapproval of anything that might put it in a negative light. Social cohesion work could imply there was 'something wrong between the communities'. To get around this, an NGO might turn this into a 'clean-up project', but include people from different groups, so turning a technical project into a social cohesion one, without attracting negative attention from the state.

In spite of these small, positive changes, there is no indication of a fundamental change by the government towards allowing

an open and critical civil society. The red lines remain and are enforced. This can be as simple (and effective) as the Mukhabbarat calling to an individual's parents' home, looking for them, to know this is a warning to stop activities.

Interviewees from the diplomatic and international donor community who have worked with organisations in government-held areas spoke of the continuing limitations – people still hesitate to be too outspoken and avoid the hot topics of political change and democratisation. One interviewee from a faith-based NGO working in government-held areas explained this position saying:

'On one hand, more civil society organisations are working now than before, and the government allowed more organisations to be active... on the humanitarian level, on the education level; now the government is more open to talk to civil society. Plus, now in Syria, they are giving licences to NGOs which was very difficult before the conflict. On the other side, we are in a war zone.'

This reference to the war and the suggestion that an open and free civil society is antonymic to a conflict context is very much in keeping with the precedent already set by the Syrian government. It is a very dangerous position for Syrian civil society, which puts its members as potential enemies of the state. There has been some opening of the space for civil society activity in government-held areas, but it is reported that this is once again closing. For instance, one interviewee from a Syrian CSO spoke of how NGOs that are seen to become too big – and so presumably more of a threat in some way – are shut down:

'We have seen people from pro-regime civil society being arrested because they reached a size and influence that can no longer be tolerated by the regime... in Damascus and Aleppo. Even people who went to Geneva as representatives of regime civil society were arrested and had their organisations dismantled.'

One interviewee from a European INGO, in a perhaps more positive note, said that 'there is no determining factor' as to what will lead to the shutdown of an NGO in government-controlled – she cited the difference in attitudes in, for instance, Latakia as compared to Hama, which seemed to be more liberal. Overall, the sense is that nothing has changed much. One interviewee who works with Syrian NGOs across Syria reported that NGO staff with whom he had spoken have had their futures made clear to them by the security apparatus: once things calm down and they have served their purpose, it will be a return to as it was before. The 2019 Human Rights Watch report 'Rigging the System' underlines

the extent to which the pre 2011 status quo of state regulation of aid programmes has not changed, and now threatens the deepen human rights violations in future reconstruction processes.⁴¹

'Draining the sea to kill the fish'

Since the bombardment of Eastern Aleppo in late 2016, there has been a pattern of government and ally takeovers: opposition-controlled areas are retaken and the work of the CSOs is dismantled. Independent, critical CSOs are seen as threatening the controlling role the government plays in all areas of citizenship.

Throughout the conflict, the government has insisted that the opposition in its entirety are terrorists and that anyone who supported them is a terrorist as well. 'Support' in this case was defined quite broadly – to include anyone who lived in the same area. The aerial bombardments of opposition-held areas, including the bombing of hospitals and schools, have killed thousands of civilians and have been widely decried as violations of international law. By the logic of the government and its allies, they can be presented as 'fighting terrorism'.⁴² The UN's 2016 Independent International commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic noted that 'merely living in or originating from certain neighbourhoods leads to targeting'.⁴³ The same report noted the testimony of survivors, who described these actions as '*tansheef al bakhar*, or draining the sea to kill the fish' – that is, getting rid of everything else to get what you want.⁴⁴

The current situation in Idlib governorate sharply illustrates this approach and the deadly environment it creates for civil society organisations there. It was described by the UN's Political and Peacebuilding Affairs chief in June 2019 as a 'grim picture of ongoing airstrikes, barrel bombs, cluster munitions, mortar exchanges and artillery fire that are causing civilian casualties and massive displacement'.⁴⁵ As of mid-August 2019, the UN reported that upwards of 500 civilians had been killed since the escalation of violence in the north west of Syria, including women and children, with hospitals included as targets in the shelling of the area, which includes more than 1 million children. More than 400,000 people have been displaced and this, alongside the death toll, is expected to increase if the crisis continues.⁴⁶

Civilians, including non-violent activists and NGO staff, have been detained and the work of their organisations ground to a halt.

The fate of CSO workers in areas returned to government control

The targeting of civilians did not stop once the armed groups controlling these areas had been driven out or reconciliation agreements had been made. Instead, civilians, particularly those who are perceived to have been anti-government activists in any form – including non-violent activists and NGO staff, if they have not fled the area – have been detained and the work of their organisations ground to a halt.

Eastern Ghouta, a suburb east of the capital Damascus, was under siege by Syrian government forces and their allies from April 2013. This led to severe deprivation for those living in the area, with repeated peaks of humanitarian crisis during the five years and numerous calls from the international community for the siege to end. Throughout the five years, Syrian CSOs continued to provide relief to those trapped – humanitarian aid alongside education, media training, and other work.

In 2018, intensive bombardment of the area killed 1,700 people and injured a further 5,000. In some areas, up to 90% of structures were destroyed. After a truce was negotiated between armed groups in the area and the government and its allies, the area fell under government control. As a result, over 1,580,000 people were displaced from the area; around 65,000 of these, mostly civilians, were forcibly displaced to Idlib and Aleppo.

One of Christian Aid's partners, which had provided various livelihood and agriculture support programmes in Eastern Ghouta, remained throughout the siege. During the worst of the shelling, they continued to work when possible. One of their colleagues was killed during this time when his home was hit by a rocket.⁴⁷

Many of their colleagues were displaced elsewhere in Syria, and did not dare to return, fearing they would be arrested and detained for involvement in a CSO in an opposition-held area. Of those who stayed, all were detained and interrogated. One staff member, an agricultural programme supervisor, was displaced to Idlib for several months, but his family asked him to come home assuring him they felt it was safe. On his return, he was arrested and detained for three months. His family were too afraid to speak about what occurred during his detention, and he has since been too afraid to leave the area again for fear of being detained again.

In Aleppo (2016) and later Eastern Ghouta (2018), Christian Aid partners had to evacuate their staff for fear of arrest based on their perceived association or support. Interviewees reflected this also:

‘All the areas that the regime got control over again, no continuation of work for civil society was allowed... those who stayed either got arrested or had to keep a real low profile, but no real activity was allowed’ and ‘[in Daraa] people are still lying a little bit low because they’re looking over their shoulders the whole time.’

One interviewee, who had taken part in the non-violent protests of 2011 and now works for a Syrian CSO, spoke of the positive work that civil society organisations like his had done in the southern city of Daraa, and the impact of the government takeover from opposition groups (including extremist Islamist groups) in July 2018. When asked what had become of the work and the organisations, he broke down in tears: ‘It’s all gone, it’s dead.’

NGO staff had been arrested, including one of his organisation’s staff who was held for three days and a friend who had been detained and not heard of since. Another interviewee said of those NGO workers who stayed behind in Daraa: ‘they were arrested... one of them was killed under torture.’

One of the most difficult things for many organisations based outside Syria was not knowing what had happened to their colleagues and friends. Reflecting on how the environment had changed, one Syrian NGO worker, whose organisation had to shut down in Daraa, reflected on the difference visible via social media postings; prior to the takeover: ‘you just see on Facebook they express about themselves... without fear, but now... they don’t talk about anything, they just put things about sport or poetry or pictures, that’s it: there are no ideas, nothing.’ Another Syrian NGO worker said that, to protect themselves, people are laying low for now: ‘People now just bury their thoughts, their beliefs, their ideology – but just for now, I believe, not forever.’

‘People now just bury their thoughts, their beliefs, their ideology ... but just for now, I believe, not forever.’

What future does Syrian civil society see for itself?

In early 2017, speaking in London at a Chatham House conference on Syria, Assaad al Achi of Syrian NGO Baytna ('Our House') described civil society as 'the last hope (Syria) has left'.

As bad as the picture was for civil society in 2017, the space has contracted even more since then. It would not be surprising if that hope had drained from the veins of Syria's civil society actors. Yet the most surprising thing in these interviews was the resilience and hopefulness that remained. For people who had been involved in the early days of peaceful demonstration, who have seen the dreams of peaceful regime change disintegrate, and have witnessed years of conflict and ever-growing challenges for this nascent movement, coping with shifting expectations has been necessary to continue to work. One interviewee from a CSO described how this had to happen early on:

'The shift from the real hope that there could be transformational change in Syria, that was the real hope that was the result of a non-violent movement... That hope had to shift when it became clear that there would be a cycle of violence that would get bigger and bigger, the human rights violations that were growing and growing, it became impossible to see that the change would come, non-violently or at least immediately.'

In the interviews, there was a prevalent realisation that, with an ever-shrinking space, the fight for civil society to exist was going to be long haul. Most often this was motivated by a sense of innate belief: this was something that could not be given up on, and a duty was owed to those who had died trying to achieve it. One interviewee, working for a Syrian NGO based in Beirut, said: 'We can't say we'll reach our goals in 10 or 20 years. Maybe it will take 100' – such work as they could do now, they were doing for their children, or even their grandchildren.

Most interviewees also spoke about how something had now changed in Syria and Syrian people. A space to think and to speak out had not existed in most people's living memory, and this space would not close so easily. As one EU interlocutor for Syria put it:

'The regime has cracked...and while there may be attempts to kick these cracks people have fallen into them quite deeply and they will work to widen these cracks.'

A space to think and to speak out had not existed in most people's living memory, and this space would not close so easily.

Almost everyone who was interviewed expressed this sentiment, alongside a recognition that – considering the challenges they faced and the lack of experience they had – what they had achieved so far is monumental. ‘I don’t think we did anything better than we could,’ said one interviewee. ‘40/50 years of fear and the destructed community and with no previous civil society or even political experience...it was the logical or reasonable response.’

However, there is also pessimism and cynicism at the current situation. For one interviewee, the speed at which the work of NGOs collapsed due to the takeover of the opposition areas indicated an inherent weakness in the entire Syrian civil society initiative: ‘wishful thinking is not useful for us, we have to say we failed.’

For him, a key issue is a lack of reflection by those active in Syrian civil society at their mistakes, something which he believes must happen now if that civil society is to have any future. Another European government donor body reflected that Syrian civil society knows it must now adapt to the changes, to see things long-term and to recalibrate its aspirations:

‘What will still happen with the Syrian Civil Society is that they will adjust and they will find ways to continue to work inside, they are already elaborating on different ways to do it... There will always be people who want to stand for change; the thing is trying to find ways to do it safely. Some of them are talking about doing things the way it was before 2011 - we hide again, we do it how we used to do it – whereas others might find other ways... and some will probably be a really strong diaspora organisation... For them, they will be the future.’

This was echoed in the comments of lawyer Layla Alodaat, in an Arabic-language podcast on Syrian civil society:

‘Maybe they won’t be able to work with the same strength and openness [in public] that we work with [...] but there are millions of people who are under the control of the Assad regime, they worked before and they continue to do this work.’⁴⁸

How this work will continue is now at the forefront of all Syrian NGOs’ internal discussions. Meetings in Jordan in late 2018, between SARC (representing the Government of Syria) and Syrian NGOs, discussed the potential for these organisations to register and work in government-held areas.

One of the great things that we learned about Syrian society is its great ability to adapt and expand within the possible spaces.

For many Syrian NGOs, this is a non-starter. They are so heavily involved in rights and justice-focused work that they would never be allowed to work there. Others will not seek to work there on an ideological basis: it would involve registration with the government and all the intense oversight this would involve. Even for the more obviously service-oriented organisations, which might accept this oversight, there is no certainty for them. It has been made clear that any organisations that wish to register must cease all operations in non-government areas.

There needs to be some kind of civil society space, no matter how small, and it needs to be supported internationally.

One place this space has been maintained is among the Syrian diaspora, particularly in Turkey and Lebanon, where Syrian refugees have formed NGO headquarters to manage programmes remotely, while also finding a space for regional and international advocacy.⁴⁹

However, this space has been significantly challenged recently as local legislation around residency permits for Syrians became tighter. In Turkey, Christian Aid partners along with other Syrian NGOs have reported issues for the last 18 months and more, whereby residency permit renewal was being so delayed that their legal status was jeopardised. In Lebanon, the recent enforcement of legislation relating to work permits for 'foreign workers' has escalated a situation where more than 70% of Syrians in the country are there illegally (due to the high costs of residency permit renewable along with the bewildering amount of supporting paperwork required).⁵⁰

This new enforcement of legislation comes within a building wave of anti-Syrian refugee rhetoric from some politicians, and has seen hundreds of Syrian small businesses shut and upwards of 300 Syrians deported to Syria, where their fate is unknown. Within this environment, Syrian NGOs are fearful for the future of their organisations. It is essential that this diaspora remain supported so that they can continue to support their colleagues inside Syria, through programme management as well as fundraising and advocating on behalf of Syrian civil society.

Some interviewees expressed real hope that the spirit of change and hope that manifested in the creation of so many organisations would continue in the shadows in government-held areas. Countering this, is the worry that ultimately the fear of the state would win: the memories and influence of an oppressive state, with no civil society space, stretch back longer than the eight or so years in which some kind of space has existed.

Hope, then is not enough – there must be something tangible for civil society to work with. There needs to be some kind of space, no matter how small, and it needs to be supported internationally. The importance of maintaining this, even in the

absence of major projects, was underlined by one Syrian NGO worker: 'Maintaining space is a worthy goal... if you don't maintain that space, what takes over? Darkness!'

Conclusions

Syrian civil society is starkly diminished and weakened from what it aspired to be. In part, these aspirations were built on, and driven by, support from the international community. International funding for democratisation projects, rights awareness, community development and social cohesion projects was provided across opposition-held areas. These projects were taken forward by Syrians. They risked their lives to provide a kind of programming that was antithetical to the views of both the armed groups that fought for ownership of this civil society space, and the Syrian government that, in most cases, ultimately took back the geographic space in which they worked.

Having been encouraged for years to work on non-humanitarian projects, with the understanding that they were vital to Syria's future, it came as a shock to Syrian NGOs when funding was routinely pulled as soon as donors felt that the risk for working in those areas was too high. This risk, in general terms, was the fear of misuse or diversion of funds when extremist armed groups took significant control of these areas. There was a further fear that the objective of this kind of work was unsustainable: it was a waste of money if the area was likely to come under government control anyway.

Interviewees did not dismiss the risks that continue to exist. What frustrated them was the assumption that those risks could not have been worked through and that no solutions could be found. For people who were facing the legitimate risks every day, it felt that they were given up on too quickly. All of the good work was simply dropped. There was no consideration for the negative long-term impact this would have; no understanding that this kind of work necessarily faces major challenges and takes a long time. As one NGO representative said, it was:

'...very frightening and disturbing to see how quickly the international community can lose faith that things can change. When we look at the history of the world, there are other countries that like, with times that got dark and dark and dark, the dawn comes, so if you're not investing in that dawn now, maybe it takes decades, that's what it takes – it's not a short-term process.'

The same long-term view must apply to funding civil society organisations in government-held areas. There are many very capable organisations working there; some still aspire to an

Interviewees did not dismiss the risks. What frustrated them was the assumption that no solutions could be found... All of the good work was simply dropped. There was no consideration for the negative long-term impact this would have.

open, independent, pluralistic civil society, and are intent on upholding those values. These organisations should be sought out and supported to continue their work.

Relatively recent history suggests that the Syrian state is likely to co-opt and subsume this burgeoning civil society movement. If it does, it will diminish its potential to deliver change and represent civil society, instead degrading it to another arm of the state. To avoid this, donors must ensure that they carry out the right due diligence on potential partners and also invest in developing a deep and nuanced knowledge and understanding of Syria, its history, its culture, its structures and hierarchies.

The World Bank's 2017 'Toll of War' report emphasised the enormous social cost that has been exacted on Syria, alongside and entangled with the massive economic and structural costs.⁵¹ The social fabric of trust and cooperation has been wrenched to pieces by the conflict. Syrian civil society will be crucial in knitting it back together.

In order to ensure that this civil society is one which best serves the people, the international community must be brave enough to recognise that it will take time and great effort on everyone's part.

The social fabric of trust and cooperation has been wrenched to pieces... Syrian civil society will be crucial in knitting it back together.

Recommendations

To donors and foreign policy makers

- Recognise the impact of your strategic decisions – whether this is a shift from one kind of intervention to another, from one phase of intervention to another, or a decision to completely withdraw funding. Significant shifts in operations undermine ownership by the local actors; this leads to mistrust in the international community and undermines the standing of these organisations in their community.
- Instead of simply ceasing funding to CSOs in the light of risks, donors should speak to those on the ground: they understand the context and could suggest ways around the legitimate challenges and risks that exist.
- International standards for emergency and development response are key to ensuring correct and accountable delivery of programmes. But when you insist on these standards, this must be accompanied by capacity building and sufficient funding to allow these standards to be met.
- For the future funding of Syrian civil society, there should be a shift away from big-budget, complex programmes to smaller, localised projects that can be undertaken under the radar. This will allow work to continue in government and non-government held areas.
- Syrian CSOs based in countries neighbouring Syria must continue to be supported, through both funding and advocacy for change in legislation regarding their legal status and right to work. Without this refugee-led response, civil society inside Syria will also struggle to maintain itself.

To churches and Christian Aid supporters

- This report has discussed the need for an independent, democratic and pluralistic civil society in Syria. The Christian churches are part of that plurality. Churches in the UK and Ireland should raise their voices in solidarity with Syrian civil society – of all faiths and none – to enable a future Syria where there is an open, tolerant and critical civil society.

To the media

- Considering the brutality of the war, it is not surprising that this has been the focus of most reporting. However, by under-reporting the work of Syrian civil society, the media have missed a silver lining on a very dark cloud. Not covering this aspect facilitates a view of the conflict as a battle between armed groups, which in turn impacts on whether there is a wider sense of solidarity with civil

society there and whether this is prioritised by donors and policy makers.

- The media, in all its forms, can expand its representation of the conflict to highlight the stories of its civil society - its wins and its challenges.

Endnotes

- 1 For security reasons, we do not name our partners.
- 2 *How Syria's Death Toll Is Lost in the Fog of War*, M Specia, The New York Times, 2018 www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middle-east/syria-death-toll.html
- 3 'Introduction: Civil Society Against All Odds', in *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against all Odds*, Salam Kawakibi and Bassma Kodmani, 2013, p5. <https://knowledge.hivos.org/syrian-voices-pre-revolution-syria-civil-society-against-all-odds>
- 4 UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework www.unreporting.org/glossary/civil-society-organizations-cso/
- 5 'Chapter 1: The Emergence and Evolution of Syria's Civil Society' by Bassma Kodmani in *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against all Odds*, Salam Kawakibi (ed), 2013, p11. <https://knowledge.hivos.org/syrian-voices-pre-revolution-syria-civil-society-against-all-odds>
- 6 *Dialogue on Syrian civil society* (Podcast) Fadi Hallisso, September 2018 <https://soundcloud.com/user-718694235/g37ixtdkpvve>
- From the original Arabic: في جسم نشأ - ما كان موجود ونشأ [...] فبينا نعرفو بإذا هو مجتمع مدني حقيقي أو مجتمع مدني غير حقيقي ولاكن هذا جسم موجود كان ابو ايجابياته وضرورته وضرورته بأن يستمر
- 7 Ibid
- From the original Arabic: بالتأكيد هناك حالة مدنية في سورية نشأت بعد ال-2011 [...] مجتمع مدني غير ناضج بعد نشأة بظروف غير طبيعية غير مكتملة لكنها موجودة
- 8 Following an uprising by militants backed by the Muslim Brotherhood in the city, Hama was bombarded for 27 days and the city crushed. A media blackout was enforced and the exact numbers of dead are unknown, but it is believed that anywhere between 5,000 and 25,000 were killed.
- See: *Syria, a Recent History*, John McHugo, New Haven: Saqi Books, 2017, pp192-195.
- 9 *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria (2011-2014)*. Rana Khalef, Oula Ramadan, and Friederick Stolleis, Badael Project and Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung, 2014, p6.
- 10 Ibid
- 11 Ibid, p5.
- 12 Ibid, p6.
- 13 Ibid, p7.
- 14 *The Syrian Civil Society in the Face of Revolt*, Laura Ruiz de Elvira, 2013, Tepsis Papers 01, p2. http://lettre.ehess.fr/docannexe/file/6410/tepsis_paper_01_en_syria.pdf
- 15 See note 9, p7.
- 16 *Syria: A Recent History*, John McHugo, Saqi Books, 2017, p206.
- 17 Broadly translated as 'secret police', a word used across the Arabic-speaking world, but with particular reference to Syria.
- 18 See note 16, p207.
- 19 Human Rights Watch 2010 report 'A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar Al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power' is one such analysis that disputes the idea that he was well-intentioned but thwarted by higher powers.
- 20 Something which was risky considering Syria's attempts at the time to become more of a global economic player and to liberalise its economy.
- 21 See note 5, p14. <https://knowledge.hivos.org/syrian-voices-pre-revolution-syria-civil-society-against-all-odds>
- 22 See note 14, p3. http://lettre.ehess.fr/docannexe/file/6410/tepsis_paper_01_en_syria.pdf
- 23 One interviewee who had worked with the Syria Trust did also speak of the weaknesses inherent in its structure, which primarily pointed to the lack of systematic needs assessments and other standardising requirements, which were not open to scrutiny with the First Lady's preference for particular projects in particular areas prioritised over quality of operations and standards.
- 24 See note 9, p8.
- 25 See note 3, p6.
- 26 See note 3, p5.
- 27 See: 'Civil Society and the Gender Issue' by Nawal YAziji in *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against the Odds*, Salam Kawakibi (ed), 2013.
- 28 The Government of Syria did not allow for any organisation registered with them to also operate in opposition held areas (a situation which continues until today). As a result, some INGOs selected to keep their opposition area work a secret while remaining registered with the Government of Syria, this was not sustainable for the vast majority.
- 29 See note 9, p13.
- 30 *The Battle for Syria*, Christopher Phillips, Yale University Press, 2016, pp126-127
- 31 Ibid, p127.
- 32 Ibid, p126.
- 33 This was most cruelly exhibited in the 2018 murder by HTS of journalist Raed Fares who ran Radio Fresh from Idlib. A pro-democracy non-violent activist, Fares was a thorn in the side of both the GoS (for its non-violent, pro-democracy and anti-GoS Stance) and the various extremist groups that had controlled the area and wanted his radio station shut down – for playing non-religious music, for having women on the air.
- See: 'Raed Fares: Syria radio host shot dead in Idlib', BBC News, 24 November 2018 www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-46320355
- 34 See here for a report of kidnappings in the Idlib governorate in 2018: 'Medical workers in Syria's Idlib being kidnapped at an alarming rate', M Nashed, The National, 9 November 2018 www.thenational.ae/world/mena/medical-workers-in-syria-s-idlib-being-kidnapped-at-an-alarming-rate-1.789881
- 35 'Clues But No Answers in One of Syrian War's Biggest Mysteries,' B Mroue, The Associated Press, 13 August 2018 www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-13/clues-but-no-answers-in-one-of-syria-war-s-biggest-mysteries
- 36 'Enabling a Local Aid Response in Syria', Building Markets, 2018, p6. https://buildingmarkets.org/sites/default/files/pdm_reports/enabling_a_local_aid_response_in_syria.pdf
- 37 Ibid
- These feelings were also reflected by local and national NGOs who participated in the recent Christian Aid led consortium research as part of the Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships programme. Local and national NGOs in Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria and South Sudan highlighted partnership practices which are most and least conducive to a locally-led humanitarian response. Some of the most commonly mentioned partnership practices which are supportive of localisation are: 1) where international agencies co-design, or support their local partner to design, project activities, budgets and indicators; 2) when project budgets include reasonable overhead costs for local partners, key assets for project implementation and organisational sustainability, and funds for capacity and institutional strengthening of the local partner; and 3) where international partners promote the role of their local partners and work to facilitate relationships between them and donor agencies.
- Crucially, the level of respect and trust developed between international and local/national partners is a key part of genuine partnerships where decision-making and power are shared.
- See: *Accelerating localisation through partnerships: Global report*, Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam, 2019 www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/Accelerating-localisation-research-summary-global.pdf
- 38 Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, 1 March 2019 www.un.org/press/en/2019/db190301.doc.htm
- 39 See note 36, p6.
- 40 As one interviewee also put it: 'Syrians right now are hopeless towards the international community.'
- 41 *Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria*, Human Rights Watch, June 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/28/rigging-system/government-policies-co-opt-aid-and-reconstruction-funding-syria>
- 42 It should be noted that by no means were the government of Syria and its allies alone in this conflict in terms of tactics of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, based on geography, religion, ethnicity and assumption of who they supported.
- See UNHCR Syria Risk Profiles www.refworld.org.ru/pdfid/56c469de4.pdf
- 43 *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/28/69, 5 February 2015, p8. undocs.org/A/HRC/28/69
- 44 Ibid, p4.
- 45 'Syria: "Deplorable" violence in Idlib against civilians, humanitarian workers must "stop immediately": UN Coordinator', UN News, 21 June 2019 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041001>

- 46 'In wake of 'collapsed' agreement, new wave of violence threatens millions in Syria's Idlib' UN News, 8 August 2019 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1043951> It
- 47 'Eastern Ghouta - Where Death Stalks And The World Ignores', M Collins, Huffington Post blogs, 23 February 2018 www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/eastern-ghouta-massacre-when-will-the-world-say-enough_uk_5a8efdc8e4b05ca787fe9286
- 48 See note 6.
From the original Arabic:
- يمكن ما ببقدروا يشتغلوا بنفس القوة والعلانية التي نحنا
مشتغل فيها... ولاكن في ملايين الأشخاص تحت سيطرة نظام
الأسد كانوا عم يشتغلوا ورح سيستمرروا بالعمل
- 49 The Citizens for Syria mapping of Syrian CSOs inside Syria clearly indicates the extent to which active CSOs have registration and HQs outside of Syria. <https://citizensforsyria.org>
- 50 Lebanon does not recognise Syrian refugees as refugees, they are not a signatory to the Geneva convention, but had allowed UNHCR to operate a registration process and some limited refugee support. Registration for new refugees was frozen by the Lebanese government in 2015 and for those registered, annual renewal of their permit to remain residents was required at significant cost.
- 51 *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, The World Bank, 2018 www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria

Contact us

Christian Aid

35 Lower Marsh

London SE1 7RL

020 7620 4444

info@christian-aid.org

caid.org.uk



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