



## Keeping the Hope Alive

### Why Belgium and the EU should support Syrian civil society

27 February 2017

#### Summary

This paper looks at the role that civil society actors play in war-torn Syria. It provides background on the emergence of Syrian civil society actors, both before and after 2011, and analyses strengths and weaknesses of current civil society actors across Syria. Based on field research in the Turkish-Syrian border area in October 2016 and a review of existing studies, it argues that Syrian civil society plays a key role in helping the Syria of today to survive and in preparing to rebuild the Syria of tomorrow. Syrian civil society offers a peaceful “third way” that keeps the hope for a better Syria alive, that provides a defence line against extremism, radicalization and authoritarianism, and that creates an environment for Syrians to stay in Syria and foster in their own community. Yet this paper also stressed that Syrian civil society faces many obstacles. It lacks core and long-term funding, faces extreme security issues, lacks a sufficient level of coordination among each other, and lacks institutionalized capacity. Many organizations are also encountering administrative challenges and unfair competition by international NGOs. In certain cases EU sanctions can also have unintended negative impacts on the work of humanitarian Syrian NGOs. Additionally, sometimes donors try to use local organizations exclusively for their own policy purposes. This threatens to undermine the work of Syrian civil society organizations.

Nevertheless the importance of Syrian civil society has been recognized in the European Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da’esh threat. However, the EU -particularly EU member states such as Belgium- needs to step up its support and cooperation with Syrian civil society. The publication of a new European Syria Strategy in April 2017 offers an important opportunity for the EU to re-emphasize the key importance of Syrian civil society and to step up its support to civil society actors in Syria.

## 1. Context: emergence of a Syrian civil society

### 1.1. Syrian civil society before 2011

The rise of a strong Syrian civil society since 2011 has been inevitably linked to the political situation in Syria since the 1960s. Since the rise to power of the Syrian Ba’ath Party in 1963 there has never been a truly independent Syrian civil society. Law No. 93 (1958) subjected every civil society organization to supervision and approval by the Syrian security services and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Syrian penal code also criminalized cooperation with international organizations or funding from abroad without prior approval. Such approval was almost never given. Consequently, most associations that were founded and registered in the 1960s and 1970s were apolitical charities. A number of human rights organizations emerged in the early 1990s, but were quickly targeted by the security services.

In 2000 Bashar al Assad replaced his father Hafez as President of the Syrian Arabic Republic. During the first six months of his reign Bashar allowed some limited political openings and released political prisoners, the so-called “Damascus Spring”. Discussion forums (*mundadiyahat*) like the Forum for National Dialogue and the Jamal Atassi Forum were created by political activists, and demanded the lifting of the state of emergency and political reforms. Several Syrian intellectuals also signed the “Declaration of the 99” (September 2000) and the “Declaration of the One Thousand” (January 2001). The term “civil society” (*mujtama’ madani*) was born. However the Damascus Spring was short-lived: by the end of 2001 activists and forum organizers were arrested and convicted. In the early 2000s several human rights organizations, like the Human Rights Association in Syria (HRAS), were founded but these associations were also targeted by the security service.

By autumn 2001 the Damascus Spring had turned into winter. Civil society continued to organize some protests and sit-ins, but it struggled to convey its message to a broader audience and to galvanize the Syrian street<sup>1</sup>.

From 2001 on Asma al-Assad, the Syrian first lady, set up a network of organizations that promoted progress in fields like rural development, culture and support for youth, disabled and orphans. In 2007 most of such organizations, often labelled “governmental non-governmental organizations” (GONGOs), were subsumed in the umbrella of the “Syria Trust Fund for Development”<sup>2</sup>. Freedom of association, however, remained severely restricted. ‘*In practice only state-friendly NGOs working on apolitical issues like rural development, social welfare, the environment, and entrepreneurship benefited from this limited opening*’, Freedom House reported in its 2011 Freedom in the World Report<sup>3</sup>. Such GONGOs and charities remained active in relief activities in regime-controlled areas after 2011. Professional syndicates and all labour unions in regime-held areas continued to be controlled by the Ba’ath Party.

In October 2005 250 members of the Islamist, secular and Kurdish opposition published the “Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change”. This declaration endorsed a set of liberal and democratic principles and called for a civil state. Again, this declaration was quickly followed by severe repression by the security services. At the end of 2007 the “National Council of the Damascus Declaration” was established, but many of its most prominent members were immediately detained by the security services.

From 2006 on a new generation of civil society activists emerged. They waged several civic campaigns such as a national campaign for ending honour crimes, a national campaign to annul an amendment of the marital law, a campaign to lower cellular phone rates, and campaigns for the protection of young women who were victims of rape. These activists started to make use of new media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

## 1.2. Syrian civil society after 2011

Despite the legacy of severe restrictions and repression, an independent Syrian civil society quickly emerged and expanded since 2011. In extremely harsh conditions they gradually professionalized their work and increased cooperation with other organizations. Immediately after the start of protests coordination committees (*tanseeqiyat*) were created in neighbourhoods, villages and towns throughout Syria. Grassroots groups such as the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU) and the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) were established throughout Syria to coordinate the organization of protests, media work and the documentation of human rights and IHL violations. From 2012 on such groups started to focus more on relief work.

Besides these coordination groups, numerous media centres, magazines and women centres were founded while citizen journalists and documentary makers emerged on the forefront. Syrian authors Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, in their book “Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War”, describe a “cultural revolution from the bottom up”.

*‘Syria was once known as a “kingdom of silence”. In 2011 it burst into speech- not in one voice but in millions. On an immense surge of long-suppressed energy, a non-violent protest movement crossed sectarian and ethnic boundaries and spread to every part of the country (...) Ordinary Syrians no longer sought permission to speak. They expressed themselves in the streets and online through slogans, cartoons, dances and songs, and through endless debate the liberated areas. Their protests targeted the regime, ISIS, the FSA, the Coalition, foreign states and more (...) The irrepressible urge to speak is perhaps the revolution’s greatest legacy, one that will outlast both regime and jihadis<sup>4</sup>.*

Syrian civil society was thus constantly expanding and diversifying its activities. A mapping exercise by the research platform Citizens for Syria identified **over 800 Syrian civil society actors** that are active in Syria or are operating from the neighbouring countries. Most of them operate in Hasakah, Aleppo, Damascus and

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<sup>1</sup> See Yassin-Kassab, R. en al Shami, L. (2016): ‘Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War’, Pluto Press, p. 16-34; Khalaf, R., Ramadan, O. en Stolleis, F. (2014): ‘Activism in Difficult Times. Civil Society Groups in Syria, 2011-2014’; Sawah, W. (2012): ‘Syrian civil society scene prior to Syrian revolution’, Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia Working Paper 21.

<sup>2</sup> Khalaf et al and Ruiz De Elvira, L. (2013): ‘Syrian Charities at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: Their History, Situation, Frames and Challenges’, in: S. Kawakbi, ed. *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against all Odds*. The Hague: Hivos- Knowledge Programme Civil society in West Asia, pp. 29-33.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/syria>.

<sup>4</sup> Burning Country, p; viii, p. 174, p. 180.

Damascus countryside, and Idlib<sup>5</sup>. They are active in a wide array of fields: relief and emergency (21,4 %); media and communication (17,5 %: mainly social media activism, printing and publishing, radio); civil and advocacy activities (16 %: mainly documentation of violations, human rights monitoring, peacebuilding and promotion of civil liberties); development and housing (11 %: mainly women empowerment, social-economic development, capacity building in administration, reconstruction, job training programmes); education (7 %: mainly primary education, vocational trainings, adult schools); social services (6,6 %: mainly child welfare, women protection, services for the handicapped, orphan care); and health (5,8 %: mainly hospitals, medical centres, psychosocial support).

**As the situation on the ground has shifted, so have the dynamics within Syrian civil society.** In February 2016 most civil society organizations are active in emergency and relief (306 organizations), social services (221 organizations), development and housing (189 organizations), culture and recreation (188 organizations), education and research (172 organizations), health (171 organizations) and civic and advocacy activities (83 organizations). Another 51 organizations are active in legal services, environment, religion, business and professional associations and philanthropic activities<sup>6</sup>.

**BOX: Example of Syrian civil society work in practice**

**SHAML** is one of the five Syrian civil society coordination bodies in the UNOCHA Turkey CSO Platform. Its six members have expertise in a wide range of services (human rights advocacy, education, women empowerment, psychosocial support, peacebuilding and conflict transformation and relief and basis services) and are working across Syria. For example, SHAML member **Basmeh and Zeitooneh** operates a network of community centres in Lebanon and Turkey while also providing relief inside Syria. SHAML member **Kesh Malek** operates a network of schools in Aleppo province and is involved in awareness-raising campaigns on Syrian national identity, while SHAML member organization **Emissa** has been working on relief and community building activities in the besieged areas of Homs and in Idlib province. **Women Now for Development** operates six community centers inside Syria and 2 centers in Lebanon. As such Women Now offers -among other things- vocational training, leadership programs and psychological support. SHAML member **Olive Branch** mainly works in Southern Syria, where it operates a network of schools and community centres that are offering education, vocational training and grants for small projects. **LDSPS** works to strengthen the capacity of local councils and facilitates in building relationships between local councils and local civil society groups.

Many of these actors directly work together with the United Nations. For example, the OCHA Turkey CSO Platform consists of **163 Syrian civil society organizations<sup>7</sup> and 5 coordination bodies** that implement relief and non-relief activities in Syria<sup>8</sup>. Such organizations are non-governmental, non-political and non-military, and they are requested to demonstrate a commitment to humanitarian principles and standards<sup>9</sup>. The OCHA CSO Platform aims to strengthen the capacity of Syrian organizations to engage in international coordination mechanisms (including clusters), to participate in inter-agency exercises (needs assessments, response plans) and in advocacy activities, to network with other actors, and to receive information on opportunities regarding funding, training and capacity development. Syrian civil society individuals and organizations also participated in the London Donor Conference in February 2016<sup>10</sup>.

It should be stressed that Syrian civil society does not only comprise of NGOs, but also of individual activists, community initiatives, indigenous groups, charitable organizations and professional associations, etc<sup>11</sup>. For

<sup>5</sup> Citizens for Syria (2015): 'Mapping the Syrian Civil Society Actors. Phase One', <https://citizensforsyria.org/mapping-syrian-cs/results/>.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers provided by Citizens for Syria, email exchange and Skype interview, 3 February 2017, 15 February 2017.

<sup>7</sup> UN OCHA defines a Syrian "Civil Society Organization" as 'an organization established inside or outside Syria for the exclusive purpose of undertaking activities in Syria and/or supporting Syrian communities within the MENA region or abroad; and whose Board of Directors is composed of at least 50% Syrian nationals and whose Director is a Syrian national. Place of CSO registration is not a factor in this definition'.

<sup>8</sup> UN OCHA defines "relief" as 'all activities under Health, Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Non-Food Items (NFIs), Shelter, Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), Nutrition, Education, Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL), Agriculture, Cash-based Assistance, Protection, Child Protection, Gender Based Violence (GBV), Mine Action and Search & Rescue, Human Rights, Early Recovery and Development, and Logistics'. "Non Relief" refers to 'Capacity Development and CSO Empowerment, Peace Building, Good Governance, Rule of Law and Media.'

<sup>9</sup> Skype interview with UN OCHA official, 12 January 2017.

<sup>10</sup> 'Supporting Syria civil society conference: final communiqué', 3 February 2016, <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2016/02/supporting-syria-civil-society-conference-final-communique>.

<sup>11</sup> Citizens for Syria defines a "Syrian civil society organization" as 'a non-profit, non-governmental, non-partisan and non-violent institution, with a distinct Syrian flavor, such that the majority of its management team members are Syrians, it focuses on the Syrian cause, it primarily targets Syrians in Syria or in neighboring countries, or particularly social Syrian social sectors or ethnicities. The legal status of an institution does not affect our classification of it as a Syrian civil society organization'. Such organizations refer to a wide array of organizations: community groups, NGOs, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable

example, a report by the renowned peace research institute Swisspeace (2016) identifies different local peace and civil society actors throughout Syria<sup>12</sup>. Such actors are involved in conflict resolution and mediation, negotiations for the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons, workshops and trainings in values of tolerance and diversity and countering sectarianism, relief and development work, and human rights activism. They are active in Aleppo, Damascus, Damascus countryside, Daraa, Deir ez Zour, Idlib, Qunaitra, Salamiyeh and Sweida. However many of them are operating independent from each other in extreme humanitarian and security conditions, and are lacking financial and logistical resources. *'These actors constitute rather small islands of temporary stability in the current context. Therefore, it is crucial that stronger networks (are build) to link the different initiatives at all levels. This might help to provide the context in which local peacebuilding can be done in a more sustained way and the small islands of stability can develop into larger zones of peace'*, Swisspeace concluded<sup>13</sup>.

## **2. Strengths of Syrian civil society**

15 March 2017 will mark the sixth anniversary of the start of peaceful protests in Syria. Syrians of all backgrounds took to the street and demanded freedom and dignity. Despite all the extreme violence, brave civilians, activists and civil society actors continued to strive for peaceful change over the past six years. The survival of this revolutionary spirit explicitly comes to the surface each time a ceasefire is announced, as recently as March, September and December 2016. *'One, one, one, the Syrian people is one'*, chants continued to be heard during these demonstrations. No black flags or extremist slogans are seen or heard at such protests, which target both the Syrian government and extremist armed groups like the Islamic State or Jabhat Fatah al Sham (formerly known as the Nusra Front).

Such peaceful individuals, organizations and local initiatives are a **third way between authoritarianism, violent extremists and armed rebels**. By helping the Syria of today to survive and preparing to rebuild the Syria of tomorrow, they are keeping the hope for a better Syria alive. Partnering with Syrian civil society is critical for building an accountable state and to install a new social contract. Civil society plays and will play a key role in providing relief and education to civilians, monitoring the situation on the ground, advocating for peaceful and sustainable change, realizing national and local reconciliation, and in creating and consolidating democratic structures and accountability mechanisms. Civil society actors that are providing services and relief also enjoy a considerable amount of trust and legitimacy within their local communities. Such relief work can sometimes be used as an entry point for other peacebuilding activities. Additionally these actors have an important bridging role between people on the ground and international peace processes. As they experience the impact of the Syrian war first-hand they provide a crucial understanding of actions that can be taken to build sustainable peace, and are key in mobilizing support for any peace process<sup>14</sup>. *'There are all kind of reasons to be pessimistic today, but hope is still here, and that hope is coming from the Syrian civil society and its potential for the country'*, one Syrian activist said to 11.11.11 during a recent visit to the Turkish-Syrian border.

A strong Syrian civil society also provides a **defence line against extremism, radicalization and authoritarianism**. It is an anchor for future peace, stability and democracy. Syrian civil society plays a crucial role in countering a variety of military, political, economic and extremist influences. It is no coincidence that civil society activists were among the first to be the victims of arrest, kidnapping and targeted killings. *'Civil society has been key to ensure a certain stability in liberated areas. We have been doing everything the government was supposed to be doing. No one else is doing this work and is going into Syria, we are the only ones that want to do it'*, another activist explained to 11.11.11. As such civil society is laying the groundwork

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organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations and foundations. "Civic activists and community initiatives" are defined as *'a group of citizens gathered in order to address a particular problem which was not addressed by the responsible authorities or other NGOs. The initiative aims to advocate or cause or respond to an emergency by acting and deciding collectively. Such groups have no particular hierarchy or title'*.

<sup>12</sup> The report looks at both formal and less formalized actors: civil society organizations, community leaders (notables, religious figures, clan leaders and business actors), women initiatives, youth initiatives, local councils and ministry of reconciliation and its committees. For a more in-depth research on the specific role of community leaders, see Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria and Peaceful Change Initiative (2014): 'Building peace within Syrian communities', [http://www.peacefulchange.org/uploads/1/2/2/7/12276601/2014\\_03\\_building\\_peace\\_within\\_syrian\\_communities\\_final\\_-\\_en.pdf](http://www.peacefulchange.org/uploads/1/2/2/7/12276601/2014_03_building_peace_within_syrian_communities_final_-_en.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Swisspeace, Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net (2016): 'Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace', p. 1 and p. 17-25, [http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/Mediation/Inside\\_Syria\\_en.pdf](http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Mediation/Inside_Syria_en.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> For a general analysis of the peacebuilding role of civil society in conflict areas, see for example Paffenholz, T. (2009): 'Civil Society and Peacebuilding. Summary of Results for a Comparative Research Project', Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding Working Paper.

for a pluralistic Syria: *'we are supporting people to be themselves, to be able to choose whatever ideology they want to support, we are not forcing something on them'*, another activist stated<sup>15</sup>.

By investing in civil society one is also **creating the environment for Syrians to stay in Syria and to foster in their own community**. *'If you do not want Syrians coming to Europe, if you want to avoid another refugee wave, then support projects inside Syria. What does Europe want: do they expect Syrians not to have work, food, a life, hope, and just stay in Syria?'*, the director of a large Syrian organization based in Gaziantep (Turkey) asked.

The importance of Syrian civil society is also recognized in **the European Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat**. This strategy was adopted in March 2015 and re-affirmed in May 2016, and explicitly calls for the strengthening of Syrian civil society<sup>16</sup>. The latter are given a key role in the creation of local mediation and dialogue initiatives, the provision of basic services such as health care and education, the development of an inclusive and participatory political context, and to allow for reconstruction and reconciliation in Syria. EU support is mainly channelled through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). European Commission President Juncker also stressed the key role of Syrian civil society in his state of the Union 2016: *'This is why I call today for a European Strategy for Syria. Federica Mogherini should have a seat at the table when the future of Syria is being discussed. So that Europe can help rebuild a peaceful Syrian nation and a pluralistic, tolerant civil society in Syria'*<sup>17</sup>.

### **3. Threats and weaknesses of Syrian civil society**

Syrian civil society organizations are working in extremely difficult circumstances. Field research by 11.11.11 in the Turkish-Syrian border area in October 2016 highlighted several key obstacles that are limiting the ability of Syrian civil society organizations to fully realise their goals.

First, almost all interviewees mentioned the **lack of core and long-term funding** as a primary obstacle. Most international donors only provide funding for short-term projects (six months) but refuse to provide core funding to organisations themselves, whereas such core funding is key to ensure sustainability. Indeed core funding allows an organization to better build its organizational structure and to prepare and implement coherent strategies itself, instead of just working on the project-driven agendas of external donors. *'If you have staff to write your proposals you can find permanent money for activities and you don't have to wait for – often counterproductive- projects. Then you're not just limited to the agenda of the donors, who often don't really understand what's really happening inside Syria'*, a responsible for a large Syrian NGO working in relief and education told 11.11.11.

Second, every respondent mentioned **security issues**, both from the Syrian regime and extremist armed groups. The non-stop shelling of opposition areas by the Syrian regime and its allies makes it almost impossible for Syrian organizations to fully operate. *'Just stop the airstrikes. Everything else we can manage, but this we cannot'*, one responsible for a Syrian civil society organization operating in northern Syria told 11.11.11. The presence of extremist armed groups in opposition areas offers additional operational challenges, because such groups perceive civil society organizations as a real threat. Several interviewees, however, explained how their local legitimacy protects them against extremist groups, who themselves need popular legitimacy. *'The right thing to do is to be very much integrated locally, to be seen as helping the local community, so you are known locally. When you are doing local projects for local people you can do almost everything you want -except playing with religion- because local communities won't accept it if you're harassed by armed groups. Whatever you are doing for the local community, this is your best protection. This is our Syrian way to solve the issue of security with these anti-democracy and extremist groups'*, the head of a big Syrian development and media organization explained. Another interviewee mentioned that extremist armed groups cannot themselves provide all the services that civil society organizations are offering to local communities, and therefore have accepted the presence of civil society organizations. "Beneficial" activities (relief, education, development) are also required to win the "hearts and minds" of local communities, after which civil society organizations can

<sup>15</sup> See also *'Syria: Destruction of Civil Society Means Dictatorship, Extremism and Displacement'*, 7 October 2016, Chatham House.

<sup>16</sup> Council of the European Union (2015): 'Council Conclusions on the Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat', [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2015/03/st07267\\_en15.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2015/03/st07267_en15.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> 'State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe - a Europe that protects, empowers and defends', 14 September 2016.

start working on more peacebuilding-orientated activities like media or advocacy, several interviewees explained. It should also be stressed that civil society individuals and activists often are particularly targeted by regime or pro-regime forces.

Third, the **lack of coordination and the overall fragmentation** of different organizations was frequently mentioned by interviewees. Many organizations are working very locally and often lack a national vision and perspective. Often different organizations are working on the same kind of projects in the same areas, without sufficiently coordinating their efforts. *'Their fragmentation is their main weakness. It's really key to overcome this, for example by supporting existing coordination mechanisms among Syrian organizations'*, one UN official told 11.11.11. Several interviewees and local UN staff, however, mentioned a recent increase in the number of coalitions and coordination efforts among Syrian organizations. Examples of effective coordination efforts that were mentioned included the Syrian Relief Network, the Syrian NGO Alliance and the SHAML Coalition. Several civil society representatives meanwhile also stressed the lack of effective coordination among EU institutions and EU member states present. *'The EU has a huge coordination problem itself. EU member states are insufficiently talking to each other, and are sometimes duplicating each other's efforts. For example, there have been four different EU-funded mapping projects at the same time'*, another civil society representative told 11.11.11. This lack of a coordinated European approach was confirmed to 11.11.11 by a EU member states' official who is based in Gaziantep.

The **lack of institutionalized capacity** was a fourth challenge that was frequently mentioned by Syrian civil society representatives. Because of Syria's long history of state authoritarianism a large and independent civil society barely existed before 2011. After the start of popular protests in March 2011 and the subsequent brutal crackdown, many newly created organizations had to start almost from scratch. Also, many organizations are working on a very grassroots level and sometimes lack a professional structure. Consequently many interviewees mentioned the need for capacity building programs, but at the same time argued for context-specific and conflict-sensitive approaches. *'A lot of capacity building programs are just imposed by international donors and are not sufficiently taking the local factor into account. There has been a lot of copy-pasting from Afghanistan, which sometimes is creating more harm than good'*, one interviewee stated. Civil society figures interviewed by 11.11.11 also explained how the issue of capacity building is closely related with coordination and staff mobility issues. Many capacity building programs are conducted in an uncoordinated way, while the lack of a stable environment is resulting in a high staff turnover. Consequently many interviewees stressed the need for improved institutional and organizational capacity, and internal training mechanisms and procedures.

Fifth, several **administrative challenges** were highlighted by respondents. Compliance and vetting regulations are cited as being overly complex and inflexible, while many Syrian organizations experience serious difficulties when trying to open a bank account or conducting financial transactions. Syrian civil society representatives interviewed by 11.11.11 understand the need for compliance and vetting, but stress the need for more flexibility. Suggested solutions included the creation of a single vetting mechanism that produces a "white list" of eligible organizations, or the increased use of sub-granting mechanisms that ensure compliance demands of international donors. It should be added that UN OCHA Gaziantep is already involved in a vetting process to ensure the eligibility of Syrian organizations to participate in the local UN cluster mechanisms. Overall, however, a change in mind-set is required: *'donor compliance demands are not reasonable and should be more flexible. People who have written them do not understand the reality on the ground'*, an officer of a Syrian NGO working on local governance remarked. Another officer of a Syrian peacebuilding organization agreed: *'There is a total lack of understanding and flexibility. Syria is a war zone, you simply cannot have a receipt for everything, donors should finally accept that.'* Interviewees also pointed to very restrictive access regulations at the Turkish-Syrian border, which limits their ability to efficiently run their programs inside Syria. Several interviewees directly blamed the EU-Turkey refugee deal as the main reason for increasingly restrictive Turkish regulations.

Finally, almost all people interviewed by 11.11.11 stressed the **unfair competition by international NGOs (INGOs)**. Such INGOs are paying "ridiculously" high salaries, which is perceived by many as seriously disturbing the local job market. Consequently many Syrian organizations find it hard to financially compete with INGOs in the search for qualified Syrian staff. INGOs, contrarily to local organizations, can also rely on stable and long-term core funding and can thereby offer long-term employment. Local Syrian organizations in the Turkish-Syrian border area also complained about the way they are often treated by international donors and INGOs. Often they are merely seen as implementing partners in international projects. As such Syrian organizations are

offered ready-made INGO projects that are not based on a localized needs assessment and an equal partnership<sup>18</sup>. *'We do not only have unfair competition with INGOs, we actually have stupid competition. These INGOs don't understand what they are doing. They think they are doing well but sometimes they are just destroying the projects because of a lack of understanding of the consequences of their actions'*, one director of a large Syrian organization stressed. Similar feelings can be heard when Dr Rouba Mhaissen addressed the "Supporting Syria and the region" donor conference in London (February 2016): *'Have Syrians at the forefront of your strategies. Speak to us please, don't speak only about us'*<sup>19</sup>.

**Other research, as well as interviews with local UN staff, shows similar findings.** A capacity assessment study by **Baytna Syria** highlighted issues of organizational development, fundraising, partnership with donors, and advocacy and policy. 80 % of respondents indicated that "scarcity of resources" is a major challenge, while 68 % said "dealing with donors" is a challenging task. Specific problems that were singled out were "bureaucratic procedures imposed by donors" (58 %) and "following donor's agenda" (68 %). 77 % of respondents also highlighted the "lack of coordination among each other"<sup>20</sup>. Research by **Swisspeace et al (2016)** suggested that financial and logistical resources, capacity-building, information-sharing and coordination, institutional support and media resources are among the main needs on the ground<sup>21</sup>.

Similarly, **Crawford (2015)** finds a lack of strategy and coordination; a lack of reliable core funding; the absence of basic security; the lack of specialized technical training; legislative restrictions on the movement of money into Syria and caution about anti-terror laws among western banks; and an unequal partnership with INGOs as key obstacles for Syrian civil society organizations. Crawford advocates for stronger capacity building efforts, but stresses that such capacity building needs to be based on a collaborative assessment of capacity building needs across Syrian civil society. Such approach should avoid the risk of capacity building programs that are more concerned with output (the number of workshops organized, regardless of its actual impact) than with effective outcomes<sup>22</sup>.

A study commissioned by **Badael and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) (2014)** highlighted a set of similar key challenges: insecurity and interferences by extremist armed groups; limited financial, logistic and technical resources and lack of international support; adherence to uninformed and donor-driven agendas; and insufficient cooperation and networking. The study also notes the risk of negative competition among Syrian organizations, in which mistrust and accusations of corruption replace coordination and cooperation. Additionally the catastrophic economic and humanitarian situation forces many organizations to divert resources from peacebuilding activities to urgently needed relief work. *'Many civil society groups have opted to focus on relief work and abandon their original civil mission while others struggle to strike a balance between their relief work and their civil work, in order to gain the trust of the local community. No organization can gain this trust without carrying out at least some relief work'*, the Badael and FES study said. Respondents of the latter study prioritized the need for financial support (75 %), logistical support (71 %) and capacity building (58 %)<sup>23</sup>. An analysis by the **Norwegian Peacebuilding Research Centre (2015)**, that focuses specifically on the work of Syrian medical NGOs, similarly highlighted organizational issues, security challenges and competition with INGOs<sup>24</sup>.

Additionally, a report by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)'s National Agenda for the Future of Syria warns for unintended negative humanitarian impacts of certain EU sanctions. The report asks *'whether a better balance could be struck between the delivery of humanitarian aid and the application of unilateral sanctions'*, and concludes that *'our findings have shown that although delivering humanitarian aid is both encouraged and permitted under unilateral measures, particularly the U.S. and EU sanctions regimes, practical steps to balance and align objectives of these policies so they do not overly inhibit delivery of humanitarian aid is a key issue for Syria.'* As such, ESCWA recommends to conduct a strategic review to ensure sanctions and related regulatory environments do not overly inhibit the delivery of humanitarian aid within

<sup>18</sup> See also Svoboda, E. and Pantuliano, S. (2015): 'International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response: A diverging set of systems?', HPG working paper, Overseas Development Institute; Harling, P., Simon, A. and Berthier, R. (2017): 'The Syria aid regime that needed help. Touching the ground', *Synaps*.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYipvP4aUz4>.

<sup>20</sup> Baytna Syria: 'Capacity Assessment for the Syrian Civil Society', <http://baytnasyria.org/media/1088/capacity-assessment.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Swisspeace et al, p. 26-28.

<sup>22</sup> Crawford, N. (2015): 'Engaging with Syrian CSOs. How can the international community engage better with Syrian civil society organizations during the civil war?', <http://www.alnap.org/resource/20856>.

<sup>23</sup> Khalaf, R., Ramadan, O. en Stolleis, F. (2014): 'Activism in Difficult Times. Civil Society Groups in Syria, 2011-2014'.

<sup>24</sup> Alzoubi, Z. (2015): 'Syrian medical NGOs in the crisis: realities, perspectives and challenges', Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre.

Syria, and to make sure that UN agencies and independent Syrian NGOs are expedited from possible negative humanitarian impacts of EU sanctions (for example by strengthening fast-tracked procurement and licencing channels for such actors)<sup>25</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion: opportunities offered by Syrian civil society**

**At the beginning of 2017 there are a lot of reasons to be pessimistic about the future of Syria.** Civilians and civilian infrastructure are systematically targeted, and violations of international law have become the new norm. Major efforts to establish ceasefires have collapsed in 2016, and the Syrian proxy war continues to be fuelled by external actors. The use of illegal and non-discriminatory weapons such as barrel bombs, cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, chemical weapons, bunker bombs and improvised missiles has only intensified in the second half of 2016. Over one million Syrians live in besieged areas (the overwhelming majority of them by the Syrian regime and its allies), and are the victims of a deliberate “surrender or starve” strategy that is aimed at forcing people to surrender and forced displacement<sup>26</sup>. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been forcibly disappeared, detained, tortured or killed in detention centres. The UN has accused the Syrian regime of a policy of “*extermination*” in detention centres.

**Yet, against all odds Syrian civil society continues to operate.** This paper *does not* suggest that Syrian civil society offers a “silver bullet” to “fix Syria”, but stresses that civil society actors *do* play a key role in the country. Civil society actors are providing relief and education to civilians, monitoring the situation on the ground, advocating for peaceful and sustainable change, and are trying to lay the groundwork for future democratic structures and accountability mechanisms. These individuals and organizations are trying to hold Syrian society together. They are preserving a humane space where Syrians still accept each other as equal citizens and humans, despite the hate and violence around them. Indeed civil society is helping the Syria of today to survive and is preparing to rebuild the Syria of tomorrow. Such peaceful individuals, organizations and local initiatives are **keeping the hope alive and are a third way between authoritarianism, violent extremists and armed rebels**. A strong Syrian civil society provides a defence line against extremism, radicalization and authoritarianism. By investing in civil society one is also creating the environment for Syrians to stay in Syria and to foster in their own community.

**However, Syrian civil society faces many key obstacles.** It lacks core and long-term funding, faces extreme security issues, lacks a sufficient level of coordination among each other, and lacks institutionalized capacity. Many organizations are also encountering administrative challenges and unfair competition by international NGOs. In certain cases EU sanctions can also have unintended negative consequences on the work of humanitarian NGOs. In the face of extremism, violence and chaos, Syrian civil society is seriously challenged to continue to adhere to its original values of justice and freedom and to promote its vision of a pluralistic democratic Syria. Additionally, the tendency of international public opinion and politicians to focus almost exclusively on military and geopolitical developments neglects the untapped potential of civil society actors that are still active on the ground. The story behind the emergence and development of Syrian civil society was largely ignored by the international media, which negatively affected the level of support and solidarity with such actors. Additionally, sometimes donors try to use local organizations exclusively for their own policy purposes. This threatens to undermine the work of local civil society organizations.

Nevertheless, the importance of Syrian civil society has been recognized in **the European Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da’esh threat**. However, the EU -particularly EU member states such as Belgium- needs to step up its support and cooperation with Syrian civil society. The publication of a **new European Syria Strategy in April 2017** offers an important opportunity for the EU to re-emphasize the key importance of Syrian civil society and to step up its support to peaceful civil society actors.

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<sup>25</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2016): ‘Humanitarian Impact of Syria-Related Unilateral Restrictive Measures’.

<sup>26</sup> See Siege Watch reporting, [www.Siegewatch.org](http://www.Siegewatch.org).



11.11.11 therefore urges the EU and Belgium to make support to peaceful and democratic civil society actors one of the key goals of the new European Syria strategy. **As such, the EU and Belgium should:**

- Increase the availability of long-term and flexible resources (including core funding) for Syrian civil society organizations and coalitions, and treat Syrian civil society organizations as equal partners. Such funding should however never be aimed at using local organizations exclusively for their own policy purposes.
- Increase the political dialogue with civil society individuals and organizations, and regularly invite them for consultations and advice. In particular, ensure a strong and meaningful participation of Syrian civil society during the upcoming Brussels Conference on Syria (April 2017).
- Support the creation of a single vetting mechanism of Syrian organizations that are eligible for external support, and increase flexibility and understanding in dealing with partners working on the ground.
- Ensure that EU sanctions and related regulatory environments do not overly inhibit the work of humanitarian NGOs operating across Syria.
- Play a facilitating role in ensuring more flexible access regulations at the Turkish-Syrian and Lebanese-Syrian border, and more flexible registration and permit regulations for Syrian civil society organizations in Turkey and Lebanon.
- Ensure more flexible EU visa arrangements for Syrian civil society representatives.