

Syrian Civil Society

As Important Now as Ever
(A survey)

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CCSD
Center for Civil Society and Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

Recent changes on the ground in Syria, have forced the international community to ask difficult questions about their strategies towards Syria. This has included some re-assessment on the part of international donors towards their engagement with Syrian civil society.

To contribute to these discussions, CCSD surveyed 221 members of Syrian civil society, 51% of whom were women. They were asked about Syrian civil society's role during the conflict, its most important achievements, the gaps within its work, and the reasons support for Syrian civil society should continue. This report also explores prospects for the future roles of Syrian civil society in light of the field and political developments taking place.

While dynamics on the ground have changed, the fact remains that Syrian civil society has continued to play an important role in nearly every area of Syria. These roles have evolved and improved since the onset of the popular movement in 2011. Syrian civil society roles initially focused on organizing demonstrations against tyranny; claiming rights; demanding the establishment of a pluralistic civil democratic state as well as accountability and fighting corruption. Following the exacerbation of the Syrian crisis, the above-mentioned roles of Syrian civil society extended to include service provision in areas where state institutions ceased to function after they were taken out of the Government of Syria (GoS) control. Despite the volatility on the ground in many areas, civil society continues to branch out, taking on notable roles as each situation dictates – including as watchdogs of local authorities, mediators, economic engines, facilitators, advocates, and peacebuilders.

There are some who have criticized the prominent role that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have taken on in managing and providing services in areas beyond the control of the GoS. In spite of this debate, which occupies the public discussions taking place among Syrians, reality remains a witness to the important roles that Syrian civil society has played and continues to play at all levels.

It has been seven years since what began as a peaceful uprising transformed into a vicious war with fierce competition between regional and international actors over Syria's future. While the role played by local Syrian actors, particularly with regard to ending the conflict as well as finding a political solution and achieving sustainable peace, has arguably been weak, it is crucial to note that many Syrian parties and actors including Syrian civil society have actively contributed to solutions and have sometimes mitigated the worst outcomes of the conflict. These actors, including many Syrian civil society stakeholders, aim to move towards a more influential and effective framework. The support of the international community remains crucial to ensure this. And the work of Syrian civil society remains crucial despite, and even because of, the radical changes on the ground.

I. ACHIEVEMENTS OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

At the level of the political process:

- Due to its capability to convey Syrian voices, Syrian civil society has made significant efforts to contribute to the UN-sponsored political process in Geneva. Such efforts have enabled Syrian civil society to take on a consultant role in the negotiations through several innovative mechanisms, and also have led to the allocation of a quota for direct civil society participation in the recently formed Constitutional Committee.
- Syrian civil society has exerted pressure to accelerate the political process, in addition to mobilization and advocacy to alleviate the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

At the level of conflict resolution:

- Syrian civil society has contributed to mitigating the humanitarian crisis resulting from the armed conflict and played a role in curbing some conflicts at the local level.
- In multiple cases it has sought to influence the dominant parties on certain issues. It has also participated in various local negotiation processes.
- Advocacy and mobilization are one of the most important roles played by Syrian civil society during the conflict, as these have contributed to exerting more pressure on parties to the conflict as well as decision makers to intervene to resolve various critical issues and crises.
- Documenting violations of human rights, which have been committed by all armed forces in different areas of Syria.
- In addition to the great awareness-raising role played by Syrian media, media organizations have delivered thousands of news pieces as well as videos documenting violations committed against human rights.

At the level of awareness and community empowerment:

- Syrian civil society has created spaces for local dialogue on various issues of concern to the local population, as well as on the issues at the negotiating table regarding the future of Syria and the political solution.
- One of the most important roles played by Syrian civil society is raising awareness on transitional justice; civil and political rights; democracy; as well as issues related to the political and constitutional process and the foundations of good governance.
- Raising awareness on the importance of civil activity as well as the importance of the roles played by civil society.
- Syrian civil society has greatly contributed to curbing the spread of extremism in Syrian communities by creating spaces for freedom of expression.

- Regarding women's issues, Syrian civil society, especially women leaders as well as women's organizations, has played a significant role in awareness raising with respect to women's rights; political, economic and gender empowerment of women; and enhancing their role in political and civil life.

At the service level:

- During the years of the war, Syrian civil society has contributed to bridging the gaps in service provision resulting from the absence of state institutions, and providing humanitarian relief and health services to those affected.

- It has conducted periodic need assessments in different Syrian regions, and provided international organizations and the UN with information relevant to the needs of the population.

- Syrian civil society contributed to the creation of new projects through its participation in community development. It also worked on providing vocational trainings for many Syrian youth as well as women.

- It has provided psycho-social support to those affected by the war.

- It has provided special care for people with war-related injuries as well as persons with special needs.

- With regard to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Syrian civil society has facilitated community integration with host communities, addressed challenges facing IDPs, as well as provided relief services and assistance.

- Syrian civil society has contributed to developing community-based organizational capacities for local government structures as well as non-governmental organizations.

At the level of Syrian civil society itself:

- Syrian civil society has contributed to organizing institutional work and assuming a greater role in organizing and framing community movements.

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

- It has empowered and raised the awareness of hundreds of community leaders as well as thousands of educated individuals on their fundamental rights and the concepts of democracy and justice.

- It has contributed to the creation of a civil environment suitable for constructive societal dialogues, which is the foundation of an effective culture of civic engagement.

- It has promoted the concept of coexistence as well as peace, which could pave the way for healing the social rifts caused by the Syrian war.

II. GAPS THAT EMERGED WITHIN SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY DURING THE PREVIOUS YEARS

Regarding the working environment of civil society organizations (CSOs):

- The security threat faced by Syrian civil society in areas held by the GoS was more serious than the threat in areas out of GoS control. Since the onset of the popular movement, the GoS has been pursuing, arresting and killing most civilian activists, or forcing them to flee outside its areas. This is a sign that the GoS has indeed sensed the real threat of any civilian activity in areas under its control.
- CSOs have collided with the various dominant military forces that have tried to interfere in their work; either directly by preventing the implementation of their activities or by framing these activities according to the vision and interests of these military forces, or indirectly by creating new CSOs that work according to their vision and interests. This has seriously affected civilian activists and often led to their persecution, arrest or murder.
- The different working environments as well as the multiplicity of dominant military forces are among the most important challenges facing the work of civil society, in addition to pressures exerted by the governments of Syria's neighboring countries, including licensing, work permits, and the freedom of movement of workers in CSOs.
- The role of Syrian political parties was not helpful in relation to civil action.
- A lack of interaction on the part of international organizations, in particular human rights organizations, UN agencies, as well as governments of the major countries, with the reports issued by Syrian civil society has resulted in a lack of confidence on the part of local Syrian communities in the role of Syrian civil society.
- The deteriorating security situation inside Syria has imposed multiple restrictions on freedom of movement as well as the work of CSOs, and pushed them to open their offices outside Syria.
- Some segments of Syrian society have not been able to absorb/accept the positive role of CSOs, and they were not previously familiar with the roles played by these organizations; leading to trust issues.
- The work of Syrian CSOs has often been shaped in accordance with donor policies. Consequently, these external decisions have limited the flexibility of civil society to address critical issues.

Regarding the structure of Syrian civil society:

- A unified and comprehensive vision and strategy for the role of Syrian civil society is largely absent, as well as long-term plans that could shape the future of civil action in Syria.
- The role of Syrian civil society has not been solidified, and there is a lack of understanding of the various roles of civil society that should take place at all levels.
- A lack of transparency and good governance have led to financial and administrative corruption as well as nepotism.
- Lack of expertise, scientific and academic competencies, and brain drain made the possibility of committing mistakes greater.
- There has frequently been a lack of planning and prioritization, and greater attention has been paid to quantity than to quality at the expense of, for example, gender.
- Alliances have been based on political, national or other backgrounds, and personal differences have been negatively reflected in civil action and hindered integration and cooperation among CSOs.
- Politics and civil action have been mixed, which is demonstrated by the fact that CSOs belonging to political parties have been established to serve their own political agendas.
- There is a lack of sustainable funding for CSOs.
- The work of CSOs has not included all areas of Syria; certain segments of society and certain areas have been reached at the expense of others. CSOs often work in cities, neglecting rural areas.
- There is a lack of collective awareness of the concept of civil society, its role and mission.
- Inconsistency and incompatibility between CSOs' programs have led to conflicts as well as insufficient coordination between those operating CSOs.
- Working for money prevailed at the expense of volunteering, which is the basis of civil action; this is due to the insufficient understanding of the role of civil society, as well as the poor economic conditions suffered by more than half of the Syrian population as a result of years of conflict and instability
- The services provided by CSOs have not been converted into production/productive projects that would motivate the local population to work.
- In some areas, Syrian civil society has transformed into an entity that acts as though it is itself an official authority, although in principle, it must serve as the link between local communities and existing authorities.
- Syrian civil society's slow response has weakened and undermined its position among the population. Had Syrian civil society's response to emerging urgent issues been rapid and sufficient, it would have received considerable support from the population.
- There is a lack of a legal framework regulating the work of CSOs in some areas. Even where legal frameworks do exist, they often restrict and control the freedom of action of these CSOs. In addition, the legal framework in neighboring countries limits the integrated work of Syrian organizations as it is taking place remotely.

In this context the solutions presented by the participants of the survey included the following:

Solutions related to the working environment of Syrian civil society:

- Raise awareness, including amongst political and military parties, on the roles of civil society.
- Establish a legal framework that would regulate the work of CSOs in various Syrian regions. This framework should be sponsored by various local entities and structures existing in all areas of Syria, irrespective of the controlling dominant forces. It is important to note that the purpose of this legal framework should not be hegemonic control over civil action by the governing authority.
- Strengthen social oversight of the work of CSOs in all Syrian regions in order to ensure the development of their work.
- Collaboration with the governments of Syria's neighboring countries to develop legal systems that will improve the work of CSOs and reduce the refugee burdens on these host countries.
- Ensure freedom of movement of workers and volunteers in CSOs that provide services to civilians in all areas of Syria. In addition, ensure the safety of these workers and volunteers, which is a cornerstone to reducing tension and opening communication channels between the spectrums of Syrian society.
- Further engagement with donors to determine priorities for the support to be provided to Syrians inside and outside Syria, to ensure the effectiveness of aid and the effectiveness of the support provided.

Solutions related to the structure of Syrian civil society:

- Syrian CSOs should develop a clear vision for Syrian society as well as the Syrian state; this should be considered as a roadmap for the work of CSOs now and in the future.
- Increase transparency, governance as well as reliance on competencies away from nepotism.
- Syrian civil society activists should work professionally, coordinate and integrate the work of existing civil entities at all levels, and open communication channels in order to find common ground for civil action.
- Create a database that includes information about CSOs and their members, ensuring deeper governance for these CSOs.
- Secure sustainable financial and in-kind resources that contribute to stability and sustainability of CSOs.
- Promote the concept of volunteering.

- Absorb and invest in community-based CSO workers/members, especially youth, within Syrian civil society activities.
- Detect, disclose and confront political and military individuals or entities that attempt to engage in civil action. They should not be accepted as members of civil networks and bodies; instead they should be included in community consultations.
- Advocacy with international bodies and donors to reduce their authority and control over the work of CSOs.

III. WHY SHOULD THE SUPPORT OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY CONTINUE?

- Civil work is a cumulative effort that needs years to produce substantial results. Civil work is closely related to social change, and works directly to develop the structure of communities to enable them to contain this social change.
- As the Syrian conflict moves to a new stage, it is important to support civil society to demonstrate that what has been achieved over the past years will be sustainable in the future.
- Syrian civil society is an emerging society, and it needs development and support in order to assume its responsibilities and roles towards society in the coming stage.
- Syrian civil society is almost the only space allowing freedom of expression for Syrian people from all walks of life, thus creating communication channels among all segments of the society and contributing in the fight against extremist ideas.
- It is the most capable of changing and influencing society because, to some extent, it has won the confidence of the community as a result of the work and services it has provided over the past seven years.
- There are many important benefits provided by Syrian civil society, from the return of IDPs and the release of detainees to building bridges of confidence in the community.
- Syrian civil society aims to raise awareness among Syrian people on various subjects, including civic culture, human rights, and elections, among other things.
- Syrian civil society will be relied upon in the future as a link between the government and the private sector on the one hand, and Syrian society on the other. We should not neglect its important role in the reconstruction phase.
- CSOs are best able to reach out to civilians and marginalized groups, and to deliver their views and perspectives to decision-makers.
- Local communities in Syria are in great need of the services provided by Syrian civil society, especially in times of conflict, and the post-conflict stage.

- In the future, Syrian civil society will constitute an essential safeguard of human rights and coexistence as well as the unity of Syrian society as a whole.
- It is the entity that is most capable of dealing with current conflicts and taking into consideration the sensitivity of the conflict taking place in Syria.
- It is the most capable of providing services without discrimination and without external agendas.
- It plays an important role in contributing to the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic civil state in Syria.
- It has an important role to play as an observer/monitor/watchdog of political parties and the military.
- It is reliable in meeting the additional needs in society and in monitoring violations.
- It is a shield in the face of tyranny, sectarianism and extremist ideologies.

IV. THE ROLES THAT SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD PLAY IN THE COMING STAGES:

At the level of the political process:

- Further engagement with international organizations as well as influential actors in order to achieve peace and equality and to guarantee human rights for all segments of Syrian society.
- Syrian civil society has an important role in the democratization process and the political reformation as well.
- Syrian civil society should support the 'humanitarian file', with a particular focus on the issues of detainees, victims of gross human rights violations, Syrian refugees and IDPs.
- It should contribute to and monitor the electoral process, and encourage participation at all levels; starting from the elections of local councils to parliamentary elections.
- It should monitor and participate in the political process as well as drafting of the Constitution.
- It should push towards achieving transitional justice in conjunction with the political transition.

At the public level:

- The core mission of Syrian civil society will be to create a public space to increase the role of local communities in policy and decision-making, as well as to express and deliver the interests of local communities. It will also promote the values of human rights and democracy.

- It should be involved locally with all parties to the conflict to help those affected; restore security and safety; achieve civil peace; raise awareness among people to renounce violence and hatred; and cultivate the spirit of coexistence.
- In the future, Syrian civil society will play several roles in comprehensive development.
- It must contribute to reconstruction, as well as providing education-related services and relief, especially in light of the inability of state institutions to provide such services.
- Enhance the concept of human rights; monitor and document violations; raise awareness on rights, laws and legislation; monitoring and accountability roles which are the cornerstones for building a just society in which civil society is involved.
- It has several roles in empowering Syrians politically, especially women and youth.
- Ease tension and counter hate speech.

V. CONCLUSION:

Syrian civil society is part of all the events that have been taking place in Syria over the past seven years. It is characterized as being active and reactive at the same time. It has been widely supported for the work it does and criticized for the flaws and gaps within its structure as well; there is partial truth in both cases. However, after all these events, the civil project in Syria is still one of the most vital projects, due to the tools and flexibility it has. Considering that it emanates from the society in which it operates, Syrian civil society is the most capable of achieving sustainability regardless of the variables taking place at all levels.