

Syrian Voices

Syrian Civil Society Mission to The Hague and Brussels 2018



Key messages

“What good is it to have hospitals or water if you cannot guarantee safety.”

- Delegate

The delegation took part in two public meetings with audiences varying from twenty to forty people. The mission held meetings with ten INGO working on Syria, on a range of issues from humanitarian support to advocacy. These INGOs included representatives of Hivos International, Pax for Peace, Article 11.11.11, Syria Campaign Liaison, Human Rights Watch, the European Endowment for Democracy, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, and Independent Diplomats. Delegates also had several face-to-face meetings with high-level decision-makers including, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, members of the Parliament of the Netherlands, representatives of the Mission of Canada to the European Union, members of the Dutch Permanent Representation to the European Union, the Maghreb Working Group, and the members of MENA division of the European External Action Service.

The policy recommendations made by the delegates were rooted in their firsthand experience, not only of the conflict, but of implementing effective local solutions through the work of CCSD and CCSD's networks.

The messages were developed in consultation with extensive and diverse networks of Syrians in Syria and neighboring countries and focuses on the following themes:

- I. Humanitarian issues
- II. Support an inclusive peace process
- III. Pre-conditions for reconstruction
- IV. Detainees
- V. A tri partite gender framework in Syria
- VI. Support to Syrian civil society

I. Humanitarian issues

The human tragedy in Syria is great and as Syrians we acknowledge the efforts of the EU bodies, and European governments such as Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as the international bodies and NGOs to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. However, humanitarian aid is reducing. Syrian IDPs and refugees in neighbouring countries face many different challenges that are a direct threat to their health and safety. It is possible to cooperate to further contribute to the mitigation of this crisis.

Key messages

1. Ensure the safe return of IDPs, before considering the return of refugees from neighbouring countries and/or Europe. There must be guarantees for the security and protection for those inside Syria first. If European and neighbouring countries push refugees to return to Syria prematurely, it will increase the number of IDPs, as well as the violence and instability inside the country; thereby lengthening the conflict, and potentially causing a new wave of migration.
2. The humanitarian situation of IDPs must be improved. In Raqqa and Deir Ezzor the cities are destroyed and inaccessible with bodies lying on streets or buried under buildings. The situation of IDPs in other Syrian provinces are not better. All IDPs in Syria suffer from difficult humanitarian conditions despite the efforts made by local organizations to alleviate their suffering. Therefore, more support should be channelled for local organizations, especially during winters.
3. Engage in dialogue with neighbouring countries and INGOs to improve the situation for refugees in the region. There needs to be a particular focus in the field of education, legal registration of refugees' papers and health insurance. Refugees should not be trapped between either living in extremely difficult humanitarian conditions in neighbouring countries or facing the risk of arrest, violence, or enforced disappearance if they return to Syria.
4. A United Nations international committee should be established to oversee the situation of refugees both in countries of asylum and monitor their return. Such a committee should also report to the UN Security Council in order to ensure a safe and voluntary return of refugees.

II. Support an inclusive peace process

With the appointment of Mr. Geir Pederson as the new envoy to Syria, the Third Brussels Conference, as well as discussions on the formation of the Constitutional Committee, efforts need to continue to ensure that the political process should remain inclusive of Syrian women, civil society, and refugees, and be based on UNSCR 2254.¹ Without proper inclusion Syrians will have no faith in the process.

Key messages

1. It is important that the new UN Special Envoy Mr. Pedersen should continue to support the inclusivity of the Geneva process, and relevant stakeholders should continue their political and financial support

¹ UNSCR 2254 calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria

for the existing mechanisms of the Women Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). In particular:

- The Women Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) should be more actively incorporated into the negotiations to strengthen civil Syrian voices at the table;
 - The Women's Advisory Board should be given support and technical guidance to contribute to engendering the constitution drafting process; and
 - There needs to be more effective participation of refugees in the political process as well.
2. Constitutional reform is not the end goal. But we now urgently need political pressure to ensure that the Constitutional Committee will be inclusive. There should be a 30% quota for women and 30% quota for civil society in the committee to ensure these stakeholders' concerns are reflected in the Constitution.
 3. There should also be effective participation of refugees in the political process. This requires that seats be allocated for refugees within the Constitutional Committee.
 4. As the third Brussels Conference is also linked to the political process, we request that Syrian representatives of civil society (1 woman and 1 man) open the Brussels Conference.

III. Pre-conditions for reconstruction

The EU and other key stakeholders who may be involved in Syria's reconstruction, must base their early recovery and reconstruction efforts in the future on the solutions that will be sustainable in the long-term. Any reconstruction efforts that are not linked with accountability for human rights violations and do not follow the signing of the peace agreement, will not build sustainable peace as it will legitimize authoritarianism and perpetuate tensions and violence. To prevent this, there needs to be preconditions that must be met before any reconstruction can begin. These include the following:

1. A signed peace agreement before any reconstruction activities can start;
2. Establishment of an International Independent Committee to investigate detainees and enforced disappearances at the same level as the Constitutional Committee;
3. The EU should financially and politically support this committee;
4. Ensure the formation of a special body for the protection of refugees and IDPs and follow-up on their well-being;
5. Ensure that UNSCR 2165 remains; and
6. Engage Syrian refugees abroad (both in the region and in Europe) in the peace process.

IV. Detainees

We welcome international support for increased accountability in Syria. The issue of detainees is urgent for Syrians. There are an estimated 200,000 people detained or missing in prisons in the country. While all conflict parties have detained people, the vast majority are held by the Syrian regime. There can be no peace in Syria or in the region unless this issue is addressed.

Key messages

1. There should be more political, diplomatic and media pressure for the release of detainees, and the issue of detainees must be linked to the political process and reconstruction. Going a step further on the issue of the detainees is important for Syrians to trust the political process and for refugees to feel safe and confident about their return.
2. An Independent Committee of Inquiry for Detainees should be established, as a pre-condition for reconstruction. This committee should include Syrian organizations and gender organizations. It is important for Syrians to trust the political process and their return. The establishment of a dedicated committee of inquiry will help this.
3. In the interim, there needs to be more support for detainees and their families. A special mechanism should be established to support male and female survivors of Syrian prisons and their families. In particular, support the families of detainees in terms of legal, financial, psychological and educational opportunities.
4. The regime's terrorism courts target activists, detaining them and confiscating their family's properties. The regime must be pressured to end the terrorism courts.

V. A tripartite gender framework in Syria

Ensuring the rights of women in any country is a cornerstone of democracy, and in order to ensure that, we propose a three-dimensional gender framework:

Key messages

1. Legal Framework: It is essential to guarantee women's rights and end violence against women in Syria. This requires the protection of women's participation in the political process with the reservation of at least 30% of seats for women at the Constitutional Committee. In addition, it is necessary to ensure the presence of gender expertise within the Constitutional Committee and in the Special Envoy team. Technical and financial support should be provided to the Women Advisory Board to contribute to the gender mainstreaming of the constitutional drafting process.
2. Protection: Support should be channelled to initiatives that support increased protection for women, particularly those directly affected or belonging to affected family members. This includes displaced women, female refugees; detainees and abductees. There should also be support for awareness raising campaigns.

3. Ensure the necessary resources to increase women's participation in local communities and provide opportunities to influence decision-makers, thereby helping to increase the legitimacy of Syrian women as decision-makers.
4. Support efforts to increase the impact of women leadership at the local level. It is an essential means of protecting women from marginalization and violence.

VI. Support to Syrian civil society

Local civilian groups and leaders are taking action to support detainees, launch education projects and improve the conditions in IDP and refugee camps, among many other things that are of the utmost importance to local communities. These local civil society efforts lead to better solutions in the short term because these groups can produce the most conflict-sensitive and sustainable solutions. They are on the ground and from the communities they work in, so they have insight, access and leverage. Their efforts also provide important space for diverse civilians to participate. Local civilian groups and leaders are protecting the essential civic space that has developed over the years in Syria and is essential for challenging the influence of extremist groups and the regime. When participating in positive efforts, people do not feel marginalized and their voices matter, providing a viable alternative to violence and extremist groups.

Key messages

1. Invest in supporting local initiatives to ensure the promotion of community peace; empowerment of women and youth; supporting free and independent media; and good governance.
2. It is necessary to invest in educational initiatives, including university education, as well as initiatives that help to promote human rights, justice, freedom and coexistence.
3. Initiatives to promote co-existence between IDPs, refugees and host communities should be supported;
4. Ensure effective participation of civil society in the political process through the Civil Society Support Room as well as provide technical and financial support to the civil society representative involved in the Constitutional Committee;
5. Ensure the inclusion of Syrians in Iraqi Kurdistan by providing space for dialogue with Syrian civil society.