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Experiences of Syrian Civil Society

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Muhammad Hourani, professor

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Introduction

The term civil society was not commonly used in Syria prior to 2011, except among a small number of individuals who were already publicly active in the civil society that existed in the regime's shadow, far away from it or under its direct supervision.

This does not mean that civil society did not exist in Syria at that time conceptually or practically whether or not it was taking place legally. Every voluntary group activity may be described as a form of civil society if the activity involves discussing issues of public concern and ways to achieve them¹.

Civil society as a concept includes a wide variety of entities such as non-governmental and non-profit organizations, civil and charitable societies, non-profit support networks, social movements and clubs, unions and federations, forums and associations and political parties among others.

Civil society presence in Syria varied before and after 2011, due to the fundamental changes imposed by the conflict including the government losing control over large areas of the country and the latter's need to expand its social base.

Syrians' conceptualization of civil society has always been associated with the government's monopoly over civil society activities prior to 2011 and the focus of the de facto authorities after 2011. As such, civil society activities were conceived as limited to charitable societies based on the Syrian regime directing public opinion to this conclusion or the work of relief and aid organizations after the outbreak of conflict in the country. In addition, there is an overall negative perception of individuals working in this sector, especially in terms of financial and administrative corruption.

This report attempts to provide a general representation of the Syrian civil society prior to and after 2011, and specifically since Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power. The report avoids analyzing the structures of civil society, its mechanism of action or the differences that characterize it. It focuses on other aspects such as civil society's performance, development, characteristics, models, agendas and the obstacles faced inside and outside of Syria or within and outside regime-controlled areas.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, (2014) "Civil Society Space and the United Nations Rights System: A Practical Guide for Civil Society", United Nations. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2ROzn2x>

This study is based on several interviews conducted with Syrian civil society actors whose testimonies contributed to developing the representation presented in the report.

It is necessary to note here that the positions listed in front of the interviewees' names in the report footnotes date to the time of interview and may not reflect their current positions.

For the purposes of this study, several interviews were conducted with civil society donors and beneficiaries. Samples of beneficiaries were selected based on various criteria including: the working level or activities inside and outside Syria, funding, influence and other considerations.

The study excludes governmental or quasi-governmental organizations such as local councils and service directorates.

First: Syrian Civil Society (2000-2011)

There were many unions, professional syndicates, student organizations, women and other organized groups in Syria before 2011, but the term “civil society” did not apply to them or they lost their capacity to act as civil society later on, given these organizations were established or subjected to the regime authority according to a series of decisions and organizational laws issued between 1963 and 1981². Based on these decisions and laws, these different groups became part of the totalitarian state apparatus in what is officially referred to the socialist society which ended the role of the third sector in protecting Syrians' rights from the domination of the public sector and even, later, the private sector³.

a. Establishment

Civil society in Syria re-emerged about a year before Hafez al-Assad's death in what became known as the “Friends of Civil Society Association”, which was established by several Syrian intellectuals following secret periodic meetings headed by the former MP and later opposition figure Riad Seif. An introductory concept note was drafted defining civil society as a series of non-governmental civil organizations including associations, unions, bodies, parties, organizations,

² “Union work in Syria: A General Reading in the Internal Procedures of Unions [al-Amal al-Nakabi fi Suriye: Qira't Amt fi al-Anthima al-Dakhiliya lil-Naqabat]”. (01.03.2008). al-Mishkat Magazine, First Issue.

³ Jusoor Center for Studies, Interview with Yassin Hilal, President of the Free Lawyers Syndicate. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

multiple and varied media outlets, clubs and institutions which are built principally on democratic choices and contribute to creating a critical dialogue between the society and the state for the sake of national interests.

With the announcement of the death of Hafez al-Assad in the middle of 2000, and then Bashar al-Assad's speech in July in which he promised to support a reform process in the country⁴, the opportunity arose to publicize the Friends of Civil Society Association's activities after it was restricted due to the embargo and need for concealment.

As a result, dozens of intellectuals, politicians, actors and others became encouraged to participate in periodic meetings that contributed to the announcement of the establishment of the "Civil Society Revival Committees" on September 27, 2000, through a statement signed by 99 people. They called for "the abolition of the state of emergency and the issuance of a general amnesty for all political detainees, prisoners of conscience, allowing the return of exiles, establishing the rule of law, launching public freedoms, and recognizing political and intellectual pluralism, freedom of assembly, press, and expression of opinion, among others"⁵.

As the meetings continued and new figures joined on January 10, 2001, the "founding document of the civil society revival committees" was announced, which addressed a series of demands to the authority. The most prominent demand was "stopping work based on the emergency law, allowing freedoms, including issuing a law to regulate the work of parties, associations, clubs and non-governmental organizations, the independence of the judiciary, and granting citizens economic rights as stipulated in the constitution"⁶.

In fact, the margin of civil society activities in Syria - which were suspended on February 17, 2001 - was based on the authority's need to expand its social base. However, the regime was soon forced to re-monopolize the definition of the role of this sector again after it became a threat to domestic politics.

⁴ Bashar al-Assad's speech before the People's Assembly after being sworn in as president. Youtube. Uploaded: 10.07.2013. Available from: <https://cutt.us/gpA42>

⁵ "The 99's statement [Bayan al-99]" (21.04.2011). Arab Intellectual Club [Nadi al-Fikr al-Arabi]. Available from: <https://cutt.us/Fwrbl>

⁶ Wael al-Sawah (11.07.2018). "From the 99 to the thousand: Committees to Revive Civil Society." Syrian TV. Available from: <https://cutt.us/pYH9h>

Accordingly, the activities of charitable societies were allowed to expand, the most prominent of which was the “Syrian Trust for Development”, established in July 2001, under the name the “Syrian Fund for Rural Development” (Firdaws) and which obtained a license as a non-governmental organization from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in 2002. It received wide support from some European governments and United Nations agencies after demonstrating its independence from the regime. Despite the fact that Asma al-Akhras, the president’s wife, indirectly oversees the Fund’s activities and programs.

“The margin of civil society activities in Syria - which were suspended on February 17, 2001 - was based on the authority’s need to expand its social base. However, it was soon forced to re-monopolize the definition of the role of this sector again after it became a source of threat to domestic politics”

b. Types

Civil society activities in Syria prior to 2011 were limited to set types of activities, most notably forums, statements, electronic petitions, human rights societies and charities.

There is no accurate census of the number of civil society entities in Syria that emerged after the year 2000, especially as activities were not limited to field activities but also included virtual activities. Several electronic forums were established, the most prominent of which is the “Syrian Brotherhood”.

Almost every Syrian province had one or more civil society entities, and most of them did not have a public name due to not having licenses from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor⁷. The National Dialogue Forum, established by former MP and opposition figure Riad Seif in mid-September 2000, was an exception alongside the Jamal al-Atassi Forum, founded by Suhair al-Atassi, mid-January 2001. The Jamal al-Atassi Forum’s public activities did not last long, and al-Atassi was forced to carry out the forum’s activities and programs in secret due to the many obstacles the forum faced from the regime⁸.

The following is a review of the most prominent forums, associations and centers that were active during that period. It is necessary to note that some of them are still active at this time.

⁷ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview conducted with Samir Nashar, political opposition figure and member of al-Kawakibi Forum in Aleppo. Interview conducted 06.05.2020.

⁸ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview conducted with Kamal al-Labwani, political opposition figure and a member of the Committees to Revive Civil Society in Syria. Interview conducted: 06.05.2020.

Entity	Founder	Location
Democratic Dialogue Forum	Riad Seif	Damascus
Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue	Suhair al-Atassi	Damascus
Civil Rights Forum	Suhair al-Ries	Latakia
Civilization Studies Forum	Omar Abu Zloun	Damascus
Islamic Studies Center	Muhammed Habash	Damascus
Tartos Cultural Forum	Habib Salah	Tartos
Nabil Suleiman Forum	Nabil Suleiman	Latakia
Al-Kawakibi Forum for Democratic Dialogue	Abdul Majed Minjwati	Aleppo
National Youth Forum	Hazem Nahar	Damascus
Arab National Forum	Syrian National Party	Damascus
Badr Khan Forum	Mashaal Timo	Al-Qamishli
Cultural Human Rights Forum	Khalil Matouk	Al-Qamishli
Syrian Social Forum	Muhammed Arqsous Salim	Damascus
Tuesday Economic Seminar	Samir Sayfaan	Damascus
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression	Mazen Darwish	Damascus
Human Rights Association in Syria	Haythem al-Maleh	Damascus
Arab Organization for Human Rights	Muhammed Radoun	Latakia
National Organization for Human Rights	Amar al-Qarbi	Damascus
Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies	Radwan Ziyadet	Damascus
National Organization to Develop the Role of Women	Rania al-Jabri	Damascus
Social Initiative Organization		Damascus
Dummar Cultural Forum		Damascus

c. Role

Civil society activities are generally characterized by ways in which they invite people to participate in determining their destinies and confronting public and private sector policies that may affect people's rights and living conditions.

In unstable countries that witness conflicts or disasters, civil society's role is more focused on preserving people's lives and reducing their living costs. In the case of developed countries that are governed by systems distinguished by their democratic values, the role of civil society extends to include developing the public sector and good governance policies.

“Civil society activities are generally characterized by ways in which they invite people to participate in determining their destinies and confronting public and private sector policies that may affect people's rights and living conditions”

Between 2000 and 2011, civil society was able to achieve a number of political, social and cultural goals, which - despite their limitations - were so influential that the regime intervened to stop their work. These achieved goals can be summarized as follows:

- **Reviving the concept of civil society** by conducting activities and programs publicly after they were limited to narrow confidential circles. This revival contributed in one way or another to encouraging many workers in this sector to shift their activities to the virtual public sphere such as forums, electronic petitions and the like. The transfer to electronic platforms came after the regime re-imposed limitations on activities ending all public forms of activities on the ground after 2002.
- **Changing the methods used to confront the authority** and demand rights at that stage. This change is noticeable in the document presented by the Muslim Brotherhood movement entitled a National Honor Charter for political action in May 2001 that calls for a modern state and mechanisms and means for political and democratic action. It is also found in the People's Democratic Party's, the former Communist Party, document in which democracy was approved as the final option⁹.
- **Activating dialogue between the different segments of Syrian society**, especially with the Kurdish and Assyrian elites. Although it did not

⁹ Radwan Ziyadeh. (24.08.2005). “The Future of the Democratic Movement in the Syrian Street”, online quote. Available from: <https://cutt.us/MnZKg>

contribute to developing a complete vision for solving an issue such as the Kurdish question, it formed the appropriate ground for it.

- **Challenging authority** through lectures, statements, petitions and other activities, without this forming a real force of pressure to confront the authority at that time. It became clear very quickly that attracting new groups to civil society, such as youth and businessmen which would expand the capabilities of this sector and even its aspirations were dangerous.
- **Demanding civil, political, cultural and other rights**, including those related to women's status in the Syrian society, but these demands did not develop a complete action plan. They remained confined to discussions and statements of a general nature.

d. Challenges

In February 2000, the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor placed a set of conditions for civil society organizations to publicize and carry out their activities. Among the conditions was that organizations must apply for permission 15 days before the date of the event and they must submit a list of all the names of attendees along with a copy of the lecture that will be delivered. These conditions came after officials launched a campaign against civil society, most notably the Minister of Information at the time, Adnan Omran, who described civil society as “neo-colonialism,” as well as the then Vice President, Abdel Halim Khaddam, who said they would not allow Syria to become Algeria or another Yugoslavia.

In either case these strict conditions were not aimed at organizing the work of civil society in Syria, rather the conditions were geared towards suspending civil society activities or ensuring civil society adapted in such a way that it did not contradict the authority's definition of civil society or its domestic policies.

This announcement constituted the most prominent challenge for civil society in Syria at that time. Civil society members were forced to return to clandestine activities after all forums and organizations were closed except for the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue.

In April 2001, the Civil Society Revival Committees issued a second document entitled “General National Consensus”, confirming their continued presence and goals, which prompted the authority to launch a widespread arrest campaign that affected many members. This time, the Jamal al-Atassi Forum was not spared from prosecution as the authority felt that the statement indicated the return of a

discourse of defiance after it retreated for a period. This resulted in the forum suspending its activities at the end of May 2005¹⁰.

In mid-2002, the Civil Society Committees in Syria issued an untitled statement, in which they addressed what they described as the reform movement within the authority. The statement was an attempt to redefine the role of civil society after it appeared as a political competitor aimed at overthrowing the regime¹¹. This step was aimed at re-establishing civil society activities in public affairs.

“In either case these strict conditions were not aimed at organizing the work of civil society in Syria. Rather the conditions were geared towards suspending civil society activities or ensuring civil society adapted in such a way that it did not contradict the regime’s definition of civil society or its domestic policies”

Second: Syrian Civil Society (2011-2020)

In 2011, when popular protests broke out in Syria, there was an emergence of a new civil society. It emerged as the authority became unable to continue monitoring and censorship procedures of the real and virtual public sphere.

Consequently, an unprecedented number of civil society entities were established, and their activities and programs affected many aspects of life that significantly influenced citizens’ rights, values and living conditions.

Civil society presence in Syria started to be more in line with its concept, irrespective of its performance or the role it played in confronting the public and private sector in light of de facto authority.

a. Establishment

Civil society presence in Syria returned with the formation of the Local Coordination Committees after March 15, 2011, which served as work teams of an independent and volunteer nature far removed from any political or military affiliation. Coordination Committees initiated organizing protests inside and outside Syria and demanding the restoration of civil and political rights which the

¹⁰ Wael al-Sawah. (08.08.2018) Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue: Last Appearance of Spring.” Syrian TV.

¹¹ “Statement: Civil Society Revival Committees in Syria”. (25.07.2002) Al-Hiwar al-Moutamadin. Available from: <https://cutt.us/FzZes>

authority had confiscated over the past four decades. With the crystallization and expansion of the activities of the Coordination Committees, a federation was formed which became known as a civil non-profit organization.

“Civil society presence in Syria returned with the formation of the Local Coordination Committees after March 15, 2011, which served as work teams of an independent and volunteer nature far removed from any political or military affiliation.”

The Coordinations was not the only entity that asserted the return of civil society. The year 2011 witnessed the establishment of voluntary and solidarity civic gatherings aiming at helping the poor and vulnerable social classes as well as those negatively affected by the Syrian regime's violent policies. Some of these entities sought to protect individuals from regime controlled institutions by developing centers for to provide health, security, military and other services¹².

It is noteworthy that with the Syrian regime's retreat from a region, social forces rushed to establish civil society entities, which were mainly formed by youths, while older adults focused on semi-governmental organizations or political parties. Although the latter is classified within the third sector, it often lost this capacity by joining the opposition.

As for the drive to establish civil society entities, it drew from the initiatives of youths of the generation who contributed to the popular protests in 2011, and civil society workers who were active before that date.

The return of civil society stemmed from the necessity of solidarity in order to protect civilians and reducing material and moral costs for them rather than to improve standards of living at that time. Although, improving standards of living was an objective in and of itself for the stage of stability rather than conflict. In addition, the civil society established at this time was characterized by a lack of coherence and the absence of many privileges especially the experience in a suitable environment¹³.

¹² Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Kamal Suray, the vice president of the Hama council subordinate to the Syrian opposition. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

¹³ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Muhammed Hourani, professor. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

However, it is necessary to highlight the importance of these gatherings and initiatives in forming the nucleus of civil society institutions, activities and programs, which played a prominent role in various fields.

“It is noteworthy that with the Syrian regime’s retreat from a region, societal forces rushed to establish civil society entities, which were mainly formed by youths”

b. Evolution

Civil society underwent significant changes which were reflected in the performance and presence of the entities that emerged. Based on these changes, civil society in Syria grew, crystallized and developed a particular model, which was influenced by five main elements including:

1) Response

The size and diversity of Syrian society response following the Syrian regime’s retreat from many geographical areas played a prominent role in the development of civil society which has come to include aspects of care and development; although there is more emphasis on charitable work. The first years of the conflict witnessed a boom in the establishment of relief associations and organizations, but many of these entities updated their tasks to focus on governance, advocacy and other development programs. In addition, many new entities have been established based on specialization to protect and care for their members.

Likewise, the emergence of volunteer teams and other initiatives demonstrated the worsening humanitarian crisis and the need for all members of society, especially those able to synergize and act in solidarity, to respond to it by all possible means. This model began to develop quickly in a more effective manner in terms of organization, media and administration.

2) Military and Security Conditions

The hostile environment and the changes that occurred in the map of influence and control among the various actors constituted a prominent factor affecting civil society.

Due to the Syrian regime and its allies’ deliberate bombing operations, the conditions of siege, displacement, and the de-facto authorities’ security practices in the areas outside regime control, civil society entities have also become concerned with protecting themselves after they were targeted and pursued. These

circumstances constitute a major challenge to civil society's capabilities and the ability of its members to carry out their activities¹⁴.

These circumstances resulted in many civil society workers leaving Syria and searching for a safe haven to carry out their activities outside Syria. This contributed to the high percentage of Syrian civil society entities operating Syria when previously the number was limited.

Also, international humanitarian organizations' inability to reach areas outside of the Syrian regime's control played a role in the emergence of civil society entities outside Syria. These organizations mediated between donors and meeting local needs.

There was an opportunity for the work of civil society to develop in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime, but the latter prevented it. Many civil initiatives arose in the form of volunteer teams, social solidarity networks and other entities of a developmental rather than charitable nature; however, these were quickly restricted, and their work undermined as the regime sought to limit their work to networks and alliances inside and outside Syria which were under regime control or supervision, such as the al-Bustan Association and the General Secretariat for Development among others¹⁵.

3) The Political Conditions

The political conditions played a significant role in changing civil society's position before the remaining local actors. This shift began in 2016, when the former international envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced the establishment of the Civil Society Support Chamber known as CSSR. This was followed by the Brussels Conference in its first edition in April 2017, which recognized the role of civil society as an essential part of the permanent solution for Syria; however, the second and third versions held in 2018 and 2019, clearly demonstrated the divisions within Syrian civil society¹⁶.

It is possible to say that the announcement of the formation of the Constitutional Committee in September 2019 was a new turning point regarding the position of

¹⁴ Jusoor for Studies. Iman Muhammed, Planning Director at the Qaym Cultural Foundation. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

¹⁵ Jusoor for Studies. Interview with Fadi Dayoub, a founding member of the local development and small project support Office (LDSPS). Interview date: 01.04.2020.

¹⁶ Enab Baladi (24.03.2019). "It reveals the gap between the Syrian civil organizations: Brussels 3, the new stage of the Russian-European struggle in Syria". Enab Baladi. Available from: <https://cutt.us/W5BR8>

civil society. Civil society represented one of three lists alongside the regime and the Syrian opposition, which is a role that emerged from the Sochi conference held on January 30, 2018. This position strengthened division among the ranks of civil society and contributed to diluting the concept of civil society. The civil society list in the committee became a tool for influential states to impose their representatives on the committee, regardless of whether or not they represent civil society.

In reality, the political conditions allowed civil society to develop its tools and enhance its ability to access official platforms as well as push for the need to build alliances and networks. It also offered civil society the opportunity to understand its role as a mediator between the regime and the opposition within the framework of the monitoring process¹⁷.

It should also be noted that international organizations and UN agencies played a prominent role in spreading and entrenching the values and ideas related to human rights, democracy and the like among those working in the ranks of civil society, and relatively among the segments targeted in areas outside the Syrian regime's control. While they did not carry out the same agenda in regime-controlled areas, but this ideology often infiltrated civil society which was subject to regime control and supervision.

4) Competition

Competition has had a fundamental role in developing the performance or enhancing the presence of many civil society entities in Syria, especially outside the regime-controlled areas. Although this did not always stem from a desire to strengthen governance and concepts of democracy, responsible and constructive governance as other motives were influential such as gaining funds and conflicts of agenda from an administrative or ideological standpoint.

5) Funding

Donor funding for civil society entities in Syria contributed to the development of the skills of staff working in various fields, after many of them lacked the minimum levels of competence and experience. In addition to expanding the tasks of many institutions and transitioning, relatively, towards governance in their structure, and their ability to form emergency responses and the like. This is not

¹⁷ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Zohour Kahawaty, a psycho-social specialist. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

withstanding the negative effects that cast a shadow on the work of these entities as a result of the massive inflow of funding.

6) Governance

Many civil society entities have been compelled to adopt the principle of governance to orient their institutional work, define responsibilities, rights, and regulatory relationships with their staff, target groups and donors. In addition, principles of governance present grounds to clarifying the rules and procedures necessary to make decisions within their work.

Although civil society entities in Syria are still emergent, the reliance of some of these entities on the governance model, albeit relatively or in a completely unprofessional way, contributed to the development of their performance somewhat.

“Although civil society entities in Syria are still emergent, the reliance of some of these entities on the governance model, albeit relatively or in a completely unprofessional way, contributed to the development of their performance somewhat”

c. Role

During the years of conflict, civil society in Syria has played a vital role in many domains and they will undergo major changes in terms of tasks and entitlements once Syria enters the stage of local stability. Although many of the entities were developed outside of Syria in a stable environment, but their response inside and outside the country is not commensurate with the conditions for local stability. Local stability may result from either a military settlement to the advantage of one of the powers or a political consensus that leads to a gradual and sustainable peace.

Consequently, the role of civil society entities outside and inside Syria in dealing with the local community, the displaced and refugees may not differ much except in terms of priorities. Activities targeting the refugee community may include development programs, while that is not a priority for displaced persons who are focused on protection and support. On the other hand, the local community may be relatively prepared for all kinds of response.

The following is a review of the most prominent tasks civil society performed through the entities that emerged since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in 2011.

1) Advocacy and Mobilization

Civil society organizations have contributed to mobilizing public opinion for the causes they support. These organizations' performances gradually evolved as they gained the necessary experience through building coalitions and temporary or sustainable partnerships among the emerging civil society entities which developed their skills and capabilities.

Syrian organizations' activities highlighted issues that affect the interests and existence of society, and then mobilized with concepts, messages and convictions to protect society from the Syrian regime and de facto authorities' practices.

Civil society entities of all kinds have advocated issues that touch the interests and rights of Syrians, and the concept of advocacy has been incorporated into the organizational framework of many entities. The significant advocacy model is institutional campaigns that aim to communicate Syrians' demands to United Nations agencies and international parliaments, especially Western ones and others. Organizations also advocated through media campaigns denouncing the policies of the de facto authorities, the Syrian regime and its allies. Advocacy efforts extended to calling for improving the living conditions of refugees and displaced persons as well as issuing emergency statements and calling for protests, sit-ins, and the like¹⁸.

2) Care

Civil society organizations have sought to fill the governmental vacuum in the vast areas outside the Syrian regime's control and given the de facto authorities' inability to establish alternative governance structures¹⁹. Civil society entities provided many services such as relief, health, education, and limited work opportunities as well as organizing emergency responses to the mass displacement, bombing, fires, epidemics and the like.

3) Protection

Civil society organizations sought to use accountability and liability mechanisms and strive towards achieving transitional justice²⁰. Civil society has benefited

¹⁸ Enab Baladi (16.07.2017). "Support campaigns for Syrias: Registering Positions and the Waning Effect". Available from: <https://cutt.us/lQQnC>

¹⁹ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Nuha Kmsheh, a civil society organization expert evaluator. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

²⁰ Nuha Abu al-Dahab (21.05.2018). "Documenting brutal acts, the Syrian Civil Society and Transitional Justice". Brookings Institute, Doha. Available from: <https://cutt.us/o0NHY>

from the accumulation of experience it has in this field since 2000, when entities specialized in defending human rights were established.

Regarding protection, civil society's role in Syria extends to many aspects including protecting civilians' lives in the face of violence, abuse, killing and other acts of violence and protecting citizens' rights regardless of the circumstances. However, emerging civil society entities' efforts on these issues has been limited to protecting civilians from the Syrian regime and its allies' systematic bombing.

4) Documentation

Civil society in Syria took up the responsibility of documenting events throughout the conflict, including all fields especially violations.

In the short term, documentation is a powerful advocacy tool to reveal the perpetrators of violations or crimes and register the names of the victims. Documentation efforts are an important aspect of media and awareness-raising campaigns, as well as to put pressure on governments and international bodies to act in the framework of accountability and liability. In the long term, documentation is a basis for developing multiple transitional justice mechanisms and to provide a historical context that will be useful in the future institutional reform process²¹.

5) Pressure

Syrian civil society organizations have exerted pressure on local and international actors to push them to adhere to the value system they adopted. This efforts included calling for strikes, the closure and disruption all state institutions in 2011, in the hope that this would push the Syrian regime to make concessions in favor of protesters.

Later, civil society played a role in lobbying and influencing the de facto authorities, through demonstrations and media campaigns among other methods. It also sought to influence and interact with public opinion to support the rights and interests of civilians²².

²¹ Nuha Abu al-Dahab (21.05.2018). "Documenting brutal acts, the Syrian Civil Society and Transitional Justice". Brookings Institute, Doha. Available from: <https://cutt.us/o0NHY>

²² Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Mutasim al-Sioufi, the executive director for the Day After organization. Interview date: 01.03.2020

“The level of pressure reached the point of civil society contributing to developing international policies such as Syrian organizations in the USA contributing to the framing of Cesar’s Law to protect civilians in 2019 and pressuring actors there to adopt the policy”

6) Development

The concept of development includes providing awareness raising services, protection programs, projects to establish stability or promote early recovery, assistance for the unemployed and the like.

Civil society in Syria has played a limited role in this regard, especially inside Syria, for various reasons. The most important reason is the lack of willingness among donors of all kinds to support these types of projects.

7) Monitoring

In 2016, the United Nations formally assigned this role to civil society when the Civil Society Support Chamber was formed. The chamber was tasked with monitoring the political process, and this role evolved later on by including civil society in the Constitutional Committee lists to create a balance during these latest discussions. This is other than the obstacles that civil society faced in terms of understanding its role as a mediator between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

d. Types

Civil society took many forms from unions, federations, associations, and representative councils of a religious or tribal nature, organizations, volunteer groups, networks among others.

The presence of civil society again in Syria after 2011 contributed to the return of unions and federations that had been dissolved since 1982 following the role they played since 1976 in supporting the protests against the regime.

Union action is still only a formality and limited to some academic and professional occupations in the areas outside the control of the regime, such as engineering, law, education, students, workers among others. Many of these unions continue to exist regardless of the executive process.

e. Challenges

Civil society in Syria has faced many challenges. Foremost among these challenges are the interference of de facto authorities, financial and legal

restrictions outside Syria, the restrictions imposed by donor policies, the difficulty of responding and poor access compared to the size of need on the ground, the absence of a stable environment, the absence of a clear vision, intense competition, corruption, the absence of oversight, polarization and division between those inside and outside Syria, the absence of regulatory law, weak initiative and a lack of independence.

The lack of independence is visible in the role that donor policies played in defining needs at a time when civil society organizations were unable to put forward initiatives and projects or identify needs and priorities²³.

Civil society organizations' statements during the 2nd edition of the Brussels Conference in 2018 reflects the polarization and the absence of a clear and common vision²⁴. This can also be seen to the list of civil society in the Constitutional Committee, which was divided between the two parties to the conflict, that is, i.e. between the Syrian regime and the opposition's lists²⁵.

“Civil society in Syria faced many challenges at its forefront the intervention of the de facto authorities, financial and legal restrictions outside Syria.”

f. Characteristics

Notwithstanding the obstacles that the Syrian civil society faces, it possesses many characteristics that can be developed in the future, such as social solidarity, effective participation, ensuring social balance²⁶, efficiency and speedy responses and access to international platforms²⁷.

²³ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Fadel Abdul Ghani, the founder and director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

²⁴ Amar Diwab. (03.05.2018). “The Syrian Civil Society’s Conflicts”. Al-Arabi al-Jadid. Available from: <https://cutt.us/B1Hea>

²⁵ Enab Baladi. (15.12.2019). “Civil society in the Constitutional Test: New Political Player or Intermediator for a Solution”. Available from: <https://cutt.us/GyaM7>

²⁶ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Yassin Hilal, President of the Free Lawyers Syndicate. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

²⁷ Jusoor for Studies. Iman Muhammed, Planning Director at the Qaym Cultural Foundation. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

Third: Evaluating the Performance of Civil Society

Before 2011, the presence of Syrian civil society was based on elitism. This constituted a great threat to civil society's existence in the absence of the participation of other segments of society and given the violent practices of the regime which refused to recognize the existence of civil society in the first place, especially in terms of denying it access to a broad social base²⁸.

Indeed, with the start of the regime's closure and prosecution campaign, civil society committees lacked the support of a social base or the private sector. Civil society members' advocacy and pressure campaigns, especially those led by human rights activists, and the regime using its response to this pressure as part of its propaganda to international public opinion, were the main reasons those arrested during this period were released after a short or long period of detention.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime at the time seemed to become alert to the need to expand the social base by taking cautious and non-serious steps towards opening up to civil society. This shift is most clear in the transition towards a social market economy, but the regime soon returned to restricting its activities and redefine civil society to limit it to charitable work rather than development, and even then, civil society's existence was a mere formality and subject to strict control.

The Syrian regime has always viewed civil society as a rival and real threat to its power based on its potential to act as monitor over the regime, and its endeavors to strive for accountability and imposing the concepts of governance. Civil society also acted as a possible gateway for the return of opposition in political life or public affairs, and a field in which it would be possible to win over a class of traditional or new businessmen, in the private sector, who the regime exerted great efforts to subdue since coming to power.

Therefore, the campaign to close and prosecute the Civil Society Revival Committees and their members stemmed from the regime's lack of seriousness to allow for any change. The tolerance the regime demonstrated during the first seven months after Bashar al-Assad came to power was due to the regime's need to renew its image internally and abroad from the image existing before the year 2000. This is reflected in the regime's refusal to enact a law allowing civil society

²⁸ Jusoor for Studies. Interview with Asaad al-Ashi, executive director for Baytna Syria organization. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

organizations and political parties to declare themselves and organize their work within an appropriate legislative framework.

“The Syrian regime always considered civil society to be a rival for authority and a source of genuine threat due to the ways civil society could act as a monitor for the regime and its endeavor to achieve accountability and impose the concept of governance”.

The civil society which re-emerged after 2011, was active in an environment full of difficulties, and it expanded its social base albeit not in a manner that would result in an environment of stability. Civil society was able to win over a segment of the traditional and new business class, albeit to a limited extent. However, it must be noted that this factor did not contribute much to enhancing civil society presence as much as the funding from donors did.

Civil society was able to reconfigure itself with increased vitality after 2011 in the absence of security service restrictions. However, it returned to stumble again when faced with financial, political, military and internal restrictions which resulted in civil society losing its ability to redefine itself and crystallize its role in a clearer and more effective way²⁹.

Civil society in Syria stumbling does not mean its failure as the evaluation process is not limited to civil society's work in an environment of conflict and instability, rather its presence in this environment was indispensable in many ways. Civil society provided care, protection, and some form of development for Syrians inside and outside the country to varying degrees. Civil society performed the job of state institutions, standing in for these institutions, whether in areas under the control of the Syrian regime or beyond its control. It somewhat relieved the burden placed on the societies and countries where Syrians sought refuge especially within the region. In addition, civil society supported the United Nations in some technical aspects³⁰.

²⁹ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Omar Sheikh Ibrahim, Member of the Syrian Commission for the Release of Prisoners and Detainees. Interview date: 01.03.2020.

³⁰ Jusoor Center for Studies. Interview with Zohour Kahawaty, a psycho-social specialist. Interview date: 01.03.2020

“Civil society was able to reconfigure itself with increased vitality after 2011 in the absence of security service restrictions. However, it returned to stumble again when faced with financial, political, military and internal restrictions which resulted in civil society losing its ability to redefine itself and crystallize its role in a clearer and more effective way”

One of the most prominent manifestations of the stumbling of civil society may be corruption and polarization. These two manifestations reached the point of dividing between civil society within Syria and another outside it as well as distinguishing between civil society according to conflict areas, and ethnic and ideological affiliations. Although some initiatives sought to bridge the gap between civil society components and attempt to redefine it away from the polarization imposed by the conflict³¹, these endeavors did not lead to an acceptable way out, but rather increased the division.

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The division and to some degree the corruption within the ranks of civil society weakened its ability to formulate an adequate definition of itself and the role that it is expected to play before donors, de facto authorities and the Syrian regime. These divisions led to the dispersion of civil society efforts and the emergence of a new elite that appeared to be cut off from the rest of society to some extent³². Civil society’s focus became centered on increasing the skills and improving the living and welfare status of its staff at the expense of the concept of volunteer work and improving and expanding its relationship with the social base³³.

³¹ Al-Arabi al-Jadid. (01.07.2014)..“Syrian Civil Alliance: Idealism and Need” al-Arabi al-Jadid. Available from: <https://cutt.us/XCWLL>

³² Jusoor for Studies. Interview with Asaad al-Ashi, executive director for Baytna Syria organization. Interview date: 01.03.2020

³³ Jusoor for Studies Interview with Fadi Dayoub, a founding member of the local development and small project support Office (LDSPS). Interview date: 01.04.2020

“The division and to some degree the corruption within the ranks of civil society weakened its ability to formulate an adequate definition of itself and the role that it is expected to play before donors, de facto authorities and the Syrian regime”

Beyond the divisions within the civil society, since 2014 initiatives have emerged aimed at forming platforms to enhance coordination among entities. In 2016 there was greater inclination towards this model of joint work, establishing alliances and then networks, and developing organizational mechanisms to ensure the continuity of communication among its components and to carry out advocacy, mobilization and other activities to put pressure especially in the context of addressing international platforms and UN agencies.

Although these models constitute an appropriate environment for civil society entities to reach a broader non-political coalition based on a clear vision and definition consistent with its role in protecting, caring and achieving development for Syrians, this has not happened yet. Also this does not mean that better mechanisms to achieve this environment cannot be developed³⁴.

Civil society did not focus much on economic, cultural and social development activities for many reasons, including the circumstances imposed by the conflict. However, civil society prevented the de facto authorities from monopolizing concepts related to citizens' relationships with the authority and the state in terms of individual rights, social and transitional justice, equality, democracy, citizenship among others. This came despite all the restrictions imposed on civil society entities and staff, including arrests, expulsions, closures and policies of dictatorship³⁵.

On the other hand, the presence of international actors in Syria did not support civil society's efforts to confront the de facto authorities. While Russia and Iran do not enter this discussion due to the ways they stood against any model threatening the structure governance, other international actors did little perhaps due to reasons related to military, security, and political priorities. In some cases, the policies of international powers constituted an obstacle to the work of civil society.

³⁴ Juso Center for Studies. Interview with Nuha Kmshet, a civil society organization expert evaluator. Interview date: 01.04.2020.

³⁵ Juso Center for Studies. Interview with Raed al-Saleh, the director of the Syrian Civil Defense. Interview date: 01.04.2020

Nevertheless, civil society has benefited from these policies to demonstrate its ability to be a substitute for international organizations to achieve a response inside Syria. Many of its entities have the competence necessary to communicate directly with donors without going through international organizations. The most significant example of this may be the formation of a working group to confront the Corona virus which includes local Syrian organizations under the supervision of the World Health Organization.

In general, Syrian civil society's performance appears to be effective compared to the circumstances in which it developed or re-emerged. However, there are many internal and external challenges that need to be overcome which limit its development and restrict its independence and status.

Recommendations

Syrian civil society's need to be more effective now and, in the future, requires it to redefine itself. This was not possible without taking steps that are not related to the circumstances only, but also to performance and internal structures. The following are several recommendations that may contribute to achieving this:

1) Governance:

- Institutionalization: Although executive offices in most civil society entities appear to be more bound by institutionalization, this is often absent from the board of directors. In boards, personal aspects are visible in decision-making processes, handling policy and the like. Overcoming this challenge may be difficult and volunteers and organization members are limited to raising awareness and carrying out campaigns to denunciate this behavior internally or by transitioning to social media platforms.
- Corruption: Most civil society organizations have fraud prevention policies, but they often remain written texts that are not adhered to. Addressing this issue requires increasing monitoring procedures and awareness raising about these policies to prevent opportunities for them to be circumvented. This task may be performed by an internal or external monitoring committee formed based on specific criteria that ensures that none of the committee members or the committee are involved in the corruption.
- Polarization: Most of the human resources departments in civil society entities have policies concerning polarization, but these policies remain texts that are not usually implemented. Therefore, solely recognizing the importance of relying on competence in recruitment processes is

insufficient unless awareness-raising measures are introduced to highlight the importance of this. Entities upholding a state of ethnic and ideological polarization positions them far from their primary role of expressing local communities' rights and goals.

2) Relationships:

- Divisions: Platforms or networks of joint cooperation that some civil society entities resorted to establishing, working or trading within do not seem effective and feasible, due to some members' ability to form tangential alliances that prevent them ending the state of division, and, effectively, reinforcing the divisions on a larger scale. Overcoming this challenge requires independent supervision and control aimed at governing these platforms or networks and ensuring implementation through joint action mechanisms and the like.
- Communication: Overcoming the emerging separation between the components of civil society and local community requires initiatives, to be presented through joint discussion sessions, based on taking steps to restore confidence, especially concerning the prevailing perceptions about the role, objectives and work of civil society. It is also necessary to re-evaluate discourse, interaction and other means that contribute to bridging the gap and improving the relationship with the social base.
- Vision: Far from addressing the divisions that civil society entities suffer from, it is necessary to try to develop a clear and common vision for it that includes the current and future role and goals. Reaching this vision requires initiatives based on goodwill, undertaken by individuals or entities that are accepted and accessible for the rest of the components of civil society. These individuals or entities must account for the concerns or allegations that prevented or might prevent the holding of an effective and joint dialogue leading to the development of a common vision.

3) Activities:

- Quality: the focus of many civil society components is still on providing care to the local community in terms of services and other aspects at the expense of development projects. While funding policies may prevent significant participation in this type of project, it is imperative to look for ways to expand these activities that would enhance the role of civil society which includes searching for non-traditional means of funding.
- Content: Many civil society organizations implement ready-made ideas, proposed by funders or ones that have been applied in other countries, which often leads to the failure of these ideas because they are not appropriate to the Syrian context. Syrian civil society organizations should

invest more in idea generating processes that are distinguished by their local character or in adapting ideas introduced from abroad.

Summary

Unless civil society in Syria begins serious and vigorous steps to redefine itself, it will not be difficult for any authority in the future to overpower it as an entitlement or for authorities to quickly revert to the model of the totalitarian state.

Therefore, civil society's ability to reconfigure itself after 2011 does not mean that it will not decline, or its presence be undermined later, especially with its members' continued desire to engage in political work instead of monitoring political work. In addition, the revival of civil society happened in an inconsistent manner and did not pose a major threat for the Syrian regime and the de-facto authorities that emerged after 2011.

This reality denies the relative achievement of civil society in Syria, and that it is the best positioned to engage in building or restoring state institutions or influencing institutions' work in a way that improves performance and capabilities if it is able to redefine its active role. Its position does not reduce from the essential problems it faces and which created a bad image of civil society among the social milieu that it is expected to provide a safety net for.

The sharp polarization within civil society represents the divisions and problems of Syrian society, which civil society is supposed to lead the process of dealing with. Thus, a process of reappraising priorities is necessary to overcome differences and achieving better governance for there to be hope that this process will strengthen civil society's ability to work independently to enable it monitor and hold accountable any incoming authority and provide more support to civilians.

Finally, civil society in Syria is considered an incomplete experience that has gone through a time interruption and self-sufficiency. As such, it is not possible to develop final judgments about the role, identity and position of civil society in the future. Its structure, which is already flexible and dynamic, may undergo continuous changes, regardless of all the problems and challenges it faces.

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