

# Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace

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## Executive summary

Local actors experience conflicts first hand. Therefore, they have an intimate understanding of what conflict dynamics need to be addressed in order to build sustainable peace. This also holds true for the Syrian case where a number of actors inside the country are engaged in significant peacebuilding activities despite the persistence of extreme levels of violence. This study seeks to increase the understanding about these local actors, their perceptions of conflict causes, drivers of conflict, and its consequences, as well as their local peacebuilding activities.

The report is based on 143 interviews conducted by Syrian researchers inside Syria. Two focus group discussions were also held in Lebanon with Syrian NGOs that have networks inside the country. Key local peace actors that were identified include community leaders, women initiatives, youth initiatives, civil society organizations, local councils, and the Ministry of Reconciliation and its committees. The activities that these actors are involved in vary between those working on negotiations for the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons, conflict resolution and mediation, promotion of peaceful values and countering of sectarian rhetoric, relief and development work, and human rights activism.

The main challenges mentioned by respondents in the current environment were the militarization and violence, ideological polarization, physical immobility, dire humanitarian conditions, and economic hardship that present obvious obstacles for local peace actors to bear fruit. These challenges translated into clear overarching priorities mentioned by respondents and addressed at actors at the national and international levels: ending the violence and foreign military intervention as well as starting a national dialogue. When asked about their main needs, the five aspects most often mentioned were financial and logistical resources, capacity-building on organizational and project management, support to be better connected with other initiatives, institutional support where appropriate, and the need for a constructive engagement with the media.

While containing impressive accounts of local peacebuilding initiatives, the report also shows that these actors constitute rather small islands of temporary stability in the current context. Therefore, it is crucial that internationally-driven peace processes account for these local peace actors and support efforts to build stronger networks 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.

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## 1 Introduction

Local actors<sup>1</sup> often have first-hand experience of conflict dynamics that need to be addressed in order to build sustainable peace. This holds especially true in the Syrian case where conflict dynamics are extremely fluid and specific to territorial areas due to historical realities and varied controlling military authorities. A number of Syrians inside the country are engaged in a range of significant peacebuilding activities despite the persistence of security restrictions and extreme levels of violence and bloodshed.

Only recently have international actors begun to consider local conflict dynamics while practitioners increasingly underline the importance of inclusivity in peace processes and the potential of localized peace initiatives. Despite growing attention to local dynamics in peacebuilding literature and practice, however, international actors tend to direct their attention to national or geopolitical conflict dimensions, positioning political and military elites as their primary partners for peacemaking.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, conflict resolution approaches often remain void of a thorough analysis of local actors and vast pools of local peacebuilding capacities remain untapped.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to fill this gap. It attempts to better understand who is perceived as a peacebuilding actor inside Syria and to convey their perceptions of the conflict and the dynamics they try to influence.

The study included a range of actors such as community leaders, women initiatives, youth initiatives, civil society organizations, local councils, and the Ministry of Reconciliation and its committees whose stated aims are to promote peace. In this sense, the report does not primarily focus on institutionalized civil society organizations, but tries to encompass a broader range of activities and actors that are contributing to peacebuilding through their everyday activities. It does not aim at producing a representative mapping of civil society actors, usually equated with formalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Rather, it also includes other, less formalized, actors that work for peace outside of international actors' spotlights.

This report complements existing reports on Syrian civil society and local peacebuilding actors<sup>4</sup> in three ways. First, it conveys perceptions, attitudes, and activities about conflict and peace held by Syrians engaged in promoting peace and conflict resolution activities inside the country. Second, it focuses on both informal initiatives as well as more formalized organizations and activities. Third, it covers several non-government and government<sup>5</sup>-controlled areas (see map 1 below) and a range of actors across ideological divides.

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<sup>1</sup> They are referred to as local rather than national actors due to the fact that their area of activities focuses on the sub-national level.

<sup>2</sup> This is for instance documented in Chetail V. (2009) Introduction: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding - Ambiguity and Identity. In: Chetail V (ed) *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. A Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.10; Bendix D. and Ruth S. (2008) Deconstructing local ownership of security sector reform: a review of the literature. In: Studies IfS (ed.) *African Security Review*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, p.99; Autesserre S. (2010) *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p.10-12, 43, 247; Von Billerbeck S. (2011) Whose Peace? Local Ownership and UN Peacebuilding. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*: p.329; Mac Ginty R. (2011) *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.10, 87.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Donais T. (2012) *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership - Post-conflict consensus building*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, p.41.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (2014) *Building Peace within Syrian Communities*. Gaziantep, available at: [http://ccsdsyria.org/files/peace\\_resouces\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ccsdsyria.org/files/peace_resouces_report_en.pdf); Citizens of Syria (2015) *Mapping the Syrian Civil Society Actors – Phase One*. Berlin, available at: <https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/CfS-mapping-phase1-EN.pdf>; Khalaf, R.; Ramadan, O.; Stolleis, F. (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria*. Istanbul / Beirut: Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/11162.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Many of the respondents, even those loyal to the current government, talk of 'Nizam' (regime) when referring to the current government of Syria while others talk of 'al-Assad government' to mean the same thing. For the purpose of this report, we will mostly use the term 'central government' or 'government' to refer to Syria's current government.

The report's discussion of local peace actors offers insights into wider conflict dynamics and peacebuilding work ongoing inside Syria. By drawing attention to the diverse local actors involved in peacebuilding, we hope to enhance the opportunities for networking amongst Syrian peace actors as well as to improve the relevance of international programs by identifying local peace actors' main priorities. In this sense, the ultimate purpose of this report is to generate better knowledge of the nature, opportunities, and gaps in the area of peacebuilding in Syria.

The report first shortly introduces the methodology used. It then presents the main local peace actors identified, their perceptions of the conflict and of peace, their activities and partners, as well as their main challenges, priorities, and needs. It concludes with insights on how international actors may best support the local actors identified.

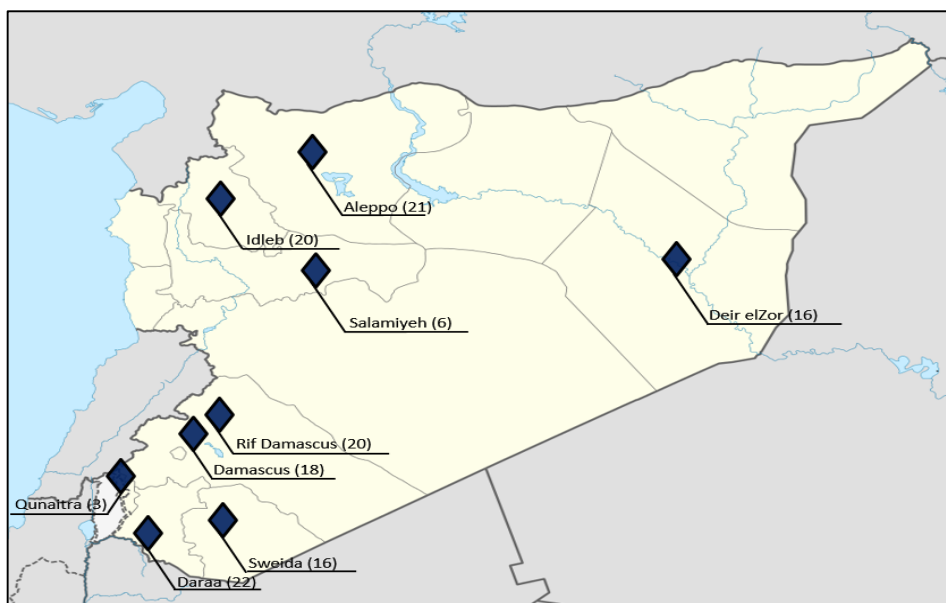
## 2 [Methodology](#)

This report is based on an interpretative methodology aimed at discerning patterns from observations and portraying perceptions and viewpoints rather than static facts. This section briefly outlines how data was collected and analyzed and mentions the main challenges that have influenced the outcome of this study.

### 2.1 [Data collection](#)

FarikBeirut.net led data collection with a team of Syrian researchers inside Syria between March and September 2015. The researchers conducted 143 interviews in six regions of Syria (see map 1 and figure 1). FarikBeirut.net also led two focus group discussions in Beirut. The areas covered within Syria were determined by the degree of access and relative centrality to Syrian peace and conflict dynamics at the time of the study. They include: 1) Aleppo and Idleb provinces, 2) Damascus (city), 3) Rif Damascus (rural and peripheral areas surrounding Damascus), 4) Southern Syria (Daraa, Qunaitra, and Sweida provinces), 5) Deir elZor province, 6) Salamiyeh (Hama province).

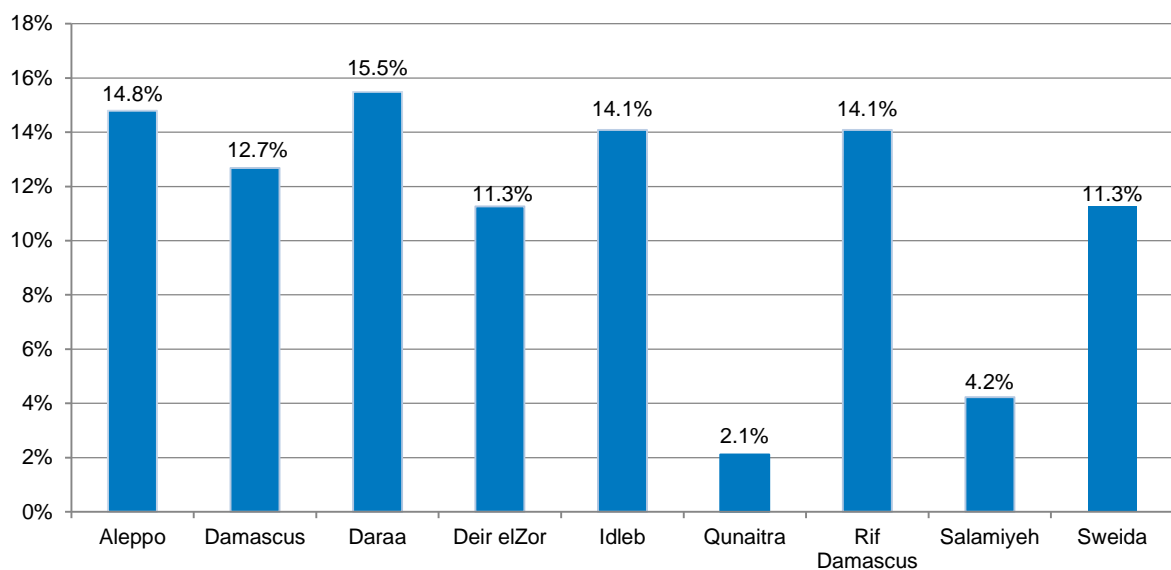
[Map 1: Number of respondents according to geographical area](#)



Interviewees were selected after consultations and extensive discussions with over seventy interlocutors on the ground, among them journalists, analysts, peacebuilding actors, and researchers who all helped in mapping peacebuilding initiatives across Syria and recommended potential respondents. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic. They were then translated into English, coded, and analyzed.

Data analysis stayed as close as possible to the recorded perceptions, attitudes, and activities of respondents in the areas in which the study was undertaken. Not all aspects of the data were analyzed in-depth owing to the scope of the reporting period. Therefore, the report provides an overview of the findings related to the main questions posed to interviewees.

[Figure 1: Area distribution of respondents](#)



## [2.2 Challenges and context](#)

The research process met with two main interrelated challenges: sensitivities around terminologies as well as a highly insecure and dynamic context. First, terminology is a highly sensitive and politicized issue in Syria, not unlike other conflict contexts. What language is used in discussing issues related to peacebuilding can rise to the level of a security risk in areas under central government, certain opposition factions, and ISIS control. Researchers, therefore, adapted terminologies while conducting interviews according to the area and respondent.

Second, the conflict in Syria has unfolded in different ways across the country, with particularities affecting each area in a constantly changing environment. The fluidity of the context combined with high insecurity constrained access in some of the study areas. At the time of research in mid-2015, the northern areas were experiencing particularly heavy fighting. Conducting interviews in Aleppo and Idleb provinces was very difficult because of the presence of multiple armed groups, aerial bombardment, and movement restrictions. It was particularly challenging to carry out interviews in both central government and opposition-controlled parts of Aleppo because residents were highly suspicious about talking to researchers.

Access in the city of Damascus was predictably limited. Access was also limited in Rif Damascus depending on the controlling opposition armed group. Central government-controlled blockades, frequent shelling, and active hostilities rendered access difficult.

In contrast, Daraa in the south was relatively accessible since it has a history of influential clans, so once the formal agreement to conduct an interview was secured, the way was cleared. In Qunaitra and surrounding areas, intense fighting between opposition factions made it difficult to conduct interviews with persons other than community leaders with secure standing. In contrast, in Sweida it was easier to conduct interviews both in terms of physical access and of the willingness of persons to answer questions related to peacebuilding because of relatively lower levels of active violence.

It was extremely difficult to perform interviews in Deir elZor due to ISIS control over the majority of the province, but researchers were nonetheless able to conduct 16 interviews. Other areas were blockaded by severe security measures imposed by central government and loyalist forces, stifling civilian movement.

Salamiyeh is under central government control, however, in practice the National Defense Force ('*Al Defa al Watania*') was said to be the primary security force in charge. In general, interviews in Salamiyeh were relatively easy to conduct, presumably owing to its historical pluralistic traditions. Additionally, while active in demonstrations, the city has neither been heavily suppressed by government attacks nor was it militarized at the time of the research.

### 3 [Syrian peacebuilders](#)

While neither exhaustive nor representative, the study sought to understand the pool of local peacebuilders in Syria. Therefore, it assessed which Syrians are perceived as engaging in promoting peaceful approaches and inclusive values in both formal and informal ways inside Syria.

Based on the interviews and focus group discussions, the following actor categories were identified: i) community leaders; ii) women initiatives; iii) youth initiatives; iv) civil society organizations; v) local councils; and vi) the Ministry of Reconciliation and its committees. Listing these actors as local peacebuilding actors does not imply that they are always peace promoting in their activities and some of these actors might incite more conflicts at times. However, they have engaged in some activities that are considered as promoting peace and resolving conflicts in the areas under study.

#### 3.1 [Community leaders](#)

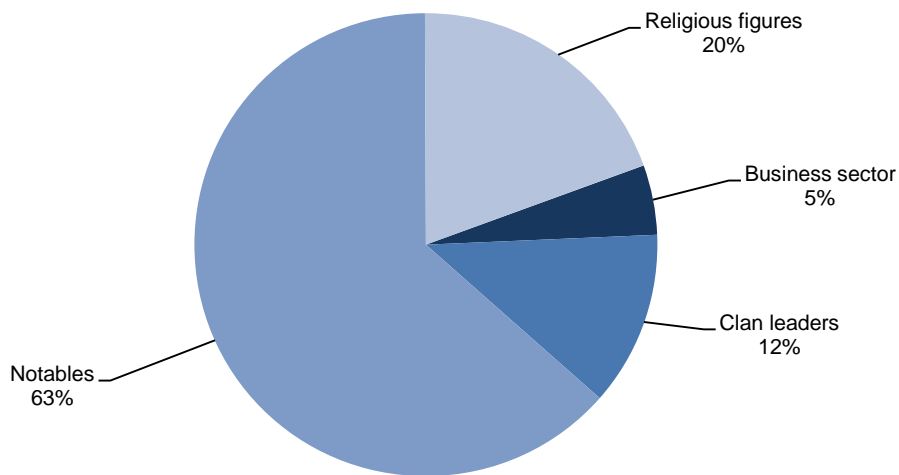
The category of community leaders encompasses notables, religious figures, clan leaders, and business actors (see figure 2).<sup>6</sup> They involve men, women, elders, and youth. These actors have influence in their communities because of specific resources, access, or their traditional position in the society.

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<sup>6</sup> Religious leaders, clan leaders, and business actors can also be seen as notables. However, in the framework of this study, the notable category included those who did not fall into the three other categories, but still had an individual influence. They came from a wide array of backgrounds and professions.



Figure 2: Community leaders breakdown



These actors seem to continue to have commanding influence in their communities and play a significant role in terms of conflict reduction at the local level, and of mediating and promoting peaceful values. Across the areas covered, respondents frequently reported that “notables and elders of the families are playing the biggest role in resolving problems and conflicts.” In Daraa, a community leader said that they often work to de-escalate conflicts by “convincing people that military options are not in the interest of any party.” In Sweida, a community leader similarly stated that “since tensions began in our area [...] we rushed to communicate with influential stakeholders [...] to contain problems before they occurred and to resolve provocative controversies.” In Idleb and Aleppo, community leaders were often involved in negotiations for the release of detained and abducted persons as well as conflict resolution and mediation between different armed factions.

Yet, the category of community leaders is neither static nor fixed across areas in Syria. While many interviewees identified community leaders as traditional notables and figures, such as educated persons, clan patriarchs, and powerful families, others described community leaders as persons associated or in good standing with the brigades. Moreover, professionals, such as lawyers or doctors working on behalf of their communities, are also assuming roles as peacebuilders. As one doctor in Aleppo mentioned, “I am able to play a mediating role because I medically treated demonstrators before the weapons appeared. I used to treat everyone who was injured during the demonstrations in my clinic. I even treated the military.”

Although respondents overwhelmingly considered community leaders as having a positive influence on peacebuilding, some said that certain leaders use their power in ways that contribute to more conflict. One interviewee described how “in some cases, [community leaders] play an inciting role that serves militants more than civilians,” indicating that the legitimacy of community leaders in peacebuilding should not be taken for granted. As another respondent summarized, “religious elders have played a major role in promoting a culture of peace and in resolving [local] conflicts. At times, however, they have also contributed to sectarian escalation.” This indicates that while several respondents have clearly identified community leaders as important actors in local peacebuilding, their role has to be analyzed on a case by case basis.

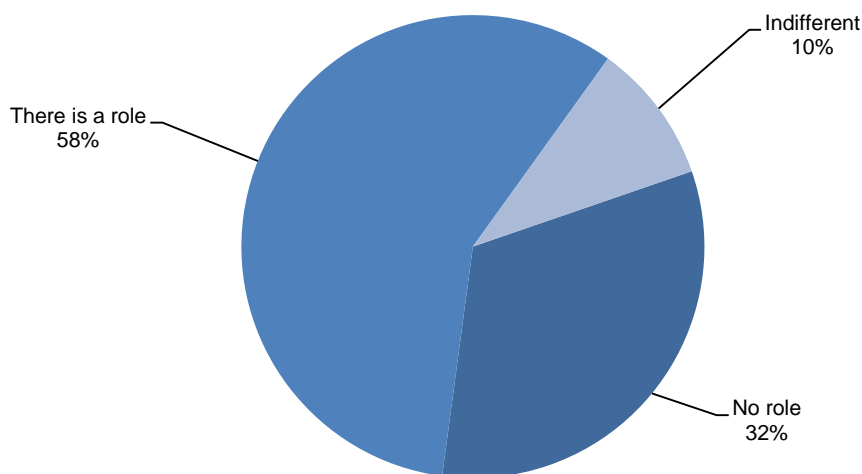
### 3.2 Women initiatives

Syrian women have historically been active members of civil society.<sup>7</sup> Research for this report sought to identify female peace actors as well as to offer a glimpse into the attitudes of men and women regarding women's inclusion in peacebuilding.

A mere 14 percent of all respondents in this study were women, suggesting that women are either less engaged in peacebuilding, less visible, or less accessible. This finding is similar to that found by Khalaf et al., who reported that out of 94 civil society groups mapped, 31 percent had no female participation and in 54 percent, women represented a minority of the membership. Only in 8 percent of the organizations did women constitute a majority of the membership, and only 7 percent were exclusively female.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the respondents' attitudes about the role of women mirrored the challenging reality of women's inclusion in Syria today. As displayed in figure 3, 32 percent of respondents answered the question "is there a role for women in peacebuilding?" with statements such as "people are mostly armed now, and women have never had any role but to look after the house and the children" and "women are busy indoors."

Figure 3: Role of women in peacebuilding



Female respondents explained that the public space for women has shrunk due to the militarized environment, although it differs from one place to the other. As one respondent said, "the role of women is very weak and they are mostly active at an individual level as they are marginalized and young [armed] men prevent them from participating." At least one respondent noted that armed actors control and monitor women's movements and thereby limit their activities. Another woman recounted, "the problems started once the conflict became armed. Before that, we had an important role in peaceful demonstrations. Now our role has returned to the kitchen and other places."

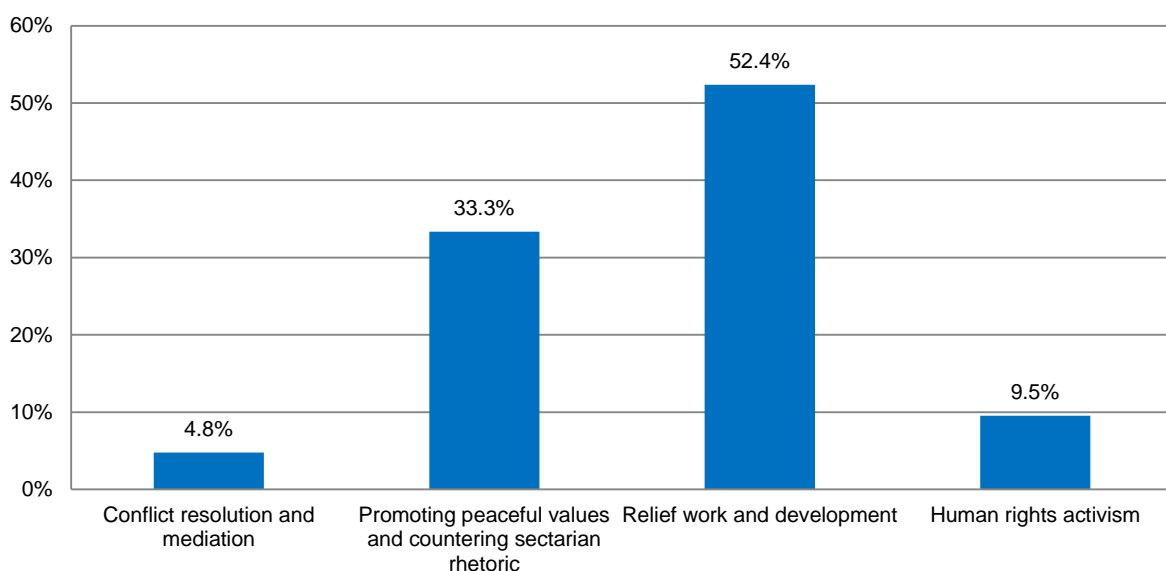
<sup>7</sup> Kawakibi, S. (ed.) (2013) *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against All Odds*. Special Bulletin 2, Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, available at: <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/42162973/download-pdf-quotspecial-bulletin-2-salam-kawakibi-6-5-13-hivos>.

<sup>8</sup> Khalaf, R.; Ramadan, O.; Stolleis, F. (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria*. Istanbul / Beirut: Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/11162.pdf>, p.22.

However, even in such a context, the majority of respondents (57.9 percent) said that there is still a peacebuilding role for women, albeit with differing attitudes about what kind of role. As female respondents conveyed, although the space for women’s activism has shrunk, it is not a static reality. Rather, women’s space is a negotiated territory in which women are finding new ways to position themselves. Women in the Kurdish areas of Syria for example have been very active. In another region, more than 50 women protested against fighting and reciprocal arrests between armed factions, ultimately having an influence on calming the situation. In another case, a group of young women went to the local council to talk about the challenges related to the presence of militants in their city. The battalion leaders subsequently asked these women’s families to prevent their daughters from intervening in political issues. Most of the parents refused to follow this order and set up meetings with the local council. In the end, it was decided to train women in relief work, as this was judged to be more socially acceptable. Women were also said to play an important role in keeping their “children away from arms, war, killing, and destruction and bring them back to their schools and games.”

Indeed, as shown in figure 4, women interviewed were mainly involved in relief work and development, promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric, human rights activism, and conflict resolution and mediation. These examples show that it would be misplaced to view women as either passive victims or as collective saviors, because their roles and impact vary greatly. Women are finding creative ways to promote peace in the broader society and are effectively utilizing the spaces they can access despite the barriers. At the same time, however, women should not be uncritically seen as only building peace. In one instance, an elderly woman adopted a narrative portraying all people involved in demonstrations and bearing arms as ‘terrorists,’ which incited violence and hatred. Just like other actors, the roles of women and women initiatives have to be critically analyzed rather than just assumed.

Figure 4: Main fields of activities of women initiatives



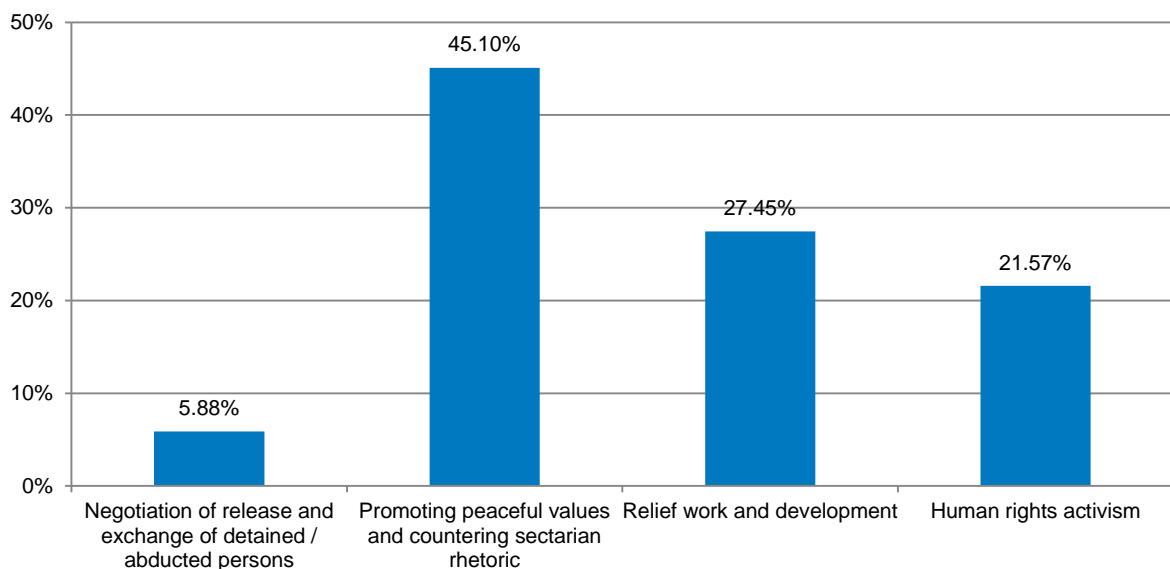
### 3.3 Youth initiatives

Youth have been particularly active in peacebuilding in Syria. As Khalaf et al. found in their report surveying 94 civil society groups, the average age of members was between 16 and 30 years.<sup>9</sup> The significant role they played has been well documented and many Syrians view the original uprising as a “revolution of the youth” in stark contrast to an older generation perceived as “silent, passive, and oppressed.”<sup>10</sup>

The degree to which youth continue to play a role in peacebuilding inside the country, however, varies and is largely influenced by security conditions. Some interviewees, especially in Rif Damascus, referred to young people as central to the uprising and peacebuilding movements: “without the youth, this blessed revolution would never have happened.” Another respondent mentioned that “when you see university students coming together around the idea of achieving peace in a certain area, [it] confirms that the youth have the largest and most important role in configuring solutions for peace.” Yet others expressed mistrust, declaring that “young people are inciting revenge and retaliation.” Such attitudes towards youth were expressed in all regions and mostly by elderly respondents, some of whom portrayed youth as “chaotic” and “bearers of arms.”

Most youth appear to be engaged in activities related to promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric in their communities (see figure 5). One respondent in Idleb credited youth with “returning life to the city through cultural, religious, and service activities, as well as publishing advertisements encouraging community cooperation for stability and security purposes.” Youth are also heavily involved in relief work and development as well as human rights activism. In some areas, youth initiatives also engaged in negotiating the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons. In this regard, just as for other actors, their activities very much depend on the space that is generally open for such activities.

Figure 5: Main fields of activities of youth initiatives



<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.28.

### 3.4 Civil society organizations

NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) fill key functions in Syria's peace infrastructure, with many focusing on providing critical humanitarian aid and development services. Official NGOs registered with the Syrian central government were one of the main components of Syria's historical civil society. Many were charitable organizations, providing social services, educational, and health programs. They were often affiliated with religious institutions, government entities, and clans, or privately formed by wealthy and influential individuals. Some of these organizations began to use their networks to provide relief and humanitarian aid for internally displaced persons and especially those in blockaded areas. As one respondent in Damascus said, "we had been working for years before the unrest [...], and after the internally displaced persons came to the Yarmouk camp, [...] we were one of the first institutions to secure their needs."

CBOs have also been present inside Syria for some time before and during the conflict. While CBOs are particularly relevant in Syria's fluid and deeply insecure environment, they are often the ones less resourced and visible, yet working in highly risky situations. They tend to be led by youth, women, and community leaders. They operate under a representative title and with regular members but are not registered or formally institutionalized.

Many NGOs and CBOs utilize the mobility and respect garnered from their front-line work to directly promote peace. Their activities range from small discussion sessions to training workshops in mediation skills, artistic performances bringing together audiences of various backgrounds and political affiliations, and traditional food marts. Many of the organizations in central government-held areas continue to operate in more tolerated fields, including the promotion of women's rights and relief aid. Yet, some NGOs, particularly those with private or public affiliations to the central government or local councils, have been accused of utilizing their resources for political purposes.

Over the past four years, there has also been a proliferation of Syrian NGOs based outside of Syria in neighboring countries, especially Turkey and Lebanon. Externally-based NGOs typically have internal networks and local offices inside, mostly in opposition-held areas. These transnational NGOs play an important role in populating the civil society space and are frequent interlocutors of external actors and donors.

### 3.5 Local councils

Provincial, city, and municipal-level councils have emerged to govern in areas outside of central government control. The first such local council was established in Zabadani in January 2012 in order to coordinate relations between civilians and armed groups.<sup>11</sup> The creation of other local councils followed. Ad hoc courts as well as lawyer and judicial syndicates and coalitions were also formed.

The legitimacy of local councils largely depends on their ability to "restore a minimum level of social services in their areas" as well as "their local nature and revolutionary history during the uprising."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, they are often considered as part of civil society since "they operate without any formal

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<sup>11</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2014) *Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations*, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5416e7d14.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Khalaf, R. (2015) Governance without Government in Syria. Civil Society and State Building during Conflict. *Syria Studies* Vol 7(3), p.46.

authority and are considered to be temporary alternatives.”<sup>13</sup> Some local councils receive funding and training from foreign governments. However, they often have financial weaknesses and lack capacities.

In the initial phases of the Syrian conflict, local councils played an important role in promoting political goals, mediating civil-military tensions, and in some cases negotiating ceasefires or access routes for service delivery. Over time, the role and authority levels of local councils have evolved to engage in conflict resolution and mediation as well. In Aleppo, for instance, local councils are said to play an active role in conflict resolution mostly related to localized social infractions and tensions. At the same time, they are also very active in relief work and development. A representative of a local council mentioned that in Daraa “relief, education, and health work is the most basic of civilian peace work because by providing food to people many of their problems are resolved.” Another local council member referred to their relief activities as well as the provision of water and electricity as being a means to promote peace, particularly by targeting civilians in both government and opposition-controlled areas. At least some local councils are involved in supporting schools, which as one respondent reminded, is essential for “keeping children educated so that they can protect Syria in the future.”

### 3.6 Ministry of Reconciliation and its committees

The Ministry of Reconciliation was established in 2012. It was part of the central government’s approach to reform the constitution and pursue localized truces (‘*Hudnas*’) contingent on armed individuals relinquishing their weapons. The evacuation of fighters from the old city of Homs was one of the more high-profile truces between opposition factions and the central government. The Ministry formed ‘popular committees’ and professional unions to promote such truces in line with the government’s approach.

Even though a widely shared perception is that most of the members of the Ministry of Reconciliation joined mainly in order to further their personal ambitions, this study identified affiliated persons who sought to use their posts for genuine peacebuilding. As a member of the popular committees said, “after the conflict escalated, the Ministry of Reconciliation was established. When they started working in Aleppo, I volunteered to work with them to [help] build dialogue with the other party.” As another respondent described, much of this work is devoted to “delivering food items and children vaccines” and serving as “a middleman in exchanging detainees.”

The exact influence of the Ministry of Reconciliation is unclear, with some respondents saying that “in many cases the head of a security department or an officer at a barricade has more authority to make a decision.” Moreover, the truces they help negotiate are often unstable. As one interviewee in Damascus recounted, “nothing changed in the neighborhood or the relations with the surrounding areas after the truce with the regime, especially because the truce is fragile and may collapse at any time.” Although this is linked to the broader context, it hints at the challenge of the Ministry of Reconciliation to have a sustained impact on the ground.

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<sup>13</sup> Khalaf, R.; Ramadan, O.; Stolleis, F. (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria*. Istanbul / Beirut: Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/11162.pdf>, p.11.

## 4 [Perceptions of the conflict](#)

This section conveys the diverse perceptions of the conflict held by the respondents interviewed, relating to conflict causes, drivers of escalation, as well as the consequences of the conflict. These insights provide a useful context to better understand local perceptions of peace as well as the types of activities that local actors implement.

### 4.1 [Conflict causes](#)

When asked about the causes of the conflict in their areas, respondents overwhelmingly said that they saw the situation as a struggle for political change with economic roots.

Many respondents defined the conflict as a revolution for political power to end the central government's domination. Respondents pointed to the "tight [state] security grip" and the "muzzling" of people as direct causes of the conflict. This was often interlinked with institutional corruption. As one respondent said, "security units kept a tight control around the necks of the people and their livelihoods. Meanwhile corruption increased as did incidents of bribery, immorality, promiscuity, and subversion."

The socio-economic causes mentioned included rising living costs, poverty, unemployment, lack of development projects, expropriation of rural lands, and water shortages. A few respondents mentioned specific reasons related to the effects of years of drought, water scarcity, and a lack of irrigation: "we are suffering economic difficulties, as our children are jobless and our lands barren with a lack of water projects." Some respondents recounted that farmers had to sell their lands due to economic hardship and they migrated to urban areas, which sometimes raised social tensions and led to frustrations. As one interviewee in Deir elZor stated "is it possible that the farmers go to Damascus and Aleppo to work as porters for cheap wages while they are landowners?"

This combination of political and economic causes was well summarized by a respondent in Damascus who said that "protests started because of high prices and the lack of sufficient irrigation projects. [Cultural and political opposition movements] were suppressed, activists were being arrested, and many notables spent years in regime prisons before the revolution." As such, respondents clearly located the causes of the conflict in both political and economic grievances.

### 4.2 [Drivers of conflict escalation](#)

Drivers of conflict escalation beyond the above-mentioned conflict causes included i) the violence and armament of multiple actors; ii) the polarization of the environment causing people to feel the need for self-defence; and iii) the involvement of external actors.

First, the violence and armament of multiple actors appear to have been a key driver in conflict escalation. On the government side, detentions, massacres, and attacks on protestors were frequently cited as historical markers leading to popular militarization. Many respondents placed particular blame on the '*Shabiha*'<sup>14</sup> for indiscriminate violence, killings, and arrests. The role of the '*Shabiha*' was especially noted in Aleppo and Idlib. Some people related that the state-sponsored violence forced people to take up arms for protection. One respondent said: "if a man is coming to kill you, do you watch him do it or do you turn your back on him? We are not used to having our

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<sup>14</sup> Literally, the term is derived from '*Shabah*,' which means spirit, ghost or shadow in English. It refers to armed militia groups that support the central government of Syria.



homes and our dignity insulted. So we aligned with young people even when they took up arms.” He continued, “the people want peace, but they also want to ensure that this peace will not lead to the destruction of their villages and their homes.”

A second driver of conflict escalation relates to the heavily polarized and weaponized environment, which, as respondents explained, made it impossible to remain neutral. Many respondents said that not taking sides in this environment would have entailed high security risks. In some areas, people felt that the only way to protect themselves and their families was to take up weapons. In Sweida for instance, one interviewee said “unfortunately, bearing arms is our only option to be safe.” Similarly, some Druze respondents and interviewees in the Palestinian-Syrian camps said that they took up arms to keep their community neutral.

The Kurdish respondents blamed the presence of Kurdish militias, as well as ideological confrontations between Kurdish communities and Islamic armed groups, particularly ISIS, for the escalation of the conflict. One respondent in Rif Aleppo blamed the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] militias for provoking “sectarian war” between different components of society, suggesting that peace would require repelling all forms of extremism. A lawyer from the area similarly named “the presence of the YPG [People’s Protection Unit]” and said that the “first refraction in the area was when ISIS controlled it.”

A third observed driver of conflict escalation stems from regional and international interventions. Nearly all respondents mentioned the conflict-inciting role that international and regional actors had been playing. Irrespective of the religious or political affiliations of interviewees (e.g. Sunni or Shia’a), they directed particular blame at outside actors. Respondents overwhelmingly mentioned Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Saudi Arabia as negatively influencing the conflict context. Respondents described how external financing of the arms flow, often times contingent on ideological bases and without clear political direction, inflamed the situation leading to current conflict dynamics in their areas. As one interviewee put it, “regarding the regional level, if the political money and flow of arms to everyone were to stop without exceptions, the war would cease within weeks.”

Yet, the role of external actors was sometimes perceived differently depending on the region. A few respondents, particularly in areas under government control, referred to external actors as instigators of war in Syria. One interviewee said, “first terrorist groups tried to destabilize security in Syria encouraged by foreign countries. [...] Then the conflict evolved, ISIS and other groups started pursuing the minorities [...], so the fight became one to defend our land and honor.” The interviewees associated with the Ministry of Reconciliation placed particular blame on externally driven weaponization and the harmful behaviour of non-state armed actors. Others blamed external actors for hijacking their struggle for change: “after the rightful demands of the people were raised, someone came along and subverted those demands to accommodate the will of regional and hegemonic countries.”

Through these drivers of conflict escalation, what had begun as a political and economic conflict morphed into localized conflicts with new actors and drivers. As described by a respondent in the south, “in the beginning, our city wasn’t really affected [...]. As events evolved, many protests occurred but were suppressed by state security forces. New problems arose as the conflict circle expanded due to foreign interference.” As such, a multitude of conflict layers now overlap. As one interviewee said, “some of the existing sub-conflicts are political, some are tribal, and some have



taken on sectarian dimensions. We know that blood draws blood and militancy attracts militancy and in war there are always those who profit and rise on the blood of our children.”

### 4.3 [Conflict consequences](#)

Interviewees pointed to two interrelated consequences of the conflict: i) societal and ideological divisions; and ii) a deterioration in law and order and economic life.

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted societal divisions that were exacerbated through the conflict as a particular consequence and challenge for peacebuilding. Ideological divisions were said to be leading to “religious incitement” and reducing neutral space for promoting “brotherly existence” and a peaceful resolution of conflicts. The divisions have spread across the country even to areas that have so far avoided armed confrontations.

One respondent said, “after months of incidents, the society of Damascus has become divided between objectors and supporters [to the regime], traitors and collaborators, and even families have divided amongst each other.” In Sweida, it was said that “our town is a mixture of Sunni, Druze, and Christians [...]. When sectarian speeches started to appear in some areas of Syria, people here became scared and cross-societal relationships became strained.” In the south, it was for instance said that “Bedouin crops were burned and their houses attacked with bullets, which boosted tensions between the Druze and Bedouins. As a result, most Bedouin families had to abandon their houses and crops and some headed to western Sweida, where Bedouins are a majority.”

These divisions are not the same in all regions. Some interviewees in areas that have been under opposition control for an extended period, such as rural Daraa, suggested that community relations had improved following the routing of the government in their area. In rural Idlib, where there are fewer foreign armed actors and relative community resilience, respondents suggested that social relations remained positive with the main consequences of the conflict being weak institutional order and a lack of services.

Another consequence of the conflict was seen in the decline of law and order and economic deterioration partly also due to the high level of displacement. In Daraa, the population in one town went from around 50,000 to 20,000 following repeated government attacks. In addition to the breakdown in the social fabric, the exodus resulted in further economic decline and loss of public services. This cycle was repeated across areas and in many places, a war economy has replaced formal economic activities.

These consequences often act as drivers for further conflict escalation. Indeed, social and ideological divides as well as the decline of law and order and economic life risk to continue to perpetuate the conflict situation and presumably feed more turmoil.

## 5 [Perceptions of peace](#)

Views on conflict causes, drivers, and consequences influence how people perceive peace. It is therefore important not to assume the meaning of peace, but to inquire into its local definitions. People define peace based on their daily experiences living in contexts of armed conflict. This

section provides insights into how terminologies of peace are being used in Syria and outlines five interlinked meanings of the term.

### 5.1 [Terminologies of peace](#)

In responding to queries about peace, interviewees mostly referred to '*Selm Ahly*.' This term literally means 'peace among people' or civilian peace. The term usually implies keeping good relations amongst families, communities, and citizens in order to live side by side. It is an ancient reference in Syria, which has evolved within the language itself, and suggests long-term peace. As such, it implies bottom-up peacebuilding, rooted within the structures and traditions of the community.

Sometimes interviewees also referred to '*Mosalaha*' when discussing peacebuilding. The term literally means reconciliation and has a long tradition in Syria, associated with specific habits, rituals, and protocols. Its traditional meaning is reconciliation between two individuals, families, or communities. In the context of the current conflict, the term is being used both at the local level in its more traditional meaning as well as by the government and opposition groups in relation to ongoing negotiations for localized truces. For instance, the central government's Ministry of Reconciliation (see section 3.6 above), is ostensibly mandated to negotiate local 'reconciliations.' Such reconciliations are often framed as requiring that opposition fighters relinquish their weapons to the government, therefore it is associated with capitulation. The dual usage is creating complexity with respect to how and who is promoting reconciliation. Nevertheless, this study found that local actors continue to call for reconciliation at the community level as a foundation for peace at the national level.

### 5.2 [Meanings of peace](#)

As mentioned, the phrase predominately used to refer to peace was '*Selm Ahly*.' When asked to define it, most respondents provided five interlinked meanings that likely underscore public expectations for a transitional period.

#### Safety and security

Given the degree of conflict, nearly all respondents defined peace as an immediate matter of personal safety and security. As one respondent said, peace is "the right of every human to live in safety and without fear." Another interviewee mentioned that peace requires "that the killing and destruction stop and security and safety return to our country." Answers showed that safety and security include ending the fighting, as well as freedom from political oppression, military attacks, arbitrary arrests, and detention from all armed actors, and an end of blockades. A respondent from Damascus said that "civilian peace means coexistence between people based on [...] freedom of expression and thinking." It also implies a certain guarantee of non-recurrence. As one interviewee in Sweida put it, "civilian peace represents a house that we built to safely live under its roof and within its walls, pledging to each other to reinforce its foundation whenever it weakens, and committing not to use weapons among its inhabitants no matter what happens."

#### Basic needs and economic opportunities

Respondents also defined peace as a state free from want and lack of basic needs, linking it to having the means for survival. One respondent in Deir elZor said that peace means, "that no child needs medicine or food and that people are not hungry." Another respondent in Damascus

described peace as “not fearing the future.” Economic opportunities and social justice were also repeatedly named as central for any sustainable peace. As one interviewee in Daraa said, “we want our country to exist in safety and peace, with a government that respects the people and provides for their economic wellbeing.”

#### Democratic governance and rule of law

Respondents also described peace as “fair government” and a country “where the law is enforced.” Political stability and democratic systems were mentioned as a precondition for this to happen. One respondent in Damascus said that “peace means a country ruled by good people who come to office through the ballot box.” It was seconded by an interviewee in Daraa who said that “civilian peace is the domination of law, political pluralism, and elections, where all respect the preference of the voting box.” Several underlined the importance of preserving state institutions in any political transition. As one respondent in Damascus said, “I am against the regime, but I am not with the destruction of the country.”

#### Peaceful coexistence and social justice

Civilian peace was frequently described as “living together,” “being brotherly,” “coexistence,” and living together with “love.” A high number of respondents linked coexistence to equality and dignity mentioning “freedom, dignity, and coexistence between all components of society.” “Social justice” was also mentioned several times as a condition for peace in the sense of ending social and economic marginalization and exclusion. As one interviewee from Sweida said, “peace equals a civil state, where every human being is respected and where you deal with each person with honesty, regardless of his or her sect, place of origin or family name.”

#### Accountability

The issue of accountability was subtly present in many of the interviews. It appears that accountability may be seen as a precondition to being able to coexist, live in love, and reach a condition of social justice. Few put it as clearly as this individual from Rif Damascus did who said that peace was “love, justice, defending the oppressed, and holding the unjust accountable,” but it served as subtext for much of the answers delivered. Reconciliation is often mentioned with an assumption that it would follow accountability for central government representatives. Less obvious is how people relate to violations that may be committed by non-government actors. Yet, the respondents interviewed for this study often spoke of the rule of law and equality, suggesting that accountability should be upheld as a matter of principle with a higher priority applied to the government. In many cases, particularly in Aleppo, respondents mentioned transitional justice as a priority for peace.

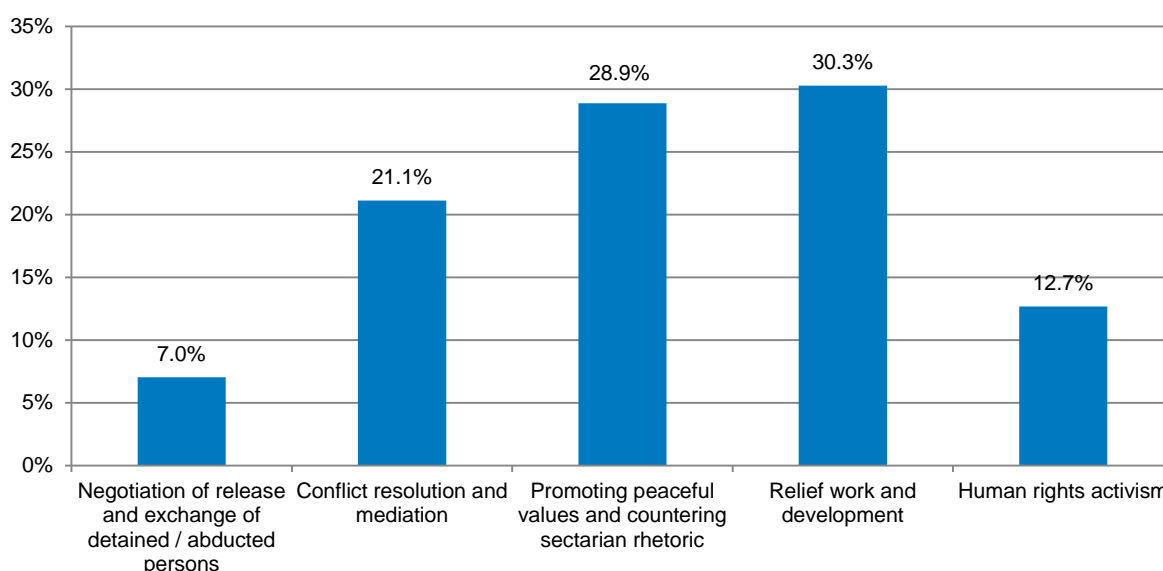
## **6 Activities**

Local actors engage in specific activities to promote peace consistent with the above-mentioned meanings of peace. Of note, in describing their work and its objectives, interviewees often omitted the term ‘*Bena’ Al Salam*,’ which is a literal translation of the English word ‘peacebuilding,’ but not an original expression in Arabic. There are three main reasons for this. First, respondents cited political sensitivities and in some areas security risks. Second, there is a perception that peacebuilding

relates to institutionalized organizations working at the national level rather than to informal activities in the everyday. Finally, there is evidence of fatigue and disillusionment with the term as many respondents felt that peacebuilding activities mostly relate to truces without durable impacts. This is partly due to the contradictory use of the term ‘reconciliation’ used by the government and opposition groups (see sections 3.6 and 5.1 above).

Nonetheless, even though respondents were not necessarily naming their activities ‘peacebuilding,’ the end objective was often the same: easing tensions between combatants, contributing to a de-escalation of violence, countering the effects of hostile blockades, and opposing extremism. Five key categories of activities were identified as illustrated in figure 6: i) negotiation of the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons; ii) conflict resolution and mediation; iii) promotion of peaceful values and countering of sectarian rhetoric; iv) relief work and development; and v) human rights activism.

[Figure 6: Main peacebuilding activities](#)



## [6.1 Negotiations of the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons](#)

In all geographical areas covered, interviewees were engaged in direct negotiations with armed groups as well as the central government for the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons. Actors most involved in this activity are community leaders and, to a lesser degree, youth initiatives (see figure 7). Respondents recounted that detentions were a significant factor in conflict escalation, especially given the proliferation of militias on all sides, and that people found it hard to think of peace in such an environment. As a community leader said in relation to a kidnapping that remained unresolved, “the conditions here are stressful now, and the problem is that tensions in one community lead to tensions in others.”

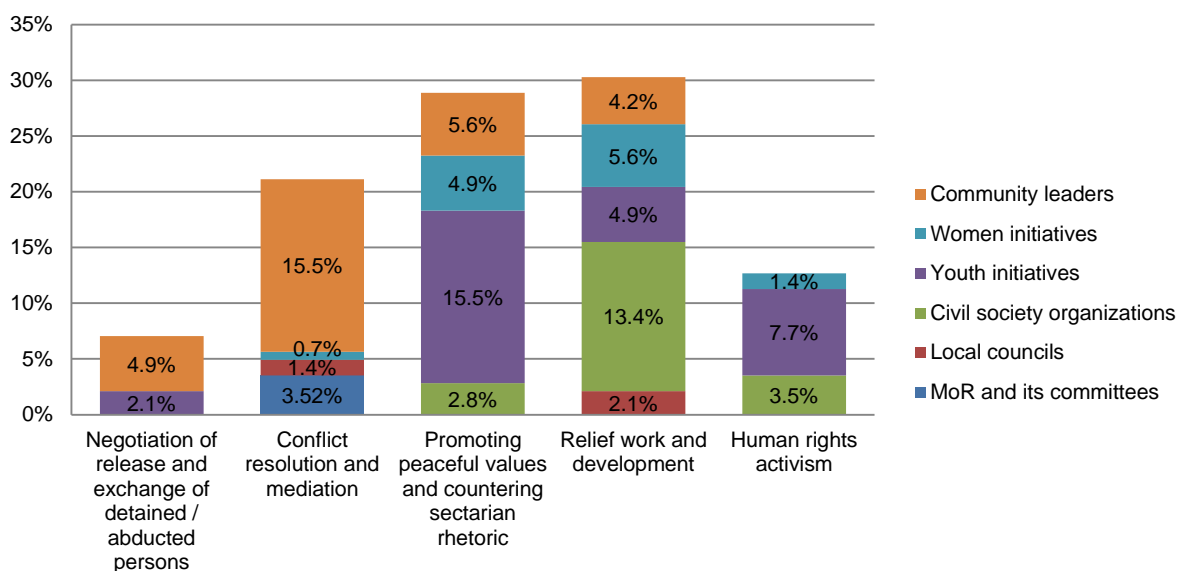
One respondent in Damascus mentioned that “we have been working for more than a year exclusively on the issue of abductees and detainees – both by the government and opposition, and we have had some successes and some failures.” In one instance in Idleb, a rumor spread that armed factions in the area were planning to kill a group of detainees. A contingent of female teachers worked to convince a wider group of women, including the detainees’ mothers, to go to the

headquarters of the battalion leader. The encounter ended with the faction leader telling them that he would speak with the military council. A month later, the detainees were released as part of an exchange deal. In Daraa, a respondent was involved in an exchange of detainees between the government and an opposition battalion. The negotiations lasted for three weeks and nearly failed until a few elders ultimately facilitated the deal. The negotiations ended with the release of ten detainees from Daraa and three from Damascus.

Sometimes such negotiations do not lead to the expected result, however. In one of the southern cities for instance, a group of youth tried to get a kidnapped man back to his family. The kidnappers were asking for a release of government detainees in return, but the government refused. Several times, they were close to an agreement, but it always failed at the last moment. As the respondent said, “the last time was three weeks ago when we could convince the kidnappers to reduce the number of those they required released from fifteen to ten people.” At the time of the interview, they were still in negotiations.

These examples show that many respondents are involved in negotiating the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons. These activities are an important contribution as they save lives and bear the potential to build confidence and contribute to a normalization of the situation. However, they also indicate how much of peacebuilding activity is directed to immediate conflict de-escalation and it remains to be seen whether and how this form of engagement can sustainably be pursued.

**Figure 7: Main activities and actors**



## 6.2 Conflict resolution and mediation

Local actors interviewed also engage directly in the resolution and mediation of a variety of localized conflicts. The actors mostly involved in this type of activities are community leaders, women initiatives, local council representatives, and affiliates of the Ministry of Reconciliation (see figure 7). They mostly aim at mediating and resolving conflicts either between individuals at the community level or between armed factions.

Mediation and resolution of conflicts between individuals are of particular importance in the absence of effectively functioning legal institutions. As one respondent in Damascus mentioned, “since the disappearance of legal institutions in the city, myself with a group of honorable brothers, who are familiar with the matters of religion, took on the responsibility to protect people’s interests and to resolve disputes between them.” Indeed, a few actors have formed local initiatives through which religious figures and notables try to resolve local disputes that arise. For example, in Damascus there was one instance when rumors spread about hundreds of armed people in one area preparing to attack a neighboring area. As one respondent recounted, “I remember people going out to the streets carrying weapons, knives, swords, and sticks.” A group of individuals then started calling all their friends and families from both areas and asked them to meet. They waited for the religious leaders from both sides to come who could ease the tensions. As they concluded, “we have succeeded over the past three years to maintain good relations between the two areas, and if it was not for us and some wise people, the two areas would have witnessed a fierce war.”

Other respondents mediate directly between armed factions to ease tensions. Three examples serve as illustration. In Daraa, one respondent directly mediated a truce between armed actors. He said that the first step was that both conflicting parties initiated a frontline truce. They exchanged messages through their fighters and then found representatives who were willing to negotiate. However, the process stalled when the government put conditions that were rejected by the armed battalions. After some time, the mediator managed to help the parties reach conditions that could be approved by the armed battalions, but certain factions remained unconvinced. The religious leaders and elders of the area then helped to persuade all parties while there was also pressure from the population due to the dire humanitarian situation. As the respondent recalled, “the discussion went on between the opposition and the regime for two months. We, the mediators, were subjected to abduction and shooting during those two months, but there was a true will to negotiate a truce and the people helped us a lot by pressuring the armed people to accept the matter.”

Similarly, a religious figure in Deir elZor said that about two years ago, he entered into negotiations with the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian security forces. The negotiations lasted for months. They stalled several times, but they kept “a vision of how things would have to progress.” They succeeded in the end to stop the fighting and strike a truce, but it did not last for more than three months “before the government entered into the area from all available axes, after there had been airstrikes and artillery attacks that destroyed half the neighborhoods.”

Another group of individuals engaged in mediation between two fighting brigades. In cooperation with a Sheikh who is a legitimate judge in the area and has a strong word in front of armed brigades, they gathered information to know more about the circumstances of the fighting. Then, they communicated with the battalion commanders of the brigades. They managed to calm down the situation and the parties agreed to meet. Despite some backlash due to a lack of trust, they achieved to have “everyone sit with each other to resolve the dispute.” However, the agreement did not last and clashes resumed after four months.

The above examples also clearly show the fragility of such initiatives, which sometimes led respondents to express a certain sense of powerlessness. Even if they, with the best of all intentions, manage to help mediate a local agreement, they are often not kept for a long time. One respondent said, “most of [our mediation attempts] did not last because of the international and regional developments that happen.” Other respondents saw the failure in the fact that the conflict parties did not genuinely engage in these efforts. They pointed to the lack of sustainable truces and

said local negotiations were mostly temporary deals between military factions rather than systematic agreements for reconciliation or peace. As one respondent mentioned, “when two parties reconcile, it is related to each party’s circumstances and calculations concerning the battle between them. In the end, it is related to postponing the conflict, nothing more. And all the truces that took place [...] were established based on coercion and not out of peacemaking intentions.” Respondents saw this reality as at least a partial explanation for why truce agreements did not develop into more long-term processes of peacebuilding.

Several respondents mentioned having attempted a truce with ISIS elements, but “all attempts failed and relations with them remain hostile with constant armed clashes.” One respondent spoke about an effort to reach an agreement with ISIS to allow food and medical aid into the neighborhood or at least to allow civilians to leave and re-enter the blockaded areas, but “they refused to even let the students go out to their universities.” Nevertheless, other reports show that some Syrians have been successful in negotiating certain agreements with ISIS in the north and around Damascus.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that many mediated agreements did not hold, many respondents still saw value in temporary truces to try to ease at least the humanitarian effects of the conflict for a moment.

### 6.3 Promotion of peaceful values and countering of sectarian rhetoric

One activity that many actors, and especially community leaders, women and youth initiatives, and civil society organizations, engage in is the conscious promotion of peaceful values and the countering of sectarian rhetoric (see figure 7). People referred to these sorts of activities as “spreading love” or “building bridges,” which was often associated with the importance of having one unified Syria and going back to what was referred to as “original Syrian values.” As one respondent stated, “I am working on building bridges of friendliness and cooperation between all the parties.” Different strategies are used to spread peaceful values and counter sectarian rhetoric.

First, some interviewees convene workshops, seminars, and discussion forums on the value of dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution, and violence prevention. Some hold workshops about religious tolerance, diversity, and the necessity of coexistence. Others organize training courses on topics such as transitional justice, conflict resolution, crisis management, constitutionalism, civic work, voting and elections, as well as other human rights issues. One initiative in Aleppo focuses on resolving the roots of the disputes in their neighborhoods through bi-monthly meetings with youth actors. They also organize youth circles, bringing people together to spread ideas of tolerance and coexistence. Other interviewees mentioned “seminars and meetings carried out by the leaders of the local councils and by activists.” One respondent said, “we always try to change our behavior and find ways to help in solving problems by conducting workshops and lectures in the mosques or our homes about justice, tolerance, and the importance of the rule of law in solving problems.” A few also create networks and platforms to bring a diversity of people together to promote pluralism and coexistence. People frequently draw on family and friends networks to conduct these activities.

Second, some of the respondents promote peaceful values through creative arts, including theater, dancing, and singing. As a member of an arts initiative in Damascus said, “our main goal is to spread a culture of dialogue and the necessity of returning peace to Syria. We [do this with] people

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance Turkmani R.; Kaldor M.; Elhamwi W.; Ayo J.; Hariri N. (2014) *Hungry for Peace: positives and pitfalls of local truces and ceasefires in Syria*, Security in Transition, LSE, Madani, available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/pdfs/Home-Grown-Peace-in-Syria-report-final.pdf>.



who refuse to take a side in the conflict.” Others perform musical plays and compose rap songs, calling on people to renounce sectarianism.

A third way is to engage people in joint community building activities that encourage coexistence. Rooftop agriculture projects, for instance, allow people to come together to grow their own food, which eases tensions between them. One respondent also explained how they regularly bring people together to cook and eat. Other activities include organizing a local market for people from different cities and towns with “each person bringing a traditional local food product from their area.” Thereby, people from different communities and regions controlled by various armed groups meet and spread messages of peace reminding them of their common humanity. As one person recounted, “it contributes to reducing intolerance between conflicting parties by introducing them to each other’s customs and by cooperating.”

A fourth avenue identified is the use of media to counter sectarian rhetoric and promote dialogue. As documented by Citizens for Syria, “social media activism is the most popular kind of activism during the last five years, the mapping team has counted over 3000 Facebook pages, blogs and media groups being managed by activists, civil and local groups.”<sup>16</sup> A group of youth created a radio platform to spread peaceful values. They said that “with all the electricity outages in most of Deir elZor, the radio is one of the most important media capable of reaching every home.” They operate a community radio “to spread a culture of love and tolerance and to help to develop civil society, which contributes to the restoration of civilian peace within Syrian society.” As they said, “we do not solve conflicts directly. I mean we do not go down to the street, but we contribute to the preservation of civilian peace by spreading the ideas of coexistence and love to our audience.”<sup>17</sup> Others created anonymous publications, posters, and online campaigns calling for a peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Some media projects focus on countering other media that are inciting hatred. As one interviewee in Damascus said, “I convinced some cells of the need to stop their inciting media work [...] after long sessions of dialogue and debate.” As another respondent mentioned, “after the changes that occurred and the rise of extreme ideological speech [...], we started to dedicate a part of our publications to encourage people not to respond to sectarian speech.” They published articles that called on people to unite and go back to their shared Syrian identity as well as to ask for freedom, justice, and equality.

Education is the fifth strategic activity being used to spread peaceful values and counter sectarian rhetoric. Some of the actors interviewed have reopened schools and cooperate with teachers in order to “keep the children away from discourse promoting violence.” As one respondent said, “we could prevent many young people from joining the armed factions [...]. You may say that this is irrelevant to civilian peace and my answer will be that four years ago, the 16 year old was 12.” Education is not only seen as beneficial in itself, but also in order to bring people together. In Sweida, for instance, a respondent opened a free education center for a year and a half where they gathered children that had been displaced. As he said, while the students from different places initially avoided each other, “after a month they started to make friends with other students from Aleppo, Daraa, Sweida, and Damascus. [...] There were two students sitting next to each other

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<sup>16</sup> Citizens of Syria (2015) *Mapping the Syrian Civil Society Actors – Phase One*. Berlin, available at: <https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/CfS-mapping-phase1-EN.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> At the time of the interview they had to stop broadcasting because a young man and woman were detained and because of general security conditions.



chatting and sharing their experiences without knowing that one's father was in the Free Syrian Army and the other one's was a government security officer.”<sup>18</sup>

Women are playing a particularly significant role in education. As one woman stated, “after the armed conflict escalated, we, a group of women, started taking care of children so that they could continue their education, especially given the rise of sectarian incitement [...]. By preserving the education of these children, we wanted to preserve their minds too.” Some also provide vocational trainings, for instance in sewing, make-up, handmade crafts, health, and nursing. As one respondent said, as the environment became increasingly militarized, “to keep our children away from the language of war, we taught girls sewing, folklore singing, and art designs.” Another respondent in Daraa mentioned that “when we protect children through education from the ideas that some religiously strict groups spread in our town, we believe that we are protecting the future of Syria.”

Lastly, many actors are promoting peaceful values by setting examples through their own behavior in not differentiating between the political orientations of the people they work with. As a female leader in Sweida said, “I deal with any person regardless of their political orientations. [...] When we preserve the values of peace that we were raised on and we spread it between young men and women, we contribute to stability and easing tensions in Syria.” As a teacher also recounted, “I try as much as I can to spread the ideas of love, coexistence, and acceptance of everyone.” A doctor from Daraa mentioned, “since the beginning of the events I did not hesitate to help anyone, which was my entry point to demonstrate my respect for people and for them to accept me as a mediator.”

#### 6.4 [Relief work and development](#)

Respondents, mostly community leaders, women and youth initiatives, civil society organizations, and local councils are also engaged in relief work and development (see figure 7). Many local actors might also have embraced these activities as it “has been the more central focus of international donors”<sup>19</sup> or due to the lower level of political sensitivity that such activities entail.

Several respondents are providing food, water, and clothes to vulnerable families, especially those living under blockade conditions. Others provide medical relief where possible. A few interviewees have opened psychosocial support centres and also provide such support for children. In all the areas of study, there were examples of people trying to deliver food and medical items to the blockaded areas in the attempt of “keeping the civilians neutral in the fighting especially children, women, and the elders.” As one respondent said, “we took part in assisting relief workers when international food assistance convoys entered the city. All young people in our initiatives are active with relief institutions.” Many also cooperate with armed factions to provide services to the people.

Respondents clearly linked these activities to peacebuilding. As a respondent in Damascus explained, “our concern is that we work on supporting people in securing their basic needs so that their lives can continue and we think that this is a crucial part of the establishment of civilian peace because a lot of youth and parents are carrying arms as a means to secure food for their children.” Indeed, several respondents linked the promotion of peaceful values with relief work. As one interviewee stated, “before we distribute any food carton we hold workshops to promote coexistence and cooperation to maintain the social fabric.” Similarly, in Sweida, a respondent engages in relief

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<sup>18</sup> They had to stop since the government asked for a working permit, which they did not have.

<sup>19</sup> Khalaf, R. (2015) Governance without Government in Syria. Civil Society and State Building during Conflict. *Syria Studies* Vol 7(3), p.54.

work for the displaced population from neighboring areas while also promoting peaceful values. As he said, “we want to say that the Syrian people are one. Our work [...] is trying to preserve the ways we used to live together before without paying attention to religion or ethnicity.”

Others see relief and development activities as providing entry points for peacebuilding. As a member of a mediation committee said, “I believe that [...] just the fact that a group of individuals can push those in conflict to make agreements even if it is related to food, is something which serves Syria now and in the future. Through this door, we have managed to achieve other agreements concerning the exchange of detainees as well as truces.” This shows that finding agreements on the delivery of humanitarian aid can sometimes open the door for other agreements.

Another respondent cast supporting basic survival as a peacebuilding act. As stated, “our work concerns bringing in aid to blockaded people [...]. Through this work, we preserve the people who are the essence of any peace in Syria. Imagine peace without people; what is the point? We are trying to minimize the killing and the destruction as much as possible.”

As such, relief and development work, even if often times viewed as distinct from peacebuilding, has the potential to further peace in Syria. The engagement of actors that seek to alleviate the suffering of civilians helps them survive and often contributes to easing tensions.<sup>20</sup>

## 6.5 [Human rights activism](#)

Respondents were also active in human rights work, particularly women and youth initiatives, as well as civil society organizations (see figure 7). Legal aid, advocacy, women’s rights, media campaigns, and human rights monitoring and training were all mentioned as main types of human rights activities. Most of the human rights defenders interviewed were lawyers by profession, but others were students, artists, and journalists. In Idleb, a group of people has been working on establishing a human rights center to educate people about their rights and duties, in addition to helping people resolve their problems with the civil management of the city.

Another example of human rights monitoring and training is an organization in Aleppo that monitors legal and judicial authorities and documents human rights violations committed by both armed opposition factions and the government. The work of this organization has evolved to include monitoring new authority figures in Aleppo as “implementing the rule of law and ensuring access to justice for all persons” are important priorities. It also convenes workshops and trainings to promote the practical application of human rights and international norms.

A women’s group in Damascus and a youth initiative in Sweida are working on the topic of detainees and advocating for ending arbitrary detentions and providing access to fair trials. One respondent is focusing on archiving human rights violations for justice in the future while a few respondents work primarily on publishing ongoing violations. However, at least one respondent stated his contempt of national and international media and the lack of interest for human rights violations.

For human rights defenders, it has been very difficult to work on highlighting human rights violations on the ground in Syria due to security concerns from the government and other actors. Human rights defenders face arrest, threats, disappearances, detentions, and torture from government authorities.

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<sup>20</sup> Armed actors reportedly also use relief work to gain legitimacy within the population. Relief activities are therefore not necessarily contributing to peacebuilding in all cases.

Another difficulty is that as the conflict has progressed, they now face additional threats from different armed groups and extremists. In Deir ElZor, one activist focusing on documenting violations committed by ISIS stated that he had great personal security fears due to the extremely difficult working conditions under ISIS. As a result, numerous human rights defenders have fled the country or are working under extreme caution. As one respondent mentioned, his work is hampered by the threat of “arrest, kidnapping, or even murder.”

## **7 Local and international partners**

The most important partners of the local peacebuilding actors interviewed were their family or community networks. Interviewees said that they mostly cooperate with people in their immediate surroundings. A few also mentioned cooperation with initiatives in other areas of the country. Many actors are informally notifying each other about their work. In general, it appears that cooperation is fluid and actions are rarely related to a broader peace plan, but rather focused within immediate neighborhoods and communities. This is often also due to blockade conditions, the plethora of checkpoints in all parts of the country, the lack of trust among different groups, as well as the proliferation of weapons and militarization.

In the relief and development sector as well as in the domain of human rights activism, cooperation tends to be slightly more formalized than in the initiatives to negotiate the release and exchange of detained and abducted persons, to resolve conflicts and mediate, and to promote peaceful values and counter sectarianism. This is probably also linked to the fact that civil society organizations (NGOs and CBOs) are more present in the two former sectors and tend to be better linked amongst each other.

To address basic human needs, some respondents also work with opposition and government institutions, such as local councils and the Ministry of Reconciliation respectively. However, some respondents voiced suspicion with regard to partnerships with these more formal bodies. As one respondent said, “each one of them has a point of view when it comes to civilian peace, and they may betray you any minute.” A few respondents also cooperate with armed actors. As one community leader in Daraa mentioned, “there is cooperation, especially with the armed brigades commanders because they are the force on the ground.” This interaction mostly concerns negotiating the space to conduct peacebuilding activities.

Respondents’ international partners were mainly relief and humanitarian agencies at the time of writing. International NGOs have also supported human rights activism since the beginning of the uprisings. At the same time, however, there are deep suspicions about the intentions of outside actors. Foreign governments are often conflated with non-governmental actors or international organizations that are trying to play a peacebuilding role. As one interviewee said, “regional countries are responsible for ruining Syria, and those who ruin do not help rebuild.” All outside actors are then clumped together in the imprecise term of “the international community.” The attitude is illustrated in the following quote: “regional and international partners are [...] behind Syria’s destruction – from international agencies to neighboring countries.” There is great disillusionment about the role played by outside actors. Peacebuilding initiatives functioning at the international level are often seen as fig leaves without concrete political results with the exception of an increase in humanitarian aid in some regions. As one respondent mentioned, “Geneva I, II, Moscow, and

Riyadh – they are anesthetic initiatives that did not give the Syrian people anything except for entering food aid.”

This does not mean that the interviewees are not willing to cooperate with international actors and other initiatives. To the contrary, almost all respondents underlined that they were ready to work with “any fair initiatives to end the war.” However, as documented by Khalaf, local actors sometimes perceive that “donors insist on working in the ways they know best, regardless if they end up spending more at a slower pace and with less impact.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, respondents underlined the bottom-up approach by saying “when you work on the local level and build a proper base, and when this base trusts you, they could push you to work on a national or regional level.” The force for an improvement of the situation is seen as lying with the Syrians themselves. As one respondent put it, “we are all Syrians, we have a history of coexistence, love, and respect. I believe it is time we woke up and realized that we have to dialogue.”

In this regard, interviewees also expressed a wish for a national project bringing people together to dialogue. However, many stressed that such a project needs to be anchored inside Syria and not be imposed by outside actors. This is linked to the challenges, priorities, and needs of local peace actors in the Syrian context, which will be addressed in the next section.

## 8 Challenges, priorities, and needs

Main challenges
➤ Militarization and violence
➤ Ideological polarization
➤ Physical immobility
➤ Dire humanitarian conditions
➤ Economic hardship

Interviewees were asked to name the main challenges facing their work. They noted physical and environmental pressures from the protracted violent conflict. Active military hostilities and the threat of detention and killing, including armed attacks, bombings, and other forms of violence perpetrated by militarized groups, government forces, and ISIS present obvious physical

challenges to the ability of peacebuilders to act and build momentum. More broadly, the militarized environment, proliferation of weapons, and ideological divisions were repeatedly noted as additional obstacles hampering the ability of people to publicly promote dialogue, inclusivity, and an end of conflict.

Another challenge mentioned is the deep ideological polarization and lack of trust dividing communities and preventing meaningful dialogue opportunities. As one respondent described, “some people accuse me of being an intelligence guy while others accuse me of being undercover opposition. This is because of my strong relations with government institutions and with some of the armed brigade leaders.” Other respondents spoke of similar pressures to align to one group or ideology, making it difficult to promote coexistence or affect a cross-section of the population.

The physical immobility facing many peace activists and leaders due to security threats, military blockades, and checkpoints compounded the difficulties in communicating with others across physical and ideological boundaries – even virtual contact is constrained due to constant electricity, internet, and phone outages. Many respondents complained about the lack of ability to reach out even to neighboring districts.

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<sup>21</sup> Khalaf, R. (2015) Governance without Government in Syria. Civil Society and State Building during Conflict. *Syria Studies* Vol 7(3), p.53.

An additional challenge is to prioritize peacebuilding work in the context of such a severe humanitarian crisis facing the country. Both those living in areas that are or were under blockade as well as respondents living in areas that are more open, reported that the humanitarian situation was a main challenge. The humanitarian situation, made worse by economic decline, lack of availability of goods, services, and commodities, and the loss of skilled persons, has increased the challenge to pursue peacebuilding work beyond immediate conflict de-escalation.

#### Main priorities

- Ending violence and foreign military interventions
- National dialogue

The two peacebuilding priorities that were commonly mentioned by nearly all respondents irrespective of their location, affiliation, or main activities were: i) ending

the violence and foreign military interventions; and ii) starting a national dialogue.

With regard to the first, respondents conveyed that their immediate priority was ending active hostilities as both a humanitarian need and a necessary condition for peacebuilding progress. The broad sentiment was exhaustion with continued fighting and profound frustration over the lack of control Syrian civilians have in stopping the fighting due to foreign military intervention and the lack of political will to enter into a peace process. Many respondents spoke of the need for personal security from government or armed groups. Combatting ISIS was a high priority mentioned by respondents in Deir elZor, as well as in Salamiyeh, while stopping government and foreign bombings was a high priority mentioned mostly in the north. It is clear that any effort to support local peace actors should begin with ending active hostilities and finding strategies to protect these actors from the various challenges cited above.

With regard to the second priority, across social indicators, geographical areas, and affiliations, respondents consistently named national dialogue as a leading priority. The emphasis on national dialogue, however formulated, is likely linked to the often cited breakdown in social relations, ideological divisions, and loss of institutional order, as well as desires to see political change and realize a state of peace as understood by local actors. The research indicated that national dialogue is a near consensus Syrian position. Still, different articulations were registered as to what a national dialogue means, when it should happen, and what its immediate objectives should be.

Some called for dialogue excluding the government, “after its fall,” or following an accountability process. Others called for the inclusion of armed people only if “they believe in the Syrian state.” Respondents also spoke of the need for a national dialogue to rebuild state institutions and recreate the social contract between people and the government or as part of a constitution-making process. Indeed, many saw the establishment of a civilian authority as a top priority. Respondents spoke of the need to separate governance institutions from military influence.

Most, however, emphasized national dialogue as a mechanism to address the severe social and political polarization. While most prioritized a “national” or “Syrian” dialogue, some called for dialogue between “quarrelling regions” or to bridge geographical areas. Others prioritized local level reconciliation to unify armed people or tribal groupings. At a broader level, many respondents spoke of a desire to create a moral high ground for peace as a reference for civility and the promotion of a common vision.

#### Main needs

- Financial and logistical resources
- Capacity-building
- Connecting with other initiatives
- Support by institutions
- Media resources

When asked about their main needs, five points were given particular attention. First, nearly every respondent spoke of a lack of financial and logistical resources.<sup>22</sup> Given the extreme economic situation inside the country and the fact that externally-based organizations are more visible and easier to fund, it is understandable that a lack

of financing is a current challenge. Many people have been working on a volunteer basis for an extended period, without an income or means to cover basic needs. While most mentioned it as a weakness, a few spoke rather of the need to scale activities to current resources. Others rejected the idea of external funding altogether, especially when it is predicated on foreign agendas.

Second, some actors mentioned the need for capacity-building, mainly in organizational and project management that “empower activists in civilian peacebuilding tools.”<sup>23</sup> This has gained in importance since many trained individuals have left Syria. As one respondent in Deir elZor stated, “we have an activity with internally displaced persons involving education, psychological, and social support, but because of the lack of trained people our activity in this matter is limited.” Respondents pointed out that many of the actors previously involved in local peacebuilding have gone abroad, making it harder to protect their space, as the critical mass in favor of peace is suppressed, harmed, or has left.

Third, several respondents mentioned the need to be better connected to people involved in similar activities in order to exchange and learn from each other. Someone mentioned the usefulness of a public conference where people from different backgrounds can meet and others suggested “awareness centers” through which people can be informed about what is happening in other areas.

Fourth, respondents also mentioned the need to have institutions through which they can have a sustainable influence on peace. Interviewees referred to the need for state institutions that are based on the rule of law and capable of carrying forward their functions so that peacebuilders do not have to focus their energy on delivering basic services. Some also referred to the need to institutionalize their own work to have a more long-term impact.

Fifth, several respondents, mainly those promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric and working in human rights activism, referred to the media as a key tool to help or hinder their work. Several referred to the media’s negative role in inciting conflicts, while others related to the media’s potential in advancing their work. This hints at the need for concrete support to media projects.

## 9 Conclusion

This report provided insights into local conflict dynamics as well as peacebuilding work ongoing inside Syria. It underscores how crucial local peacebuilding actors are to mobilize support for any national peace process and contribute to the local de-escalation of violence. It is particularly important for international and Syrian national decision-makers to appreciate the roles and impacts

<sup>22</sup> It is not clear whether this was influenced by the fact that the study was internationally sponsored or not.

<sup>23</sup> See also Khalaf, R.; Ramadan, O.; Stolleis, F. (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria*. Istanbul / Beirut: Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p.49.



of local actors, as well as their challenges, priorities, and needs in order to formulate feasible and secure support and inclusion strategies.

International support in particular should be offered within the broader objective of ending hostilities and foreign military interventions and realizing a peaceful resolution of the conflict through a national dialogue. The presence of local initiatives and activities contributing to peacebuilding in Syria has been clearly explained in this report and others. Nonetheless, this study has also shown that local initiatives currently constitute rather small islands of temporary stability and are extremely vulnerable and insufficiently connected to each other and to internal as well as external support networks.

The main priorities for international actors wanting to enable local peace efforts should be to provide financial and logistical support, capacity-building in organizational and project management, enable better connections amongst local actors, help them – where appropriate – to cooperate with formal institutions, and design projects that promote the media's constructive role in conflict resolution, all with sensitivity to contextual challenges and protection requirements.

Most crucial, however, is that international decision-makers look beyond formalized civil society organizations and build stronger listening and action networks with local actors that go beyond current prioritized engagements with political and military elites. The existence of these local peace actors, their respective work, and their expectations should be accounted for in any internationally-driven peace process. More analysis may be needed in order to understand when and how to link the top and bottom processes and actors. This might help to better inform the context in which local peacebuilding work can happen more sustainably and where the small islands of temporary stability can develop into larger zones of peace.

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## 11 Annexes

### Questionnaire

*The exact sequence and wording were adapted from one interview to the other.*

#### Perceptions of conflict resolution and peacebuilding

- Q1. What are/were the direct reasons for conflict in your area? At the local, national, regional level? How have they evolved?
- Q2. How did it affect the relations in your community / neighborhood?
- Q3. What does the term civilian peace or peace mean to you?

#### Peacebuilding activities

- Q4. Does your work / organization / initiative contribute to solving problems or resolving conflicts? If yes, how?
- Q5. Do you see your activities contributing to peacebuilding in Syria in the future? If yes, how?
- Q6. Is there a role for women, youth, and religious leaders? What is it?
- Q7. How about an example of successful efforts in peacebuilding, and an example of a bad experience where the efforts failed?
- Q8. Are there any other comments or additions on the nature of the activities carried out?

#### Peacebuilding priorities

- Q9. What are the immediate priorities for conflict resolution in your region? At the local, national, regional level?
- Q10. How did you come to consider them priorities? How have these priorities evolved?
- Q11. If the situation allows it, what are the different topics that you may want to work on?
- Q12. What do you need so that this happens?

#### Entry points for peacebuilding

- Q13. What are the opportunities for your work in peacebuilding? What are the entry points available to you? How can we create an entry point to achieve civilian peace?
- Q14. What are the activities or tools you see as influential in the process of civilian peacebuilding and conflict resolution?
- Q15. What are the biggest challenges facing you in your work / your activity / your initiative?
- Q16. What are aspects that can make your work more effective?

#### Networks

- Q17. Do you have partners / institutions / persons working with you in your activities to build civilian peace? If there are, please share briefly.
- Q18. What are the types of networks and relationships you do / did draw on in your work?
- Q19. Is there cooperation to achieve peace in your area / neighborhood?
- Q20. How can your work be better linked in the framework of a national, regional, or international process?

