

# Civil Society and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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## Civil Society and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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**This is an excerpt from *Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States*, edited by Max O. Stephenson Jr. & Yannis A. Stivachtis. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.**

This chapter evaluates the rise of civil society in the context of the 2011 Syrian civil conflict and the resulting refugee crisis. The evolving nature of the conflict, from a grass-roots protest against the Assad regime to a full-scale revolution involving the entire country, followed by the involvement of foreign actors, both state (Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US) and non-state (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/ISIL, Hezbollah), left the country in ruins, without basic services and with large numbers of Syrians either displaced internally, or fleeing the country. As of this writing, there are 6.7 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers hosted by 128 countries, and approximately 6.8 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria. The total of 13.5 million Syrians represented in these two groups comprises more than half of the country's pre-war population (UNHCR 2021). Syrian civil society 'barely existed' prior to the 2011 revolution (Crawford, 1). Faith-based groups catered to the needs of specific ethnic groups. The Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOS) were patronized by the Syrian government and catered only to the needs of those who supported the government's policies (Alhousseiny and Atar, 101). The popular revolution put in motion scores of people working either to make the plight of Syrians visible to their own government and to the outside world, or to hold the government accountable for its actions against its own population, or to help those directly affected by the conflict such as refugees and internally displaced populations. The work of domestic groups engaged in such activism resembles what Western researchers call 'civil society'. Their work, and the work of International Non- Governmental Organizations (INGOs) is described and recognized in this chapter.

The chapter proceeds with a brief introduction into conceptual frameworks of analyzing civil society to put the activity of Syrian groups in perspective. It continues with two sections evaluating two types of civil group activities: advocacy, and humanitarian relief. A conclusion summarizes aspects of the activities of these groups that warrant their description as a rising civil society in Syria.

### **Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations: Conceptual Frameworks of Analysis**

Western scholars employ a variety of concepts to designate organizations or institutions that form 'civil society.' Alexis de Tocqueville is considered the original political thinker to discuss 'voluntary associations' in America, which he considered a landmark of a democratic society (de Tocqueville 2000). Anthropologist Ernest Gellner defined civil society as the collection of institutions and associations that are separate from the government and which free people join at will. This collection of institutions and associations is a must-have ingredient if a society is to be free, democratic, and keep its government accountable (Gellner 1996). In 1995, Robert Putnam popularized the concept of 'social capital,' defined as 'the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995, 67). While Putnam, an influential Harvard professor, based his study primarily on Italian and American data and examples, he identified three variables that remain important for any discussion of civil society: political and civic engagement, informal social ties, and tolerance and trust. A society in which citizens can associate freely, in 'horizontal bonds of fellowship' whether via membership in a club, or a neighborhood group, produces a strong society, in which governments, constituted on 'vertical bonds of authority,' can be held accountable (Putnam et al. 1993, 175-6).

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Arabic scholars caution that 'civil society' does not translate directly into the Arabic language, at least not in a 'Western' sense (Al-Om 2011). Concepts such as 'civil community,' 'brotherhood,' or 'kinship' have been proposed by various Arab scholars to denote a sphere of human activity that is separate from the state, but which does not exclude religion. An influential Arab thinker who defined civil society as a mix of group feeling, tribal ties, and a brotherhood based on kinship and religion was Ibn Khaldūn. His concept of *aṣabīya* as a powerful social cohesion force remains influential in Islamic studies (Esteban 2004, 27–37).

The analytical concepts described above indicate one main similarity between the two conceptual frameworks: that civil society happens outside government control. One main difference between Arabic and Western concepts of civil society is the inclusion of religion and tribal ties as vehicles for the creation and facilitation of what Putnam calls 'horizontal bonds of fellowship,' de Tocqueville calls 'voluntary associations,' and Gellner calls 'associations that free people join at will'. A second important difference appears to be the exclusion from the Arabic concept of 'government accountability' as a function to be performed by freely formed associations of people.

In the Syrian case, the terminology used to designate civil society groups is important particularly considering the position of the Syrian authorities regarding this sector of human activity. Art. 4.a of the Law of Emergency, imposed in 1963 prohibited freedom of assembly and movement, and Art. 4.b made provisions to 'monitor all types of letters, phone calls, newspapers, bulletins, books, drawings, publications, broadcasts, and all forms of written expression, propaganda, and advertisements prior to publication' (Syrian Human Rights Committee 2003), a clear mark of government censorship. As a result of the 2011 mass protests across Syria demanding reform, the Assad administration issued Legislative Decree no. 54, which permitted peaceful demonstrations and promised that 'duly licensed civil society organizations have the right to organize demonstrations in accordance with the principles of the (Syrian) Constitution' (Parliament of the Syrian Government 2011, Art. 3). A day after the decree was issued, fresh peaceful protests in the streets calling for the fall of the Assad regime were met with live ammunition by security forces.

The notion that civil society organizations should not operate outside a formal framework approved and monitored by the Syrian government – consequently cannot hold the government accountable in a Western sense – is also supported by the views of its president. In 2001, President Assad explained that civil society and non-governmental organizations are not and should not be independent of the work of the authorities. On the contrary, he viewed them as tools of the authorities in meeting certain governmental goals: 'T] hese institutions are not an alternative to government institutions as some suggest, and they should not precede them in the process of construction,' Assad stated. 'On the contrary, civil institutions are based on government institutions and support them and are not a replacement for them' (Al- Assad 2001). This view contrasts directly with Gellner's conceptual framework of civil society as a network of institutions and associations separate from the government, working to keep the government accountable, and Putnam's horizontal bonds of fellowship created outside a government frame of control. It also contrasts with both Western and Arabic concepts that civil society constitutes a sphere of human activity separate from the government.

It is therefore fitting to ask whether civil society groups could function at all in Syria, in conditions of martial law (imposed in 1963), severe censorship (under the Law of Emergency, 1963), and a civil war (since 2011). To do that, this author proposes to evaluate this question by drawing on both Western and Arabic concepts of civil society to identify which, if any, conceptual elements of civil society may apply to Syria in the context of the 2011 civil conflict and the resulting refugee crisis.

A Western framework of analysis would look for variables such as the organizational capacity of a civil society group or formal non-governmental organization (NGO), and its operational experience on the ground (Hurd 2017; Tavares 2010). While it would be useful to the researcher to know which groups and organizations have a strong operational capacity, illustrated in their charter, administrative staff, leadership and plan of work; and demonstrated operational capacity with results of the ground, the situation in Syria is that of a society in prolonged crisis, with decades of censorship. As such, the ability of groups of people to organize themselves and perform functions typically associated with the concept of civil society had to be modest, by Western standards.

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Some authors describe early forms of civil society in Syria (pre-1963) as faith-based groups with charitable missions towards the poor, elderly, or the sick, a description consistent with the Arabic concept that civil society does not exclude religion. Between 1963 when the state of emergency was instituted and 2000, when Bashar al-Assad became president, the number of these groups declined from 596 to 513; and during the Damascus Spring (described in the next section), they were estimated to grow to 1,400 (Alhousseiny and Atar, 12). The question of whether civil society groups could function in Syria under such conditions is therefore a legitimate topic of research.

The next two sections offer an evaluation of two types of activities observed and documented by local groups and INGOs, that groups of Syrians performed in the context of the 2011 civil war: advocacy (with its associated functions of documentation, education and training), and humanitarian relief. This analysis seeks to identify whether these two types of activities were organized by voluntary groups of citizens, freely assembling whether to foster a community, a 'brotherhood,' or a (faith) community need, independent of a government mandate, and creating an *aṣabiya*, a powerful social cohesion force. These variables correspond broadly with the conceptual frameworks identified by de Tocqueville, Gellner, and Khaldūn. In addition, it sought to identify whether elements of Putnam's social capital framework are present, in how horizontal bonds of fellowship emerged, in order to hold the government accountable for its actions.

One caveat is in order: Western and Arabic practitioners and scholars use the concept of 'civil society' or 'civil society organizations' (CSOs), understood as the organizations that have close ties to the Syrian society, provide public goods that the government cannot or does not provide, and operate mainly or exclusively in Syria (Crawford, 3; Al-Om 2011). This chapter uses the terms CSOs, local groups, civic groups, NGOs, and INGOs interchangeably. This author also recognizes that listing, describing, and recognizing the work of every single CSO group in Syria is not feasible given space constraints and availability of reliable data. The activities and patterns described in the following two sections are representative of the work of many more organizations than can be highlighted in the space of a chapter.

## The Syrian Conflict and the Rise of Civil Society: Advocacy and Government Accountability

Public anger against the Syrian government predated 2011. It can be traced to 1970, when Hafez al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar al- Assad, appointed himself as leader of Syria after a coup d'état that he engineered. To maintain his power, Hafez created a cult of personality around himself and his family, characterized by violent suppression of freedom and civil rights, and an imposition of a state of emergency under the Law of Emergency of 1963. Upon his father's death in 2000 and new to politics, Bashar al-Assad initially permitted freedom of expression and association, in what became known as the Damascus Spring. This short period of approximately one year was characterized by the formation of citizen-and intellectual-led groups, meeting in forums to discuss political reform in the country. This type of civic activity outside a government mandate was relatively new, and consistent with both Western and Arabic concepts of free people assembly outside government structures or mandates.

The result of this collective civic work was the publication of the 'Manifesto of the 99,' a pamphlet outlining political demands such as the abolition of the martial law, an end to the state of emergency, the release of political prisoners and securing the safe return of political exiles (Middle East Intelligence Bulletin 2000). At this point in the Damascus Spring, civil society groups were starting to display a distinct government accountability function.

The initial response of the regime was encouraging, with scores of political prisoners released. By 2001, however, the regime changed course and returned to the repressive policies of Hafez al-Assad, shutting down the citizen-led forums, arresting intellectuals, and reinstating martial law.

The conflict that started in February 2011 in Syria originated in Daraa, a town in the south-west of the country, when a group of 18 school-aged boys wrote graffiti on their school wall calling for the overturn of the Assad regime. The governor of Daraa, an Assad loyalist, launched raids on the homes of all 18 boys demanding that they be handed over. News of the raids and imprisonment of the boys spread, and residents flooded the streets, calling for the return of the boys to their families. In response, the governor of Daraa allegedly said to the boys' parents: 'My advice to you

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is that you forget you ever had these children. Go back home and sleep with your wives and bring other children into the world and if you cannot do that, then bring your wives to us and we will do the job for you' (Ridley, 2014).

Grass-roots demonstrations demanding the return of the boys continued and spread throughout the country. Large, peaceful protests started to be organized every Friday after prayers, underscoring the importance of faith-based civic activities in Syria. They were given names such as the Friday of Dignity, Good Friday, Friday of Steadfastness, Friday of Pride, and many more. The authorities responded with mass beatings, teargas, arrests and imprisonment of the protesters, and eventually resorted to using live ammunition. The 18 boys were eventually released, beaten and bruised, which further fanned public anger. The brutal response of the authorities ignited a mass movement that continues.

One of the constant features of the Syrian revolution has been the authorities' denial that first, it occurred at all, and second, that it was an uprising of Syrians against their government. In March 2011, Assad blamed the unrest in the country on a foreign conspiracy, terrorist and other foreign elements, and vowed to defeat it. In April 2013, he called it a 'fake revolution'. In 2019, he claimed that the revolution was not about the Syrian people's discontent with their government who, for the most part supported his administration, but about a 'third World War' for power and influence being fought on the territory of Syria by Western powers led by the United States against the legitimately elected authorities in Syria (Al-Assad 2013; 2019).

Activists on the ground made it clear on countless occasions that the uprising was against the Assad regime, for human rights and dignity for all Syrians, calling on the authorities to be accountable to 'the people'. 'The things we're asking for are basic human rights. No leader starves his population to death – there are nations that starve other nations – but no leader besieges his own people, and starves them to death, or forcibly expels them,' Mazen Kewara, an activist in a large civil society group coalition called *Save Our Syria* told *Al Jazeera* (Tahhan 2017). Groups such as *Save Our Syria* organized themselves outside government control and assumed functions of advocacy for 'the people,' for Syrians who were forced by oppressive government policies to leave their homes in search of safety. These incipient forms of civil society groups demanded justice and human rights from their government.

The Assad regime's response focused on violently suppressing mass protests, submitting cities or areas engulfed in the uprising to bombardment, curfews, and cutting off means of subsistence and basic services such as trash collection, food supplies, running water, and electricity (HRW June 2011). These government policies led to mass displacements of people. Civic groups stepped in to provide humanitarian relief to refugees and IDPs. I describe their activities below.

In the 10 years of this conflict, additional forces joined a fight that appears to have different meanings for different actors. Neighboring Turkey was concerned about the possible breakup of Syria and the emergence of a Kurdish state on its border. Iran and Russia supported the Assad regime for a variety of reasons, not all related or coordinated. Non-state actors such as ISIL and Hezbollah (both designated 'foreign terrorist organizations' by the US State Department since 2004 and 1997 respectively), plus a host of armed groups and militias supporting or opposing the regime also operated in Syrian territory, with loosely defined interests and sources of funding. The US and the EU initially supported regime change from within, encouraged by the work of domestic groups of citizens making political demands on their government. Both condemned the abuses of the regime against its people, reported by civil groups and INGOs as this section further discusses. Both imposed sanctions against the ruling government and companies that did business with it. US/EU air strikes were launched for a limited time against territory believed to be controlled by non-state actors such as ISIL. As a result, Syrians suffered from repercussions for their uprising from their own government, state and non-state actors, and US/EU forces. Many chose to flee the country in search of safety for their families. Some fled from unsafe to safer areas within Syria becoming IDPs. Some remained in their homes trying to wait out the crisis.

Regime forces used chemical weapons against the Syrian people between 2012 and 2015. The Assad regime claimed that opposition groups performed the attacks and demanded a UN investigation, but only agreed to an inquiry that confirmed the use of the weapons, not by which forces against whom. Subsequent UN resolutions and negotiations led to Syria joining the Chemical Weapons Convention and renouncing its chemical weapons program in

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2013. The existing stockpiles were seemingly disposed of with US-Western-Russian backing and coordination. A 2016 report by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism found that the Syrian government used chemical weapons again in 2014 and 2015 against its own people. It also found that ISIL used such weapons in 2015 in Northern Syria, in attempts to force the population to be sharia-law compliant. Additional chemical weapons attacks in 2017 prompted the US to bomb a Syrian government air base. Similar attacks and subsequent reports laying responsibility on the Syrian regime and ISIL led to a 2021 resolution by the parties of the Chemical Weapons Convention to suspend Syria's rights and privileges under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The disproportionately punitive government response to the popular protests was a miscalculation. The regime counted on people getting hungry, tired, and hurting enough to prompt them to stop protesting. Instead, the opposite occurred. Syrian groups, both local and in diaspora raised awareness of the events inside the country. The day following the abolition of the Law of Emergency in 2011, which prohibited freedom of assembly and movement, a network of approximately 70 groups of media and grassroots activists connected to the revolt across the country began forming Local Coordination Committees (LCC). They advocated for the release of prisoners, the dismantling of the security forces, and their replacement with new security personnel that would apply the laws of the country without abusing their power. LCCs related events on the ground to international media outlets, highlighting abuses of power, including statistics on numbers of prisoners, casualties of war, and numbers of people missing since 1980. LCCs were also responsible for organizing anti-regime demonstrations and disseminating information about the popular revolution. Most of the people working under this umbrella group operated within Syria, with a smaller number of expatriate Syrians lending support. LCCs were creative in organizing themselves via social media and virtual coordination meetings, and they cooperated with Arab media outlets to keep the international community informed about developments in Syria. They also cooperated with other Syrian organizations such as the Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria, which focuses on reporting human rights abuses (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012).

Organizations such as the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria and the Syrian Revolution Martyrs Database collected information about martyrs and cross-referenced it with data from the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies (Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies n.d.). They also partnered with local groups to document, train, and educate Syrians about their human rights. All these activities were performed by groups of people organizing themselves outside government institutional frameworks to fulfill needs on the ground such as advocacy, education, training and government accountability functions. For instance, in 2013, VDC partnered with Sawa (Together), a youth coalition, to organize volunteers to support displaced groups and perform other civic duties in Qamishli in north-east Syria, on the Turkish border. Their joint 2013 campaign to 'document' numbers of martyrs, detained, missing or kidnapped people, the effects of the use of chemical weapons, and other violations by the regime against civilians led to the group's harassment and arrests by the authorities (VDC 2013).

VDC also called attention to and documented inhuman prison conditions in Adra, particularly in women's prisons where abuse and mistreatment was accompanied by a denial of a fair trial (The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution 2017).

Advocacy was performed throughout the decade of war by numerous organizations, large and small. In 2016, *The Syrian Observer* reported that 191 Syrian civil society organizations had been involved in documenting the war, raising the visibility of casualties and violations of basic human rights by the Assad government (al-Wasl 2016). The Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) reported on the effects of the government's blockade on various urban and rural areas. Aside from high unemployment and a lack of medicine, food, and water in areas in which the Assad authorities prohibited humanitarian support, disease followed, leading to more people fleeing to safer areas. For many of those who chose to stay, severe trauma, disease or death followed. Environmentally, the lack of basic services such as trash collection led to an invasion of rodents and consequently, to more disease (SHRC 2013).

Pro Justice, The Day After, Syrians for Truth and Justice, Creative Memory, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression are just a few of the grass-roots organizations that worked to raise the visibility of the crimes committed by the Assad regime. They documented the plight of the

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population and the resulting large numbers of refugees and IDPs, pressured the international community to help Syrians seek justice and accountability for the actions that the regime committed against its people. These groups created networks of supporters bound by what Putnam calls 'horizontal ties' speaking truth to power, to the vertical bonds of authority of the Assad regime.

In addition to domestic and diaspora groups of Syrians organized for advocacy and government accountability, several INGOs had a prominent role in performing these civil society functions. Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Red Cross, and Mercy Corps are some of the INGOs that called attention to the crimes against the Syrian people at the hand of their government. In 2011, HRW reported that the crimes committed against civilians imprisoned because of their peaceful protests amounted to crimes against humanity. Prisoners were beaten and humiliated, electric shocks were administered, cases of rape against male and female detainees were reported. Extrajudicial executions of people in detention occurred. The first mass grave was discovered and reported in May 2011, in Daraa (HRW 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). HRW also reported that the authorities made 'enormous efforts to ensure such information did not get out'. Cell phone networks were disrupted by the government and security forces confiscated personal phones on which they could identify coverage of the events taking place in the streets. Journalists and independent observers were prohibited by the authorities in the areas of protests, and the only journalist who was able to report from Daraa was arrested on his return to Damascus (HRW 2011b).

Another INGO that reported human rights abuses as early as the revolution started is Amnesty International (AI). It documented examples of how the government tightened its grip on the population by instilling fear of reprisals. For instance, when a child was killed while watching a street protest in front of his house, the family had to sign a written statement to the police saying that he had been killed by 'armed gangs,' to avoid trouble with the authorities. 'They will punish us if we complain,' the sister of the killed boy said at the time (Rovera 2012). AI also reported abuses by ISIL against populations in the northern areas of the country that they controlled. For instance, in 2013, Syrians in the northern part of the country were subjected to cruel torture. Children as young as eight were not spared; they were beaten and abused in front of their parents. People suspected of not following ISIL's practice of sharia law were publicly executed and their bodies were left hanging in public view for days. Syrians in detention were subject to beatings with rubber cables, electric shocks, or forced to sit in painful positions for hours (AI 2013). Overall, the advocacy and raising awareness of the situation in Syria by domestic and diaspora groups and INGOs amounted to a public information campaign and exposure of the crimes of the Assad government against its own people. The advocacy of these groups had a strong government accountability function which further hardened the Assad regime against such groups and their activities. Local and international awareness of the plight of Syrian refugees, IDPs, and those who chose not to flee prompted humanitarian support and relief activities profiled briefly next.

### **The Syrian Conflict and the Rise of Civil Society: Humanitarian Relief and Support Operations**

Local Syrian groups and INGOs had an important role to play in providing humanitarian relief to displaced populations and refugees resulting from the 2011 anti-Syrian government revolution. Syria Civil Defense (White Helmets), Syria Relief, and the Charity Commission are just some of the many groups and organizations that fit under this rubric.

Many local groups evolved in accordance with the needs on the ground and provided a mixture of services that spanned the continuum from advocacy to humanitarian relief. For instance, in Barza, northeast of Damascus, activists created an LCC to organize the revolutionary movement in the area. As a result of the armed response of the regime and the curfew imposed in the entire area, the Barza LCC expanded its mission to establish a medical center, a civil defense team, and a relief office to offer humanitarian relief to those wounded in, or displaced by, the bombardments. Activists also created an education office to keep area children in school (The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution 2017, 58-9). Similar grass-roots initiatives occurred in ar-Raqquah, an agrarian province on the northern bank of the Euphrates River in north-east Syria, which came under violent siege early in the war by Syrian authorities, and thereafter, by ISIL. Parts of the country in the north and east also came under bombardment by an international coalition led by the U.S. fighting against ISIL; and starting in 2015, by Russia, which lent support to Assad's armed forces. Activists organized to provide support to the population under siege. The Assembly of the Free Youth of ar-Raqquah launched several campaigns, including 'I will not leave my school,' during which as many

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as twenty schools were reported rehabilitated so that children could continue their education. The Stamps of the Syrian Revolution group issued a stamp showing the youth of ar-Raqqah after a street cleaning campaign organized by the Free Youth (The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution 2017, 289). In Adra, groups of citizens formed an LCC and created a medical center and a relief office. They also partnered with the United Relief Center based in eastern Ghouta to assist Syrians caught in the violence (The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution 2017, 17). Such local groups organized themselves along the horizontal bonds of fellowship described by Putnam, in order to provide a public good that the government did not offer – humanitarian relief.

In May 2012, observers on the ground described funeral processions turned into protests, or more traditional protests following Friday prayers, with demonstrators clapping their hands in the air, to show that they were not armed, and chanting 'silmiya,' meaning 'peaceful'. They were met with live ammunition by regime forces and associated militias. Wounded people would not go to a hospital to be treated out of fear of being arrested; they relied instead on sympathetic citizens who hosted them in their own homes, or they quietly sought the services of a doctor or nurse. These forms of healthcare support came to be known as field hospitals. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defined field hospitals as informal self-settled sites, transit centers, collective centers, or planned camps across North-East and North-West Syria. Many of such last resort sites were created and inhabited by IDPs. The injured who could not be treated at these locations were evacuated by groups such as the White Helmets (described below) to a safe location while those who had more serious injuries were evacuated out of the city or the country, sometimes to Turkey. To avoid the official border crossing checkpoints, those involved in the transfer of the wounded used less trafficked agricultural roads to evade regime forces (Rovera 2012).

Some local groups were organized by women. For instance, Syria's Civil Defense is a women's volunteer search and rescue group also known as the White Helmets. The Helmets aided people affected by bombings. Rabia Kusairi, a 23-year-old and one of the 230 female volunteers who worked for the White Helmets, is the leader of the women's center in Shanam, where the group goes house-to-house or tent-to-tent administering first aid and providing essential medical referrals. She says being a woman in a Muslim community means having better access to women affected by war to treat them as 'it's not easy for a woman to be treated by a male volunteer. Despite doing this important work, I face a lot of attempts to silence me or to reduce my role' (Williams 2021).

The Mazaya Center is another example of an individual civic initiative that became a network of similar centers to empower women through training. In 2013, Ghalia Rahal, a 47-year-old woman, converted a beauty salon into a center for the vocational training and empowerment of women. Having experienced sexual harassment first-hand, Rahal has explained, 'as a conservative society, we are still afraid to talk about this publicly, because it's very hard for a woman to come forward and say I was abused, or I was assaulted in exchange for a food basket or in exchange for a job'. Rahal suggested that the main problem in Syria is that men are in charge of every aspect of life, from fighting the war, to civil society, and humanitarian organizations (Williams 2021). Groups of women thus assumed an important relief function by organizing themselves to support the wounded, be they refugees, IDPs, people on the run, or people staying in their homes. None of their activities were mandated by the authorities. Theirs was a civic initiative along horizontal bonds of caring for their fellow human beings in need.

INGOs have also had an important role to play in humanitarian relief and support functions. Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, the International Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, Physicians across Continents, World Vision International, International Humanitarian Relief, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Education without Borders, and many other organizations worked in Syria throughout the 10 years of war, and some of them before the 2011 revolution.

Mercy Corps worked in Syria before the 2011 crisis, providing emergency assistance. Between 2008 and 2021, the organization prioritized addressing the immediate needs of refugees and IDPs inside Syria and in neighboring countries. It provided potable water, desludging and garbage collection in camps and informal refugee settlements. It worked with displaced individuals to help them develop coping mechanisms. Relief teams worked to increase economic opportunities so people could adopt self-sustainable lifestyles in their new displacement locations and provided new skills training and cash grants to small businesses. Mercy Corps also tried to address the root causes and drivers of the conflict by providing training and assistance in mutual reconciliation and civic engagement (Mercy

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Corps Syria n.d.; Mercy Corps 2019; 2021).

Oxfam worked in Syria in cooperation with local groups to provide food, hygiene kits, and household essentials. The organization also worked in neighboring countries to which Syrians fled, such as Lebanon and Jordan, providing cash assistance for rent, distributing food vouchers, warm clothing and blankets for the winters, building latrines and showers in camps, including wheelchair-accessible facilities. Oxfam also conducted hygiene training and guided journalists on how to interview people in need (Oxfam 2013, 2). For the April 2018–March 2019 period, it reportedly spent 8.8 million euros on humanitarian relief in Syria (Oxfam 2018–2019, 47).

Official camps set up either by UNCHR or by neighboring countries were overwhelmed by the number of people fleeing violence, leading to the creation of last resort sites. The work of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) is notable here. The Assad authorities placed restrictions on humanitarian aid missions by various INGOs, and closed border crossings in areas it did not control, restricting the process of registration of groups offering humanitarian aid, or denying them access altogether. OCHA advocated for better aid access and raised the visibility of those restrictions in its reports (OCHA 2014, 7; OCHA, UNCT 2014, 3).

OCHA and UNHCR reported that shelters were crowded, leading to unsanitary conditions, lack of privacy, and exposure to contagious diseases particularly during the pandemic. Some IDPs chose to stay out of shelters and live and sleep in the open air. That decision carries health risks, especially during adverse weather conditions (OCHA 2020, 7).

In addition to the tremendous work that relief agencies performed on the ground under difficult conditions, there are three aspects of relief assistance that merit attention.

First, providing humanitarian support directly to the affected populations was disrupted or prohibited by the Syrian government, who restricted aid access to areas in the country that it controlled. In some areas, the authorities closed border crossings altogether. In a remarkable conceptual shift, humanitarian aid became ‘criminalized’ by being linked to aiding ‘terrorists,’ when the relief aid was aimed at wounded ISIL members. The International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders made this point during a conference in 2019:

In northern Syria, we’ve been working in a displaced peoples’ camp in al-Hol, and there’s a section in that camp where the ISIL families are. People there have been treated completely differently than the rest of the camp. There was no health screening. Water provision is terrible. The 12,000 children there have no access to any kind of mental health services, toys, or education. They can literally see – across the fence – that the other children have safe spaces and playgrounds. ... So, it’s active discrimination against that population who have been tagged as terrorists or ISIL people (Elliott and Parker 2019).

Second, donors placed restrictions on how the aid should be used, with some funding clauses being restricted to specific areas and populations. This challenge applied primarily to areas of the country under the control of ISIL, which is considered a terrorist group by the US government, the EU and other countries (Alhousseiny and Atar 2021, 113).

Third, humanitarian relief funding from wealthy countries has been declining since 2014, which translates into fewer organizations being able to provide support. For instance, a Syria Emergency Response Fund (ERF) was set up by OCHA in 2012 to increase support for humanitarian projects in partnership with local and international NGOs. In 2014, the Syria ERF received more than \$23 million from a variety of governmental and non-governmental donors. Seventy-five projects with a value of \$32 million were reported under way, and 143 NGOs were active on the ground as a result (OCHA 2014, 1). As of 2020, decreased funding resulted in fewer organizations operating on the ground; 130 NGOs and 25 INGOs with a humanitarian mission remained in operation (OCHA 2020, 40).

The amounts pledged and delivered by the governments of the US and the UK have been declining since 2018. Germany has increased its donation since 2018 but not enough to offset the lower pledges of other big donors. At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic persists and the Syria crisis remains unresolved, lower funding affects the ability



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of INGOs and NGOs to deliver relief and support services, and leaves Syrians without basic means of subsistence. Ten NGOs working on the ground signed a public letter protesting the cuts and highlighting that they come as sixty per cent of the Syrian population are food insecure (Worley 2021). As of this writing, the funding situation has not improved.

## Conclusion: Is There a Civil Society in Syria?

This chapter provides evidence that civil society groups have been rising in Syria since the civil war started in 2011. Local groups have been forming to fulfill civil society functions described by both Western and Arabic scholars: 1. Groups organized themselves outside government control – and despite the government’s attempts to silence them. 2. They created networks of support for one another and the populations in need such as refugees and IDPs. 3. They held the government accountable with their actions and protests. Diaspora dissidents sometimes argue that while the Syrian revolution may be on the decline in terms of the ability of the population to resist the Assad regime, it amounted to a liberation of ‘civil society’ from the fear of that regime (Lababidi 2021).

Once the civil conflict erupted in 2011, local Syrian groups formed in support of two main public service functions: advocacy, and humanitarian relief. There is high connectivity between these two types of civil society groups. Advocacy and watchdog groups reported the repression and abuses of the regime against its own citizens, demonstrating a classic feature of the Western concept of ‘keeping the government accountable’. The visibility of the repression via internet and social media led in turn to humanitarian relief groups being formed by local groups, INGOs, or both. In the words of a prominent Syrian civil rights activist and politician:

[C]ivil society has been responding to Syrians’ needs and raising awareness about the situation in Syria from the beginning of the revolution ... conveying to the world what was happening in Syria; took photos and published them to the entire world; helped refugees and those displaced; defended human rights; documented violations of human rights and crimes against humanity (USIP 2014).

In so doing, rising groups of people organized for action demonstrated a growing maturity akin to a nascent civil society. This society combined elements of both Western concepts of free and voluntary associations of people holding their government accountable for its actions, and Arabic concepts of bonds of kinship and religion exercised outside a government sphere of activity. If civil society was weak prior to 2011, the work of advocacy and humanitarian relief of the past decade can be said to resemble Putnam’s ‘social capital,’ since it created political and civic engagement, informal social ties, and, to a certain extent, tolerance among some segments of the population. This development was possible because of all the efforts at local, regional, and national levels that organized individuals, whether through CSOs, NGOs, or INGOs, were able to make.

This review of reports, eyewitness accounts, and NGO and INGO fact sheets, and stories concerning the activities of civic groups indicates that the national government of Syria created the initial crisis with its repressive response to popular demands for reforms. The persistence of street protests eventually became a nation-wide revolution that attracted foreign actors. Civilians were caught in the crossfire, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis that continues more than ten years after the first protests began. In estimating the contribution of the nascent Syrian civil society to mitigating the effects of the conflict, we should be mindful that the scale of the human crisis in Syria is such that any effort is better than nothing. The scale of the population displacement is massive, requiring a commensurate response at the highest levels of national and international governance, above and beyond what local groups, NGOs and INGOs can offer with their limited resources.

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