



Building peace within Syrian communities

Community leaders across Syria are taking action to manage the impact of conflict and prevent violence. They are negotiating ceasefires and truces, working to secure the release of prisoners or deceased family members, mediating local disputes, and working to maintain inter-communal relations by promoting coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups. These community leaders are able to mobilise their communities around local peace processes because of the 'peace capital' that they hold, based on a sense of legitimacy in their communities, access to a wide range of relationships, and a problem-solving approach.

The local mechanisms used by community leaders to promote peace include traditional / tribal structures, religious arbitration bodies and independent civic courts / mediators, as well as specialised local Peace Committees. These community leaders, and the mechanisms through which they work to manage conflict, represent significant 'peace resources' in Syria, with a proven ability to reconnect severed community relations, reach across conflict lines and initiate local dialogue. As such, if properly supported, these peace resources could also make a significant contribution to national peace processes and political negotiations.

This report describes the work of the community leaders at the forefront of efforts to build peace in Syria, and the mechanisms that they use. It also provides an agenda for how to better support these 'peace resources', so they can make a stronger contribution both locally and to national peace processes.

This report documents the results of a mapping of local peace resources in Syria, conducted between December 2013 and February 2014 and tested in a Dialogue Forum in March 2014. More information on the mapping process is provided in the methodology section at the back of the report.

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1. Community responses to violence

1. The Syrian conflicts – large-scale and corollary

Since the start of revolution, Syrian communities have had to contend with large-scale conflict between: (a) armed brigades broadly aligned with the opposition movement and those forces supporting the Damascus government; and (b) different armed brigades within the opposition movement.

There has also been a dramatic rise in corollary conflict and violence in Syria, especially in those areas where the tight grip of the Damascus government has weakened or collapsed. The resulting deterioration of law and order has enabled disputes and acts of violence between community groups – whether tribes, political groups, ethnic groups or religious groups – to spiral out of control. Examples of such corollary conflict / violence include (*inter alia*):

- Old rivalries between different community groups that are suddenly finding violent expression
- Fighting over control of political institutions, geographic areas, borders and natural resources
- Disputes over money and land that escalate into physical violence
- Violence between armed brigades spilling over into civilian life – with families and clans / tribes drawn into revenge attacks if one of their sons is killed in combat
- Kidnappings for money and violent robberies that can cause a series of 'tit-for-tat' revenge actions.

As such, community groups not only require support to minimise the impact of large-scale violence, they are also looking for temporary legal and administrative processes that provide a vehicle through which local disputes can be resolved before they escalate into (further) violence.

In the midst of this chaos, strong leadership groups have emerged in many communities to help them address both large-scale and corollary conflict. They are doing this through the provision of vital humanitarian aid and the re-establishment of basic social services. They are also, in extraordinary ways, intervening directly to manage conflict and violence. They are negotiating ceasefires and truces, working to secure the release of prisoners or deceased family members, mediating local disputes, and working to maintain inter-communal relations by promoting coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups.

Syrian voices – negotiating with the FSA

"Sometimes Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades want to attack one of the regime locations [near our community]. Such attacks can have really big consequences and lead to significant damage [to the community]. So we try to encourage the FSA to change their decision to avoid the negative effects on civilians.

"We were also involved when the FSA made sand barriers on the only road to nearby areas under the control of the regime. The regime imprisoned 60 civilians in the area under their control and told us that they would not release them unless the sand barriers were removed. So, we coordinated with the FSA and sent the Committee's machinery to remove the barriers. When the road was opened, the civilians were released."

Civil defence committee member – Dar'a province

2. Negotiating ceasefires and truces

Community leaders are often directly involved in negotiating humanitarian ceasefires and truces between belligerent parties. For example, in a town near Damascus suffering from heavy shelling, a group of women mobilised their community to advocate for a ceasefire agreement. They succeeded in collecting 200 signatures to a petition calling for a halt to the violence. Based on this 'mandate', they approached the local opposition forces and got agreement to a ceasefire, on condition that the women would negotiate a similar agreement with the Damascus government. Subsequently, a delegation from the women's group contacted Damascus government officials and obtained their agreement to the ceasefire (although this has subsequently broken down).

3. Facilitating the release of prisoners and bodies

Some community leaders have worked to negotiate the release of captives and the exchange of bodies for burial. In Ar Raqqa, seven men were taken prisoner by forces belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). After normal negotiation processes had failed to secure the release of the detainees, families and community leaders organised a peaceful protest against the detention. They drove, unarmed, in a convoy of up to 400 cars towards the town where ISIS were holding their prisoners.

A delegation from the convoy met with the ISIS leader in the area and peacefully asked for the prisoners to be released. Seemingly in response to the large-scale expression of public opinion, the men were released without violence.

4. Mediating local corollary disputes

Across all regions of Syria there are examples of community leaders intervening in local corollary disputes to prevent them from escalating into (more substantial) violence. Such initiatives are often undertaken through civil 'Peace Committees' that have been established to manage and resolve conflicts when they emerge (see section 4).

In Dayr Az Zawr, for example, a civil Peace Committee has been established by local citizens to help manage conflict by promoting dialogue and communication. Interlocutors from Dayr Az Zawr describe their province as having a tribal structure – meaning that tribal identity is highly important in inter-community relations as well as in decision-making processes. As a result, an 80-person committee was created, with members drawn from the different tribes present in the area.

When a conflict broke out between two towns in the province following a murder, 20 committee members were selected as contact points for a conflict resolution process. This group then chose five representatives to intervene in the conflict. Decisions about how to proceed in the process were not taken by the group of five representatives until it had consulted with the 20 contact points who, in their turn, consulted with the remaining committee members. Efforts were also made to provide feedback to affected communities about the process.

Similarly, in Hamah, a civil Peace Committee was established to resolve a dispute between local community members and members of the popular committees that are supported by the Damascus government. The dispute had erupted when residents of one village attacked a bus that had some government supporters among its passengers, and took them hostage. The civil Peace Committee intervened by conducting negotiations that led to the release of the hostages. This intervention was instrumental in preventing an escalation of violence through revenge attacks.

5. Maintaining inter-communal relations

Finally, community leaders are involved in a wide array of initiatives aimed at maintaining relationships between different tribes, or different religious or ethnic groups. Such initiatives are often led by civil society organisations (CSOs). For example, in the Al Hasakah province, CSOs in Qamishli ran a public campaign 'From Noroz to Akito', which brought Kurds, Arab and Assyrian Christians together to celebrate coexistence over ten days from the national Kurdish day 'Noroz' until the national Assyrian day of 'Akito'.

At the same time, a civic Peace Committee has been established in the same town to provide a constant platform for communication between the different community groups that live in the area.

It is important to note that the delivery of humanitarian aid has provided a significant vehicle for maintaining inter-communal relationships – despite the well-documented cases of politicised or manipulated aid provision that favours or pressurises specific community groups. For example, in the Damascus suburbs, a civil Peace Committee comprising opposition and pro-Damascus government members has been able to work effectively on coordination of humanitarian relief, despite struggling to work effectively together on other issues.

6. Mobilising community support

These are just a few examples of local community leaders responding in extraordinary and constructive ways to the impact of conflict on their communities. At a local level these leaders have demonstrated an impressive ability to hold together the social fabric of local communities whilst filling some of the gaps left behind where the state has withdrawn.

Perhaps most importantly, those local leaders who are effective in promoting peace have been successful because they are able to mobilise their communities – either in tacit support of their initiatives, or through active involvement in their interventions. This is no small task, given the heightened level of distrust across society.

Because of this ability to galvanise and organise community action, the resulting initiatives have: (a) de-escalated acute outbreaks of violence; (b) created mechanisms for mediating or managing local conflicts; and (c) potentially played a critical role in preventing the development of major new conflict dynamics (e.g. large-scale tribal conflict).

“People are becoming more separated. Areas are divided and people are labelling each other as anti- or pro-government or revolution. This division of the grassroots is the biggest problem [we face]. We have so many old differences and now the revolution has brought these new ones out”

Damascus participant – Dialogue Forum

2. Local leaders' 'peace capital'

1. The source of community leaders' 'peace capital'

Traditionally, every Syrian community has a group of local individuals who they turn to for leadership in solving problems and managing conflicts. While many Syrians are concerned that 'effective' leaders have been displaced by the conflict, it is clear that a wide array of individuals and groups are stepping up to the challenge of supporting their communities to mitigate conflict and build peace.

The primary types of social leaders driving peace initiatives are tribal elders, religious leaders and civilian individuals who are widely respected in their community (*wajaht albalad*). In addition, however, new types of leadership groups are gaining prominence, including CSOs, women leaders and youth leaders.

In the absence of a formal role provided by a recognised political authority, the ability of any community member to play a leadership role in conflict management and to mobilise their community depends on the 'peace capital' that they can access. Such capital is gained by being viewed as legitimate, by maintaining a strong network of relationships, by demonstrating a 'problem-solving' approach, and by being effective at achieving quick solutions to community problems.

2. The importance of legitimacy

Syrians describe a combination of the following attributes as typically essential for a community leader (or a leadership group) to have the legitimacy to intervene in a conflict:

Tribal position

For tribal leaders, legitimacy is broadly speaking inherited from father to son. In many, though not all, cases, the legitimacy of a tribal leader (or 'wiseman') is limited to the particular area in which he is based. Some interlocutors felt that the 'standards' of tribal leaders, such as knowledge of clan / tribal / religious customs, have weakened because many leaders who were considered particularly effective have become displaced during the conflict.

Religious authority

Religious authority is generally well respected, with knowledge of the rules of God considered by many to be an important source of legitimacy for resolving conflicts. Indeed, there is evidence that different faith groups are increasingly turning to

local religious figures to represent their interests, either through religious committees / courts (see section 4), or as individuals in local peace processes. For example, Ismaili elders, the Druz 'mind elders' (*shyukh alakeh*) and Christian church leaders are playing an essential mediation role in some areas.

Social status in the community

In addition to tribal and religious authority, other civil leaders can gain legitimacy because of their respected status in the community. These *wajaht albalad* gain authority by belonging to a well-known family that is considered trustworthy and (in pro-revolution areas) has been supportive of the revolution since the beginning.

Alternatively, the authority of civil leaders may derive from their profession or position in society (e.g. lawyers, judges, engineers, doctors, academics, business people and local area administrators). Perhaps most importantly, civil leaders need to have demonstrated that they are active and willing to act in their community's interest, rather than for their own economic, political or social advancement.

Proven effectiveness in resolving community problems

While many peace resources enjoy *a priori* respect within their community, the key to gaining and maintaining the credibility required to represent a community's interests in conflict resolution and management processes is to be effective within them. This means that even people who are not tribal or religious leaders, and who do not hold a respected social position, can earn legitimacy, if they prove themselves to be effective.

Transparency and consultation

For many Syrians the legitimacy of a community leader is bolstered if they regularly share information about the negotiation / mediation they are engaged in. In addition, Syrians think that it is important for such leaders to regularly ask communities for their views and experiences, so as to lend credibility not just to their role, but also to the mediation process itself, as well as its eventual outcomes. Unfortunately, at present there are few good examples of community leaders using consultation and information feedback loops.

Living 'on the ground'

For some, the fact that a person has stayed 'on the ground' provides the basis for his / her legitimacy to intervene in conflict. Indeed, Syrians are often suspicious of those who have left the country, even if they have done so for a good reason.

Syrian voices – creative use of relationships

"I spent 10 years in prison before the revolution. During my time in prison I made friends with other prisoners, many of whom were in prison because of their connections with religious or political parties. At the beginning of the revolution many prisoners were released by the amnesty given by the Damascus government. Some of these prisoners joined or established armed opposition groups with a strong religious basis.

"In 2013 when ISIS entered Ar Raqqa province, communities belonging to a particular religious sect became afraid that they would be persecuted. I am also from this minority group, although I come from another part of Syria. I was able to use my old network of prison contacts and friendships to initiate a dialogue with ISIS commanders. Because this dialogue was built on previous friendships and trust, we were able to negotiate safe passage out of Ar Raqqa for the communities in question. We were also able to negotiate with social leaders from other communities that homes belonging to families who were leaving would not be harmed and taken over. Instead, the door would be open for their return, if and when the overall situation changes."

Wajaht albald – Hamah province

3. The ability to exercise relationships

A strong network of relationships is essential for securing the involvement in peace processes of: (a) representatives from the conflicting parties, who themselves have the respect of their communities and who can speak on their behalf; (b) the different actors who are necessary for resolution of the conflict at hand (including 'hard-to-reach' groups or 'spoilers'); and (c) those who can act as guarantors for the process.

Community leaders use a range of creative tactics to get the most out of their networks of relationships – particularly in terms of establishing dialogues with 'hard-to-reach' groups. Pro-revolution communities have, for example, found ways of using intermediaries to dialogue with government officials (see section 4). Similarly, some community leaders have been able to establish dialogue with armed brigades (including ISIS and *Jabhat al Nusra*) through family members, former colleagues in civilian life, students and fellow prisoners.

The fact that many of the political and military structures that have developed as a result of the revolution have not yet become highly institutionalised has enabled community leaders to use their networks of informal relationships to promote peace. For example, someone who holds a position within an armed brigade can still be appealed to as an individual person – a friend, a family member, a former student.

4. Problem solving for quick results

Community leaders, while mostly well-educated people, on the whole lack formal training in conflict resolution and are often not prepared for negotiating issues of life-or-death importance on behalf of their community. In addition, the scale of conflict and violence faced often goes beyond what tradition and customs are able to effectively manage. Nevertheless, community leaders gain peace capital by coming up with creative solutions that deliver results in a relatively short period of time (e.g. organising a peaceful convoy of cars to free a detainee, or using networks to communicate with 'hard-to-reach' groups).

While this focus on short-term results is understandable, the actions of community leaders often lead to only temporary solutions that: (a) do not address the drivers of conflict; and (b) may even incentivise violence in the long-term (see section 3).

5. Effectiveness and expectations

As noted above, community leaders need to demonstrate that they are effective in order to be viewed as legitimate. However, given the nature of the conflicts they are dealing with, it is to be expected that some of the negotiation and mediation processes may be highly complex, and that it may take time and effort to achieve an effective result. Unfortunately, as communities are desperate for a 'result', leaders can lose credibility if their initiatives do not come to fruition relatively quickly.

There are examples of community leaders, who have previously held high levels of peace capital, losing their credibility because their negotiation efforts had failed. This demand from communities for quick results may be an important cause of the predominance of short-term solutions. It may also be the reason behind the high turnover of negotiators, which many feel is undermining the efficacy and impact of negotiation processes at the community level.

“Those who seek reconciliation among people, take legitimacy from good behaviour in public... from wisdom and rationality. [He / she is] a person who fears God and has no personal interests. This legitimacy allows him to resolve the conflict among people”

Community member – Dar'a

3. Direct interventions in conflict

1. A focus on mediation, negotiation & arbitration

Community leaders are using a variety of methods to mobilise communities behind peace processes (e.g. through petition and networking). Nevertheless, the majority of these processes are direct interventions that look to resolve conflict through mediation / negotiation and arbitration. Although the use of mediation / negotiation and arbitration is traditionally associated with tribal leaders, in the revolutionary context they are being used by other leadership groups (e.g. religious figures, civil leaders or brigade members).

An intervention may be carried out by a single community leader. If the conflict is more complex, a team of leaders may work together so as to ensure good communication with the conflicting parties at critical moments. Alternatively, community leaders may intervene through a number of more formal mechanisms (see section 4).

2. Stages in an intervention

Based on the descriptions provided by Syrians across the country, a successful process might unfold as follows:

1. *Immediate contact with the parties to prevent (further) violence.* The intervener (or team of interveners) meets with the parties separately. The purpose of these early meetings is to prevent an immediate escalation of conflict by calming the parties and warning them of the dangers of escalation. At this stage, messages may be passed between the parties to prevent misinformation.
2. *Getting agreement to a mediated / negotiated process.* The next step is to get agreement from the parties to settle their conflict through dialogue. The intervener(s)' authority may be sufficient to convince the parties to engage in a negotiated process. The intervener(s) may also choose to issue a warning that if the parties do not agree to dialogue, then their case may be referred to the local court for arbitration, or an armed brigade will be called on to intervene by force.
3. *Understanding the facts of the case.* The intervener meets with the parties (separately or together, depending on the situation) in order to understand and determine the facts of the case. Ultimately it is for the intervener(s) to determine who are the victims and which wrongs have been perpetrated, against whom, by whom.

4. *Identify guarantors.* Because civilian conflict resolution mechanisms do not have any enforcement power (other than moral persuasion), the intervener(s) may reach out to armed brigades to act as guarantors. In effect, the armed brigades are asked to function as a police service that ensures the terms of the agreements are upheld.
5. *Negotiation of an agreement.* In accordance with locally applicable customs, the intervener(s) will either mediate a negotiation between the parties, or will arbitrate (i.e. impose) a decision on them. In those cases where there has been loss of life, negotiation / arbitration will often revolve around reaching agreement on the amount of compensation to be paid to the victims' families.
6. *Signature and declaration of agreement.* The parties sign a document setting out the terms of their agreement as proof that an agreement was reached. The terms of the agreement are then communicated to the main parties involved (and, in cases of best practice, to the wider communities involved) and to guarantors.
7. *Implementation and follow-up.* Ideally the intervener(s) will follow up with the parties to ensure the agreement is implemented in practice. The role of the guarantors may come into play in this regard if the parties are reluctant to follow through on the agreement.

3. Enabling conditions

There are a number of enabling conditions that, if met, make the intervention's success more likely:

Mediators are neutral and respected

It is important that those intervening are considered neutral – as not having a personal interest in the case, nor having particular knowledge of either party. However, it is even more important that the intervener(s) command the respect of the conflicting parties. A strong sense of respect for the intervener(s) will make it socially and psychologically much harder for the conflicting parties to refuse the intervention or resulting settlement.

Shared understanding of applicable norms and traditions

The intervention is more likely to lead to success if the conflicting parties are from the same ethnic group or similar tribal communities.

Syrian voices – Inside a mediation process

“My role in the [mediation] process was to calm the affected parties. We talked to them with words inspired by God. We talked to them about the compensation they would receive, and we also focused their attention on the repercussions if they took hasty actions. The affected parties responded positively to our efforts, and they accepted arbitration [by a sharia committee]. When the party you are trying to calm looks at you as someone who has no personal interest in the case, and as a person who talks in the public interest, then he will respond positively, and he will be calm and listen to what you say.

“For example, when you go to a father whose son has been killed, he may insist on taking revenge. The first step is to discourage that person from doing so, even if it means making difficult or impossible demands of him. The important thing is to ensure that he will step back a little. If we can reach this point, the next stage of asking him to present logical demands will be easier. After that, we will try to convince the person to ask for a reasonable amount of money. We can't let him insist on a large amount of money, because this will create a precedent and encourage other people to ask for the same amount of money when they lose someone close to them.”

Wajaht albald – Dar'a province

In this case they are more likely to have shared expectations of how the process will unfold and the norms that will be applied to resolve the conflict. An intervention becomes more complicated when the conflicting parties are from different types of community groups, because they may have different approaches to resolving conflict.

Follow-up and implementation

The success of an agreement is enhanced if some kind of enforcement mechanism is in place. For example, it is important that the intervener(s) is able to follow up with the parties to monitor progress, and keep social and psychological pressure on them to implement the agreement. Having a guarantor or the possibility of referring the case to a court is also deemed important in terms of incentivising implementation.

4. Ordinary people, extraordinary circumstances

As noted in the previous section, interventions often focus on temporary solutions that do not address the drivers of conflict, or may even incentivise violence in the long term. Indeed, there are some instances of community leaders employing unhelpful tactics to pressure reluctant parties to enter into negotiation / mediation or arbitration.

For example, if one group has kidnapped for ransom people from another group, the victims' families may arrange a series of revenge kidnappings so as to create a balance of power between the two sides, as an incentive for negotiation. Further, direct interventions involving 'victims' and 'perpetrators' tend to focus on 'legal' agreements and compensation, rather than on ways of increasing trust between conflicting groups.

This focus on short-term results is understandable, given the importance of being 'effective' so as to maintain credibility, and the fact that community leaders are often responding to urgent and dramatic events. As a result, they do not have the time to reflect on new and better-adapted methodologies, or to think about longer-term approaches to address the drivers of conflict. For example, with the right support, community leaders could focus more on preventative confidence building between community groups, or on early warning.

5. Processes are often not inclusive

While communities usually accept interventions, the solutions that result from mediation / negotiation or arbitration are most often imposed on them. This is because conflict management processes tend to involve restricted leadership groups, without strong mechanisms for community engagement. As a result, communities are rarely able to input into the decisions made on how to manage the conflicts that affect them.

Young people and women are the segments of society most likely to be excluded from decision-making on conflict issues. This is despite the importance of the situation to them, and their ability to make a positive contribution if involved. This approach (decision-making by restricted leadership groups) may be because there is not a well-established culture of consultative decision-making in Syria. Indeed, few community leaders have experience of facilitating consultative processes or in public communication to ordinary citizens.

“There is a doctor, he has no political orientation and he refused to leave the country. He has the authority to deal with all kinds of conflict... a person was found murdered... people wanted to take revenge. The doctor took charge of the investigation to calm people down and to solve the crime”

Civil society activist – Idlib province

4. Mechanisms that promote peace

1. Use of mechanisms that promote peace

While community leaders are often able to effectively manage disputes as individuals, sometimes they pursue peace through more formal mechanisms – including traditional / tribal structures, religious arbitration bodies, civil mediation and civil Peace Committees. These mechanisms have in turn relied on other bodies in order to be effective – Local Councils because they are often the only identifiable structures able to agree and deliver peace initiatives, armed brigades because they can act as guarantors of decisions / agreements reached and individual intermediaries because they provide a way of communicating with the Damascus government. In addition, CSOs provide an additional indirect mechanism for peace initiatives.

2. Traditional / tribal structures

Many Syrians describe themselves as belonging to a 'tribal community'. Tribes have social structures, headed by 'wisemen', that have largely survived the conflict as well as long traditions of resolving intra- and inter-tribal conflicts. These structures / traditions coexisted alongside the modern Syrian state before the revolution and are therefore still seen as relevant in many communities. Tribal structures have proved to be especially relevant where previously dormant inter-tribal rivalries are finding space to be expressed, increasingly in violent form.

However, tribal / traditional structures seem to work best if the conflict protagonists are all from tribal systems. If not, there may be a clash of norms or expectations that require an external mediator to intervene. For example, in Al Hasakah the death of one person triggered a conflict between an Arab tribe and Kurdish political / military groups. Attempts to solve this conflict have failed due to the lack of a basic agreement between the parties about the norms that should govern the resolution process.

It may also be the case that in some areas of Syria the role of tribal structures is diminishing. This is because of a common perception that wisemen were supported by the regime before the revolution, and that they did not back the revolution quickly enough. This means that while many may look to tribal structures to play a role in solving immediate problems, they question whether these structures have a legitimate role to play in longer-term negotiations around the future of Syria.

Further, some Syrians are concerned that the tendency to use tribal structures has led to the isolation of youth voices. In some areas this has created a conflict between younger and older generations. Similarly, women express concern that there is little room for them to participate in, or have their voices heard by, conflict resolution processes led by wisemen.

3. Religious arbitration bodies

Those areas where state legal systems have broken down have seen a proliferation of religious arbitration bodies – primarily sharia committees and courts. While these bodies may focus on local questions of justice, in doing so they provide an important mechanism for preventing disputes from escalating into (further) violence. Religious arbitration bodies overlap considerably with armed brigades, as well as with some civic institutions. Armed brigades are often used to enforce decisions taken in a Sharia committee / court, while religious figures are often involved in both religious courts and Peace Committees.

The role and legitimacy of Sharia committees / courts is highly contested. Some Syrians see them as a resource for peace, given the breakdown in the state legal system and the proliferation of corollary conflicts. Others view them as a source of provocation and conflict, by imposing a certain interpretation of one religion on all community groups. Similarly, some Syrians are concerned because they believe that religious arbitration bodies in their area seek to supplant, rather than work with, traditional structures or civil mediation.

4. Civil courts and mediators

In addition to traditional / tribal structures and religious arbitration bodies, most communities have also created civil courts or turned to respected individuals (*wajaht albalad*) as 'civil mediators'.

While those involved in civil initiatives may lack a professional background in mediation, many have informal experience from before the revolution, when they were relied on to mediate civil disputes (e.g. land disputes or defamation cases) as an alternative to the state legal system. This informal arrangement arose because many Syrians were unwilling to apply for justice in civil conflicts through state courts, due to the high costs involved and the perception of widespread corruption within the legal and administrative systems.

Syrian voices – Arbitration between brigades

"I am a member of an FSA brigade. In our area we have a number of different brigades and there were regular problems between members of the different brigades. Sometimes violent. So we established a committee which brings together representatives of each brigade. This committee functions just like a legal court and is responsible for settling disputes between the brigades. Given the previous civilian careers of many brigade members, the committee includes former judges, experts in Islamic traditions and others considered to bring relevant expertise to the process.

"I also get involved in civilian conflicts. Whenever there is a conflict in our area they call on the wisemen. I am one of the wisemen. I listen to both parties... I analyse the problem and decide who is right. I tell the perpetrator what he should do in order to make the situation right again. If he doesn't comply we can tell him that he will be taken to the court we established. The community themselves asked for this court because without courts there is no law and order."

FSA brigade member – Aleppo province

5. Civil Peace Committees

Many communities have also set up standing or *ad hoc* 'Peace Committees'. The main purpose and composition of these committees varies significantly. Some are directly involved in mediating conflict or negotiations, some provide a platform for increasing communication and tolerance between different ethnic and tribal groups present in an area, some seek to reduce conflict between different armed brigades and to create a focal point for civil-military liaison.

The scope of Peace Committees can also vary substantially. Some are established to cover a limited geographical or identity community (e.g. in Qamishli, each ethnic community has established its own civil Peace Committee). Others have the ambition to achieve acceptance at a provincial level (e.g. a civil Peace Committee in Dayr Az Zawr is working to establish hubs or chapters across the province).

Further, while many Peace Committees are made up of tribal leaders, *wajaht albalad* and religious figures, this is not always the case. In many places these new institutions, which have evolved through the context of revolution and conflict, have provided a platform for the involvement of new kinds of actors in community affairs – essentially ordinary but active citizens who are seeking to make a difference for their communities during the Syrian conflict.

6. Local Councils

Local Councils provide an important vehicle to support peace processes initiated by community leaders. They can also provide an important communication link between local communities and the political opposition, as well as with armed brigades aligned with the opposition. Their potential to play this role, however, varies significantly from area to area (dependent on their nature, membership and legitimacy).

The role of Local Councils is especially important in those areas where they are the only immediately identifiable 'structure' with which to work, and the only one which brings together individuals who can organise implementation of agreements (e.g. ceasefires involving the handover of heavy arms in exchange for detainees) or simply coordinate measures that protect the local community. For example, in Al Ladhqiya province, a local council has established a shelter for use by community members during bombardments.

7. Armed brigades as peace guarantors

While they are a key user of violence in Syria, some armed brigades have also played a more positive role, by establishing military courts or by acting as guarantors of the decisions / agreements resulting from conflict management mechanisms. This is because conflict management mechanisms generally do not have sufficient means or authority to execute their judgments, or enforce decisions.

In effect, some armed brigades play the role of legal system, police force and jailor. Some Syrians welcome the sense of law and order that armed brigades can bring to an area when acting as peace guarantor. Others are concerned that there is little oversight over their actions and, as a result, there is a substantial potential for human rights abuses.

It is important to note that there is often no clear distinction between military and civilian initiatives. Given the civilian background of many of those who now hold positions within armed brigades, some military leaders are, at the same time, also seen by communities as respected social leaders. They may, therefore, be called upon to mediate local conflicts – partly in their individual capacity, but also partly because they carry the weight of an armed brigade behind them.

8. Non-aligned intermediaries

When mediating a conflict or negotiating with the Damascus Government, community leaders often use individuals to pass messages or facilitate communication. These 'intermediaries' have been used (e.g.) to find out information about the fate of people who have been arrested, or to open a communication channel as a prelude to local ceasefire negotiations.

Intermediaries are people who are perceived to have good relationships or communication channels with government officials, and are perceived to be neither strongly pro-revolution nor pro-government. Most commonly, intermediaries are retired government officials or military officers. Although intermediaries are not fully 'trusted' by pro-opposition groups, they are nevertheless seen as very important resources for peace, as they are generally acceptable to both government officials and pro-opposition communities.

9. Civil society initiatives

CSOs also make an important contribution to peacebuilding, even if their specific aims and activities are not directly related. This is because the actions of CSOs help communities to cope with the consequences of conflict, and help create the space for tolerance as well as support for local peace processes.

Humanitarian organisations can, in some circumstances, contribute indirectly to improved relationships between groups who may otherwise be in conflict. For example, a group of Christian youth in Damascus are actively involved in delivering humanitarian aid to the displaced people in the town who are primarily Sunni Arabs. Even though they were not directly working for peace, this kind of action provides a powerful example of practising tolerance and coexistence.

Human rights organisations are actively involved in raising awareness of the importance of coexistence across Syria. For example, a group of human rights organisations in Al Hasakah run a range of language and cultural projects, as well as public advocacy campaigns on tolerance. These activities not only help to build confidence between communities in the short term, but also help create the attitudes and experiences essential for better conflict management in the long term.

Some Syrians view youth groups as having been the backbone of the peaceful revolution when it first started, and argue that they still have an important role to play in helping communities to resist violence. Youth groups are considered to be an example of how people from different sects can provide support for each other, as well as an important communication link between different provinces (as they have greater access to, and are more frequent users of, social media).

10. Challenges facing local peace resources

Taken together, the community leaders who work to manage conflict, and the mechanisms they work through, represent significant 'peace resources' within Syria. While they presently focus on alleviating the immediate concerns within their community, they could also make an important contribution to national political negotiations. However, despite their substantial potential impact, these peace resources face a number of serious challenges.

Syrian voices – CSO's working for peace

"Our work includes campaigns:

- to release detainees who have been arrested by FSA battalions and the Sharia Court
- to empty schools of weapons
- to promote car number registration to prevent chaos in liberated areas
- to prevent fighting between Kurds
- against corruption in Aleppo city council."

Civil society member – Aleppo province

Community leaders work in isolation

It is important to note that the impact of any initiative is for the most part geographically limited, and that initiatives working on similar themes are often isolated from each other. Even within the same town, community leaders working to build peace in different parts of the town or amongst different community groups tend not to have developed ways of communicating or collaborating. While there are examples of community leaders coming together in a particular area to establish a civil Peace Committee, these bodies also tend not to coordinate and collaborate with one another.

Substantial protection concerns

The work that community leaders undertake to promote peace exposes them to considerable risks. At a minimum, talking to the 'other side' (especially the Damascus government) can expose community leaders to condemnation from their own community. At worst, community leaders promoting peace face arrest or attack for their activities. The threat of attack can come not only from the government, but also armed brigades broadly aligned with the opposition.

Another dimension of this issue is the uncertain legal space in which peace mechanisms and individual community leaders are operating, especially in contested or Damascus government-controlled areas, where the legal umbrella of the state can still be applied. Those working in CSOs are particularly at risk from intimidation, detention or worse if their activities are felt by local power holders to represent a threat.

Limited space to promote human rights

Some Syrians express concern at the increased reliance of community leaders on religious courts / committees and traditional structures. Their concern is that these mechanisms are disconnected from human rights frameworks, and may not promote the experiences and norms that support due process for all persons, and the enjoyment of basic human rights and freedoms.

Restrictions on the role of women leaders

There are several examples of women becoming actively involved in negotiations between conflicting parties, and lobbying for peace with Local Councils and other community leaders. However, the role of women in peace processes is not widely acknowledged or universally supported. This is because women are traditionally seen as the repository of their families' honour whose primary role is in the private sphere, rather than in public life. Women who are active in public life are often viewed with suspicion by their community members (both male and female). Without greater recognition of, and support to, women leaders promoting peace, their ability to be effective is reduced.

“... I can't be effective in negotiations, because I am a woman. We, women, can only assist resolution of local conflicts within very small parameters. We have a bigger role in relief and development, but we are trying to be more effective [in peacebuilding]”

Woman leader – Damascus suburbs

Table 1: Summary of mechanisms used to promote peace

Type	Description	Assessment
<i>Main mechanisms</i>		
Traditional / tribal structures	Tribal leaders using traditional norms to manage disputes or for arbitration. Important where previously dormant inter-tribal rivalries are re-surfacing.	Work best if the conflict protagonists are all from tribal systems. Some legitimacy has been lost due to association with Damascus government and inter-generational contest for influence.
Religious arbitration bodies	Often sharia committees / courts made up of religious figures that prevent the escalation of violence by ruling on local questions of justice.	Some see them as essential for providing justice, others as source of conflict by imposing strict interpretation of one religion.
Civil courts and mediators	Mediation of difficult issues through civil courts or by respected individuals (<i>wajaht albalad</i>).	Legitimacy comes from family status or professional background. Some have experience of informal mediation from before the revolution.
Civil Peace Committees	Focus on: (a) mediation / negotiation; (b) inter-group communication; or (c) managing conflict between armed brigades and civil-military relations.	Can be standing or <i>ad hoc</i> . Some are established to cover a limited geographic area or identity community, others are working at the provincial level.
<i>Support mechanisms</i>		
Local councils	Often the only structure present in a community, and hence essential for delivering agreements reached. Local Councils also enable communication between communities and political opposition.	The ability of Local Councils to support peace mechanisms varies significantly from area to area, dependent on their nature, membership and legitimacy.
Armed brigades	Used to persuade parties to accept or implement an agreement. Act as legal system, police force and jailor. They have also established military courts.	Some welcome role, others are concerned by limited oversight, and hence substantial potential for human rights abuses.
Non-aligned intermediaries	Pass messages to, or facilitate communication with, the Damascus Government. Most commonly are retired government officials or military officers.	Although not fully 'trusted', generally acceptable to both government officials and pro-opposition communities.
<i>Indirect mechanisms</i>		
Civil society organisations	Help communities to cope with conflict, especially through the work of: (a) humanitarian organisations; (b) human rights organisations; and (c) youth groups.	Most affected by physical threats and uncertain legal space, especially in contested or Damascus government-controlled areas.

5. An agenda for supporting peace

Community leaders, and the mechanisms they work through, represent essential 'peace resources'. This is because they have a significant ability to mobilise their communities in support of peace processes. As a result, they have been able to reduce the level of violence faced, and to hold together the social fabric of local communities whilst filling some of the gaps left behind where the state has withdrawn.

Local peace resources consequently provide an important entry point for support to multi-track and / or bottom-up approaches to ending the conflict in Syria. At the same time, local peace resources require substantial support to maximise their impact both locally and in assistance of national political processes. The following recommendations represent an agenda for such support. They are aimed at National Syrian CSOs working to promote peace, as well as those international government and non-government actors providing support on these issues.

1. *Ensure support is Syrian-led and tailored to the realities in each area.* The methods used for managing and resolving tensions vary across Syria, dependent on the intensity of conflict, the make-up of society and the 'space' that community leaders have to take action. Therefore:
 - a. any support for a specific area must be led by Syrian organisations that operate in it, or have a good understanding of local dynamics
 - b. the support should be tailored to the specific context, including conflict dynamics and existing peace resources.
2. *Assist collaboration by peace resources on long-term strategic action.* Peace resources' impact will be enhanced if they are able to build relationships with each other (especially across conflict divides), and to undertake joint analysis and strategic planning. Therefore:
 - a. external actors should support forums that bring together peace resources from different areas, and use these forums to increase their ability to plan for long-term actions, rather than only focusing on 'quick wins'
 - b. collaboration between peace resources should be developed gradually, so that community leaders from across divides have the opportunity to build trust with one another.

“I have learned that I should not have preconceived ideas about places I do not know. There are differences in how people solve problems. We can't use the same tools and mechanisms in all places”

Participant – Dialogue Forum

3. *Increase understanding by peace resources of inclusive consultation and human rights.* Support for peace resources should focus on strengthening their ability to:
 - a. run consultation processes for all parts of Syrian society when making decisions on how to manage conflicts. In order to make these consultation processes as inclusive as possible, additional measures should be taken to give voice to women and girls. Support in this area should build on the work that is already in train to make national political peacebuilding processes more inclusive
 - b. apply human rights principles in their work. While many peace resources express a desire to operate in line with human rights standards, they do not know what this means in practice, and often encounter resistance to such ideas from their local interlocutors.
4. *Identify innovative ways of protecting peace resources.* Peace resources presently face a range of social and physical threats when taking action to prevent conflict. As such:
 - a. it is critical that those organisations that presently support peacebuilding in Syria develop a shared plan with their Syrian partners for how they will act to reduce the threats faced by local peace resources. This is an important duty of care requirement for any organisation working on this issue
 - b. action should be taken to explain the important work of civil society as peace resources in existing communication / advocacy activities. Communication should target both Syrian communities and those groups (and their supporters) that may see civil society as a threat – for example the Damascus government and some of the more extreme armed brigades.

5. *Support peace resources both inside and outside Syria.*

The scale of the refugee crisis is placing a significant strain on host country resources and is starting to destabilise social cohesion in these places. As such:

- a. consideration should be given to how to strengthen and support the peace resources that exist inside refugee communities
- b. efforts should be made to connect peacebuilding activities inside Syria with refugee communities. Greater connections would: (1) cross-fertilise skills, experiences and lessons learned; (2) help maintain Syria's social fabric; and (3) provide an opportunity for refugees to contribute to peace, and thus help prevent radicalisation (particularly amongst young people).

6. *Increase the coherence of external support.* Programmes that strengthen the conflict resolution skills of peace resources, that mentor them, and that provide a space for more long-term thinking and planning, are essential for maximising their impact. While several organisations are already working to provide this kind of support, it is not as yet strongly coordinated – see table 2 for an overview of the clusters of external support identified during the research for this report. As such:

- a. mechanisms need to be established for joint analysis and strategic planning between Syrian CSOs and their international CSO partners. Such mechanisms will provide opportunities for thinking through how external support: (1) can be more 'conflict sensitive' – i.e. it not only 'does not harm', but also supports resilience to conflict where possible; and (2) can enable peace resources to meet the distinct needs of both men and women
- b. it is important to provide structured dialogue between Syrian actors and their international government partners on how donor support can be more flexible to ongoing changes on the ground, while remaining focused on consistent long-term goals.

Table 2: International support clusters

Cluster	Description
Strengthening of local resources for peace	<p>Trainings in conflict resolution and mediation techniques for community leaders.</p> <p>Joint analysis and planning workshops for community leaders aimed at building confidence between different groups and addressing local conflict dynamics.</p>
Mediation support	Targeted support for mediation and negotiation processes associated with ceasefires, humanitarian access and the exchange of prisoners.
Track II dialogues	<p>Facilitated conversations between civil society leaders from all sides of the conflict to discuss issues such as transitional justice, how to agree a new constitution for Syria, and the shape of political negotiations.</p> <p>Inter-faith dialogue, based on religious norms.</p>
Research and mapping	<p>Analysis of how to more effectively deliver humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes in difficult environments.</p> <p>Analysis of linked policy areas, such as the conditions for successful ceasefires.</p>
Resolving refugee and host community tensions	Support to peace resources based in refugee and host communities to provide early warning of tensions, and to develop mitigating measures.
Support for women's participation in peacebuilding	<p>Creation of opportunities for women leaders to network on, and develop joint actions / demands for, peacebuilding in Syria.</p> <p>Advocacy for the participation of women's civil society representatives in official peace processes and support to women's civil society representatives to play this role.</p>
Support to civil administrations	Creation of opportunities for Local Council members to meet and consult with civil society stakeholders.
Support to the development of civil society	<p>Creation of opportunities for civil society actors from the same areas, or who are working on similar thematic issues, to engage in joint analysis and planning with a view to fostering greater coordination and collaboration.</p> <p>International advocacy on behalf of Syrian civil society actors.</p>

NB – this table only captures that external support to Syria that specifically targets local peace resources.

Annex: methodology & key findings

The research for this report comprised:

- mapping of peace resources in nine Syrian provinces – Al Hasakah, Aleppo, Dar'a, Damascus city, Damascus countryside, Dayr Az Zawr, Hamah, Idlib and Al Ladhqiya
- additional mapping of peace resources (in less depth) in three Syrian refugee communities in urban areas of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey
- a total of 25 focus group discussions and 56 individual interviews across the 12 mapping areas
- conversations with 252 Syrians participants within the focus groups and interviews, including 175 men and 77 women, yielding a gender ratio of approximately 70:30
- interviews with 30 international CSOs providing direct support to Syrian communities / organisations

- a 5-day dialogue forum bringing together 28 community leaders activity engaged in peacebuilding, including from three areas not included in the main mapping – Ar Raqqa, As Suwayda and Homs.

The majority of mapping activities took place in what can broadly be described as opposition-controlled areas and therefore reflects the perspectives of people who are more likely to support the Syrian revolution. That said, the mapping also included people who are equivocal towards the revolution, or who are openly supportive of the Damascus Government.

This report does not mention people's names and does not provide detailed information on the locations where they work. This is a deliberate choice made by project partners, to help protect the participants and their important work.



Table 3: Summary of regional conflict dynamics and how they are managed

Region	Conflict dynamics	Peace resources
Al Hasakah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between: (a) Kurdish and austere Islamic groups; and (b) government forces and opposition-aligned brigades Inter-communal tension Limited competition over oil resources Cross-border dynamics with Iraq and Turkey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil Peace Committees Tribal structures ('wisemen') Civil Society (esp. human rights organisations) Political parties and councils (ethnically based) Civil court mechanisms
Dayr Az Zawr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between: (a) Arab tribes; (b) different austere Islamic groups; and (c) government forces and opposition-aligned brigades Substantial competition over oil resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharia committee <i>Wajaht albald</i> and religious leaders as mediators Civil Peace Committees Local Councils Tribal structures ('wisemen')
Ar Raqqa <i>Limited mapping due to security challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between: (a) different austere Islamic groups; (b) the FSA and ISIS; and (c) Kurdish and austere Islamic groups Pressure on religious minorities Cross-border dynamics with Turkey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunistic use of personal relationships Sharia (and possibly civil) courts
Aleppo and Idlib	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between: (a) Kurdish and Arab groups (Aleppo only); (b) Kurdish and austere Islamic groups (Aleppo only); (c) government forces and opposition-aligned brigades; and (d) different FSA interest groups Aleppo split into segregated areas Cross-border dynamics with Turkey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inter-brigade military court mechanisms Civil Peace Committees <i>Wajaht albald</i> and religious leaders as mediators Sharia and civil courts Local Councils Kurdish political parties and councils Civil Society (humanitarian / human rights)
Al Ladhqiya and Hamah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between government forces and opposition-aligned brigades Inter-communal tension (between pro- and anti-government areas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil Society (humanitarian / human rights) Religious governance committees Civil Peace Committees <i>Wajaht albald</i> and religious leaders as mediators Non-aligned intermediaries
Damascus city and countryside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between government forces and opposition-aligned brigades City fragmented into segregated areas Cross-border dynamics with Lebanon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Council <i>Wajaht albald</i> and religious leaders as mediators Military / Brigade leaders Civil Society Non-aligned intermediaries
Dar'a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fighting / tensions between: (a) Arab tribes; and (b) government forces and opposition-aligned brigades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tribal structures ('wisemen') <i>Wajaht albald</i> and religious leaders as mediators Dar'a council
Urban refugees (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extreme stress on / competition over resources Danger of youth becoming radicalised Stress on socio-political balance (esp. Lebanon) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil Society organisations Reservoir of <i>wajaht albald</i> who have left Syria

An agenda for supporting Syrian peace resources

1. *Ensure support is Syrian-led and tailored to the realities in each area:*
 - a. support for a specific area must be led by Syrian organisations that operate in it, or have a good understanding of local dynamics
 - b. support should be tailored to the specific context in each region, including conflict dynamics and existing peace resources.
2. *Assist collaboration by peace resources on long-term strategic action:*
 - a. support forums that bring together peace resources from different areas, and that increase their capacity to act strategically
 - b. ensure collaboration between peace resources is developed gradually, so that trust can be developed across divides.
3. *Increase understanding of inclusive consultation and human rights:*
 - a. strengthen peace resources' capacity to run inclusive consultation processes, which also give women and girls a voice in decision-making
 - b. strengthen peace resources' capacity to apply human rights principles in their work.
4. *Identify innovative ways of protecting peace resources:*
 - a. organisations who presently support peacebuilding in Syria should develop a shared plan for how they will act to reduce the threats faced by local peace resources
 - b. take action to explain the important work of civil society as peace resources in existing communication / advocacy activities.
5. *Support peace resources both inside and outside Syria, especially:*
 - a. take action to support peace resources that reduce tensions inside refugee communities
 - b. connect peacebuilding activities inside Syria with refugee communities.
6. *Increase the coherence of external support:*
 - a. establish mechanisms for joint analysis and strategic planning between Syrian CSOs and their international CSO partners
 - b. provide structured dialogue between Syrian actors and their international government partners on how donor support can be more flexible to ongoing changes on the ground.

This report captures the results of a mapping of Syrian peace resources conducted between December 2013 and March 2014. CCSDS and PCi would like to acknowledge the effort of the research team inside Syria, as well as the 252 Syrians who contributed to this mapping in very difficult circumstances.

Contact information



The **Peaceful Change initiative** is a not-for-profit network, registered in the UK, with operations in North Africa, the Middle East and the South Caucasus. We work to support more effective management of conflict in societies undergoing significant change, by increasing skills and opportunities for dialogue, inclusion and collaboration.

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The **Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria** seeks to support and strengthen civil society and democracy, and promote the values of freedom, justice and coexistence through the analysis of the current situation and developing and implementing solutions.

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