Conflict sensitive assistance in Syria – new considerations

Peaceful Change initiative

COAR CENTER FOR OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

Introduction

During 14 years of conflict in Syria, the international humanitarian aid community has had to navigate inter-communal tensions, flourishing war economies, a divided aid effort, risks of being instrumentalised by the Assad Regime, risks of lending legitimacy to a range of conflict actors, and an ever-shrinking civic space. Delivering assistance has been fraught with conflict sensitivity challenges and trade-offs. The fall of the Assad Regime fundamentally altered how international assistance can be delivered in Syria. International aid agencies can already work across most parts of the country through a Damascus-based registration. Sanctions regimes are being revised, making engagement with the de-facto government possible. On the horizon, one can glimpse the possibility of moving from humanitarian to development, reconstruction and peacebuilding programming. However, the humanitarian needs in Syria remain vast, as do the peacebuilding needs. As an international community, we must recognise that conflict sensitivity must be a cornerstone of all engagements moving forward.

This report outlines several ways in which international assistance risks doing harm and ways in which international assistance can contribute to peace in Syria. It is based on discussions with Syrian colleagues and partners working alongside international teams to support aid delivery over the past decade. It is intended as a living document to underpin further discussion and inquiry into emerging conflict sensitivity considerations for international assistance in Syria.

The Syrian conflict environment is characterised by incredible diversity and local dynamics across the country that interact with national and international dynamics. This resource outlines broad conflict sensitivity considerations that could apply across the country but may play out in distinct forms in different localities. For example, the current situation in the Northeast of the country characterised by ongoing fighting and the position of that region in a future national setup remains particularly precarious. It may also present specific conflict sensitivity implications for international assistance that should be further unpacked.

Syrian colleagues identified four key needs in the new context that require consideration from a conflict sensitivity perspective:

— **Reconciling civil society ecosystems**: Over the past 10 years, diverse civil society movements and eco-systems have developed in different parts of Syria and outside of Syria. Syrian civil society is therefore likely to be characterised by significant diversity, but also considerable fragmentation. It is critically important that space is maintained for pluralism and organic debate within civil society; how assistance is delivered can contribute to expanding, restricting or distorting this space.

— **Social cohesion**: The Syrian social fabric has been thoroughly torn. How aid is delivered, to whom and where, will play into the perceptions of strength or marginalisation of different communities. It is critically important to be aware of existing divisions and tensions, real or perceived inequalities and grievances, and perceptions of marginalisation between different communities. How assistance is delivered can reinforce these divisions or promote social cohesion and reconciliation.

— **Governance and institution-building**: Syrians are waiting to see how governance will take shape at national, regional, and local levels. It is critically important that we, as an international assistance community, are aware that how we engage in governance assistance in Syria may either contribute to building accountable, inclusive and responsive institutions and approaches or to inadvertently developing fragmented and unaccountable governance that is not inclusive of all Syrians.

— **Reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation:** There is space for international assistance providers to support Syrians in implementing reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation processes. However, it is critically important that we acknowledge that how such processes are supported can either reinforce sustainable and locally driven reconciliation efforts or inadvertently reinforce grievances, create backlash and/or entrench existing divisions.

The report makes suggestions for ongoing research and analysis agendas that can support conflict-sensitive assistance in Syria.

About Peaceful Change initiative

Peaceful Change initiative (PCi) is a peacebuilding organisation striving for a world free from violent conflict. To achieve this, we work with communities and their leaders to confront the drivers of violent conflict. Together, we build the conditions that make sustainable peace possible. We establish deep knowledge and strong partnerships where we work. This allows us to do both the long-term work of building sustainable peace and to respond rapidly and effectively to crises. We work only where we know we can make a real difference to people's lives. Many communities we work with have successfully managed high-risk conflicts and avoided violence, even when formal peace processes have failed.

About COAR

Launched in 2018 to support the delivery of more rapid, efficient, impactful, and accountable interventions in Syria, COAR Global (COAR) is a research consultancy purpose-built to operate sustainably in protracted crises and fragile environments. COAR comprises diverse and far-reaching teams of more than 125 researchers and analysts from over fifteen countries, who speak more than 25 languages, and are equipped with a wealth of experience across fields spanning academia, international development, and implementation. Teams support the design, implementation, and monitoring of peacebuilding, development, stabilization, and humanitarian programs and policy in complex and conflict-affected countries.

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Reconciling civil society eco systems

Over the past 10 years, diverse civil society movements and eco-systems have developed in different parts of Syria and outside of Syria. These eco-systems have developed in response to different opportunities, needs and context stressors where they were located. Therefore, their cultures and networks are likely to be different, even in cases where they share similar aspirations. It is important to note that social and political views are not homogenous across Syrian civil society, but likely shaped by a range of factors, including different experiences of the conflict, social identity, political ideology, and geography. In addition, CSOs who operated in the Syrian diaspora and those who operated inside Syria will have different experiences of the past 14 years, which are not necessarily easily reconciled.

Organisations and activists who come from Alawi communities may feel ostracised in the current political climate. Organisations and activists who have been operating in Idlib in coordination with the "Salvation Government" have access and influence with the de-facto government in Damascus that other civil society organisations do not currently enjoy. Furthermore, in addition to CSOs, several other actors, such as unions and associations that were previously controlled by the Assad government, are expected to enter the civil society space. Syrian civil society, therefore, is likely to be characterised by significant diversity, but also considerable fragmentation.

It is critically important that space is maintained for pluralism and organic debate within civil society; how assistance is delivered can contribute to expanding, restricting or distorting this space.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Incentivising Syrian civil society organisations to work in ways that are convenient to international donors. There is a risk that we deal only with those activists and organisations that share broadly liberal values or "language" – potentially contributing to increased division and fragmentation within the Syrian Civil Society through competition for funds and polarisation. Accusations that organisations that receive international (Western) funding are "Western leaning" and that the liberal values they are promoting, for example around gender issues and the role of religion in politics, are imposed by "foreign agents" may contribute to shrinking civil society space. This may, in turn, contribute to undermining the Syrian population's trust in those organisations and their work. It may also disincentivise organisations that do not identify with "Western" or "liberal" agendas to work with international partners. Similarly, perceived uneven support for women's CSOs over non-women-led CSOs may contribute towards pushback on women's empowerment and participation, through the narrative that those priorities are a foreign agenda, not a Syrian-led one.

Undermining Syrian collaboration and credibility. There is a risk that we incentivise Syrian civil society organisations to work in ways that are convenient to us, as an international society. This may curtail Syrian efforts to collaborate across the different civil society eco-systems and marginalise more informal civil society actors, while also contributing to a loss of legitimacy and credibility between civil society and Syrian communities. Over time, this may contribute to shaping civil society space towards models that better fit within the aid system but are less reflective of Syrian priorities, perspectives and structures. Working with more professionalised organisations may also disempower informal civil society actors, with a negative effect on gender and social diversity and inclusion within the civil society space.

Undermining the development of sustainable government services and local civil society. There is a risk that we rush into new geographical areas in Syria without understanding the civil society (including informal) capacities that already exist in those areas, taking over service delivery instead of strengthening local CSOs, other community-based capacities, or new local administration capacities. This could, over time, undermine the development of sustainable government services and local civil society (including informal structures) capacities, which may negatively impact the social contract.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Investing in mapping and analysis helps us understand the inter-relationships between our partners and other parts of Syrian civil society. We engage with diverse Syrian formal and informal civil society actors. Through dialogue with our Syrian partners and strong coordination mechanisms between international NGOs and donors, we can identify ways of working that support Syrian efforts in building connections across different ecosystems, maintain a pluralistic civic space, and strengthen capacities for Syrian-led approaches. By working in a coordinated and coherent manner, we can deliver assistance in a way that avoids duplication and that responds to priorities and needs identified by Syrian civil society.

Emphasising Syrian-led programming and approaches. We consistently communicate and emphasise the Syrian-led nature of gender work in as many ways as possible. We facilitate proactive and early engagement with male powerholders and allies to mitigate the development of resistance and backlash against women's meaningful political participation. We engage with religious and community leaders to create powerful supporters of women's participation in political activities and overcome resistance.

After decades of dictatorship and almost 14 years of revolution and war, mass displacement, and deep individual and community trauma, the Syrian social fabric has been thoroughly torn.

It is critically important that space is maintained for pluralism and organic debate within civil society; how assistance is delivered can contribute to expanding, restricting or distorting this space.

2

Social cohesion

Most Syrians are currently united in their relief and joy at the fall of the Assad Regime and are prepared to extend some trust to the de-facto government in Damascus to lead a political transition. Since 8 December, there have been powerful examples of spontaneous and Syrian-led efforts at reconciliation. However, there are also plenty of events that show that divisions and tensions lie very close to the surface between different ethnic, religious, political and geographic (e.g. rural v urban) communities, and those who have experienced protracted displacement within or outside the country. The return of Syrian refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) may further trigger tensions along existing fault lines or create new fault lines. For example, there may be suspicion between former neighbours, questions around housing, land and property rights, and challenges around sharing of resources.

The political transition process will throw these divisions into sharp relief, as critical decisions are made about who leads Syria and what kind of country Syria will be moving forward. International assistance (humanitarian, reconstruction, development, etc.) will also be a key trigger for divisions to surface. Beneficiary selections, priorities around types of aid to be provided, and where it will be delivered first will play into the relative perceptions of strength/marginalisation of different communities. It is important to recognise that for many Syrians in areas previously held by the Assad Regime, UN operations were subject to allegations of corruption and politicisation. Recipients of assistance do not always distinguish between one type of aid organisation and another – we are often lumped together as one community of actors.

It is critically important to be aware of existing divisions and tensions, real or perceived inequalities and grievances, and perceptions of marginalisation between different communities.

How assistance is delivered can reinforce these divisions or promote social cohesion and reconciliation.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

The benefits and pace of aid delivery are (or are perceived to be) distributed differently between groups with different social, religious, or political identities in Syria – increasing tensions between them and making a cohesive political transition harder to achieve. This risk is, to some extent, almost inevitable. Distribution that only targets women, for example for capacity-building purposes, without broader community buy-in, may be perceived negatively by men and society more widely and lead to a backlash. Understanding dynamics in granular detail, establishing effective information sharing and coordination mechanisms between international actors, and having strong communication strategies and partnerships with local actors will be critical to help implementers mitigate this risk. A baseline of conflict and social cohesion analysis, especially in high-tension areas, should inform all humanitarian, reconstruction, development, and peacebuilding operations. Clear and transparently communicated criteria for how distribution decisions are made will also help mitigate this risk.

Delivering poorly thought-out efforts to build bridges across divides that end up making things worse. We may rush to well-intentioned efforts to build bridges across the many divides that exist in Syria. However, if these efforts are conducted prematurely or without proper analysis/ understanding and/or facilitation, they will:

— At best, be largely ineffective, leaving problems unaddressed despite having spent significant resources. This can leave communities very cynical about peacebuilding efforts and can undermine the credibility of the Syrian civil society actors that have partnered with international organisations to implement activities.

— Entrench existing inequalities and power imbalances between different groups through initiatives.

— At worst, backfire and potentially worsen tensions and exacerbate existing grievances and inequalities.

Being seen to impose values that are contrary to Syrian cultural, religious or social norms. Initiatives that are seeking to address patterns of inequality, including gender and social inequalities, can be perceived as attempts by international actors to impose values that are contrary to Syrian cultural, religious or social norms if these initiatives are based on external models or approaches rather than being locally designed. This can lead to backlash and place these initiatives and topics on the radar of actors who do not support equality. It can also present reputational and security risks for Syrian civil society and community members who are involved.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Based on a thorough understanding of divisions and gender dynamics in different parts of Syria, we prioritise and plan locally led assistance along Nexus principles, with social cohesion objectives built into how humanitarian, development, and reconstruction support is delivered. We work in a coordinated fashion, based on shared theories of change that are co-designed with Syrian partners for how to build social cohesion. Only in this way can the international community support social cohesion and peacebuilding at the scale needed in Syria.

Model accountability towards partners and transparency in our engagement with Syrian partners to facilitate their accountability towards their constituencies. This will help build and restore trust both in the international community and, more importantly, in Syrian organisations.

Design gender-focused interventions using local cultural reference frames and consistently communicate and emphasise the locally led, Syrian-owned nature of gender work in as many ways as possible. We facilitate proactive and early engagement with male powerholders and allies to mitigate the development of resistance and backlash against women's meaningful political participation. We engage with religious and community leaders to overcome resistance and create powerful supporters of women's participation in political activities.

It is critically important to be aware of existing divisions and tensions, real or perceived inequalities and grievances, and perceptions of marginalisation between different communities.

3

Governance and institution-building

Syrians are waiting to see how governance will take shape at national, regional, and local levels. There are social contracts to be developed at all levels. Some of this work is already taking place locally, with the formation of new local government institutions, and nationally, through shaping a roadmap for the transitional period. What is already known from the new administration's experience in governing northwestern Syria through the Salvation Government in Idlib could be encouraging for service provision and the economy but concerning in many civil matters. A key concern for many Syrians is how inclusive social contracts will be for ethnic and religious minorities, and what status women will have in society. Linked to this is the process of building new institutions in Syria and how to fill technical capacity gaps at all levels of the State. Another question around governance and institution-building is the degree to which new authorities will be willing to collaborate with a broad range of Syrian CSOs in setting priorities and delivering services – and how tolerant they will be of CSOs monitoring their activities and spending. There has already been a strong backlash, on social media and on Syrian streets, against a range of policy announcements made by the de-facto government. The rapid spread of misinformation about the de-facto government's actions has contributed to social tension among the different social components, especially minorities.

It is critically important that we are aware that how we engage in governance assistance in Syria may either contribute to building accountable, inclusive and responsive institutions and approaches or to inadvertently developing fragmented and unaccountable governance that is not inclusive of all Syrians.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Undermining the emergence of accountability as a core element of the social contract at all levels in Syria. We resist requests to be transparent about aid prioritisation, beneficiary selection processes, international staff salaries, admin costs etc. We become resistant to placing Syrians in decision-making positions and integrating diverse Syrian voices into our planning and implementation processes. We diminish or punish negative feedback on the aid that we provide. We work in an international aid bubble that is distrustful of Syrian colleagues. All these actions will undermine the emergence of accountability as a core element of the social contract at all levels in Syria. INGOs will continue to hold much of the resources (and therefore power) in Syria for years to come and, therefore, how we act will set the tone for what is acceptable behaviour; actions that are contrary to the values we seek to promote may undermine our legitimacy and those values.

Inadvertently supporting the emergence of different governance approaches and service delivery methodologies in different parts of Syria to a degree that disrupts state consolidation. Many Syrians see decentralisation as critical to sustainable peace in their country. In support of this aim and, potentially, due to concerns about engagement with the de-facto government in Damascus (even if sanctions are fully lifted), we may be tempted to focus on governance support and engagement at the local level. Unless this is done in a coordinated fashion, there is a risk that different governance approaches and service delivery methodologies emerge in different parts of Syria. Ultimately, international development agencies, and their donors, will need to strike a careful balance between supporting a decentralisation agenda and not leaving the national level with weak institutional capacities that will make it more difficult to forge a coherent state.

Providing de-facto government with un-conditional recognition and legitimacy. While operating within the law, INGOs will, nevertheless be faced with difficult choices regarding the extent to which they want to work with the de-facto government. Working with the de-facto government will inevitably give them a degree of status, recognition and perceived legitimacy. If the de-facto government entrenches itself and turns out to be non-representative, non-inclusive, violent and/or repressive, then the INGOs could be seen to have supported their entrenchment. Those INGOs could ease any criticism if they continued to acknowledge and expose violations. On the other hand, there is still some room to provide the de-facto government with the benefit of the doubt (something that many Syrians seem prepared to give). Should INGOs not engage, the risk is that we, as an international community, miss the opportunity to build trust with and support the de-facto government to work towards positive outcomes that are in line with international norms. Providing the de-facto government with unconditional recognition and legitimacy is a risk; however, recognizing that we equally risk delegitimizing them by a refusal to engage based on the fears of future abuses, or based on an overemphasis on individual incidents. An approach to dealing with this conflict sensitivity dilemma is to continue to adopt a "compliance mindset" to working in Syria. This compliance mindset may not be linked only to legal frameworks but speaks to building a broader understanding of how a particular partner acts within their community, what legitimacy they have, and how that is changing over time.

Inadvertently supporting inequitable and elite-captured economic development. Syria's economy is destroyed, large numbers of state services are essentially nonfunctional, and many of the previous regimes' major economic stakeholders have fled the country or had their assets appropriated. Syria is also now transitioning from a state-commanded pseudo-socialist economic model to a more market-based economy. There are incredible opportunities currently to better the lives of ordinary Syrians. However, there are also major concerns that in supporting Syria's market liberalization donors may reinforce equally harmful and inequitable economies and force an unhealthy privatisation of the economy which ultimately forms Syria's economy into an equally unhealthy elite-dominated system (albeit for different elites). Conflict and context-sensitive approaches to economic development must attempt to prioritize an economic transformation which prioritizes equitability, equal opportunity, and the betterment of the lives of Syria's wider population.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Strong coordination amongst donors and strong coordination amongst INGOs will support joined-up approaches to working with government institutions to develop a harmonised governance system across Syria. Approaches should incorporate elements that strengthen Syrian institutions' capacity to deliver services responsively and inclusively. Support might usefully focus on the development of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security accompanied by a commitment to appropriately resourcing and politically supporting national architectures and institutions leading on these issues. We should incorporate a gender analysis of governance structures, decision-making processes and service delivery in our assessments about how to engage with and support governance institutions at all levels.

Working with civil society and local activists as key partners in monitoring the performance of the new administration and reflecting people's perspectives and concerns. Building capacity and mechanisms for fact-checking and fighting misinformation that depends on civil society might help in both reflecting more accurate voices of people and minimising the impact of misinformation spreading among Syrians.

4

Reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation

Throughout the past 14 years, Syrian organisations and activists have been gathering information on the atrocities committed by the Assad Regime against its citizens, by extremist groups, and by different military factions. There is a clear and pressing need for truth-telling, transitional justice, reconciliation and memorialisation. Understandings of the violence that has played out in Syria over the past 14 years – and how it started - differ significantly between communities living in different parts of Syria. For example, many people living in formerly government-controlled areas know only the former regime's narratives about the conflict. On the other hand, many pro-opposition supporters do not believe that there should be accountability for violations committed by opposition armed groups.

Some local reconciliation initiatives have already been developing. However, addressing the scale of trauma and loss that Syrians have experienced, knitting together the social fabric across all of Syria's components, and embedding a robust social contract requires national-level and comprehensive reconciliation efforts. The de-facto government may struggle to initiate and lead a reconciliation process, as key elements within the administration have, arguably, been involved in atrocities themselves.

There is space for international assistance providers to support Syrians in implementing reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation processes. However, it is critically important that we acknowledge that how such processes are supported can either reinforce sustainable and locally driven reconciliation efforts or inadvertently reinforce grievances, create backlash and/or entrench existing divisions.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Rushing into well-intentioned but poorly prepared reconciliation efforts without adequate analysis or strong enough community relationships. Reconciliation efforts that are conducted prematurely or without proper analysis/understanding and/or facilitation, will:

- At best, be largely ineffective leaving problems unaddressed despite having spent significant resources. This can leave communities very cynical about reconciliation efforts and can undermine the credibility of the Syrian civil society actors that have partnered with international organisations to implement activities.
- Entrench existing grievances and power imbalances.
- At worst, backfire and potentially exacerbate existing grievances.

Reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation initiatives will disclose sensitive information, including instances of sexual and gender-based violence. If not done in a way that is locally grounded, sensitive to gender and social norms around stigma on such issues, with proper preparation and buy-in from key actors and communities more widely, the surfacing of these issues may create a backlash, expose victims to safety and security risks, undermine the effectiveness of the initiative, and contribute to entrenching stigma around these issues.

Reconciliation efforts are seen to apply external models. Applying models of - or approaches to - reconciliation that are imported from other contexts, or trying to build new structures for reconciliation that are not grounded in the local context, may at best be ineffective and at worst undermine existing capacities and confidence in such initiatives.

Reconciliation efforts are seen as biased and unfair on the one hand, reconciliation and transitional justice efforts may be perceived by de-facto government as an attempt to undermine their legitimacy and they may thus disengage at the demands to address violations committed by those affiliated with the de-facto government. On the other hand, if reconciliation and transitional justice processes are implemented that do not address violations committed by those affiliated with the de-facto government or other opposition groups, those grievances will remain unaddressed, which may marginalise those who have real grievances. This may undermine the reconciliation process as it will be seen as unfair or biased.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Work with Syrian colleagues to build an understanding of what outcomes Syrians want from a reconciliation and truth-telling process (or processes). We resist the temptation to impose reconciliation models that have worked in other countries and instead work with Syrian colleagues to build an understanding of what outcomes Syrians want from a reconciliation and truth-telling process (or processes). Based on this, we can share lessons learned from reconciliation efforts in different countries to offer inspiration for the establishment of Syrian-led reconciliation processes.

Openness and flexibility to Syrian solutions. We are open to flexible pacing of reconciliation efforts and offer support to the processes that tackle the things that can be spoken about now (even if this is not the totality of all that has happened in the past 14 years or the past 50 years).

Support Syrian partners in creating an enabling environment for truth-telling and reconciliation. We can do this by supporting work that builds a culture of free speech, civic space, and difficult conversations about what justice and accountability can look like in a new Syrian state. Cultivating civic space and free speech is also a critical enabler of women's participation in public and political life.

There is space for international assistance providers to support Syrians in implementing reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation processes.

Conclusion

Syria may present an opportunity for best-practice roll-out of conflict-sensitive Triple Nexus programming. However, Syria remains a complex context in which to implement programming and a strong commitment to minimising and mitigating the potentially harmful impacts of assistance remains necessary. A key shift, since the fall of the Assad Regime, is that the international aid community now have a wider range of opportunities to support Syrian colleagues and partners to contribute to building and sustaining peace. This is an opportunity that we, in the international aid community, must seize.

Analysis is critical to conflict-sensitive programming. In Syria, the international community could usefully collaborate to produce and share analysis on the following lines of inquiry:

- Updated analysis of key geographies inside Syria where intra-community tensions can be expected to be most severe so that this can inform aid planning and delivery – to minimise conflict sensitivity risks around, for example, aid distribution and diversion.
- Mapping of Syrian civil society as it has developed inside Syria and in the diaspora to:
    - Support international organisations and donors, particularly those who may have only been programming either from Damascus or cross-border in understanding the broader spectrum of civil society organisations that they may encounter from now on.
    - Inform thinking about how the international community can avoid reinforcing fragmentation within civil society and support Syrian efforts at collaboration, reconciliation and networking across civil society eco-systems.
- Gender analysis of civil society organisational structures, capacity, and distribution. This should support: 1) the contextualisation of gender work according to Syrian history and traditions, and cultural and religious references; 2) a proactive and early engagement with male powerholders and allies, including religious leaders, to mitigate resistance and backlash. This can lead to guidance on how to integrate gender-sensitive social cohesion into a range of different types of programming.
- Map Syrian efforts at re-building social cohesion and reconciliation to ensure that international support and harmonises with these efforts.

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