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Civil Society in Exile, Reconciliation and the Future of Syria: The Role of the Emerging Syrian Civil Society in Lebanon

Master's Degree Programme in Democratic Governance:
Human Rights and Democracy in the MENA Region



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**CIVIL SOCIETY IN EXILE,
RECONCILIATION
& THE FUTURE OF SYRIA**

The Role of the Emerging Syrian Civil Society in Lebanon

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Abstract

As the polarised violent conflict in Syria continues without end in sight, Syrians continue to flee into neighbouring countries in search of safety and security. The displacement of Syrians *en masse* into Lebanon over the past few years means that there are now Syrians from a wide variety of socioeconomic, sectarian and ethnic backgrounds, together forming a microcosm of Syrian society in Lebanon.

Within this exiled population, many Syrians with strong entrepreneurial abilities from different political projects have taken the opportunity presented by the relatively enabling civil society environment in Lebanon to set up different forms of civil society groups.

While no official register of these organisations exists, field research in Akkar, Beirut, Bekaa Valley, Shatila, and Tripoli, managed to identify a total of 34 Syrian-led civil society actors across Lebanon. Fourteen of these groups were examined more closely, through interviews and direct observations. The majority of the researched Syrian actors work in response to the suffering of fellow Syrian refugees, while some focus on easing the tension between Syrians and their Lebanese host communities, and others yet again conduct and disseminate research.

The research suggests that Syrian civil society in Lebanon ought not to be misunderstood as merely a form of charitable service provision or temporary pastime activities of exiled Syrians. Rather, the analysis of the research findings suggests that the emergence of a Syrian civil society in exile presents a unique phenomenon. Instead of waiting passively for a ceasefire and a political settlement to be reached, these Syrian groups are seizing the opportunity to develop and grow as civil society actors in exile, hoping to play a role in rebuilding Syria at a later stage.

However, the emerging civil society will require international support in order to sustain its work and develop organically. While the international community can play an important role in this context, it needs to recognise the specific and fragile circumstances in which the Syrian civil society actors are operating. A number of concrete recommendations are derived from the research findings, proposing ways in which the international community could support the emerging Syrian civil society in exile.

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CIVIL SOCIETY IN EXILE, RECONCILIATION & THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

The Role of the Emerging Syrian Civil Society in Lebanon

“We can’t wait till the war is over; we have to start from now to build a society that lives in dignity and independence [...] What really affects our future in Syria and the social cohesion is this solidarity.” - Fadi Hallisso, Basmeh wa Zeitooneh

Introduction

The Syrian civil war and the mass displacement of Syrians since 2011 is generally considered one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of today. Currently, the United Nations estimates that there are at least 7.6 million Internally Displaced Persons in Syria, while more than 12 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, at least 4 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees since the conflict became militarised, with a large number of unregistered individuals to add to those official figures.¹ The vast majority of Syrians resort to seeking safety in the neighbouring countries of Turkey (1,760,000 registered refugees), Egypt (134,000), Iraq (249,000) Jordan (628,000) and Lebanon (1,183,000).²

The largest strain has been placed on Lebanon, one of the smallest and least prosperous countries in the region, where the actual number of Syrians is estimated to reach nearly 2 million, representing approximately 50% compared to the total population.³ As an indirect result, Lebanon is experiencing heightened societal tensions and fears of sectarian conflict.

The Lebanese government has allocated significant parts of the country’s overstretched resources to deal with the influx of refugees by increasing public spending⁴, whilst struggling to handle the situation of increasingly impoverished segments of the Lebanese population⁵. In parallel, different UN agencies and a large number of international and Lebanese NGOs are working to fill gaps and provide emergency relief and services.

¹ OCHA (2015)

² Ibid.

³ Dahi (2014)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ World Bank (2013)

Nonetheless, due to the sheer number of Syrians in Lebanon, combined with unfulfilled international donor appeals and outstanding donations to the UN-led refugee response,⁶ services and shelter are far from sufficient to reach all Syrians in need of protection. The absence of official refugee camps, as a result of an explicit government policy due to fears of the creation of permanent refugee enclaves within Lebanon,⁷ further complicates the work of humanitarian relief agencies and leaves many Syrians in a deplorable situation without shelter, hygiene facilities and basic services.⁸

However, the story of Syrian refugees and exiled communities is not simply one of a population passively waiting for assistance on the receiving end. Over the past few years, the beginnings of a Syrian civil society have emerged in Lebanon – as well as in other neighbouring countries – with a large number of civil society actors filling a variety of functions in the context of the civil war and the ensuing refugee crisis.⁹

Having been previously deprived of an environment allowing actors to operate freely as a civil society under the rule of the Ba’ath party and its 1958 Law on Non-Governmental Organizations¹⁰, many Syrians are now seizing the opportunity afforded by the much more liberal civil society context in Lebanon, to set up different forms of organisations and associations. Some are working relentlessly in response to the suffering of fellow Syrian refugees, while others focus on projects aimed at easing the tension between Syrians and the host communities, and some run projects contributing to peace dialogues and reconciliation efforts or conduct and disseminate research. Syrians are thus able to build the fundamentals of a civil society, in anticipation of a political settlement and ceasefire in their country.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the current and future role of the emerging Syrian civil society in Lebanon. Chapter 1 commences by providing a theoretical backbone regarding the roles of civil society in peace-building and reconciliation. Subsequently, Chapter 2 sets out to provide an overview of Syrian civil society in Lebanon, with a specific focus on the different functions it can and does fill whilst in exile, and the potential roles it

⁶ As of June 2015, the funding gap of the 3PR Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan amounts to over \$1 billion, representing a 78% funding gap. In 2014, the funding gap amounted to 50%, compared to 29% in 2013 and 30% in 2012. See UNHCR (2015).

⁷ Dahi (2014)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Al-Jazeera (2014)

¹⁰ The 1958 Law on Non-Governmental Organizations was passed during the Egyptian-Syrian unity and places limitations on the establishment of organisations with the Ministry of Social Affairs having exclusive authority to decide about granting license to organisations. The government has the right to close any organisation without going through judicial channels, and any activities carried out without legal NGO status is punishable by imprisonment and fines. See for instance Wael Swah (2012), p. 13.

can place in Syria once the peace process is underway. In Chapter 3, a number of challenges and opportunities for Syrian civil society are analysed, and the paper then proposes ways in which the international community can support the emergence of a flourishing Syrian civil society, in ways that are appropriate to the unique context and circumstances of the Syrian civil society in Lebanon.

Methodology

The theoretical backbone of the paper is derived from a literature review and desk-based research of secondary sources dealing with the concepts of civil society, peace-building and reconciliation.

Meanwhile, the key findings and analysis are based on a two-month field research in Lebanon in May and June 2015. During this time, a total of 20 qualitative interviews with Syrian-led civil society actors operating in Lebanon were conducted in Akkar, Beirut, Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and the Shatila camp in Beirut, all of which are locations with high numbers of Syrian refugees and high levels of civil society activity.

All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and aimed on the one hand to extract information needed in order to develop a mapping and typology of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, and on the other hand to bring out these actors' views on their current and future roles, and the key challenges and barriers they face, as well as threats and opportunities linked to their sustainability and future development as Syrian civil society actors.

The field research moreover included direct observations of civil society organisations' activities and the context in which they work. These observations took place in informal refugee settlements, in established Palestinian camps also inhabited by Syrians, in refugee schools and in homes. The direct observations aimed not only at obtaining a better understanding of the contexts in which the Syrian civil society actors operate, but also with the hope of gaining insights into the internal operations, governance structures and underlying values of the organisations.

A number of additional qualitative interviews were carried out with representatives of Lebanese and international NGOs, a civil society expert at the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, as well as academics in the field.

A final component of the paper was a survey for small-sized civil society organisations, aiming to draw out lessons about the most impeding barriers to funding. Twenty organisations participated in the survey, which was carried out in Beirut, Lebanon in May 2015.

Chapter 1: Civil society, peace-building and reconciliation: A Theoretical Background

1.1. Defining ‘Civil Society’

Deriving from political theory, early definitions of civil society are found in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Tocqueville. Later entering the field of sociology, the concept was also dealt with by critical thinkers like Marx, Gramsci and Hegel.¹¹ More recently, the idea of ‘civil society’ has been integrated into human rights and development discourses, and carries an endless number meanings. As such, it is a concept that has undergone many changes over time and across different national contexts,¹² and is perhaps one of the most contested concepts in social sciences today.¹³

While it is outside the scope of this paper to go into a longer discussion of the concept of civil society, its origins and normative concerns¹⁴, the paper will seek to establish a broad understanding thereof, along the following lines. Broadly understood, the term ‘civil society’ is generally accepted throughout political science as an intermediary between the private sector (or ‘market’) and the state. Importantly, civil society is at the same time distinguished from family-life society.¹⁵ Along these lines, Brown et al define civil society as “an area of association and action independent of the state and the market in which citizens can arrange to pursue purposes that are important to them, individually and collectively”.¹⁶ Another oft-cited scholar on the issue, Larry Diamond, adds that civil society is “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, bound by a legal order or a set of shared rules.”

As regards civil society *actors*, one scholar notes that the concept is often taken to narrowly include formal, non-governmental organisations (NGOs).¹⁷ While the term ‘NGO’ itself is a loose and contested concept, it could be defined as “private, not-for-profit organizations that aim to serve particular societal interests by focusing advocacy and/or operational efforts on social, political and economic goals, including equity, education, health, environmental protection and human rights.”¹⁸

¹¹ For an overview of the development of the concept, see e.g. Boose, pp. 310-311.

¹² Bunbongkarn, p. 137

¹³ Vinod, p. 783

¹⁴ It is for instance not within the scope of this paper to discuss concerns about whether the term ‘civil society’ implies a normative theory of civil society as ‘civilised’ and other actors being ‘uncivilised’.

¹⁵ Bunbongkarn, p. 137

¹⁶ Brown et al (2000), p. 275

¹⁷ Orjuela (2003), p. 196

¹⁸ Yaziji & Doh, p. 5

However, such definitions fail to recognise the wide variety of civil society actors, and the variations from one context to another. Instead, Diamond suggests that civil society actors are simply “private citizens acting collectively.” These actors are concerned with public matters, such as “civic, issue-oriented, religious, and educational interest groups and associations”. He adds that “while some are known as nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs; some are informal and loosely structured.”¹⁹ Along these lines, different types of civil society actors may be referred to as voluntary organisations, third sector groups, charitable organisations, grassroots organisations, non-state actors, and so on.

It is not within the scope of this paper to seek to establish the most appropriate terminology to use when referring to the Syrian actors operating in Lebanon. The paper will therefore use the terms ‘civil society actor’ and ‘civil society organisation’ interchangeably to refer to the broad range of registered and non-registered groups, organisations and networks operating as part of Syrian civil society in exile.

1.2. Classifying Civil Society Actors: An Overview of Typologies

As seen in the previous section, civil society actors in any part of the world represent a heterogeneous group of entities, varying enormously according to their purpose, ethos, sector, the scope of their work and activities.²⁰ To make sense of a given civil society landscape, practitioners and scholars have over time developed a number of different typologies for the classification of civil society actors. For instance, some suggest classifying actors based on level of operation, internal governance structures, or main areas of work. Others group actors in accordance with who their beneficiaries are, or whether they are religious or secular. A further typology may be based on actors’ main activities, or whether they are more public or private-oriented.²¹

The Asian Development Bank suggests categorising civil society organisations in accordance with what it refers to as ‘orientation.’ In other words, it groups actors based on whether they are charitable, service oriented, participatory or empowering in orientation. At the same time, this typology further classifies organisations based on their level of operation, i.e. whether its activities are mainly carried out at the community, city, national, or international level.²²

¹⁹ Diamond, pp. 221-222

²⁰ Malena (1997)

²¹ World Bank (2002)

²² Cousins (1991)

The World Bank proposes a typology that divides actors into ‘operational’ vs. ‘advocacy-oriented’ organisations. The former type refers to organisations whose main purpose is to design and implement projects at community, national or international levels, while the latter refers to groups working to raise awareness and disseminate knowledge through lobbying, press work and activist events.²³

Meanwhile, Yaziji & Doh suggest categorising civil society organisations according to whether their main beneficiaries are the ‘self’ or ‘others’, and whether they mainly conduct ‘service’ or ‘advocacy’ activities (similarly referred to by the World Bank as ‘operational’ and ‘advocacy’ activities). Elaborating slightly on the World Bank definition, Yaziji & Doh define ‘advocacy’ organisations as civil society actors that “work to shape the social, economic or political system to promote a given set of interests or ideology.” Within this category, the scholars moreover distinguish between ‘social movement organisations’, which operate to try to change or undermine the existing system, and ‘watchdog organisations’, which are usually less ideologically radical and are generally relatively satisfied with a given system. Once again elaborating slightly on the World Bank definition, Yaziji & Doh defines ‘Service’ organisations (or ‘operational’ organisations) as actors who “provide goods and services to clients with unmet needs.”²⁴

The below matrix illustrates how Yaziji & Doh combine the two dimensions to create a typology of civil society actors:²⁵

Beneficiary	Self	Alcoholics Anonymous Chess clubs	Labor unions Trade associations
	Others	Salvation Army CARE	WWF Amnesty International
		Service	Advocacy
		Type of activity	

An important caveat to note is that in reality, many civil society actors would occupy more than one quadrant of the matrix, and some may even move from one quadrant to another with

²³ World Bank (2002)

²⁴ Yaziji & Doh, pp. 8-9

²⁵ Matrix borrowed from Yaziji & Doh, p. 5

time. In this light, the scholars have added a third type, the ‘Hybrid’ or ‘evolving’ type of actor.²⁶

Irrespective of the parameters utilised to create a typology of civil society actors, there can be no clear-cut classification of the myriad of actors existing in most civil societies. This is no less true for Syrian civil society actors operating in Lebanon, as we shall see later in the paper. Before doing so, however, we will now proceed to a theoretical discussion regarding the role of civil society in peace-building and reconciliation.

1.3. Civil society, reconciliation and peace-building

Over the past few decades, conflict resolution and peace-building have been given a prominent place in the human rights, democracy and development discourses. At the same time, there has also been an increased donor interest from international agencies like the UN, the European Union and the World Bank in working through international civil society and non-state actors²⁷, as these are considered to be better suited for peace work than potentially corrupt, inefficient or sometimes even violent state actors.²⁸

Traditionally, the literature dealing with the role of non-state actors in peace-building and reconciliation tended to be primarily concerned with the role of the ‘international community’ and Western-dominated actors in preventing, diverting or resolving violent conflicts around the world. Through such an ‘interventionist’ lens, local civil society groups were mainly regarded as rather passive ‘local partners’, grantees or aid recipients. Few efforts were given to understanding their specific roles and their significance to peace-building and reconciliation.²⁹

More recently, however, the role of local civil society efforts has been given increasing recognition. It is now being recognised that local groups can be better placed to carry out certain activities linked to peace-building and reconciliation as they are less constrained by narrow mandates, have better knowledge of the local context, and can reach and deal directly with the grassroots population.³⁰ Seen as ‘representative of the people’, there is wider

²⁶ Yaziji & Doh, p. 6

²⁷ Joseph (2014)

²⁸ Orjuela (2005), p. 1

²⁹ Ibid. p. 196

³⁰ Van Tongeren (1998), summarised in Orjuela (2003), p. 196

recognition that local civil society can prove to be instrumental to the implementation of peace agreements.³¹

Along these lines, a former United Nations Secretary General stated in a report that any efforts to strengthen justice, democracy and peace in fragile post-conflict settings can only be effective if they include civil society and victims.³² Later in the report, he critiqued international post-conflict assistance along the following lines: “Too often, the emphasis has been on foreign experts, foreign models and foreign-conceived solutions to the detriment of durable improvements and sustainable capacity.” He unambiguously advocated for the mobilisation of in-country expertise and meaningful participation of local civil society: “Civil society organizations, national legal associations, human rights groups and advocates of victims and the vulnerable must all be given a voice in the [post-conflict] processes.”³³

Several research efforts concur, and emphasise that local civil society needs to be given space in reconstruction efforts since such work involves “changing identities and group boundaries; the difficulties of communicating across boundaries; justice and reconciliation; the distribution of property, land and wealth; the writing of history; the rebuilding of trust; and the capacities for new political systems.”³⁴ A large international NGO with offices around the world similarly acknowledges that “the key is that [local peace processes] are not [ours], and in order to be lasting, they must come from the grassroots.”³⁵

However, some observers emphasise risks linked to civil society involvement in peace-building and reconciliation efforts. For instance, some have highlighted that increased levels of tension, violence and oppression can result when a group “confronts resistance or inadequate accommodation processes”.³⁶ While this risk ought to be acknowledged, there are few scholars who perceive it as a strong enough argument for civil society to be excluded from playing a central role in peace-building activities.

Meanwhile, some scholars have also questioned the impact and effectiveness of civil society involvement in peace-building. They hold that it is extremely difficult to determine impact and measure the effect of small-scale local activities on the wider high-level conflict

³¹ Orjuela (2003), p. 197

³² United Nations (2004), p. 1

³³ Ibid, p. 6-7

³⁴ Pouligny, p. 505

³⁵ Riak, p. 504

³⁶ Development Assistance Committee, p. 44

dynamics.³⁷ However, while it is clear that civil society actors alone cannot transform civil war and violent conflict, the wide range of literature in the field continues to emphasise that peace can neither be agreed nor sustained at the top-levels only. In order to succeed, peace-building needs popular involvement and so-called ‘multi-track diplomacy.’³⁸ As one scholar explains, “the multiplicity and variety of actors involved in generating conflicts requires a similar multiplicity of [actors] to resolve them.”³⁹

Thus arguing that local civil society is crucial to peace-building and reconciliation, the literature further identifies a number of different roles for civil society to play at different stages of the so-called ‘conflict cycle’,⁴⁰ as we shall now see.

1.3.1. Civil society contributions at the prevention stages

Firstly, civil society has a critical role in the *prevention stages of the conflict cycle*, addressing the root causes of conflict. Here, civil society is seen to generate trust and cooperation across different sections of society; over ethnic, religious and political divisions. It can contribute to inclusiveness and debate.⁴¹ It can help to alleviate social tensions through facilitation of dialogue and other group activities that encourage mutual understanding. For instance, a comparative study from India, examining both violence-prone cities and more peaceful ones demonstrates that activities encouraging inclusiveness and dialogue across ethnic and religious societal divisions helped prevent violence.⁴²

Through education and training on conflict resolution and mediation, civil society can help strengthen capacities among people themselves to manage differences and mediate conflict.⁴³ Some argue that better conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level may help generate increased trust for resolution mechanisms at higher levels.⁴⁴

Furthermore, at the prevention stage of the conflict cycle, civil society can address structural violence, monitor and promote human rights in communities and strengthen human security. Through relief services aimed at development, it can generate improved living conditions and

³⁷ See for instance Anderson & Olson (2003), pp. 76-78

³⁸ See for instance Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999)

³⁹ Barnett & Campbell

⁴⁰ See for instance Barnes, p. 27-31

⁴¹ Putnam (1992), quoted in Orjuela (2003), p. 197

⁴² Chandhoke, p. 102

⁴³ Barnes, p. 28; see also Joseph (2014)

⁴⁴ Orjuela (2003), p. 208

financial situations of people. This can help address underlying frustrations, including economic and political marginalisation, thus lowering the risk of conflict between groups.⁴⁵

1.3.2. Civil society contributions in early prevention and inside war zones

At the *second stage of the conflict cycle*, civil society may play an important role by monitoring and analysing early warning signs of conflict. It can raise awareness and draw attention to critical situations and help address them before violence breaks out. For instance, civil society can mobilise local constituencies and facilitate peaceful dialogues through problem-solving workshops, thus helping to reduce violent response and create ‘zones of peace’ within a larger conflict area.⁴⁶ Civil society can run programmes to empower women, to make them more likely to act as agents for change by playing a role in bringing partners together through dialogue, negotiations, as well as in later reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts.⁴⁷

Some civil society organisations may engage in advocacy activities and policy-dialogue to mobilise political will in favour of de-escalation, peace negotiations and political reform. By conducting research about the costs of war and the potential solutions to the conflict, monitoring and recording human rights abuses, some civil society actors can help build a constituency of peace. They can use research to lobby politicians and create a movement demanding de-escalation and peace negotiations. Research efforts can also raise awareness of the conflict amongst international actors who can assert pressure on relevant political leaders.⁴⁸

Moreover, civil society groups that operate in or near conflict zones to provide humanitarian assistance to fellow nationals can help build trust, peace and strong relations between different parties of a conflict. By showing compassion through humanitarian relief, civil society groups can help lay the foundations for peaceful relations between people from different societal groups in the present and future.⁴⁹

Research has shown that civil society-led common approaches to joint efforts to improve socio-economic difficulties help create a shared sense of identity. Hence, relief and development efforts play a role beyond concrete development impact; they can foster confidence-building and enable people from different groups to identify and work for

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 197

⁴⁶ Barnes, p. 28

⁴⁷ Development Assistance Committee, p. 46

⁴⁸ Orjuela (2003), p. 208

⁴⁹ Orjuela, p. 197; Barnes, p. 28

common goals.⁵⁰ According to three oft-cited scholars in the field of peace-building, “evidence suggests [there is] a valuable consequence of [...] local professional people [taking part] in relief operations. Such people can be critical elements for rehabilitation.”⁵¹

As an example, a Jaffna-based civil society group used theatre performances to provide a space for people from the two warring factions – the Sinhalese and the Tamil – of the prolonged civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) to meet with one another. Sinhalese women were taken to Tamil refugee camps to bring gifts to children and thus gained a better understanding of the hardships endured by the Tamil and the far-reaching impacts of the conflict. Meanwhile, the exchanged helped the Tamil to see that not all Sinhalese are ‘enemies’. In the long term, both groups were thus familiarised with people from other ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, and longstanding prejudices and ignorance could be bridged, which helped towards mitigating further conflicts and violence.⁵²

Along the same lines, the provision of education for children during conflict and in refugee settings is of undisputed importance, as it is acknowledged that disrupted schooling and a lack of safe spaces for children who have witnessed brutality and war can increase instability in society at present and in the future.⁵³

1.3.3. Civil society contributions towards negotiations and settlements

At the *third stage of the conflict cycle*, civil society has the potential to play a role in peacemaking, and in supporting negotiations and settlements. First of all, civil society organisations can participate in the so-called ‘multi-track diplomacy’ and facilitate popular involvement in official peace processes, making sustainable peace more likely.

Moreover, through advocacy and training, civil society can help influence the ambitions of leaders.⁵⁴ For instance, during the Sri Lankan civil war, civil society groups provided training for local politicians, allowing ‘bitter enemies’ to meet in negotiation workshops which succeeded in creating “a space to exchange and find common ground and shared interests.”⁵⁵

The Development Assistance Committee further notes that local civil society is in a good position to work with traditional authorities and mechanisms, which in many cases exercise

⁵⁰ Development Assistance Committee, p. 48

⁵¹ Sørensen et al, p. 24

⁵² Orjuela (2003), p. 203

⁵³ Development Assistance Committee, p. 48

⁵⁴ Orjuela (2003), p. 197

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 203

considerable influence over national political leaders.⁵⁶ In South Africa during the post-apartheid era, civil society programmes for community leaders and officials helped foster a better understanding of processes and political institutions and allowed leaders to develop their interests in representing their constituents' interests.⁵⁷ Also, through public dialogue, civil society can feed into a negotiation agenda that reflects the people's vision for the future, ensuring that their grievances are fully acknowledged and addressed in the process.⁵⁸

1.3.4. Civil society contributions after ceasefire and political settlement

Lastly, at the stage where *ceasefire and a political settlement have been reached*, civil society can play the role of endorsing reconstruction and reconciliation, preventing reoccurrence and supporting post-settlement peace-building.

As one scholar observes, "wars destroy not only buildings and bodies but also trust, hope, identity, family and social ties." Local civil society and community-based groups with knowledge of the backgrounds and cultural references of the people and groups having experienced violence can help rebuild societies in ways which state actors and international agencies might not.⁵⁹ Another scholar adds that the role of civil society in building trust is particularly crucial in cases when groups of people have been socialised to view 'the other' as an opponent and 'enemy'.⁶⁰

Through a project implemented in eastern Croatian and Bosnia affected by the war in the 1990s, a civil society project identified 'listening' as a powerful tool for peace-building and conflict prevention. Through the project, more than 2,000 people affected by the war were interviewed and thus had a channel through which they could express their grievances and liberate themselves from some of their pain, fear, anger or similar emotions. Independent evaluators found that that project helped support change and contribute to reconciliation between different groups of the society.⁶¹

Furthermore, it is widely recognised that civil society can play an important role in building and consolidating democracy and 'good governance' after conflict, complementing other parts of the democratic programme. At local level, civil society actors can hold the local authorities accountable, push it to fulfil its responsibilities and to ensure the rule of law is

⁵⁶ Development Assistance Committee, p. 45

⁵⁷ Development Assistance Committee, p. 47

⁵⁸ Rupesinghe, p. 127

⁵⁹ Pouligny, p. 496

⁶⁰ See e.g. Orjuela (2003), p. 197

⁶¹ Barnes, pp. 39-40

implemented.⁶² They can also act as a mechanism for political mobilisation and participation of the wider population, and can help disseminating democratic ideas and norms.⁶³

In this context, there is a central debate in civil society literature discussing whether civil society develops before or after democratic transition processes. At any rate, both sides of the debate agree that the existence of a civil society is “a crucial phenomenon that takes shape and becomes influential during processes of democratic transition.”⁶⁴ Some would argue that civil society is important in its own right for a well-functioning democracy.⁶⁵ It is important, however, that civil society organisations themselves “embody democratic values of diversity and tolerance within its membership”⁶⁶ and be run in a democratic way if they are to effectively challenge state authorities to be democratic.⁶⁷

Against this theoretical backdrop, the paper will in the next chapter seek to identify the ways in which Syrian-led civil society in Lebanon may play different roles conducive to reconciliation and peace-building, in the long and short terms. Before doing so, however, the next section will provide a brief overview of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, and will seek a classification of these actors through several different typologies.

Chapter 2: The emerging Syrian civil society in Lebanon

2.1. Overview of Syrian civil society in Lebanon

The displacement of Syrians *en masse* into Lebanon over the past few years means that there are now Syrians from a wide variety of socioeconomic, sectarian and ethnic backgrounds, together forming a microcosm of Syrian society in Lebanon. Within this exiled population, many Syrians with strong entrepreneurial abilities from different political projects, usually from the middle classes in big cities like Aleppo and Damascus, have taken the opportunity afforded by the relatively enabling civil society context in Lebanon to set up different forms of organisations and associations.⁶⁸

Some of these individuals had been actively engaged in civil society activities that cropped up in Syria following the March 2011 revolution, and when the uprising became militarized

⁶² See for instance Pouligny, p. 496 and Diamond (1997) as quoted in Makumbe, pp. 305-306.

⁶³ See for instance Bunbongkarn, p. 141

⁶⁴ Boose, p. 311

⁶⁵ Cousens & Kumar (2001), quoted in Orjuela (2003), p. 197; see also Orjuela (2005), p. 3

⁶⁶ Boose, p. 311

⁶⁷ See for instance Makumbe, p. 312

⁶⁸ Dahi (2014)

they turned to civil society relief programmes across the country, before eventually fleeing to Lebanon when the security situation had become too dangerous. Others had had no prior experience with civil society projects whatsoever, but suddenly found themselves unable to sit and do nothing in the face of the humanitarian crisis endured by fellow Syrians in Lebanon.

As a result, Lebanon has seen the flowering of a Syrian civil society across the country, with a wide range of civil society organisations emerging.⁶⁹ While civil society activism had been long thwarted in Syria and people being prohibited from setting up nonprofits, watchdog organisations and advocacy groups, exiled individuals have over the past four years been able to take advantage of the relatively enabling civil society environment and legal framework in Lebanon. This provides an opportunity for Syrians to try to build the fundamentals of a civil society and to prepare for the post-conflict future, in anticipation of a political settlement and ceasefire in their country.⁷⁰

While there is no official count of the Syrian-led civil society organisations existing in Lebanon today, primarily due to the fact that many of them have been unable to register as legal entities, field research conducted managed to identify a total of 34 Syrian-led civil society actors, all based in Lebanon (see list in Annex 1). Out of these 34 organisations, 14 were studied in detail through extensive interviews, and in many cases through direct observations. The key characteristics of each organisation are summarised in the below table:

⁶⁹ Dahi (2014)

⁷⁰ Al-Jazeera (2014)

Table I: An overview of selected Syrian-led civil society actors in Lebanon

	Organisation name	Year founded	Location of Headquarters	Main geographical focus of work	Nationality of founder(s)	Main staff nationalities	Key funding sources
1	Alphabet for Alternative Education	2013	Beirut / Bekaa Valley	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian, with Lebanese founding members	Private / Family donations
2	Basmeh wa Zeitooneh	Mid-2012	Shatila, Beirut	Shatila, Beirut & Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian, with Lebanese founding members	Bilateral development aid, funds from partner NGOs
3	Decostamine	2014	N/A	Different parts of Lebanon	Syrian	Syrian	N/A
4	XXXXX	2001	Beirut (but planning to relocate to Jordan)	Inside Syria	Syrian	Syrian & European	Bilateral European development aid, funds from partner NGOs
5	Jusoor	Mid-2011	Beirut	Worldwide	Syrian	Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian	Syrian diaspora (Standing donations, Crowdfunding, Private sector CSR)
6	Kayany Foundation	Mid-2013	Beirut	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian/Lebanese	Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian	Private donations of high net-worth individuals & through auctions
7	Mobaderoon	2009	Various locations	Inside Syria, Lebanon & neighbouring countries	Syrian	Syrian	Bilateral European development aid, funds from partner NGOs
8	Nuon Organization for Peace-Building	2012	Beirut	Beirut, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian	Private / Family donations & Small funds from private foundations
9	Sawa for Development & Aid	End of 2011	Beirut	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian, with Lebanese founding members	Private / Family donations & project funds from partner NGOs
10	Sonbola	2014	Bekaa Valley	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian	Partner NGOs
11	Spark of March	2011	Beirut	Inside Syria	Syrian	Syrian	None
12	Syrian Eyes	2013	Beirut / Bekaa Valley	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Syrian, Lebanese	Private / Family donations & small project funds from partner NGOs
13	Yasmine Syria	2012	N/A	Bekaa Valley, Lebanon	Syrian	Mainly Syrian	Private / Family donations
14	Watan	2011	Beirut	Lebanon & other neighbouring countries	Syrian	Mainly Syrian	Syrian diaspora (donations, Crowdfunding, Private sector CSR)

2.2. Classification of Syrian civil society in Lebanon through different typologies

Drawing on elements from the widely acknowledged NGO typologies outlined in Chapter 1, this section will suggest a number of typologies enabling the classification of Syrian civil society actors in exile. The aim is to provide a good understanding of the Syrian civil society landscape in Lebanon.

Firstly, it would seem helpful to classify actors in accordance with their *key approaches and activities*, under the two categories ‘operational’ and ‘advocacy-oriented’ borrowed from the World Bank typology. As seen earlier in this paper, ‘operational’ refers to organisations whose main purpose is to design and implement projects or deliver services at community, national or international levels, and ‘advocacy-oriented’ refers to groups that work to raise awareness and/or promote a given set of interests through lobbying, press work and activist events.⁷¹ The following table classifies the Syrian-led organisations in accordance with this typology.

Table II: Typology of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, by key approaches & activities

Key approaches/activities	Description	Organisation names
A) OPERATIONAL		
Training on peace-building and reconciliation	The actor’s main mission is to promote peace-building and reconciliation activities within the exiled Syrian community in Lebanon. This is done through structured conversations, trainings, workshops, and/or through education and other forms of interaction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuon Organization for Peace-building • Mobaderoon
Service provision – Health and/or psychosocial support	The organisation provides Syrian refugees with health care services and medication, and/or psychosocial services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Syrian Eyes • Watan • Yasmeen Suriya
Service provision – Education	The organisation provides Syrian children with informal education, and/or provides them with support in order to attend formal Lebanese education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabet for Alternative Education • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Jusoor • Kayany Foundation • Sawa for Development • Sonbola • Watan
Service provision – Livelihoods	The actor provides Syrians in Lebanon with income generation activities and/or vocational training and/or scholarships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Jusoor • Sawa for Development

⁷¹ World Bank (2002)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian Eyes • Watan
Community dialogue – Host community focus	One of the main aims of the organisation is to ease tensions and foster peaceful relations between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decostamine • Nuon Organization for Peace-building
Community dialogue – Syrian focus	One of the main aims of the organisation is to bring together Syrians from across the political spectrum to find common ground and gain a better mutual understanding and respect; encouraging people from across the political spectrum to channel their frustrations through other means than violence and solve conflict peacefully.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobaderoon • Nuon Organization for Peace-building
B) ADVOCACY-ORIENTED		
Research & Publications	The actor conducts research linked to the Syrian conflict and/or refugee crisis and presents findings in publications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX • Spark of March • Watan
Monitoring of human rights violations	The organisation gathers information about human rights abuses linked to the conflict in Syria, in order to raise public awareness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuon Organization for Peace-building • Spark of March • Watan
Media work & journalism	The actor works through traditional and/or social media to raise awareness of a certain topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX • Spark of March • Watan
Regional or international advocacy	The actor utilises regional or international advocacy channels to make its voice heard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuon Organization for Peace-building • Watan
Network-building	The actor interacts non-overtly with like-minded organisations to create a network based on political goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX • Watan

While most of the organisations thus tend to fall under *either* operational *or* advocacy-oriented, we see that Nuon Organization for Peace-building and Watan fit well under both types, meaning that they could be referred to as ‘hybrid’ organisations.

A further common NGO classification seen in this paper looked at the *level of operations*. In the context of Syrian civil society, all of the *operational actors* work primarily at the local community level (albeit many of them in multiple locations and thus might identify themselves as working at the national level). The two organisations identified as heavily *advocacy-oriented actors* (xxxxx and Spark of March) mainly work at the national or regional

levels. Meanwhile, the work of the *hybrid actors* identified above (Nuon Organization and Watan) takes place both at the local and national levels.

Another way to classify Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon is by their *official status*, which is something that may affect their ability to carry out their work in Lebanon. Indeed, the official status of an actor tends to affect its ability to attract local and overseas funding to sustain its work, and determines how likely it is to run free of risks and government interference.⁷² The table below classified the Syrian civil society in Lebanon in accordance with precisely official registration status.

Table III: Typology of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, by official status

Type	Description	Organisation names
Registered NGO in Lebanon	The organisation has registered under the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations as an official NGO. Organisations in this category may have an operational advantage vis-a-vis non-registered actors in that they face fewer risks of having their work hampered, and they are freer to collaborate with international NGOs, UN agencies. They can also apply for and receive foreign and local funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphet for Alternative Education • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Kayany Foundation • Nuon Organization for Peace-Building • Sawa for Development • Sonbola
Registered company in Lebanon	The organisation has not registered as an NGO under the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations. However, it is operating legally in Lebanon due to its official status as a non-profit company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX
Registered NGO abroad	The organisation has not registered officially under the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations. However, it is operating legally in Lebanon due to its official NGO status in another country, usually in Europe or North America.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jusoor • Watan
Registered company in Syria	The organisation has not registered officially under the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations. Rather is registered as a company in Syria, rendering it a legal entity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobaderoon

⁷² The risks and challenges related to non-registration are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Non-registered entity

The organisation has not registered officially under the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations. As such, it is not operating as a legal NGO in Lebanon. For organisations in this category, it can prove difficult to collaborate with international NGOs, UN agencies, or to apply for foreign funding.

- Syrian Eyes
- Yasmeen Suriya
- Decostamine
- Spark of March

The above classification suggests a certain link between the type of work conducted by an organisation and its official status. The majority of ‘operational’ organisations engaged in relief and service provision are registered as official NGOs in Lebanon or abroad (with the exception of Syrian Eyes and Yasmeen Suriya). Meanwhile, most of the ‘advocacy-oriented’ or ‘hybrid’ organisations have either opted for a status as a registered company, or have remained non-registered (except Nuon Organization).

Syrian civil society in Lebanon can also be classified in accordance with their *organisational structure*, focusing on the one hand on whether the entity operates through paid staff, volunteers, or both, and on the other hand whether it operates from an official office space with a clear team structure. The matrix below illustrates this classification:

Table IV: Typology of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, by organisational structure

	Official office space & clear team structure / closely knit team	Ad hoc office spaces & clear team structure / closely knit team	No physical office space & loose network of individuals operating separately or together
Paid staff only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX 		
Paid staff & volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Kayany Foundation • Mobaderoon • Alphabet • Sawa for Development • Watan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jusoor • Sonbola 	
Volunteers only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuon Organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian Eyes • Yasmeen Suriya 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decostamine • Spark of March

The above classification suggests that while Syrian-led organisations strive for an official office space and clear team roles, several of them are lacking one or the other. All organisations, except one (XXXXX), work through volunteers to sustain its work, while several also have a few paid staff members to coordinate the work.

Another way to classify Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon is according to whether they are overtly *taking a political stance* or *operating as a neutral entity* outwards, as depicted by the below table.

Table V: Typology of Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon, by political position

Position	Description	Organisation names
Overtly political	A political position regarding the Syrian conflict lies at the foundation of the organisation's work, and informs its mission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • XXXXX • Spark of March • Watan
Officially apolitical	The organisation does not affiliate itself with any political camp. While individual team members may have moderate to strong political opinions, these do not inform the mission of the organisation nor its partnerships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabet for Alternative Education • Basmeh wa Zeitooneh • Decostamine • Jusoor • Kayany Foundation • Mobaderoon • Nuon Organization for Peace-Building • Sawa for Development • Sonbola • Syrian Eyes • Yasmine Syria

The majority of organisations are thus approaching their work in a politically neutral way. Some may wish to avoid being constrained by the interests of a political group, and others may realise that being associated with a certain political agenda could hamper their work and sever their relationships with beneficiaries, funders and other partners. It is worth noting that the organisations that were earlier identified as ‘advocacy-oriented’ or ‘hybrid’ organisations are also classified as ‘overtly political’, with the only exception of one organisation (Nuon).

Lastly, it would have been interesting to create a typology based on the *internal governance structure and organisational values* of the Syrian organisations in Lebanon. However, due to the limited scope of the research, it was not possible to fully determine which ones have developed fully democratic structures allowing for grassroots participation in decision-making, accountability and transparency.

What did emerge clearly from the observations and interviews, however, was that the management level of most organisations used a discourse of solidarity, inclusiveness, collaboration and peaceful relations. The management-level of most organisations also appeared to aspire to a democratic and inclusive organisational governance structure, but may not always be able to adhere to those principles in practice due to the highly limited recourses available to them combined with the very fragile and volatile context in which they operate. At any rate, there would certainly be space for further research on this topic.

2.3. Syrian civil society and its current contribution to peace-building and reconciliation

As seen in Chapter 1 of this paper, various theoretical viewpoints and empirical examples suggested that civil society actors can contribute positively towards peace-building and reconciliation in a number of different ways, at all stages of the conflict cycle.

The emerging Syrian civil society in Lebanon appears to be no exception; the findings of the field research suggest that most, if not all, of the organisations contribute, in a direct or indirect way, to peace-building and reconciliation efforts. The following section provides a non-exhaustive summary of those activities.

2.3.1. Training and capacity-building related to peace-building

The most direct contribution to peace-building and reconciliation by Syrian civil society in Lebanon is done by organisations who run workshops and community activities aimed at problem-solving, mediation and reconciliation. Nuon Organization, for instance, runs training sessions aimed at promoting tolerance among different Syrian constituencies. The

organisation moreover provides training for individuals to become strong civil society actors, with the hope that they will later contribute to peace-building in future Syria.

The interviewee from Nuon Organization explained that one of the overarching aims of the organisation is indeed to empower people to one day lead the country in accordance with principles of freedom and democracy, within the framework of an independent and fair justice system. In her own words: “We thought that the Syrians should work to unify their efforts to achieve civil peace as a preparation for more effective work in the next stage”.⁷³

Within schools, Nuon Organization provides peace education to children, and runs workshops about peace and tolerance. The organisation raises awareness about small and medium sized arms and works to prevent children from being sent to participate in the war. Several other organisations, including Alphabet and Kayany Foundation, also integrate specific elements of peace-building and mutual understanding into educational activities for children.

Another organisation that conducts training and capacity-building is xxxxx. As one of the most long-standing Syrian civil society organisations founded already in 2001⁷⁴, xxxxx relocated to Lebanon towards the end of 2011 when the revolution escalated into armed conflict. In exile, the organisation immediately started to work on capacity building for effective democratic leadership. It works to strengthen the role of civil society in the current war and to empower local leaders to cope with challenges of transition and peace-building in the future Syria. The organisation works through a network within Syria and in neighbouring countries, and aims at creating a network of trust and a stronger civil society.⁷⁵

2.3.2. Creating mutual understanding and easing tension

In the Syrian context, addressing reconciliation between different socio-political, religious and geographical groups will be of crucial importance for the future of the country. The best placed people to address these issues are Syrians themselves, who have an understanding of the various structures of the Syrian society. Several of the Syrian-led organisations in Lebanon are already engaging in a range of activities aimed at generating trust and cooperation across different sections of society in exile; over ethnic, religious and political divisions.

⁷³ Interview with Salloum

⁷⁴ XXXXX started its work in Syria in 2001, with a focus on political liberalisation and human rights. It worked in whichever areas it was possible to do so, for instance in women’s rights or environment, with the underlying objective of promoting political liberalisation and human rights.

⁷⁵ Interview with Anonymous

Mobaderoon, whose primary mission is to build trust, understanding and support peaceful coexistence between Syrians, brings together people from diverging ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. It thus aims to address, and bridge, longstanding prejudices and promote better understanding between groups through open communication channels. As an example, they have held workshops with people from the entire spectrum; ranging from Islamists to seculars, people from disadvantaged backgrounds to wealthy families, and so on. The organisation does not provide any new information and does not try to influence people's opinions. Rather, Mobaderoon's sessions are aimed at encouraging people interact, express themselves and listen to one another.

At the end of a typical 4-day workshop aimed at creating inclusiveness and debate, they have seen good results, with people interacting in a friendly way across socio-political boundaries. One example was a workshop where high levels of tensions were felt between a lady in support of the Syrian regime on the one hand, and a young man from the opposition on the other. At the end of the workshop the two participants had found constructive ways to deal with their differences.⁷⁶ By allowing Syrians with opposing political views to familiarise themselves with one another's reasoning, Mobaderoon is thus hoping to build peaceful relations and reconciliation.

Other groups focus specifically on easing tension between refugee communities and the Lebanese host communities. Decostamine, a group that takes its name from the Syrian decongestant drug with the same name, started carrying out its work as a response to increasing tensions and violent clashes between Syrians and Lebanese host communities in areas like Tripoli, Baalbeck and Akkar where the density of Syrians is high. While prejudice against Syrians is commonplace, Decostamine runs community activities to "show the human face of Syrians"⁷⁷ and to demonstrate that most Syrians do not wish to fight but rather live normal lives as doctors, architects, etc.⁷⁸

2.3.3. Monitoring potential outbreaks of violence between refugee communities

While international NGOs and UN agencies are reported to have very limited presence on the ground, according to most interviewees, the Syrian civil society has nearly constant presence through their camp coordinators and volunteers.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mohamed

⁷⁷ Interview with Yousef

⁷⁸ Interview with Yousef

These organisations are therefore well placed to monitor human rights violations and analyse early warning signs of conflict between and within refugee communities. They are thus able to raise awareness and draw attention to critical situations and play a role in addressing them before violence breaks out. Given their strong commitment and their thorough understanding of cultural factors among fellow Syrians, the Syrian-led organisations are well placed to facilitate discussions and find solutions to problems before they escalate into conflict.

2.3.4. Humanitarian relief and service provision

Many of the Syrian civil society groups providing humanitarian relief and services to fellow Syrians are led by educated middle classes from major Syrian cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. Their beneficiaries typically represent families from less privileged backgrounds having seen their home towns completely destroyed by the war.⁷⁹ This creates an opportunity for organisations to combine their relief work with a reconciliation element between socio-economic and political groups. As one civil society activist suggests, “humanitarian relief provided by Syrians is the doorway for future reconciliation amongst the people themselves.”⁸⁰

Along those lines, several other interviewees also perceived that Syrians working together as providers and beneficiaries of services helps create and maintain peaceful relations across societal boundaries. A number of respondents reported separately that recipients of relief services often expressed their appreciation over the fact that the service providers were fellow Syrians, and some reported that the most vulnerable groups of refugees, in particular women, were more prone to opening up and speaking to civil society representatives if they knew they were Syrian.⁸¹

In addition to provision of food, water and clothing, several organisations also provide medical assistance and access to medication (e.g. Syrian Eyes, Watan, Yasmeen Suriya) and make medical referrals (e.g. Kayany Foundation). Yasmeen Suriya, whose director used to run her own clinic in Syria for the rehabilitation of children, provides psychosocial support and parental guidance to Syrian refugees.⁸² In cases of emergencies, such as storms and fires, most of the organisations mobilise quickly to intervene and provide relief and protection.

⁷⁹ Al-Jazeera (2014)

⁸⁰ Massa Mufti, Director of Sonbola, quoted in Al-Jazeera (2014)

⁸¹ Interviews with Ibrahim, Talamas, Suqi, among others

⁸² Interview with Ghanem

Syrian-led organisations, with their in-depth knowledge of Syrian social structures, explained through several interviews that they are well placed to provide relief services to refugees in that they know how to deal with the head of each camp, the so-called ‘shaweesh’, in a more effective way than international organisations or the UN might, thereby reducing the risk of additional tensions or conflicts breaking out within or between camps. Respondents explained that INGOs and the UN tend to do all their relief work through the ‘shaweesh’, who is often a corrupted leader that provides services only to the families he likes or who belong to his socio-political group. Needless to say, this creates significant tensions and discontent. Syrian-led organisations tend to circumvent the ‘shaweesh’ and deliver services and goods directly to each family, ensuring that no one is discriminated against.⁸³

As one respondent phrased it, “most of the UNHCR aren’t Syrian, not even Lebanese, so they don’t know the people and what’s happening [in the camps] They just came from Europe or from the US and try to work here and this doesn’t make sense when there are many Syrian-led organisations who can do the work”.⁸⁴ Another interviewee said: “The big organisations don’t always know the needs, or don’t always respect the needs [of Syrians].”⁸⁵

These perceptions are shared with scholars in the field who cautions against the potentially harmful impact associated with using external resources in work aimed at rehabilitation and relief: “Excessive use of external resources can foster dependence and passivity. It can also become a new object of contention, inadvertently fueling the conflict.” If these activities are instead carried out by local organisations, relief and rehabilitation can be done with a long-term perspective and promote sustained and comprehensive reconciliation.⁸⁶

In short, the relief work carried out by Syrian civil society in Lebanon should thus not be misunderstood as merely short-term provision of “food, medicine and blankets”. Rather, by providing humanitarian assistance and showing compassion to fellow nationals, the Syrian civil society can help build trust, peace and strong relations between people from different parts of society.

2.3.5. Livelihoods activities and income generation

Several organisations integrate an element of livelihoods activities in their work. Syrian Eyes, for instance, are running a farming project while Basmeh wa Zeitooneh runs workshops to

⁸³ Interview with Ghanem; Interview with Al-Sheikh; Interview with Anonymous.

⁸⁴ Interview with Salloum

⁸⁵ Interview with Ghanem

⁸⁶ Aall (1996)

provide women with financial support for their families and restore their sense of dignity. These workshops present women with training opportunities and the opportunity to sell their products.

We saw earlier in this paper that such community efforts aimed at improving the living conditions of others can help address underlying frustrations, including economic and political marginalisation.

2.3.6. Providing Educational Opportunities for Children

The provision of education for children in refugee settings is of undisputed importance. We saw in a previous section that it is widely acknowledged that disrupted schooling and a lack of safe spaces for children who have witnessed brutality and war can increase instability in society. Throughout the field research, many of the Syrian-led organisations in Lebanon highlighted the importance of filling the education gap for as many Syrian children as possible. In doing so, they are not only hoping to ensure the short-term welfare of the children, but also consider education as one of the key areas of work that can help prepare for the future of Syria.⁸⁷

A Syrian teacher explains that she can really notice how volatile the psychological state of the children is due to the amount of violence some of them have seen: “They have seen a lot of things they should certainly not see...they are no longer kids.”⁸⁸ Syrian teaching staff may therefore be better placed as they have shared the experiences of the war with the children, and can better address their difficulties and make sure the children feel a sense of belonging and find ways to deal with their frustrations.⁸⁹

The Syrian organisations’ education work takes different shapes, ranging from provision of alternative education to children who are unable to attend Lebanese schools (Alphabet, Basmeh wa Zeitooneh, Sawa) to preparation of children for the Lebanese curriculum (Jusoor) and homework support (Kayany Foundation; Jusoor). Kayany Foundation in collaboration with the American University of Beirut has brought portable schools to a number of informal refugee settlements in the Bekaa Valley. Currently running three schools, they are about to open a fourth one. Like several other organisations, Kayany complements the educational

⁸⁷ Interview with Haidar; Interview with Ibrahim

⁸⁸ Interview with Jusoor teaching staff 1

⁸⁹ Interview with Jusoor teaching staff 2

opportunities with additional elements including medical referrals and sessions dedicated for children with special needs.⁹⁰

While on the one hand providing scholarships for Syrians around the world, Jusoor also works to prepare Syrian children for enrolment into formal Lebanese schools. There are many barriers to this, including lack of transportation between the camps and schools, the volatility of refugee families' situations, child labour, and gaps between Lebanese and Syrian curricula, including language barriers.⁹¹ There is also a lack of social acceptance of Syrian children in schools, both by teachers and students. Jusoor's school director explains: "It is still strange for both sides. They don't feel that [the Syrian students] should be there."⁹² Jusoor works to address such issues through integration programmes in order to contribute towards a more peaceful atmosphere in schools.

Basmeh wa Zeitouneh provides educational opportunities in the Bekaa Valley and in the Shatila camp in Beirut. In the latter, education is open to both Syrian and Palestinian children, thus building bridges between the two communities living in Shatila. Meanwhile, Syrian Eyes provides cultural education to children in the Bekaa Valley, in order to help preserve the Syrian cultural heritage and folklore. Through storytelling, music and game, the organisation gives refugee children a sense of security and peace whilst also learning about their country of origin.⁹³

Alphabet for Alternative Education provides Syrian children with educational opportunities to ensure there is no "lost generation", and to prevent children from going to war.⁹⁴ Alphabet operates 10 schools in the Bekaa Valley and thus reaches around 1,200 children. Treating the children with respect and ensuring that their rights are protected, the Syrian teaching staff also tried to look after the children's' mothers and provide them with a sense of security amidst uncertainty and war.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Interview with Suqi

⁹¹ Interview with Jesri et al

⁹² Interview with Salem

⁹³ Interview with Al-Sheikh et al

⁹⁴ Interview with Ibrahim

⁹⁵ Interview with Ibrahim

2.3.7. Research and media work

Some Syrian-led organisations work to provide alternative media and information sources. Through their work, they aim to support the freedom of access to information and to encourage genuine debate over the future of Syria.⁹⁶

As an example, Spark of March has been producing newspapers, documentary movies and TV reports, documenting human rights violations and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria and in refugee communities ever since the revolution. The aim is to raise awareness of the actual situation which might not be seen through official media, and to send a message that “this should never happen again”, thus promoting popular resistance to war and conflict.

Towards the end of 2013, Spark of March fled Syria and arrived in Beirut where they established a research centre and published a book in collaboration with other Syrian researchers and scholars. The most recent work of Spark of March focuses largely on demonstrating examples of judicial and democratic institutions set up by the Syrian opposition in cities within Syria, to give examples of what democratic governance in Syria could look like in the future.⁹⁷

Organisations such as Nuon Organization for Peace-building documents human rights violations, with the aim of mobilising communities against further conflict and spreading a non-violence culture.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, xxxxx is continuously engaged in research activities and makes its publications available online and in hard copy. It thus aims to keep citizens in Syria and in exile engaged in debates concerning the transition and the building of a future, peaceful and democratic Syria that respects the rights of all.⁹⁹

2.3.8. Collaboration between actors

In terms of interaction and collaboration between organisations, several interviewees reported that they work in partnership with one or more Syrian-led organisations. By joining forces, they reported that they can complement each other’s work and draw on each other’s strengths. While some of these partnerships seemed fairly permanent, others appeared to be more of an *ad hoc* nature, with organisations coming together to support one another in case of emergencies, such as storms and fires. One respondent mentioned that a Syrian civil

⁹⁶ Interview with Darwich

⁹⁷ Interview with Darwich

⁹⁸ Interview with Salloum

⁹⁹ Interview with Anonymous

society network called the ‘Syria Peace Network’ has been created by Syrian-led organisations. However, the network has been dormant for a longer period of time and would need to be further strengthened. Participating organisations will need to find time and resources to make the project take off.¹⁰⁰

One interviewee emphasised the importance of collaboration between Syrian organisations through the following sentence: “[My organisation] is part of the growing Syrian civil society, which can only grow and become a force through cooperation, partnership and shared knowledge.”¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, a few organisations have taken collaboration a step further by helping to channel funding from larger registered organisations to non-registered ones.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, only one of the interviewed organisations, a group working on advocacy and research, mentioned that they are cautious about collaborating with others as they are not sure who they can trust. The organisation therefore prefers to work independently.¹⁰³

Many of the Syrian-led organisations also mentioned collaboration with Lebanese NGOs in different aspects of their work (e.g. Sawa, Syrian Eyes, Nuon Organization). Typically, those Lebanese NGOs would be of a slightly larger size and might provide Syrian organisations with project funding. Meanwhile, several organisations also mentioned some form of collaboration with international NGOs or UN agencies. Two organisations reported having worked in collaboration with Oxfam GB (Syrian Eyes, Sawa for Development), one cited Human Rights Watch (Sawa) and one mentioned Save the Children as a key collaboration partner (Kayany Foundation).

Among the Syrian-led organisations working on education, some of them have joined the UNHCR and UNICEF led education working group (e.g. Jusoor, Kayany Foundation among). This working group aims at coordinating education efforts by civil society and monitoring relevant policy updates. Some organisations moreover work in collaboration with other Syrian-led organisations (e.g. Sawa and Jusoor sharing education facilities).

Several organisations expressed disappointment with the work of INGOs and UN agencies, due to their lack of presence on the ground¹⁰⁴, for making use of Syrian civil society’s support when needed but not returning any favours, for taking too long to react in cases of

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Bokern

¹⁰¹ Massa Mufto of Sonbola, quoted in Al-Jazeera (2014)

¹⁰² E.g. Basmeh wa Zeitooneh and Watan channel funds to small Syrian-led organisations. Similar funding umbrellas were also mentioned in the interview with Nuon Organization but without specifying names.

¹⁰³ Interview with Anonymous

¹⁰⁴ Several interviewees cited this, but all wish to remain anonymous.

emergencies¹⁰⁵, for failing to keeping their statistics updated, for only collaborating with very few organisations,¹⁰⁶ and also for sometimes taking credit for work done by Syrian organisations¹⁰⁷.

Chapter 3: Syrian civil society in exile and the future of Syria

3.1. Future opportunities for Syrian civil society

The previous chapter explored how the work and presence of Syrian-led civil society actors in Lebanon feed into peace-building and reconciliation in different direct and indirect ways. In addition to these current roles, Syrian civil society actors in exile also have an important function to play in the future of Syria, if they are able to sustain their activities and develop as strong civil society organisations. Indeed, as seen in Chapter 1, civil society can fill several different roles in negotiations, reconciliation and peace-processes once ceasefire and a political settlement have been reached.

Indeed, the majority of interviewed Syrian-led actors appear to consider their future role within civil society to be a given. Many of the founders and staff of the Syrian organisations in exile had been actively engaged in civil society activities that cropped up in Syria following the 2011 revolution¹⁰⁸, and others had even been active in civil society before the revolution to whatever extent possible,¹⁰⁹ and perceive their role as one that will certainly not finish once their time in exile comes to an end. Only one of the interviewees – a woman with no prior experience with civil society projects but who suddenly found herself unable to do nothing in the face of the humanitarian crisis endured by fellow Syrians – seemed to signal that her role as a civil society actor is temporary for the duration of the war.¹¹⁰

Many interviewees mentioned that, while they hope that relief work aimed at helping people living in miserable conditions will not be needed for much longer,¹¹¹ they envisage adapting and taking their projects home one day. As one interviewee added: “We work because we

¹⁰⁵ Interview with three separate respondents who wish to remain anonymous.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Salloum

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Ibrahim

¹⁰⁸ Cited by e.g. Basmeh wa Zeitooneh staff, Syrian Eyes founders, Spark of March

¹⁰⁹ Cited by e.g. Nuon Organization, XXXXX, Yasmeeen Suriya, Mobaderoon

¹¹⁰ Interview with Ibrahim

¹¹¹ E.g. Interview with Al-sheikh et al, Interview with Suqi

want to work with our fellow Syrians and build a future together [...] The internationals come and go and don't always seem to care if they change something or not.”¹¹²

In this sense, Syrian civil society actors are potentially there for the long-term, and our understanding of these actors ought therefore not be underestimated as merely a form of charitable service provision or temporary pastime activities of exiled Syrians. Rather, the research findings suggest that the Syrian civil society in exile presents a unique phenomenon; we are witnessing the emergence of Syrian civil society groups who have an opportunity to grow as civil society actors whilst in exile, hoping to play a role in rebuilding Syria and giving shape to a Syrian civil society back home, one a peace-process is underway.

A longstanding Syrian civil society activist, Wael Sawah emphasises the critical role that Syrian civil society returning from exile will have in rebuilding Syria in the future:

“Civil society is what guarantees the sustainability of any [peace] agreement. Civil society has been responding to Syrians’ needs and raising awareness about the situation in Syria from the beginning of the revolution. Civil society [...] took photos and published them to the entire world; helped refugees and those displaced; defended human rights; documented violations against human rights and crimes against humanity. [...] The world needs civil society to be involved.”¹¹³

Nevertheless, Syrian civil society is also faced with a number of challenges which need to be addressed if they are to remain active and sustain their work, both during their time exile and during future peace-building and reconciliation in Syria. The next section explores those challenges.

3.2. Challenges facing Syrian civil society

3.2.1. Challenges related to the Lebanese legal and policy framework

Firstly, most Syrian actors are facing difficulties vis-a-vis the Lebanese government, in terms of registering legally. Although Lebanon traditionally has an enabling legal framework for civil society, the government has started imposing stricter restrictions on civil society activities as a reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis.¹¹⁴ The Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations, which only requires newly formed groups to *notify* the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities of their creation (Article 2), is often misapplied. For instance, the government

¹¹² Interview with anonymous

¹¹³ Open Democracy (2014)

¹¹⁴ International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (2015)

might take several months, or even years, to deliver a receipt of notification, without which associations are not able to enjoy the rights afforded to registered entities.¹¹⁵

A receipt of registration is supposed to be provided within 30 days of registering as a new organisation (according to a Ministerial circular from 2006)¹¹⁶, yet many of the interviewed Syrians reported that it took them up to two years to receive their papers – which meant that some were operating without legal protection for a long period of time. Without legal status, organisations are exposed to additional risks in their work, in that they are operating without legal protection and can have their work halted at any point. Without legal registration, they are also unable to carry out essential NGO activities such as opening a bank account or applying for international funding. The delay in receipt of notification, thus poses detrimental challenges on organisations' work and operations.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, others have not been able to register at all. Interviewees explained that if anything in the organisational description mentions 'Syria' or 'refugees', the registration process is usually halted,¹¹⁸ and the organisation needs to change their vision, mission and in some cases their organisation name, in order to be recognised by the Lebanese government. The government moreover requires organisations to present a number of Lebanese individuals as members of their governance structures in order to register. While this did not present much of a problem for some of the organisations, others are still unable to register as they do not have contacts that are willing to lend their names to the registration process.

Another pressing issue facing Syrian civil society staff is the non-renewal of Syrian nationals' residence permits by the Lebanese government. This means reduced mobility of staff, as they may be stopped at any time at check-points or simply whilst walking in the street. Generally, staff members of a number of the organisations cited this as a source of stress which held them back from performing their work to the best of their abilities. One of the respondents explained that around 80% of the members of his group are now lacking legal papers, which means that they have had to put all of their work on hold for the time being.¹¹⁹

As a consequence of the non-renewal of papers, Syrian organisations often see their volunteers and paid staff leave Lebanon to relocate to a European host country instead, where

¹¹⁵ International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (2015)

¹¹⁶ International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (2015)

¹¹⁷ International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (2015)

¹¹⁸ Interview with al-Sheikh et al

¹¹⁹ Interview with Yousef

they would be able to live ‘legally’ as asylum seekers and refugees in accordance with the law.¹²⁰ Needless to say, this makes it difficult for Syrian actors in Lebanon to grow and develop as strong civil society organisations, and makes it difficult to pursue strategic planning when you are never sure who is going to still be with you the next day.

3.2.2. Funding challenges

The most oft-cited challenge mentioned by Syrian organisations is the lack of access to funding and other resources, despite the fact that the Lebanese 1909 Law on Associations places no legal barriers to resources whether these come from domestic or international sources.¹²¹ Very few organisations mentioned that they have managed to secure sufficient funding to develop their organisational structure, while many of interviewees reported that they are struggling on a daily basis and mainly operating on personal and family contributions and volunteer time. A number of interviewees even reported the discontinuation of other Syrian-led organisations due to the lack of funding, or due to withdrawn funds for political reasons.¹²²

While the non-registered organisations are struggling to access funding for obvious reasons, those Syrian actors who can apply for funding explained that it is nearly impossible to successfully compete for funds as they have no prior experience with grant-writing, as Syrians.¹²³ Others also felt that international funding tends to divert their attention away from the work that they feel is most crucial, thus making them donor-driven rather than empowered agents for change.¹²⁴ Suddenly, funds may crop up for projects targeting specific issues according to donor ‘buzz words’ such as gender or environmental preservation, which “in the reality on the ground might not at all be the best place to start”.¹²⁵

With very limited funds, Syrian organisations are unable to compete with INGOs regarding salary scales. The same risk goes for the management of Syrian organisations, who are dependent on sufficient funds to be able to uphold their organisations. No matter how strong their dedication to building a flourishing civil society and sustaining their work, they may one day be forced to look consider establishing a for-profit business or seek a paid job elsewhere, if they are no longer able to receive even the most modest of salaries from their organisation.

¹²⁰ Interviews with Tallas, Interview with al-Sheikh et al, Interview with Yousef, Interview with Haidar et al

¹²¹ International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (2015)

¹²² Interview with anonymous Watan accountant

¹²³ Interview with Salloum

¹²⁴ E.g. Interview with Talamas

¹²⁵ Interview with Nistrine

This means that the emerging Syrian organisations risk losing some of their best staff – who after all need to find a way to make a living for themselves and their families whilst in exile – to INGOs. This renders Syrian civil society organisations weaker due to the ‘brain drain’ effect, and leaves them with less of a prospect to grow as an organisation.¹²⁶

3.2.3. Operational and governance-related challenges

As regards challenges to Syrian organisations’ governance, some of the actors have been unable to develop fully democratic structures allowing for grassroots participation in decision-making, accountability and transparency. While it may be the intention of the management to achieve democratic governance within, they are not always able to develop their organisations due to the limitation of staff and resources. They may find themselves having to take arbitrary decisions due to the fragile context within which they operate in which emergency situations are common.

In terms of their day-to-day operations, several of the interviewed organisations also lacked an office space to work from. Several organisations use their homes or public cafes for their team meetings and desk work, which they felt made their work more difficult.

In terms of joint operations, actors explained that they are finding collaboration difficult for several reasons. First of all, Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon are not always aware of one another, and do not know exactly who does what, and in which geographical regions.¹²⁷ Secondly, collaboration is rendered difficult by the lack of staff capacity to engage outside of the organisations. Indeed, as pointed out by several respondents, they hardly have the time and resources to do their own work, let alone discuss with others about potential areas for collaboration.¹²⁸ This leads not only to a lack of coordination which might cause organisations to double up their work, but also presents a wasted opportunity for different actors to exchange best practices and learn from one another.

3.2.4. Potential challenges in future Syria

Most of the current challenges faced by Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon are likely continue to present difficulties to their future work in Syria. In addition, the actors will inevitably also need to adapt to an entirely new legal framework in post-conflict Syria, whatever such a framework might end up looking like.

¹²⁶ Interview with Talamas; see also Fadi Hallisso, quoted in Open Democracy (2014);

¹²⁷ Interview with Salloum

¹²⁸ Interview with Ghanem, Interview with Ibrahim, Interview with Haidar et al

In terms of day-to-day operations of organisations, and their legal obligations vis-a-vis the state, chances are that any future Syrian framework will be more inhibiting than the Lebanese counterpart. Meanwhile, as regards future funding availability, the international community might start pouring in funds for Syrian civil society in the future, but the national legal framework may or may not impose restrictions on foreign funding.

Overall, actors will therefore need to demonstrate flexibility in terms of organisational structures and operations, and need to have a strong determination to continue their work in Syria despite potential new challenges that may arise, if they are to successfully resume their activities as strong civil society actors in a different context.

3.3. International Support in Overcoming Challenges

The research findings have thus shown that most of the Syrian-led civil society actors are demonstrating remarkable resilience in their work despite the number of challenges they are facing. Most of them also envisage a role for their organisations in rebuilding future Syria. However, if they are to sustain their current work and develop as strong civil society actors that can play a role in peace-building and reconciliation in Syria, they will require support from the international community in overcoming some of the challenges seen in the previous section.

While international support to civil society in post-conflict transitions has been trending for several decades, a new approach is required in the case of Syrian civil society. In the past, international actors have tended to encourage the sudden formation of a civil society in the aftermath of war and conflict, mainly by pouring in funds and encouraging the creation of new NGOs shaped through a ‘Western mould’, carrying out activities that donors deem important. However, in most cases, such attempts have proven ineffective if not futile, as such efforts do little more than create ‘empty boxes’ rather than allowing for the organic growth of meaningful civil society entities that are well aware of the underlying social and political life in a certain context.¹²⁹ In this light, the following sub-sections attempt to identify how the international community can adopt a new approach to its work with civil society and peace-building by supporting the organically emerging Syrian civil society in exile in a variety of context-appropriate ways.

¹²⁹ Pouligny, p. 505

3.3.1. Increased availability of resources and more local ownership

First of all, the international community does of course have a role to play in ensuring that sufficient funding is available for the emerging Syrian civil society to sustain their activities. Indeed, the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, in their guidelines on conflict, peace and development co-operation, notes that international donors can effectively support peace-building efforts by “identifying and supporting key actors and mechanisms dedicated to peace and reconciliation at the community level.”¹³⁰

In doing so, however, it will be important for international actors to take a non-interventionist approach and ensure that Syrian actors have relatively high degrees of ownership over these funds. We saw in a previous section of this paper that Syrian actors in Lebanon often felt that while funds are overall very scarce, international funding moreover tends to divert actors’ attention away from the work that they feel is most crucial, thus making them donor-driven rather than empowered agents for change. Also drawing on examples from the Balkans and Afghanistan, it seems clear that donor agendas can cause the sudden appearance of programmes that are “completely disconnected from the core issues faced by the [people] of those regions and even more from their cultural references.”¹³¹

Along the same lines, when foreign donors ask local actors to adjust their agendas and activities to suit those of the donors’ benefactors and their domestic constituencies,¹³² local actors may eventually lose their initial identity and accountability vis-a-vis their beneficiaries. Indeed, local NGOs who receive funding from international donor agencies often need to jump through hoops and dedicate disproportionate amounts of time to donor reporting and other forms of paperwork, rather than focusing on generating results on the ground.

The international community should bear this in mind as it formulates its support to the emerging Syrian civil society, and ought to give the local actors more ownership and put more emphasis on civil society accountability vis-a-vis the beneficiaries rather than to the donor. A major research study on the role of civil society in peace-building suggests that donors use peer review processes and more reasonable benchmarks to ensure ‘horizontal accountability’ rather than over-emphasising CSO accountability to the donor.¹³³

¹³⁰ Development Assistance Committee, p. 48

¹³¹ Pouligny, p. 499

¹³² Makumbe, p. 315

¹³³ Barnes, p. 93

3.3.2. Recognising the existing local knowledge and capacity

The emerging Syrian civil society in exile presents a unique opportunity for the international community to support an organically grown civil society that can play a role in future Syria. These existing actors must not be neglected in favour of an internationally generated civil society formation at a later stage.

As an example, research on civil society and peace-building efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that while international efforts managed to create more than 400 new NGOs in the post-war transition period, mainly due to a huge funding input, Bosnian citizens tended to perceive Western civil society building programmes as “bizarre and alien efforts that do not take into account Bosnian history and society.”¹³⁴ The international civil servants working on the programmes aimed at setting up the new Bosnian NGOs were often ill-equipped to grasp the dynamics of social, political and cultural contexts. Eventually, this meant that the well-funded NGOs which suddenly appeared in society were not necessarily able to bring about real change as they were not always driven by concern for the people.¹³⁵ As such, the whole process was largely perceived as an externally driven process, and as a researcher notes, “The mushrooming of local NGOs does not lead per se to the establishment of a healthy civil society.”¹³⁶

In the case of Syrian civil society, an international effort starting from scratch to build a new civil society in the post-conflict period will hence not be desirable or required. Instead, international actors can recognise the existing local knowledge and resources make support available to the emerging Syrian civil society already growing organically in exile. While researchers on the post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina civil society project noted that the international rhetoric on ‘local ownership’ were mere words, with international actors taking the lead in a top-down model as usual,¹³⁷ the support to Syrian civil society needs to move away from asymmetric structures and give real ownership to the Syrians.

On a similar note, international actors who wish to support the emerging Syrian civil society, needs to recognise and gain a better understanding of the large diversity and richness of local actors. As one scholar observed in regions of Eastern Congo and Sudan, international actors tend to look for structures that correspond to civil society actors in Europe and North America, looking for homogeneity and a ‘common view’. However, as another scholar points

¹³⁴ Belloni, p. 169

¹³⁵ Belloni, pp. 170-178

¹³⁶ Belloni, p. 178

¹³⁷ Pouligny, p. 501

out, common views are neither necessary nor desirable for solving the long problem of defining a new social contract following conflict.¹³⁸ Thus, in supporting the emerging Syrian civil society, the international community needs to be open to lending its support to actors of different shapes and sizes.

In short, rather than viewing Syrian staff as low-cost manpower, or actors who have the potential to learn from international colleagues and imitate their organisational structures, Syrian actors should be recognised as capable strategic partners who are deeply rooted in the complex political, social and cultural dynamics of the Syrian war. It must be acknowledged that it is the Syrians themselves who best understand the dynamics of their own situation and who can identify ways to resolve conflicts and rebuild their country. By overlooking existing local knowledge and resources, international actors often fail to contribute positively to peace-building processes and reconciliation efforts.

Along the same lines, international NGOs operating in Lebanon ought to better utilize the unique position of Syrian organisations. Local actors ought not to be viewed merely as potential contractors or recipients of small grants, as actors that can handle some of the ground work when the INGO/UN agency is unable to send staff for security reasons. Rather, INGOs ought to show modesty, patience and flexibility towards local organisations and recognise that the Syrian actors – not the INGOs – are the main actors in the context of the Syrian crisis.¹³⁹ In this context, it emerged clearly from several interviews that Syrian organisations had valuable feedback and advice to share with INGOs, however they were cautious in voicing these as they worried about the repercussions. Hence, an open dialogue between international NGOs and Syrian organisations in exile would be commendable.

3.3.3. Adapted funding schemes

Donors need to better understand the nature of Syrian civil society in exile in order to be able to support them. Several Syrian-led actors mentioned during interviews that, due to the extremely fluid situation they are working in which is subject to constant change, existing funding schemes are inappropriate for them. The time span between applying for funding and receiving a grant is often so long that when the money eventually arrives, the context on the ground may have changed so much that the project is no longer very relevant, or it may no longer be possible to undertake the exact project outlined in the proposal. To overcome this problem, funders could either shorten the application process and reduce the amount of

¹³⁸ Pouligny, p. 498-499

¹³⁹ Pouligny, p. 508

required paperwork significantly, or do as one researcher suggests and “shift their focus from ‘short-term project thinking’ to longer-term ‘process thinking’”¹⁴⁰, giving increased flexibility to grantees to use their funds as appropriate in accordance with the situation on the ground.

Another difficulty for Syrian organisations that are just starting out, are co-funding requirements. These present a catch-22 situation in which no donor would like to be the first to provide financial support. Applying for co-funding is moreover a more laborious and overly bureaucratic process which takes up a lot of time and human resources from already over-stretched organisations.

Another concrete way for donors to make the funding of Syrian civil society possible is to start launching small-grants programmes for unregistered entities and small grassroots groups in exile, who have little to no experience with financial and narrative reports and due diligence processes. One of the interviewed organisations had a success story to share in terms of funding. Despite not being registered legally at the time, a bilateral aid donor took a chance and allocated a relatively large sum of money, allowing the organisation to develop its structures and services significantly. The director urges donors to do the same for other small Syrian-led organisations in exile: “There are many young groups here in Lebanon who are fighting for a cause. They have the will to make a difference and they want to work, but no one wants to support them. It’s not logical!”¹⁴¹

One Syrian-led organisation further recommended that larger grants could be given to some of the larger-sized registered Syrian organisations in exile, who could then act as an umbrella organisation supporting smaller and non-registered groups.¹⁴² This would not only increase the capacity of smaller organisations through transfer of funds, knowledge and peer-learning, it would also create increased collaboration and a sense of a cohesive Syrian civil society in exile.

Moreover, core-funding grants ought to be introduced to help all Syrian organisations in exile build a strong administrative and operational structure.¹⁴³ This would boost civil society actors’ knowledge, skills and professionalism and help strengthen the institutional capacities

¹⁴⁰ Barnes, p. 93

¹⁴¹ Interview with management level staff, wishing to remain anonymous for privacy reasons

¹⁴² Open Democracy (2014)

¹⁴³ Open Democracy (2014)

of the organisation.¹⁴⁴ Without such support, they are unlikely to develop as civil actors and will continue to conduct their work “in survival mode” – on an *ad hoc* and purely reactive basis, rather than working more strategically with a longer term vision. We also saw that several Syrian groups are operating without an office space. Through core-funding or other forms of support, international actors could help ensure organisations have a stable and safe hub to work from.

Building on extensive field research, a scholar in the field recommends that donor-grantee relationships are also made less asymmetric and less intrusive into internal governance issues. It is recommended that donor requirements are adapted to each local context, as too much paperwork often diverts too much time and energy away from the real work on the ground, and can also in fact be perceived as a double-standard: “We tend to ask for more accountability and better governance on the part of our interlocutors, while the ‘international community’ keeps making arbitrary decisions regarding local situations and changing what local people have decided.”¹⁴⁵ In a similar vein, one respondent in Akkar advised international supporters to “give the organisations in the field the freedom to achieve the broader goals”,¹⁴⁶ referring to the often much too strict indicators and benchmarks imposed by funders.

In order to provide an additional source of recommendations for international donors on how to best reach small organisations such as the Syrian actors in exile, a survey conducted in May 2015 (see Annex 3) with 20 small civil society organisations in Lebanon (see Annex 4) provides the following recommendations. Firstly, documentation and instructions ought to be made available in Arabic as there is often a language barrier hindering organisations from applying for funding. Secondly, funders should make the process for small grants less complex (65% of respondents generally found international funding opportunities too complex), and with fewer documents required. This would allow smaller organisations with less staff capacity to apply. Thirdly, rather than investing money in staff reading through thousands of long applications on end, funders should send people to the field to visit projects and see them with their own eyes, in order to choose their grantees. Furthermore, funders are encouraged to take risks and start with small grants and have faith that it will go well.

¹⁴⁴ Barnes, pp. 93-94

¹⁴⁵ Pouligny, p. 504

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Bokern

One survey respondent summarised his input by saying: “There are many easy solutions. You just need to want to do it!”. Another one added: “Small organisations who work in the field know a lot about what must be done, and the donors don’t try to reach them. If donors tried to pay attention to the small NGOs, that would be great.”¹⁴⁷

Lastly, a number of Syrian organisations wished to remind donors to ensure that their funding of UN agencies and INGOs is accompanied by sufficient funding for Syrian-led organisations. If not, Syrian organisations risk having to stop their activities or may lose their best staff to INGOs who attract people by offering much higher salary scales. As such, the international community must ensure funding for Syrian-led organisations whilst of course continuing to also fund the UN and INGOs, rather than looking at it as an ‘either/or’ situation.

3.3.4. Supporting genuine collaborative efforts and useful capacity-building

As seen in a previous section, many Syrian civil society actors in Lebanon find it difficult to collaborate with one another. Along those lines, one Syrian civil society activist explains why support for collaboration is needed: “The biggest challenge among civil society organisations is the lack of coordination. Each group is doing a great job with the capacity and resources they have [but] if you put the efforts of two or three organizations together, it would not just be adding the sum of the parts, but multiplying them.”¹⁴⁸ Another respondent said: “We want to collaborate with everyone and we work together. We all want the same thing but some think it’s easier and faster to work alone.”¹⁴⁹ Hence, increased resources for joint action could be a useful form of support from the international community. Creating forums or mechanisms for collaborative action, collective strategy formulation and joint situational analysis could be one way to facilitate such.¹⁵⁰

However, international supporters must be very wary of creating the ‘rules of the game’ for this collaboration. For instance, the international community ought to refrain from sponsoring coordination meetings and platforms unless requested by the local organisations. Instead, support could be provided to organically grown networks such as the aforementioned Syria Peace Network, and let the local actors design the forms of collaboration. As one researcher noted, leaders of local organisations often feel that countless donor-driven consortiums and

¹⁴⁷ Anonymous respondents to the Funding Survey on 25 May 2015

¹⁴⁸ Brandenburg (2014)

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Salloum

¹⁵⁰ Barnes, p. 94

collaboration meetings that they are required to attend mean that they no longer have time to do their actual work on the ground.¹⁵¹

While several organisations cited capacity-building and organisational development as useful forms of support from the international community, a word of warning was issued by one of the most well-established Syrian organisations: “Most of this money and effort has gone down the drain, as no serious effort was made by the providers of those workshops to coordinate their work.”¹⁵² Hence, rather than commissioning external trainers, funds could be channelled to the Syrian organisations themselves, for them to determine what areas they would require capacity-building, by whom and for what purpose. This might help create a capacity-building process allowing for meaningful consolidation of skills which can be useful for present and future work.

Some interviewees suggested that international support could be given to support the growth of alternative media groups, through continuous training on how to operate in the difficult and ever-changing circumstances of conflict. One interviewee suggested that international support could aim at facilitating and sponsoring ‘partnerships for exchange’ between regional media and publishing organisations rather than providing Western-led training that might not be rooted in the realities on the ground.¹⁵³

Training in fundraising and grant-writing would be yet another way to support the emerging Syrian civil society. As one respondent rightly noted, “Syrians are new to proposal writing as we have never operated as a civil society that could apply for foreign funds in the past”.¹⁵⁴ Given the time-consuming nature of funding applications, and the language-barrier that often hinders organisations from applying, one form of support to small organisations could be the *pro bono* outsourcing of grant-writing, done by experts. This would enable organisations to focus on their field work, whilst attracting funds to sustain their activities.

3.3.5. Potential risks involved

As with all international support to civil society around the world, there are a number of risks for the international community to bear in mind as they formulate their support for Syrian civil society in exile.

¹⁵¹ Pouligny, p. 500

¹⁵² Open Democracy (2014)

¹⁵³ Interview with Darwich

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Salloum

For instance, due to the inevitable existence of ‘false’ civil society organisations using any given situation to make a profit without making much difference on the ground, funders need to have a good understanding of what is actually going on in-country, who is doing what, and how. It is thus important to carry out an analysis of the actors on the ground in order to better understand the dynamic taking place within local societies. As one interviewee put it, “donors should just go to the field and see what [organisations] are doing; ask beneficiaries what they think and not just look at them on the internet.”¹⁵⁵

A further risk is linked to the potential aggravation of conflict as organisations grow stronger thanks to international support. Indeed, given that civil society organisations may be organised along ethnic lines¹⁵⁶, any efforts to strengthen civil society needs to recognise and appreciate the full range of organisations, rather than just channelling all funds to the ones that for instance adhere to ‘Western’ notions of civil society organisations or the ones doing work considered useful by donors themselves without much context-knowledge.¹⁵⁷ Along these lines, the Development Assistance Committee emphasises that international supporters need to be aware that support to specific groups can be misunderstood and cause further tensions. Recognition and consideration of all types of actors can help avoid the potential damage of increasing ethnic polarisation. In short, a good understanding of the civil society landscape and local context is once again crucial in order to avoid fuelling further conflicts between groups.

Along similar lines, international supporters should be aware of potential tensions between Lebanese and Syrian-led civil society organisations, and must aim to ensure that these two groups do not ‘compete’ for the same funds. In addition, specific support could be allocated to collaborative efforts aimed at easing tensions between host communities and Syrian refugees, including those efforts led by Syrian organisations.

There are undoubtedly certain risks involved in funding small and relatively newly formed civil society groups in a novel and ever-changing context. However, at the same time, the emerging Syrian civil society in exile presents a unique opportunity, which will require international supporters to take certain risks and proceed to lend their support. As one expert

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Ghanem

¹⁵⁶ Orjuela (2005), p. 3

¹⁵⁷ Söderberg & Ohlson (2002)

mentioned, although investments in Syrian civil society carries certain risks, “so does inaction, particularly as both refugee and host communities become increasingly restless.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Dahi (2014)

Concluding Remarks

The paper started out by providing a theoretical backbone for the research in Chapter 1, defining the term ‘civil society’ in its broadest sense as “an area of association and action independent of the state and the market in which citizens can organize to pursue purposes that are important to them, individually and collectively”.¹⁵⁹ By the same token, a broad definition of ‘civil society actors’ was adopted, which included “civic, issue-oriented, religious, and educational interest groups and associations [...], some known as nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs; some are informal and loosely structured.”¹⁶⁰ The same chapter also provided an overview of different typologies used to classify civil society actors.

The paper then proceeded to presenting a theoretical background concerning the role of civil society in peace-building and reconciliation, which also drew on a number of examples from different parts of the world to provide real-life examples. We saw that the literature dealing with the role of civil society and peace-building traditionally focused on the role of the ‘international community’ and Western-dominated civil society in conflict prevention and peace-building efforts, while regarding local civil society as mere partners for implementation. However, such interventionist perspectives were later complemented by new strands of literature and theories which placed much greater emphasis on smaller NGOs and local civil society actors in reconciliation and peace-building efforts.

Against this theoretical backdrop, Chapter 2 explored the emerging Syrian civil society in exile, more precisely in Lebanon. Based on field research across the country, the paper proposed a number of ways to classify Syrian civil society actors through different typologies. Subsequently, the paper looked in greater detail at the type of activities undertaken by these actors, and found that while the majority of them work in response to the suffering of fellow Syrian refugees, some focus on easing the tension between Syrians and their Lebanese host communities, while others conduct and disseminate research or pursue advocacy activities.

The paper examined the different ways in which these actors’ work can be conducive to peace-building, reconciliation and the prevention of further conflict among Syrian groups, in a direct and indirect way. In doing so, the analysis of the research findings suggested that the Syrian civil society in exile presents a rather unique phenomenon. By developing civil society activities and structures in Lebanon and other neighbouring countries, many Syrians are

¹⁵⁹ Brown et al (2000), p. 275

¹⁶⁰ Diamond, pp. 221-222

seizing the opportunity to prepare themselves for the roles they can play in future Syria while the conflict is still ongoing, rather than passively waiting for a political settlement and ceasefire.

However, if these actors are to sustain their current work, let alone remain active and be able to take their presence back to Syria where they can play a role in future peace-building and reconciliation efforts, they will require support from the international community. Due to the very specific context and circumstances of Syrian civil society in exile, international actors and funders will need to re-think their support and undertake certain adjustments to their previously trialled approaches, if they are to effectively contribute to a strong civil society in exile. In this light, a number of concrete recommendations were derived from the research analysis.

Summary of Recommendations

- ***Support an organically grown civil society and recognise local knowledge:*** International actors ought not to repeat past mistakes of interventionist approaches aimed at creating a civil society in the aftermath of war and conflict to help foster a flourishing civil society for post-conflict purposes. Rather, it needs to support the current organic emergence of Syrian civil society that makes use of local resources deeply rooted in the complex political, social and cultural dynamics of the Syrian war and society. International supporters need to be open to supporting structures that do not necessarily correspond to civil society actors in Europe and North America, and trust that it is indeed the Syrians themselves who can find the most appropriate and effective ways to resolve conflicts and rebuild their country.
- ***Develop context-specific funding schemes:*** Donors need to better understand the nature of Syrian civil society in exile in order to be able to support them. First of all, they need to caution against asking grantees to dedicate disproportionate amounts of time to donor reporting and other forms of paperwork rather than focusing on generating results on the ground. Secondly, provision of core-funding should be introduced to help Syrian organisations strengthen the institutional capacities of their organisations, to help them develop as civil society actors and with a longer-term strategic vision. Thirdly, donors could take a ‘leap of faith’ and launch small-grants programmes available also to unregistered entities and small grassroots groups in exile, who have little or no experience with financial and narrative reports and due

diligence processes. Alternatively, larger grants could be allocated to one of the larger, registered Syrian organisations acting as an umbrella organisation, channelling funds to smaller entities. Moreover, funders may wish to consider investing more staff time in meeting Syrian organisations and observing their work on the ground rather than ploughing through large numbers of long written applications.

- ***Promote increased local ownership over resources:*** International donors ought to bear in mind the particularly fragile and fluid situation in which Syrian civil society in exile operates. Due to the constantly changing context of the current emergency situation, Syrian civil society needs to be granted increased flexibility to use their funds as deemed appropriate in accordance with the *de facto* situation on the ground, which may have changed significantly since the time of writing the funding application. Moreover, given that the role of Syrian organisations goes beyond mere service provision, in that it also helps build mutual trust and peaceful relations between the different socio-political groups it serves, it is crucial to ensure that donor requirements do not force Syrian civil society actors to change their agendas and adjust their activities and divert their attention away from the work that Syrians feel is most crucial. As such, the international community ought to caution against viewing Syrians as passive recipients of funds and instead give them more ownership of the funds to ensure they do not lose their accountability vis-a-vis their beneficiaries.
- ***Enabling the development of collaborative efforts:*** By providing financial and other resources for joint action, the international community can enable the creation of mechanisms and platforms for collective strategy formulation and joint situational analysis. In doing so, however, international supporters must refrain from trying to create the ‘rules of the game’ and rather leave it to Syrians to design the shape and content of collaboration and coordinated action on the ground.
- ***Supporting fruitful capacity-building:*** The international community could for instance support capacity-building in the areas of media and communications focusing on effective communication in circumstances of conflict and peace-building. It could also support capacity-building in fundraising skills and grant-writing, reconciliation and mediation techniques, amongst several other areas. However, rather than commissioning external trainers, funds could be used to sponsor ‘partnerships for exchange’ to allow Syrians to learn from one another and from other experts in their region. Thus, Syrians should be invited to determine in what areas they would require capacity-building and for what purpose, by whom it should be delivered and how.

This approach could help ensure meaningful consolidation of skills which can be useful for their present and future work.

- ***Utilising the unique position of Syrian actors:*** International NGOs and UN agencies operating in Lebanon are encouraged to better utilise the unique position of Syrian organisations, rather than merely viewing them as potential *ad hoc* contractors or recipients of small grants handling the ground work when international bodies are unable to send staff for security reasons. Overall, the international community ought to invite constructive feedback and analyses from Syrian organisations, whilst also showing modesty, patience and flexibility towards local organisations. It should be recognised that the Syrian actors – not the international bodies – are the main actors in the context of the Syrian crisis.
- ***Bear in mind potential risks:*** As with all support to civil society around the world, there are a number of risks for international actors to bear in mind as they formulate their support for civil society actors. Firstly, efforts to strengthen civil society need to recognise and support the full range of Syrian organisations operating in Lebanon, as well as Lebanese NGOs, to avoid fuelling competition and the potential aggravation of conflict between groups. Moreover, as in any civil society context, ‘fake’ civil society organisations may use the situation to make a profit but not make much of a difference on the ground. Funders therefore need to gain a good understanding of the civil society landscape through direct observation, to ensure that their funds are not wasted but rather channelled to dedicated groups.

In sum, it seems appropriate to end this paper with a quote from one of the Syrian-led civil society organisations in Lebanon:

“Supporting Syrian CSOs is a direct investment in the future of Syria [...] After all it is Syrian society itself that will be expected to lead the rebuilding of the country when the war ends. Rebuilding Syria starts with empowering its civil society.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Fadi Hallisso of Basmeh wa Zeitooneh, quoted in Open Democracy (2014)

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Annexes

Annex 1: List of identified Syrian-led civil society actors in Lebanon

	Organisation name
1	Alphabet for Alternative Education
2	Basmeh wa Zeitooneh
3	Centre for Syrian Freedoms
4	Citizenship Association (رابطة المواطنة)
5	Cord
6	De yalla
7	Decostamine
8	Dirasat
9	xxxxx
10	Farik Beirut
11	Future View
12	Generation Freedom
13	Girath al-Nahda
14	Inspiring Volunteers Team (فريق ملهم التطوعى)
15	Jusoor
16	Kayany Foundation
17	Khayr Charity Foundation
18	Lamsat Ward
19	Mobaderoon
20	Najda Now
21	Nuon Organization for Peace-Building
22	Sawa for Development
23	Sdccc
24	Sonbola
25	Spark of March
26	SYAN
27	Syrian Anamel
28	Syrian Business Club
29	Syrian Eyes
30	Syrian National Media
31	Watan
32	Women Now
33	Yasmine Syria
34	Youth League of Saadnoyel

Annex 2: List of Interviewed Syrian-led civil society actors

	Organisation name
1	Alphabet for Alternative Education
2	Basmeh wa Zeitooneh
3	Decostamine
4	xxxxx
5	Jusoor
6	Kayany Foundation
7	Mobaderoon
8	Nuon Organization for Peace-Building
9	Sawa for Development
10	Sonbola
11	Spark of March
12	Syrian Eyes
13	Yasmine Syria
14	Watan

Annex 3: Funding Survey

Survey regarding NGO access to funding – May 2015

This short survey is aimed at small NGOs mainly operating at the local level. The survey is part of a broader research effort aimed at developing recommendations for international actors on how to adjust their funding mechanisms to ensure that their funds reach small NGOs carrying out crucial work at the local and community level.

1. Do you consider yourself a grassroots organization / small NGO?
 - Yes
 - No

2. What is your annual budget?
 - Less than \$10,000 / year
 - \$10,000-\$50,000 / year
 - \$50,000-\$100,000 / year
 - More than \$100,000 / year

3. Which level do you mainly work at?
 - Local
 - National
 - International

4. Has your organization ever *applied* for grants from the European Union (EU)?
 - Yes
 - No

5. If you answered YES to question 4, please specify which funding mechanism this was:
.....

6. *(Skip this question if you have never applied for a grant from the EU)* As a result of your application, did your organization ever *receive* any grants from the European Union (EU)?
 - Yes
 - No

7. If you answered NO to question 4, what are the main reasons that you have not applied for grants from the European Union (EU)? Please tick all relevant answers.
 - We didn't know that there were funding opportunities available from the EU
 - We knew that the EU makes grants but have not seen any suitable funding opportunities that fit our work and/or organisation size
 - We did not fulfil all of the criteria
 - We did not have all the documents required for the application process
 - The application process was too complex / took too much time
 - We do not have staff capacity to apply for such funds

- The application was not in our first language or a language we could manage
- The deadline was too short
- The grant was too small for the amount of work needed
- We do not wish to be associated with the EU
- Other (please explain):

.....

8. In general, what do you think are the main barriers for organisations like yours to accessing funds (from the EU and any other funding opportunity)? Please tick all relevant answers.

- Organisations like mine often don't fulfil all of the criteria
- Not having all the documents required for the application process
- Application processes are often too complex / take too much time
- Lack of staff capacity
- Language barriers
- Short deadlines
- Grants are too small/funding cycles are too short for the amount of work needed
- Other (please explain):

.....

9. If you were to give advice to the EU and other large donors (governments or private funds) on how to best reach organizations like yours with their funding, what would you tell them?

CONTACT DETAILS:

Organisation name (required):

Contact name (optional):

Contact email (optional):

My organisation wishes to remain anonymous in the research outcomes: YES / NO

I would be open to being contacted again in case of further questions: YES / NO

Annex 4: Funding Survey Respondents

	Organisation name & country
1	ABAAD, Lebanon
2	Al Hayat Center for Civil Society Development, Jordan
3	Basmeh wa Zeitooneh, Lebanon/Syria
4	Beirut for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (BETA), Lebanon
5	Carthagina, Tunisia
6	Childhood Asthma Centre, Lebanon
7	xxxxx, Lebanon/Syria
8	Hiber for Training and Technology, Jordan
9	Identity Centre, Jordan
10	Legal Education Advancement and Development "LEAD", Tunisia
11	Little Push NGO, Lebanon
12	MARCH, Lebanon
13	Media Association for Peace, Lebanon
14	Nuon Organization for Peacebuilding, Lebanon/Syria
15	Rasayel Adam Foundation for Development, Egypt
16	Sakker El Dekkane, Lebanon
17	Sawa for Development and Aid, Lebanon/Syria
18	Social Media Exchange, Lebanon
19	Spark of March, Lebanon/Syria
20	Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF), Lebanon
