

CSSR VIRTUAL CONSULTATIONS

– *Follow up on 10th round*

Participants summary report

December 15th – 17th 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria) convened virtual follow-up Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) consultations between December 15th and 17th 2020 with participants who had attended the Geneva meeting held in January 2020. Participants discussed recommendations to strengthen the CSSR by broadening its inclusivity and transparency, as well as mechanisms for information sharing and knowledge management. They also

engaged with Special Envoy (SE) for Syria Geir Pedersen and Deputy Special Envoy (DSE) Khawla Matar on a wide range of concerns, including the lack of tangible progress on the political process, the detainee file, the impact of the pandemic, the economic crisis and the impact of sanctions, growing criminality, and their call for greater civic space for and protection of civil society.

CONSULTATION SESSIONS

During the first session participants were briefed by the OSE-CSSR team and were presented with proposals on the establishment of thematic working groups (TWGs), a dedicated CSSR website, and prototypes of a virtual collaboration platform and a CSSR liaison group that were developed in response to CSSR recommendations delivered to the SE in January 2020.

Among these recommendations were a greater desire for CSSR participants to engage on issues related to the political process, while continuing to advocate with International Syria Support Group (ISSG) member states through the CSSR. Participants also sought greater Syrian ownership of the CSSR, and recommended knowledge management as an ongoing process to capture ideas generated by CSSR participants and greater levels of transparency around the CSSR process.

The second session was an interactive meeting with SE Geir Pedersen and DSE Khawla Matar on the political process. SE Pedersen provided an update on the political process and the fourth round of the Constitutional Committee (November 30th-December 4th 2020) and engaged in a discussion on the broader political process, noting he would be briefing the UN Security Council the following day. DSE Matar welcomed the opportunity to interact with the CSSR group, underlining the importance of civil society in the political process. She said that the tools and ideas presented by the CSSR team were aimed at reinforcing the CSSR and ensuring Syrian ownership of it.

Participants thanked the SE for his update on the Constitutional Committee and asked several questions on its functioning, its potential as a tool to build confidence among the parties, and its representation. Participants also raised questions on the broader

political process, the situation on the ground, and the need for a nationwide ceasefire and meaningful action on the detainee file and the response to the pandemic.

Following the presentation on the working groups, digital tools and the political exchange CSSR participants had with the OSE-Syria, participants held a third internal CSSR session to discuss the proposals and give feedback to the OSE-CSSR team. During the fourth session participants provided consolidated feedback to the OSE-CSSR team on the proposals (see: "Feedback to the OSE-CSSR team", below).

Finally, the fifth session comprised a presentation of the outcomes of the consultations to SE Pedersen and a final interactive discussion. SE Pedersen was very impressed by the proposals made by participants, noting that they would strengthen the CSSR and deepen cooperation with the OSE-Syria. He looked forward to the establishment of the TWGs and to observing potential synergies among the groups. Participants welcomed the new organisational framework for the CSSR, in particular the proposals for the setting up of TWGs and the liaison group. Participants commented on the Security Council briefing and specifically on the use of one term that had sparked controversies among civil society ([see clarification issued on 18 December 2020](#)).

Several participants emphasised the confusion between the CSSR and the Middle Third, asking for more communication to better explain the role of the Middle Third of the Constitutional Committee to the wider civil society. Participants also discussed the situation on the ground, the situation of refugees and IDPs, the impact of sanctions, the difficult economic and humanitarian situation, and possible elections.

Feedback to the OSE-CSSR team

The following points are CSSR participants' summaries of the discussions that took place on issues outlined below:

The overall situation in Syria

- ◆ The solution to the Syrian conflict still lies in foreign hands. We must promote a local, civilian option for resolving the conflict.
 - ◆ It is of paramount importance to have access to the papers and documents produced by the Constitutional Committee and to keep supporting its civil society bloc.
 - ◆ There are high risks of general devastation and destruction (in part caused by illegal economic activities, the war economy, education problems and drugs).
 - ◆ The SE is a mediator and not a decision-making third party.
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The CSSR's identity and role

- ◆ Since its creation in line with Security Council Resolution 2254 the CSSR has prioritised advocacy and the exercise of political influence, and will continue to do so.
 - ◆ The CSSR should remain closely in touch and up to date with the Syrian people's concerns.
 - ◆ The CSSR is not an alternative to negotiations, nor a way out of the numerous deadlocks that plague so many aspects of attempts to resolve the Syrian crisis.
 - ◆ The CSSR does not replace the existing political process, but will support all tangible steps taken to further that process.
 - ◆ Strategic planning is of the essence. We must stop being reactive and become proactive.
 - ◆ We recognise and value differences and believe in shared values as an essential part of our practice.
 - ◆ The CSSR's approach to the public sphere is strictly a civil one that operates in parallel with the negotiation process.
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On the digital platform and TWGs

- ◆ It is important to emphasise that consensus is not an objective, despite its importance.
- ◆ The CSSR process is not about establishing research and study groups. However, the aim is to produce policy papers that intersect with the SE's mandate and his office in managing the dialogue and negotiation process.
- ◆ In all the papers that are produced we will reflect the civil views of the groups working through the digital platform, including potentially divisive views.
- ◆ The TWGs are an opportunity to delve into more nuanced and detailed discussions and to come up with a strategy to reinforce the CSSR's identity and values.
- ◆ Setting our social/political alignments aside is important but having meaningful discussions that acknowledge differences and work around them is equally important.

Shortcomings

- ◆ Continuing to have unrealistically high expectations will only result in further frustration.
- ◆ Our impact on the negotiation process itself remains very limited.
- ◆ Communication in our COVID-19 response could have been better but fell short for many reasons.
- ◆ The lack of clearly set time frames and milestones reduces the quality of outcomes.

Opportunities

- ◆ New steps can be taken towards broadening the public space.
 - Creating a sustainable interactive process that is not seasonal.
 - Supporting a constructive negotiation process.
- ◆ Encouraging stakeholders to reject geographical labelling and embrace thematic issues.
- ◆ Broadening inclusion and participation.
- ◆ Opening new perspectives for a constructive dialogue that acknowledges differences but is not undermined or disrupted by them.
- ◆ Our voices are still needed and are still heard.
- ◆ The digital platform is a large window and a greater space that can end the monopoly of the few, travel lists, and geographical references for those who wish to seek a workable solution for Syria.
- ◆ Developing more coordination avenues with the Women's Advisory Board through the TWGs.
- ◆ Developing coordination avenues with the Constitutional Committee's Middle Third.
- ◆ Achieving a new level of inclusion for all interested stakeholders.

Risks

There is the danger that we feel ourselves to be working on the margins and that CSSR outputs are not being discussed in depth, and there is no assessment of the impact of our efforts.

Negative competition rather than collaboration between civil society organisations could undermine our commitment.

Dividing participants according to regions creates many challenges.

We can become frustrated and feel that things are not moving forward.

To overcome all these risks, what is needed is a transparent approach that carefully and constructively plans and implements what it does but is bold in what it wishes to do.

Next steps on the digital platform

- ◆ We can leverage many participatory research mechanisms and expert lists.
 - ◆ It is important to develop our role by using a bottom-up research approach.
 - ◆ Producing academic research is not our aim; rather, we seek to produce policy and position papers while carefully considering what others are producing and scrutinising their methodology and credibility.
 - ◆ It is essential to increase participation in the process to include all segments of Syrian society.
 - ◆ Some TWGs may be merged (such as “governance” with “civic values” and “constitution” with “elections”) and other new ones created (on trust-building measures, detainees, abductees, the forcibly disappeared).
 - ◆ Papers sent to the OSE are designed to be shared with the SE. Should this not happen, the reasons must be clarified so as to avoid them in the future.
 - ◆ A survey form is needed to facilitate active and immediate participation in the digital platform and TWGs.
 - ◆ Liaison group participants should be actively encouraged to give precedence to public interest over personal interest.
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Proposed liaison group structure and organisation

The following feedback was obtained from CSSR participants regarding the structure and organisation of the liaison group proposed by the OSE-Syria. The aim was to address gaps in the proposed mechanism. Please note that the proposal was not finalised by participants and the OSE-Syria.

- ◆ After the various groups are formed and their members chosen, a facilitator should be chosen for each group by the members themselves. These facilitators will become members of the liaison group. In addition, a list

of seven participants nominated by the OSE-Syria should complement the final number of 14 members of the liaison group. This is intended to guarantee a balanced representation of regions, genders and people with special needs. In total, the 14-person membership of the liaison group should comprise four representatives for Syria, two for Lebanon, two for Jordan, two for Turkey, two for Iraq's Kurdistan Region, and two for Europe.

Rotation of group participants

1. Each founding group should remain in place for six months. Should any member decide to leave a group, he/she should be replaced using the same procedure by which he/she was appointed.
 2. On July 1st, 2021 a minimum of half of the members of each group (i.e. seven members) or a maximum of ten should be replaced. A group facilitator should then be chosen for each group who can, but need not be, the same facilitator as previously. Some of those members who are replaced should be nominated by the OSE-Syria using the same procedure as before (see the formula in the diagram below).
 3. The process described in point 2 should then be repeated every three months after July 1st 2021.
 4. The same mechanism for researching and issuing papers within the groups should be retained.
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CSSR, 2020

The Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) was established in January 2016 by the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria as a mechanism to consult with a broad and diverse range of civil society actors. Through the CSSR, civil society actors can meet, interact and provide their insights and ideas to the Office of the Special Envoy, relevant United Nations actors, as well as international stakeholders.

This mechanism aims at rendering the UN mediation process more inclusive.

The overall supervision and guidance of the CSSR rests with the OSE-Syria. NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution and Swiss Peace foundation have been mandated by the OSE to provide methodological expertise, operational and technical support to the process.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UN standpoint.