

CSSR Regional Consultations

Outputs and Recommendations

– *Fifth Group*

June 24-25, 2021

SUMMARY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS MADE IN FOUR SESSIONS

The group agreed on the importance of discussing all the topics on the table: political issues, participation and inclusion, protection and the humanitarian sector, and social and economic issues. However, the group reached consensus that the **disruption of the political process**, the lack of progress, and the politicisation of technical, humanitarian, and human rights issues such as aid, detainees, and the economic and social situation were major causes of the deterioration of the situation in other sectors. Also, the negative impact of the failure and deterioration of the response to these sectors (participation, protection, and social and economic issues) adds to the disruption of the political process, forming a vicious cycle that must somehow be broken.

Given the nature, divergence and complexity of the issues affecting the political process, the group chose to focus on this process over the other ones. This is because it is the traction engine powering the others, and is connected to, influences, and is influenced by the other topics, in the hope that achieving a breakthrough in this track will have a positive effect and increase the ability of civil society to influence and push for an equitable solution to the Syrian crisis.

Although the group is aware of the importance of political debate among Syrians residing in Europe, a clear consensus has emerged of preferring consultations and dialogues based on participants' areas of specialisation, action and focus rather than place of residence.

The group discussed the political topic from several angles, but focused on active and inclusive participation, including the effectiveness of the role, representation, and inclusion of Syrians, as well as the extent to which different political tracks – including Resolution 2254 – are linked to local changes and developments.

The group looked towards a future in which the political process will be effective, make progress, and include and represent all Syrian actors (including women, civil society, displaced persons, and refugees).

Below is the set of challenges and bottlenecks discussed by the group that affect the political process:

a. *Challenges and bottlenecks affecting the **official political process***

The first of these challenges is that of viewing the constitutional process represented by the Constitutional Committee as the only key and exclusive track for making progress in the political track in Syria. Although the Special Envoy and his Deputy have stressed that the constitutional track is not an exclusive one, the lack of progress either on that track or elsewhere sparked disagreement among group participants about the importance and effectiveness of the Constitutional Committee in terms of both the logic of its being a goal in itself and the feasibility of its being a tool for making progress in the political process. In addition, the group discussed the feasibility of working in terms of Resolution 2254 only and the ability of international actors to influence decision-making instruments in the face of high levels of international polarisation.

b. *Challenges and bottlenecks related to the **politicisation of humanitarian issues***

The problems of continued displacement and migration, the resulting demographic changes, and the use of these issues as a weapon and negotiating tactic increase the number of displaced victims and add a political dimension to a humanitarian issue that should not be highly polarised, because its politicisation ultimately robs civil society of a major tool of influence and narrows its workspace in this case. The same applies to the file of

detainees and the forcibly disappeared, because the previously mentioned two files are a major priority for millions of Syrians but are still not on any serious and technical political negotiating table.

c. **Technical challenges and bottlenecks in *sponsoring and managing the political process***

During the debate, calls emerged for undertaking technical reviews and evaluations of the work of the former UN/international/Arab envoys to Syria, in the hope that these reviews will help determine why these tracks have limited influence compared to other regional or international ones. In addition, the independence of UN humanitarian offices and other UN bodies operating in Syria and the feasibility of their continued involvement whatever the cost were discussed, as well as the possibility of significant concessions.

The problems of lack of transparency and access to information within political tracks – particularly the Geneva Track – represented by political actors, civilians and the Women's Advisory Board has also been addressed on many occasions. Effective women's participation remains an issue that has been raised several times, as well as the impact of lack of transparency, effective channels of communication by various actors in the Constitutional Committee, the erosion of confidence in individual Committee members, and the loss of hope in the whole process.

d. **Challenges and bottlenecks related to the *role of civil society in the political process***

Finally, de facto authorities and authoritarian forces limit the effectiveness of civil society, given their control over the civil space and their constant efforts to undermine the role of civil society.

Even in the Middle Third of the Constitutional Committee, the problem of political polarisation, which has split the group of 150 into two halves in different ways, has emerged, undermining the reason for the Middle Third's existence in the first place.

This comes with a range of challenges in the civil work environment itself, which limits the ability of a wide range of civil society actors to exercise any influence over the political process, such as organisations that are not under the umbrella of international and UN networks or funding, or local groups and teams.

The group discussed various **determinants of solutions/alternatives** that civil society organisations (CSOs) could propose or work on. The set of solutions had to be issues that civil society is able to influence directly. Such solutions should:

- a. contribute to achieving stability at the local level;
- b. contribute to alleviating grievances and violations;
- c. contribute to dismantling the economies created by the conflict and improving the country's economic situation; and
- d. fill the vacuum in the role of political actors.

With regard to such appropriate solutions, voices were intensely raised within the group of the need to gradually boycott specific events and mechanisms that civil society is currently a part of, such as the Constitutional Committee, and to mobilise civil society action among members across the political spectrum as a pressure tool that contributes to supporting the political process, and as an ongoing statement of the importance of the role of civil society's representatives and civil society itself within the political track. The participants stressed that such a boycott and the pressure on participants to boycott a series of specific events is not aimed at leaving the arena completely, but rather to advance civil society's involvement and activate parallel political tracks under the umbrella of Resolution 2254.

On the other hand, there have been calls for strengthening the presence of civil society in the tracks and areas that it has traditionally been absent from because of specific actors' exclusion of civil society, its organisations and the values it represents.

The Group further proposed to expand and accelerate the thematic groups of Syrian civil society. There have been references to the importance of breaking free from working and communicating under the umbrella of the Office of the UN Special Envoy and opening independent and parallel channels of dialogue, communication and alliances between civil society actors themselves, on the one hand, and non-traditional political actors, on the other hand (outside the Geneva Track). The aim would be one of emphasising the distinction between the political track and the civil one in terms of the role played by CSOs and strengthening Syrian leadership of the civil space.

The group proposed to open channels of dialogue with de facto authorities and powers, on the one hand, and civil society actors, on the other, by promoting communication, improving the level of transparency, and maintaining the space for dialogue among civil society actors. In light of all the current challenges and bottlenecks, the group agrees that expanding the space for civil society to influence the political process will contribute to advancing that process and making it more serious and more equitable.

However, there was no consensus on the mechanisms by which this space could be expanded. The following is an account of what was discussed regarding what should be achieved, taking into account civil society's capacity and stability. Areas that could be worked on include alleviating grievances, dismantling the conflict economies, and filling the vacuum in the political arena.

- a. ***The political process vis-à-vis the detainee file:*** The detainee file remains pending, intractable to any solution and making no progress, because it is linked to confidence-building measures or progress in the political process. Therefore, the release of detainees would not only contribute to the resolution of this issue, but would also ease the burden on the political process and facilitate its progress. It would do this by allowing a large and weighty movement to withdraw from the meetings of the Constitutional Committee and asking the representatives of civil society to boycott, withdraw from or freeze participation in these meetings if there is no actual/technical action towards resolving the issue of detainees and depoliticising this issue.

Other steps that could be taken include:

- b. engaging CSOs in humanitarian diplomacy processes to provide non-politicised technical consultations;
- c. helping to increase Syrian confidence in the political process if it progresses and promoting the legitimacy of representation by having the civil society representatives publicly disclose their interventions and/or the minutes and proceedings of the various sessions;
- d. supporting the presence and influence of civil society within existing bodies/tracks, e.g. engaging representatives of civil society in preparing agendas for Constitutional Committee meetings and allowing them to view briefings before they are issued;
- e. involving civil society in the meetings of key regional players such as negotiating bodies and Astana tracks, and local actors such as the Coalition and Syrian Democratic Council, in order to ensure that the voice of the people and public interests are represented instead of narrow ideological and partisan interests. The presence of civilian actors in municipalities would achieve the same purpose, while the Office of the Special Envoy and the European Union could be asked to include representatives of civil society in their meetings on the Syrian issue with other actors and various tracks;
- f. introducing mechanisms and pressure tools with the aim of making progress (such as threats of boycotts and acting as observers) in order to push either towards making progress or starting a new track in order to assess the importance of the presence of civil society in the Constitutional Committee in the first place and to push for the support of existing members;
- g. assessing the feasibility of civil society's involvement in the Constitutional Committee, as opposed to falling into the trap of the polarisation and legislation of the process;

- h. engaging in the thematic working groups in order to develop a code/working document in the public space for Syrian civil society actors to prevent the politicisation of humanitarian and technical issues; and
- i. disengaging international asylum and protection issues from political polarisation and international positions by asking the Special Envoy to ask the governments of refugee-hosting countries to include the voice and opinion of civil society when these countries deal with the issue of refugees and displaced persons.

In addition to the above, the group stressed the importance of interacting with networks of civil society actors in Europe, opening up to all political actors within the frameworks of dialogue and the interests of the Syrian people, activating intra-Syrian tracks, and monitoring the bodies and organisations working on the detainees files.

Below is a tabular summary of the issues discussed by the group:

Regional Consultations	Fifth Group
Topic	Political Process
Question/Issue	The effectiveness of the role, representation and inclusion of all Syrians (active and inclusive participation; and the linking of the general political process – including Resolution 2254 and other tracks – with municipalities)
	A political process that is effective, makes progress, and includes and represents Syrian actors (women, civil society, displaced persons, refugees)
Official political track	The issue of positioning the constitutional process as an exclusive priority
	The issue of positioning Resolution 2254 or the Geneva Track, its bodies, and mechanisms as an exclusive and single track
Politicisation of humanitarian issues	Politicising displacement, migration, refugee return, and demographic change and using these issues as negotiating and pressure points (aside from the negative impact displacement has on the displaced) robs civil society of the tools of action and influence in this case.
	The absence of priority files from the political process (detainees)/separating the file of detainees from the political process?
	Participation of women
Technical problems in sponsoring the political process	Lack of confidence in representatives of the Constitutional Committee
	<u>Technical reviews of the work of the Office of the Special Envoy (despite the varied inputs) even within the organisational procedures of the committees and bodies, although there are other tracks that directly and significantly have an impact on the ground</u>
	Continued compromises by the UN in exchange for what? And at what cost?
	Transparency issues in the Geneva Track and the related committees on two levels: the different committees (CSSR & WAB) and society
Other	Civilian actors are paralysed because of the de facto authorities' control over the civil space, thus limiting civil society's effectiveness.
	The absence of an intra-Syrian political track
	Deliberate disruption
	<u>The role of civil society in putting forward solutions and initiatives, e.g. the control of the conflict powers (regime and opposition) over the constitutional process and the marginalisation of the role of civil society (also due to the exclusive funding of the organisations involved in the UN track)</u>
	Participation of women

Actors and drivers	UN/Office of the Special Envoy					
	Members of the Constitutional Committee (the three groups)					
	Turkey					
	Iran					
	Russia					
	EU (as a donor and political actor)					
	Syrian CSOs					
Alternatives and determinants <i>Civil society can ...</i>	...directly influence the political process	...contribute to local stability as a priority	...contribute to alleviating grievances and violations	...contribute to dismantling the conflict economies and promoting material well-being for everyone	...fill the vacuum in the political role of political actors	

Alternatives and solutions	Discuss putting pressure on civil society representatives within the Constitutional Committee to withdraw in the event of disruption or to activate parallel tracks					
	Discuss the consequences of leaving the arena empty					
	Establish mechanisms to prevent the politicisation of aid and its investment in the conflict economies					
	Work on the issues of continued displacement, asylum seeking and emigration					
	Establish follow-up committees (thematic groups)					
	Open channels for dialogue with de facto powers					
	Build relationships and channels of communication with non-traditional actors (from the Geneva Track)					
	Break free from the exclusive work under the umbrella of the UN Envoy					
	Distinguish the civil role from the political one					
	Strengthen the civil space by ensuring Syrian leadership					
Distinguish the civil role from the political one						

What exactly do we want to discuss during this round of consultations?					
Regulatory	Political Process	Participation	Protection and Humanitarian Sector	Social and Economic Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges and gaps • Gaps and bottleneck • Drivers and actors • Then <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Alternatives and solutions ○ Recommendations and ideas
Geographic groups vs. thematic groups	Constitutional Process	Women	Detainees and Missing Persons	Development Priorities	

The mechanism of inclusion of civil society messages	New mechanisms for implementing Resolution 2254	Civil Society Support Room	Cross-border assistance	Economic and livelihood reality	
Sharing the outputs	New mechanisms to activate the current Constitutional Committee	Civil society participation	Forced displacement and migration		
	Detainees and missing persons	Political actors' participation			
	The local dimensions of the political process				

CSSR, 2021

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.

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