

# SIDE EVENT ON THE MARGINS OF THE BRUSSELS VI CONFERENCE

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**Messages from Syrian  
participants**

– *Brussels*

CSSR Brussels, virtual side event

April 27-30 and 5 May, 2022

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# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>MESSAGES FROM THE SYRIAN PARTICIPANTS OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT ROOM.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SYRIA .....</b>	
<b>THE ECONOMIC AND LIVELIHOOD SITUATION OF SYRIANS.....</b>	
<b>HUMANITARIAN AND PROTECTION ISSUES.....</b>	
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE .....</b>	

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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On the margins of the Brussels VI Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) co-hosted a virtual side event for Syrian civil society actors between 27 and 30 April 2022 as well as on 5 May 2022. The side event aimed at providing a high-level advocacy opportunity for civil society actors to raise issues of concern and priority regarding the Syrian conflict.

During four days of closed-door discussions forty-three Syrian civil society representatives, youth activists and experts, women and men, working

inside Syria and in neighboring countries and Europe, formulated a number of key message along the line of the following topics: Youth perspectives for the future of Syria, the economic and livelihood situation of Syrians, humanitarian and protection issues as well as on the Syrian civil society space.

During a virtual meeting that followed, the Syrian participants presented their messages to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen; EEAS Deputy Managing Director MENA, Ambassador Carl Hallergard, Head of the EU Delegation to Syria, Ambassador Dan Stoenescu; and to Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) donors.

# MESSAGES FROM THE SYRIAN PARTICIPANTS OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT ROOM

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## *Youth Perspectives on the Future of Syria*

The Group discussed three key axes:

1. *Potential roles for youth in public affairs*
2. *Challenges facing youth (internal challenges – challenges that youth can influence – challenges beyond the influence of youth)*
3. *Opportunities that youth can utilize to strengthen youth participation in public affairs (present opportunities that could be built upon – possible future opportunities”unions-laws-policies”)*

Recommendations to the OSE Syria:

- Recognizing youth's crucial role in building, consolidating, and sustaining peace in Syria; being the majority of the population and having the ability to access and mobilize local resources, and adopting practical measures that aim at encouraging and engaging youth in shaping the future of Syria.
- Establishing a Youth's Advisory Board similar to the Women's Advisory Board aiming at providing a safe dialogue space across conflict lines to discuss youth issues and effectively engage them into the political process.

Recommendations to the EU:

- Investing in the Syrian youth's interest and capitalizing on their desire to play a future role in the public affairs, through designing training programs meant to build the capacity of youth community leaders, with a specific focus on cumulative and long-term interventions.
  - Empowering youth-led organizations: by building their administrative and operational capacities and providing coaching and mentorship, in addition to increasing the direct funding for youth-led local and community organizations.
  - Building and strengthening partnerships with Syrian youth through engaging them in the process of policy making, planning, as well as funding and operational scopes on Syria.
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## *The Economic and Livelihood Situation of Syrians*

The living conditions of the Syrian people continue to hit record deterioration levels. The economy continues to be at risk of more decline and collapse. Coupled with a severe drought, a pandemic, the crises plaguing the neighboring countries, the sectoral sanctions, the war in Ukraine, in addition to the failure of economic governance, the strong fist of war economies and the war elites, as well as the exodus of human capital, Syria risks seeing more fragmentation between its different regions, more polarization, and further destruction, corruption, and subjection to foreign parties.

We, therefore, reaffirm the following:

1. Donors must embrace a humanitarian-developmental approach, that embeds the principles of human rights and sustainable peace conditionalities; an approach of “integrated development nodes” as a means to attribute a greater role to civil society and the private sector in the economic process. This is expected to contribute to more integration between the different regions and sectors; the geographic break up of Syria would be curbed, and so would the economic deterioration and the worsening of the living conditions. If adopted, such an approach would increase chances for accountability and transparency, reduce potential disparities and differences, as well as ensure active and effective participation for women and the youth.
2. Consider the dismantling of the war economies as a strategic requirement in all humanitarian, economic, and development projects and activities; thus, sidelining the war elites and their networks, and encouraging productive activities and the establishment of transparent mechanisms.
3. Place the challenge of food security at the top of the donors’ priorities. The food sovereignty strategy must be adopted to ensure the sovereignty of local communities over the entire food production and distribution process. This would begin by abolishing illegal tributes\dues\fees\commissions, dismantling the monopoly by the different de-facto powers on the ground, and criminalizing the politicization of food and water as pressure tools against civilians.
4. Ensure a conducive financial environment in Syria that would allow legitimate financial transfers, strengthen the role of the uncompromised local actors, and facilitates a more productive role for the principled private sector in transitioning from an aid-based economy to a productive economy.

## *Humanitarian and Protection Issues*

1. The severe economic crisis, mass displacement, widespread destruction of public service infrastructure and the COVID-19 pandemic have left more than 14.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including about 6.5 million children, more than 3 million of whom are out of school, according to United Nations statistics. Therefore, the exacerbation of the needs, the lack of resources and the decline in funding limit the ability of humanitarian actors to meet needs and invest in sustainable solutions. Hence, we demand an increase in funding for the Syrian humanitarian response, as it will have a direct impact on improving the lives of the affected groups and meeting the basic needs that preserve the lives and dignity of Syrians and help them withstand and protect the future of their children through education. It is very important to fund early recovery activities in an integrated manner with humanitarian activities throughout the areas of the Syrian humanitarian response. In this regard, we stress the need for the Syrian issue to remain an
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important one and even a priority for the international community due to its deep humanitarian dimensions during the accelerating global crises.

2. The issue of detainees, the forcibly disappeared and the abductees, remains a matter of serious concern for Syrians. Therefore, we call on the international community, and the European Union in particular, to take an active role by exerting greater pressure towards revealing the fate of the detainees, the disappeared and the abductees, enabling access to them and holding the perpetrators accountable.
  3. The suffering of Syrians has continued for eleven years. With the increasing need associated with the difficulty of access to all those affected, we reaffirm ensuring neutral humanitarian action separate from the political file and ensuring the right of all those affected to have safe and just access to humanitarian aid, in addition to the necessity to ensure that this aid reaches all Syrian response areas, by all available means. We further stress that the mechanism for delivery of aid across the lines is ineffective to meet the needs. We therefore demand that all necessary work be done to renew the decision to work across borders and that pressure be put towards activating all humanitarian exceptions of sanctions, including building a permanent communication mechanism with the bodies regulating international banking and addressing excessive compliance.
  4. Humanitarian facilities and humanitarian workers are still being directly targeted, and all parties are always unable to fulfill their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to protect civilians. Therefore, we demand more pressure on all parties to the conflict to apply the laws on the protection of humanitarian workers ensuring the neutral character of humanitarian facilities on all Syrian territories and holding violators accountable.
  5. The international community should realize that asylum seekers and displaced persons have been pushed by danger and reasons beyond their control to search for a safe place, and that states are concerned with implementing the obligations imposed under international conventions to address the refugee issue in its humanitarian dimensions without discrimination and away from political developments. Therefore, we urge the international community to play an active role in working with the authorities of countries hosting Syrian refugees to stop the humanitarian violations they are exposed to and to abolish arbitrary laws that impede their safety and their access to basic and legal services in accordance with international human rights laws. Furthermore, we demand that urgent pressure be put to adopt policies that objectively address the return file in accordance with international law and the requirements of social cohesion and stability, in addition to the formation of a United Nations mechanism to follow up and monitor the return process to ensure that no refugee is forcibly returned or deported and to ensure that conditions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return are met.
  6. More than 6.9 million Syrians are heavily impacted by long and continuous displacement, of whom about 1.7 million live in camps that lack the minimum requirements for basic needs and a decent life. Moreover, they suffer from a lack of access to services and legal identification papers, which risks nationality and proof of titles and rights loss. Therefore, we call on the international community to undertake its role by applying pressure to ensure the delivery of full humanitarian and legal services to the displaced and provide a safe environment for a dignified return.
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## Civil Society Space

World wars were one of the harshest memories and experiences that mankind experienced in the twentieth century. Today, in the twenty-first century, we continue to witness one of the cruelest human tragedies that continued to exceed a decade. And this is in the light of evolving national legislation and international treaties that protect human rights and establish the values of freedom and justice.

In Syria, peace is missing, its territory is either torn or occupied, the Syrian economy is in a state of continuous deterioration, the Syrian reality continues to become increasingly complex, and the prospects for young people continue being narrowed, coupled with children being denied the right to education, families being denied the ability to live a decent life, and the rising number of injured and people with special needs. On the other hand, mothers are waiting with a broken heart and a teary eye awaiting information on the fate of their sons and daughters who are detained, abducted, and missing.

While emphasizing our demands made in the previous five conferences and in the light of the current political deadlock, we would like to emphasize our support for a political solution in Syria in accordance with the UN mandate of UN Resolution 2254, and that is based on the creation of a safe, supported and effective civic space that will lead to an improvement in the reality of human rights and freedoms, and that activates citizenship ensuring social equality without discrimination on the basis of religion, sex, opinion or economic status. We also stress the need for the cessation of all military operations and the departure of all foreign forces from Syria while maintaining the unity and integrity of all Syrian territory.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us, we, the participants of the Civil Society Support Room (Syrian Civil Society Space Activation Group), present to you the following recommendations:

- Involving civil society in the "Step for Step" approach in a manner that considers and achieves the interests of all Syrians in accordance with UN Resolution 2254 and human rights principles.
  - Supporting civil networks across the borders of conflict, while ensuring their protection in a manner that enhances trust and understanding between actors and civil entities.
  - Promoting and supporting community capital, as the holder of civic space and taking advantage of the civil heritage and elements of power accumulated by Syrian civil society to achieve sustainable peacebuilding.
  - Supporting the participation of civil society by ensuring that women participate actively and meaningfully in all dialogue processes in accordance with UN Resolution 1325 and the relevant international programs.
  - Increasing support for development programs, livelihoods, social cohesion, and capacity building as well as the projects dedicated to supporting Syrians in a balanced manner and without discrimination, in addition to increasing funding and direct grants to local partners and Syrian-led local organizations to ensure optimal access to those in need.
  - Working to alleviate economic sanctions and excessive compliance measures that have negative effects on the Syrian people in the health and education sectors and affect community cohesion and livelihoods.
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- Continuing to apply pressure to complete the work of the Constitutional Committee on a declared timetable in parallel with the activation of other baskets in accordance with the UN Resolution 2254.
- Separating the Syrian file, or as is termed the Syrian case, politically and militarily from regional and international files or influences, in addition to ensuring the protection of refugees from the risk of being drawn into political and military conflicts.
- Encouraging the continued monitoring and documentation of violations against civilians in all areas of Syria and the accountability of those involved in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law regardless of who is responsible.
- Developing actionable strategies to address the demographic change that has taken place since 2011 and providing a guarantee that no similar processes will be repeated.
- Preserving the rights and property of displaced persons and refugees and working to create the necessary ground to protect them (in terms of security and legal grounds) to ensure safe and voluntary return.
- Supporting the educational process in all Syrian regions and pressing to neutralize school curricula away from ideologization and speeches of violence and hatred.
- Working on long-term peace-building and social cohesion programs on all tracks to prepare for a safe and healthy environment.

In conclusion, we hope that the Syrian people will live in peace on the land of Syria, which is dear to our hearts.

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## **CSSR, 2022**

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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