

CSSR

Thematic Working Group: Civil Society Space & Civic Values

–*Geneva*

Participant's summary report

Thematic Working Group

February 27 until March 2, 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Group on Civic Values and Civil Society Space is a CSSR Thematic Working Group (TWG) established to develop ideas, input and recommendations to the Office of the Special Envoy pertaining to civic values and the protection of civic space.

Following months of substantive and serious online collaboration, CSSR participants of the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on “Civic Values and Civil Society Space” met during four days in Geneva, at the invitation of the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria and his team to finalize the group’s work. The meetings concluded with the presentation of a summary of the discussions and key recommendations to the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria team, International Syria Support Group (ISSG) members and CSSR donors.

MESSAGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is the message agreed upon by participants of the TWG on civic values and civil society space. It was delivered during the final day of the Geneva meeting to the SE-Syria, ISSG members and CSSR donors:

“In our last meeting in February 2020, we referred with much concern to our fear of the Syrian issue remaining within a sphere of polarization, and we expressed concerns about its continued internationalisation, which marks a return to the atmosphere of the Cold War. These concerns seem even greater today. Unprecedented violence threatening international peace and security has broken out in the heart of the European continent, which is not merely a perpetuation of the general atmosphere of the Cold War but has become a hot war that is taking many lives and causing huge destruction. And now that it has started, neither its ending nor its cost can be predicted.

While learning about and putting into practice various forms of negotiations, mediation and research on establishing the foundations of a just and sustainable peace in our local environment, we are becoming increasingly aware of the difficulties facing our Syrian file, the relatively new civil experience, the narrow democratic margins characterising Syrian society and the significant decline in community participation in the eastern Mediterranean working environment. The TWG is determined to reach an in depth understanding of our local context and its entanglements with other broader contexts.

The Syrian civil movement, which has opened up fresh paths for a decade and has supported its structure with young cadres that reflect societal development, pluralism and aspirations for freedom, is keen contributing to the promotion of international peace as a partner of the global civil movement. This movement is a genuine reflection of renewed thinking in Syria, which is exploring the issues of convergence, unity, and dialogue, and is focusing on creating a safe environment within a free and inclusive civil space.

During the past decade of the civil movement's life and diverse activity through international outlets and the CSSR in particular, the Syrian civil movement has demonstrated its ability to develop creative responses to the Syrian crisis. This is reflected in the thematic groups it has formed and its efforts to consciously overcome many of the divisive factors imposed on society and replace them with content that promotes confidence over skepticism and the broad unity of its objectives over the narrowness of self-seeking personal and group interests. Ultimately it has an unshakable belief in the value of justice.

The integration of the local peacebuilding role with the international role primarily indicates a real and broad-spectrum partnership for Syrian civil society and an investment in its ability to reach out and engage directly in various processes to achieve its humanitarian and civil interests. Of particular importance is what this role means in terms of the democratic transformation of our country.

Civil society is proud of its sacrifices and its commitment to the strict standards of humanitarian action and civil values. It is no longer possible to imagine the overall landscape of Syrian society as being separate from this pluralist activity of activists and non-governmental institutions. Civil society is a reliable actor for positive change. This was demonstrated through its members' commitment to these standards and the development of their accountability.

This clearly does not mean that we have achieved all our aims, but rather pushes us to invest more of our energies in the most urgent tasks that face us, which include:

1. Ensuring greater transparency and making a public statement to the entire population that can serve as a model of inclusion and effective community accountability; and
2. Increasing our engagement in the community partnership process by moving from a focus on crisis management to a focus on peacebuilding based on local environments and community engagement.
3. Strengthening civil contribution in the resolution of pressing issues affecting the Syrian population, the movement has introduced pioneering initiatives in responding to the COVID crisis, and today it is required to take urgent action to address the growing educational gap that poses significant development risks.

Additional guarantees to promote a dynamic and influential civil space will depend on relationships characterised by mutual trust with governments and bodies involved in the Syrian file. Measures should also be taken to strengthen civil structures, encourage coalition building and help ensure a modern legal environment commensurate with the development of the civil movement. Moreover, a package of additional activities can accelerate and maximise the results of the work of the civil movement and define its identity, including:

1. Applying the principles of justice and equality in the distribution of aid and not politicising assistance, in order to ensure the nationwide implementation of human rights.
2. Adopting the principle of preventing damage and overcoming sanctions that prevent Syrian civil society from directly accessing support;
3. Developing grant procedures to help secure core funding for civil organisations and entities in order to ensure their continuity and development as transparent and credible partners; and
4. Keeping cross-border access open, because there is currently no guaranteed alternative to securing humanitarian requirements across conflict lines.

The CSSR, as it develops the thematic working group system and launches new groups, creates a kind of integrative thematic mechanism that would enable it, once the process is completed, to provide knowledge and support in various areas of work for the cause of civil peace, development and community participation. This should allow the CSSR to link all of this in a single package of actions and effective response that would help to prepare a smooth transition environment outside the destructive cycle of the conflict.

We are all in a learning cycle today, based on our peaceful activity to implement human rights, enhance solidarity and extend the system of civil values to the entire country, and if the voice of war is still loud here and there, the forces of peace are not weak, possessing as they do the power to do good by ensuring justice, tolerance and progress.

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.