

VII Brussels Conference – Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region

CSSR Statement Ministerial Conference, 15 June 2023¹

Mr. Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Excellencies, Ministers, Ambassadors and Envoys, and colleagues of the Syrian Civil Society,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I address you today as a member of the Civil Society Support Room, established by the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 as a mechanism to involve the Syrian civil society in the political process facilitated by the UN. Over one and a half years, four CSSR Thematic Working Groups comprising Syrian Civil Society experts from diverse specializations and geographies held discussions on a series of issues that are at the heart of the Syrian cause and are common among different Syrian geographies.

Experts were divided in four thematic working groups according to their expertise:

- Civic space and civic values group
- Economy, development and recovery perspectives group

¹ This is an unofficial English translation of the original Arabic version written by members of the CSSR Thematic Working Groups and is “Not an Official UN Document”.

- Protection priorities for Syrians group
- Local governance and decentralization group

Through in-depth technical discussions, the groups were able to break political polarization and work on building a common discourse based on the values of justice, democracy and peace.

I am here among you, to sincerely convey to you the outputs and recommendations of the four groups.

First

TWG1 on civic space and civic values”

The group presented a realistic assessment of the threats to the civic space across Syria and reached a consensual framework through which civic entities work together, support one another and expand spaces for civil action in all regions, taking into account their condition.

The group sees local communities as the key driver of positive change, through the different phases of such change starting from design to implementation and evaluation. According to data gathered from groups of activists, it becomes evident that several factors are required to support the process of change in Syria, including:

1. Protecting the civic space as a contributing factor to creating a safe environment, and the reform of existing laws constitutes an important starting point towards regulating working conditions for civil organizations and entities.
2. Adopting the concept of citizenship across different stages of education and in practice within civic institutions in order to move towards a new social contract in Syria that aligns with civic values.
3. Providing high standard transparency mechanisms to promote effective societal accountability.
4. Promoting local communities' partnerships, adopting development solutions that rely on local communities as primary guarantors and incentivizing community participation.
5. Enhancing civic contribution to pressing Syrian matters, with the top of the list being education and the dangers of gaps caused by years of conflict and different educational curricula.

TWG2 on economy, development and recovery perspectives

The working group on economic, recovery and development developed a joint analysis of the root causes of the economic crisis. The group highlighted different factors that impacted the economy including the earthquake, the Lebanese crisis, drought as well as the side effects of sanctions. The group pointed out that the failure

of economic governance, dominance of warlords, war economies and decline of human capital were among the key factors contributing to the economic collapse, along with regional competition and social polarization. The group noted that the decline in the number and intensity of military operations has not contributed to

economic recovery in a context influenced by conflict politics and foreign interventions.

The group put forth a set of recommendations, including:

- Economic restructuring to ensure that resources are not concentrated in the hands of the ruling authority and without fair distribution.
- The Syrian society can play a key role in supporting economic growth either through civil society organizations, initiatives, networks or NGOs and focusing on supporting small and medium-scale projects.
- Strengthening solidarity economy by encouraging alternative economic projects based on solidarity, that gradually end the activities of crisis traders and ensure early recovery.
- Adopting a fair approach to interventions by external stakeholders to help mitigate negative competition among local communities.
- Focusing on sustainable solutions by linking support to SDGs and promoting accountability.

The group also made a number of important recommendations to enhance and strengthen food sovereignty including the “development convergence nodes” strategy.

TWG4 on protection priorities for Syrians

The thematic working group on protection explored the standards for a safe environment and affirmed the need to establish a protection baseline for all Syrian women and men. It recommended the following:

- End lawlessness, stop arbitrary detention, abolish security prosecutions and return all confiscations.
- Reveal the fate of detainees, abductees and forcibly disappeared by all parties across Syrian territories and release them.
- Ensure the safe and voluntary return of refugees to their places of origin or their location of choice, while guaranteeing their safe return.
- Ensure flexible access to identification documents (personal records, property documents, travel documents).
- Improve living conditions by rehabilitating infrastructure, and supporting early recovery and economic development projects.

TWG3 on local governance and decentralization

The thematic working group on local governance and decentralization, of which I was a member, considered decentralization an essential step towards ensuring the country's unity, building peace and starting the process of democratic transition. The group suggested to use the current legal framework (local administration law No. 107) as an entry point for reviewing the experience, and to propose political, economic,

social and service frameworks towards reforming governance, benefiting from the different experiences across Syrian regions and the expertise developed therein.

Accordingly, we submit the following recommendations:

1. Despite the inadequacy of the local administration law, it remains possible to build on some components, especially developing a national decentralization plan as an inclusive space for dialogue. Legal frameworks need to be developed to guarantee wider powers for local authorities, to ensure decisionmakers' proximity to the needs of communities and citizens. This includes the development of electoral laws that are fair, equitable and representative of citizens.
2. Local authorities' power should be expanded to ensure fair investment shares for local communities and to guarantee fair distribution both locally and nationally.

3. The debate on decentralization creates spaces for dialogue on multiple levels opening doors for the OSE to use them within the political process, not only with regard to the future Syria but also to find applicable solutions for the current situation that serve the interests of Syrians.
4. We emphasize the need to support local administrations in carrying out their new, post-service roles across all Syrian regions, adopting similar approaches.

All groups have reiterated the importance to protect the rights and interests of women and youth across the four axes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

After decades of Syrian women and men striving for democracy and more than twelve years of suffering, the civil society remains determined to reach a democratic, civic, modern state far from tyranny, violence, extremism and in line with our aspirations. We will work together to preserve the unity and stability of Syria and to achieve social cohesion and build its future.

Despite the current deadlock in Syria, the division among the de facto forces, the complete stalemate of the political process, the creation of parallel tracks unrelated to the content of resolution 2254 and the absence of real international action to address this reality, the Syrian civic space continues to carry the values of the democratic movement for the Syrian people. “Common safe spaces” constitute an opportunity for



Syrian-Syrian dialogue among civil society organizations and will contribute to positive progress toward implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254. By producing new visions, strategies, work approaches and programs they enable us to achieve our goals in creating of a democratic environment that upholds human rights standards, and celebrates freedom, difference and diversity.

CSSR 2023

The Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) was established in January 2016 by the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria) as a mechanism to consult with a broad and diverse range of civil society actors. Through the CSSR, civil society actors meet, interact, and provide insights and ideas to the OSE, relevant United Nations actors, and international stakeholders. This mechanism aims to make 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 swisspeace Foundation have been mandated by the OSE to provide methodological expertise and operational and technical support to the process.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.