Building Bridges

Lessons from the Syrian Civil Society Support Room

Dana Madsen

Imprint

Building Bridges: Lessons from the Syrian Civil Society Support Room

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

CC	Constitutional Committee
CC MT	Constitutional Committee "Middle Third"
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSSR	Civil Society Support Room
CTF	Ceasefire Task Force
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
HTF	Humanitarian Task Force
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOREF	Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution
OIOS	Office of Internal Oversight Services (United Nations)
OSE-S	Office of the Special Envoy for Syria
SE	Special Envoy
TWG	CSSR Thematic Working Group
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WAB	Women's Advisory Board
VTC	Video-teleconferencing call

List of Figures

Executive Summary

On December 8, 2024, the Assad regime fell after 14 years of brutal conflict. For nearly a decade, the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-S) has operated the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), a unique experiment in inclusive peacemaking. Established in January 2016 alongside Geneva III talks in a physical workspace in the Palais des Nations in Geneva, the CSSR grew from 18 participants in its first meeting into a multilevel process encompassing over 1,300 Syrian civil society actors by November 2025, achieving unprecedented geographic, political, and communal diversity under extreme adversity. Drawing on systematic document analysis, key informant interviews, and a multi-stakeholder validation workshop, this study examines how the CSSR created value despite severe constraints, which design choices enabled effectiveness, and which lessons can inform Syria's transition and other conflict contexts.

The CSSR's primary achievements span four dimensions:

1. Modeling intra-Syrian dialogue and transforming relationships;

2. Creating a dense ecosystem that contributed to tangible results on the ground;

3. Influencing the broader political environment;

4. Influencing the political process.

The CSSR navigated three interlocking tensions through creative institutional arrangements: bridging Syrian ownership and UN-led Track 1 needs; bridging Track 1 needs and inclusion; and bridging inclusion and Syrian ownership. The CSSR functioned as an "accordion": contracting when Track 1 intensified, expanding when it stalled, whereas Syrian ownership and broad inclusion built progressively through iterative practice. While direct impact on Track 1 negotiations was limited by inherent constraints, the CSSR cultivated a dense ecosystem, thickening relationships, transforming narratives, and building capacities in ways that laid crucial groundwork for future political progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT PHASE

Based primarily on insights from interviews with CSSR participants and civil society actors conducted in October and November 2025, and refined through a workshop with a broader group of stakeholders in December 2025, the following recommendations identify priorities for the CSSR's next phase.

Comprehensive mapping and outreach expansion: The need for comprehensive mapping to chart shifted networks and identify previously inaccessible actors now reachable emerged as a consistent theme across interviews, workshop inputs, and earlier CSSR-wide strategy consultations. Participants advocated for a whole-of-Syria approach that includes civil society across the different geographies as well as diaspora-based actors, moving toward more inclusive approaches to selection and participation that are not defined by geography or affiliation, and that seek to foster a shared civic identity. This includes extending mapping beyond formal CSOs to encompass less formalized civil society organizations such as civic initiatives, professional associations, syndicates, independent media, traditional and tribal leaders, community-level actors, youth movements, and previously under-engaged constit-

uencies. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring the meaningful inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities in both substance and presence, while sustaining and strengthening the existing focus on gender equality.

Adaptation to the new context: The majority of stakeholders consulted for this study called for the CSSR platform to continue while adapting to new political realities, pivoting to support Syrian-led transition processes rather than Track 1 mediation. While most workshop and interview participants recommended that the CSSR remain a key element of the UN's engagement and outreach in the short to medium term, drawing on its established role as an impartial convener, stakeholders also suggested that planning should articulate a gradual pathway toward greater Syrian ownership, with international partners transitioning over time to more supportive, facilitative, and backstopping roles as Syrian actors increasingly shape and lead the process.

Multi-stakeholder engagement to chart ways forward: Adapting the CSSR would require substantive engagement involving CSSR participants, newly accessible civil society actors, the Government of Syria, and UN representatives. Such engagement could help to clarify partnership frameworks, redefine mandate and roles, and adapt governance structures to reflect enhanced Syrian ownership. Interview and workshop inputs converged on two complementary priorities that could constitute a starting point for these discussions. First, clarifying how the CSSR might adapt to and support political transition efforts, including by structuring and amplifying civil society's technical contributions to emerging governance frameworks. Second, defining how an adapted CSSR might continue to provide an independent and neutral space for dialogue – bridging divides, building trust, and promoting inclusive dialogue across communities – while systematically linking local, national, and international processes.

Documentation and knowledge management: The need to systematically document and archive CSSR outputs, methodologies, lessons learned, common ground, and key developments emerged across data sources. Accessible knowledge systems such as digital platforms, searchable databases, and synthesis documents support knowledge transfer, facilitate dissemination to wider audiences, and provide crucial foundations for future processes.

Multilevel engagement architecture: Consultations revealed the value of the proven multilevel model and surfaced calls for its continuation and expansion, combining international venues, regional hubs, in-country national rounds, and new subnational formats or linkages. Stakeholders emphasized that while digital tools and proactive outreach should continue to bridge participation gaps, the locus should shift toward in-person engagements in Syria wherever feasible.

Thematic deepening: Interview and workshop participants pointed to the potential of the CSSR as a space within which to operationalize working groups on topics of highest importance to transition – identified through consultation with civil society and the Government of Syria – while maintaining trust-building spaces. Stakeholders suggested that technical groups on legal and constitutional reform options, decentralization models, transitional justice frameworks, education, and economic reconstruction could provide crucial options analysis and comparative expertise to inform nascent policy processes.

Enhanced Syrian ownership and public communication channels: Stakeholders called for the continuation and deepening of the participatory design approach while adapting mechanism governance to enhance Syrian ownership of the CSSR. Specific priorities identified include establishing more systematic mechanisms or structures that build ownership of strategic direction, governance, and implementation; transitioning to more holistic approaches to selection and engagement; and investments in information-sharing, public participation, and communications grounded in Syrian information ecosystems. This includes utilizing social media, expanding surveys and townhalls, developing accessible outputs, and creating public input opportunities.

Introduction

On December 8, 2024, the Assad regime fell after 14 years of brutal conflict. What began as a peaceful pro-democracy uprising in 2011 demanding rights, freedom, and dignity quickly developed into a devastating, highly internationalized multi-sided armed conflict characterized by sweeping attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure,[1] mass displacement,[2] systematic use of prohibited weapons,[3] prolonged sieges of civilian areas, and widespread human rights violations. The conflict fragmented Syria into three main territorial enclaves – areas under government control, opposition control, and Kurdish-led administration – severely restricting movement between zones and dividing civil society along geographic, political, and community lines.[4] As Syria enters a new phase of transition, questions of inclusion, dialogue, and civil society's role in state-building have moved from theoretical to concrete. Improvements in security conditions across most of the country have eased movement restrictions that constrained civic organizing throughout the conflict, enabling unprecedented opportunities for in-person collaboration and dialogue. In parallel, shifts in the political context have altered the role of international actors and transformed the nature of international engagement. Similarly, civil society inclusion mechanisms originally designed to support Track 1 negotiations require reimagining and adaptation to support Syrian-led transition processes.

For nearly a decade, the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-S) has operated a unique experiment in inclusive peacemaking: the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). Established in 2016, the CSSR grew from an initial meeting of 18 people into a multilevel process encompassing over 1,300 Syrian civil society actors by November 2025.[5] Achieving unprecedented geographic, political, and communal diversity, the platform facilitated dialogue across divides, created networks of trust and collaboration, enabled civil society perspectives to feed into UN-led mediation, and provided high-level advocacy opportunities. Born into extreme adversity characterized by high levels of violence, low party consent to talks, and profound geopolitical complexity, the CSSR provides rare empirical evidence of how inclusion mechanisms embedded in Track 1 peace architectures function under such conditions.

---

1 By early 2024, nearly 618,000 people had been killed, and 113,000 disappeared (UNDP 2025, 12). The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) verified a total of "350,209 unique, documented, identifiable casualties for the period 1 March 2011 through 31 March 2021" alone, including deaths in custody, by torture, by sexual violence, by prohibited weapons, and by denial of access to/destruction of objects indispensable for survival resulting directly from war operations, of which 1/13 represent child deaths (OHCHR 2022, 6). Infrastructure damage was catastrophic: by end of 2024, 50% of Syria's infrastructure had been destroyed or rendered dysfunctional, GDP contracted to only 25% of its 2010 value, 90% of the population had fallen below the poverty line, and approximately 70% (16.7 million people) required humanitarian assistance compared to only 5% in 2010 (UNDP 2025, 4, 8, 10).

2 The conflict forced more than 13 million people from their homes, of which an estimated 6.1 million became refugees (primarily in Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan) and 7.4 million remain internally displaced (UNHCR 2025).

3 For example, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented 217 chemical weapons attacks conducted by the Assad regime between December 2012 and December 2024 (SNHR December 20, 2024), most notably the August 21, 2013 Ghouta attack using sarin gas that killed hundreds of civilians (Human Rights Watch September 10, 2013). Barrel bombs, cluster munitions, and incendiary weapons were also used (SNHR December 20, 2024).

4 By 2014-2015, Syria was effectively divided into three distinct geographic enclaves, each controlled by different actors: government-held areas centered on Damascus and coastal regions; territories controlled by opposition factions in the north and south; and areas administered by Kurdish political and military entities in the northeast. The addition of ISIL-held territory (2014-2019) further complicated the landscape. External actors and humanitarian funding patterns reinforced these divisions by treating the three areas as distinct territories. These divisions created formidable barriers to movement, with checkpoints, travel restrictions, and risks of arbitrary detention preventing people from crossing between zones. Compounded by narratives that described the conflict in geopolitical or sectarian terms rather than recognizing civic agency and plurality, this geographic fragmentation made it increasingly difficult for broad-based civic movements to thrive and mobilize across divides, creating what some described as "three separate civil societies." See also Theros & Turkmani 2022, 7.

5 The CSSR e-database contains 1,337 discrete, active interlocutors as of November 14, 2025. An additional 200+ participant entries have been deleted upon right-to-be-forgotten requests.

That the CSSR not only survived but thrived represents a remarkable feat of institutional innovation and political courage. What began as a politically risky experiment evolved into a durable platform that outlasted multiple Special Envoys, weathered repeated negotiation impasses, and ultimately proved its value precisely when the window of opportunity opened. The regime's collapse on December 8, 2024, has fundamentally transformed the context and operational architecture, creating both opportunity and imperative for adaptation. The trust-building, dialogue facilitation, and network development that the CSSR achieved under extraordinarily constrained conditions are precisely the capacities Syria's transition demands. Originally designed as a civil society inclusion mechanism supporting UN-mediated Track 1 negotiations, the CSSR must now redefine its mandate, governance, and operational approach to support Syrian-led state-building while preserving the foundational principles that enabled its effectiveness.

This study examines three central questions: How did the CSSR create value despite severe constraints? Which design choices enabled an effective, Syrian-owned civil society inclusion mechanism within UN-led architecture? Which lessons can inform future inclusion processes in Syria and globally? The analysis identifies three interlocking balancing acts that shaped the CSSR's trajectory and impact: bridging Syrian ownership and UN-led Track 1 needs; bridging Track 1 needs and inclusion; and bridging inclusion and Syrian ownership. Understanding how tensions were managed offers practical insights and best practices for designing and implementing inclusion mechanisms in highly constrained environments, as well as forward-looking recommendations for the CSSR's next phase in supporting Syria's transition.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, utilization-focused lessons-learned approach designed to generate practical insights, capture best practices of inclusive engagement, and provide Syrian civil society actors, the OSE-S, donors, and partners with an evidence base to inform future processes. Drawing primarily on 22 semi-structured key informant interviews with Syrian civil society participants, external experts, and OSE-S, swisspeace, and Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) implementing team members; systematic analysis of internal documentation; and an online validation workshop bringing together 81 Syrian civil society, government, OSE-S, and implementing partner participants, the flexible methodological approach was designed to surface both achievements and gaps, identify replicable elements for other contexts, and support forward-looking recommendations for the platform's next phase. Conducted internally by swisspeace, the research was led by a member of the Mediation team who is unaffiliated with the CSSR implementation team and enjoys a degree of independence while gaining full access to internal documents.

APPROACH

This lessons-learned study employs contribution analysis to assess the CSSR's results and impact, and process tracing combined with thematic analysis to examine design and implementation patterns. Contribution analysis serves to assess causal claims in complex settings where experimental designs are not feasible, and multiple factors influence outcomes. For this study, it was applied to reconstruct the CSSR's implicit theory of change, systematically assess evidence for each posited pathway of influence (outputs, outcomes, and impact), and evaluate the degree of contribution made by the CSSR in relation to other factors and processes, surfacing both direct and indirect contributions to change. Process tracing complements this by reconstructing the sequences of events and decisions that shaped the CSSR's evolution, drawing on detailed documentary and interview evidence to identify how specific design choices emerged, why adaptations occurred, and which mechanisms linked decisions to consequences. Thematic analysis involved systematically coding interview data and documentary sources to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and themes across stakeholder categories, time periods, and contexts, enabling comparison of perspectives and identification of areas of convergence and divergence. Together, these methods allow for rigorous analysis of both outcomes and processes while acknowledging the complexity and contingency inherent in peace process support.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION METHODS

Document review:
A systematic desk review of over 950 internal CSSR documents spanning January 2016-November 2025 included: meeting documentation (notes, memos, reports); strategic planning materials (strategy documents, work plans, concept notes); project management documents (proposals, donor reports, MEL frameworks); evaluation and feedback materials (forms, responses, and summaries); and background documents (official meeting reports, informational notes, statements, agendas, Terms of Reference, Codes of Conduct, internal guidelines, participation summaries, and correspondence). Quantitative data including participation data was drawn from the CSSR e-database, which prioritizes participant safety through consent-based inclusion and voluntary data provision including strict compliance with right-to-be-forgotten requests; quarterly project monitoring data where available; and internal CSSR-wide surveys (2018 n=110, 2021 n=214, September 2024 n=205). The study also drew on academic research; grey literature; media coverage; and public UN documents

including public CSSR reports. Published studies of the CSSR, including Turkmani & Theros (2019), Hellmüller & Zahar (2019), Theros & Turkmani (2022), Hellmüller (2024), and UN OIOS (2025), were drawn on extensively, providing comparative perspective and triangulation across time periods.

Key informant interviews:
The author conducted 22 confidential key informant interviews in October and November 2025 with 12 Syrian civil society actors (9 CSSR participants and 3 individuals adjacent to but not directly involved in the process) and 10 individuals with implementation roles and/or external expertise, including current and former OSE-S, NOREF and swisspeace team members. Some respondents had overlapping roles across categories over time. Interviews combined virtual and in-person formats, guided by consistent interview protocols covering experiences with CSSR design and implementation, perceived impacts, challenges encountered, and recommendations for future practice in English and Arabic. Initial key informants were selected by the swisspeace CSSR implementation team, supplemented by further nominations by key informants. Selections were made based on relevance to the study objectives as well as diversity of geography, gender, professional background, topical expertise and role. Research design included purposive sampling based on equal representation of supportive and critical perspectives to ensure balanced analysis. The research further intentionally sought out respondents engaged at different periods to capture the full trajectory of the process as well as variations in perceptions over time. Voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and conflict sensitivity guided all activities.

Validation workshop:
To validate and refine the study's findings, lessons learned, and recommendations in light of rapidly evolving post-Assad realities, a validation workshop was convened online on December 10, 2025, bringing together 81 participants including a broad cross-section of Syrian civil society actors (both CSSR participants and actors not previously engaged), representatives from the Government of Syria, UN officials, and implementing partner. The workshop verified findings, explored future scenarios for the CSSR, assessed persistent challenges, and gathered participant recommendations on strategic priorities for the mechanism's adaptation. Findings from this exercise are integrated extensively throughout the Future Outlook section and inform the study's final recommendations.

ANALYSIS AND TRIANGULATION

Interview and documentary data were systematically reviewed and analyzed to support the analytical approaches described above, identifying patterns in experiences, perceptions, and recommendations across respondent categories, document types, and implementation phases; tracing event sequences and critical junctures; and assessing the CSSR's contribution to observed changes. Claims in this study are supported through triangulation across multiple sources wherever possible. Triangulated claims presented without source attribution integrate evidence across primary sources (interviews, internal documentation, and quantitative monitoring or survey data). Where findings draw primarily on a subset of sources, this is specified either in-text or in footnotes. The strength of evidence varies. Quantitative frequency claims reference project monitoring or survey data with specific citation. Qualitative frequency descriptors for interview findings follow defined thresholds: "the vast majority" indicates roughly 80%+ of respondents; "most" or "the majority" indicates 60-75%; "many" indicates 40-60%; "several" indicates 20-35%; "some" or "a few" indicates under 20%; and individual perspectives are attributed to "one respondent." When referencing subsets of respondents (e.g., only CSSR participants), thresholds are adjusted

proportionally to maintain these percentage bands. Direct quotations from interviews are anonymized to protect confidentiality. Interview dates are not provided as temporal specificity could compromise anonymity given the small respondent pool.

LIMITATIONS

This study recognizes several inherent limitations. The research was conducted internally by swisspeace, one of the CSSR implementing partners, introducing potential institutional bias toward favorable interpretation. This was mitigated by assigning the research to a Mediation team member unaffiliated with the CSSR implementation team; systematically seeking out critical and external perspectives; triangulating findings against external research as well as internal documentation; and maintaining transparency about evidence strength for each claim. The interview sample (n=22) is modest and not randomly selected, though purposively sampled to capture diverse perspectives across stakeholder categories. Selection bias may be present as initial respondents were identified through implementing partner networks, supplemented by further nominations by participating key informants. This was mitigated by categorizing potential key informants as likely supportive or critical based on prior knowledge of their positions and ensuring balanced representation of both in the final sample; intentionally seeking diverse perspectives across geography, gender, professional background, period of engagement, and role; and including three individuals adjacent to but not directly participating in the CSSR to capture external viewpoints. The study further cannot assess perspectives of participants who remained unengaged or fully disengaged from the CSSR over time, potentially skewing findings toward those with more positive experiences. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in October and November 2025, requiring respondents to recall events spanning 2016-2025. These limitations are partially mitigated by analysis of contemporaneous documents spanning January 2016-November 2025 and secondary research from earlier periods, as well as by interviewing respondents engaged at different periods to capture the full trajectory, and analysis of documented criticisms from earlier periods including 2017-2018 statements and boycott threats. However, not all meetings were documented with equal detail, feedback was collected through varied mechanisms over time, and survey instruments differed across data collection periods, precluding direct comparison. Additionally, participant demographic data was gathered unevenly due to strict conflict sensitivity protocols governing data collection and retention. These challenges constrain systematic longitudinal analysis. Confidentiality requirements and the political sensitivity of the topic limit independent verification of some claims. Internal documents are referenced but not individually cited to protect participant confidentiality.

The unique value of this study lies in:

1. access to confidential internal documentation not available to prior researchers;

2. temporal perspective spanning January 2016-November 2025, enabling assessment of evolution and learning;

3. triangulation with large-n survey data from multiple sources;

4. interviews conducted after the regime's fall in December 2024, providing insights into the CSSR's resilience and continuing relevance.

Background and History

The Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) was established by the OSE-S alongside Geneva III talks in January 2016 as the UN's formal inclusion platform for consulting a broad and diverse range of Syrian civic actors. It has since provided the only forum for civil society inclusion in the Track 1 process. Initially a physical workspace in the Palais des Nations, it was conceived to make mediation more inclusive by creating a facilitated "common space" where Syrian organizations could meet, interact, and provide analysis and options to the Envoy and his team, relevant UN entities, and international stakeholders. While women's participation was formally mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), the establishment of a mechanism for civil society inclusion rested on creative interpretation of the mandate's language regarding "an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people," UN facilitation of a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" process, and inclusive engagement of "a broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians."[6] Civil society actors' sustained advocacy, dating to the conflict's early years, drove this interpretation.[7] Institutionally, the CSSR functions as an advisory and consultative interface rather than a negotiating body: its value lies in convening plural voices, synthesizing field-level analysis into actionable options, and sustaining dialogue across otherwise disconnected civic constituencies.

The CSSR is anchored in three operating principles: Syrian ownership of the CSSR, its management and agenda; systematic transmission of civil society voices into the UN-facilitated mediation process; and complementarity to existing CSO-led efforts to build bridges across Syria's geographical and political divide. Participation is open to Syrians engaged in civic initiatives or with relevant thematic expertise who are not members of political parties or armed groups. The OSE-S strives for balance across gender, age, geography, and thematic profiles, operates on a rotational basis, and applies a Code of Conduct emphasizing mutual respect.[8] Agendas are co-shaped by participants and the OSE-S, and outputs range from advocacy messages to thematic papers presented to the Envoy, UN agencies, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG),[9] and donors.

The OSE-S ensures strategic leadership of the CSSR, working in close collaboration with implementing partners. From 2016 to October 2023 the mechanism was jointly implemented with swisspeace and NOREF; since November 2023 with swisspeace alone. The implementing partner assumes responsibility for daily management including communications, outreach, operational support, advisory support, dialogue and mediation expertise, multilingual interpretation and translation, and access to comparative experience from other peace processes. Funding has been provided by a consortium of public donors, including the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency until 2023. Currently, it is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the German Federal Foreign Office, the European Union, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

---

6   UN Security Council, Resolution 2254, S/RES/2254 (2015), December 18, 2015, 1-2.

7   Turkmani & Theros 2019, 9.

8   The CSSR does not have membership; rather "participants." To increase diversity and ensure representation by bringing together a broad range of voices and views, participation is rotational: some actors attend multiple rounds for continuity while others rotate in to maximize inclusivity. See CSSR "Frequently Asked Questions."

9   The ISSG is a multilateral forum established in 2015 comprising the United States, Russia, the United Nations, the European Union, the Arab League, and key regional and international stakeholders including Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and major European powers to coordinate international efforts on the Syrian conflict.

During its initial phase (2016-2018), CSSR sessions convened in Geneva parallel to shuttle diplomacy and formal intra-Syrian negotiations, expanding conversation beyond elite delegations to include diverse civil society actors from the humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, human rights, research, and university sectors. Early in 2016, broadening participation emerged as a strategic priority, leading to the diversification of formats: Geneva rounds, consultations in regional hubs (Beirut, Gaziantep, Amman, Erbil, Istanbul, European cities), virtual meetings via video-teleconferencing (VTC), bilateral engagements, and regional outreach missions. Advocacy opportunities were integrated from the outset, including CSSR side events to the annual EU Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region from 2017 onwards.

The track pivoted to a constitutional pathway endorsed at Sochi (January 30, 2018).[10] The Syrian Constitutional Committee was confirmed in September 2019 and formally opened in Geneva on October 30, 2019, meeting intermittently from late 2019 through 2022 before stalling. Throughout, the CSSR continued to brief the OSE-S and provide issue-specific inputs tied to constitutional themes. In 2021, a strategy review including a survey of 214 active participants identified 7 thematic areas where OSE-S and CSSR participant priorities converged. In 2021-2022, four Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) were formed and published technical reports on:

1. Civil society space and civic values

2. Economy, recovery and development perspectives

3. Local governance and decentralization

4. Protection priorities for Syrians

Following the 2023 earthquake, an "Ad Hoc Group" was formed as a small Track 1.5 body for discreet talks aimed at identifying entry points to negotiations, meeting 3 times before the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, and once since. Measures to enhance transparency were progressively introduced: the CSSR website launched in 2021, followed by virtual townhalls in 2024.

Major conflict dynamics repeatedly shaped the political process, impacting the CSSR: the fall of eastern Aleppo (December 2016), Astana process (2017),[11] chemical-weapons attacks, ISIL's territorial collapse (March 2019), Idlib ceasefire (March 2020), and the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes (February 2023) created inflection points affecting interpersonal dynamics, priorities, and discussions.

---

10 The Syrian National Dialogue Congress hosted by the Russian Federation 29-30 January 2018 in Sochi brought together approximately 1,500 Syrian delegates. The congress aimed to advance constitutional reform and proposed establishing a Constitutional Committee to draft a new Syrian constitution under UN auspices in Geneva.

11 A parallel peace process launched in January 2017 by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to complement the UN-led Geneva talks, the Astana process brought together the Syrian government and armed opposition groups for direct dialogue, focused primarily on military and security issues rather than political transition. The process established four "de-escalation zones" across Syria in May 2017 and continued through multiple rounds until December 2024.

Results and Impact

From an initial group of 18 people including only one woman in 2016, the CSSR grew into a diverse, gender-balanced network of over 1,300 civil society actors by November 2025. It became the gravitational center of an ecosystem of relationships, information, processes, and influence surrounding the UN-led political track. This section documents the CSSR's primary achievements across four dimensions: building a model for intra-Syrian dialogue with transformative effects; creating a dense ecosystem of relationships and capacities that contributed to tangible results on the ground; influencing the political environment; and influencing the broader political process.[12] Direct influence on Track 1 negotiations was limited by structural factors: the political process delivered neither a peace agreement nor measurable reductions in violence; Track 1 mediation efforts faced recurrent impasses, often leaving civil society with no political process to influence; and the conflict ended in a military solution, leaving core negotiating files unresolved. In this sense, the legacy of CSSR discussions, ideas, and technical reports provide a valuable foundation for ongoing efforts to consolidate the political transition. More importantly, measuring the CSSR solely by its direct impact on Track 1 fundamentally misunderstands its purpose and contribution. What emerges is not merely incremental progress but a fundamental reshaping of Syrian civil society's relationship to political processes and to each other under conditions that should have made such transformation impossible. The CSSR cultivated a dense ecosystem, thickening relationships, transforming narratives, and building capacities in ways that laid crucial groundwork for future political progress. In the words of one respondent "the Track 1 […] that was not so important. It was the human – the human-to-human interaction – that was what mattered […] that was where the change was."

A MODEL FOR DIALOGUE

The core value of the CSSR was seen across all sources as one of creating trust, shared values, common ground, and safe space for dialogue across conflict lines. Its earliest contribution was simply making the unthinkable routine: bringing into the same room individuals and organizations that would otherwise not sit together, despite deep wounds and suspicion. In a context of territorial fragmentation, it also provided a venue for civil society actors to physically meet where communications and access had been cut. As meetings accumulated, the CSSR provided a facilitated safe space in which trust could plausibly grow between civic actors located across lines and geographies.[13]

Politically, the CSSR injected civic logics into a process otherwise dominated by armed and geopolitical actors. It served as an advisory interface to the mediator, modeling crossline deliberation and discovery of common ground even when delegations refused to meet, including on short-term and long-term humanitarian, development, and political priorities, as well as acceptable terminology for negotiations. Echoing earlier research, the vast majority of interview respondents noted a distinct movement of attitudes away from entrenched positions towards a focus on commonalities and joint problem-solving.[14] They also observed a move towards a shared culture

---

12 Assessing the CSSR's contribution to broader outcomes is complicated by the multiple actors and contextual factors shaping the political environment; the analysis focuses on pathways where evidence of CSSR contribution could be identified while acknowledging that observed changes reflect complex causal packages.

13 Turkmani & Theros, 2019, 15.

14 Similarly, Turkmani and Theros found that in their survey, "a majority of respondents (81 per cent) reported that CSSR participation was able to break barriers and converge conflicting viewpoints, with only 4 per cent stating it resulted in divergent opinions" (2019, 12); See also Hellmüller 2024, 10.

through a process of coming together that "helped dilute the binary narratives some of them held, break stereotypes of the 'other', and expanded opportunities for dialogue and networking across conflict lines."[15] As one respondent noted, "the willingness to listen to others was restored."

Key to this achievement was the diversity of perspectives in the room, and most felt that the CSSR as a forum where this common ground was found, where dialogue was productive, respectful, and allowed for the expression of differences rather than forcing consensus on specific language and agreements, served as an important model for how productive Syrian-Syrian dialogue could be.[16] Exposure to different viewpoints and realities – what two respondents termed a "reality check" – combined with the imperative to work together to produce effective messages created a shared culture of respect and dialogue, foundational norms and principles that continued to underpin relationships outside of CSSR engagements (such as non-violence, respect for international law, and commitment to Syria's future), as well as an increasingly shared lexicon: "We started to think about each other's safety and how to work on finding mutual ground so that we can come up with something at the end of meetings, not just waste each other's time […] so by the end of our meetings […] I know that people who work in this area cannot say 1/2/3, and they know that if they use this word or term, it will affect me." One participant described this as a process of "rationalizing" positions and thought patterns, cultivating what Theros and Turkmani (2022) conceptualize as "civicness."[17]

ECOSYSTEMIC EFFECTS

The trust and shared culture built within the CSSR supported the emergence of a dense, multi-directional web of relationships and channels of communication that endured beyond the formal settings of CSSR meetings, and contributed to tangible results on the ground. These connections formed among Syrian civil society actors across geographical, political, and community divisions; between Syrian civil society and UN officials (both within the OSE-S and beyond); and between Syrian civil society and the wider international community, including UN member states, international organizations, NGOs, ISSG member states, and the European Union (EU).[18] While bilateral relationships between the UN and Syrian civil society existed independently, the CSSR systematically broadened and deepened these connections in strategically valuable ways. Similarly, when asked whether intra-Syrian networks would have formed independent of the existence of the CSSR, one interview respondent replied: "Maybe, but maybe not with the same intensity." Echoing the findings of other studies, this thickening of ties, rather than any single event or output, emerges as the CSSR's key contribution.[19]

These networks were able to contribute to tangible results on the ground. First, they played a direct role in consistent information-sharing across conflict lines and geographic divisions. As one participant explained: "These spaces provided us with the information [we] needed so [that] we can have a different influence on the ground separate from the media, because you can't take the news in the media at face value [as the media] don't present the different viewpoints nor deliver the truth. So, for us,

---

15 Theros & Turkmani 2022, 10.

16 This sentiment also appears strongly across meeting notes 2016-2025 and available survey data (2018, 2024). See also Turkmani & Theros, 2019, 22.

17 "The notion of civicness is invoked and explored […] in its three manifestations: as 'a logic of public authority', as 'a form of political or social behaviour' and/or 'a political position'. These three components refer to the norms, practices and processes that 'sustain integrity, trust, civility, inclusion and dialogue, and non-violence' and represent an attempt to (re)construct public authority characterized by the rule of law, norms and rights, and the public interest" (Theros & Turkmani 2022, 2).

18 Annual side events to the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, as well as frequent structured engagements between the CSSR and the ISSG were built into the design of the process.

19 Turkmani & Theros 2019, 15.

it was a trusted space and channel for communication, and it would not have been able to exist anywhere in Syria." Second, many interview respondents reported that trust and relationships built among civil society actors across lines, as well as with donors, led to the development of crossline initiatives, the launch of joint projects, and coordinated interventions. Third and more often, the networks of trust served an important yet understated early warning function, contributing to both humanitarian and peacebuilding results.[20] Humanitarian results included protection outcomes such as evacuations and prisoner releases, facilitated aid delivery, refined needs assessments, and early warning for crisis response. Peacebuilding results included early mediation interventions for deconfliction, violence prevention, and local ceasefires. While the CSSR's contribution was mostly indirect – exercised through its ecosystem-building function – it operated through layered pathways. At times, early warnings communicated to OSE-S contacts or trusted focal points within implementing partners led to the direct mobilization of successful mediation and protection interventions. At others, CSSR-facilitated connections with relevant international or local actors created bilateral channels that participants could activate independently. Often, CSSR networks rapidly formed instant messaging groups to monitor and coordinate effective responses to particular incidents within the changing context. One respondent described the mobilization of civil society networks for protection in the early days after the fall of the regime, noting that they were then "more important than before," providing "access to the new leadership and governments [...] access to information about abductees, disappeared people [...] many cases happened," further noting that "there was some collaboration throughout the [CSSR process], but when it was really needed is when the terrain changed, when the regime fell, [...] that is the moment when that group really moved." Another respondent noted that sustained information-sharing through CSSR networks kept their organization current on conditions across Syria, enabling rapid adaptation and tailoring of program interventions to the needs of returnees when large-scale returns began in December 2024.

In addition, participation contributed to building the capacities of participants in the realms of coordination, dialogue, political messaging, and advocacy, raising the impact and quality of their participation, but also enhancing the work of their organizations. International exposure helped some participants to elevate their visibility, strengthen donor relations, sharpen advocacy, and frame messages for multilateral forums as well as deepen expertise on topics of relevance to a political solution. Some interview respondents reported that at times, relationships built between participants and international actors facilitated new funding for civic work in hard-to-reach areas. Whereas several interview respondents highlighted the negative security and political implications for participants, others indicated that participation had a protective effect by enhancing information-sharing and heightening individual visibility and status.[21] However, these effects were uneven: some respondents observed that where mobility was constrained, repeated participation by those able to travel produced local power and capacity imbalances, fostered competition amid shrinking funds, and non-participants occasionally viewed CSSR-linked actors with suspicion.

---

20 See also Theros & Turkmani 2022, 13. While many of these interventions directly contributed to life-saving results, they often paled in comparison with local needs and expectations. At other times reputational damage was incurred, for instance when acceding to requests for small-scale evacuations of civilians was perceived to contribute to forced displacement.

21 See also Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 87.

INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The rotational system, while imperfect, mitigated fears that the CSSR would harden into a rival opposition, and over time both opposition and government-aligned figures came to treat the CSSR and civil society more broadly as unavoidable interlocutors. Many interview respondents reported an increasing tendency by the negotiating parties to consult – or at least interact with – civil society in later years, particularly in the last 2-3 years of the process, which they partially attribute to the existence of the CSSR. One respondent described how the opposition's attitude changed over time: "[At first] they [saw civil society as] competitors. What was interesting is in 2021 to 2022 [the opposition] switched and they started saying let's join forces [...] and try to do things together." While the majority underscored the opposition's increasingly positive attitude towards civil society inclusion, only a few interview respondents agreed that such a shift occurred on the part of the Assad regime. However, one noted a distinct shift in relation to discussion of detainees. Importantly, this shift occurred once commonly accepted language had been developed (DAMP – detainees, abductees, and missing persons). Another respondent credits a wider shift to the constant contact of the regime security services with CSSR participants during pre- and post-departure interrogations: "Those meetings with those 300-400 people at the end, they created some kind of understanding and opened the eyes of the security [services]. They start to understand that [...] these people have to go, we can't block them 100% because there will be reactions from outside, there will be criticism [but having all these people] continue to tell them no, we have to go, we have to say this or that and no, we are not traitors, we are patriots and we have a different opinion..." These long-term shifts – and the CSSR's contribution to them – are modest. Party suspicion of and resistance to civil society inclusion endured, marked by persistent attempts to infiltrate and surveil the CSSR, obstacles to participation including travel bans and security threats, and recurrent dismissal of civil society messages.

However, several respondents emphasized the contribution of CSSR engagement to international actors' understanding of Syrian civil society, in that the breadth of perspectives represented in the CSSR served as important proof that Syrian society could not be reduced to a binary government-versus-opposition framework, deepening prior and ongoing shifts in perceptions.[22] The presence of actors from across the Syrian political spectrum – voicing opinions different from those of the conflict parties – further made them hard to ignore for international actors involved in the Syrian conflict. Concretely, respondents noted the reflection of this inclusive composition in the increasingly diverse range of Syrian civil society actors invited to consultative formats such as EU initiatives. Moreover, as the platform with the broadest representation, in addition to its privileged position in relation to Track 1, the CSSR became the gravitational center of Syrian civil society engagement, playing a complementary, force-multiplying role to numerous other processes. The CSSR enhanced access across parallel forums by deepening or initiating contacts between participants, amplifying and enriching Track 2 and Track 3 dialogues inside Syria and abroad. As one respondent explained: "In the CSSR, [...] you get to know some people, discuss [...], take [those discussions] out [into] a Track 2 dialogue or a Track 3, [then] you bring it back to the CSSR through the OSE. So that interaction was always there, it was not about the exact meetings we were having. [These loops created a] constant stream of information and discussion." Some interview respondents continue to use their crossline networks to extend invitations to previously hard-to-reach actors across divisions for dialogue in Syria and the region.

---

22 See also Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 85, 86.

INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Finally, the existence of the CSSR injected Syrian civil society into political processes in multiple ways. First, the high degree of visibility and legitimacy of the CSSR contributed to raising civil society's profile and status in the political process generally, over time helping to normalize the idea of a "third voice" beyond conflict parties and close to the Syrian public within Track 1. Gradually, civil society became an inevitable interlocutor. Referring to the Constitutional Committee's (CC) "Middle Third," former Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura confirmed: "I have no doubt that having established and supported the role of CSSR and WAB [Women's Advisory Board][23] did contribute substantially to the later 'acceptance' by all players and external supporters of the concept of including a third category to the CC."[24] The trace of this influence can also be detected in the design of the 2018 Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, as well as evolving approaches of both the political opposition and the Assad regime to civil society consultations.

The CSSR's continued operation when formal formats stalled also mattered symbolically and practically: it kept the locus of Syrian political engagement anchored in Geneva/UN forums rather than ceding the field to regional power configurations, providing a structured interface that recognized Syrians as indispensable actors rather than mere audiences to external bargaining.[25] As one OSE-S member reflected: "It gave a sense that something was still happening in Geneva, which [...] I think even at the time I underestimate how necessary and useful that was, just to have something happening that Syrians are coming to and to keep [...] an international focus on Syria." This symbolic importance – along with the practical value of the CSSR as a database and ecosystem of connections – enabled the UN to resist external interference at key junctures, including during the selection process for the CC's "Middle Third." De Mistura noted that "thanks to the well-established and well-known existence of the CSSR and WAB, the UN – which had no influence on the selection of the constitutional committee lists 1 and 2 of the regime and the opposition – had a real veto power on the names of list 3 of civil society."[26] The CSSR's extensive database of vetted civil society actors provided a crucial repository that the UN could draw on at these critical moments. For instance, the OSE-S seized the opportunity presented by the civil society list to redress the gender imbalance resulting from very low numbers of women in the government and opposition lists. The CSSR provided qualified women candidates, making achieving gender balance possible – something that would have been extremely difficult otherwise.

Besides these evident contributions to the formation of the Constitutional Committee's "Middle Third," only much more modest influence can be detected on the political process. Across interviews, most respondents were unsure of the exact impact of CSSR messages, although there is a shared perception that these influenced the discourse of the mediator.[27] CSSR deliberations provided the OSE-S with credible messages to pass to parties and external actors, enriched understanding of ground-level dynamics, and allowed stress-testing of ideas for Track 1 negotiations. The crucial importance of accurate information from inside Syria – where the OSE-S did not have a presence – was noted by the majority of both OSE-S respondents and CSSR participants interviewed for this study.[28] Moreover, several of the CSSR's substantive

---

23 The Women's Advisory Board (WAB) is an advisory body to the OSE-S formed to ensure diverse women's perspectives and the gender equality agenda are considered throughout the political process and at key junctures. It is currently composed of 17 Syrian women.

24 Quoted in Theros & Turkmani 2022, 14.

25 See also Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 86-87.

26 Quoted in Theros & Turkmani 2022, 14.

27 See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 12.

28 See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 15; Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 86; Hellmüller 2024, 8-9.

inputs tangibly influenced the mediation strategy.[29] For example, describing the development of the Steps-for-Steps (S4S) approach, one OSE-S member noted that: "the key issues and the importance of considering what would trigger what […] the whole process was really informed by civil society." Other frequently cited examples include an early working group's report on constitutional principles and the CSSR's Thematic Working Group 3 (TWG 3) report on decentralization and local governance,[30] which provided substantive ideas that enhanced internal OSE-S understanding of these highly complex, context-specific topics, and fed into multiple policy streams. Although one input among many, one OSE-S member recalls having "really dissected [the TWG report] and [gone] through many of [the] ideas with the parties." Moreover, most civil society interview respondents observed subtle, incremental changes that are harder to quantify. As one articulated: "We used to notice that our meetings were bringing about results. We noticed that through statements, decisions, specific changes in behavior. But I understand if these changes might not be clear or direct. Because when we used to meet with colleagues, they would ask us: 'What happened? Nothing changed?' The problem with change is that it can be 'soft' and take place one step at a time."

29 Early internal reports document the uptake of certain ideas by the Special Envoy and use in intra-Syrian talks. However, documentation of such uptake is thin.

30 CSSR Thematic Working Group 3 2022.

Design and Implementation

The CSSR's success lay not in resolving fundamental tensions but in navigating them. The three interlocking balancing acts identified below – bridging Syrian ownership and UN Track 1 needs, bridging Track 1 needs and inclusion, and bridging inclusion and Syrian ownership – could have paralyzed the process. Instead, through creative arrangements, sustained OSE-S commitment, and consistent adaptation in design and implementation, these tensions were managed. Understanding how these challenges were navigated offers crucial insights for future inclusion mechanisms.

Before examining these balancing acts in detail, it is important to contextualize the criticisms that emerge throughout this analysis. Multiple channels through which criticism was expressed (regional consultations, Geneva rounds, bilateral engagements, outreach missions, surveys and feedback forms) enabled the collection of both positive and negative perspectives from CSSR participants and civil society actors not directly involved. Participants consistently exercised their agency in critiquing the CSSR and lobbying for its improvement, precisely because they found value in the mechanism.[31] Similarly, interview respondents invested energy in critique while simultaneously articulating a strong desire for the continuation of the CSSR process.

BRIDGING SYRIAN OWNERSHIP AND TRACK 1 NEEDS

Creative interpretation of UNSCR 2254 embedded immediate structural tension: the CSSR was Syrian-led and Syrian-owned by mandate, but nested in UN-led architecture whose sequencing, discretion, and risk calculations necessarily took precedence. As one respondent expressed, "we say it's fully owned by Syrians, but then it's honestly fully owned by the [Track 1] process." From the outset, four constraints shaped implementation: low consent of parties both to intra-Syrian talks and to civil society inclusion; low acceptance and prioritization by powerful external actors;[32] the inherent ambiguity of the mandate; and imperatives not to outpace Track 1 talks lest the CSSR jeopardize fragile formal processes. These imposed political constraints on the development of a coherent long-term approach for the CSSR – with a formal strategy not codified until 2023 – and placed the CSSR in a consistently reactive position vis à vis Track 1.[33] With inclusion as a goal in its own right, the question of what broad participation can achieve substantively came second.

Strategic Ambiguity
Strategic ambiguity presented a deliberate design choice and a distinct advantage, particularly in earlier phases of the process. From the outset, designers used a flexible interpretation of Resolution 2254's mandate to progress toward overlapping objectives simultaneously. The CSSR was conceived to advance the political process: feeding information to the OSE-S, generating and stress-testing ideas for Track 1, enriching the work of the Humanitarian Task Force (HTF),[34] Ceasefire Task Force (CTF),[35]

---

31 See also Turkmani & Theros, 2019, 5, 10.

32 This includes geopolitical interference, a lack of consensus on the conflict within the UN Security Council and resistance of powerful external actors to the inclusion of certain groups beyond the conflict parties. See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 23; Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 84-85.

33 These inherent constraints had reverberating effects on strategy development: In 2025 an internal UN evaluation found that 35% of OSE-Syria staff disagreed that the overall strategy to achieve the mandate was clear (UN OIOS 2025, 13).

34 Established by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in February 2016 and co-chaired by Russia and the United States, the HTF was tasked with ensuring immediate, unimpeded, and sustained humanitarian access throughout Syria, particularly to besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The Task Force coordinated with the UN to develop and implement humanitarian access plans, and reported weekly on progress in reaching civilians in need.

35 Established by the ISSG alongside the HTF in February 2016 to secure and monitor a nationwide cessation of hostilities, the CTF was co-chaired by Russia and the United States, with the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria serving as secretariat. The Task Force was responsible for delineating territory held by ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra (excluded from the ceasefire), ensuring communications among parties, resolving compliance allegations, and referring persistent violations to ISSG Ministers.

Women's Advisory Board (WAB), and ISSG, and modeling intra-Syrian dialogue. Simultaneously, it provided strategic dividends for Syrian civil society: network- and trust-building, a structured interface with the international community, opportunities for advocacy, tangible on-the-ground results, capacity-building, and a safe space for crossline engagement. Flexibility in approaching these goals allowed for trust to develop between participants, moving from entrenched positions to "civicness," and building networks of crucial importance for early warning, information-sharing, coordination, and protection. Strategic ambiguity also provided the OSE-S with political cover to incrementally build conflict parties and external actors' trust in the process, which was necessary for later expanding participation beyond the government/opposition binary. Key to this increasing adaptability was the partnership model with NOREF and swisspeace along with a consortium of external institutional donors. Flexible funding allowed rapid adaptation to emerging needs; specialized human resources brought regional socio-cultural knowledge, language skills, and dialogue design expertise that enabled participation otherwise out of reach; and institutional elasticity permitted the OSE-S to cautiously test ideas and push mandate boundaries while staying within political, security, and safeguarding risk thresholds.[36] The platform's flexibility to function as an "accordion" – contracting when Track 1 intensified, expanding when it stalled – allowed it to weather deadlocks, Special Envoy turn-over, and focus-shifting toward other regional formats while maintaining relevance. Finally, the positioning of the CSSR as embedded but not dependent on Track 1 enhanced the work of the OSE-S while granting it both the legitimacy and the independence to develop into a "process in its own right."[37] As the process matured, it was increasingly able to operate independently of Track 1 deadlocks, proving valuable when the Constitutional Committee stalled and when the regime fell in December 2024,[38] but it was never free to outpace or outperform the political process (Fig. 1).

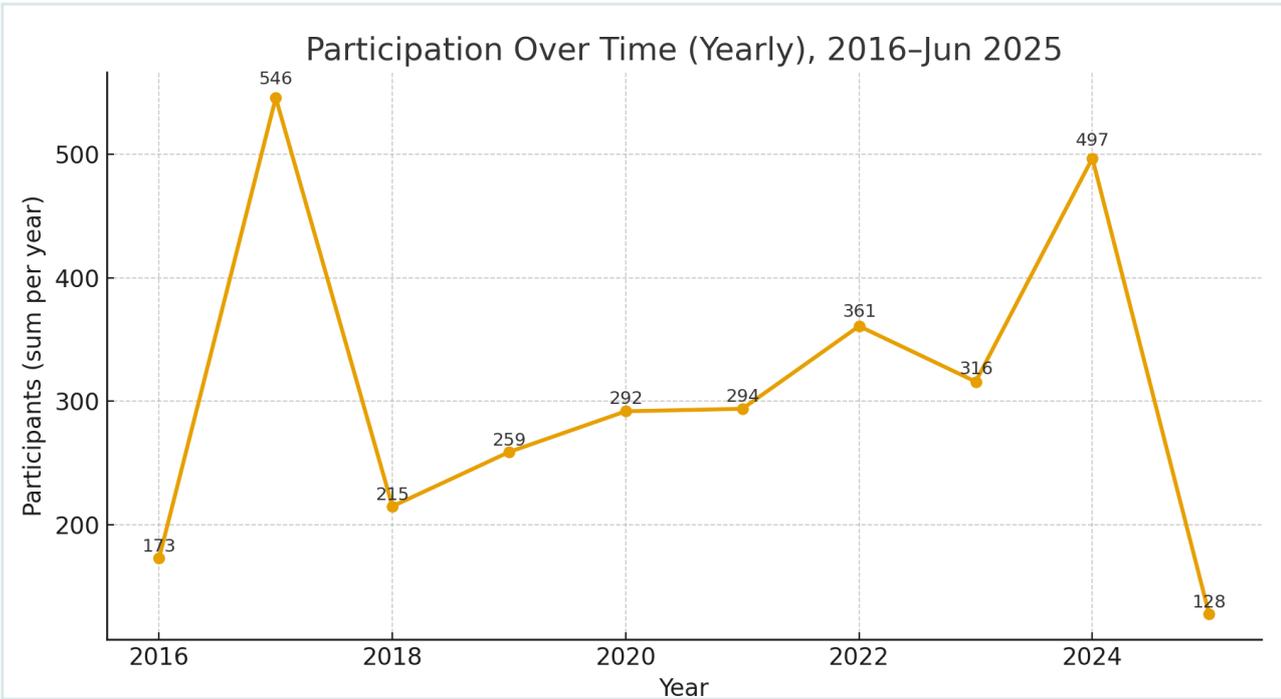**Figure 1: Participation across all CSSR events and outreach per year (excl. bilateral outreach and correspondence)**

---

36 A UN evaluation in 2025 identified the flexible partnership model as "a critical element of the success of the CSSR" (UN OIOS 2025, 29).

37 Turkmani & Theros 2019.

38 CSSR networks immediately activated for coordination and protection, according to interview findings.

Costs of Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity also created significant challenges and generated substantial criticism.[39] Participation in the CSSR involved information-sharing, substantive discussion, and agreement on commonalities, thereby modeling the very possibility of intra-Syrian dialogue. Furthermore, its position within the Track 1 architecture inevitably raised expectations as to its influence on the peace process, particularly as breakthrough points of commonality accumulated. Indeed, many interview respondents felt that the depth of thematic expertise and ground-level knowledge within the CSSR was not fully leveraged for strategic planning and process design.[40] At times, the lack of clear feedback loops, tangible results,[41] or information about how inputs were used created suspicion among civil society participants that their inputs were being misused or misrepresented to parties, the Security Council, or other actors. Pauses as other components of the Track 1 process took priority, such as the 18-month negotiations around the composition of the Constitutional Committee, generated accusations that CSSR activities resumed only when there was "nothing else or better to do," particularly as it was felt that the reasons for these pauses could not be openly communicated at the time.[42] At other times, a lack of clear pathways for influence resulted in outright disengagement. In 2018, Syrian human rights organizations including the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre publicly articulated deep disillusionment with the CSSR, arguing that civil society engagement had been treated as "an afterthought" with no clear mechanisms for feeding conclusions into the political negotiations.[43] Later innovations demonstrated what was possible: the Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) launched in 2021-2022 provided clearer pathways for channeling civil society expertise, and the "Ad Hoc Group" introduced in 2023 formalized civil society's capacity for message-passing and discreet Track 1.5 negotiations.[44] But strategic flexibility continued to obscure process objectives as well as pathways for transferring, implementing or developing CSSR outputs – particularly TWG reports. Referring to the 2021-2024 period, this generated a sense that one respondent articulated as participating in "talks for the sake of talks."[45] TWG reports were intended for dissemination to specialized UN agencies, influential external actors, and negotiating parties, as well as follow-up via the "Ad Hoc Group," but many felt that this design was not clearly communicated from the outset, nor were the limitations of the OSE-S in pushing the development or implementation of recommendations. Despite the real influence of TWG reports on the mediation strategy, expectations were raised that could not be fulfilled. Whether greater transparency or bolder approaches would have collapsed the fragile process, as feared at the time, remains an open question.

Horizontal Transfer

Transfer mechanisms across the UN peace architecture relied heavily on informal linkages rather than systematic design: overlapping UN staff responsibilities across bodies and thematic areas (HTF, CTF, WAB, CC, intra-Syrian talks, ISSG), as well as dense intra-Syrian connections linking CSSR, WAB, and members of the CC "Middle

---

39 See for example SJAC 2018.

40 Similarly, analysis of meeting notes and internal reports across 2016-2024 reveals consistent demands to be granted a stronger role in the political process (as monitor or observer) and more structured integration into the Track 1 architecture, as a means to strengthen the influence of civil society on the mediation strategy and the content of talks. See also Hellmüller 2024, 8-9.

41 Perceptions of impact are polarized: while UN OIOS 2025 survey findings showed 77% agreed that the CSSR facilitated trust-building between different Syrian groups, only 18% strongly agreed and 44% somewhat agreed that the CSSR allowed meaningful participation of civil society in the political process, and overall 66% agreed that it had been effective in achieving its objectives (UN OIOS 2025, 26-27).

42 Internal meeting reports 2018-2020.

43 SJAC 2018.

44 It is worth noting that the vast majority of respondents involved in both early and later phases of the CSSR agreed that this move from cyclical advocacy, trust-building and information-sharing to joint knowledge production and substantive debate on topics of key relevance to a political solution would not have been possible without the trust and networks built across earlier years, although they still felt that the TWGs came late. In addition, the division of the platform along thematic lines too early runs the risk of creating topical silos which would hamper the network- and trust-building function, broad based advocacy, and the development of "civicness."

45 See also Hellmüller 2024, 8.

Third" (CC MT). The CSSR's design also included facilitated exchanges between the CSSR and OSE-S officials, HTF, CTF, WAB, UN agencies, international organizations, ISSG members, and international NGOs. One interview respondent highlighted the effectiveness of these bilateral meetings and wider ecosystemic effects of the CSSR as network: "[We were having] a lot of bilateral meetings with them. That's where the main ideas were coined or developed and then [would be discussed] later in the CSSR." But analysis of internal meeting reports, notes, and survey responses reveals a consistent demand for more structured and synergistic engagement opportunities, particularly to coordinate and maximize the combined impact of CSSR, WAB and CC MT messages on the political process. In one case, successful synergies were created "more by coincidence than design, [wherein] the WAB were at the same time looking at the decentralization issue, perhaps from a different perspective [...] therefore the [WAB and CSSR TWG 3 reports on decentralization and local governance] are surprisingly complementary" – enhancing their combined influence on OSE-S policy-making and illustrating what more intentional coordination could have achieved. While the sustained efforts of OSE-S staff with overlapping responsibilities often enabled rapid response to emerging crises, the absence of systematic mechanisms left substantive transfer vulnerable to competing priorities. Moreover, analysis of internal meeting notes reveals that CSSR participants were often implicitly expected to activate their own networks for transfer and coordination across the UN architecture – particularly with the WAB and the CC – but this expectation was not always proactively communicated, nor did many find these informal linkages sufficient. Clearer articulation of these expectations, as well as more careful communication on the limitations of OSE-S powers, could have mitigated tensions.

BRIDGING TRACK 1 NEEDS AND INCLUSION

Building the diversity of the CSSR across geographic, political, and community lines was key to fostering substantive dialogue on difficult points in a way that shifted entrenched positions and produced tangible results through crossline network- and trust-building. But diversity and divisions when embedded in Track 1 architecture and a highly constrained political environment introduce further complexity.

Vertical Transfer

Until the CSSR introduced a sharper thematic focus, strategic ambiguity created the impression that participation correlated with representation, generating competition to represent certain constituencies or the "authentic Syrian voice."[46] Selection criteria were intentionally loose – a core part of the strategic balancing act – but unclear objectives invited frequent criticism of the selection process.[47] Across years and all data sources, persistent concerns are raised about selection as relates to the over-representation of particular groups (recurrent invitees, diaspora), as well as the disruptive effect of "non-civic actors."[48] Frequent pauses as Track 1 talks stalled shifted expectations onto individuals, as some communities began to read invitees as de facto representatives. As one interview respondent explained: "because of the deadlock in the political process, civil society took [on] a role that's larger than it should be, and it was regarded by the public as its representative." Many CSSR participants interviewed for this study treated representation as a responsibility: they consulted their communities, translated constituency views into contributions, and

---

46 See also Hellmüller 2024, 10.

47 While full transparency around selection within the constraints of the political process is impossible, it is worth noting that the process was robust: implementing partners conducted constant mapping and outreach to identify, extensively vet, and onboard new participants, complemented by snowballing through participant nominations. Selection overall became more effective through the gradual expansion of representation, but accusations of corruption, favoritism, and monopolization by certain groups persist until today.

48 See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 21.

formulated positions through coordination with networks on the ground.[49] Some were selected through coordinated internal processes and participated as representatives of CSO networks comprising hundreds of people.[50] These findings suggest that the implicit goal of positioning the CSSR as an interface between Track 1 and international actors, and Syrian communities and networks was effective upstream: information, perspectives, and priorities from ground-level communities successfully flowed into CSSR discussions and from there into international processes, at least in some cases.[51] But practices were uneven, constrained by short notice and security conditions. Across available internal documentation, CSSR participants consistently asked for both more time and more information ahead of meetings to coordinate their inputs, stronger coordination mechanisms linking regional hubs, and protection measures for participants such as CSSR identification cards and guarantees from local authorities to facilitate their own consultation, coordination, and preparation processes. Wider audiences' mistrust, stemming from both a lack of tangible results and the absence of avenues for broader public participation, often hampered downstream information-sharing.[52] As one respondent explained, "it wasn't easy […] because even if they trusted you, they didn't trust the process. […] Some thought that you could change the world in this Room, and others were asking 'why are you wasting your time?'." In addition, respondents underscored the difficulty of generating broader trust and interest in the process without meeting reports that better reflected the content and depth of CSSR discussions.

Substance

Due to the diversity of viewpoints, deep divisions, security concerns, and non-attribution rules of CSSR meetings, most papers and statements settle at the lowest common denominator.[53] When statements reached deeper agreement but crossed political red lines, they generated significant backlash,[54] especially when read as representing the positions of Syrian civil society at large. While their circulation was symbolically important in breaking the narrative monopoly of conflict parties, several interview respondents felt that this dilution reduced the value of reports both to CSSR participants rotating into the process for the first time, and to wider audiences. Therefore, some participants consistently took it upon themselves to produce and often translate their own meeting reports and minutes for dissemination to their networks.[55] More broadly, participants frequently exercised agency to shape the substance of discussions, at times rejecting suggested meeting objectives entirely to focus on different priorities or broader questions than those crafted to align with Track 1 agendas, and occasionally refusing to produce meeting reports entirely when no commonalities were found.[56] Considering that diversity was one of the most highly valued features, it is unsurprising that a consistent push to reach consensual agreements would be considered unproductive. For many, the core value of the CSSR was exposure to different realities and viewpoints, the opportunity to become familiar with other parties' red lines, and the ability to reach agreement on principles rather than concrete language. However, some also articulated the transformative effect of consensus-generating formats. The annual Brussels Conference side

---

49 Further research is needed to corroborate these findings given the small sample size of Syrian civil society interview respondents. While internal documentation suggests that many CSSR participants beyond interview respondents developed processes for pre-consultations and cross-regional coordination ahead of meeting rounds, available data is thin and uneven. Practices further range from extensive, consistent pre-meeting consultations with constituencies to reliance on professional knowledge and personal networks. See also Hellmüller & Zahar 2019, 86.

50 Internal outreach reports, CSSR e-database analysis. See also Hellmüller 2024, 9.

51 Interestingly, a gender imbalance arises in the extent to which CSSR participants felt that they systematically operationalized their own perceived duty to disseminate information to their networks and broader Syrian society, with women vastly more likely to report having established systems and procedures. This variation requires further research.

52 See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 23; Hellmüller 2024, 8-9.

53 See also Hellmüller 2024, 11.

54 See also Hellmüller 2024, 11. Several interview respondents referred to specific backlash associated with the publication of a statement by CSSR participants on the margins of the 2018 Brussels conference, which resulted in death threats. Analysis of internal meeting notes reveals substantial criticism of the controversial statement, particularly as civil society actors felt that it was published in the name of Syrian civil society as a whole, whereas many objected to its contents.

55 Author interviews & participant documents. See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 9-10; Theros & Turkmani 2022, 9.

56 Internal reports, meeting notes, and correspondence 2016-2023.

event and other advocacy opportunities, as well as technical working group formats both before and after the introduction of TWGs, imposed collaboration for effective advocacy messages and technical reports, demonstrating that consensual outputs were achievable and valuable in specific contexts.

Striking a balance between reaching outputs and leaving space for productive difference was a consistent challenge, navigated on a case-by-case basis by the CSSR team with varying degrees of success – ceding ownership of the space to Syrian civil society, but also encouraging the articulation of commonalities, particularly through pre-meeting guidance and framing. Leaving too much space for difference risked producing shallow outputs that hampered coordination and information-sharing beyond CSSR networks, while inappropriately forcing consensus risked generating ill-adapted inputs that frustrated participants; both extremes undermined influence on the political process. One respondent suggested an alternative approach focused on building consensus on principles rather than positions: "I would build the consensus objectively on the themes, on the principles, on the ideas, not on the people [...] and move to focus on agreeing on something ethical that the participants could [build on]; not only on the ethics of the meeting itself, but on the content."[57] Another proposed that "we could [...] look at all of the options, find commonalities if [possible], find alternative ways of doing things if [not], and lay them out at least relatively equally as options for decision-makers" – while remaining within the political and security strictures of Track 1 architecture, including confidentiality and commonly accepted nomenclature.

Agenda

Relatedly, Track 1 constraints and the degree of political polarization complicated the agenda-setting process. In general, there was constant tension between reaching politically relevant outputs and respecting ownership. This was particularly true of the early years of the process when violence was high, frontlines were dynamic, and trust was still slowly building among participants. CSSR agendas needed to align with Track 1 talks and priorities to exert influence. But given urgent humanitarian needs and the pressure to represent larger constituencies, long-term political priorities were not always of immediate relevance to civil society participants; neither did civil society agendas always converge. For instance, civil society inside parts of Syria consistently focused on the human impact of international sanctions – the lifting of which was opposed, especially by diaspora organizations in the early years – whereas human rights violations feature prominently in agenda item proposals from organizations based in neighboring countries, discussion of which presented substantial security risks for Syria-based actors.[58] To navigate this tension, designers settled on an agenda-setting process that involves gathering suggested agenda items and priorities from all participants through bilateral pre-consultations, after which the Office drafted broad agendas containing suggested discussion points. Many still feel that agendas thus set remained too broad, resulting in time wasted on defining meeting goals and outputs. However, the majority of interview respondents agreed that this compromise, while imperfect, effectively balanced diverse and often contradictory priorities against the OSE-S's operational need to draw transferable advice from CSSR deliberations. Broad inclusion and Syrian ownership were key to generating politically relevant discussions and outputs that enhanced the mediation strategy. Civil society actors brought ground-level knowledge and were best positioned to identify where civil society engagement would most effectively advance a political solution addressing root causes. But whereas diverse participation and strong civil society

---

57 See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 10.

58 Internal reports, meeting notes, civil society correspondence 2016-2020.

ownership present immense opportunity, they also generate operational challenges that can be navigated but never entirely resolved.

Broadening Participation

Designers intentionally used the opportunity to rectify imbalances in the gender and geographical representation of Syrians in other components of the Track 1 talks, including the negotiating delegations, the Constitutional Committee, and to an extent also other regional processes. Over time, the CSSR became the most inclusive component of the UN peace architecture, achieving unprecedented geographic and communal diversity as well as gender-balance within the CSSR network: within the e-database, 44% self-identified as women as of November 2025 vs. 54% self-identified men,[59] with the gender ratio reversing at times across CSSR dialogue rounds (Fig. 2). Available quantitative data confirms that geographic balance was progressively built in early stages (roughly 2016-2018) then maintained between Syria-based actors and diaspora (Fig. 3). The increasingly successful balance in representation of actors from different geographical areas of control, communities, and political leanings was emphasized across key informant interviews and internal notes. However, strict conflict sensitivity protocols, as well as the UN's productive refusal to pre-define Syrian society along ethnic, sectarian, and political lines, precluded the coding of interlocutor data according to those parameters, and thus this claim is not independently verifiable. The systematic collection and management of this data relied on team knowledge and deep engagement with interlocutors, which all implementing team members report fed into the balanced design of participant lists for meetings while mitigating political, security, and reputational risks.
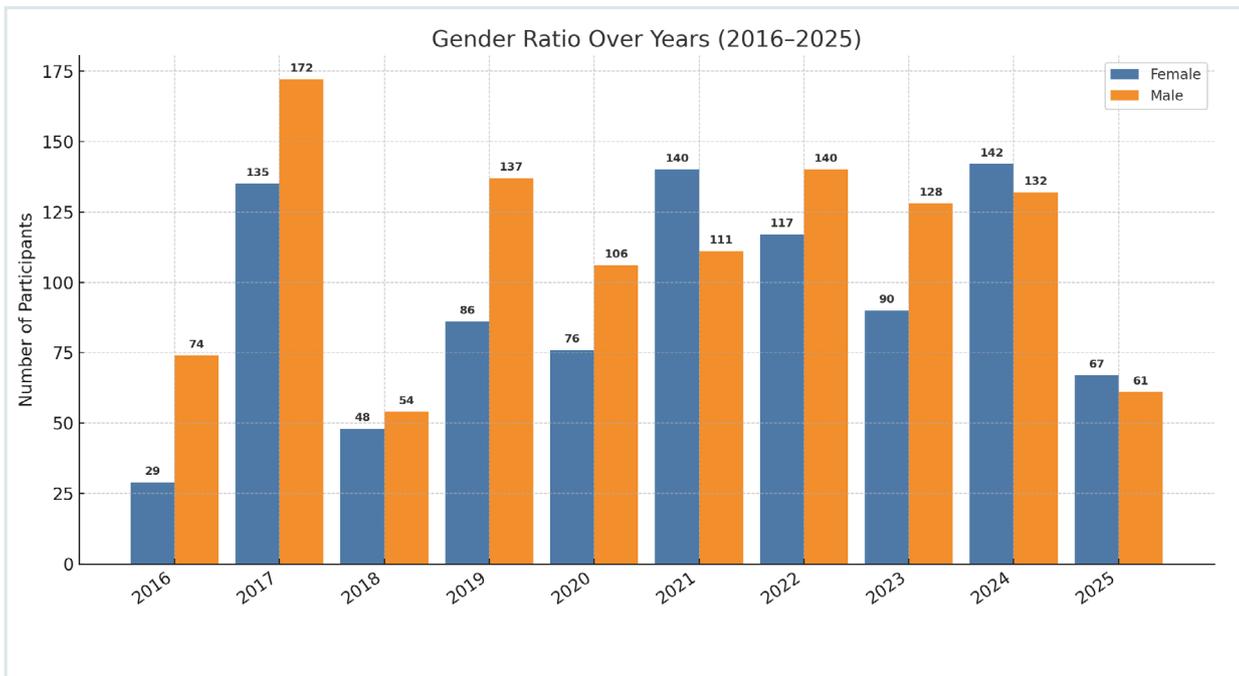
Figure 2: Gender ratio of engaged interlocutors by year February 2016 - June 2025

---

59 Statistics from CSSR e-database, November 2025. This achievement stands in marked contrast to other UN peace processes. The UN OIOS evaluation recognized OSE-Syria as "one successful example of effectively developing and implementing mechanisms for broadening inclusion with civil society and women" among Special Political Missions (UN OIOS 2025, 3).

Recognizing that inclusion will never be perfect, the vast majority of available data sources and interview respondents point to diversity as the core achievement of the CSSR. It was frequently mentioned as the element most conducive to both trust-building and substantive progress. Despite this enormous achievement in an extremely difficult context, gaps remain. While a frequently communicated demand was to expand participation to encompass actors beyond NGOs and formal CSOs,[60] the methodology for identification via participant nominations, the nature of the UN's networks, and practical considerations created constraints.[61] Over time, outreach expanded and a few non-traditional actors were drawn into the process in an individual capacity or through ad hoc outreach, but inclusion was not systematized. The OSE-S successfully expanded the participation of underrepresented groups, particularly in the Northeast and Northwest, rectifying early gaps in Kurdish inclusion as well as other minorities, but access barriers still constrained participation from these areas, especially for those actors with less international visibility.[62] Youth were consistently present in meetings, but a strong programmatic focus on youth was only added in 2023-2024. There was never any focus on persons with disabilities either in presence or substance.[63] The refusal to define Syrian society along sectarian lines kept the aperture wide, but practicalities and politics set limits.
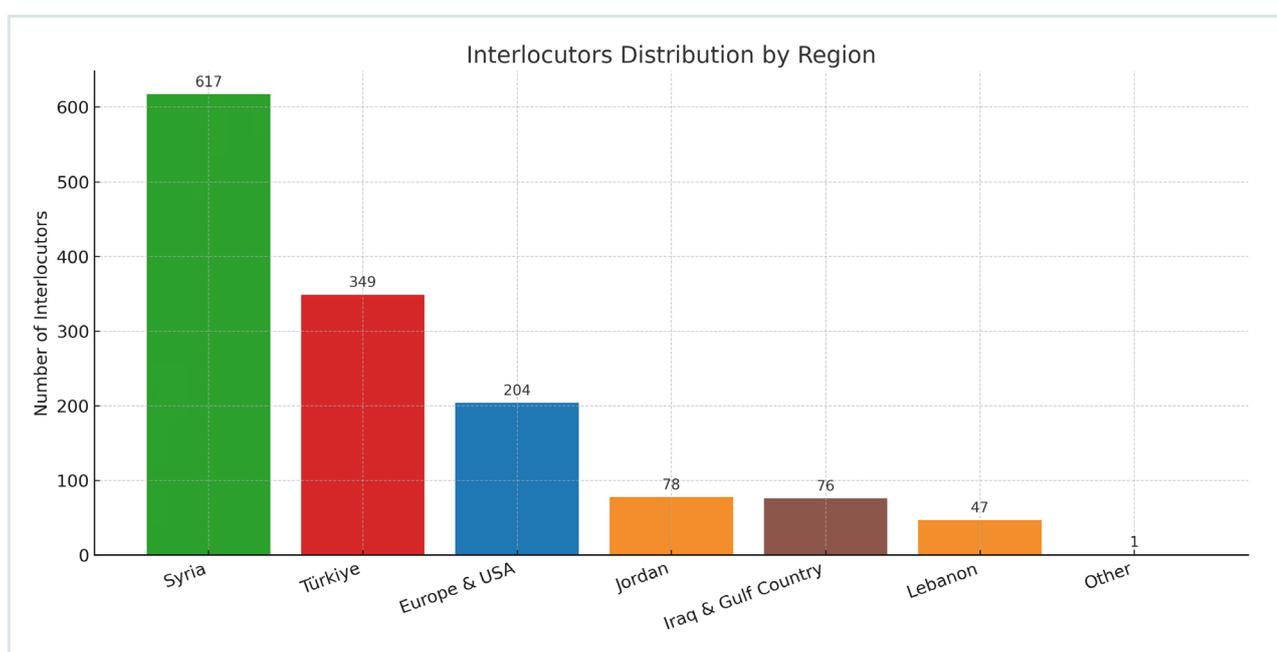
Figure 3: CSSR participant distribution by region, as of June 2025

---

60 This appears consistently across meeting notes and internal survey data gathered in 2018 and 2024 to inform CSSR strategy development. See also Turkmani & Theros 2019, 26.

61 Both the UN's civil society networks and the existing CSSR database are dominated by NGOs and traditional CSOs, resulting in snowballing and nominations that naturally skew towards other traditional forms of civil society organization.

62 Some interview respondents noted that these exclusions created power and capacity imbalances between civil society actors, creating new divisions between those able to gain international exposure throughout the conflict and those unable to do so, but who often carry greater legitimacy on the ground. Mapping these gaps and continuing to broaden participation throughout the next phase should be strategic priorities.

63 Given the nature of the Syrian conflict as a mass-disabling event, a disabilities focus should be a strategic priority for the next phase.

Multilevel Engagement

Core to achieving a high degree of inclusion were the multilevel, fit-for-purpose engagement formats, which proved deeply effective in advancing substantive goals while overcoming access barriers. Each format was designed to accomplish specific objectives:

Physical meetings in Geneva and Europe removed participants from conflictual environments, enabled informal relationship-building and in-person interactions, and promoted deep discussions between actors who could not meet anywhere else. This built trust, moved discussions from entrenched positions toward problem-solving, and created sustainable crossline networks.

Structured advocacy opportunities with the international community, particularly annual participation in the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region deepened relationships, developed capacities to work together toward common goals, and sharpened collective messaging.

Online formats and early digital adoption[64] expanded the CSSR into hard-to-reach areas of Syria and closer to the ground, supported the participation of traditionally marginalized groups (particularly women and youth who typically faced higher access and mobility barriers), and gave participants more time to prepare, coordinate, and consult ahead of meetings. Early digitalization also promoted resilience to shocks, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, allowing the process to continue with few disruptions.

Regional consultations and outreach missions brought the CSSR closer to Syrian communities in key regional hubs (Beirut, Gaziantep, Amman, Erbil, Istanbul, European cities). While less useful for network-building and crossline exchange – as participants usually knew each other well – they carried crucial symbolic importance. Without detracting from the primary focus on in-country communities, these consultations allowed the needs, perspectives, and priorities of diaspora and refugee populations (many of whom have since returned to Syria) to remain part of the peace process. They also provided a direct interface with the international community, and like online formats, proved particularly useful in providing crucial, ground-level information to the OSE-S.

Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) were consistently mentioned as the most appreciated format for engagement. Much like the CSSR itself, this format was something CSSR participants had lobbied for and earned. TWGs allowed participants to self-select based on thematic expertise and self-organize their work via an independent encrypted online portal, producing detailed, valuable reports that stood in marked contrast to other meeting outputs. The "Ad Hoc Group," introduced after the 2023 earthquake as a small Track 1.5 body for discreet message-passing was noted as useful, although its full potential could not be tested before the regime's fall in late 2024.

Constant stakeholder mapping and bilateral outreach by implementing partners continuously expanded CSSR networks and enhanced inclusivity. Targeted support measures including capacity-building enabled the meaningful participation of women and youth. Embedded gender expertise within the OSE-S and partners, in addition to specialized capacities within implementing partners such as language skills, socio-cultural knowledge, and operational flexibility were key to this success, although logistical constraints limiting travel, ranging from visas and temporary residence

---

64 These include VTCs, virtual townhalls, virtual regional consultations, virtual outreach, and continuous bilateral contacts through digital communication channels.

status, caregiving, mobility, digital security, permissions from de facto authorities, and other security concerns endured despite these efforts. Ultimately, participation carried significant protection, political, security, and reputational risks for participants that the latter had to weigh themselves. To mitigate these, multiple modalities of engagement were proposed and modulated to individual risk profiles, including discreet bilateral contacts, digital tools, flexible approaches to data collection and management, and engagement outside of the formal strictures of the CSSR.[65]

BRIDGING INCLUSION AND SYRIAN OWNERSHIP

Diversity in combination with ownership introduces complexity due to the need to satisfy often contradictory demands. From the outset, negotiated "middle-way" design approaches, participatory principles, and iterative learning cycles were applied to help navigate this tension and allow the process to develop into more than the sum of its parts. While imperfect, Syrian ownership and positive external interventions for support were generally held in productive balance through careful case-by-case compromises and increasingly responsive adaptations.

Rotation and Continuity

Rotation was crucial to enabling broad participation while keeping meeting sizes manageable and productive.[66] A few interview respondents opined that it also contributed to increasing participant motivation and engagement, as uncertain future invitations to participate encouraged invitees to "not take the space and opportunity for granted." Meeting design that incorporated at least one prior peer-nominated participant per session facilitated the transfer of institutional memory and linked new participants to existing CSSR networks of trust more effectively. But this modality of balancing rotation and continuity has drawbacks. Rotation can disrupt process continuity and prevent participants from building progressively on discussions from one round to the next. Recurrent invitations can create or exacerbate power imbalances, particularly as access barriers skew participation towards elite groups and diaspora, as well as inviting accusations of favoritism and corruption. Moreover, time and energy is needed to bring newcomers up-to-speed on the content of previous discussions, induct into the functioning and civic culture of the space, build trust, and adapt facilitation to new group dynamics.[67] The vast majority of CSSR participants interviewed for this study agree that longer timeframes for consultative rounds are necessary to reconcile onboarding, trust-building, self-organization and agenda-setting; deep discussion; and especially for negotiating then drafting public-facing meeting reports. However, most interview respondents viewed the balance between rotation and continuity as necessary given competing imperatives. The compromise ensured that the CSSR developed cumulative value while maintaining and expanding broad participation.

To further mitigate continuity disruption and enhance ownership, many recommended stronger governance structures and knowledge-sharing mechanisms to deepen institutional memory, moving away from forms of continuity that rely on individual recurrent participants to transfer institutional knowledge. Measures to enhance transparency and information-sharing were progressively introduced, including a website (2021), biannual newsletters (2021), and virtual townhalls (2024). While relatively effective in addressing these challenges, many noted that these came late. Several civil

---

65 Risks were clearly articulated to potential CSSR participants and monitored through constant bilateral contact with Arabic-speaking focal points within NOREF and swisspeace teams. A strict Code of Conduct was clearly disseminated and enforced. Multiple channels were available for complaints and safeguarding concerns, including assigned female, Arabic-speaking Persons of Trust within NOREF and swisspeace and distinct email addresses.

66 Approximately <40 participants per round.

67 Given that most CSSR rounds lasted approximately 3 days, and facilitators were often different each time, this was a significant time investment.

society actors interviewed for this study observed that some digital communication formats were not fitted to how Syrians share information,[68] while others questioned whether the CSSR team could have played a more proactive role in enhancing information-sharing across the CSSR network. One respondent suggested that inter-CSSR information-sharing systems be developed in future, noting that "sometimes people were surprised when [other organizations'] reports were published." The later success of surveys and virtual townhalls demonstrated the value of more accessible formats, indicating that these should be further systematized and integrated with approaches enabling dissemination of substantive content beyond official CSSR outputs.

Iterative Learning

The negotiated approach to protecting both ownership and diverse inclusion represents an intentional design facet: implementers consistently settled on a "middle-way" approach to balance different needs and preferences. Meeting design was co-developed with participants through bilateral pre-consultations followed by an internal planning process to bridge multiple – often conflicting – demands and preferences: some wanted more detailed agenda items disseminated further in advance, outside facilitation, more guidance; others wanted no agenda and full control. Each meeting or round was then self-managed by participants who nominated rapporteurs, distributed facilitation, moderation, timekeeping, and notetaking functions, redirected the agenda to fit evolving needs, and drafted outcome reports. The team occasionally provided external experts or assumed facilitation roles – including high-level OSE-S officials whose moderation lent meetings a gravitas that enabled discussions to continue past key roadblocks. Overall, most respondents felt that self-facilitation, self-organization, and agenda-setting largely aligned with both their needs and the OSE-S' priorities.

Implementation approaches evolved through iterative learning, exemplified by TWG support structures. The first TWG received minimal structured guidance, with participants navigating process design largely independently. Learning from challenges, subsequent TWGs received progressively tailored support: editorial guidelines, advocacy training on messaging for Track 1 integration, and monthly check-ins to guide progress. Crucially, early groups consistently shared lessons with their peers to inform later designs. This evolution demonstrates the "middle-way" in practice: respecting autonomy and self-organization as fundamental to ownership, while providing and adapting scaffolding based on expressed needs and observed challenges. In addition, the implementation team often proactively identified areas to improve support through targeted training and capacity-building. A notable example was the Women's Skills Enhancement Training (2020-2021), offered in both introductory and advanced formats open to all women CSSR participants, which reportedly improved their ability to meaningfully participate in CSSR discussions, formulate effective advocacy messages, and engage strategically with international stakeholders. Similar capacity-building efforts were introduced for youth participants in later years, though these came late in the process. However, several interview respondents noted that broader systematic capacity-building remained under-addressed and that implementing partner expertise in this area was underutilized.

---

68   Criticism centers around insufficient social media use and the format of e-newsletters. Low click-rates across CSSR email campaigns 2023-2025 seem to corroborate the latter claim. Internal statistics collected across 46 email campaigns between October 2023 and March 2025 show an average open rate of 34.12% and an average click rate of only 11.82%, on a steady decline over time.

Participatory Design
Beyond ownership over meetings through self-organization, self-facilitation, and self-management principles, ownership over the process was increasingly operationalized through participatory design. Feedback collection mechanisms included wide-based strategy surveys (2018, 2021 and 2024) and post-round feedback and evaluation forms,[69] while continuous outreach, regional consultations, and virtual formats systematically allocated time to capture participant concerns and suggestions. These tools created multiple channels for participants to shape the process. Systematic review of available internal documentation from January 2016-November 2025 – including meeting notes, outreach mission reports, feedback forms, survey data, and consultation records – reveals a pattern of increasing responsiveness across multiple dimensions, although documentation was uneven and feedback mechanisms evolved over time.[70] Where demand patterns are traceable, evidence suggests progressive adaptation and increasingly participatory process design. Inclusion of underrepresented groups improved substantially through sustained efforts to map, reach out to, and maintain focus on the participation of women, youth, and other groups, the expansion of regional consultations to additional locations including Erbil and European cities, and creative approaches to overcoming mobility barriers. Selection processes became more transparent and participatory as inclusion broadened, consensus emerged on the civic values underpinning participation, the website published clear criteria, process objectives directed selection toward topical expertise, and TWG self-selection mechanisms were introduced, reducing concerns about opacity. Meeting design and management evolved to provide expanded timeframes, better balance between closed and joint sessions, more systematic pre-consultations for agenda co-design, and participant leadership in designing and self-managing meetings, addressing demands documented in 2016-2018 records. Public communication improved with sustained outreach, the website, and newsletters (both 2021), improving process transparency, inter-participant coordination, information-sharing, and enhancing overall understandings of the CSSR, its purpose, outputs, design, and place within the UN architecture amongst CSSR participants and wider Syrian audiences, later supplemented by wide-reaching townhalls.

The introduction of Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) in 2021 represented the most significant manifestation of this approach. This addressed longstanding demands documented consistently from 2016 onward to move from information-sharing to knowledge-sharing by creating structured pathways to channel civil society expertise into Track 1. Across meeting notes, CSSR participants agree that early trust-building phases were necessary groundwork for these formats, enabling participants to refine their methods of work and sharpen collective definitions of their role in the process. Through a wide 2021 survey process, broad themes and objectives were jointly identified with the OSE-S. Of seven priority topics identified, four were launched and produced reports before the fall of the regime. Available documentation from 2022-2024 suggests that this addressed core civil society demands by providing structured spaces and channels for substantive contribution to the political process.

The 2024 strategy survey, recent meeting notes, and interview data converge in identifying priorities for future phases. Throughout all years, participants continued to call for more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes with formal frameworks for civil society governance of the mechanism – a demand that could not be

---

69 While feedback and evaluation forms were used to collect participant assessments systematically after every Geneva round 2016-2018, this practice became more uneven over subsequent years. Where different post-meeting feedback collection methods were experienced, respondents highlighted this aspect positively.

70 Identifying patterns of responsiveness across unstructured documentation presents methodological challenges. See Methodology section above for more detail on limitations.

adequately addressed before the fall of the regime. Demands for mechanisms enabling horizontal coordination and information-sharing among CSSR participants, as well as for public participation mechanisms to support civil society's interface role with ground-level constituencies, remain despite adaptations. As new demands continued to emerge across later years, participants stressed the need for broader and more diverse participation – particularly of civil society actors beyond traditional NGOs, youth, and persons with disabilities – and for localized, practical support including enhanced capacity-building resources and mechanisms linking CSSR processes to dialogue spaces and constituencies inside Syria. Interestingly, while tools and approaches were incrementally refined and expanded but not fundamentally changed, participants' perceptions evolved over their engagement trajectories. Study respondents involved from founding phases recalled early frustrations, whereas those joining structures once established experienced broad participation and selection, incremental feedback, evaluation and learning processes, and participatory design and management as normative features enhancing ownership.[71] This suggests two things. First, inclusion mechanisms must be given time to mature, for trust to build, and for civil society to collectively define its core role and objectives. Second, a pattern of responsiveness rather than any single adaptation progressively builds ownership over time.

---

71 The small sample size and uneven documentation across years suggest that further research is needed to verify this variation. A slight gender variation also emerges and aligns with Turkmani & Theros' findings (2019, 5), warranting further investigation.

Lessons Learned and
Best Practices

Three insights emerge as particularly salient for comparable peacebuilding processes. First, strategic ambiguity was necessary given the political constraints, yet it also led to tensions. Greater openness about what could be clearly stated and the earlier introduction of mechanisms for public communication and participatory process design could have helped mitigate those challenges. Second, broad and diverse inclusion was crucial to creating a process that produced value independent of its impact on Track 1. Achieving this diversity required sustained investment as well as fit-for-purpose, multi-modal and multilevel engagement strategies. Third, ownership was key. When civil society actors have ownership, they can most effectively articulate contributions that serve both their interests and Track 1 needs, but the balance between diverse inclusion and ownership is delicate. Effectiveness depended on continuously "finding the middle-way" between legitimate but competing preferences while remaining adaptive to evolving needs. In general, the process was characterized by several dilemmas and balancing acts that were carefully navigated through creative institutional arrangements, participatory design, and iterative learning, but never fully resolved.

Inclusion mechanisms embedded in Track 1 architectures create value beyond political settlements. Inclusion mechanisms should not be measured according to whether they deliver political settlements. This misunderstands their purpose and potential. The CSSR functioned as an aggregator and force-multiplier for civic action, creating ecosystemic effects: building networks and capacities, transforming narratives, and laying groundwork for future progress. It also provided crucial inputs to OSE-S mediation strategies and information-gathering processes, enhancing and informing its work at multiple levels. Designing with this impact pathway in mind from the outset, rather than over-emphasizing direct policy influence, enables more realistic goal-setting and clearer communication with participants, process designers, and stakeholders about what inclusion mechanisms can accomplish, without undervaluing or underutilizing their potential.

Strategic ambiguity provides essential flexibility but carries costs. Intentionally vague strategy and short-term planning provided political cover and the flexibility to adapt as an "accordion," to pursue multiple objectives simultaneously, and to test political boundaries. Moreover, this flexibility proved essential when the CSSR's original function changed with the regime's fall in December 2024. The ecosystem's independent value proposition enabled immediate pivoting to support local needs. Some degree of ambiguity may be necessary and desirable in highly constrained environments, especially in the early phases when operating space needs to be proactively created. However, the lack of codified strategy contributed to perceptions of insufficient vision and unclear purpose, particularly during prolonged inactivity and once significant breakthroughs had been achieved. Mechanisms designed with narrow, codified mandates tied exclusively to specific Track 1 functions risk obsolescence when the context shifts fundamentally, but excessive ambiguity undermines ownership and engagement. Future processes should aim to balance clarity of purpose with adaptability, recognizing that this tension cannot be fully resolved but must be continuously navigated.

Thematic focus sharpens purpose without formal codification. "Going thematic" in focus earlier in the process would have provided clear purpose without the unrealistic expectation-generating risks of formal strategy codification. Thematic work delivers dual value: trust-building, network development, cultures of dialogue, and tangible progress toward points of commonality, alongside sophisticated technical proposals that can inform both mediation strategy and Track 1 substance. Introducing thematic specialization early to structure process development and sequencing provides focus while maintaining strategic flexibility, although initial broad trust-building phases may be necessary before structured formats can succeed and the production of high-quality thematic outputs can raise expectations of effective follow-up mechanisms.

Clear communication of expectations supports effective engagement. The tension between Syrian ownership and Track 1 political imperatives created structural constraints. Insufficient clarity about these limitations and implicit expectations generated frustrations that clearer communication about architecture limitations, UN implementation capacities, and realistic scope of influence could have mitigated. When responsibilities are implicit rather than articulated, tensions can arise even when the design is functioning as intended. Similarly, matching output expectations to format purposes, such as exploratory dialogue for trust-building and perspective-sharing, consensual positions for external advocacy, and detailed technical reports where expertise and time align, avoids judging effectiveness by output quality alone where other purposes (relationship-building, exposure to different realities) are primary goals. Some formats will produce shallow outputs, but this does not necessarily indicate failure.

Structural separation from Track 1 while maintaining tight linkages enables resilience. The CSSR developed its own rhythms, constituencies, and value propositions even while feeding into and learning from Track 1 processes. Intentionally designing for this positioning from the outset in ways that allow inclusion mechanisms space to develop independently and pursue civil society-defined objectives rather than existing solely to service Track 1 needs creates resilience while maintaining linkages through overlapping and committed staff, systematic information-sharing, and clear but non-binding pathways for input. However, transfer and information-sharing mechanisms benefit from systematic design at the outset. Clear pathways for inputs to feed into Track 1, specialized agencies, and architecture components do not need to be heavily formalized or resource-intensive, but they can be mapped and utilized. This could include establishing mechanisms to systematically identify entry points to negotiations from civil society inputs, developing tools to track emerging synergies between architecture components, and planning for follow-up when formats produce clear outputs that raise expectations of formal uptake. Viewing inclusion mechanisms as true resources from the outset and integrating them into strategic planning maximizes their contribution.

Achieving inclusion at scale requires multi-pronged approaches. The CSSR experience illustrates that inclusion must be central to design from the outset through targeted outreach, adapted formats, and dedicated resources, including embedded gender expertise, tailored support, and training opportunities. Selection criteria should be broad enough to accommodate multiple objectives but evolve as processes mature. Multilevel engagement strategies support diverse participation, recognizing that different formats serve distinct purposes and contextual moments. Deep socio-cultural knowledge, language skills, and mediation expertise – ideally integrated into UN mediation teams – are essential for managing diverse participation productively. Future

processes should treat inclusion as a strategic priority while recognizing that this can require significant financial and human resources, flexibility, and commitment.

Rotational participation balances breadth and continuity. Rotational participation was essential to building an inclusive process capable of delivering value at multiple levels: crossline networks, trust, diverse civil society presence in political processes, substantive progress that signposted ways forward for Track 1 talks. Balancing rotation and continuity enabled this breadth but demanded time and resources for mapping, outreach, vetting and onboarding, trust-building, monitoring for emerging hierarchies, ensuring equitable access, and responding to evolving needs for meaningful participation while enabling institutional memory transfer. In the CSSR, meeting reports that settle at the lowest common denominator due to security constraints and political sensitivities served important symbolic functions but underperformed as tools for institutional memory, newcomer onboarding, or public accountability. Future processes could distinguish between external-facing outputs constrained by political realities and internal documentation needed for continuity, developing separate mechanisms for preserving substantive discussions, communicating with the broader public, and enabling new participants to engage productively.

Ownership builds progressively through participatory design. The first years of cyclical meetings and advocacy constituted necessary trust-building groundwork before structured thematic and Track 1.5 formats could succeed. Participants involved in founding phases experienced different frustrations than those joining established structures, and perceptions evolved from early critiques to stronger ownership as the process matured. Anticipating this developmental trajectory, recognizing that design strategies benefit from shifting across phases, and planning accordingly by establishing systematic feedback collection and integration mechanisms enables adaptive improvement and the progressive development of ownership. Treating early critiques as essential input for improvement rather than resistance to overcome reflects that civil society is itself best placed to define its collective role and added value. Planning for adaptive support structures from the outset while remaining flexible to autonomy preferences (proactively identifying areas for and offering capacity support, creating mechanisms for early cohorts to share lessons informing later designs, consistently negotiating a middle path in design) builds virtuous cycles of improvement without compromising ownership.

Information-sharing that aligns with communication patterns enhances transfer. Analysis reveals an important asymmetry: civil society actors were generally effective at channeling ground-level information upstream into CSSR discussions and international processes, while downstream information-sharing to broader constituencies faced persistent challenges. Mistrust of the process among wider audiences, compounded by the lack of tangible Track 1 results and constrained avenues for broader public participation, restricted participants' ability to disseminate CSSR knowledge to their networks despite efforts. Addressing this asymmetry implies designing information-sharing mechanisms grounded in indigenous information ecosystems, investing in social media for analysis and engagement, expanding survey use, and developing modalities for meaningful public participation from the outset.

Future Outlook

The fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, fundamentally altered Syria's political landscape and created both significant opportunities and pressing challenges for the CSSR and Syrian civil society more broadly. The Government of Syria has undertaken the task of dismantling the authoritarian state. The political context in which the CSSR was established has changed substantially, and the UN's future role in Syria has yet to be determined. These developments raise important questions about the mechanism's mandate, relevance, and future role, prompting renewed reflection on how existing frameworks align with the current phase.

The vast majority of Syrian civil society actors consulted for this study characterized the CSSR as one of few practical models for intra-Syrian dialogue across divides, and recommended that it be preserved and adapted rather than abandoned. Emerging consensus appeared across both workshop discussions and interview findings that the CSSR should continue because it delivered value at multiple levels: as a safe and neutral space for crossline dialogue; as a platform convened by an established actor with perceived impartiality; and as a legacy-holder of relationships, common ground, and trust built over years. However, both interview respondents and workshop participants emphasized that continuation requires fundamental adaptation: shifting from supporting UN mediation efforts toward providing protected space for Syrian-led dialogue on state-building priorities and inter-communal trust-building, expanding participation beyond traditional NGOs to include unions, syndicates, independent media, and grassroots movements, and establishing clear pathways for civil society technical work to inform transitional governance and policy processes.

CONTEXT

Syria in 2025 presents a complex landscape where conflict, post-conflict transition, and state-building processes simultaneously coexist, with substantial variation across subnational geographies. While the national-level transition has opened unprecedented political space and mobility, localized violence persists. Legacies of conflict and division have left stark differences in governance institutions, service delivery, and civic infrastructure across regions. Ongoing violence combined with rapid political changes has catalyzed the resurgence of political and identity-based divisions and the emergence of new ones.

Echoed by workshop discussions, most civil society interview respondents expressed deep concern that trust and networks painstakingly built, if not actively maintained, could rapidly erode. Most interview respondents noted that the zero-sum settlement of the conflict has generated new civil society configurations and divided CSSR networks along communal lines. Workshop participants observed that rising identity-based divisions have been accompanied by increased hate speech in demonstrations, social media, and everyday conversations, creating urgent need for spaces that can build bridges between communities and promote narratives of shared citizenship. Across interviews and workshop interventions, many also worried that gender parity gains would be lost in future, and that discussions, breakthrough moments, and accomplished technical work risk being forgotten without systematic documentation and continued engagement. A recurring concern was the perceived risk that 14 years of international investment in Syrian civil society and civic space would be wasted precisely when such investment could best bear fruit. Some described the inactivity of the CSSR as emblematic of dwindling international support at the very moment when civil society networks, dialogue spaces, and coordinated action could

best support transition and prevent violent conflict. The CSSR's mature processes, networks, and accumulated trust have not eroded irreversibly. But many interview respondents stressed that preserving and expanding the relationships, shared language, and mutual respect built within the CSSR represents a time-sensitive opportunity.

Civic Space

The stabilization of security in most parts of the country has lifted movement restrictions that had constrained civic organizing throughout the conflict. For the first time since 2011, Syrian civil society actors have been able to return to Syria and travel relatively freely between most regions, enabling in-person collaboration at scales until recently impossible. Yet civil society actors interviewed for this study are divided in opinion on the future of civic space in Syria. While some underscored their skepticism, others are more optimistic. Syrian civil society itself is in flux. Priorities are shifting rapidly from humanitarian response to state-building, reconstruction, and reconciliation. Individuals are returning to Syria in large numbers,[72] reshaping organizational structures and networks. Previously hard-to-reach actors inside Syria are now accessing CSSR networks for the first time, creating both opportunities for inclusion and challenges of integrating new participants.

The initial opening of civic space by the Government of Syria represents a window of opportunity to consolidate a future role for independent civil society, although several interview respondents pointed to rumors and actions that have caused concerns among some civil society groups. These include reported denials to hold workshops on transitional justice and political issues, and MoSAL-issued Circular no. 28 confirming continued enforcement of Law No. 93 governing civil society.[73] Workshop participants emphasized broader civic space fragility: civic actors remain vulnerable to political narratives and sectarian agendas, as well as facing practical challenges with regulatory frameworks. They stressed the importance of protecting civil space from recapture by political elites, regional power centers, or narrow circles, emphasizing that civil society should remain independent to defend justice, rights, transparency, and accountability.

Despite ongoing challenges, substantial opportunities for progress are evident. Recent developments demonstrate potential for constructive government-civil society collaboration. Recent statements issued during the EU's ninth "Day of Dialogue" with Syrian civil society – held in Damascus for the first time in November 2025 – represent encouraging signs of commitment to government-civil society collaboration. Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani declared the event would "launch a strong partnership with civil society and our European partners," characterizing civil society as an integral rather than foreign element of Syrian society,[74] while Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Hind Qabawat emphasized that dialogue marks "the beginning of change" and that Syria's reconstruction requires "a close partnership based on mutual respect between the state and society."[75] The presence of former CSSR participants in the Government of Syria, local governance structures, and parliamentary lists also constitutes an opportunity: these individuals carry the specific culture of dialogue and crossline collaboration cultivated through CSSR participation.

---

72 UNHCR estimates that over 401,000 Syrians have returned from neighboring countries between December 8, 2024 and April 10, 2025, and 1.05 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their homes (UNHCR April 10, 2025).

73 SJAC October 4, 2025. Despite persistent concern, it is important to note that no NGO closures have been reported under this law since December 8, 2024.

74 Meshmesh November 15, 2025. Al-Shaibani noted that "civil society is not a new phenomenon but an extension of local unions, humanitarian initiatives, and student movements that have operated under the most challenging circumstances."

75 Meshmesh November 15, 2025.

Mandate

Several workshop participants and interview respondents underscored persistent questions about the UN's future role in Syria and continued relevance of its mandate under UNSCR 2254. While several feel that an emphasis on Syrian-led, Syrian-owned processes remains highly relevant, many stressed the need for clarity regarding the CSSR's mandate in the new context, emphasizing that a mandate written for pre-2024 circumstances cannot simply be transposed into new realities, and that with a new government the CSSR cannot continue without significant adaptation. Renewed anchoring is required so that CSSR recommendations can be recognized and implemented inside Syria, with several stating that the mandate requires study and amendment to reflect post-Assad realities. Therefore, most interview respondents and workshop participants called for dialogue involving civil society, the Government of Syria, and the OSE-S around mandate, roles, and responsibilities within the CSSR to inform strategic development and the mechanism's governance under enhanced Syrian ownership.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

Given these contextual realities, five potential scenarios for the mechanism's future evolution emerged from the workshop discussions.

Scenario 1: Maintain the current model under new conditions. This would preserve the CSSR as a UN-supported neutral space, essentially reinforcing the existing model under new political realities. Most interview respondents and workshop participants favor preserving the CSSR under the Office of the Special Envoy because they perceive the UN umbrella as providing neutrality, protection, and inclusiveness that is difficult to replicate. However, they recognize that without updating mechanisms, this scenario risks leaving the platform without real policy influence beyond consultations. This scenario was largely rejected.

Scenario 2: Reform and modernize the CSSR while maintaining UN support. This scenario received the broadest support across all data sources. It involves updating structures to reflect post-Assad realities and the presence of new authorities, maintaining independence through the support of an impartial convener, expanding representation to be truly national rather than donor-driven or tied to old political zones, redesigning working groups to avoid redundancy and focus on key national priorities (decentralization, justice, social cohesion, gender equality, economic recovery, education, legal frameworks, service reform), creating clearer channels for outputs to shape policy-making and legislation, and embedding trust-building mechanisms into operations including transparency over selection, agendas, and follow-up.

Scenario 3: Gradual transition toward full localization. This involves the UN transitioning to a more supportive, technical, and backstopping role while Syrian structures assume leadership. Civil society would gradually shift from being invited to consultations to setting its own overall objectives and frameworks for state engagement. However, for this scenario to be feasible, a few participants noted that legal environment stabilization are required favoring civic freedoms, predictable MoU and licensing procedures, and ongoing capacity strengthening for smaller and local organizations. While only a few advocated for this scenario in the short term, it received broader support as a long-term goal.

Scenario 4: Direct integration into state-led processes. This would formally embed the CSSR within the emerging governance architecture. While coordination and dialogue with ministries are viewed across both interview and workshop data as essential, many expressed concerns that full integration would compromise independence,

increase politicization, and reduce space for critical engagement. For a large majority of participants, a government-led approach would contradict the mechanism's core value as a neutral civic space. This scenario received minimal support.

Scenario 5: Discontinuation. Consensus was strongly negative: participants stressed that discontinuing the mechanism would eliminate one of the very few existing neutral national platforms for civil society, increase fragmentation, reduce coordination and trust-building, and create a vacuum that could be filled in ways that do not serve civic freedoms. This scenario was rejected.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Strong consensus emerged across interviews and workshop discussions that the CSSR should continue operations while adapting to new needs and priorities. With Scenario 2 receiving broadest support in the short to medium term while preparing the ground for Scenario 3, workshop participants articulated a clearer vision for how a reformed and modernized CSSR could function. The military settlement did not resolve many of the political grievances, and the vast majority of respondents and participants agree that CSSR topics remain deeply relevant to transition and state-building: constitutional principles, decentralization and local governance, justice and accountability, economic recovery, rights and freedoms, citizenship, civic values, and education. Completed technical work provides a ready foundation. Frequently mentioned directions for long-term relevance include developing joint visions for Syria's political future, refining technical proposals on governance structures, legal and justice sector reform, transitional justice and rule of law, social cohesion, peacebuilding and reconciliation processes at the local, regional, and national levels, economic reconstruction frameworks, protection of civic space and pluralism, and education.

With hate speech, disinformation, and identity-based violence emerging strongly among pressing concerns, interview respondents and workshop participants stressed that the CSSR represents one of few spaces capable of building bridges between communities, countering polarization through sustained dialogue grounded in shared citizenship, and maintaining networks of trust essential to preventing further fragmentation. The need for localized and adaptive approaches emerged strongly across both data sources, with the vast majority of civil society respondents pointing to gaps in programming that links the national and subnational levels. The large majority agreed that dialogue, peacebuilding and social cohesion should be strategic priorities through sustained engagement for trust-building, alongside context-specific interventions responding to local dynamics, varying levels of trust between communities, and distinct patterns of displacement and return. Many called for women's roles to be strengthened not only symbolically but structurally, through meaningful inclusion in diplomacy, economic planning, and governance reforms, with mechanisms addressing discrimination and underrepresentation.

Evolved Role and Core Functions
Workshop discussions around the CSSR's evolved role identified three interconnected functions responding directly to transition needs:

1. Independent civic space with structured state engagement. Participants recommended that the mechanism should maintain independence from both state structures and partisan interests while facilitating structured cooperation with the Government of Syria, emphasizing that the CSSR's credibility depends on remaining non-aligned even while engaging governmental openness as an opportunity. They argued that this requires clear frameworks defining how civil society engages

ministries on laws, procedures, and policies without compromising neutrality or allowing politicization. Some suggested that an adapted CSSR should also contribute to more transparent and predictable procedures enabling CSOs to engage effectively with state institutions.

2. Whole-of-Syria forum for shared understanding and cohesion. Workshop participants argued that the CSSR should function as a space for building shared understandings on contentious issues: supporting community-level reconciliation, developing approaches that balance accountability with the rejection of collective blame, and actively promoting unified civic identity grounded in shared citizenship rather than sectarian, ethnic, or geographic divisions. One workshop participant noted that millions from different backgrounds have been victims of repression, violence, displacement, and loss; acknowledging this shared experience can provide a foundation for more inclusive approaches. In this context, participants argued for moving beyond selection and participation frameworks that dominated earlier phases (territorial and factional categories) toward more holistic approaches embracing citizenship-based identity. They contended that these earlier frameworks no longer correspond to current realities and risk reproducing divisions that transition processes should address.

3. Thematic work with institutional influence. Workshop participants argued that the mechanism should create clear channels for working group outputs to inform policy-making and legislation. Both participants and interview respondents acknowledged that thematic working groups have produced studies relevant to Syria's current phase but stressed that these require redesign through consultations with broader constituencies, and stronger connections to implementation and policy processes. Most interview respondents emphasized regular, structured dialogue rather than episodic consultations, while workshop participants suggested organizing periodic meetings focused on specific national issues to support civil society in developing joint positions or coordinated messaging on major questions including transitional justice, decentralization, human rights, and economic policies.

Operational Adaptations

Echoed throughout workshop discussions, all civil society interview respondents stressed that the CSSR now has an unprecedented opportunity to decentralize activities, moving beyond primarily national level dialogue to systematically link processes and stakeholders at subnational and local levels. This would require adapting formats, methods, and focus to local needs while maintaining national and international-level dialogue space to combine local grounding with national coherence. While substantially increasing in-country activities is a priority, many stakeholders recommended that regional hubs remain components of the engagement architecture for diaspora communities and CSO concentrations.

In line with the results of the September 2024 CSSR strategy survey, workshop participants noted that representation has historically favored formal NGOs, particularly those registered or well-connected to international actors, while grassroots actors, unions, syndicates, professional bodies, independent media, and informal civic initiatives – although integral and important civil society components – were under-represented or absent. They emphasized that future iterations must adopt broader understandings of civil society, moving beyond traditional NGO-based definitions. Many participants stressed the need for continued support to women and a sustained programmatic focus on gender equality, in addition to increasing the participation of youth.

Conclusion

The Civil Society Support Room evolved from a politically risky experiment into a highly valuable model for civil society inclusion mechanisms in contemporary peacemaking. From 18 initial participants to over 1,300 actors, achieving gender parity and unprecedented geographic, political, and communal diversity, the CSSR created dense networks of trust, transformed participants' relationships and capacities, injected civil society voice into political processes, and facilitated tangible humanitarian and peacebuilding results. Its impact lies not in direct influence on Track 1 outcomes but in its ecosystemic effects: thickening relationships, building capacities, transforming narratives, and laying groundwork for future progress, including by training and exposing a large cohort of Syrian civil society actors to international processes – many of whom now play key roles in the transition.

Operating under conditions that should have doomed it to failure, the CSSR not only survived but fundamentally reshaped Syrian civil society's relationship to political processes and to each other. This achievement reflects above all Syrian civil society's determination, sustained over nine years through multiple Special Envoy transitions and repeated threats to the platform's existence, aided by the OSE-S's entrepreneurial approach. The platform's survival required navigating three interlocking balancing acts through creative institutional arrangements, systematic application of the principle of Syrian ownership, and adaptive implementation. Over time, the CSSR evolved into a transformative process that proved resilient to deadlocks, transitions, and shocks, and was able to move things on the ground. The regime's fall on December 8, 2024, revealed the value of this patient work: CSSR networks immediately activated for protection, emergency response, sustained trust and crossline information-sharing, and engagement with new authorities, demonstrating precisely the resilience the platform had cultivated.

The current transitional moment represents both culmination and inflection point. Years of patient network-building created a uniquely valuable ecosystem, platform, and repository of deep expertise grounded in civic values that proved essential when Syria's transition created space for civil society engagement, but the mechanism now faces uncertainty precisely when civil society actors deem it most needed. Effective adaptation of its mandate, governance, and future role will require balancing responsiveness to the new context with the foundational principles that enabled the CSSR's effectiveness. The window for adaptation is narrow: carefully constructed networks could dissolve, highly relevant technical work could become obsolete, and hard-won trust could erode without sustained engagement. With strategic shifts toward supporting Syrian-led state-building and peacebuilding processes, geographic localization, enhanced participatory design, improved transparency, and sustained commitment from the UN, donors, implementing partners, Syrian civil society, and the Government of Syria, the CSSR could play a vital role in supporting Syria's transition toward a more inclusive, pluralistic, and peaceful future.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHING ORGANIZATIONS

swisspeace
is a practice and research institute dedicated to advancing effective peacebuilding. Partnerships with local and international actors are at the core of our work. Together, we combine expertise and creativity to reduce violence and promote peace in contexts affected by conflicts.

swisspeace is an associated Institute of the University of Basel and member of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences. Its most important partners and clients are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, international organizations, think tanks and NGOs.

For more information, visit www.swisspeace.ch.

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, works to shape a future worth living around the world – for people, our partner countries, Europe and Germany. For a society that protects the rights of the individual and embraces sustainable change. GIZ works on behalf of the German Government, with international organisations, the scientific and academic community, civil society and the private sector. GIZ is a federal enterprise with the legal form of a limited liability company (GmbH). It is wholly owned by the Federal Republic of Germany, represented by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

For more information, visit www.giz.de.

References

Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). n.d. "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)." Accessed 19/11/2025. https://cssrweb.org/en/about-the-cssr/faq/.

CSSR Thematic Working Group 3: Local Governance and Decentralisation. 2022. *Meeting Report*. Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://cssrweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/TWG-on-local-governance-and-decentralization-report.pdf.

Hellmüller, Sara, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar. 2019. "UN-led Mediation in Syria and Civil Society: Inclusion in a Multi-Layered Conflict," in Andy Carl (ed.) *Negotiating Inclusion in Peace Processes*. Accord 28. London: Conciliation Resources.

Hellmüller, Sara. 2024. "Broadening Perspectives on Inclusive Peacemaking: The Case of the UN Mediation in Syria." *Third World Quarterly* 45(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2299802.

Human Rights Watch. September 10, 2013. *Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria*. New York: Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 17/11/2025 from https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria.

Meshmesh, Agid. November 15, 2025. "Damascus Hosts EU 'Day of Dialogue' with Syrian Civil Society for First Time." North Press Agency. Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://npasyria.com/en/132129/.

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC). 2018. "Revitalizing Civil Society Engagement in the Geneva Process." Retrieved 13/11/2025 from https://syriaaccountability.org/revitalizing-civil-society-engagement-in-the-geneva-process/.

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC). October 24, 2025. "Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor." Retrieved 25/11/2025 from https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-on-the-directive-from-the-minister-of-social-affairs-and-labor/.

Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). December 20, 2024. "Summary of the Assad Regime's Crimes Against the Syrian People Over the Last 14 Years." Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://snhr.org/blog/2024/12/20/summary-of-the-assad-regimes-crimes-against-the-syrian-people-over-the-last-14-years/.

Theros, Marika, and Rim Turkmani. 2022. "Engendering Civicness in the Syrian Peacemaking Process." *Journal of Civil Society* 18(2). https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068625.

Turkmani, Rim, and Marika Theros. 2019. *A Process in Its Own Right: The Syrian Civil Society Support Room*. London: Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101034/5/A_process_in_its_own_right.pdf.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2025. *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery*. New York: UNDP. Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025_compressed.pdf.

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR). 2022. "Civilian Deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic." Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/50/68. Geneva: United Nations. Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/ahrc5068-civilian-deaths-syrian-arab-republic-report-united-nations-high.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). April 10, 2025. "Regional Flash Update #22 Syria Situation Crisis." Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://www.unhcr.org/media/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-22.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). n.d. "Syrian Arab Republic." Retrieved 19/11/2025 from https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/syrian-arab-republic.

United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (UN OIOS). 2025. *Evaluation of Cluster I Conflict-Specific Special Political Missions.* Report number IED-25-003. New York: United Nations. https://www.unevaluation.org/member_publications/evaluation-cluster-i-conflict-specific-special-political-missions-ied-25-003.

United Nations Security Council. December 18, 2015. "Resolution 2254 (2015) [on the Situation in the Middle East]." S/RES/2254. Retrieved 02/11/2025 from https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/443/97/pdf/n1544397.pdf.