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Journal of Civil Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcis20

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To cite this article: Marika Theros & Rim Turkmani (2022): Engendering civicness in the Syrian peacemaking process, Journal of Civil Society, DOI: 10.1080/17448689.2022.2068625

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068625

Published online: 28 May 2022.

JOURNAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068625

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Engendering civicness in the Syrian peacemaking process

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolution, role and impact of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the first formal mechanism to involve civil society in the UN-led political talks for Syria. Through surveys, focus groups and interviews, it examines how and whether the CSSR influenced the peace process. Importantly, it also illustrates how the CSSR transformed the participants and third-party mediators themselves, suggesting that it shapes the conflict and peace-making landscape beyond the high-level political process. It argues that the CSSR had a transformative impact on both the attitudes and behavioural patterns of the participants themselves, while also challenging the dominant representations of the conflict that strengthen the power of conflict actors and shape international action. Even if the UN failed to successfully mediate a political agreement, the paper demonstrates how an inclusive and more independent mechanism can inject the logic of civicness. This can be seen in the design of the Constitutional Committee, in actions taken to broaden inclusivity, and in the changing discourse of political actors.

KEYWORDS

Peace process; inclusion; Syria; peacebuilding; civil society

Introduction

The complexity of the Syrian war is only matched by the multiplicity of efforts to bring it to a negotiated end. The uprising began with widespread and peaceful demonstrations before quickly mutating into a multi-layered conflict with increasing regional and international involvement. As the militarization of the conflict shifted attention from its civic roots, it became increasingly narrated in both sectarian and broader geopolitical terms. These evolving dynamics and their corresponding narratives have both shaped and been shaped by international action and mediation strategies to end the war. Early in the uprising, many Western officials supporting the revolution failed to make clear distinctions between peaceful civic actors and those taking up arms and supporting violence. Likewise, at the start of the UN-led process, mediation approaches reinforced these narratives by privileging top-down efforts to bring together two opposing sides – the regime

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with the political and armed opposition – and to leverage their regional and international backers in support of a solution.

Nevertheless, throughout the conflict, peaceful civic actors continued to play an important role, whether as first responders, as mediators, as service providers, particularly in schools and hospitals, or in monitoring or documenting violent activities. Civil society has been directly targeted, and many have been killed or have fled the country. Moreover, when sectarian narratives deepened and violence fragmented society geographically, civil society itself became increasingly polarized. Over time, however, the persistence of Syrian civil society in challenging this status quo and presenting alternative ideas and practices that counter the logic of identity politics can be seen in the creation, work and impact of the Civil Society Support Room, the first formal mechanism to involve civil society in the UN-led Syrian political talks in Geneva.

This article explores the evolution, role and impact of the CSSR, and contends that it was much more than a complementary mechanism or simply 'window dressing' to an elite process. It argues that it was not only an attempt by civil society and their UN backers to create a more inclusive political process, but also that the CSSR had a transformative impact on both the attitudes and behavioural patterns of the participants themselves, while also challenging the dominant representations of the conflict that sustain violence, strengthen the power of conflict actors, and shape international action. Moreover, by elevating the perceived legitimacy of civic actors and strengthening their links with international actors, participation in the CSSR arguably influenced dynamics on the ground and helped to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian activities.

In trying to analyse and assess the CSSR's impact, this article builds on the literature on civil society inclusion in peace-making processes. Scholarly attention has focused predominantly on the merits of civil society inclusion or exclusion on achieving a lasting peace agreement, with emerging literature highlighting the different modalities inclusion might take. While we first explore how inclusion influences the political process itself, we extend our analysis by examining how participation in inclusive mechanisms can transform the participants themselves as well as third-party mediators, highlighting how it can shape the conflict and peace-making landscape in the midst of continued violence. Secondly, much of the literature assumes a sequencing logic, where reaching an elite settlement first ends the conflict and then ushers in a period of post-peace implementation and reconstruction in a post-conflict phase (Faria & Youngs, 2010; Rangelov, 2014). Yet, many intractable conflicts experience a series of attempted, fragile and/or repeated peace-making processes that may lead to reductions in violence for certain periods of time before new forms of conflict resumes, as in Afghanistan, Colombia and South Sudan, or experience a prolonged and slow-moving peace process as in Syria. Moreover, in many difficult conflicts, mediation takes place where there is no 'mutually hurting stalemate' or desire by the conflict parties to end the war and reach an agreement.

Lastly, in our discussion, we employ the notion of civicness, as one of the three logics of political authority developed by the Conflict Research Programme, alongside the political marketplace and identity politics. The notion of civicness is invoked and explored here 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.[1]

In Syria, a key question is how to build a pluralistic democratic Syria where citizens from all backgrounds feel protected and included. Our findings demonstrate how CSSR became a space for civic actors from different backgrounds, geographies and perspectives to meet and challenge themselves, and to build a meaningful platform for action and behavioural change. The process of coming together, despite deep mistrust and clashing perspectives, to deliberate on key issues and principles could be described as a form of 'pre-figurative politics' or re-imagining of the social contract. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive mechanisms designed to promote dialogue and joint analysis among multiple perspectives and experiences in order to redefine their shared context, build cross-community networks and help forge consensus on the vision and foundational principles that could underpin a legitimate settlement. The close link of the CSSR to official processes was critical for legitimating and elevating the 'political' position and role of civil society as an actor in peace-making *and* peace-building inside Syria.

This article draws from research conducted by the Syria team at the Conflict and Civil Research Unit at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) between April 2018 and June 2019 with additional interviews conducted for this article between January and October 2020. The research involved an online survey of 118 CSSR participants, focus groups, interviews, secondary sources and discussions with policy-makers and practitioners. The online survey included 28 questions in Arabic designed to capture the impact of the CSSR on those who have participated, and to elicit their perspectives on its design and how best to improve it. We sought external advice and the input of key members of the CSSR in the design of the survey questionnaire as well as soliciting feedback from the UN Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) and its implementing partners, swisspeace and NOREF. Moreover, we previewed initial research and survey findings at a meeting of the CSSR in Geneva in November 2018 and at an LSE conference in December 2018.

This article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on civil society inclusion in peace-making processes while the following section addresses both the broader Syrian conflict and peace-making context. The fourth section identifies and analyses the key findings from the research on the CSSR, and the conclusion draws out the main implications of the findings.

Civil Society Inclusion in Peace-Making

Dominant approaches to peace-making usually involve a narrow set of actors, often armed and male, meeting behind closed doors to negotiate a political settlement. Broadly speaking, negotiators and mediators have tended to prefer smaller, binary, negotiating tables and favour the exclusion of civil society from negotiations, believing it unnecessarily complicates efforts to reach an agreement. As Wanis-St. John (2008) explains, 'international conflict mediations seem to prefer marginalizing all except government factions and armed groups to maximize the chances of getting an agreement'. Indeed, only one-third of peace agreements between 1989 and 2004 involved civil society, whether through direct or indirect inclusion (Nilsson, 2012). Mediators resisting

more inclusive processes cite a variety of reasons often centred around efficacy concerns, such as confidentiality requirements, the multiplication of positions at the table, and resistance by conflict parties seeking to claim the sole ability to legitimately represent part of society or the broader public (Paffenholz & Ross, 2015). For the mediator, the perceived dilemma with inclusion is the tension between the efficacy of securing an agreement and the legitimacy of the broader elite settlement (De Waal, 2017).

Recently, however, inclusion has emerged as a common theme in the peace-making landscape, and figures prominently in both academic and policy literature as critical for ending armed conflicts and sustaining peace (Bell & Pospisil, 2017; Krause et al., 2018; Nilsson, 2012; United Nations & World Bank, 2018). Efforts to include women and civil society have become part of an increasingly global movement, backed by UN Security Council Resolutions (1325, 2419 and 2282). Moreover, a growing body of research strongly indicates that peace settlements are more durable when they involve a fuller range of stakeholders. A 2008 study of 25 peace treaties, for example, demonstrates a strong correlation between high or moderate civil society involvement in negotiations with sustained peace in the peacebuilding phase and argues that war resumed in those cases not characterized by direct or indirect civil society involvement in peacemaking (Kew & Wanis-St. John, 2008). A 2012 study assessing 83 peace agreements between 1989 and 2004 comes to similar conclusions and finds that civil society involvement in peace-making reduces the risk of peace failing by 64% (Nilsson, 2012, p. 258). Similarly, a 2015 study of 182 signed peace accords over two decades that measured the presence of women as negotiators, mediators, witnesses and signatories, showed that these accords were 35% more likely to last at least 15 years when women were involved (O'reilly et al., 2015).

Calls for an inclusive peace process, in part, can be seen as a response to both the complexity of ending current conflicts as well as the fragility of peace agreements once concluded. World Bank figures, for example, indicate that more than 50% of all peace agreements fail and violence resumes within five years of signature (World Bank, 2011). Today's conflicts typically involve numerous actors, a mixture of political and criminal violence, complex geopolitical involvement, and the presence of ideological and identity-based conflict. As Jewett (2019) argues, 'evidence shows that neither force nor aid nor mediators are capable of tackling these conflicts on their own'. Exclusive elite settlements will only succeed if the main warring parties are assured of retaining their power positions and access to resources. This may reduce violence between the armed groups, but it does not end their coercive and predatory behaviour towards civilians. In addition, critical scholars have argued that these top-down peace agreements have become more akin to constitution-making processes, as with Dayton in Bosnia or the Taif Accords in Lebanon, and tend to reinforce processes of criminalization and ethnic identity formation (Kaldor, 2016). Others, such as Bell and Pospisil (2017) use the term 'formalised political unsettlements' to describe these settlements, arguing that they can entrench the conflict within the legal and political structures of the country in questions and thus generate new forms of conflict and manifestations of insecurity.

Although increasing evidence demonstrates considerable linkages between inclusion and efficacy, inclusive peacemaking is not yet a systematized framework of practice, nor is it universally accepted by those who have traditionally held the reins of power

(Paffenholz & Ross, 2015). Many of the academic studies tend to focus on the merits of civil society inclusion or exclusion, largely leaving aside design considerations and the various ways in which civil society can and should participate. Yet, calls for greater inclusion raise a number of questions on whom to include, how, and why – all of which are inevitable highly political issues that touch the heart of the conflict and its resolution. A complementary line of inquiry, as suggested by Alex de Waal, would be an analysis of the 'political logic of exclusion', identifying whether for instrumental, strategic or normative reasons, as a way to temper and ground the normative concept of inclusion empirically (De Waal, 2017).

In the literature, much of the scholarship emphasizing the importance of inclusive peacemaking highlight factors such as the need to generate public support and legitimacy for the process; to empower women and other marginalized groups; or to support longer-term conflict transformation processes. Scholars cite cases such as Northern Ireland where a pro-peace civil society constituency led a positive advocacy strategy to sway undecided voters to vote in favour of the Good Friday Agreement (Somerville & Kirby, 2012). Or conversely, in Guatemala where the failure to secure buy-in from the country's Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Financial Associations lobby group resulted in a campaign that generated sufficient public support to reject the peace deal (Paffenholz, 2015). Within the literature on women, peace and security, cases such as Liberia, Guatemala, Colombia are cited, where women were instrumental in pushing for formal talks, holding parties accountable, broadening the agenda to include issues that matter to the citizens, and build public support (Krause et al., 2018).

Hirblinger and Landau (2020) categorize these different rationales for inclusion, identifying and problematizing the assumptions that underpin their relationship to peace. With legitimacy-seeking inclusion, the aim is twofold: first, to include all armed actors to avoid spoilers, and to involve civil society actors to build broader participation. The second rationale identified is the motivation to empower and include specific groups, such as women and minorities, as a way to either correct a series of perceived wrongs and/or advance changes in the distribution of power within society (p. 308). A tension, however, within this perspective is the need to name and define groups, which may be necessary to combat the longstanding exclusion of certain groups, but can also obscure heterogeneity and diversity. This can further essentialize identities, especially in conflict contexts where armed actors instrumentally use identity-based politics to legitimize their authority.

The third rationale they cite is transformative, and building on Lederach (1997, 2005), emphasize the relational aspect of conflict transformation. For Lederach (2005), 'the art of strategically and imaginatively weaving relational webs across social spaces of protracted violent conflict' in order to also address the cultural and social structures that underpin conflict. From this perspective, Hirblinger and Landau (2020, p. 316) argue for a relational approach to 'account for the complexity and intersectionality of actors' multiple identities, while paying attention to their potential strategic essentialization in peace processes'. Moreover, it invites us to through the processes and mechanisms by which relationships can be transformed and shared values and interests defined through dialogue in ways that can counter the logics that underpin violence and conflicts. In Burundi, for example, the broadly participative talks in Arusha were

described by the President as 'an exercise in civic education', enabling the citizenry and civil society to engage in public life (De Waal, 2017).

From Narratives of Civic Uprising to a War on Civil Society

The conflict in Syria began with civic protests in March of 2011 demanding rights and dignity and evolved into large demonstrations by mid-year. Fuelled by long-standing grievances against the regime's repression and kleptocratic rule, the Syrian uprising called for fundamental changes in the relationship between the government and the governed. The movement was not pioneered and led by organized political parties, but rather by civil society activists who started echoing each other across the country and then organized themselves in coordination committees to organize protests (Yahya, 2020). The regime's violent reaction to quell the demonstrations provoked an armed rebellion, with intensifying external involvement. While some protestors did join the armed opposition, many of those who took part in the civic uprisings opposed the turn to violence.

As violence mutated, identity politics was deliberately fostered, first by the regime and later by most factions of the armed opposition and their regional backers, as a way of deflecting the value-based demands for democracy and social justice and deepening polarization (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). This resulted in the sectarianization of the conflict which together with violence served as exclusionary dynamics against civil society. Gradually, civic actors found themselves being side-lined and faced with a new reality of violence, deepening humanitarian crisis and state. In response, the key roles of civic actors transformed from expressing the civic demands of the people and mobilizing broad-based movements into humanitarian assistance, helping to run schools and health centres, offering mediation, or documenting war crimes (LACU, 2015).

During that period, external backers of the opposition were demanding 'representatives' of the Syrian people away from the Syrian regime which they declared as illegitimate. Very quickly, and in an attempt to replicate the National Transitional Council of Libya, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed outside Syria in October 2011 as an umbrella group of opposition (Fakher & Weiss, 2012). In February 2012, the SNC managed to secure the endorsement and the political and financial support of the Friends of Syria, which is an international group that included in its membership the US, the UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and excluded any backers to the Syrian regime (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). However, the exile-based SNC's tangible impact on the in-country situation was minimal and it largely excluded civic actors and internal opposition (ICG, 2013). In an attempt to come up with a more inclusive representative body, the external backers of the opposition pushed for the creating of a wider umbrella group; the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), which was created in November 2012 (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2012). The SOC was soon declared by the EU as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people (Turkmani & Haid, 2016). The UK went even further by recognizing the SNC as 'sole legitimate representative' of the Syrian people.[2] But SOC's inclusivity extended more to include opposition armed groups rather than civil society (ARK, 2016). Since then the SOC continued to dominate the representation of the opposition in international arenas including the UN-led Geneva process.

This process of reducing the conflict to a binary of 'legitimate' versus 'illegitimate' actors further excluded civic voices and contributed to the portrayal of what is a complex conflict as a dyadic struggle (Turkmani, 2018). This portrayal is deeply flawed: the protagonists themselves are fragmented, both the regime and the opposition are dependent upon several external parties with differing and conflicting agendas. The rise of terrorist groups like HTS and ISIS from 2013 did not fundamentally alter this binary since they, as proscribed groups, were neither considered part of the broader opposition nor included as an actor in the political talks. These binary narratives also effectively worked to reduce civilians to either being 'pro-Assad' or 'pro-opposition'. Civic voices refusing to articulate their position as either pro or against particular political authorities were often accused of being traitors by both sides or mocked as 'grey'. Civil society was effectively silenced in the debates, rendering invisible the rich diversity of experiences and perspectives of Syrian citizens that could help deepen understanding of drivers and solutions to the ongoing conflict.

For political and armed parties, these binary narratives have been used to instrumentally consolidate their power and authority as they claimed to authentically represent their respective constituencies. Part and parcel of this approach was a politics of division: communities remained fragmented, afraid, and unfortunate bystanders in zero-sum politics. As a result, spaces for citizens and civil society to collaborate, network and work together across conflict and spatial divides narrowed dramatically.

To complicate matters, Syrian civil society has been divided into three main separate enclaves, each perceived as associated with or influenced by political authority controlling their respective areas (i.e., regime, opposition and Kurdish). External actors and top-down solutions and even the patterns of external humanitarian and governance funding dealt with these three areas as different territories, which some argued helped fostering the radicalization of the armed actors on all sides (Hallaj, 2017).

While some organizations and networks operate across these geographies and divided communities, the conflict has made it increasingly difficult for broad-based civic movements to thrive and mobilize across these divides. This has been accentuated by both narratives that describe the conflict in broad geopolitical or sectarian terms, which renders invisible the agency and plurality of civic actors. Nevertheless, such dire and pressing circumstances have encouraged the search for, and corresponding creation of, alternative modalities of civic expression, and correspondingly, the consolidation of a divergent socio-cultural milieu as well. The notion of civicness has thus equipped civil society with a value system through which to correspond and operate, one based on individual character and the public interest.

It is important to highlight that the actors who make up civil society in Syria transcend more formalized groupings and include *informal* networks and individual actors such as doctors, teachers, professors and businessmen. At the same time, such informal associations include individuals seeking political engagement and expression that transcend the formal 'interest groups' of the opposition, and who instead associate themselves with spaces and values that represent civicness. This may be true for several reasons. First, these emerging voices-which we shall hitherto refer to as civic actors – viewed the exiled leadership of the formal opposition as increasingly linked to external backers and agendas. Second, these civic actors identified the opposition as strongly linked to the armed factions.

Countering Exclusionary Dynamics

Despite competing external processes as well as divisions over the role of the UN, the UN-led mediation process remained important as it became the only place capable of bringing together all international actors. Syria UN mediation efforts can be broadly divided into three phases, including by UN envoy Kofi Annan, the UN-Arab League special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi (2012–2014); UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura (2015–2018); and now UN envoy Geir Pederson (2019 – present).

Until 2015, UN mediation attempts focused on working only with the main political and armed parties and their external backers, despite active lobbying efforts of Syrian civil society calling for an inclusive process since 2012. In June 2013, these civic efforts culminated in a conference organized in Lebanon by Syrian civil society and the London School of Economics and Political Science about the strategic role of Syrian civil society in resolving the conflict.[3] The conference organizers called upon UN – Arab League Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, to consult with civil society and provide a space for its participation in the talks.

In 2014, in response to continued lobbying by Syrian civil society (including the organizers of the Lebanon conference), Brahimi agreed to form a small, diverse group of civil society figures to act as his sounding board. Shortly after a four-day consultation in Montreux with Brahimi and his team in April 2014, the group announced itself as the Syrian Peacebuilding Advisory Unit.[4] While his initiative to engage civil society was perceived as positive, Syrian civil society still had no formal role in the political process. Despite calls for civil society inclusion and women's participation, in particular, efforts led by mediators Annan and Brahimi have been described as 'exclusionary processes' (Hellmüller & Zahar, 2019). When they encountered intransigence among the conflict parties at the national level, the mediators shifted attention upwards towards regional and international powers. In some ways, a tacit strategy of avoidance, or at best appeasement, commenced.

Importantly, however, a gradual shift to a more inclusive process began under the leadership of the third UN Special Representative, Staffan de Mistura, who seemed to be more appreciative of the value of genuinely including women and civil society from the outset. After his appointment, Syrian civil society began to lobby the Special Envoy for greater inclusion in the process, and members of the Syrian Peacebuilding Advisory Unit also met with the Special Envoy. Calling for more formal and genuine inclusion of civil society in the Geneva process, the Advisory Unit rejected the 'inclusion' of women and civil society *as part* of the existing delegations of the main conflict parties. In turn, a network of Syrian organizations sent De Mistura a proposed plan outlining how civil society could be included in Geneva.[5] The plan proposed the formation of a Civil Advisory Forum composed of members of Syrian civil society and coordinated by the UN.

Soon afterwards and within the framework of the 'Geneva consultations', De Mistura began to meet with a broad range of stakeholders, including women and civil society representatives of myriad areas and backgrounds. In parallel, women's organizations came together under the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy and lobbied the UN and the Special Envoy for a corresponding role in the process. When intra-Syrian political talks resumed under his auspices in January 2016, De Mistura

creatively interpreted UN Security Council Resolution 2254 calling for bringing together 'a broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians' and 'other initiatives' to institutionalize civil society's participation in the political talks. He then formalized his commitment through the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) and the Women's Advisory Board (WAB). Both CSSR and WAB are hybrid platforms that enabled the coming together of three different institutions: the UN, Syrian civil society and International Non-Governmental Organizations. Together both mechanisms diversified participation in the process while contributing to a larger regeneration of political attitudes and mindsets.

At the time, however, there was significant resistance to the inclusion of civil society by the government and opposition delegations, as they feared it would undermine their political gravitas.[6] De Mistura's invitation for civil society to take part in the Geneva process, for example, generated anxiety and prompted the head of the Syrian National Coalition (the leading opposition party in Geneva) to invite Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Turkey to talk about 'Syrian CSOs representation in the negotiations'. As one participant in a focus group stated, 'the negotiating teams dislike the civil society room because they think that they should be the only representatives of the Syrian people'.

Moreover, not all Syrian CSOs favoured an independent role in the Geneva process for civil society, with some advocating for inclusion within existing delegations of the political opposition. Notably, a group of pro-opposition Syrian CSOs met in Gaziantep (soon after the announcement to invite Syrian civil society to Geneva as formal participants) and issued a statement[7] declaring that civil society could only participate within the structures of the public movement. Nevertheless, many of those who signed the statement eventually warmed up to the idea and became regular participants in CSSR. Some, ironically, also became leading proponents of inclusion.

Inside the Civil Society Support Room

The CSSR was initially set up as a physical room at the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva to convene civil society actors from across conflict lines during official UN-led political talks, and as a space to facilitate dialogue, networking and advocacy among civil society and with the OSE mediation team, UN member states, UN agencies, international experts, and officials from other delegations. For the UN, it represents a unique initiative to include civil society actors formally within a UN-led process in the early stages of peace talks.[8] Most of the CSSR meetings took place during political talks sessions in Geneva. An official from the office of the OSE was charged with overseeing the CSSR's formation and its functions, but importantly also acted as an advocate for its role among sceptics. The semi-governmental peace organizations, swisspeace and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF), provided logistics and managed the CSSR. They are noteworthy in that they largely enjoyed legitimacy as a neutral convenor among all participants, given the pro-peace policies and moderate positions on the Syrian conflict of their respective countries. Participants also played a role in choosing methods of facilitation and at times they facilitated their own meetings.[9] Participants also took the initiative of producing their own reports of their meetings, making them public and discussing them with members of civil society who could not participate in

the meeting. Participants also constructively put forward suggestions on how to improve the design of CSSR and improve its inclusivity.

Officially, the CSSR played an advisory role to the UN Special Envoy and his team and was not conceived as a third party to the talks. It was an attempt to bring civil society from all sides together in order to promote different perspectives in the talks but also, in some ways, to demonstrate that people from very different political and geographic backgrounds can sit at the same table together.[10] According to UN documents, the CSSR specifically sought to strengthen civil society participation in peace talks in six ways: (1) sharing local knowledge and expertise; (2) acting as prominent advocates for a political solution; (3) providing unique perspectives and insights on a range of thematic topics; (4) enhancing transparency of the political process; (5) expanding the space for a cohesive civil society in Syria; and (5) building the foundations for civil society participation in peace processes in other contexts.[11]

The CSSR started with a small meeting in January 2016 but over time, it expanded in size and scope, and has included several outreach meetings in the region (Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan) as well as teleconferencing with civil society in hard-to-reach areas. By early 2018, the CSSR involved nearly 500 civil actors from a range of backgrounds, expertise and geographies, but with the notable under- or mis-representation of civil society from Kurdish-controlled areas. Its direct link to the political process helped to legitimize a role for civil society as an actor in a broader political process that supports but goes beyond its impact on elite negotiations. It created multiple opportunities for Syrian civil society with diverse views to build bridges and substantively think through some of the key elements that could shape a pluralistic, democratic Syria in the future.[12] To manage the large and rotating numbers of participants, the format of the meetings involved plenary sessions to discuss the broader situation and to develop an agenda with breakout groups for specific issues based on people's expertise and interest.

As discussed below, survey results demonstrate that CSSR participation had a transformative impact on both the attitudes and behavioural patterns of the participants themselves while also influencing the political process and mediation effort as well as assistance on the ground.

Building Bridges and Finding Common Ground

The CSSR's direct link to the political process strengthened civil society and elevated it as a legitimate actor that transcended the parameters of the negotiation table. Our findings suggest that its greatest impact was in creating opportunities for Syrian civil society from across the divide to come together and build bridges in spite of differences, and to lay the foundation for a political culture of dialogue. According to respondents, the process of coming together helped dilute the binary narratives some of them held, break stereotypes of the 'other', and expanded opportunities for dialogue and networking across conflict lines. By doing so, the majority (more than 72%) stated that they believed more in the importance of civil society participation in the peace process, while only 15% did not.

However, such an achievement was by no measure facile or without tension. CSSR participants involved from the beginning described the difficulty of having to put aside political narratives in order to expand debate, listen to one another, and envision a peaceful future for Syria. Such sentiments were duly reflected by one CSSR participation:

> It was challenging at first for all participants to put aside their political positions in order to envision together a peaceful future for Syria. There was a tendency to blame others for everything that has happened. There was also a prevailing atmosphere of deep distrust and conspiratorial thinking with participants questioning the legitimacy of others in the room.

Indeed, in the first few rounds of the CSSR, nearly all participants were male and represented only the views of the political opposition and those living outside of Syria. They were initially chosen by the UN from the pool of known civil society and human rights activists, especially those representing organizations. Participants were also asked to nominate other potential invitees not known to the UN. Some initial participants were reluctant to involve civil society from regime-controlled areas, weary that their counterparts were unable to hold independent views. Travel and exit visa restrictions by the regime further prevented CSOs registered in Damascus to travel to Geneva for meetings. Over time, however, the CSSR created a demand for participation, particularly among members of civil society who were sidelined by the polarized and violent landscape. As an increasing number of people demanded to take part, especially from government-controlled areas, the designers and managers of the CSSR built sufficient trust in the process to broaden participation and get the regime to ease the travel restrictions it imposed on some participants.

Over time, participation increased trust and respect among participants and their belief in the important role that an inclusive civil society can play in peace-making and peace-building. It also exposed the readiness of Syrian civilians to engage those with opposing views and connect across conflict lines. As one participant stated, 'the most important impact was connecting Syrians from different areas and with different viewpoints' while another noted, 'before [the CSSR], we didn't have a way to do so … [even if] we already believed that we had to work with civil society across conflict lines. This transformative impact that CSSR participation had on attitudes and behaviours can be seen in the survey findings:

- 81% of respondents felt it helped converge conflicting viewpoints, with only 4% stating it resulting in more divergent opinions.
- 52% believe it helped break barriers with others from different political views.
- 58% believed it expanded networking and 57% were more receptive to working across conflict lines.

Creating an Alternative Kind of Politics

The CSSR can be seen as allowing a fragmented civil society to carve out more self-consciously autonomous spaces. Correspondingly, a different type of politics, one predicated on dialogue and shared values, began to emerge and take the form: when asked about the different impacts of the CSSR, most participants (68%) agreed with the statement that it 'formed an opportunity to create an inclusive Syrian civic framework through which the Syrian civil society could play a bigger and more constructive role in the future'. In a context where violence damaged social cohesion and intercommunal trust, most respondents (72%) believed that the CSSR should focus on consensus-building concerning

common goals and shared values, key ingredients that may lay the blueprint for a peace process and far-reaching political reform. As one participant summarized, 'we should be united on values but should also protect the right to be different on other issues'. Indeed, only a minority – 12% – sought to seek consensus on specific subject items.

The value of intra-Syrian civil society dialogue can also be seen in the criteria that participants placed on participant selection. They favoured a process informed by a set of common principles while also reflecting a diversity of opinions, geographies and backgrounds over selection criteria based on religion, sect or ethnicity. In the survey, when asked to rate the most important factors, more than 84% stated principled selection as very important while only 23% felt identity-based selection is important. Recognizing the limitations of primarily involving NGOs, they gave near equal weight to the inclusion of prominent individuals (68%) and organized sectors of civil society (67%). They also emphasized the space provided by the CSSR for Syrian experts, who preferred to remain independent, in order to utilize their technical and subject-matter expertise on specific agenda items in a non-political manner, thereby promoting productive dialogue and capacity for effective analyses of issues. They did not claim nor want to be seen as formally representing constituencies but felt they were closest to expressing the grievances and aspirations of society. For them, civil society was largely associated with both the commitment to civic values and the ability to articulate the needs and priorities of citizens without bias. In contrast, participants felt that the presence of extreme views and non-civic actors, defined as those involved with military and political organizations, were the main obstacles that impeded the CSSR and the quality of discussions.

Influencing the Political Process

Much of the literature on inclusion tends to focus on its impact on the negotiating parties, the agenda and the nature of the agreement reached. Our research, however, shows that the CSSR had negligible impact on the immediate political talks, but still influenced the broader political environment by reshaping narrratives that inform external understandings of and approaches to the conflict. Indeed, participation in the CSSR actually reduced the interest and trust of participants in the immediate political process while paradoxically increasing their belief in the importance of civil society participation in peace processes. In the survey, only 26% of respondents believed that the CSSR had a direct and constructive impact on political talks, while not one participant believed it contributed to creating an environment of trust among negotiating parties. Instead, participants pointed to the progress that the CSSR made in influencing external actors by signposting the way forward on key issues and demonstrating the possibilities for consensus-building and areas of agreements.

In contrast to the negotiating parties, the CSSR also exposed the readiness of Syrian civilians to engage with those with opposing views and connect across conflict lines. Emblematic declarations from participants included: 'I was surprised how easily the different participants accepted each other, opposite to what happens at the political tracks'; 'Actually my trust in the parties completely eroded after participation'; and 'Negotiation parties – the regime and opposition – prefer power over people'. Nearly half reported that they believed they influenced the discourse of the UN Special Envoy

and other country representatives, while a majority believed it helped end the monopoly of representation by negotiating actors, and their monopoly of political process.

The CSSR provided an opportunity for external engagement with a broader spectrum of Syrian society beyond armed actors with vested interests in limiting access to activists, dissenting voices and potential constituencies for change. The UN's presence has been limited in Syria which has not only hampered humanitarian efforts on the ground, but it also has limited effective conflict analyses and enabled the main conflict parties to dominate representations of the conflict.

CSSR participants felt that the CSSR helped thicken contacts and networks between civil society and with relevant international actors and delegations, including the UN's Humanitarian Task Force, the Ceasefire Task Force and members of the so-called International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in which all relevant international and regional actors, including Iran, were represented. Several cited examples in which contacts made through the CSSR helped facilitate action on the ground, including humanitarian access, temporary ceasefires and negotiated evacuations. In one case, for example, one of the participants was alerted by calls for help about a situation where the civilians of two villages where armed groups suddenly withdrew found themselves feeling exposed and unprotected and fearing revenge. He alerted the OSE and several of the Syrian UN-instruments based in Geneva who in turn mobilized humanitarian organizations on the ground to send a team to these villages to ensure the protection of civilians until other security arrangements are in place.

A CSSR participants suggested, 'the UN can't work without our knowledge' but it also 'proved helpful for us to operate in various sites of the country now that we know we have colleagues across different areas'. Of course, given the level of atrocities committed in the country, many felt that these positive examples were few and raised expectations that could not be met. While only 41% believe the CSSR helped facilitate humanitarian action on the ground, 75% of those under 40 felt it positively impacted humanitarian action on the ground. This could be explained by the fact that younger participants tend to be more connected to the ground. As one respondent stated, 'CSSR impact was more direct on humanitarian issues, ceasefires and humanitarian access than on political talks'.

For international actors, the CSSR was a way to gauge the sentiment of a broad cross-section of Syria civilians away from the polarization of the government and armed opposition.[13] As one official argued, 'the majority of the Syrian people – the 80% – are not represented by either side and the CSSR as a mechanism enables you to engage with the sentiments and ideas of this majority'.[14] OSE members also emphasized how the CSSR was considered an important player in Geneva and valued by many, including the Humanitarian Task Force and the Ceasefire task force, as well as the delegations of member states who participate in Geneva. Indeed, some of the recommendations and discussions with Syrian civil society were reflected in the periodic briefings of the UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, to the United Nation's Security Council.[15]

External actors pointed to the expertise of civil society actors as 'offering a window' into both conflict and societal dynamics in Syria. Before the CSSR, they argued, the UN's lack of presence on the ground meant that they had to rely on personal contacts with civil society members to operate; now, with over 1000 members of civil society have participated, there is continuous communication and information sharing. One

official argued that the CSSR changed the views and the language of some key external players in the conflict, citing how some initially portrayed those against the government as terrorists but then started referring to them as civil society after meeting with CSSR participants.[16] For those external actors more reluctant to get involved politically behind both negotiating parties but wanting to support processes that promote civic values and democratic transitions, the CSSR gave them an opportunity to play a constructive role by providing it with funding and logistical support.[17]

Importantly, the logic of civil society inclusion has been able to extend itself beyond the CSSR and into the Constitutional Committee (CC), one of the mechanisms that is intended to decide the future political order of the country. This can be detected in the design of the Committee, which was made under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy to Syria De Mistura, to broaden inclusivity, in influencing the discourse of the political actors, and in articulating the political position of civicness within its internal structure. One-third of the composition of the CC was reserved for civil society. The CSSR carved a space for civil society in the Geneva process that was hard to ignore by process designers and difficult to argue against by those who typically oppose civil society participation. As Mr De Mistura confirmed in an interview 'I have no doubt that having established and supported the role of CSSR and WAB did contribute substantially to the later "acceptance" by all players and external supporters of the concept of including a third category to the CC'. The CSSR enabled the UN to resist external interference in the selection of the civil society members of the committee. As Mr. De Mistura noted,

> 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.

Conclusion

This article sought to gain insight into the role and impact of the Civil Society Support Room in Syria to explore how an inclusive mechanisms can shape the broader conflict and peace-making landscape. In its findings, it demonstrates how the CSSR had a transformative impact not only on the political process but also on the attitudes and behaviour patterns of the participant themselves. In many ways, it highlights how the CSSR helped create the conditions to engender civicness and its manifestation in both public and private spheres. In doing so, the findings highlight several issues with important implications when thinking about the value of civil society inclusion in peace-making processes.

Firstly, the inclusion of civil society in peace-making should not simply be seen as a matter of principle or as a complementary add-on to elite negotiations. Traditional conflict resolution approaches that bring together the two conflict parties to negotiate a political settlement may lead to reductions in violence but can often reinforce conflict dynamics. These conflicts, which are often characterized by identity-based violence, and the processes that seek to resolve them have multiple levels and interweaving strands that tend to reinforce one another. Despite significant grievances among participants, the CSSR still became a space for civil society actors from different backgrounds,

geographies, and perspectives to challenge themselves and the dominant narratives that sustain conflict and shape international action. In contrast, at the negotiation table, political actors simply refused to engage with each other and even resisted sitting in the same room. For civil society, the collective experience of coming together despite deep mistrust and divergent opinions in a messy process to build consensus on shared values and principles that could underpin a future Syria could be described as a 'logic of public authority' or reimagining of the social contract. Strengthening the capacities of civil society to bridge divides and engage in productive dialogue and collaborate action make it important to include them from day one in any peace-making effort. For external actors, these mechanisms can deepen understanding and attention to the underlying drivers of conflict, and how the conflict has mutated over time through violence and the strategic use of sectarian narratives.

Secondly and related, it is important to appreciate the relational aspect of conflict transformation, and the educative role that inclusive civic processes can have on civil society itself. Our findings demonstrate that inclusion is not simply about giving voice to citizens or sourcing different perspectives. The value of civil society engagement lies in the impact that informed dialogue, deliberation and face-to-face interactions can have on transforming relationships, re-articulating conflict narratives, fostering connections and building a shared vision for the future. At the same time, international legitimation and engagement with civil society engagement can help shift ground-level dynamics and realities, by improving the effectiveness of humanitarian action or protection of civilians, for example.

Thirdly, inclusion mechanisms must be closely linked to official processes to elevate and legitimate the role of civil society, but they must go beyond the excessive focus on inclusion at the negotiation table as the sole avenue of engagement. The CSSR created a space for transformation within civil society to help, in part, address the effects of conflict and violence on civil society; but it also supported the work of external mediators and actors by signposting the way forward on key issues and potential areas of agreement and consensus-building. Rather than make the process less efficient, the CSSR empowered mediators by providing a more balanced perspective on the conflict and the diverse views of the Syrian people and equipped them with granular knowledge on the ground. Moreover, in contexts where elite processes are stalled, as in Syria, these spaces can offer a demonstration effect by presenting a microcosm of society and cultivating the ability of participants to engage and connect across conflict lines.

Importantly, the CSSR indirectly influenced the broader political process. The intra-Syrian talks may not have produced an outcome, but the CSSR made possible the inclusion of civic actors across other subsequent and important political fora, such as the Constitutional Committee. Similarly, at the early stages of peace-making processes, for example in the cases of Northern Ireland and Guatemala, the civil society helped identify root causes, generate agenda items and create momentum for peace even when the political level has stalled.

Lastly, the findings suggest a need to adopt a broader understanding of civil society that goes beyond the more formal, organized sectors of civil society such as NGOs while also emphasizing their civic character. In these contexts, civic actors may include community figures, religious leaders, professionals (academics, teachers, experts), women and youth groups, as well as activists and NGO professionals, who

share a primary aim of ending violence and creating the conditions for transformation. Inclusive mechanisms are ideal platforms to involve a cross-section of civic actors, ranging from those who work with and provide for local communities to those with technical and subject-matter expertise to feed in effective analyses and promote productive dialogue on substantive topics. While civil society is not monolithic and difficult to place within certain conceptual boundaries, the findings highlight an important common denominator for inclusion: its civic quality. This does not imply limiting the selection of participants which should aim to be inclusive and diverse. It does, however, focus on those grounded in communities, willing to engage across conflict lines, and concerned with the public interest in order to prepare the intellectual ground and bolster the 'moderate middle'.

Notes

1. M. Kaldor, 'the phenomenon of civicness and researching its advancement', blog, 2019. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2019/05/22/kaldor-civicness/.
2. Syria conflict: UK recognizes opposition, says William Hague, BBC, 20 November 2012, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20406562.
3. See https://bit.ly/2K9V3Eq for more information on the conference.
4. See http://www.salamsyria.org
5. Copy of the plan which was sent on 10 December 2015 is available at https://bit.ly/2Rkclj3.
6. See for example 'What is behind De Mistura's insistence on including civil society in Geneva' available at https://bit.ly/2MJI0M6 (May/January 2016).
7. Text of the statement available at: https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/news/details/3168/.
8. Alongside the establishment of the CSSR, a Women's Advisory Board consisting of 12 Syrian women from different backgrounds was also formed as a result of the calls from Syrian women organizations. For more information on the Women's Advisory Board, please see https://bit.ly/31BLymH.
9. See authors report 2019.
10. Interviews with OSE members.
11. From the Q&A document provided by the OSE to participants of the CSSR.
12. Insert ref: focus groups and interviews with
13. Interviews with OSE members and officials from member states.
14. Interview with an OSE member.
15. De Mistura mentioned the meetings with civil society and some of their recommendations in his briefings at the Security Council in June 2017, August 2017, September 2017 and November 2017. Please see https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speechesstatements/27062017/syria; https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speechesstatements/30082017/syria.
16. Interviews
17. Interviews

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by DFID [grant number GB-1-204428] and Carnegie Corporation of New York [grant number G-20-57764)].

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