

Civil society in Syria (Text written in June 2013)



The following text was written by **Professor Mary Kaldor** on 17 June 2013.

The war in Syria is in the news. Bloody battles, humanitarian tragedies, the use of chemical weapons, high levels talks, arms supplies and arms embargoes can all be learned about in the pages of newspapers, on the television or through the Internet. Yet what is rarely reported is the upsurge of civil society activity all over Syria. Many of those who were engaged in the pro-democracy protests in 2011, at the beginning of the war, have organised themselves to help the victims of violence and indeed to try to stop the violence. Some collect and deliver humanitarian relief. Some organise workshops to bring people together from different sides. Some actively try to stop the violence. In Ras al-ayn in the Kurdish part of Syria, peace activists literally stood between a brigade of the Free Syrian Army located in an Arab village and a Kurdish brigade and negotiated the withdrawal of both. In civil society workshops members of Shabiyya have been persuaded to give up fighting. One young woman became famous for standing up in the middle of Damascus with a sign saying 'Stop the Killing' and there have been other similar incidents. Some help the widows and families of people killed on both sides. Several women's groups work with the victims of sexual violence. Many are involved with providing services, such as schools or healthcare, especially in the areas where the government has withdrawn

Many of these groups came to a hotel North of Beirut last weekend to discuss how to work together in the Syrian national interest. They came from all over Syria, from Damascus, from Aleppo (both Government controlled and non-Government controlled parts), from the Kurdish areas, from Raqqa near the Turkish border; some came by bus from Damascus (about 5 hours), those in the non-government controlled areas had to travel to Istanbul and fly from there. Some came from outside Syria –Cairo, Beirut, Istanbul and London. The meeting include people of many different opinions including two regime supporters. They had different views, for example, about outside intervention. Some, especially those from non-government controlled areas, strongly favoured a safe zone near the Turkish border or a no-fly zone, even if not agreed by the United Nations Security Council; one person argued that using aircraft and Patriot missiles from Turkey would be sufficient to stop attacks on these areas. Others were strongly opposed and feared that this would divide the country and further intensify international involvement in the war. Some favoured arming the Free Syrian Army on the grounds that the FSA is the most controlled force and is losing out to both Government and Islamist forces. Others argued that no side could ever win and that this would merely escalate the violence.

But all agreed on the urgent need to stop the fighting and on a shared vision of the future of a multicultural cosmopolitan Syria. The meeting was very different from the kind of chaotic civil society conferences I am used to. Academics played a prominent role. The Centre for Policy Research in Damascus presented their analysis of the economic and social roots of the crisis, the deterioration of health and education, the low participation of women in the workforce, the problems faced by young people (see http://scpr-syria.org/att/1360464324_Tf75J.pdf). Then they organised discussions about a shared vision of Syria, about possible scenarios for the future ranging from endless conflict, collapsed state or a divided Syria through to international and external negotiations. Participants discussed the pros and cons of each scenario and their likelihood. The favoured scenario was internal negotiations, that is to say, negotiations that are driven by the needs and priorities of the Syrian society. However it was generally agreed that negotiations driven by the interests of external players or a combination of internal and external factors were more likely and that civil society needs to find ways to make sure that the needs of Syrians are taken into consideration.

Only in the last session was there any discussion of what to do now and how to reach the favoured scenario. But everyone was really enthusiastic about the process; they felt they needed

to know the information that the Policy Centre had prepared and what the dialogic process achieved was to show the degree to which this group of Syrians were committed to a shared vision of Syria. In contrast to the fractious and fragmented nature of the formal political opposition, the overwhelming sentiment of this group of Syrians was mutual solidarity. Working groups have been established to discuss the mechanisms for ending the conflict and to extend the project to more people inside Syria. The participants wanted to describe what they are doing not as a platform or a network – phrases that have become increasingly discredited in the Syrian context – but as a project.

At the moment, the main hope for a ceasefire is Geneva II, a resumption of talks broken off earlier, which are supposed to focus on a transitional government for Syria and are expected to begin in July. Many commentators are concerned that talk of arming the rebels and establishing a no-fly zone, along with Assad's recent victories on the ground will derail the talks. The main sticking point is the divisions among the political opposition – a group of disparate groups and individuals mainly outside Syria. The fragmentation both of the opposition and of the armed groups poses a big obstacle to ending the violence. This is why it is all the more important to draw attention to the efforts made by civil society groups to work together and to bring their voices into public discussions.

Mary Kaldor

A report of the meeting BBC Newsnight was shown on Monday June 10:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b02xd16y/Newsnight_10_06_2013/

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