Activism in Difficult Times

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Field Research: Badael Team

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Preface

As this study is published, Syrian citizens continue to live under inhumane and dangerous conditions. Several hundred thousands have lost their lives due to military conflict, violence and hunger, their plight exacerbated by limited relief aid and medical care. Millions have lost their homes and property as a result of multiple displacements within Syria or of seeking refuge in exile.

Peaceful civil society activists have played an important role since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. Initially convening spontaneously in order to organize demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, they have since established a multitude of groups and networks across the country campaigning for democracy, justice, equality and respect. In response to the dire humanitarian situation, many activist groups have also become engaged in distributing relief aid and providing medical, educational and other services to Syrians in need.

Civil society activists were among the first to become the victims of arrest, kidnapping and, in many instances, targeted killings. In areas under government control, they continue to face oppression, torture and death. In areas outside government control, they are being relentlessly persecuted by extremist groups that continue to diminish their ranks or cause them to flee the country. Despite the enormous difficulties they face, numerous civil society groups are still active in Syria. They play a crucial role in countervailing the influence of a variety of military, political, economic and extremist groups and individual warlords.

The empowerment of civil society is an essential step in establishing and consolidating democratic structures. Irrespective of the course Syria takes in the coming years, civil society will continue to hold the government and its agencies accountable for their actions, to oppose dictatorship, to counteract terrorism and to struggle for a better future. It is therefore crucial to understand the forces and dynamics that are shaping Syria's civil society today. This not only provides a more nuanced picture than that often conveyed by the media but also supports Syrian civil society groups in overcoming their difficulties and making better use of the opportunities available to them. At the same time, it could inspire the international community to review its support for Syrian civil society to make it more relevant to the realities and needs on the ground. This study, carried out as part of the Badael Project, therefore aims to help empower Syrian civil society by making it better understood.

The Badael Project, which is supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, is a Syrian initiative committed to strengthening civil society groups that are - or want to become - active in promoting non-violence and peace-building measures to prevent Syrian society from falling apart.[1] The Badael Project also aims to encourage civil society groups to explore ideas about how peace could be achieved in Syria and what could be done while the country is at war, to lay the foundations for a sustainable peace in the future. Since July 2013, the Badael Project team has been providing training and consultancy support to numerous civil society groups in Syria. With the help of its contacts and trust circles on the ground, the Badael team was able to compile the quantitative data presented in this report; this data would have been impossible to obtain through other channels. The Badael team's rich insights and informed analysis have also been key to enhancing the substance of this study. Any misinterpretations of the data collected are the responsibility of the authors.

This study covers the period until February 2014. Since then, the working conditions of civil society groups have severely deteriorated, especially in areas which have come under the rule of the Islamic State in Syria/Levant (ISIS). Many activists have fled to Turkey where they are trying to coordinate their activities from the outside and hope for a chance to return. At the end of 2014, civil society work in Syria is facing more difficulties and challenges than ever before.

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[1] Originally incubated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, the Badael Project is currently being registered as an independent entity. To ensure local independence and ownership as per its national priorities, Badael does not accept politicized funding which seeks to interfere with its aims and working principles as defined by its Syrian members and steering committee.

Executive Summary

■ Civil society activities in Syria have been severely restricted over the past four decades under the Assad regime, and the few non-governmental organizations that existed during this period have always been subject to strict governmental control. The recent emergence of a variety of non-governmental groupings, organizations and institutions is a new phenomenon. While many of these champion the quest for freedom, justice, democracy and peace, others have stepped in to fill the void created in several areas across the country by the abuse of public services as war tools.

■ This study presents and analyses the results of a quantitative and qualitative mapping of 94 civil society groups (CSGs) and Local Councils (LCs) representing the vast majority of local activist groupings in non-government-controlled areas of Syria whose focus is mainly on issues other than humanitarian aid. The research pursues three objectives: (1) to identify the characteristics of local CSGs in Syria, (2) to understand their identity and dynamics and (3) to analyze their challenges, opportunities and needs. The research data has been collected from discussion groups, interviews with individuals, semi-structured questionnaires and, as a secondary data source, from the media.

■ The CSGs analysed are based in five governorates: Hama, Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir az-Zor. Over two thirds of these CSGs were established between the first half of 2012 and the first half of 2013. This period coincides in many cases with the ending of government control in the respective region and the emergence of an urgent need for CSGs to take control of local affairs in a context that afforded them greater freedom to do so. The spread of extremist groups in the second half of 2013 significantly slowed down the establishment of new groups.

■ Most of the GSCs analysed are relatively small and their influence is only local: one in three has only 11 to 25 members. Female participation is weak but increasing and varies significantly as a function of local social specificities. Most of the CSG activists are between 16 and 30 years of age - a characteristic typical of all civil society groups that

have campaigned for peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience across Syria since the beginning of the uprising. Older members are also well represented and moreover form the majority in LCs. Educational attainment levels are relatively high and reflect the groups' respective age structure: over half of all CSG activists have a higher education qualification and the rest have a vocational training qualification, are still in higher secondary education or have a secondary education qualification.

■ The names adopted by these CSGs directly reflect aspects of the cause to which they are committed and the image they seek to project: being united behind their cause, belonging to the revolution, being strict advocates of freedom, being young and aspirational, having a specific geographical identity. The ideology of most of the CSGs is difficult to grasp, their responses and statements often being ambivalent and sometimes contradictory. In general, the CSGs share an endorsement of fundamental values such as democracy, diversity and gender equality. However, they differ in how they define these values.

■ Funding is a highly sensitive issue in non-government-controlled areas. CSGs with insufficient funding have to depend on mobilizing whatever resources they can. In cases where funding is available, its often ineffective, inefficient and unsustainable allocation is a hotly debated issue. This criticism is levelled as much at international actors such as donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and private intermediaries as at local actors such as the CSGs themselves. Intertwined with this is the key challenge of ensuring the sustainability of aid for Syria. Non-financial support in the form, for example, of capacity-building projects is rare, albeit desperately needed.

■ The large majority of the CSGs analysed perceive their work to be mainly a matter of awareness-raising through initiatives and projects covering a variety of topics. Although this study focuses on CSGs not solely delivering humanitarian aid, approximately one in three of the CSGs analysed is engaged in relief work in addition to its core mission. A further characteristic in this context is that most groups pursue more than one mission simultaneously. This has had a significant impact on their roles, functioning and ability to deliv-

er. The latter are also impacted by the groups' constantly changing dynamics with other stakeholders.

■ The main challenge facing CSGs is their lack of support and their consequently limited financial, logistic and technical resources. Local CSGs lack capacities and skills, yet there is insufficient cooperation and networking between and among them to allow for mutual enrichment. CSGs are also adversely affected by the dire economic and humanitarian situation, the disintegration of political authority, the interference of extremist groups in public life and the overall environment of violence and insecurity.

■ The role of international institutions and NGOs in supporting these local CSGs is ambivalent: while their support is well-intentioned, it can also create additional problems. International and other organizations working with communities operate in a climate of ignorance, patchy social cohesion and ideological warfare. However, as many insist on taking the easiest option of using technical consultants, many of whom lack the necessary knowledge and understanding of the situation on the ground, even international organizations with the best intentions fail to provide genuine support to CSGs. Other international organizations seem to be solely pushing their own self-interested political and economic agendas while politicizing humanitarian aid and imposing their own project-driven support to the detriment of the work of local CSGs.

■ One of the key assets of CSGs is their pool of activists who represent all that civil society stands for. Acting against all obstacles that conflict casts in their path, these activists are persistent and resilient in pursuing their cause, open-minded with regard to trying out new tools and mechanisms in their campaigning, public relations, networking and resource-mobilizing activities, and are furthermore determined to create a genuine constituency within their local community.

■ When asked about their needs, most CSGs cited financial support as their main need, followed by logistical support in the form of internet access, computers, cameras and office space. More than half reported a need for capacity-building support or consultancy on specific issues. Their training needs varied from one area to another depending on local circumstances.

These recently established CSGs are trying to drive a process that will transform Syria into an inclusive, modern and developed society. Their newly evolved sense of citizenship, their motivation and persistence, coupled in many cases with flexible, efficient and pluralistic structures – in stark contrast to the strictly controlled and bureaucratically imposed ideological structures that typified civil society in Syria prior to the 2011 uprising – suggest that these CSGs are potentially well equipped for pursuing their campaigns.

■ In order to be more effective, CSGs should invest in organizational development and capacity-building. Project planning and management are indispensable skills for obtaining international funding. Rather than overloading themselves with too many issues and thereby blurring their profiles, CSGs should focus their activities on a specific field and define their vision and mission accordingly. Mistrust and conflict among CSGs can be counteracted by means of networking, joint activities and a commitment to transparency. An essential issue here is equal opportunity with regard to accessing support as the imbalances in the support forthcoming from international NGOs have deepened mistrust among CSGs.

■ As for the international community, its main priority should be to seek a political solution to end the war in Syria. As a parallel measure, it should modify its support to meet the specific needs of Syrian civil society. International donors should invest in education and critical thinking, support the building of transparent institutions and networks and work towards improving the information on CSGs disseminated in mainstream media.

1. Introduction: The Awakening of Syrian Civil Society[2]

Prior to the popular uprising in March 2011, international organizations working in Syria to implement cultural, political or development projects in collaboration with local civil society organizations found themselves operating in a void. Many simply gave up after years of fruitless and frustrating attempts to work with and build constructive relationships with the civil society institutions there. The absence of an active and independent civil society in Syria was one of the factors explaining the country's dire plight. But radical change is currently being sought in this and so many other respects. To understand better the situation within which civil society operates in Syria, it is important to look back to the time before and during the rule of the Ba'th Party and at the authoritarian context of the Assad regime.

1.1 Syrian Civil Society in the Twentieth Century

The tradition of voluntary and non-governmental associations in Syria can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire. Building on this historic foundation, a number of associations were established in the first half of the 20th century, mainly charitable institutions such as orphanages, organizations providing services for the poor, and cultural and social associations to promote specific population groups such as young people, writers and women.

New legislation on associations was passed in 1958 (Law no. 93). Although most pre-existing associations sought to renew their legal status by registering under the new law, many did not. This is attributed to the fact that the 1958 law is one of the least favourable statutes governing civil society in the region, stipulating as it does that the foundation of an association is subject to supervision and approval by the security services. Moreover, the Syrian penal code criminalizes cooperation with international organizations or the receipt of funds from abroad without prior approval. Such approval would usually be denied.

When the Ba'th Party assumed power in 1963, the Syrian government set up state-funded associations for all major groups of the population – women, youth, farmers, journalists, etc. As the government saw no need for parallel structures, most pre-existing associations were subsumed under the government-sponsored organizations and the registration of new organizations was virtually stopped. The pluralism that once existed disappeared and was replaced by a unified, strongly ideological understanding of society. However, a few charitable organizations maintained their independence and remained active without legal status.

With this state monopoly in place, the only associations that were founded and registered in the 1960s and 1970s and thus tolerated by the government were almost exclusively charitable and very largely religiously motivated. They supported the poor, the elderly, orphans and the disabled, for whom the state made inadequate provision. Political unrest and subsequent emergency legislation, however, made the registration of new associations even more complicated and time-consuming, and many applications for registration failed. The registration process was discontinued entirely during the 1980s and 1990. It was not until the end of the 1990s that the Syrian government finally granted official status to a number of charitable associations that had been set up in the preceding two decades and had been operating informally.

All associations were registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and required to seek written approval for every activity they undertook, even for establishing initial contact with potential partners. This requirement de-motivated some associations, while others opted to risk a complex balancing act between approved and non-approved activities. According to official figures, the number of associations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in the late 1990s was about 600. However, no detailed information was accessible on these, nor was a directory of associations available for inspection by the general public.

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[2] This chapter is based on a text originally published in German (STOLLEIS 2012). For further reading see KAWAKIBI₉ (ed.) 2013.

Despite this challenging situation, a number of human rights organizations emerged in the early 1990s. Their members were subjected to persecution and arrest by the security services; a case in point was the Commission for the Defence of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria which was established in 1989.[3]

1.2 The 'Damascus Spring'

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, the concept of non-governmental organizations carrying out anything other than charitable work was alien to many segments of Syrian society. Encouraged by the promises of reform given by the young president, the early years of his rule quickly saw the establishment of political discussion forums such as the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society or the Friends of Civil Society. These discussion forums demanded political reforms and the lifting of the state of emergency. The so-called Damascus Spring added the term 'civil society' (*mujtama' madani*) to the Syrian dictionary. Initially, the concept was understood mainly to mean a political movement representing those segments of the population that were not organized in state structures. At the same time the adjective 'civil' was understood by many Syrians as signifying opposition to the dominance of the military in Syrian society and as a critique of a dictatorship that had come to power by means of a military coup. Although the discussion forums associated with Riad Sayf, an independent member of parliament, and other prominent figures represented an important step towards the establishment of an opposition in the era of Bashar al-Assad, large sections of Syrian society remained untouched by this development and watched it, if at all, from a distance.

By the time the Damascus Spring, only a few months into its career, was crushed by the imposition of a ban on discussion forums and the arrest of its leaders, the Syrian public had come to understand the term 'civil society' as signifying regime critics, and the term was often used, especially by official agencies, interchangeably with the term 'opposition'. The resulting climate of mistrust towards 'civil society' made the continued existence of any non-governmental organization even more difficult. To distance themselves from the supposedly dangerous concept of civil society (*mujatama' madani*), many associations pursuing non-political goals preferred to identify themselves *as mujtama' ahli*, a term that emphasized the social aspect of their activities.

Despite the stricter controls then in place, a new form of civil society began to take shape after 2001. Some of the organizations it encompassed were concerned with rights issues, focusing on human rights documentation, the monitoring of human rights violations and advocacy.[4] However, key leaders and members of these organizations continued to be subject to prosecution, travel bans and investigation by the security services. Similarly, other segments of civil society and grass-roots activism were not completely silenced. One illustration of their continuing public presence is the series of activities that took place at Daraya, near Damascus, in 2003, when a group of young people organized four peaceful campaigning events. The first was a silent demonstration against the American invasion in Iraq. To the distaste of the security services, this demonstration was unique in failing to display images of the president – conventionally a requirement for any protest in Syria. The second was a campaign concerning street-cleaning services in Daraya. The regime interpreted this as an attempt to discredit it as being delinquent in its duty to satisfy its citizens' needs and was furthermore unnerved by the activists' organizational skills, fearing that the campaigners could set an example for other activists supporting more critical causes. The regime was similarly unnerved after the third event, which entailed hanging posters and distributing flyers urging citizens not to pay bribes, and again after the fourth event, a campaign for a boycott of goods imported from the United States and all American

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[3] Website of the Commission for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria: http://cdf-sy.org.

[4] These include the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies, established in 2005, which published the monthly magazine *al-Boussla* (The Compass) that was printed abroad and distributed secretly in small discussion workshops inside Syria (http://dchrs.org/english/news.php). Prior to the March 2011 uprising, the Centre launched *al-Mishkat*, a quarterly magazine on human rights issues in Syria which is still being published.

branded goods as a sign of protest against the American invasion of Iraq. The activists who organized these events were subsequently arrested, their silencing marking the end of the 'Daraya movement'.

Then, following the 2005 political crisis which pressurized the Syrian regime into withdrawing its armed forces from Lebanon, a security grip was reinstated that differed little from that prevailing prior to 2000.

1.3 Governmental Non-Governmental Organizations

In the same period, Asma al-Assad launched herself into her new role as Syria's First Lady, devoting her time and energy to the 'revival of civil society'. Inspired by the example of Jordan's Queen Noor Foundation, in 2001 she arranged for the setting up of a network of organizations to promote progress in a variety of fields such as rural development, culture, and provision for young people, the disabled and orphans. These organizations, which suffered neither from financial constraints nor from the hassle of red tape, soon occupied centre-stage in the arena of civic engagement. While all other civil society associations, strictly controlled by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, needed to obtain permission for each and every contact with foreigners, international donors were regular guests of the organizations operating under Asma al-Assad's patronage.

These government-related NGOs – so-called GONGOs, i.e. governmental non-governmental organizations – operated both as an element of the facade that portrayed the Syrian president as a modernizer and reformist and as a lease valve for the West's willingness to support Syrian civil society. In the absence of alternative structures allowing them to implement cultural or development projects, even regime critics submitted their proposals to the GONGOs, well aware that they were thereby strengthening the facade of modernism projected by the regime. Some outstanding projects which would have otherwise have been doomed to failure under the complexity of Syrian bureaucracy were implemented using the GONGO route.

In 2007, the majority of organizations operating

under the patronage of Asma al-Assad were subsumed under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development. The aim was to project the image of an effort to revive Syrian civil society, to at least apparently awaken associations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour from their slumber and create the overall impression of an active civil society in Syria. The number of registered associations doubled in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule. Most of these newly founded associations focused on charity work, but some devoted their energies to issues such as the promotion of culture, science, environmental protection, women and young people.

With the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Syria Trust for Development created an NGO platform aiming to support the existing associations in their efforts to network and coordinate their activities. A stronger civil society, the Syria Trust for Development's website claimed, would lead to stronger participation in democratic processes and improve the relationship between civil society and the state.[5] Despite its proximity to the First Lady, and thus to the regime, some dissidents perceived this NGO platform as a means of strengthening civil society and ultimately as a means of strengthening the forces of government opposition. Other, more critical observers perceived this NGO platform as an extended arm of control over the few remaining independent civil society organizations and as an attempt to burnish the Assad regime's civil society credentials.

This development culminated in a major international conference held in Damascus in 2010 entitled "The Emerging Role of Civil Society in Development", where the organizations under Asma al-Assad's patronage were presented as the representatives of Syrian civil society. The follow-up meeting, scheduled to be held in Aleppo in spring 2011, never took place, a fact attributable to the popular uprising of March 2011 when sections of the population who had not previously been associated with civil society in Syria stood up and made their voices heard.

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[5] The reference to the establishment of the NGO platform is still on the organization's website (www.syriatrust.sy), but the respective link is no longer valid (last accessed on 1 August 2014).

1.4 A New Civil Society

Initially in Dara'a in the south and ultimately across the entire country, Syrians took to the streets to demand political reform. From the outset, their peaceful demonstrations were brutally repressed. It was therefore not long before protesters were demanding not only reform but also the ousting of the regime. To cloak violence with dialogue, the government began showing an unprecedented degree of interest both in the weak organizations that had been nurtured and controlled by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and in the above-mentioned NGO platform, suggesting that these were partners in dialogue with the regime and thus projecting the impression that popular opinion was indeed being taken into account. Not surprisingly, these attempts to mislead the population failed, and many of the organizations involved were clearly aware of being miscast as the "voice of the people".

Concurrently, popular mobilization in the towns and villages of Syria continued apace. The spontaneous demonstrations of the early days of the uprising were soon superseded by more organized protests as grass-root support structures were put in place across the country. Many areas saw the founding of Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), which organized demonstrations, managed public relations, developed strategies, built up contact networks and engaged in fund-raising. As the insurgency spread and the number of casualties and displaced persons increased, informal administrative structures were also set up to help get humanitarian assistance delivered to citizens in need. Gradually, the revolutionaries created a variety of structures working in parallel to those of the government. In areas no longer controlled by the regime, some of these structures were institutionalized in the form of Local Councils (LCs) which, although differing from one area to another in terms of their capacities, support the functioning of all kinds of public services ranging from distributing aid, providing medical services and education, maintaining the judiciary system, to managing waste collection.

On a less institutionalized level, after the correspondents of foreign news agencies had been expelled from the country and independent reporting from Syria had become impossible, informal news agencies began to emerge through which self-appointed citizen journalists were able to document and comment on events taking place in all parts of the country and make their information available to the world. Concurrently, medical and humanitarian aid networks were being expanded and increasingly supported by newly founded organizations in Syria and abroad. Equally important were the countless civil society groups (CSGs) that were set up to operate in all areas of social engagement with a view to creating democratic structures and strengthening civil society. Within these CSGs, students created independent student groups. New democratic trends also emerged even within the trade unions, which had become part of the state control apparatus under the rule of the Ba'th party. Over the past three years, dissidents – the majority of them young and hitherto completely unknown – have brought about fundamental changes to Syrian society. In a country where all forms of collective action have been firmly in the hand of the state for decades, new forms of grass-roots organizations are now being tested and the "people", so regularly invoked in Ba'th Party rhetoric, have themselves redefined their role.

However, with all independent forms of organization having been suppressed for decades, Syrian CSGs now lack a solid basis on which to build. This is particularly true of secular groups. Religious Muslim and Christian associations, mostly pursuing charitable causes, have always existed and can draw on networks built up over a lengthy period. This means that religiously motivated associations are currently providing support for many of the victims, including displaced persons, while many of their secular counterparts are still building up the necessary structures under extremely difficult logistical and security conditions.

And again, international organizations are looking for suitable partners with whom they can become active in Syria. While government bureaucracy was their most difficult challenge in the past, often their main challenge today is having to deal with nascent organizations operating under exceptionally difficult circumstances. Cooperation therefore requires a high degree of flexibility and an assumption of partnership-worthiness in advance, an assumption

that conflicts with the rules of many international donor institutions and needs to be challenged.

The awakening of Syrian civil society is one of the great opportunities for Syrian society today. This study endeavours to shed some light on the changes Syrian civil society has undergone since the beginning of the uprising (2011-2014). It aims to create a clearer understanding of these changes both within Syria and on the part of the international public, which all too often focuses exclusively on the war and destruction and thereby neglects the potential of the many individuals who are campaigning on the ground for a peaceful and democratic country.

2. Research Scope and Methodology

2.1 Research Scope

This study examines the trajectory that Syrian society has taken between March 2011 and February 2014 by analysing newly emerged civil society groups (CSGs). It seeks to create a clearer understanding of the characteristics of these groups, their structure and their dynamics while describing the difficult security situation in which they are operating and the challenges they are facing.

The study is based on field research involving 94 local CSGs working in non-government-controlled and/or contested areas of Syria. Most are informal groups, and they pursue a variety of causes: creating a strong, unified voice against their oppressors; campaigning for democracy, justice, equality and respect of all segments of society; demanding accountability from the various structures of governance; and campaigning for an inclusive, pro-poor economic system that provides opportunities for all. Given the current circumstances, some of these groups are also engaged in providing humanitarian aid, but they do not consider this to be their main aim. Groups engaged exclusively in the field of humanitarian aid were not included in the sample.

The 94 CSGs under review include 21 Local Councils (LCs). For the purpose of this study, LCs are considered to be part of civil society. Although LCs are currently substitutes for government structures at municipal level, they operate without any formal authority and are considered to be temporary alternatives. They operate and function in a manner similar to CSGs.

Because conditions in areas under government control are different, CSGs working in such areas should be seen as a different and distinct category; they are beyond the scope of this study. The same applies to CSGs operating from outside the country, which are likewise not included in this study. International actors whose impact on local CSGs is such that no complete picture can be drawn without reference to them are addressed briefly in the study but an in-depth analysis of their roles and dynamics is beyond its scope.

The analysis of the research findings pursues three objectives:

Identifying the characteristics of local CSGs in Syria

Despite the rapid spread of new CSGs, very little is known about them, not least because CSGs and their work continue to be upstaged by military and other dangerous developments on the ground. This study therefore identifies the key characteristics of the CSGs under review and examines them in terms of their geographical spread, size, age structure, the educational attainment level of their members, and their gender ratio, identity and status.

Understanding the identity and dynamics of local CSGs in Syria

Many generalizations have been advanced with regard to the identity of CSGs in Syria, mainly in terms of their ideology and religious background, but research in this field remains scant. Moreover, there may be a difference between how CSGs perceive and market their identity, role and impact and what their identity, role and impact actually is. This study therefore examines the CSGs' perception and projection of their identity, including the names they have chosen for themselves; their political, economic and social leanings; and their dynamics. The analysis is intended to provide further insight into their agency, impact and roles and also into their relationships with each other and the various stakeholders currently featuring in the Syrian context.

Analysing the challenges, opportunities and needs of local CSGs

Having set themselves up under circumstances of violent conflict and dire humanitarian need and still lacking basic resources and support systems, CSGs in Syria continue to face massive difficulties. But against all the odds, their motivation to bring about change and their newly inspired sense of citizenship and responsibility are key resources, among many others, that need to be considered when assessing how to make best use of the opportunities available to them. This research therefore examines the potential of local CSGs for fostering positive change in Syria while shedding light on their needs and, more importantly, the key challenges they are facing.

2.2 Research Techniques

Discussion groups and individual interviews

Small discussion groups and individual interviews were conducted with members of CSGs and community leaders in non-government-controlled areas of Syria. Some were conducted in person, others via Skype. The fact that the researchers on the ground cooperated with the CSGs via trust circles helped to facilitate a more comprehensive and candid sharing of information; it also ensured that the groups and interviewees felt more at ease and willing to talk.

Semi-structured questionnaires

This research used semi-structured questionnaires to obtain specific quantitative and qualitative data from CSGs based mainly in non-government-controlled areas of Syria. The questionnaires sought more comprehensive information on CSGs operating under conditions of conflict. A total of 94 questionnaires were completed by CSGs working inside Syria over the past year. Almost half of the questionnaires have since been updated to reflect the situation as at February 2014. The remaining questionnaires either have not been updated (some date back to mid-2013) or were never fully completed due to the insecurity context.

Secondary data collection

In addition to primary data, important qualitative secondary data was collected and analysed from online articles and documents, social media sources, NGO publications and academic reports. Additional background information was sourced from documentation compiled in connection with training workshops conducted by the Badael team.

2.3 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

The main strength of this research is its reliance on the Badael team of field researchers. Their widespread outreach made it possible to access CSGs inside non-government-controlled areas of Syria and obtain an in-depth understanding of their various situations.

■ The fact that the field researchers were locals helped to establish a relationship of trust in which the GSGs were willing to share informa-tion. It would have been difficult to interview any of the CSGs without this relationship of trust.

The research methods, which included both semi-structured interviews and discussion groups, provided a "relatively" comprehensive comprehensive picture of the situation and a realistic understanding of the dynamics of CSGs in most non-government-controlled areas of Syria.

Limitations

The four main research limitations concern the security situation, fear of oppression, exaggeration and time constraints.

■ The overall lack of security, together with widespread chaos and violence, continues to limit the mobility of and access to CSGs. To date, it has caused eight groups (four CSGs and four LCs) in Raqqa and Aleppo to abandon their work and has limited access to 21 groups based mostly in Aleppo and Idlib. The quantitative findings therefore do not always reflect data from all 94 questionnaires; rather, they reflect the responses that were available.

■ Fear of oppression – mainly from extremist armed groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria (ISIS) – posed a serious constraint in terms of understanding the identity, funding sources and dynamics of the CSGs under review.

■ Some groups which provided information tended to exaggerate when replying to questions concerning their size, funding, achievements etc.; probably they did this to better market themselves for potential funding. Moreover, in many instances, it was not possible to interview the entire CSG; in these cases the interview was conducted with the group's key leader. It is therefore possible that many responses reflect the perception of the respective group leader rather than that of the entire group. A countervailing assumption here is that groups are often composed of like-minded individuals. A further consideration is that the measurement of perception is in itself a strong research indicator.

As a result of time constraints and the currently difficult communication situation, several sections in various questionnaires remain incomplete and suggest a need for further investigation.

3. Characteristics of Local Civil Society Groups

3.1 Civil Society on the Ground

3.1.1 Geographical spread

Geographically, the CSGs under review – which represent the vast majority of local CSGs not focusing on relief work in non-government-controlled areas – are spread across five governorates: Aleppo, Idlib, Deir az-Zor, Raqqa and Hama. Aleppo has the largest share of active CSGs (34 groups), the majority of these (20) in Aleppo countryside. Idlib holds second place with 20 groups, followed by Deir az-Zor (15) and then Raqqa (nine). Hama governorate appears to have the smallest share of CSGs (four) (see Figure 1).

With the biggest population of all these governorates[6] and also accommodating a very large number of internally displaced persons, it is not surprising that Aleppo hosts the largest share of CSGs. However, the distribution of CSGs within the Aleppo governorate warrants further analysis as Aleppo city and Aleppo eastern countryside together almost equally host the majority (85%) of all CSGs located there. Aleppo northern and southern countryside host only a small number of CSGs (two and one respectively), and no CSG coverage was identified in Aleppo western countryside at the time of data collection for this study due to the presence of ISIS in the area. Although this apparent absence of CSGs may be attributable to insufficient mapping, the control exercised by ISIS and other extremist groups has certainly repressed civil life there and undoubtedly accounts for the discrepancy in numbers. This inequitable spread of CSGs across Aleppo governorate is of concern as it may have future implications: in the event that progress is made in ending the spread of arms, violence and tyranny, the need for the services of CSGs will be all the greater in those areas that have suffered most.

An interesting case here is that of Idlib governorate. Although one of the smallest of the governorates under review in terms of population.[7] Idlib hosts the second largest number of CSGs (but only half that of Aleppo despite a similar population density in the two governorates). All of these CSGs are based in Idlib countryside rather than within the city as the latter is still under government control and thus beyond the scope of this study. This high CSG ratio may reflect a change in the perception of the local citizens: living in an area that was previously one of the most deprived in Syria, they may have now opted to take matters into their own hands as active citizens. Nevertheless, it is also important to stress that two thirds of these groups are Local Councils (LCs). The establishment of such a large number of LCs in Idlib countryside may be attributable to a number of reasons: the dire need to have LCs run local affairs as substitutes for non-existing or dysfunctional governmental institutions; a keener interest in governance in the wake of the greater freedom experienced after the end of the Ba'th party's centralized system of governance; the project-driven nature of the financial support forthcoming from the international community and the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) to run LCs.[8] Another interesting case is that of Hama governorate, which hosts the smallest number of CSGs. This is mainly attributable to the fact that Hama city is still under government control and only a small part of the surrounding countryside is under opposition control. Whereas access to CSGs in the area controlled by the regime was very difficult as activists tend to keep a low profile, access to those in the liberated areas was restricted mainly by the geographical distance separating such areas.

Analysis of the five CSGs under review that are represented in multiple governorates shows that

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[6] According to the Syrian Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS), Aleppo governorate had a total population of 4,744,000 in 2011 pre-crisis, at that time a population figure over five times that of Raqqa (921,000) and three to four times that of the other governorates under review. (Syrian Central Bureau for Statistics, 2011)

[7] The CBS reports a population of 1,464,000 in 2011 pre-crisis, i.e. almost one third that of Aleppo. (Syrian Central Bureau for Statistics, 2011)

[8] Such a pronounced increase in the number of LCs was also noted elsewhere in the governorates under review; however, as outreach to these LCs was limited, the validity of any LC comparisons may be compromised.

Figure 1: Geographical spread of the CSGs and LCs under review
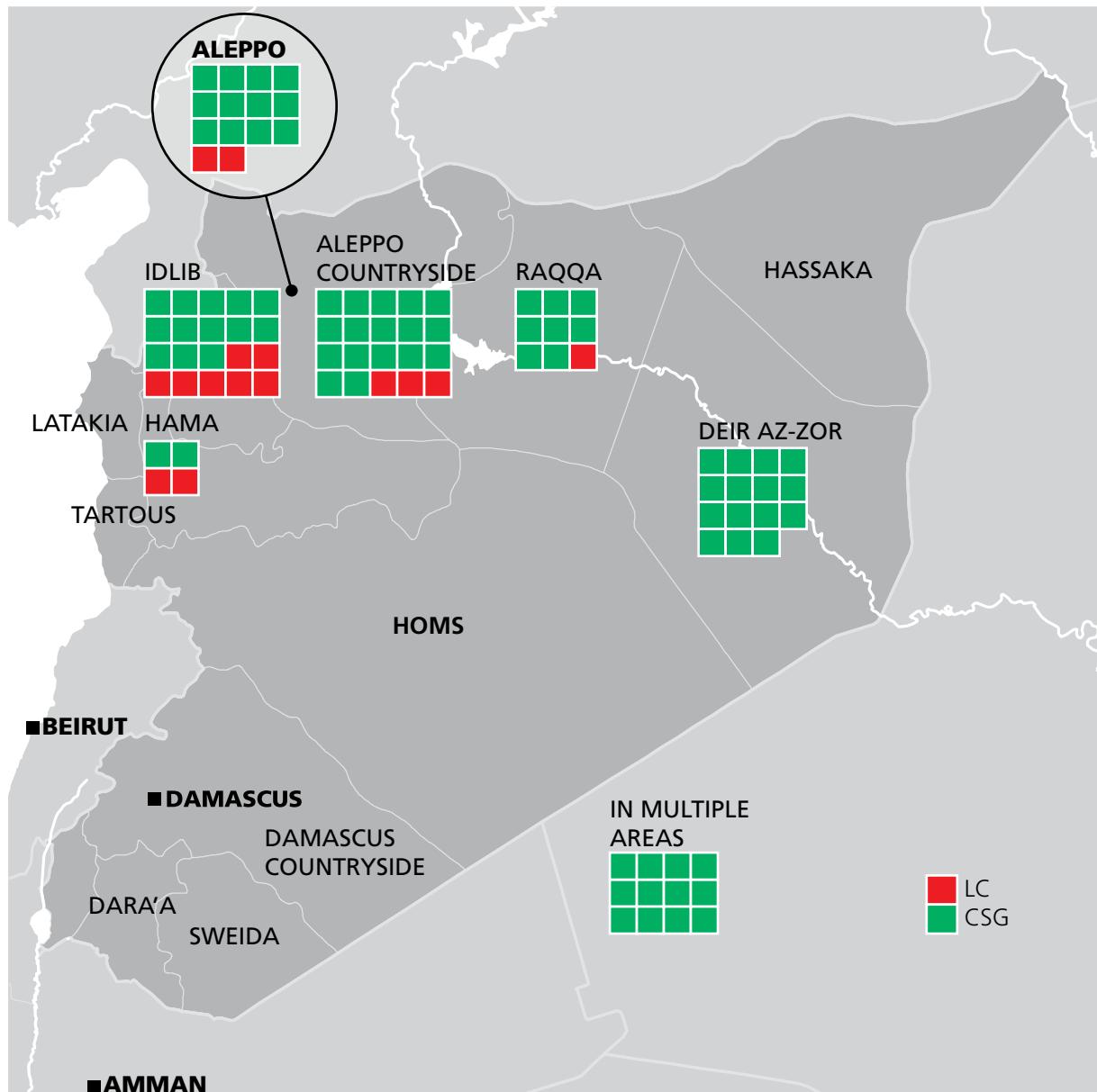
altogether they have branches in six of the 14 governorates of Syria, with the two biggest cit-ies, Aleppo followed by Damascus, hosting the largest share of such CSGs.[9] (see Figure 2)

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[9] Hasakeh, Tartus and Qunaitra are unexamined in terms of CSG branch outreach as these remain beyond the governorates under review. This does not necessarily mean that there are no CSGs in these areas, but this study cannot offer any evidence-based assessments for these regions. Nevertheless, general observations suggest some possible explanations for this lack of clarity with regard to CSG activity in government-controlled areas: policy of working in strict secrecy out of fear of oppression; national border locations with severely restricted access; and geographical distance from the centre of the country.

Figure 2: Geographical spread of CSGs operating in multiple governorates
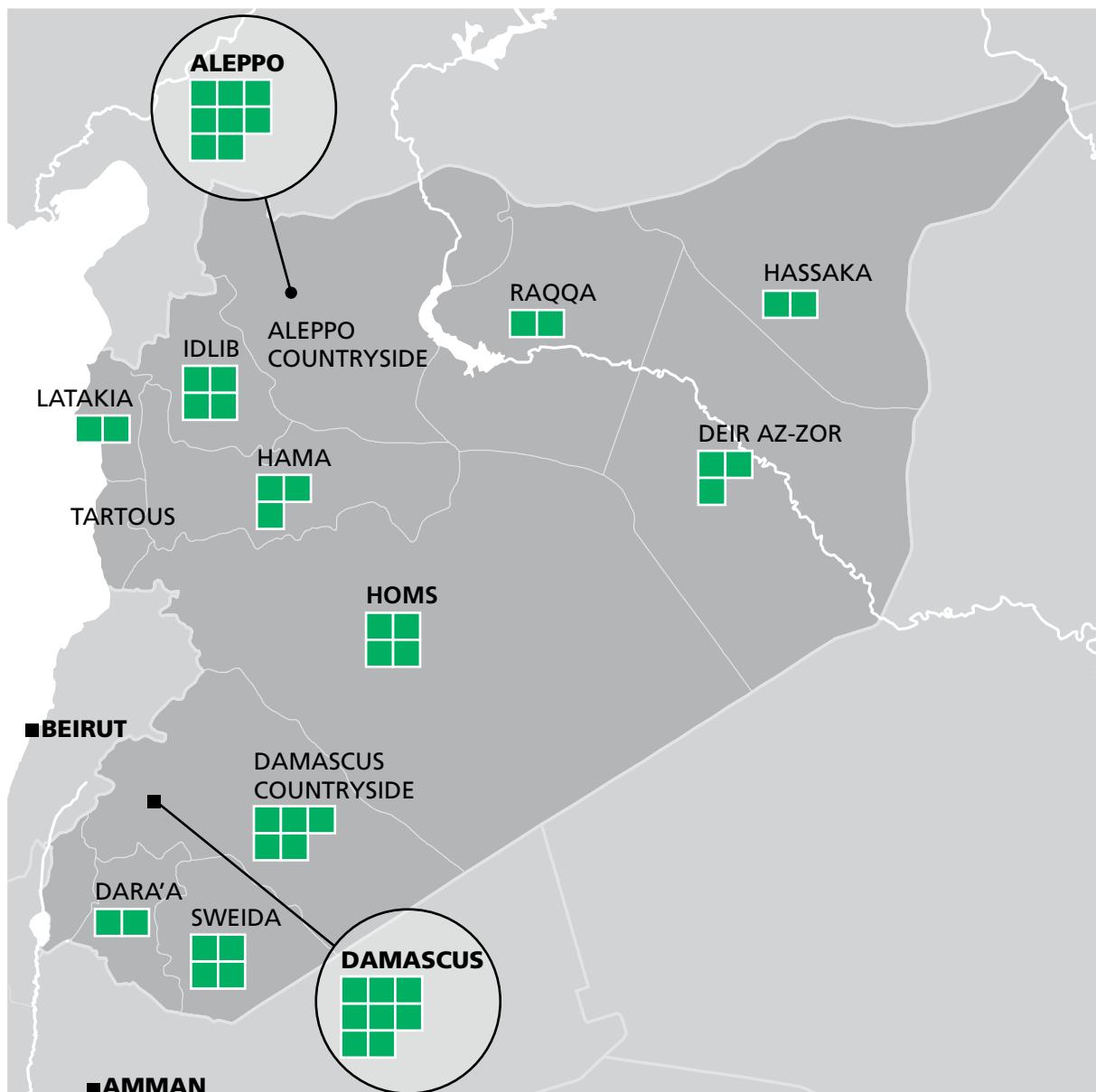
3.1.2 Emergence of civil society groups by region

A chronological analysis of the establishment of CSGs (including LCs) in the governorates covered by this study clearly shows that over two thirds were established between the first half of 2012 and the first half of 2013 (see Figure 3). This period coincided with the end of government control in many areas and a consequent dire need for alternative bodies – CSGs – to run local services, provide humanitarian aid, implement development projects, organize awareness-raising campaigns and foster rights-based activities. More importantly, the timing of the establishment of these CSGs reflects the greater freedom prevailing during that period for CSGs to set themselves up and start operating. The fact that CSGs were at that time discovering the possibilities of obtaining international funding could also have contributed to the rapid rise in the number of CSGs being established. In the new context of greater freedom that prevailed between early 2012 and early 2013, CSGs flourished in Syria despite the very difficult

constraints they faced and continue to face today.

Only few CSGs were established prior to 2012, when many areas of Syria were still under government control, and again after the first half of 2013, by which time many areas had fallen under the control of ISIS and other armed extremist groups; many of those that were founded within those timeframes have since ceased to exist. While no accurate information is available on the number of CSGs that stopped working prior to 2012 as a result of government control, data collected for this study indicates that the majority of the CSGs covered by the study and set up in 2011 were Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), youth groups organizing peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience, and community organizing groups campaigning for the toppling of the regime.

The research data shows that since the first half of 2013, as the influence of ISIS and other extremist groups has become stronger in various areas, more than eight CSGs have been caused to suspend or terminate their activities; the fate of many others remains unknown as access to them is currently limited. Concurrently, the number of CSGs newly established in areas under the control of extremist groups dropped sharply to only six. However, whereas these six CSGs claim to be apolitical and not involved in any rights-based activities (seemingly out of fear of their new ISIS oppressors), the fact that their memberships include a high ratio of women and young people are positive signs. Half of them are women's CSGs or groups with strong female representation, and the other half are youth and student CSGs whose members have an average age of 23.

Aleppo and its countryside

Clearly reflecting the changing geographical extent of government control, the CSG boom in Aleppo peaked in the second half of 2012. When extremist and foreign-armed groups first arrived in Aleppo and its environs and started to interfere heavily in local affairs, thus changing the dynamics on the ground, the number of CSGs was still rising – though at a slower pace. It then dropped sharply in 2013.

Deir az-Zor and its countryside

The difficulties Deir az-Zor continues to face in terms of the establishment of CSGs reflect the specific characteristics of this area: its oil fields, tribal structures and a high level of militarization mean that it remains one of the most sensitive and most highly contested areas in the Syrian conflict. Whereas no robust data is available on its local governance systems, it is clear that CSG activity boomed in the second half of 2011 and the first half of 2013.

This again reflects the changing situation on the ground. The various extremist groups were initially more interested in the oil fields than in meddling in local affairs. However, this did not last, and ISIS and other extremist groups have since been interfering more and more in local affairs and civil work in the city, especially since the beginning of 2014.

The research data indicates that whereas some of the CSGs established between 2012 and 2013 were concerned with political issues, many of those formed since 2013 have shied away from politics and adopted a more Islamic identity. The climate of violence and the omnipresence of weaponry in Deir az-Zor have caused civil activities that do not entail aid and rescue work to appear totally divorced from reality.

It is worth mentioning that the existence of large oil deposits in Deir az-Zor played a key role in escalating the violence. As political authority disintegrated, new warlords were able to randomly take control of the local oil wells and make a handsome profit from them. They clearly have no interest in putting an end to the conflict. Many have since set up brigades for the sole purpose of protecting the oil wells.

Idlib countryside

Unlike in Aleppo and Raqqa, ISIS is not strong enough in much of Idlib countryside to interfere seriously in local affairs (though the towns in Idlib northern countryside and a few others elsewhere are exceptions in this respect). Two factors can be advanced to explain this situation. On the one hand, ISIS has met with strong resistance from local communities. On the other, at the time this research was conducted, Idlib countryside was apparently not a priority for ISIS – when the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and some Islamic militias started waging war against ISIS, the group preferred to focus its efforts on maintaining control in Raqqa, Deir az-Zor and Aleppo eastern countryside.

Figure 3: Chronology of CSG establishment in non-government-controlled areas
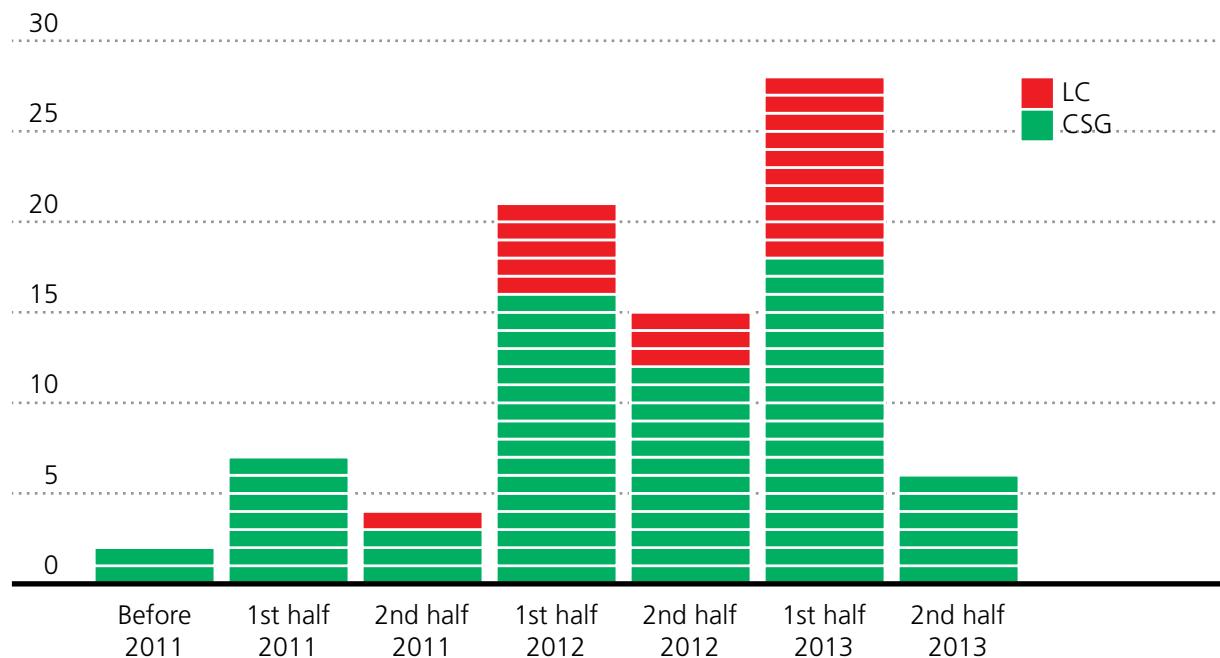
The research data strongly supports this observation with regard to the period from the first half of 2012 to the first half of 2013. However, the situation changed in the second half of 2013, when new CSG activity ceased entirely in Idlib. This raises concern about the role of all stakeholders there – including that of the extremist groups, criminal gangs and warlords deemed by most CSGs in Idlib countryside to be their greatest challenge. The presence of ISIS was indeed one of the main reasons for the disappearance of some CSGs in areas that fell under its control in the second half of 2013 before the organization was repelled by local armed groups representing the FSA.

Hama countryside

With only four CSGs having been established in Hama in the first half of 2012 and 2013, of which two are LCs, it is difficult to make any general statements concerning this region. The two LCs in Hama seem to be more inclined to function as CSGs than as governance structures, pursuing work in the fields of awareness-raising, development, rights and humanitarian aid. One interesting aspect in the case of the LCs in Hama is that both have declared that they would like to open branches in Turkey. This reflects

not only the fact that CSGs need to expand in order to attract international funding but also the lack of cooperation and networking activities between and among them as each group works in isolation from other similar groups aspiring to achieve the same goal. Moreover, as most activists, international donors and INGOs are now operating from Turkey, local CSGs are increasingly keen to have a presence there. This development may create problems in the future with regard to the independence, ownership and sustainability of local civil society work in Syria.

Raqqa and its countryside

When ISIS set up its headquarters in Raqqa in August 2013, it imposed severe restrictions on local CSG activity that clearly also had a detrimental impact on the latter's expansion. Activists report that over 35 CSGs had been set up in Raqqa within a month-and-a-half of the city's liberation in march 2013, attributing this boom not only to the greater freedom that prevailed post-liberation but also to the return of activists from training programmes and workshops offered by international and local organizations based in Turkey, equipped with new expertise and keen to obtain funding. But although the number of CSGs

boomed between April and August 2013, only eight of the new groups remained active. Some ceased operating owing to structural weaknesses and/or the non-arrival of anticipated funding even before ISIS began to interfere in civil society work; others gave up later as a result of the control exercised by ISIS.

Raqqa LC, established after the city's liberation, is no exception here. Over four hundred independent activists and representatives of CSGs, revolutionary bodies and local clans initially elected 50 members to form the General Secretariat. The latter then elected the LC members from within its ranks. The

Figure 4: Chronology of CSG establishment by governorate
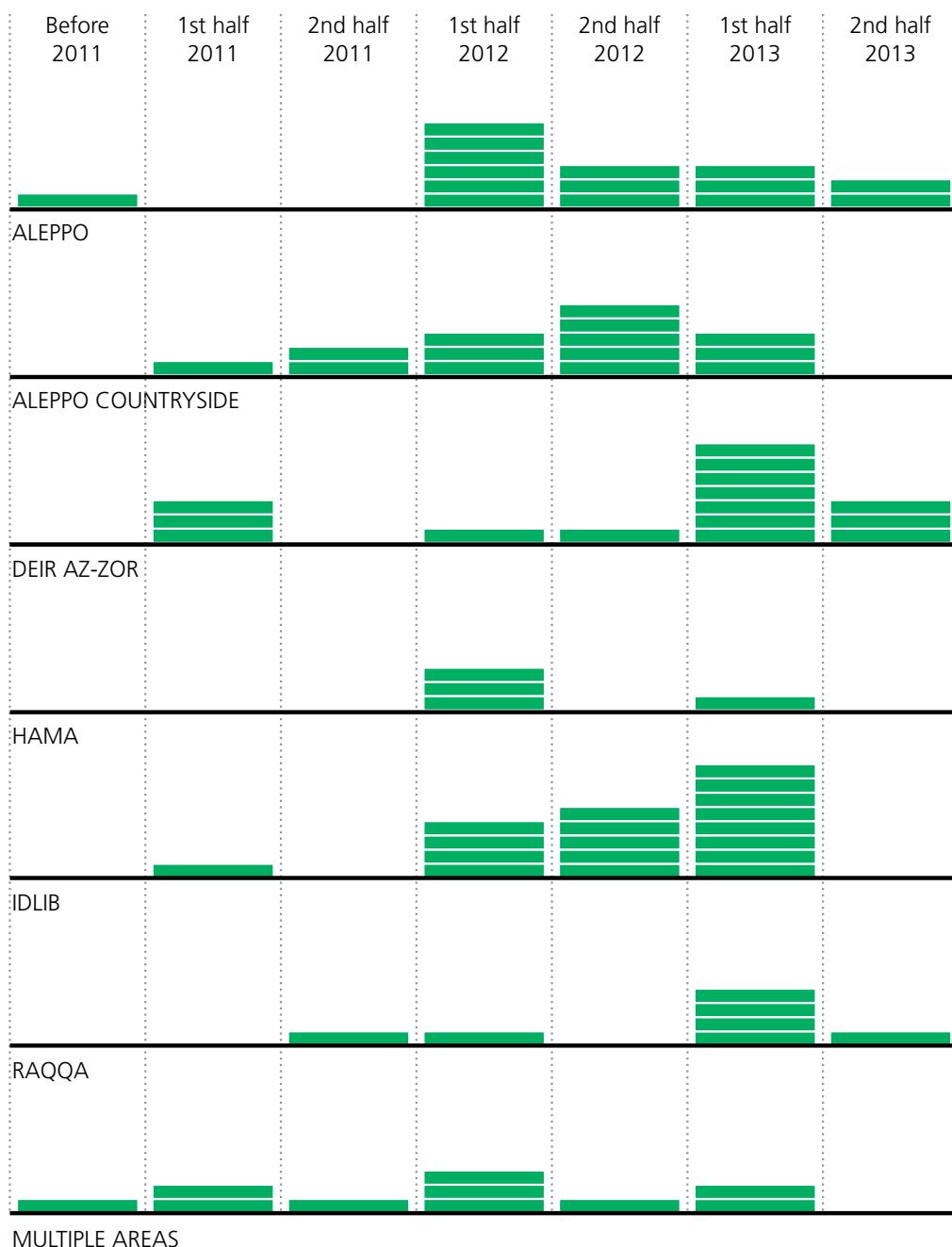
elected LC duly commenced operations, focusing on service provision. When ISIS took control of the city, however, the LC had to pursue a strategy of non-confrontation with ISIS and continued its work on those terms. The LC's term of office ended in March 2014 but, fearing that the LC's executive structures will be hijacked by ISIS, the people of Raqqa are unwilling to hold a further election.

Despite being more severely constrained by ISIS and other extremist groups than CSGs in other governorates, the CSGs that were set up in Raqqa in the first half of 2013 are remarkable in that they are more progressive, more peaceful and seemingly more secular than many CSGs elsewhere. Some Raqqa-based CSGs moreover distinguish themselves from many other CSGs in Syria by pursuing carefully planned and well-focused strategies.

Civil society groups operating in multiple areas

The emergence of CSGs operating in multiple areas differed from that of CSGs operating in a single governorate in the period been the uprising in 2011 and the year 2013. This seems to be a consequence of their trans-border nature, broader geographical outreach and more holistic strategic approach, all factors which make them more suitable for meeting

longer-term needs across the country than responding to a specific crisis in a specific area. Many of these CSGs are based in Aleppo, Damascus or other large cities, and most focus their work on awareness-raising, advocacy, documentation, civil disobedience, peace-building and/or politics rather than relief work or humanitarian aid. However, if these CSGs are to make full use of their potential to have a stronger and more sustainable impact on the ground and contribute more generally to state-building, they need to network more closely with CSGs operating in single areas. The latter can offer local legitimacy and community acceptance, the former a more strategic and comprehensive outlook; when working in partnership they complement each other (see Figure 5).

3.2 Demographic Characteristics

3.2.1 Group size

While in many instances providing only rough estimates, the questionnaires indicate that 30% of all groups under review are composed of between 11 and 25 members; only one, in Aleppo, comprises five or fewer members and only three comprise more than 300 members (the latter have memberships ranging between 850 and 1,000).

Figure 5: CSG size (by number of members)
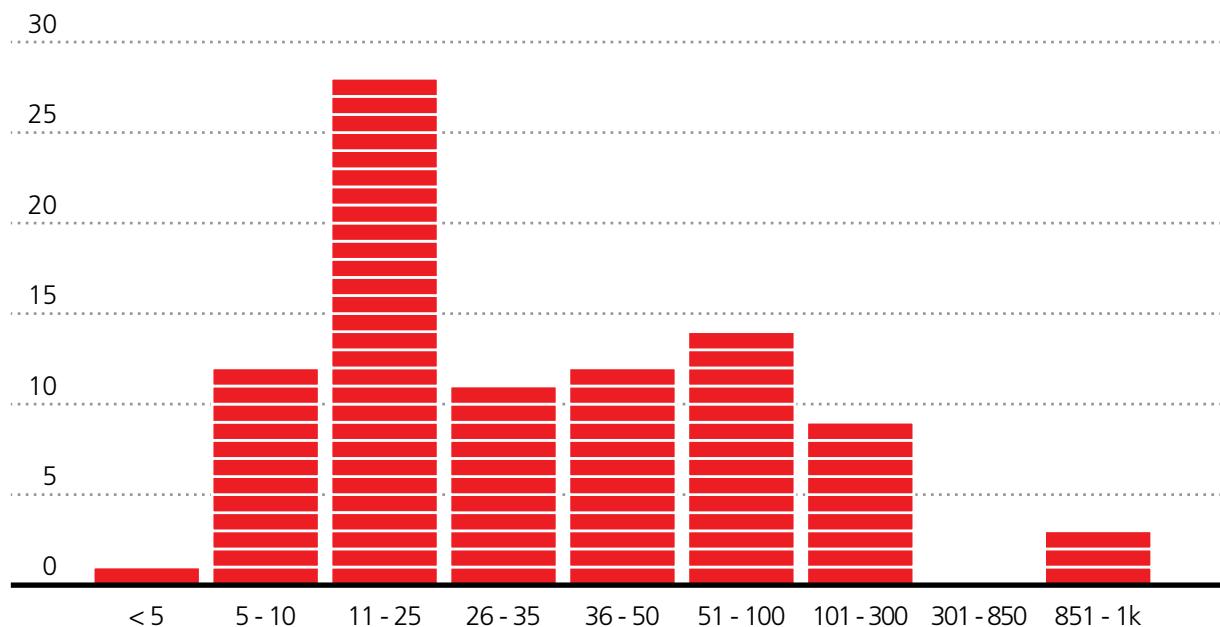
A closer analysis of group size by governorate shows that Deir az-Zor and Idlib are the only areas where groups with between 11 and 25 members account for the largest share. In Raqqa the largest share is held by groups with between 101 and 300 members. Group size clearly differs from one governorate to another. The more diverse governorate of Aleppo has many groups with up to 300 members; no group

in the governorate of Idlib has more than 50 members (possibly reflecting the small size of the towns in Idlib countryside covered by this study); and one third of all groups in the governorate of Deir az-Zor are composed of 51 to 100 members (see Figure 6).

The data provides no clear understanding with regard to a possible correlation between a group's size on the one hand and that group's success, impact and

Figure 6: Breakdown of CSGs by size and governorate

	< 5	5 - 10	11 - 25	26 - 35	36 - 50	51 - 100	101 - 300	301 - 850	851 - 1k
ALEPPO	0%	27%	14%	13%	13%	13%	20%	0%	0%
ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE	0%	25%	25%	25%	0%	15%	10%	0%	0%
DEIR AZ-ZOR	0%	7%	47%	0%	13%	33%	0%	0%	0%
IDLIB	5%	10%	53%	16%	16%	0%	0%	0%	0%
RAQQA	0%	0%	22%	11%	22%	11%	34%	0%	0%
MULTIPLE AREAS	0%	0%	11%	0%	22%	11%	22%	0%	34%
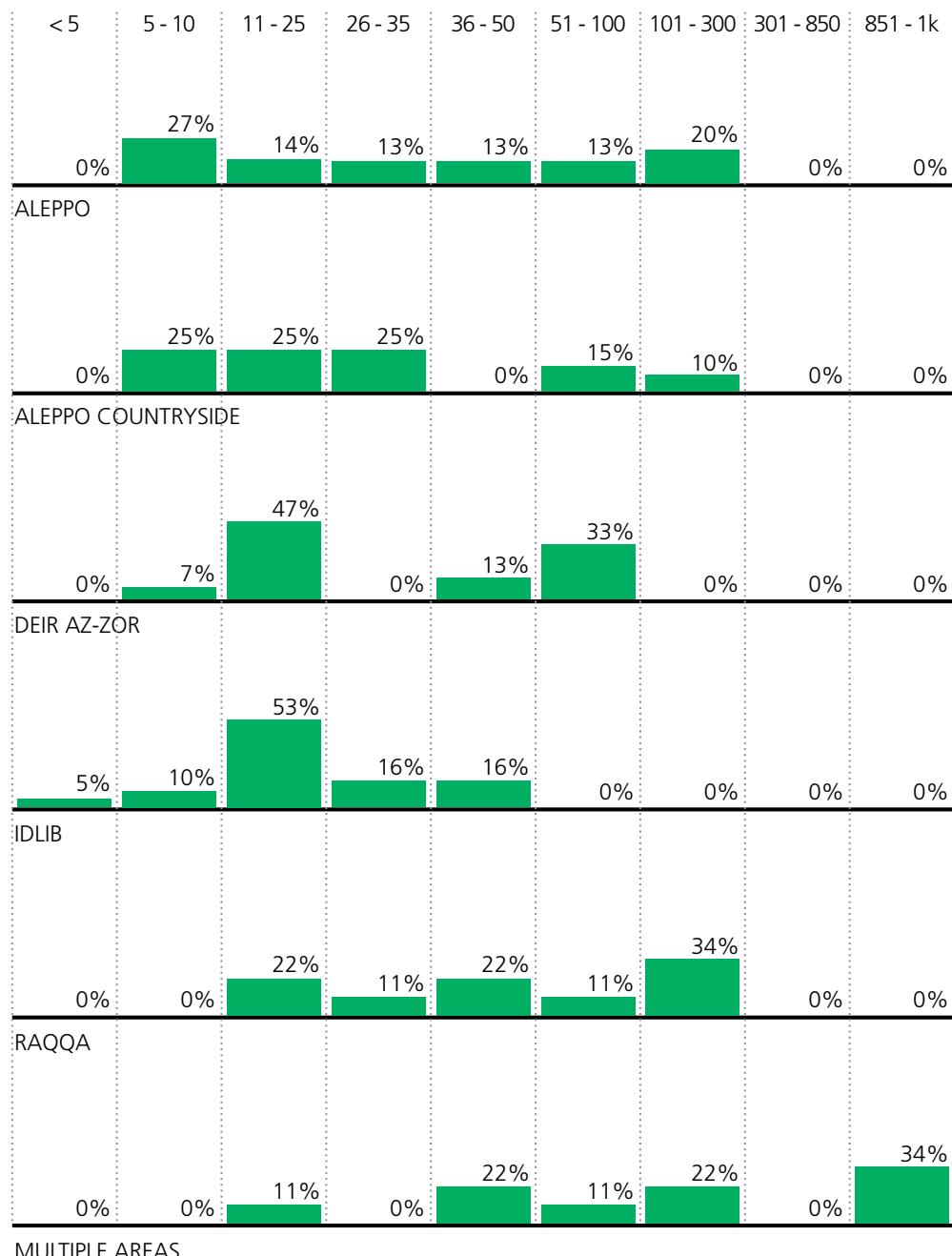
efficiency on the other. Some of the field researchers describe this relationship as proportional, associating larger memberships with greater effectiveness and suggesting that larger groups tend to be better known and more resilient to loss of members (many members leave to return to work or education, leave the country as refugees, or are forcefully detained, internally displaced or killed). They also suggest that only larger groups are able to stand up to ISIS. Other field researchers correlate success and effectiveness with the specific conditions prevailing in the governorate concerned, pointing out that in some areas such as Aleppo western countryside and Idlib northern countryside, success in making an impact correlates with a group's ideology and its role in providing humanitarian aid as these factors affect the group's legitimacy and the support it receives from local communities.

The survey also shows that the only group in Aleppo countryside that had fewer than five members has now disbanded. It further reveals that the three groups with the largest memberships (between 850 and 1,000) seem to be having a sizeable impact. They have a number of aspects in common: (1) all operate in multiple governorates; (2) all have between 25% and 49% female participation; (3) two of them were established in the second half of 2012 (the other, incidentally, dates back to 1957); (4) none is registered; (5) all have connections outside Syria; and (6) all are engaged in awareness-raising or educational activities.

As for the Kurdish population, the data shows that many Kurdish groups have large memberships and strong structures; this is particularly apparent with regard to their political parties and CSGs. Resisting oppression is not new for them – Kurds in the so-called Arab belt have been struggling against persecution since 1962.[10] Unlike the Arab community, Kurds have been well organized since long before the 2011 uprising began. To them, large numbers signify power and a united front against persecution.

3.2.2 Gender structure

In general terms, female participation in the groups under review is weak but increasing. The same applies to female participation at the time of data collection compared with the situation prior to the 2011 uprising. In general terms, female participation in the groups under review is weak but increasing. The research shows that, of the mapped groups, 31% have no female participation, that women represent a minority of the membership in 54%, that women represent a majority of the membership in 8%, and that around 7% are exclusively female (see Figure 7). The data thus indicates that, as already seen with other CSG characteristics, gender participation differs from one region or governorate to another. It is therefore of interest to examine gender participation by governorate (see Figure 8).

Non-existent or low female participation

Over 61% of CSGs with no female participation are based in Idlib countryside, which ranks well below all other governorates in this respect. Idlib countryside has only two CSGs that count women within their membership, which have five and three female members respectively out of a total membership of 25 in each case. Aleppo countryside has a slightly higher female participation ratio than Idlib countryside, but the low level of female participation in CSGs here is likewise remarkable.

Increasing female participation

The research shows women as accounting for the majority of the membership in seven groups mainly across Deir az-Zor governorates and in Aleppo city and its eastern countryside. In the other governorates under review, women participants in CSGs remain a minority, in many cases representing less than one quarter of the total membership. While this finding indicates rather weak female participation in CSGs in many non-government-controlled areas of Syria, it is also a strong qualitative indicator

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[10] In October 1962, 125,000 Kurds living in Syria were stripped of their Syrian nationality. Legislative Decree No. 93, issued by the then Syrian president, made them stateless. This legislative decree deprived Kurds living in Syria of all rights, including those to register land or real estate, to register births and marriages, to a university education, to obtain a passport or driver's licence, to employment in government agencies, to deposit money with or obtain loans from Syrian banks and even to trade freely.

of the characteristics of women who willingly join male-dominated groups there. Culture and tradition in these areas create barriers to female participation that only women of very strong character are willing to tackle and overcome with a view to joining mostly male-dominated groups. It is interesting to note that some of the women who have done exactly that, were born into families with a decades-long tradition of political opposition. From another perspective, it is also important to note that some women are reported to have joined humanitarian CSGs specifically with a view to taking advantage of their aid. In either case, the overall result has been stronger female participation in the public sphere in the past three years, though the increase in female participation has differed from one governorate to another.

Female-dominated CSGs

As contact between the sexes can create problems from the viewpoints of culture and tradition, some women have opted to leave male-dominated CGSs and form their own groups. Others have set up all-women groups specifically to highlight the issue of women's rights. The phenomenon of all-female CSGs is not judged as either positive or negative where the gender exclusivity is related to the group's identity and role. A total of six all-women CSGs were examined in this study: one in Aleppo, two in Aleppo eastern countryside, and three in Deir az-Zor. The role of those based in Deir az-Zor is somewhat unclear but seems to be to encourage women to carry out traditional tasks in certain predominantly female occupations

or to engage in religious teaching. Some community members report that the latter role is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, the other all-female CSGs – mostly based in the eastern countryside of Aleppo – appear to have adopted a very progressive role in promoting the women's rights.

Female political participation

Judging by female participation in LCs, where women remain a minority, women's participation in politics is weak. Nineteen of the 21 LCs contacted supplied data for this study. Four reported a female representation of up to 17%, the women concerned ranging in age from 31 to 44 years. These four LCs are located across the Hama, Raqqa and Aleppo areas.

The paucity of female representation in politics and the public sphere in general prior to the uprising may have been exacerbated in Raqqa and Deir az-Zor by the influence of ISIS and other extremist groups in those areas and by the generally conservative nature of society in Idlib. Moreover, the fact that the majority of the LCs contacted (12 out of 21) are located in conservative Idlib may distort the overall picture.

On the other hand, an assessment of women's political participation in terms of their involvement in the 22 CSGs under review that are involved in political activities, reveals that women are not represented in 11 of these CSGs (mostly LCs in Idlib); represent a minority in eight; the majority in one and, more importantly, the totality of the membership in the remaining two. These two, both clearly interested

Figure 7: Female participation in the CSGs under review

No females | Up to a quarter | Over quarter to half | Majority but not all | All females

31% | 41% | 13% | 8% | 7%

Majority male 85%

Majority female 15%
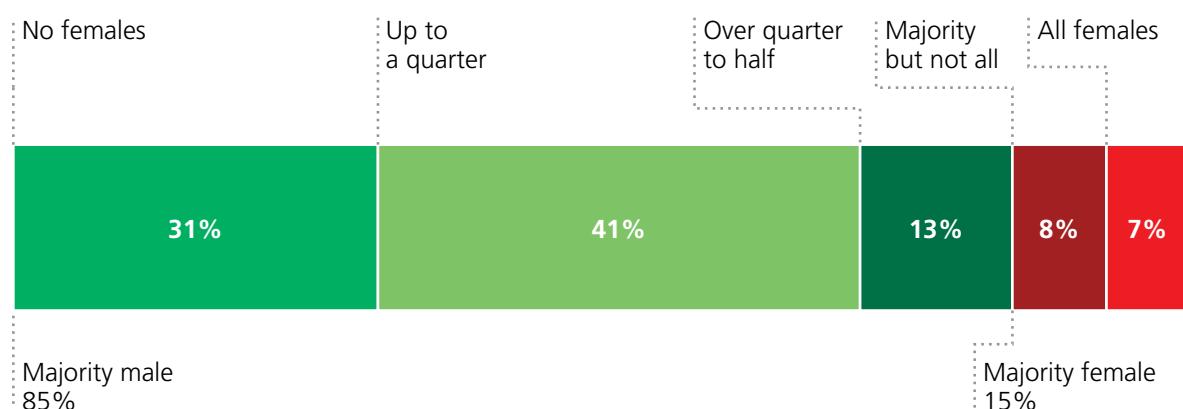
in playing a political role, are based in Deir az-Zor and Aleppo eastern countryside. Meanwhile, upon the analysis of the mapped Kurdish political parties, female political participation seems to illustrate a stronger female political participation than any other area in Syria. Although still weak, the female political participation that is urgently needed in Syria thus seems to have taken root in the non-government-controlled areas of the country.

3.2.3 Age structure

Reflecting the young age of many activists who organized peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience during the 2011 uprising, the average age of most members (74%) of the CSGs under review is between 16 and 30 years.[11] Older members ranging in age between 31 and 40 are also well represented (17%), the strongest representation of this age group being found mainly in

Figure 8: Female participation in the CSGs under review by governorate
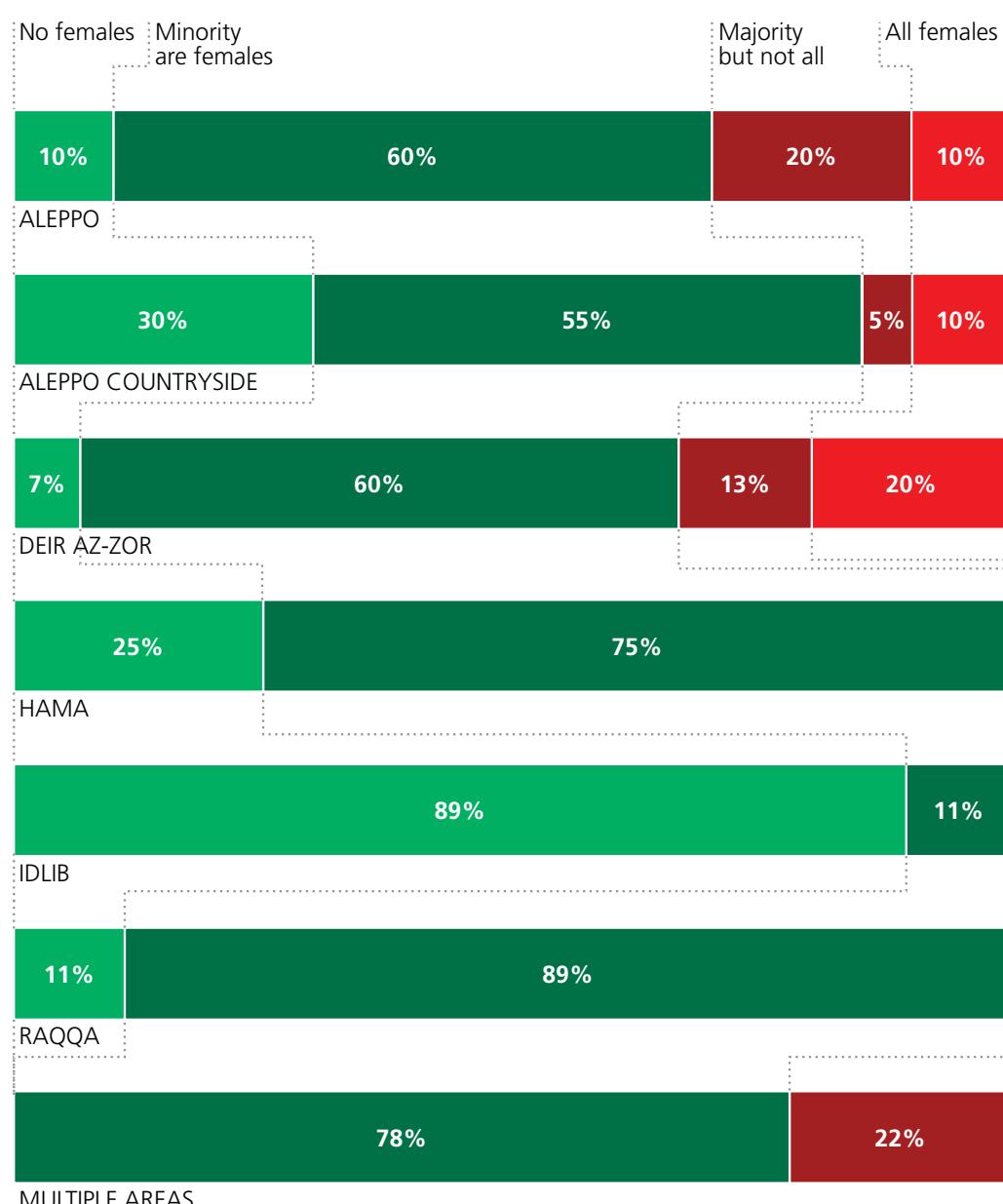
Aleppo, Idlib and Hama. Members aged between 41 and 50 years represent a minority (8%) in all CSGs but the majority in LCs. On average, LC members are older than other civil society group activists. The elections of many LCs produced a roughly equal split in their membership between revolutionary young activists who were protagonists in the uprising and older local community leaders who have earned a good reputation and local respect. It is therefore not surprising to find that, on average, members of LCs are four to nine years older than members of other CSGs.

It is also worth noting that, in general terms, CSG members in Raqqa, Aleppo countryside and Deir az-Zor, most of whom are in their late 20s (mainly 26 and 27), are younger than their counterparts in Aleppo and much younger than those in Hama and Idlib, where the average age is in the mid-30s. This finding is related to the nature and number of CSGs in each governorate that responded to the age question. For instance, with only four responses from Hama, half of the responding CSGs there were LCs (generally older) and one was a rights-based

Figure 9: CSG age structure by governorate
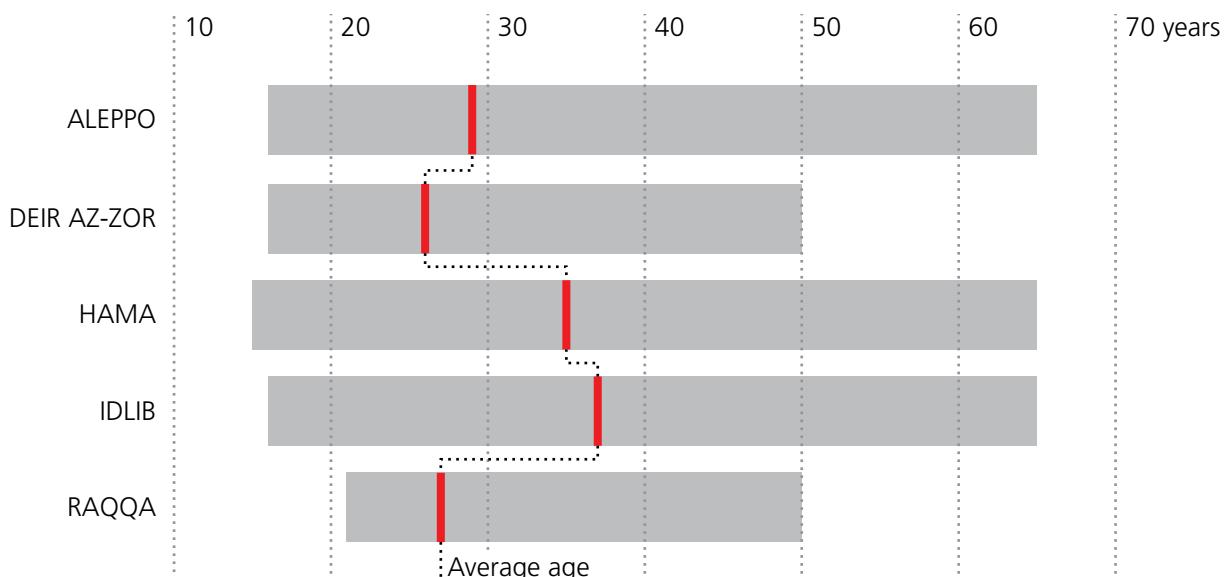
However, one governorate defies this trend, namely Idlib. On average, members of CSGs in Idlib are about five years older than members of LCs there (see Figure 9). This finding may well be attributable to the small number of CGSs (four) that responded to the question concerning age structure and in particular to the high average age of the membership in one of those, a factor that distorted the overall picture. That CSG has the fourth highest average age of all CSGs under review, namely 43 years. If this CSG were excluded from the analysis, the average age of CSG members in Idlib would be 30 years, i.e. three years lower than that of LC members there.

CSG whose technical slant necessarily attracts older people. In Idlib, seven of the 11 CSGs that responded were LCs (generally older) and one was a CSG with a membership of an average age much higher than most of the other CSGs under review. The case of Aleppo is somewhat different: responses were forthcoming from only two LCs but several rights-based CSGs whose members, given the technical expertise

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[11] This average reflects the age structure of only 52 of the 94 groups in the survey. Only 52 groups provided information in this respect.

required in their work, are necessarily older than members of other CSGs. The data suggests that governorates with a stronger complement of LCs and rights-based institutions such as Aleppo, Hama and Idlib generally have a broader age range than governorates where this type of CSG is less widespread.

3.2.4 Educational attainment level

The 41 CSGs under review that provided information on educational attainment levels reported that over 55% of their members hold a university qualification, 17% hold a vocational education qualification and 22% are either still high school students or have high school as their highest educational attainment (some of them due to the closure of many educational establishments across Syria).

As illustrated in Figure 10, whereas the majority of CSG members on whom data was collected for this study hold at least a university degree, the situation in Raqqa governorate seems to be different. Here, 90% of CSG members are educated only to high school level. However, given that only four of the nine CSGs under review here replied to the question about educational attainment, these statistics do not necessarily reflect the real situation in Raqqa. While CSG membership in Raqqa is younger than in the other governorates – with some members possibly still at high school –, the educational attainment data for Raqqa are distorted by the existence of one very large group with 275 members whose highest educational attainment is a high school qualification. Another governorate with a large proportion of members with a high school qualification is Hama, where again the existence of one very large CSG with 255 members (double the membership of the other CSGs in Hama combined) may give a distorted view of the actual situation.

However, it is important to point out that the majority of schools and universities in non-government-controlled areas are no longer functioning and that many young people's education has ceased as a result of their having been arrested or at best expelled from the education system for their activism. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that educational attainment levels are lower in areas such as Raqqa, where destruction is widespread and levels of violence are high.

That said, it remains difficult to analyse educational attainment levels by governorate as fewer than half of all CSGs under review provided the relevant data and their membership sizes were not representative of the totality of the CSGs. However, one very positive general finding emerged: it seems that it is better-educated individuals from grass-roots society who are taking on a leadership role in CSGs in non-government-controlled areas, and that they are not excluding sections of society with different educational attainment levels. This finding is very positive because, as described in the foregoing, civil society work prior to the uprising was the preserve of a Syrian elite working for GONGOs and intellectuals who tended to have only scant contact with ordinary people. Given that the education situation in Syria is still deteriorating, CSGs will have a very difficult job bridging the educational gap that is condemning a 'lost generation' to a future of vulnerability, exclusion and violence. After one, two or three years without educational provision – indeed, some Syrians are now entering their fourth year – for many children and young adults the options for resuming their education and the motivation to do so are dwindling fast.

Figure 10: Highest educational attainment level of CSG members by governorate

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE

DEIR AZ-ZOR

HAMA

IDLIB

RAQQA
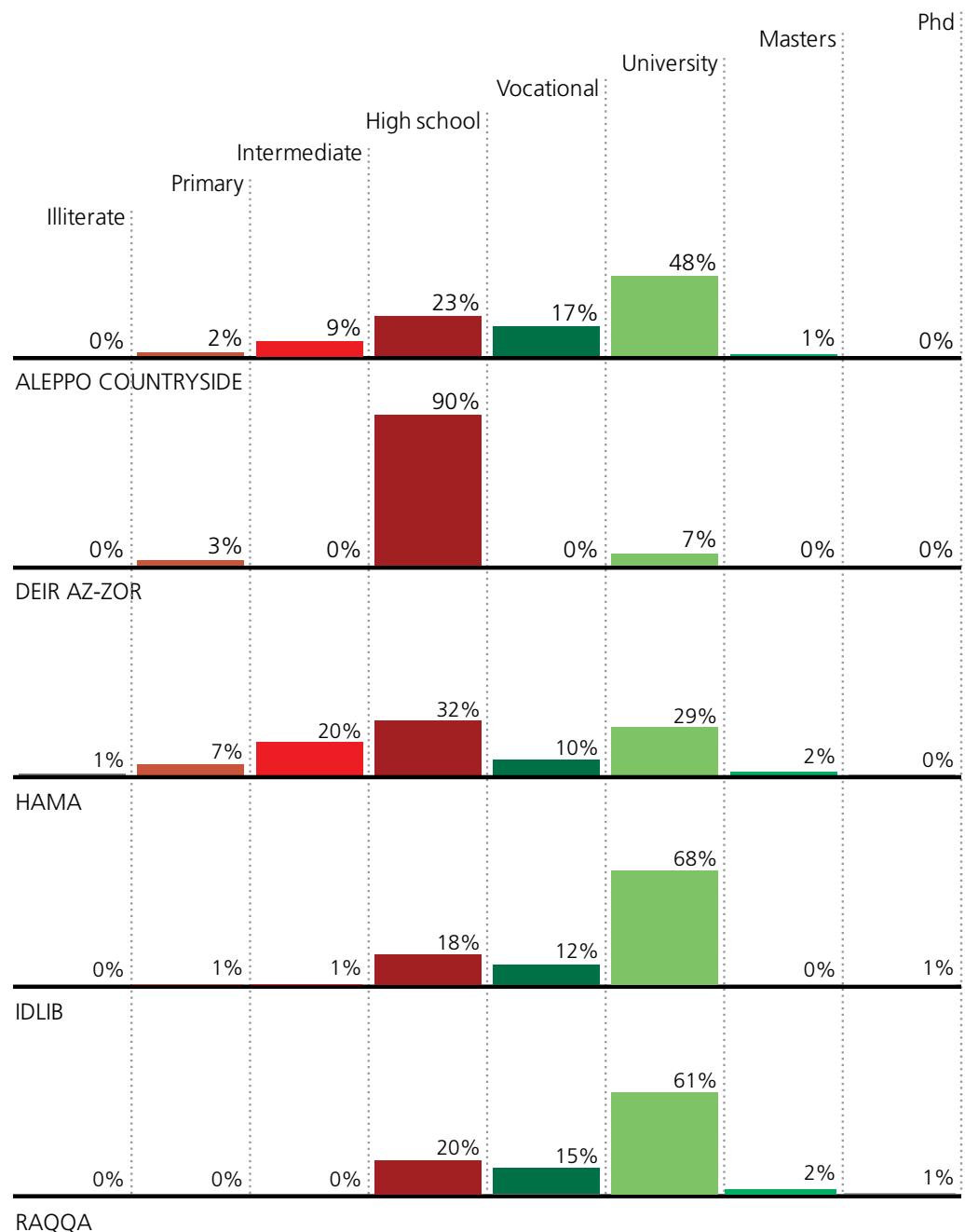
4. Identities and Dynamics of Local Civil Society Groups

Understanding the identity of the CSGs under review is a challenging task as they are emerging within a continually changing context of violence that constantly impacts their dynamics, needs and priorities. Unlike the urban-based civil society groups established prior to the Syrian uprising and described in the introduction, most of which focused on elitist intellectual causes, the newly established CSGs have evolved from and are driven by grass-root communities and operate in response to the needs and priorities imposed by the circumstances of the day. As long as the identity and role of these CSGs are still in the process of taking shape, it is not realistic to advance any comprehensive analysis in this regard. This study therefore focuses on how the CSGs under review perceive and project themselves by examining the names they have given themselves, their political, economic and social orientation, their agency, and their work and role on the ground. It then explores their impact and dynamics.

4.1 Choice of Name

The names chosen by many of the CSGs under review undoubtedly do not fully reflect their identity but they do follow certain trends. These include the common use of self-explanatory names, an explicit reference to unifying structures by including terms such as 'union' or 'assembly', the common use of specific terms and notions such as 'freedom' and 'youth', names that reflect the group's geographical purview, and a correlation between name association (union, party, committee, etc.) and role.

Within the group of CSGs under review, nine named themselves 'assembly', seven 'union' and four 'coalition' or 'team'. The term 'free' occurs in various guises in the names of 16 groups (of which four are women's groups) and 'youth' occurs in the names of 17 groups. Furthermore, excluding the 21 LCs and nine Local Coordination Committees that follow standard naming conventions ('Local Council' or 'Revolutionary Local Council' or 'Local Coordinating Committee

of Area X'), the names of 13 groups include the name of the governorate/city/area they work in. The names of many of the CSGs under review are therefore permutations involving the terms 'union', 'coalition', 'assembly', 'free', 'youth' and 'area X'.

This choice of a self-explanatory name seems to directly reflect how some groups perceive and project themselves, emphasizing the nature of their structure (union, party, local committee, etc.), their affiliation to the revolution and/or their endorsement of 'freedom' as a value, the youthfulness of their membership and voice, and their geographical/regional/sub-regional identity.

Regarding name association, 20 of the CSGs include an element in their name that refers to a unifying structure such as 'union', 'coalition', 'assembly' or 'team'. This may be an indication of a perceived role or the need for unity which features in many of these groups' stated aims. The quest for unity is a reaction to the widespread competition and mistrust that divide civil society activists and hinder their work. The choice of a name that indicates a unifying structure thus incorporates a contradiction but also a desire for a more unified civil society movement.

On closer inspection, name associations are often indicative of a group's aims and role. For instance, most CSGs that name themselves an 'assembly' focus on rebuilding government institutions and redirecting the revolution back to its original values; groups that are 'coordinating committees' have similar goals, but their role is more centred on fostering civil disobedience and calling for the fall of the regime; most groups representing a 'union' are engaged in promoting educational causes as students, youth and teachers' CSGs; most groups with a name that includes the term 'centre' or 'office' are active in the field of human rights, mainly engaging in documentation and advocacy work; and most groups suggesting they are a 'commission' are predominantly active in awareness-raising, apolitical work.[12] Some of the few groups that chose more creative names seem to play more advocacy-related and stronger awareness-related roles than most other CSGs and many of them report having a more secular orientation.

The common use and repeated occurrence of certain

terms associated with freedom and youth seems to be intended to market the notion of young people's ownership of the revolution. Many pro-revolutionaries perceive the uprising as a 'youth revolution' that has finally voiced a demand for change, in stark contrast to an older generation perceived as silent, passive and oppressed. However, an alarming issue here is the increasing use of these terms as tools in the game of language politics to exercise power or establish a blind or enforced legitimacy – a phenomenon already familiar from the Ba'th Party's rhetoric. The term 'union' featured in the name of almost every Ba'th-controlled so-called CSG; examples include the Student Union and the Women's Union. It served to homogenize and subsume all such activities under one very centralized and heavily controlled entity. Interestingly in connection with the term 'union', two different groups now operate under the name of Free Syrian Students' Union. Both organizations see their role as replacing the former Ba'th-controlled Student Union. As the latter never really voiced the concerns of students, these new organizations' choice of the same name and possibly the same venues may well be a reflection of students' keenness to ensure that their voice is finally heard. Ensuring that the Ba'th legacy does not find an outlet through these structures will be a critical challenge.

Finally, the fact that CSGs are increasingly adopting a more regional focus and working to meet the specific needs felt within their region is a comprehensible and unsurprising corollary to the regional dimension of the conflict in Syria given that this conflict has brought in its wake increasing regional disparities, the intensification of regional and sub-regional violence-infused discrimination, increasingly restricted mobility as a result of security constraints, and the politicization of aid plus the associated imposition of internationally fostered decentralization interests. However, a regional focus can also entail the risk of regional divisiveness. One example given by activists to illustrate this point is the fact that a certain international organization has ensured that the five different LCs it is supporting are offered completely different training courses on their institutional management. The outcome, it is claimed, will be that these LCs, which could assume a governance role

in Syria in the absence of a government alternative, are more likely to opt for autonomous rather than coordinated action. Whereas the notion of decentralization is not negative in itself, decentralization in the current situation and in the absence of a superordinate system can serve nothing but divisive purposes.

4.2 Ideological Orientation

When replying to open questions such as "Tell us about your group, its orientation, ideology, etc.", many of the CSGs under review referred to their membership's educational background, several indicated that their members come from religiously and ideologically diverse backgrounds, and some outlined why and how they were established. But the vast majority either highlighted their identity as a "civil" organization or stressed that their goal is to help build a "civil state".

Indeed, if there is any common feature in the way in which CSGs perceive (or portray) themselves, it has to be their ambiguity. A vivid case to illustrate this is that over a third of all the CSGs under review (both secular and Islamic) aspire to a civil state, yet none had a clear or coherent vision and understanding of what this implies. This ambiguity may be a result of a fear of clearly stating their ideological aims due to the presence of ISIS and other armed groups that pose a serious personal and collective threat. On the other hand, as contradictory statements in the questionnaire framed in closed/definitive statements such as "Moderate Islam is the solution" and "Religion should be kept separate from politics" attracted equally high ratings from many CSGs, the explanation for this ambiguity may simply be the lack of a clear identity on the part of most of the CSGs. As pointed out in the foregoing, many are still at an embryonic stage and have yet to acquire a definitive profile.

Despite this lack of clarity, the questions asked do deliver some insightful information on the economic, social, political and religious orientation of the 38 to 48 groups that responded to the questions relating to these issues. The responses are analysed in the following.

[12] These are general observations only; given the small number of CSGs in each case, they cannot be seen as definitive.

4.2.1 Interest in engaging in political activism

The peaceful demonstrations calling for equality, freedom and justice which marked the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria probably rank among the strongest public political events in Syria's modern history. But when they turned violent, the scene was set for the ascendancy of many armed groups fighting for power rather than the demonstrators' aspirations for greater equality, freedom and justice. Today, like the Syrian regime, extremist groups are exerting an oppressive influence on CSGs in the hope of keeping them apolitical and driven by their respective religious/ethnic identities. This would perpetuate the conflict (and consequently the extremist groups' power) while limiting any efforts to hold them accountable for their actions.

When asked to rank to what level they agree with the statement: "We are a non-governmental CSG that works (or may work) in politics", 12 of the 39 groups that responded agreed, ten were unsure and 17 disagreed.

in political activism to wanting to remain neutral in order to ensure that their work is "right"- as they put it. Their activities vary from advocacy for human rights, women's rights, and citizens' rights to humanitarian relief and aid and the monitoring of elections. Interestingly, many of these groups are already active in politics as they struggle to hold those in power accountable for their actions but at the same time they shy away from declaring a political intent.

Most groups which were undecided on whether or not they wanted to work in politics are secular LCs and CSGs. Some attributed their uncertainty to the current situation, how it may change and what implications such changes might have. Others, including most LCs, attributed it to their lack of clear vision in this respect. Still others thought that there might be a need in the future to work to promote democratic rule. Nevertheless, seemingly similar to the case of many groups that reported being "apolitical", underlying the reasons given is a reluctance

Figure 11: CSGs groups' interest in engaging in political action

"We are a non-governmental CSG that works (or may work) in politics."

31%	26%	44%
Agree	Unsure	Disagree
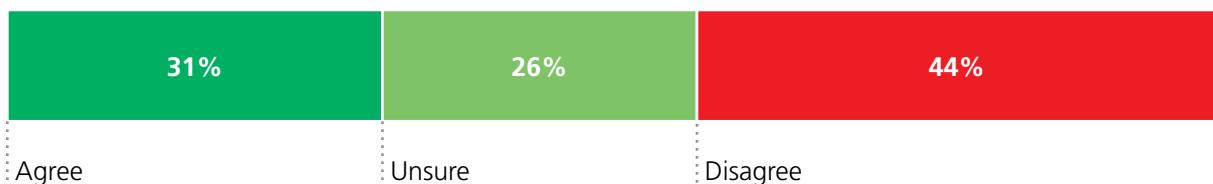
Groups which classified themselves as already active in politics – of which one third were LCs – relate their interest in politics to governance issues: some want to work towards ending centralized governance, others want to participate in governance in general, and still others believe that the situation in Syria may require such civil-society-based political involvement. Whereas three of these groups do not define themselves as being religiously inspired, the majority are Islamic – and some of these are perceived by their own community as being related to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Groups which classified themselves as apolitical – of which only one is an LC and almost equal numbers are Islamic and secular – relate their lack of interest

to announce an interest in working in politics.

In a nutshell, the largest share of the CSGs under review which responded to the question on their political orientation are apolitical or at best undecided. However, given the reasons they cited and their mostly secular or moderate Islamic orientation, it appears that several of these CSGs chose to report being apolitical or not interested in political involvement in order to protect themselves from the governing power, be it the regime or extremist and armed groups which would otherwise suppress any form of civil society or law authority that could hold them to account. This seems to be especially true of some secular groups. As for the

groups which are already active in politics or want to become active in future, governance was clearly the main issue for them. It seems that Islamic groups dominate this arena. This may be attributable to both their better funding and to the fact that extremist and armed groups are less likely to oppose them.

4.2.2 Economic vision

Possibly one of the most important dimensions of the conflict in Syria today is the economic one. It is not only that local, regional and international economies of war are striving to sustain the violence in Syria; equally important are the vested interests aiming to implement radical free-market economic policies that are best promoted in times of crisis or extreme violence when adversaries are so "shocked" by the scale of the challenge that they are ready to accept any economic recipe (KLEIN 2010). The CSGs were therefore asked to rate the following statement: "We dream of a Syria that is based on the values of a free market".

model of governance, a vision of diversifying and speeding up economic development, and a quest to promote equal opportunities while safeguarding local production and ensuring that no abuse or exploitation takes place. Referring to these last two points, groups that are against a free-market economic model see injustices and inequities embedded in the free-market system that they fear would neglect and exploit both the poor –who they said account for the majority of the population– and citizens in general. Other groups reporting that their activism has nothing to do with economic issues gave this question a correspondingly low rating.

It is interesting to note that although the CSG ratings suggest differences in terms of their preferred economic model for Syria, most groups are focused on the notions of equality and development and the need to secure these as a first step in overcoming the rampant poverty in their areas.

Figure 12: Economic outlook of the CSGs under review

"We dream of a Syria that is based on the values of a free market."

36%	49%	15%
Agree	Unsure	Disagree

Of the 39 groups that responded to this question, 14 agreed, 19 were unsure and six disagreed. This indicates that almost half of the groups are unsure about the economic model they would like to see in Syria. Some believe such a decision should be based on the country's need and level of development; some consider that Syria is satisfactory economically; some think that Syria needs to be prepared economically and socially before taking such a step; and others said they did not have enough relevant information to make an informed decision.

The CSGs that support a free-market model associate their choice with a number of factors: the need to end the existing centralized autocratic

4.2.3 Religious orientation

With the expansion of the power of extremist armed groups across Syria, be they foreign jihadist groups or locally recruited fighters, the question of religion and terrorism in the name of religion has become a major concern globally. Much has been written on the military progress of these groups on the ground. More is being written on why these groups have found host communities in many of the areas they have taken under their control. Yet there is only scant analysis of the peaceful CSGs who are able to hold these perpetrators in the name of religion accountable and establish a power base to oppose their tyranny. There is also only limited understanding of these groups'

religious orientation and how it interacts with their politics. The CSGs under review were therefore asked to rank the following two statements: "Moderate Islam is the solution" and "Religion should be separated from politics" (as taken from the Arabic proverb: "Religion is for God and the Nation is for all").

As pointed out earlier, 21 (i.e. 60%) of the 35 groups that responded to both questions ranked these two contradicting statements positively. This ambiguity

this is not necessarily the case. All these groups were formed in 2013, i.e. when ISIS and other extremist groups were taking control of entire cities. Five groups endorsed the statement as a reaction to the extreme Islamism of ISIS in contrast to their support for moderate Islam. On the other hand, many groups agreed with the statement from a religious perspective: five considered that moderate Islam is not opposed to freedom and seven associated their

Figures 13 and 14: Indicators of the CSG's religious orientation

"Moderate Islam is the solution."

76%	24%
Agree	Disagree

"Religion should be separated from politics."

79%	18%	3%
Agree	Unsure	Disagree

may reflect a lack of a clear identity or a fear of hinting at their secular nature as this would jeopardize their future. Replying to open questions on their ideology and background, only very few groups reported having a religious orientation.[13] Six groups clearly identified themselves as secular and only one group clearly identified itself as Islamic. However, analysis on how the groups perceive the role of Islam in politics suggests that around 24 groups are probably secular and 23 are probably Islamic. The orientation of the remaining groups is difficult to assess given the limited amount of information they provided.

An assessment of the responses to each statement individually shows that 28 of the groups that responded consider that "Moderate Islam is the solution" and nine groups disagree with this statement. Although it is easy to assume that the groups endorsing this statement are all Islamic in orientation,

agreement with their identity. Moreover, while some groups interpreted the statement as referring to the community only and not to wider political practice, alarmingly six groups believed that as Muslims form the majority community in Syria, it is self-evident that moderate Islam should be the solution politically.

It was precisely out of fear of the implications of the last statement that many other groups disagreed with or hesitated to endorse the idea of moderate Islam being the solution. Some groups indicated that there is no common understanding of what "moderate Islam" means; many other activists believe that the

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[13] This research focused on the CSGs' religious vision and its interaction with politics; it does not refer to the personal religious choices of the group members where these are not part of the CSG's general policy.

notion's vagueness may be an invitation to exploitation and tyranny. Other groups simply believe that religion should not be mixed with politics, and a minority of these suggest that there is no problem having technocrats take the political lead though leadership by technocrats is not necessarily the better option.

Regarding the statement that religion should be kept separate from politics, which is a complete contradiction of the first statement, 30 of the 38 groups that responded agreed, seven were unsure and one strongly disagreed. Those which agreed referred to a need to respect the existence of other sects and religions in Syria, the importance of including everyone in efforts to rebuild the country, and the importance of acknowledging that religiosity is not the criterion for governance. On the other hand, those which were undecided or disagreed suggested that this is a controversial issue on which the people should decide. That said, no clear understanding emerged with regard to the religious orientation of the CSGs under review.

4.2.4 Democratic and citizenship values

The conflict raging in Syria today is partly ideological. However, definitions of the notions of democracy, equality, freedom, citizenship and justice differ, varying not only between CSGs and the extremist armed groups who clearly oppose all such notions, but also between CSGs and LCs, between CSGs and armed groups, between CSGs and local communities, between CSGs and religious courts, between CSGs groups themselves and even among the membership of individual CSGs.

This study therefore attempted to understand the democratic and citizenship values endorsed by the CSGs under review by asking the groups to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements:

■ "We want Syria a democratic country run by institutions."

■ "We believe in a diversity-oriented Syria where all its citizens – females and males – have equal rights and responsibilities."

■ "We believe in equality between men and women."

The responses were very positive. All groups but one endorsed democracy, almost all endorsed equality between men and women (one exception), and equally almost all endorsed diversity and citizenship (again one exception). However, the work of activists and Badael trainers on the ground seems to suggest a different picture. All groups were in favour of these notions, but they defined them differently and in accordance with one of the following predominant lines of thought:

International conventions

The international human rights declaration and other relevant international conventions and documents that protect citizens' rights without discrimination based on sex, religion, colour, ethnicity and/ or any other national, social or political affiliation

This line of thinking is more common among groups that project a secular group identity, among groups working on human/women's rights, and among pressure groups engaged in the fields of conflict resolution, peace promotion and advocacy against the tyranny of both the regime and extremist armed groups.

Islamic shari'a

The Islamic shari'a system that calls for a democracy tailored to the specificities of the Syrian context

This line of thought holds that decisions and elections are not matters for everyone but rather for a specific section of society, e.g. community leaders, the more educated, the intellectual elite. It is common among groups that assume a "moderate Islamic" identity, that do not believe in keeping religion separate from politics, that consider Syrian society to be not ready for democracy and that perceive the international understanding of these notions to be a western idea which is alien to Syrian culture. Many LCs follow this line of thinking in their restrictive policy on voting rights for community leaders and representatives of revolutionary groups.

A combination of both

A view of Islam that, while not opposed to democracy and freedom, projects it as a system that has created mechanisms to promote and protect citizens' rights and obligations

The manner in which CSGs define and act on their notions of democracy, freedom, equality and justice varies and ambiguity prevails, not only among CSGs but also within the membership of individual CSGs. Most of the CSGs under review were found to follow this line of thinking and reflect its ambiguity in their own structures (degree of democracy, female participation, diversity and freedom), often owing to inadequate understanding and a fear of being persecuted by armed groups to whom these notions are anathema. Others simply believe in these notions but find them still wanting in their present form. For example, whereas most groups endorse the importance of freedom, many argue that individuals should not be given freedoms at the expense of society and government as is the case in the West.

Extremism

The extremist Islamic system that equates the notions of democracy, freedom, equality and justice with infidelity (*kefr*) and treason against God, and promotes authoritarianism with a view to sustaining its power via an extremist religious discourse

None of the CSGs under review follows this line of thinking, not least because it makes no provision for CSGs except charities or institutions under extremist control and preaching an extremist discourse.

Many armed groups have assumed power in Syria lately and to some, building up a Syrian state based on the rule of law would mean being held to account for their actions and returning to previous livelihoods

that are unlikely to equal their present existence in terms of authority, income and power. It is therefore not surprising that these armed groups, extremist or not, are seeking to consolidate their power by suppressing any meaningful form of freedom, democracy and citizenship with a violently framed discourse against such notions. Many CSGs therefore see themselves as having three options: to suffer persecution from armed groups, to act on these notions in secret, or to shy away from them altogether.

That said, the violent oppression of CSGs by armed groups is not the only obstacle to the advancement of democracy, citizenship, gender equality and freedom. Equally important is the inadequate understanding of what these notions really stand for. Another crucial issue is the shortage of capabilities, tools and mechanisms for acting on them or developing them further. The latter is not problematic as long as the focus remains on human rights and choice. Democracy is a particular case in point: although endorsed by many of the CSGs under review as the best system available, a large number of them pointed out that it is not without flaws and needs improvement.

4.3 Dynamics

4.3.1 Funding resources

"CSGs speak the language of their funders" is a perception commonly held by activists on the ground. Whereas this may be true of sponsored CSGs promoting a heavily ideological/religious dis-

Figure 15: Support received by CSGs
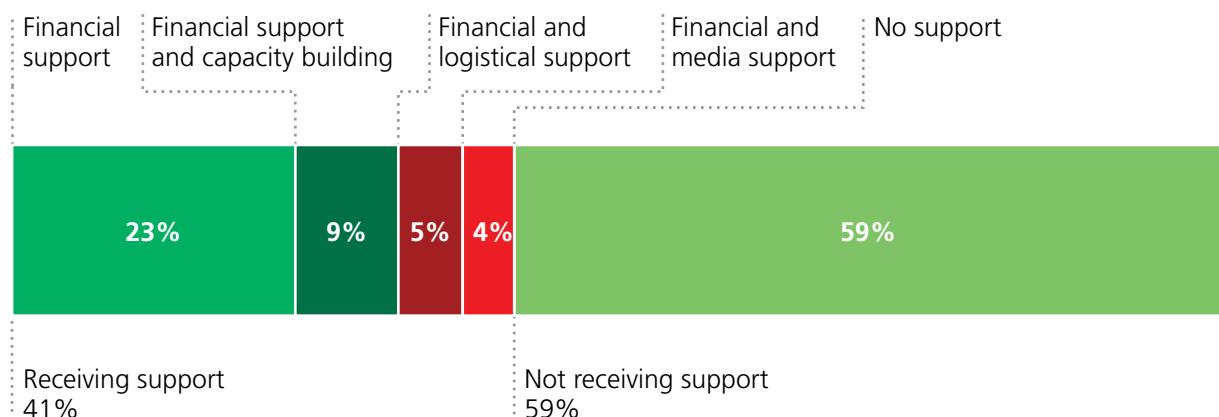
course and also of some politicized or economically-motivated LCs, it is not necessarily a generalized phenomenon. In order to understand the agency of CSGs, this study analyses how many CSGs receive support, the nature and source of such support, and which categories of CSGs receive it.

Although it can be assumed that the responses provided by many groups may be inaccurate given the sensitivity of this issue, this research assesses the responses as submitted. Thirty-nine (41%) of the 94 CSGs under review stated that they receive financial support. In addition to this financial support, which most described as minimal, eight of these groups indicated that they receive training and capacity-building support, five indicated that they receive logistical support and four indicated that they receive media support. This suggests that the remaining 59% of the CSGs under review receive no form of support whatsoever (see Figure 15).

Analysis of the CSGs that have managed to obtain some kind of support reveals that 12 have an Islamic leaning; these are based in Aleppo (two CSGs), Raqqa (two CSGs), Idlib (six CSGs), Hama (one CSG) and Deir az-Zor (one CSG). Seven of the CSGs in receipt of funding have a more secular leaning; these are based in Raqqa (three CSGs) and Aleppo (three CSGs) and the remaining group in this category is operating in multiple areas. The religious/ideological orientation of the remaining CSGs which receive funding is unknown.

Very few CSGs responded to the question on the identity of their funders, and most of those that did gave only a general indication suggesting local or international organizations. Many reported receiving remittances from individuals originally from their area or governorate who are now living abroad. Activists from discussion groups mentioned Saudi Arabia and Europe as being sources of remittances, while Sweida, Idlib and the Kurdish areas in Aleppo northern countryside were cited in the questionnaires as being remittance destinations. Clearly, the list of source and destination countries or areas is longer than suggested by the responses but the specifics remain concealed under the blanket term 'local funding'. Four CSGs reported having received funds from LCCs, Syrian businessmen and Syrian women's

NGOs. Apart from that, the only specific funder identified was the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SNC), which was cited by nine groups –all of which stated that the amounts received are merely nominal and insufficient to cover even a small fraction of their needs.

An interesting finding is that more than a fourth of the 39 groups that responded (11) depend on mobilizing their own resources, be it from membership fees, from microfinance activities (e.g. bakeries), from renting out assets or from border levies.[14] In the case of LCs, those that mobilize their own resources whenever feasible seem to be more successful and progressive as they are thereby more independent. In fact, some have started rebuilding their own state institutions. However, they face fierce resistance from extremist armed groups, whose main interest is proving to be confined to governing these areas rather than supporting or re-building them. As for the CSGs in this category, it is alarming to see that although some of them are among the strongest, they are being left unaided to survive under conditions of widespread extremism.

In general, it is acknowledged that funding sources represent an inaccurate measure for assessing the agency of CSGs. However, as only three of the CSGs under review are legally registered (two in Turkey and one in France) and a further three report that they are registered in Syria (one by the LC of the Aleppo governorate, one in Aleppo and one in Raqqa),[15] funding, together with constituency and identity, is the only remaining means of assessing a CSG's agency. Whereas it was seen in the foregoing that no unambiguous conclusions could be drawn from an analysis of constituency and identity, the funding issue allows for three important observations to be made:

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[14] The latter income source refers particularly to LCs located in border areas.

[15] As many CSGs were discouraged and/or banned from being registered in Syria prior to the uprising, it is very unusual to find a registered Syrian CSG active in the non-government-controlled areas. Given that these CSGs were established after the uprising, it is unlikely that they are government-registered; they may be registered with other entities.

■ Funding remains a very sensitive and delicate issue in the non-government-controlled areas. Strict secrecy is maintained in this regard, possibly for one or more of three prominent reasons: fear of losing constituency (agency is especially important in terms of religion and ideology, and gossip plays a strong role in gaining or losing constituency); fear of seeing support re-directed elsewhere; and respect for the donor's interest in remaining anonymous. Many other possible explanations exist, for instance simply a reluctance to provide such information. But an important, over-arching issue here is that while donors need to address this topic sensitively and in accordance with the recipients' preferences, they also need to ensure that transparency is a value that CSGs will embrace.

■ Funding may well be insufficient, but often the bigger problem is the ineffective, inefficient and unsustainable manner in which it is granted and spent. The amount of aid that the UN and international NGOs have raised and spent on Syria is one of the largest in modern history (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2013), but even this has not translated into a clear impact on the ground. Possibly, the crisis in Syria is an opportunity for the international community to re-think the matter of the aid and support it should provide to conflict-stricken countries as part of its basic human rights obligations. Typifying this problem of money wasted is perhaps the large amount of inflexible funding being spent on international staff who, far removed from the realities on the ground, design and push forward projects that are not necessarily needed by local CSGs and are moreover implemented in the easiest manner possible, usually outside Syria. While the international community has been trying to help Syrian CSGs to create networks, there is also an urgent need for international NGOs to ensure better coordination and efficiency in their own dealings with local CSGs. In addition, the issue of the sustainability of aid and its politicization remains a key challenge. The scale of the crisis in Syria demands a change in perspective and focus towards supporting livelihoods rather than providing food and other immediate relief. The latter strategy is creating total dependency and limiting the options not only of Syrian communities but also of CSGs which, to countervail the extremist constituency created by this context, are being compelled to divert their focus to humanitarian aid at the expense of promoting individual choice and freedom. It is therefore hardly surprising that extremism is on the rise.

■ Support is not necessarily financial. Indeed, a more sustainable form of support is that invested in human resources. A few NGOs have opted for this approach by providing capacity-building and technical support. However, as the responses to the questionnaires show, non-financial support remains limited in both scale and scope: only 19 groups indicated that they have received such support. Moreover, most of the capacity-building support received has been in the form of short training programmes intended as an introduction to specific topics (documentation, transitional justice, peace-building, project management, human rights, women's rights, conflict resolution, etc.) rather than in a form that could build up a robust body of technical expertise in any specific field. Furthermore, hardly any organization has provided institution-building support for local CSGs beyond offering two or three rounds of one-week training sessions. The result is highly motivated CSGs that have only limited capabilities in terms of strategic project organization and, more importantly, applying for funding within a context of adhering to the strict monitoring, evaluation and reporting procedures that enhance their likelihood of success.

4.3.2 Roles and relationships on the ground

With its focus on CSGs in non-government-controlled areas of Syria whose work is not centred predominantly on providing humanitarian aid, this study has tried to understand how these CSGs categorize their work, what role they actually play and aim to play, and the nature of their dynamics.

CSGs' perception of their work

One section of the questionnaire requested CSGs to categorize their work in terms of development, awareness-raising, rights-based and humanitarian aid / relief services. The replies from the 58 CSGs that responded to this section seem to indicate a number of major trends (see Figure 16).

■ A focus on awareness-raising: 88% of the groups perceive part or all of their work to be related to awareness-raising, citing initiatives and projects covering a broad range of topics. Many groups perceive their work as promoting human rights (and documentation of right abuses), peace-building, transitional justice, state-building (via a focus on rebuilding the country's institutions), freedom, democracy, equality, human dignity, civil disobedience (as a peaceful means of resisting tyranny), education, resource mobilization and economically productive projects (to foster economic independence), first aid and medical support, citizenship, and conflict management. A few groups also reported a specific focus on promoting issues related to elections, law, media, volunteerism, safety procedures, women's rights, women's economics, social and political participation and the curtailment of the random proliferation of weapons ownership.

■ A strong involvement in relief work: Although relief work is not explicitly listed in their mission statements, 17 CSGs (29%) are engaged in relief work in addition to pursuing activities that support their original mission. Ten of these groups are LCs. The others are rights-based, developmental, or awareness-raising organizations that together offer a wide range of services providing, inter alia, food and shelter for displaced persons and communities in general, medical and life-saving aid, care for orphaned children, children's edutainment, and support for shelter and infrastructure reconstruction.

■ Assumption of multiple roles/functions: 72% of the groups were found to be simultaneously active in more than one role. Disregarding the five groups which are engaged exclusively in developmental and/or rights-based activities, all of these groups are involved either in an awareness-raising or a service-providing role, or in both roles together (see Figure 16). Interestingly, a relatively large percentage (12%) of the groups perceive themselves as assuming all four functions mentioned above simultaneously.

These findings possibly indicate two key needs that are currently determining the priorities and roles of Syrian CSGs, namely social protection services to alleviate the dire humanitarian need situation and awareness-raising on issues that are vital for Syrian communities' survival and the country's transition to a productive, human-centred and development-oriented state. Although this change in CSGs' roles and priorities is crucial at the moment for humanitarian reasons, it does pose several threats. One is that CSGs could become de-politicized and de-strategized if their original cause is totally supplanted by humanitarian work and the various other roles they are assuming simultaneously. Another is that humanitarian aid itself could become politicized in line with the various CSGs' agendas (and more importantly their donors' agendas), with the effect of enhancing the legitimacy and power of financially stronger CSGs at the expense of those which are defending and promoting human-centred developmental values but have virtually no financial resources.

CSGs' visions and goals versus their actual impact on the ground

The visions and goals of the CSGs under review differ, and so, too, do their activities. The strongest focus of many CSGs is on promoting the values of justice, equality, freedom, democracy, dignity and, in some cases, citizenship; on filling the gap created by the absence of functioning governmental institutions and, to a lesser extent, rebuilding such institutions; or on continuing the peaceful civil disobedience campaigns demanding the fall of the regime – though in the case of several groups this demand has widened to include the fall of any tyranny opposing human rights and freedom of expression.

The evolution of CSGs in Syria since the pre-2011 period is indeed astonishing. Whereas most civil society associations used to focus on providing charity and humanitarian aid or fostering business-related skills, today the scope and roles of CSGs are much broader. The visions, goals and activities of the CSGs under review cover health; education; medical and life-saving aid; peaceful civil disobedience; youth and women's political, social and economic empowerment; citizenship; election monitoring; the environment; humanitarian and relief aid; social protection services; student issues; legal issues; law enforcement; conflict resolution; peace-building; human development; psychosocial support; state-building; institutional capacity-building; social and economic development;

Figure 16: CSGs' categorization of their role(s)

	4 Roles	3 Roles			2 Roles				1 Role			

Rights-based
Developmental
Awareness
Services

| 7 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 2 | 9 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 11 | 2 |

| 7 groups | 16 groups | 17 groups | 18 groups |
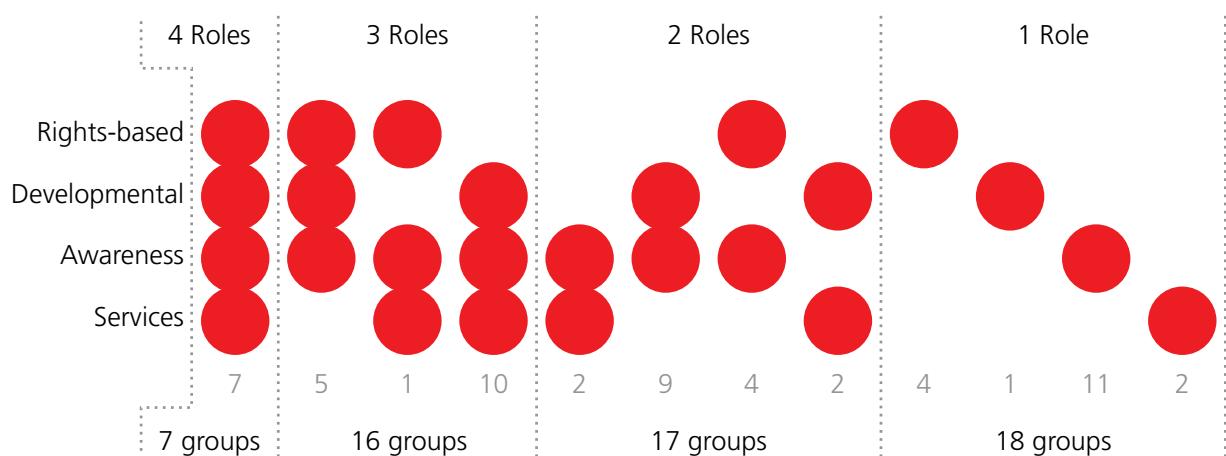
justice; equality; democracy and many other issues.

The CSGs' visions and goals may not be eloquently expressed by international standards, but in many cases these visions and goals are clearly focused and creatively pursued. This is illustrated by examples of goals and achievements of two selected CSGs (see Figure 17).

However, in many other cases there seems to be a shortfall between visions and goals on the one hand and what the respective CSG has achieved on the other. While such a shortfall may indicate an inability to plan and develop a robust strategy, it can also be attributed to humanitarian needs, security issues and a lack of funding, factors that have caused many CSGs to move away from their original mission.

From the responses provided, it seems that CSGs with aims rather generally phrased around the pursuit of key values such as justice, equality, freedom and democracy are particularly likely to lack the focus and robust strategy that would enable them to make a real impact on the ground. Another segment of CSGs where the correlation between goals and achievements is poor are LCs. With only few exceptions, LCs are making little effort to restructure and re-establish the state institutions that they require to carry out their governance work. In many cases this lack of action can be attributed to the difficult security situation and a dire lack of resources. Nonetheless, LCs are working hard on providing relief

and humanitarian aid, reconstructing local infrastructure, promoting conflict resolution, limiting the random spread of weapons, organizing community life, implementing economically productive and sustainable projects, and promoting education. Their work in these areas is acknowledged and appreciated.

The key recommendation here has to be that donors and the international community should support institutional capacity-building and strengthen the ability of local CSGs and LCs to plan strategically and sustainably. Such support should be tailored to enhance the accountability, transparency and ownership of the CSGs concerned and encourage them to network with each other in order to benefit from greater solidarity and a stronger voice and thus to make a more forceful impact on the ground.

4.3.3 Relationships with other stakeholders

CSGs' ability to perform their roles and functions effectively is strongly influenced by the dynamics created with other stakeholders: the local community, activists on the ground, other CSGs, the FSA, extremist armed groups, religious courts, civil courts, local community leaders – to name but the major stakeholders in this context. The CSGs under review were therefore asked to identify these stakeholders and assess their influence on them. Overall findings indicate a generally positive relationship with other CSGs,

the local community and activists on the ground; a more ambiguous relationship with LCs and the FSA, ranging between negative and positive depending on the area/governorate concerned; and a very negative role for extremist armed groups. Civil courts are currently non-existent and many have been replaced by religious courts whose role is highly controversial. The situation in each governorate is examined below.

Raqqa

Activists and local CSGs were seen to play a very constructive role in Raqqa. LCs were likewise perceived as playing a positive role generally, though some were criticized for lacking the capacity to make a genuine impact. The role of the FSA was highly ambiguous, with over half of the groups expressing a neutral attitude towards it and the rest perceiving its role as negative. Armed religious groups and religious courts were severely criticized for their destructiveness and negative impact. CSGs cited ISIS and other extremist groups, despite a major fear of jeopardizing their personal and the group's security for doing so. Some groups cited other CSGs as having a negative impact on civil society work.

Figure 17: Samples of the plans and achievements of the CSGs under review:

GROUP A

Goal / vision:	A home country that protects the dignity of the individual and allows each person to participate in its construction through elections and competence-based competition.
Objectives:	(1) Monitoring elections, (2) Enshrining the notion of programmes / institutions
Achievements:	Carried out field research to determine the realities faced by the local community; provided psychological support for children; erected a mourning tent as a response to field executions; organized pressure groups during demonstrations; pressured the community to ensure it has a legitimate LC.
Future plans:	Fostering advocacy and pressure groups to reactivate government institutions, monitor armed groups and LCs, and ensure that these are held to account.

GROUP B

Goal / vision:	To promote awareness of and respect for human rights
Objectives:	To defend freedom of speech and expression; to support a culture of dialogue and respect for others; to establish the principles of equality, citizenship, peaceful coexistence, tolerance and non-discrimination; to revive the values of reconciliation while ensuring transitional justice is administered to promote a society based on peace, justice and democracy.
Achievements:	Organized an awareness campaign on children's rights – as an entry point for human rights; led a campaign to maintain the city's cultural centre in order to highlight the importance of preserving all public institutions
Future plans:	Implementing projects to support human rights and to document and raise awareness on the destruction of public and private buildings and specifically the local cultural heritage. Creating pressure groups to hold perpetrators to account.

Deir az-Zor

The CSGs under review in Deir az-Zor agreed on only one point here, namely the positive role of CSGs and activists. The vast majority rated the role of the local community as positive, while one group perceived it as negative due to the potency of tradition. LCs were seen by the majority of groups as playing a supportive role by providing social protection services and infrastructure, though they were criticized for their weak management capacities. On the other hand, a minority of groups saw LCs as supporting only their own projects, being controlled by their donors and lacking the features that would properly institutionalize them.

The role of the FSA was perceived as neutral to negative by half of the CSGs, the reason cited being the limited support it provided. In contrast, its role in providing logistical support to CSGs was rated as positive. As for the Islamic armed groups, while the majority of CSGs rated their role as neutral to negative, three groups perceived it as positive because of the support received from the religion-preaching "Daawi" groups. Similar considerations governed the thinking of the half of the CSGs that gave the religious courts a positive rating. The other half had a neutral attitude towards the religious courts despite criticizing them for tribal biases and emphasizing that civil courts played a more positive role as long as they were functioning.

Aleppo

The CSGs under review in Aleppo and its rural areas also rated the role of activists and other CSGs as supportive; some groups in Aleppo eastern countryside indicated that their communities take great pride in them. LCs were rated as neutral to negative by a quarter of the groups, with reference being made to armed groups having hijacked LCs in certain areas, replacing staff with their own people and trying to control aid and resources. The role of LCs in other areas of the governorate was perceived as positive by most groups owing to the support LCs provide in terms of mainly humanitarian aid and infrastructure reconstruction.

The role of the FSA is highly controversial in Aleppo. While some groups perceived the FSA as interfering in and trying to control their work, others gave it a positive rating for facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to them. A more homogenous assessment was forthcoming with regard to the role of religious courts, which the overwhelming majority of groups rated as negative because these courts are perceived as fighting democracy and fostering corruption in the name of religion. This is especially significant as civil courts are virtually non-existent and are in any case much less powerful in areas under the control of extremists groups and ISIS.

Some CSGs in Aleppo also specified other supportive and non-supportive stakeholders. Those rated as supportive include the Aleppo governorate council, the Free Lawyers Association, charities, the Civil Syrian Council, the Army Council, the Revolutionary Council, relief groups and local leaders. Those rated as non-supportive include ISIS, other armed groups, religious bodies and extremist armed groups.

Idlib

A handful of CSGs in Idlib governorate were the first to break the mould by perceiving the community as unsupportive, offering only moral support that is never translated into action on the ground. The majority of CSGs, however, rated the community's role as cooperative. Similarly split views were forthcoming regarding the role of activists and other CSGs: two LCs rated their role as neutral to negative, but the vast majority of the groups considered it positive in terms of improving coordination.

As in other governorates, the role of both LCs and the FSA was controversial. Whereas some groups regarded LCs as useless or concerned only with competing for resources, others saw them as supportive because of the aid and social protection services they provide. Regarding the role of the FSA, some rated it as negative for competing for control and power, while others credited the FSA with providing protection to them and to public institutions and also solving problems and conflicts within society. The FSA was seen to be more supportive when activists are among its ranks.

As for extremist armed groups, almost a third of the CSGs in Idlib seemed to fear expressing a view as they rated their role as neutral. Others pointed out that these groups are very hostile to any civil society work and are specifically preventing all CSG activity

relating to democracy and freedom. This split was also evident regarding the role of religious courts: whereas some groups rated their role as negative, many groups rated it as supportive owing to the fact that civil courts no longer exist in many areas.

Other CSGs were reported as playing a supportive role, and so too were the LCCs and other national and international relief organizations. In contrast, stakeholders identified as unsupportive included ISIS and other armed groups that are benefiting from the war economy such as gangsters and armed criminals.

Hama

The community, activists, LCs, coordination committees and the students' union were all rated as playing a very supportive role by the four CSGs under review in Hama. Civil courts were also seen as supportive to the extent that they exist. Again, the role of the FSA was highly controversial, with one half of the CSGs rating it as neutral and the other half rating it as positive by virtue of the protection the FSA offers. Armed groups benefiting from the war economy (ransom, theft, smuggling, etc.) were rated as playing a very destructive role. Similarly severe criticism was forthcoming for extremists and extremist armed groups; although these were generally perceived as dangerous and unsupportive, the majority of the groups refrained from naming them.

5. Local Civil Society Groups: Challenges, Opportunities and Needs

Following the analysis of the dynamics that govern the work of the CSGs under review, it is worthwhile examining the challenges they face, their needs and the key resources they can depend on and mobilize in their efforts to contribute to Syria's development. The key findings reached by the study in this regard are set out below.

5.1 Challenges

Having evolved from a very hostile authoritarian context and expanded under conditions imposed by a violent proxy war, the newly emergent civil society in Syria deserves credit for its persistence in tackling the internal and external challenges it is facing. When questioned about the general and specific challenges they face, the CSGs under review (backed up by secondary data) highlighted a number of key challenges:

5.1.1 The situation in Syria

Disintegration of political authority and interference in public life by extremist groups

The fragmentation and disintegration of political authority in Syria, coupled with the destruction of state institutions that formerly provided social protection services, has given rise to a plethora of new structures. Various groups supported by international funding, some of them belonging to international jihadist and extremist religious movements, have created and expanded their own political-military structures and transnational networks. These groups share a non-national dependency and a separatist non-tolerance that, as many of the CSGs under review have experienced, serves to prolong violence and weaken and oppress any form of civil society activism.

An example to illustrate this is the way such extremist groups have manipulated the legal system in Aleppo by creating their own courts and prisons to maintain control over civilian and military affairs while supporting local courts which are resisting being integrated into the unitary judiciary system. Given the inadequacy of LCs in imposing and expanding their authority, extremist groups have been able to deploy their ample resources in order to acquire more power and legitimacy on the ground. Today such groups have their own institutions for supporting their non-national agendas and consolidating their pre-state identity: their own army, courts, charities, health centres, and schools that teach the curriculum they have imposed on the host community (KHALAF 2013, BACZKO/DORRONSO/QUESNAY 2013).

Post-liberation, activists had a brief taste of freedom: no more fear of being arrested for walking the streets with a camera, freedom to organize events, the possibility of demonstrating every Friday without fear of regime interference or being shot by regime troops. The fear returned when ISIS took control and started kidnapping activists and arresting and executing FSA leaders. ISIS is now targeting not only activists but anyone who might have a project in mind. ISIS even began to control relief work and set up its own structures for providing aid and assistance.

After the so-called 'second revolution' – the effort by civil and military forces to expel ISIS from the country – the situation on the ground changed quickly. Aleppo's western countryside, where the resistance to ISIS had started, was liberated while Aleppo's eastern countryside, fell under the control of ISIS after only a few days of resistance by the FSA. Since then the majority of activists who worked for CSGs in those areas have fled to Turkey. The same applies to those working in Raqqa, which was re-taken by ISIS. Subsequently, the city of Raqqa was declared capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria. Civil society activities in all the above areas have almost entirely ceased to exist and activists are now either working clandestinely as they used to do under the Assad regime or have fled the country.

However, extremist armed groups are not the only structures opposing the state-building efforts of local civil society. As explained in the section on stakeholder dynamics, some armed groups and LCs, in their struggle for more power, represent a serious challenge to CSGs, their oppres-

sive measures sometimes extending to denying CSGs resources or even detaining their activists.

Insecurity and violence

Grave violations of human rights are being committed every day in Syria. These include murder, summary execution, arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, the taking and execution of hostages, enforced disappearances, pillage, attacks on protected objects, and the destruction of private and public property (Khalaf 2013, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2013). Services and infrastructure such as schools, universities and hospitals have been damaged, destroyed or used as war tools and instruments of oppression (Khalaf 2013). Resources have been diverted from productive to destructive purposes and the already dire economic situation has been exacerbated by a war economy driven by criminality, rent-seeking, lawlessness and terror. The emergent CSGs have been left to struggle for survival under these conditions while at the same time trying to improve the situation around them and hold the perpetrators to account.

Dire economic and humanitarian situation

Described as having descended into a state of de-industrialization and de-capitalization, Syria is estimated to have sustained economic losses amounting to USD 103.1 billion by the first half of 2014, i.e. 174% of Syria's GDP in 2010 in constant prices (The Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2013a, 2013b). This economic contraction, together with high inflation, limited sources of livelihoods, job losses, a decline in real income, the deterioration of the education system (with almost half of school-age children not at school), a health crisis (with widespread mortality, morbidity, injury, disability, and chronic and communicable disease) and a dwindling supply of goods and services, meant that 9.3 million Syrians were in need of protection by November 2013 (Khalaf 2013, The Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2013a, 2013b). Likewise affected by this dire economic situation are CSG members themselves, who are each having to find ways of sustaining their livelihoods, and the CSGs as groups as ever more of their resources are having to be diverted to

carrying out urgently needed humanitarian work.

Given the shortage of basic necessities in Syria today (food, medications, electricity, water, etc.), civil society groups are now also facing a serious problem of acceptance. Many CSGs have therefore opted to focus on relief work and abandon their original civil mission while others, such as those which were interviewed for this study, struggle to strike a balance between their relief work and their civil work in order to gain the trust of the local community. No organization can gain this trust without carrying out at least some relief work. In the eyes of local communities, civil work has low priority when people are hungry and desperate to sustain their livelihoods.

Displacement and dislocation of entire communities

The violence and destruction that Syria continues to experience have caused dramatic demographic shifts. Between 2010 and mid-2013, the population growth rate is estimated to have fallen from 2.45% to -5.9% (The Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2013a). The population distribution has also changed, with at least 6.5 million Syrians having relocated or been internally displaced and 1.73 million Syrians having sought refuge abroad (Khalaf 2013, The Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2013a). A number of villages and urban districts resembled ghost towns by November 2013. Deprived of livelihood sources and basic services, many key players in CSGs have likewise been compelled to leave their homes for destinations inside or outside Syria. A brain-drain is the disturbing result.

5.1.2 Internal challenges

Lack of experience and skills

Most activists working in the recently emerged CSGs in Syria had no involvement in civil society work prior to March 2011 and thus lack experience and skills in institution building and management. Moreover, the Syrian public education system failed to provide them with foreign language skills and key soft skills such as planning, management, decision-making, communication, negotiation, etc. They therefore have neither the skills nor the channels required for communicating with foreign donors, let alone the skills needed

to draft proposals and write reports to the required minimum international standard. Their general lack of experience and skills has moreover also hampered them in their efforts to manage and run their own CSGs. This is especially true of LCs which, due to the centralized governance and institutional bottlenecks associated with and fostered by the Assad regime, generally have no knowledge of or experience in local governance, let alone governance in such a complex context. The general lack of experience and skills has been exacerbated by a brain-drain to other countries/areas motivated by a quest for better life opportunities.

Moreover, this lack of experience is magnified by a lack of focus on one main set of actions and strategy. Since the beginning of the uprising activists have been involved in too many causes simultaneously. At the time when the uprising started, peacefully, activists who were involved in acts of non-violent resistance were also busy organizing demonstrations, supplying field hospitals and smuggling medicines to areas under shelling. There was no specialization or a focus on just one or two tasks. When the CSGs were established, this anomaly continued in a different form: many activists are simultaneously members of at least three civil society groups which may even be pursuing different objectives.

Limited financial, logistic and technical resources

Given their operating context of a shrinking economy and the large-scale destruction of property, infrastructure and sources of livelihood, only few of the CSGs under review are managing to mobilize their own resources. However, even those which can rely on remittances and limited funds from the National Coalition and the international community usually find their financial resources insufficient in view of the scale and cost of the work awaiting them. Moreover, with social protection services such as electricity and communication channels being used as war tools, many groups are unable to communicate or work efficiently. Key resources needed by the CSGs under review include broadband connection, computers, phones and office space. Inconveniently, only few donors offer such in-kind donations that are so urgently needed by CSGs working in the non-government-controlled areas of Syria.

War of ideologies

Exploiting the widespread lack of awareness and, at best, confusion regarding key notions such as democracy, freedom, citizenship, and secularism, many extremist and otherwise opportunistic groups have been able to project their own definitions of these notions or reject them outright as a means of advancing their agendas and enhancing their power and legitimacy. Religion has been the tool used in this pursuit. With CSGs receiving only limited support from secular institutions, the scene was set for religious institutions to acquire greater power and legitimacy on the ground.

Ignorance and lack of social cohesion

Violence and injustice, fuelled by pre-state affiliations, intolerance, ignorance and fear of change, have damaged social solidarity, undermined human values and deepened the fissures within Syrian society. Faced with increasing violence and no formalized protection, many people have reverted to seeking support from informal traditional institutions such as the family, clan, region, ethnicity and religious affiliation. Exploiting this context, and aided by a war economy, social media and foreign intervention; extremist groups have politicized the dire humanitarian situation to advance their own control and legitimacy agendas. Extremist groups have abused these affiliations to arm civilians and justify their denial of human rights to the "other", whether that "other" be women, children, young adults or civil society as a whole (Khalaf 2013, The Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2013a).

Inadequacies in terms of cooperation and networking

Inadequate communication and networking among CSGs in Syria – including among those pursuing similar goals – weakens their voice and saps their power. Two possible explanations for these inadequacies are competition for funds and other resources and the need, for security reasons, to work clandestinely. Other critical issues hindering cooperation and networking among Syrian CSGs are the lack of mutual trust and a culture of competition rather than teamwork.

Intellectual fragmentation

Syrians retell how the population has spent over four

decades without discussing political or social issues. In a way, as many activists put it, they did not know each other before the uprising. With the uprising, a space was created within which people could get to know about others. As they communicated and socialized, Syrians were exposed to different ideological views. However, the resulting intellectual and ideological fragmentation among group members has sometimes led to disagreement and even conflict about the philosophy, ideology, objectives and strategies underlying the group's work. This in turn meant that more time was spent on resolving internal conflicts than on the group's real mission. In some cases such fragmentation has caused the organization to collapse or individual members to defect and create new organizations. This anomaly again underscores the need to establish robust institutional structures.

Mistrust

After the Syrian uprising, and particularly after mid-2012 as the level of militarization increased, a wave of mistrust spread across Syrian society engulfing all in its path, including armed groups, political bodies, CSGs, and revolutionary bodies. This phenomenon is clearly a result of the current war, but its roots can be traced back to the dictatorship of the Assad regime which used it, over four decades, as a method of spreading fear. A common saying went: "Out of every three Syrians, one is working for the intelligence", another was "The walls have ears". These sayings indicate how much people used to fear each other, knowing that expressing any criticism of the political system could mean spending the rest of their life in prison.

In the absence of an established civil society culture, the newly established CSGs risk engaging in a kind of negative competition where mistrust and claims of treason replace coordination and cooperation. The absence of a civil society culture has also resulted in organizations being personalized. Many CSGs are associated with a single person, often a leader but sometimes just a member, and are referred to as "the organization of X".

The issue of mistrust has a political background. The Syrian regime has nourished mistrust by spreading rumours about specific activists or CSGs in order to have the local community turn against them.

Moreover, the political competition between Islamic and non-Islamic organizations has also contributed to creating an unhealthy environment where each side encourages the community to mistrust the "other". The criticism of engaging in unhealthy competition is likewise levelled at the international community with its political money and obsession with gaining the trust of partners and target communities while neglecting the role of others. The above-mentioned actors (the regime, Islamic charities, etc.) have the financial and manpower resources to foment large-scale mistrust. CSGs are less well equipped to cope with the consequences.

Indicative of a further dimension of the mistrust issue is the fact that, in many areas, having no personal revolutionary credentials can be an obstacle to joining a CSG. Eligibility for acceptance as a member is often based on the applicant's revolutionary record: what they did for the revolution and whether they participated in revolutionary activities. This strict policy has meant that some young people and people who did not join in the uprising have been excluded from membership of the newly established organizations. One group in Raqqa adopted a different policy and also accepted members who were neutral during the uprising or even supportive of the regime, but this group has since disbanded. Its failure may underscore the importance of group members agreeing on the essential principles underlying the work they collectively do. There have also been some cases where influential persons have accused members of their LC of not having participated in the revolution for the sole purpose of having them replaced by other, more obliging individuals.

Corruption

Accusations of corruption are adding to the mistrust. Fuelled by a lack of financial transparency, they have become common and are often levelled at groups providing services and aid. CSGs are also facing suspicious questioning about their funding and how it is spent. Corruption may indeed be a reality as the security situation prevents the monitoring and supervision of service delivery by anyone other than the local partner. Moreover, there are also some fake CSGs which only exist on paper and

reject all contact with other CSGs out of fear of being exposed. However, irrespective of how widespread corruption may be, civil society in Syria still lacks the right approach and tools for dealing with it.

Psychological Stress and Trauma

After three years of war, Syrians have experienced the worst impact a war can have. They have witnessed people dying, they know of activists who died under torture in prisons, they have seen chemical weapons being used against civilians, they have experienced regular shelling, and much more. The war has had a psychological impact on everyone. One of the major challenges for CSGs today is how to deal with posttraumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related psychological disorders from which an entire community may be suffering and at the same time deal with their own stress problems.

5.1.3 Inadequate international response

Lack of support

CSGs in Syria feel that they are being left on their own to topple an authoritarian regime and replace it with a system based on the key values of freedom, democracy, dignity, citizenship and human rights. This task is rendered even more difficult for CSGs simultaneously trying to meet the dire humanitarian needs of their local community within a highly insecure, violent environment driven by power politics, extremism and a war economy. CSGs are suffering oppression from numerous bodies ranging from the regime and extremist armed groups to some FSA groups and LCs. Despite all these constraints, hardly any support is reaching them from the international community – which has opted to distance itself from all internal security issues. Many international community players have chosen instead either to support more accessible civil society groups that are located in neighbouring countries or to provide humanitarian aid to charities inside Syria via private, project-driven intermediate groups.

Role of international institutions and NGOs

Several activists pointed out the negative role played by some international institutions and NGOs, criti-

cizing them for their politicization of humanitarian aid, their project-driven approach to granting financial and technical support, and their lack of true focus on capacity-building within Syrian civil society. One example cited by a Syrian intellectual concerns one of the large NGOs which has been providing training for five different LCs but has assigned each LC a different trainer and sufficient funding to ensure that none of the LCs cooperates with the others. This NGO's mission seems to be to promote decentralization in Syria, a notion which, in the absence of a robust over-arching system, can lead only to further division and fragmentation.

Another criticism applicable to many INGOs is their insistence on making their training work as easy as possible by repeatedly focusing on the same small group of activists, irrespective of whether the training provided represents any added value to the sending CSGs, and at the same time failing to coordinate with other INGOs working in the same field. Attending a workshop or training course (usually in Turkey) has thus become the monopoly of a few 'activists' for whom attending such training events has become a source of livelihood in itself (accommodation, stipend and equipment provided such as a camera and a laptop), rather than a tool for advancing the cause of the sending CSG. Moreover, many CSGs with limited resources see themselves condemned to adhering to donor conditions and project funding interests and thus compelled to adopt the agenda of the supporting INGO rather than focusing on their own national agenda.

Constantly changing goals and an absence of robust organizational structures represent a further challenge. Many CSGs change their goals and objectives frequently, usually for donor-driven reasons or in response to a real need emerging within their community. An example is a CSG originally providing medical services which switched to awareness-raising on women's rights simply because the latter was a priority issue for some potential donors. As the CSG had no guarantee of receiving the desired funding, even after switching its focus, this donor-driven change of strategy could well have been a mistake. Need-driven changes of strat-

egy can likewise be problematic. A case in point was the life-threatening outbreak of poliomyelitis in northern Syria in 2013, a serious health problem which caused many CSGs previously engaged in documenting human rights abuses to switch their focus to administering the polio vaccine to children.

5.2 Opportunities

The responses given by the CSG interviewees and the findings of the discussion groups indicate that, while the situation in Syria remains very challenging for CSGs, they do still have several key resources and opportunities available to them:

Human resources

When questioned about their resources, most groups cited the knowledge, skills and expertise of their members, for example members with language or computer skills and members who trained as lawyers, teachers, doctors, artists, engineers, etc. and subsequently gained professional experience in those fields. The knowledge, skills and expertise of CSG members clearly represent a key asset that they have put to good use in the past and should continue to deploy to maximum effect.

Equally important is the courage, motivation and persistence of CSG activists in promoting the values for which they have spoken out and campaigned – through civil disobedience, lobbying and awareness-raising measures – since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011. Without this strong will to bring about change and faith in its ability to do so, civil society in Syria would have ceased to exist and the situation in the country would have been even worse than it is today.

Public relations and networks

When questioned about how they seek to overcome their main problems, many CSGs reported networking and negotiating with other stakeholders, including ISIS and other extremist armed groups. They also stated that tribal and family ties play a very important role in dealing with traditional power and support structures, indicating that although tribalism is considered an outdated form of governance, it has become a safety net in contemporary Syria, possibly the strongest safety net available in the face of oppression by extremist groups such as ISIS. Although reliance on tribalism may be vital at the moment, CSGs need to focus on improving their communication, networking and negotiating skills in order to move on and make Syria a country based on sound institutions and the rule of law.

Resource mobilization potential

Many CSGs seem to have members with active support networks in the form of relatives and friends abroad who support their cause financially through remittances and donations. Others can rely on membership fees to keep their organizations afloat financially.Many CSGs with limited finances simply confine their activities to community-organizing campaigns and other low-cost projects. Although still subject to numerous non-financial constraints, CSGs that are able to mobilize their own resources were found to be not only the most independent but also the best able to promote their own agenda. This financial potential is indispensable for consolidating Syrian civil society's role in the ownership of the country's future.

Ability to use new tools and media

Despite the security risk, new technologies, social media and an ability to think flexibly and creatively have enabled many CSGs to continue working clandestinely, even in areas under the control of extremist armed groups. These tools and skills have also made their advocacy work with the Syrian diaspora and the international community more effective. Looking ahead, these skills can only enhance CSGs' eligibility for technical and financial support despite the political interests acting against them.

INGOs should therefore continue their training provision, but it should be intensified and adapted to meet specific needs. If the negative impact of the 'workshop business' described in the foregoing is to be avoided, INGOs should consult with local CSGs in advance to determine exactly what the training should achieve and how to ensure that the choice of participants, through the multiplier effect, will benefit the largest number of people.

5.3 Needs

When questioned about their needs, finance ranked at the top of the list with 75% of CSGs indicating that they need more financial support. Funding was closely followed by logistical support, with 71% of the groups reporting a need for internet connection, computers, cameras, office space and other forms of logistical support. Next in line was a need for support in capacity-building, which was cited by 58% of the CSGs, followed by a need for consultancy, which was cited by 20% of the groups (see Figure 18).

Paradoxically, the need for capacity-building seemed to be underestimated as 97% of the groups also indicated an interest in receiving training on a wide range of topics. Figure 19 provides a breakdown of the capacity-building needs reported, with media training (including journalism) ranking as the most popular topic – even among CSGs whose work is not related in any way to the media. On further inquiry, activists pointed out the need for CSGs to be able to

Figure 18: Needs categories as specified by the CSGs under review
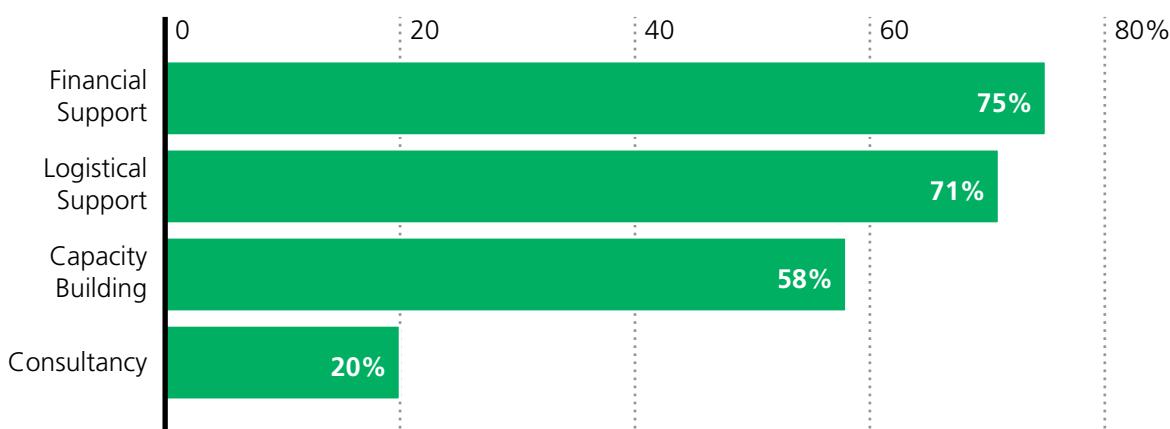
Figure 19: Capacity-building needs as specified by the CSGs under review
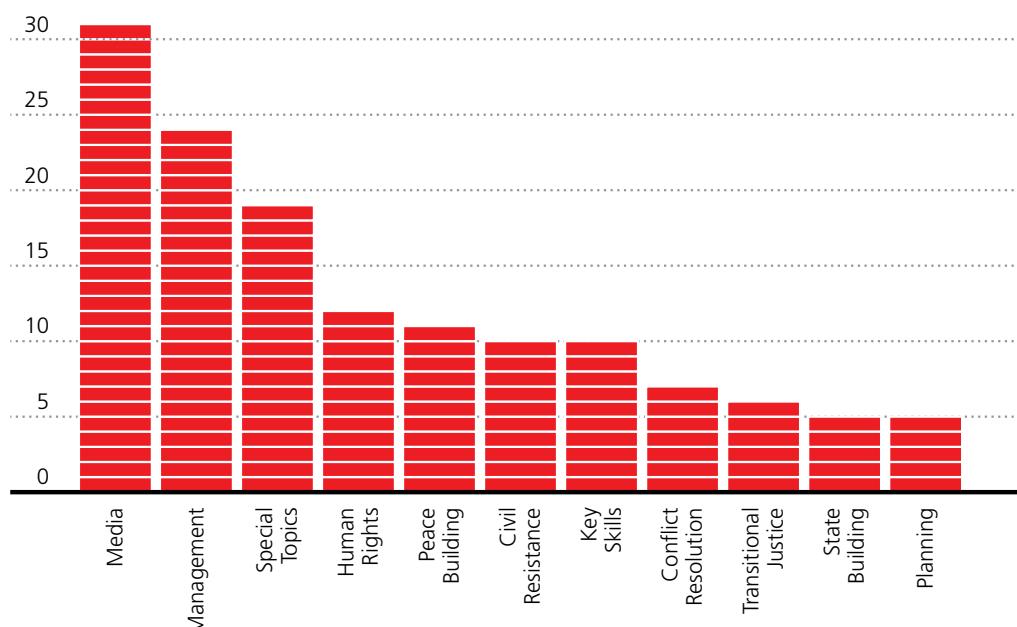
market themselves properly in order to enhance their funding prospects. Another interesting reason given concerned regional competition, with many activists wanting to market their own areas that they perceive as forgotten and neglected. In addition, many activists reported an urgent need for media-targeted documentation as a means of projecting their voices and their suffering to the outside world in the hope of stronger solidarity and support and a better future if the transition justice process proceeds properly.

Remarkably, training in management skills was rated as the second greatest need in the capacity-building category, possibly reflecting the CSGs' keenness to carry out their work more effectively and efficiently. The topics suggested included project management, campaign management, risk management, institutional and human resource management and civil society management. An interesting finding is that some individuals from various CSGs have used some of the strategic management skills they learned in the train-

Figure 20: Capacity-building needs by governorate

ing on non-violent resistance provided by the Badael team to plan income-generating projects to support their own livelihoods. This is but an indication of the scale of the economic challenge facing CSG members in non-government-controlled areas of Syria.

Training on so-called 'special topics' ranked third. The topics here included research skills, campaign leadership and first aid in Raqqa; politics, physiotherapy, citizenship and training of trainers in Deir az-Zor; and film-making and production, writing, documenting, and community organizing in the case of CSGs working in multiple areas. Other topics for which training was requested included sports, accounting, teaching, musicianship, acting, medicine, design, women's rights, working under conflict conditions, and civil defence - to name but a few.

The topic with the next highest rating was human rights, seemingly reflecting an urgent need to understand the concept. The demand for training in human rights was particularly strong in Idlib. The topics that followed included peace-building, civil resistance and conflict resolution. These ranked particularly high in Aleppo, possibly reflecting the scale of the tyranny, arming and conflict there. More generally, the CSGs under review expressed an interest in training in key skills such as decision-making, negotiation, and communication, indicating how vital these have become in their everyday lives. Lower in the list of priorities were transitional justice, state-building and planning; these were listed by a few CSGs.

It is important here to note that whereas most of the training topics cited were reported by the CSGs as reflecting a grass-roots-driven need, the fact that many of the terms used are new to Syrian civil society culture suggests that purported needs are being influenced by INGOs and their project-driven approach to training provision.

It is interesting to examine which topics ranked highest in which areas. Figure 20 shows that CSGs in Aleppo are focused mainly on peace-building and civil resistance; those in Deir az-Zor are focused mainly on planning and to a lesser extent on the so-called special topics; those in Hama are focused on state-building, transitional justice and conflict resolution; those in Raqqa are focused on key skills and

planning; and those in Idlib are focused on civil resistance and human rights. CSGs operating in multiple governorates were found to be particularly interested in the so-called special topics and in peace-building.

6. Conclusion

It might be that the one positive phenomenon Syria is experiencing today is the rise of a dynamic, grass-roots-based civil society embodying strong potential for positive change inspired by the notions of justice, equality, freedom, democracy and citizenship. The emergence of civil society has already contributed to containing the process of fragmentation along ethnic, sectarian, political and ideological lines, and continues to do so today despite the prevailing climate of violence. Moreover, it is civil society that will be called upon when the opportunity arises for a just and peaceful transition, sustainable state-building and human-centred development.

Today, the newly emergent civil society groups and social movements in Syria, which include youth networks, LCCs, LCs, and awareness-raising, development and rights-based organizations, are trying to drive the change towards an inclusive, modern and developed Syria. Their newly evolved sense of citizenship, their motivation and persistence, coupled with their often flexible, efficient and pluralistic structures – in stark contrast to the strictly controlled, bureaucratic, ideological and top-down civil society structures that existed prior to the 2011 uprising–suggest that they have great potential for engaging in this quest.

Evidence from the ground supports this assessment, with robust findings on how the majority of CSGs in non-government-controlled areas of Syria are questioning and fighting traditional notions of exclusion and the institutions and organizations that uphold them. In terms of their perception of their identity and dynamics, it was found that not all groups are progressive, but many tend to be secular, political (in the sense of holding governance structures accountable), socially responsible (calling for an inclusive, pro-poor economic system that provides opportunities for all), pluralistic (demanding democracy, justice, equality and respect for all segments of society), and interested in cooperating to speak out against their oppressors with a strong, unified voice.

However, a crucial issue remains the confusion prevalent within many groups regarding both their own identity and their understanding of development notions such as democracy, freedom, women's rights, human rights and secularism. Destructive forces such as ISIS and other extremist groups, which draw their inspiration and resources from pre-state identities, power politics, the war economy and cross-border agendas, seem to be exploiting this confusion. They are accordingly more successful than the international community in promoting their agenda while further limiting the resources of local CSGs and exacerbating the problems challenging them. This indicates that the international community should continue to invest in improving the resources available to CSGs in Syria (i.e. their human resources; their constituency in local communities; their networks, relationships and solidarity; their innovativeness, flexibility and ability to use new technology; and their potential to mobilize social, economic and political resources). It also indicates that the international community should provide better support to CSGs to help them overcome their problems: inadequate capabilities; limited financial, technical and logistic resources; the disintegration of political authority that triggered the rise of oppressive tyrannical structures and brought widespread insecurity; the vicious war economy; the dire humanitarian situation; the ideological war that was fuelled by ignorance and pre-state identities and has been hijacked by extremism; the insufficient efforts to communicate and network that are holding back CSG empowerment; and the politicization of aid to promote decentralization and other non-local agendas being pursued by some international organizations.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Syrian Civil Society Groups

Focus and specialize

Most CSGs were set up spontaneously as part of the uprising, in reaction to a specific event or in response to an emerging need. As the research data shows, many CSGs are assuming multiple functions and in many cases these are not or only remotely related to each other (a case in point is a CSG that works simultaneously in journalism, relief work, education, psychosocial support and peace-building). The resulting work overload prevents such groups from specializing and developing their specific or even unique profile. It also makes it difficult for CSG members to prioritize their activities and convince potential donors that they have the expertise and capacities to implement a given project. CSGs need to start making strategic choices and consolidating their vision and mission. Specialization will also help reduce competition for resources among groups and, while each works with its own specific focus, enable them to cooperate and network.

Invest in organizational development and capacity-building

Just as most CSGs need to define and consolidate their vision and mission, they also need to improve their organizational structures and operating mechanisms. In the long run, no organization can function without a clear structure and a clear strategic plan. For CSGs aiming to develop into something beyond a social movement, institutionalizing their structures could help overcome the problem of fluctuating membership as positions are easier to fill when roles are clearly defined. Moreover, as most donor organizations require information on organizational structure, annual planning and budgets, robust project planning and management are indispensable capacities for obtaining international funding.

Improve knowledge transfer

Many CSGs in Syria currently receive training on various topics from international and/or Syrian organizations in neighbouring countries. Very often one activist per CSG attends a workshop and then returns to pass on what he/she has learned to other group members or even outsiders. This is a positive phenomenon, but it harbours certain risks as providing training without experience and proper guidance can do more harm than good. In order to improve knowledge transfer, CSGs should aim to send more than one person to workshops and request sets of training material or – ideally, if the security situation permits – request an equivalent training measure run in-situ by a professional trainer. If in-situ training is not possible, knowledge transfer should not necessarily take the form of the returnee trying to replicate the training he/she has undergone – this is never an easy task and almost impossible for the inexperienced returnee. Instead it could take the form of reporting on the workshop or holding an introductory session. Such an approach could help individual CSGs to identify the fields in which they need training and coordinate their training requests with other CSGs in order to improve the prospects of such training being made available.

Prevent mistrust and conflict between CSGs

Mistrust and conflict between CSGs can be reduced through networking and joint activities inspired by common values and focused on the common good. Additionally, a commitment to transparency with an established system for regular, responsible reporting to members, partners and beneficiaries is crucial, especially in times when gossip and rumour can play a key role in building up or destroying a CSG's constituency and reputation. Another way of overcoming mistrust is to hold meetings to confront the issue. Such meetings, where people come face-to-face to discuss the problem, are usually constructive, especially if supported by a good facilitator.

As corruption is one of the factors that foment mistrust, it is advisable for groups to set up an internal monitoring system that enhances transparency in project implementation and at the same time can improve their prospects of obtaining funding from the international community. One of the reasons international community organizations deny funding is that they have no access to Syria and therefore cannot monitor project implementation. As for prevent-

ing rumours, teams should be established composed of properly trained people who are able to investigate them, collect evidence, and raise awareness of how severely rumour can divide the community and compromise the good work being carried out.

Advocate your concerns

CSGs are the experts on the ground, have a very sound knowledge of local affairs and developments, and understand the needs of the local community. They should therefore use this expertise to convince donors and the international community of the merits and validity of their concerns rather than adapt their objectives to align them with donors' support criteria.

7.2 Recommendations for the International Community

Promote an enabling environment for CSGs

First and foremost, every effort should be made to find a political solution that will end the war in Syria. Reaching a political settlement between the regime and the opposition which allows for stability and transitional justice is of paramount importance in marginalizing extremists and others currently benefiting from the war economy. In order to ensure that violence does not recur in future, a concurrent concern should be to use the transitional justice regime to address the economic, social and political causes of the crisis in Syria that date back decades before the March 2011 uprising.

The first step should be to enforce a ceasefire and peace-keeping measures while negotiating on the long-term interests of external parties (networks, businesses, governments) in sustaining the war economy in Syria. The inclusion of groups representing civil society in negotiations and peace talks is of vital importance here, although civil society should also play a parallel role as a powerful entity in its own right that belongs neither to the government nor to the political opposition as represented by the Coalition. The inclusion of civil society is especially important as its previous exclusion is a key cause of the contemporary crisis.

Tailor support to the specific needs of Syrian civil society

The information presented in this study needs to be complemented with local knowledge and expertise on reaching out to CSGs inside Syria if the specificities of Syrian civil society are to be properly understood and respected. Donor organizations equipped with such specific information will be able to tailor their support to the needs on the ground instead of taking the easiest option of relying on foreign experts and groups with virtually no contacts within Syria. The following points include further advice on providing customized support for local CSGs in Syria.

Move away from project-driven support

Only few international organizations have so far offered Syrian CSGs capacity-building support that extends beyond ready-made projects on topics such as transitional justice, documentation of human rights abuses, conflict resolution, peace-building, community organization, internet security and the media. Even where customized training provision has been offered, it was almost always merely basic and therefore ill-suited for building up a sustainable and replicable body of expertise within the country. Moreover, only very few organizations have focused their capacity-building activities for Syrian CSGs on the fields that these ranked as their highest priorities in this study, for example management skills and various other skills not covered by the above list of ready-made projects. The aim should be to establish sustainable connections with Syrian CSGs in order to build up on previous training undergone, consolidate expertise and generate genuine capacities instead of the hitherto prevalent "hit-and-run" approach aiming simply to involve the maximum number of groups.

Take account of the identity and characteristics of local CSGs

The information presented in this study on the newly established CSGs' social, economic and political identity and their characteristics in terms of geographical purview, size, age, education, gender and status points to more efficient and effective ways of supporting them that maximize their resources and take account of their aspirations and limitations.

Undoubtedly, a fact of serious concern to donors is that the majority of Syrian CSGs cannot be registered in Syria and are not registered elsewhere. But even CSGs that contemplate registration face difficulties regarding their organization's ownership and also in such practical matters as opening a bank account given the international sanctions currently applicable to Syrians. Any call for proposals aimed at supporting Syrian CSGs that requires applicant CSGs to be registered is therefore self-defeating and leaves the pitch open to international staff intermediaries who stand a much better chance of obtaining the funding on offer than local Syrian CSGs.

Be aware of internal regional specificities and dynamics

Although generally similar, the various regions of Syria and their respective CSGs are neither homogenous, nor do they have the same resources and problems. An example to illustrate this point concerns the differences that exist between LCs in border areas that are able to mobilize certain resources by virtue of their location but are unduly challenged by tyrannical extremist groups with a vested interest in controlling those resources (as in Raqqa) and their counterparts elsewhere which have no local resources to mobilize and have to rely on external support but enjoy greater freedom in the absence of widespread local control by extremist groups (as in many areas of Idlib governorate).

Assess information on local CSGs carefully

The scarce information available on Syria can easily be misread if assessed without an in-depth understanding of the realities on the ground. An example highlighted in this study concerns local CSGs' expressed interest (or lack thereof) in political participation and their visions for Syria's future economic system. If the statistics are taken in isolation, they suggest a preference for a largely apolitical, religious and neoliberal civil society. Group discussions on the ground, however, forcefully suggest a general preference for a more political and (once the notion is better understood) secular civil society and a pro-poor economic system.

Invest in education and critical thinking

An area that warrants further study is the way

in which extremist groups penetrated and spread across Syria. In general terms, it is true to say that these groups have acquired greatest influence in Syria's poorest and least educated areas with sizeable populations of young men that fought in Iraq as jihadists over the past decade. In the areas under their control, these extremist groups are today running their own schools that teach a curriculum based solely on their ideology and vision of Islam while forcefully repressing efforts by secular groups to maintain or re-establish all other forms of education.

There can be no doubt that these extremist armed groups and other beneficiaries of the war economy consider as anathema any form of education that holds the potential for peace, stabilization and development –not only in Syria but also in the region as a whole. With almost half of Syrian children not attending school today and the equivalent of 35 years of human development forfeited in Syria to date (THE SYRIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH 2013B), efforts to reinvest in Syrians via education need to be strong, creative and wide in their outreach. In some situations, simply equipping CSGs with basic resources such as computers, an internet connection and education modules can be very helpful to them in their efforts to promote education and the formation of critical minds.

Support the building of institutions and networks

Any future state-building efforts in Syria will need to tackle the institutional obstacles to creating modern, accountable and transparent institutions and ensure that the new governance structures minimize division and fragmentation along regional, ethnic and/or sectarian lines. Donors and the international community should therefore aim to give equal priority to supporting institutional capacity-building on the one hand and, on the other, enhancing the financial, technical and logistical resources that CSGs and LCs need in order to plan more effectively, strategically and sustainably. All such support should take into account the need for all civil society organizations to be made more accountable, more transparent, and endowed with a stronger sense of ownership. In other words, support should be forthcoming for both LCs and other CSGs, but in a manner that ensures that the power of the former is effectively checked by that

of the latter through established accountability procedures. Furthermore, CSGs should be encouraged – perhaps via funding conditionalities – to network with each other with a view to enhancing their sense of solidarity and their collective voice and impact.

Improve information on Syria in mainstream media

"Stop the killing, we want to build a homeland for all Syrians" is a well-known peace slogan which originated with a young woman waving a banner with this demand displayed across it in front of the people's parliament in the spring of 2012 and subsequently developed into a nationwide peace-building campaign that is still active today. However, the event and the story behind it were very largely ignored by the international mainstream media, which seem to focus solely on military developments in Syria and thereby further exacerbate the conflict there. Syrian journalists and civil society activists report that media organizations are willing to pay enormous sums for any news on military developments but that professional and citizen journalists and CSG activists find it difficult to negotiate any media coverage of civil society work. Their stories seldom appear on mainstream TV channels or in mainstream newspapers.

With the culture of violence being the only aspect of contemporary Syria that is of interest to the mainstream media, motivation to support and demonstrate solidarity with Syrian civil society is dwindling. If this trend is to be reversed, international media should give more coverage to human interactions on the ground and the incredible things that Syrian civil society has been achieving and continues to achieve - against all odds. The same recommendation applies to academic research. If more was known about social movements such as the CSGs in Syria, it would be much easier to mobilize the resources required to make them more efficient, more effective and more sustainable.

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List of Acronyms

CSGs	Civil Society Groups
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GONGOs	Governmental Non-Governmental Organizations
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
ISIS	The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria
LCs	Local Councils
LCCs	Local Coordinating Committees
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
SNC	Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

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