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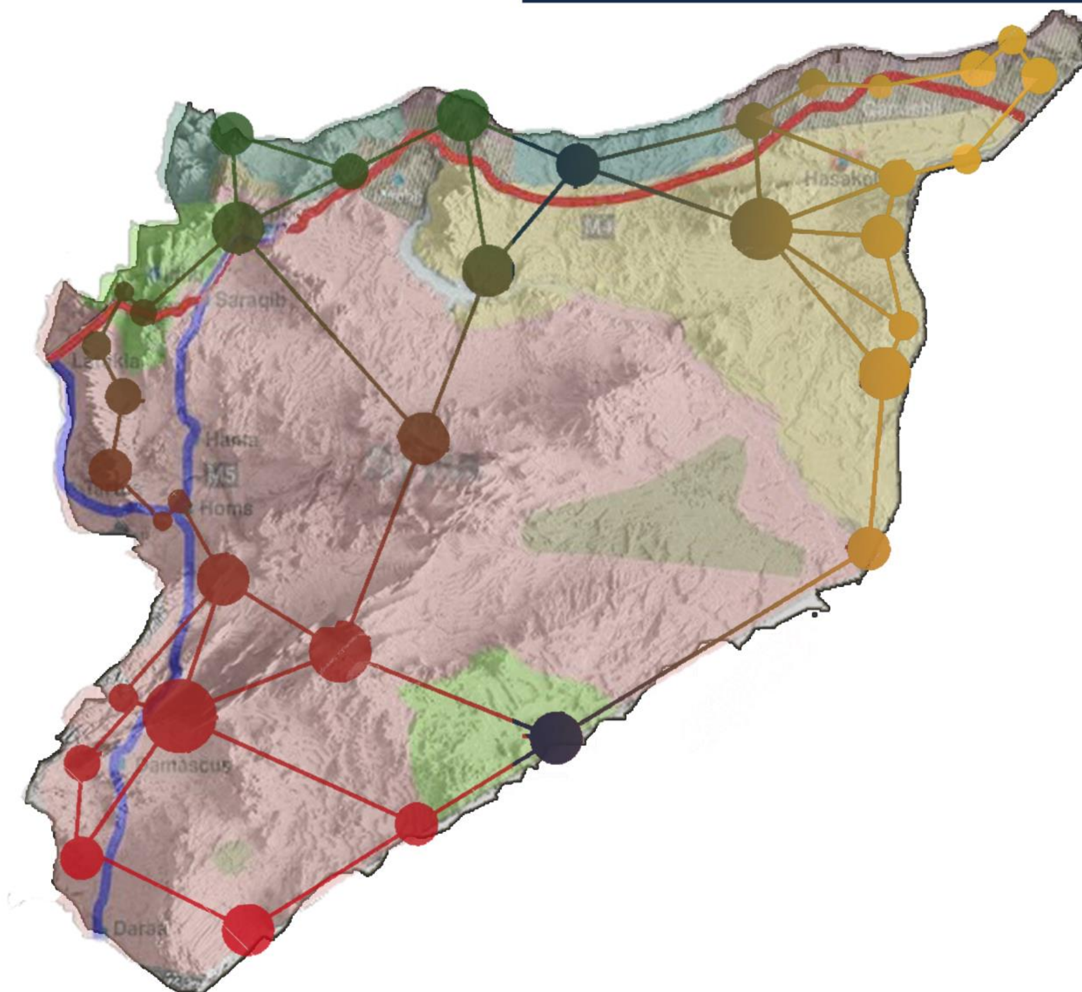
NO COMMON CAUSE

DIVISIONS AND INFLUENCING FACTORS OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS.



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To Raifah Samie

Executive summary

This research analyzes the current state of Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs), how they interact, and what keeps them divided. It also gives suggestions for overcoming these divides for the betterment of all Syrians. Specifically, we aim to answer three fundamental questions: 1) what are the primary divisions affecting Syrian CSOs 2), what factors influence these divisions, and 3) what are possible paths towards cohesion among Syrian CSOs?

To answer these questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with civil society actors operating in the three main areas of Syria, government-held areas (GHAs), opposition-held areas (OHAs), and areas under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), as well as those operating outside Syria. The findings of the research are as follows:

1. Three primary divisions separate Syrian CSOs and act as barriers to cohesion. Foremost, they are divided across areas of control (*territorial division*). Within each area, they are further divided along political, social, ethnic, and tribal lines (*sociopolitical division*). Even within organizations, there is a substantial divide between the workers in Syria and the administrative "elites", who are present at international dialogues and monopolize their connections to donors, and who often are residing in neighboring countries and Europe (*organizational division*). Importantly, these dividing lines interact, yielding a complex matrix of obstacles for CSOs.
2. Cross-territorial dialogue occurs among the organizational elites outside of Syria, however, these dialogues are confined to high levels and do not trickle down to the civil society workers in Syria, significantly limiting their impact.
3. Within Syria, cross-territorial relationships vary by area of control. There is less political polarization between the AANES and GHAs, although their working relationship appears the least developed. Their lack of communication is partly due to the large geographical distances between the areas. On the other hand, despite political challenges, communication lines are stronger between CSOs in OHAs and those in the other two territories.
4. These divisions are caused by four influencing factors: 1) geography, 2) the de facto authorities in each area (e.g., some restrict CSO workers' freedom of movement), 3)

donor policies and political mandates, and 4) political polarization which propagates into the CSOs.

5. These divisions have been deepening and reinforcing each other since the intense early years of the conflict which split the country. Currently, there is enmity based on which international donor is supporting each territory. Relationships are strained further by a protracted political process and near-complete territorial isolation. Adding to the difficulties, CSO funding has become scarcer, increasing competition and damaging partnerships.

Despite this grim picture, this research also gathered recommendations from the surveyed CSO actors for enabling a more unified and effective CSO landscape. Each recommendation thus attempts at mending either the territorial, sociopolitical, or organizational divide (noted as *T*, *S*, and *O*, respectively).

Leverage what works:

- Leverage shared causes, such as women's rights, to build cross-territorial CSO society networks. (T)
- Leverage early recovery programs to encourage cooperation between CSOs serving different social groups and territories, avoiding isolated interventions in the humanitarian phase. (S)
- Utilize less polarized areas with larger networks (i.e., Sweida, Salamiyah, and Daraa) as a pass-through for equitable funding across the regions. (T)

Increase inclusivity:

- Increase cross-territory communication via virtual dialogue platforms, such as the virtual civic platform, which is supported by the European Union. (T)
- Broaden organizations such as the WAB and CSSR to ensure wider participation from all regions, all ideologies, and particularly all age groups. (T)
- Empower youth leaders who are more closely linked to community needs and carry a higher potential for impact with local initiatives. (O)

Rethink funding:

- Allocate funding based on the alignment of organization administrators and the workers in Syria. Administrators have access to funds, development expertise, and

relations with CSOs in other territories. On the other side, local Syrian workers are close to the communities in need and can more directly impact the situation. (O)

- Optimize the funding process for impact instead of prioritizing organizational structure, compliance reporting, and documentation. Thus, the system should reward social entrepreneurs who are solving community problems instead of CSO contractors singularly concerned with securing grants. (O)

Create new foundations:

- Create a cross-territory (and cross-sociopolitical group) consortium for Syrian CSOs, localizing civil work, bypassing outside NGOs, and directly funding impactful organizations. (T, S)
- Hold civil society conferences to galvanize organizations with a common mission, especially the reunification of the country. (T, S)
- Establish a civil media platform, allowing for unified messaging among CSOs, giving organizations a platform to work together, and enabling organic initiatives of all sizes to form and coordinate with each other. (T, S)

Apply pressure where appropriate:

- Advocate in neighboring countries, specifically Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government), to facilitate cross-territory meetings. Practically, this could mean relaxing (or at least standardizing) visa requirements and covid restrictions across Syrian areas of control. (T)
- Pressure territorial authorities and intervening military forces in Syria to open economic channels and facilitate mobility between the various regions of Syria. This increases cross-territory communication at a local level and enables CSOs to work together more closely. (T)
- Pressure donors to be politically impartial with their funding. Often, funding will be denied to a CSO merely because of their location. This excessively ties CSOs with the respective territorial authorities. After all, a distinction must be made between these service organizations and military institutions. CSOs should be allowed to deal with the territorial authorities to facilitate their work and enable them to network with other geographical areas. (T)

1. Introduction

Civil society is not a new concept in Syria. Beginning with the Syrian elites' activism during the Ottoman era, it traces its history through the country's independence from Ottoman rule, the 1923 French Mandate, and up to the present time. The public presence of CSOs allowed by ruling authorities varied throughout time, with significant reductions in activity starting with the one-party political system and continuing during the regimes of Shishakli, Nasser, and Hafez al-Assad in particular (Hinnebusch 2005).

During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, CSOs were taken over and replaced by so-called "peoples" or "popular" organizations, such as the Women's Union, the Youth of the Revolution, and the Peasant and Labor Unions. Following this, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party dominated CSOs with their own puppet organizations and trade unions, increasing their overall influence in society (Rabo 2004). Notably, during this time it was not allowed to use the term "civil society organization," which was a Western term and even considered a tool of Western cultural invasion, and the terms "community-based organizations" and "civil organizations" were devoted in its place (Fowler & Sen, 2010).

After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as the president in 2000, a CSO revival movement took place, dubbed "Damascus Spring". Various cultural forums run by opposition figures popped up but were soon stamped down by the regime. Most of their founders were imprisoned, and the term "civil society organization" was criminalized again, this time replaced by "communal society organizations," which presented themselves as charity organizations that were subject to intense scrutiny by authorities (Zisser 2003).

With the start of the uprising in 2011, CSOs returned to life and became one of the most critical actors in Syria. This is because the Syrian government intentionally created a major vacuum in services by withdrawing its institutions from contested territories, leaving many in need (Khalaf 2015). As opposition forces were unable to provide such services or institutions, CSOs stepped in to fill the vacuum. Accordingly, the emerging Syrian CSOs were now required to partly play the role of the state in providing services that are usually provided by larger political institutions, in addition to the humanitarian role that CSOs assumed at the beginning of the uprising (Gunes & Lowe 2015).

The civil war – and the resulting territorial divides – between the opposing political groups greatly influenced the structure of civil society. What was supposed to be a single civil

society turned into plural "civil societies" that are affected both indirectly and directly by military action. Importantly, the functioning of CSOs became linked to the de facto authorities in each territory (Baczko & Dorronsoro 2018). For example, if an institution operates in areas controlled by a party, its areas of intervention will often be limited to areas that this party loses or gains in military conflict. This entrenched the division of CSOs to their area and, importantly, away from civil society actors elsewhere.

At present, CSOs operate in government-held areas (GHAs), opposition-held areas (OHAs) in the northwest of the country, and areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This division is profoundly polarized, with modifiers such as “loyalist-CSO” and “opposition-CSO” now in common use. This has engendered rivalry and hostility among organizations with otherwise similar goals. In contrast to a mere spatial division, current CSOs attempt to cancel and undermine their counterparts in other territories.

A stark example of this division was observed in the Constitutional Committee, formed by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This was based on the Syrian government’s nomination of a 50-member bloc, which was then matched in number by the opposition, with a third bloc formed of CSOs that were theoretically chosen by the Special Envoy to Syria. In practice, however, the Syrian political actors influenced the selection of the latter. The mere fact that the opposition and the government hand-picked CSO representatives – as opposed to selecting based on the communities the CSOs support – is an affirmation of the politicization of CSOs. Although there were some cases of cross-territorial collaboration throughout the conflict’s history, such as the Tamas Alliance in 2015, these were short-lived (e.g., the Tamas Alliance went inactive in 2018 and was stopped entirely in 2020).

Studying this division and the limited instances of coordination is crucial, as CSOs have an indispensable role in Syria’s present and future. CSOs are an essential component of the political process due to their representation in the Constitutional Committee, the importance of the Civil Society Support Room[1] (CSSR) and the Women’s Advisory Board[2] (WAB), and their presence in many Track II initiatives[3] in the peace process (Brett 2017). CSOs continue to

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[1] An organization to enable inclusive political processes in Syria and to connect Syrian CSOs with international organizations (https://cssrweb.org/en/)

[2] An organization to promote women’s right and to include women in Syrian peace talks (https://cssrweb.org/en/)

[3] Unofficial conflict resolution efforts by CSOs/NGOs/activists, also called “backdoor diplomacy.”

provide essential services in all geographic regions, including GHAs, and they are expected to be critical to the future development and early recovery programs. Left unchecked, however, instead of being tools for reunification, CSOs may further institutionalize the social and political divisions within Syria. Hence, understanding the forms and causes of these divisions and exploring ways to overcome them is critical to promote a constructive early recovery process.

The research hypothesis is that Syrian CSOs, despite many initiatives, are divided along many of the same lines as the political or military landscape. To examine this hypothesis, we collected and analyzed qualitative data to answer three questions:

- What are the forms and extent of division in Syrian CSOs?
- What are the factors that influence these divisions and their magnitude?
- What are the opportunities for promoting cooperation between the Syrian CSOs?

2. Methodology

2.1 Defining *Syrian civil society organization*

There is no universal agreement on the definition of a CSO, and definitions change over time, institutions, and countries. According to the European Union, CSOs include all non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan, and non-violent structures through which people organize themselves to achieve common goals and values, whether political, cultural, social, or economic, and at the local, national, regional, or international level. It also includes urban and rural organizations, formal and informal (European Commission 2012).

With a slightly different emphasis, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development defines CSOs as associations around which society voluntarily organizes itself and represents a wide range of interests and ties. This includes all organizations outside the for-profit business sector, state institutions, and families, in which people organize themselves to pursue common interests in the public sphere. Examples include community organizations, village associations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, farmers' associations, trade unions, cooperatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes, and non-profit media organizations (OECD 1012).

Despite the broadness of these two definitions, they cannot adequately cover the complex Syrian context. For example, in the case of the Constitutional Committee, it is challenging to distinguish CSOs from the territorial authorities they fall under, particularly because the CSOs are providing services that are normally given by state institutions. A major criterion for a CSO is activity outside of the state, but what if there *is* no legitimate state to act outside of? In the absence of legitimate institutions, as is the case in areas outside the control of the GHAs, the line between CSO and de facto authority is blurry.

To distill the essence of CSO into a usable definition for Syria, we turned to the work of Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2017). They find four characteristics fundamental to a CSO: it is representative in form, enhances participatory or deliberative democracy, is self-established, and advocates for the common good (or public interest).

The representative form means that the CSO represents a group of people's interests, and therefore includes institutions such as chambers of commerce and syndicates. The second characteristic is that a CSO is a tool to enhance participatory or deliberative democracy, following the belief that the role of the CSO is to bring public life closer to the people and to make participation in it possible, away from parties, political life, and electoral cycles. The third characteristic is self-establishment, meaning the individuals in CSOs can gather and establish an entity by self-actions and self-desire and for goals they choose for themselves. Finally, the fourth characteristic describes CSOs as any horizontal social and institutional ties, civil initiatives, and activities between individuals that seek to achieve the interest of society in general.

However, defining CSOs is only half of the challenge. It is a new task entirely to define what makes an organization "Syrian." The legal registration process which could normally designate an organization (national or otherwise) is not possible in the Syrian context. This is because official registration by the Syrian government is impossible for those who work outside of GHAs, and even for many who *are* inside government areas. Further, most institutions within GHAs are unregistered, and organizations mainly seek to obtain work registration in neighboring countries, Europe, and North America. This makes it very difficult to distinguish between a Lebanese, Turkish, or German institution from the Syrian one based on the registration alone.

Considering all the previous research, this paper adapts the definitions and concludes that "Syrian CSO" can be defined as follows:

> Any initiatives, organizations, or network of non-profit organizations that 1) are independent in the decision to establish themselves from any ruling authority in any area of control, 2) have a majority of Syrian founders, and 3) work by peaceful means for the benefit of Syrian community inside or outside the country, regardless of their registration status or country.

By "independent", we mean that the institution's establishment was the desire of its members, not the desire or instruction of a de facto authority, including any Syrian or non-Syrian political or military authority, the Syrian Government, the AANES, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham[4] (HTS) Islamists in Idlib, the Turkish government and its affiliated councils and bodies in the northern countryside of Aleppo and the areas controlled by the "Syrian National Army" in the countryside of Raqqa and Al-Hasakah.

2.2 Data collection

In this research, we relied on a qualitative approach by conducting key informant interviews with civil society actors, intending to cover each main area of control within Syria, namely GHAs, OHAs, and the AANES. Additionally, we included all governorates within each geographic region, because of the differences within the same geography. The sample was further diversified by interviewing CSO actors from international organizations and in diaspora countries to gain outside perspectives.

The 11 interview questions (see Appendix 1), focused on the relationship of CSOs in the geography where the interviewee works with their counterparts in other geographic regions. The purpose was to understand the reality of these relationships, namely the opportunities and challenges of cooperation between these organizations. We also tried to understand the interviewees' attitudes toward CSOs, how they perceived the role of CSOs, and how CSOs in their area perceive their counterparts in neighboring territories. The meeting minutes were taken directly during the interview, after which a table was filled in with the researcher's observations and participant's quotes (see Appendix 2). Afterward, a focus group discussion was conducted to test the results.

Between October and November 2022, we sampled 21 individuals: seven from GHAs, five from the AANES, five from OHAs, and four people outside Syria. Additionally, one respondent was from an international non-government organization (INGO). There were

[4] Literally, "the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant"

seven women and fourteen men in total. The focus groups were conducted in mid-December 2022. Eight respondents participated in the focus group - half of whom were women from different areas of control.

2.3 Levels of Analysis

For the interviews, we sampled respondents from different territories, ethnic and political groups, and from different levels within the organizations. For territories, we focused on the three major areas of control (i.e. GHAs, OHAs, and AANES) in which the organizations operate. We analyzed the CSOs in neighboring countries based on their primary areas of operations. For example, the CSOs in Turkey are mainly linked to opposition-controlled areas, and the same applies to the rest of the neighboring countries, namely Iraq and Lebanon.

We recognized and addressed heterogeneity in the territories. Daraa and Sweida, for example, are two exceptional cases in the GHAs, as they are not entirely under government control and due to the presence of local factions with significant influence. We also distinguished between the Arab and Kurdish regions in the AANES to gain a wider perspective, and because the CSOs from each region have a different relationship with the Autonomous Administration. Finally, we distinguished between the areas under the control of HTS and the areas directly influenced by Turkey and its supported factions, due to the different working conditions of CSOs in each. We dealt with Turkey as a de facto authority in northwestern Syria, distinguishing its role from the United States of America in northeastern Syria, and Iran and Russia in the government-held areas. This is because the Turkish government directly interferes with CSOs in the rural areas of Aleppo, permitting some organizations to work (while preventing others). It, additionally, directly determines who from the CSOs can cross into and out of Syria and is the granting authority for work permits of the institutions registered in OHAs. It does not mean that Turkey singularly controls all CSO operations in these areas, but its role differs radically from that of other interfering countries.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Three divisions of Syrian CSOs

The data was conclusive in answering our three research questions regarding 1) the forms and extent of the division among Syrian CSOs, 2) the factors influencing these divisions, and 3) the opportunities for promoting cooperation between Syrian CSOs. After reviewing the responses of the participants, it became clear that there were three distinct lines on which Syrian CSOs are divided. These are: territorial, sociopolitical, and organizational. Additionally, they described the factors influencing those divisions: geography, the de facto authority, donor policy, and political polarization.

All the interview participants agreed that the predominant form of division is territorial. That is, the territorial authority under which the CSO operates characterizes their ability and willingness to network with others. Paradoxically, each CSO saw themselves as operating independently of their respective territorial authority (and even in opposition to it), although they all accuse CSOs within the other two territories of being unduly influenced by and associated with the de facto powers. For example, a significant segment of CSOs in GHAs see themselves as defenders of the people against tyranny. In contrast, CSOs in other areas of control see the CSOs in GHAs as government apologists and tools of the regime. The same applies to CSOs in the areas controlled by HTS, which sees itself as an opponent of the territorial authority but is often accused by those in GHAs and the AANES of siding with it. The same dynamics apply, too, to CSOs in the AANES. To this end, a participant from Deir Ezzor notes, “In the areas of the Autonomous Administration, no one is ready to work with the organizations operating in the regime’s area.” It appears that no CSO goes unaccused of being in league with the de facto political power, making cooperation unlikely. Although there is an increasing number of organizations operating in more than one geography of control, openly or otherwise, these remain exceptions to the rule and most CSOs stick to their territory. In addition, networks of organizations, such as consortia, that seek to break this polarization are almost non-existent. We label this the *territorial division*.

The interviews also revealed a *sociopolitical division* within each territory, between those who support the authority and those who oppose it, conservative and secular groups, and the various ethnicities present. Take for example one participant from northern Aleppo who reports, “the Kurds are secessionists, from young men to young children, by my experience,

and they want to build a Kurdish state. They may have experienced some [marginalization in the past], but now the only thing they want is separation." Typecasting and bad-faith disputes abound. The hostility between secular and conservative organizations exceeds mere policy disputes and has come to each side accusing the other of treason, being agents of the West, or being patriarchal and backwards (Al-refraai 2021).

Lastly, we found evidence of an *organizational division* based on roles within each organization. This takes the form of misalignment between local workers in Syria and the administrative elites in the respective CSOs, who often live outside the country. We explore each of these divisions to understand their causes their extent, and how to address the divide.

3.1.1 Territorial division

In 2012, Syrian geography became split among the various parties in the country (Tan & Perudin 2019). Areas of control shifted and mutated, becoming relatively stable after 2019 (Akhmedov 2022). At present, territorial authority is primarily divided into three regions, each controlling CSOs differently.

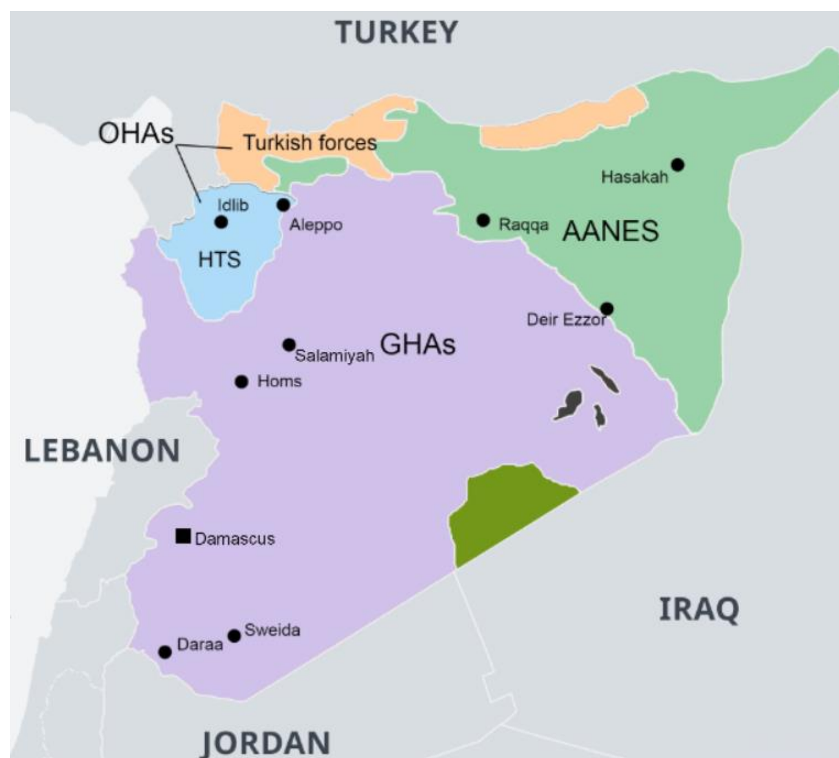

Figure 1: Divided regions of Syria with mentioned locations

In the GHAs, CSOs are untrained, unempowered, and less funded due to donor and government policies. The grievances of these CSOs grew due to their isolation by the donor

class and the other Syrian CSOs, and due to the increased economic and security struggles. Despite showing some desire to communicate across territorial borders, these CSOs fear the security consequences and must also reckon with the greater experience of CSOs in other territories (particularly in OHAs). This uneasiness is due to the competitive nature of the CSO landscape. CSOs are sometimes hesitant to work with larger and more experienced organizations, for fear that they will be pushed around and taken advantage of.

In contrast, CSOs in OHAs are deemed the most experienced and knowledgeable, and most of the organizations there believe they do not need networking in the first place. This is the case because they either do not trust the other CSOs, they believe that only specific areas need their services, or they only possess the relevant knowledge of their territory. These CSOs were able to gain significant experience due to the training and backing from Western donors and because they had to provide essential services in the absence of a legitimate state. Consequentially, these CSOs also receive the largest share of funding. This funding was needed, as its facilities and staff were bombed and forced to flee from areas recaptured by the Syrian government (which also makes these organizations believe they are the most persecuted groups).

The CSOs located in the AANES are between the two in terms of the ability and desire to network. It also has long-standing grievances linked to the historical marginalization of the regions of northeast Syria in general and the Kurds in particular.

To that end, it is impossible to ignore the historical roots and geography of these regions if we want to understand the current relationships between CSOs across territories. For example, the AANES is characterized by its remoteness and its strong tribal network. Throughout history, it was also repeatedly marginalized by the Syrian government. This absence of a common geographical area, the limited economic connections, and a crackdown on cross-border informal markets by both sides help explain the current divide between CSOs in the AANES and GHAs.

On the other hand, the networks between OHAs and the AANES are influenced by their close geographical proximity, which enabled communication and movement between activists and communities at the border. Previously, the AANES had a less contentious rivalry with Turkey and the Turkish-backed OHA. Before then, the dialogue was more open, and it was even possible to talk about one civil society between northeast and northwest Syria. This lasted until 2015, with cross-border activity being more or less closed off in 2018.

Since then, however, Erbil (Iraq) emerged as a common meeting ground between these two parties, nearly free from the influence of the Syrian government. After 2019, donors began increasing funding in the AANES, attracting CSOs operating in OHAs, but without gaining interest in those operating in GHAs (due to the aforementioned divide). Yet, relationships between Turkey and the AANES deteriorated in light of three military operations: Olive Branch, Peace Spring, and Euphrates Shield. One respondent from the OHAs explains it in the following way: "It is much easier to talk about building bridges with civil organizations in Damascus than in northeastern regions because of the Turkish security grip. The work is limited to tools determined by the Turkish government, whose main goal is security, not CSO efforts."

However, these relationships are complex, and some CSO actors in OHAs express little desire to communicate and network with the GHAs. “We do not know the organizations operating in the areas of the regime,” states a respondent residing on the border between Turkey and the OHAs, “and there is no willingness to know them.” Importantly, even when they *do* want to work with each other, they have varying abilities to accomplish it. Asked to rank locations according to the practical ease of working with CSOs there, the respondent said: 1) the diaspora, 2) Daara and Sweida, 3) GHAs, 4) AANES. Yet, when considering the ideological standpoint in the OHA, the ranking of who she would work with changed to 1) AANES, 2) Daraa and Sweida, 3) the diaspora, and 4) the regime in GHAs. Noteworthy here is that, as she put it, "Daraa and Sweida are not seen as belonging to the regime areas,” although they are geographically located in GHAs. Also crucial is that, from the standpoint of someone who identifies with the revolution, the CSOs in the Syrian diaspora are characterized by an easier life, higher salary, and a superficial attitude toward the opposition’s goals, creating an ideological impasse.

Thus, our research finds that the relationship between CSOs in the three territories is polarized but asymmetrically so, with levels of cooperation varying in nature and intensity. For instance, <u>the relationship between CSOs in GHAs and OHAs is tense due to their politics. However, it witnesses cases of networking and cooperation greater than those between the AANES.</u> The cross-border CSO networking attempts between those in GHAs and OHAs occur because of common dialogue spaces (e.g., virtual spaces of the EU, the CSSR, and the WAB). Most of the Track II dialogues venues include organizations from OHAs and GHAs, with little representation from the AANES, which hinders the latter from effective networking. Secondly, some sub-regions of the GHAs, such as Sweida, were able to

effectively act as a mediator in talks, and they were able to keep a relationship with the CSOs in the OHAs throughout the conflict. Additionally, there are some on the borders of the GHAs who side ideologically with the opposition, which formed a bridge between CSOs from the two regions.

Accordingly, a common dialogue space is a crucial issue in forming a cross-geography network for CSOs in all territories. Despite any feelings of self-sufficiency, the actors operating in OHAs and those in Sweida and Salamiyah may be able to form a bridge between all three civil society components.

3.1.2 Sociopolitical (or, intra-territorial) division

In the context of CSO networking, closer does not necessarily mean easier. "Before you ask me how we can network with other geographies," an interviewee from the Sweida governate starts, "tell me how we can network between the organizations of Sweida?" Indeed, CSO networking within one territorial authority is made difficult by political and social polarization, even if they are closer to home.

This is evidenced by the clear division between registered and unregistered organizations in GHAs. Registered institutions enjoy the freedom to move within GHAs and the support of the Syrian government. Yet, they claim that they are less able to receive donations from non-UN agencies donors than unregistered ones, believing that donors prefer CSOs closest to the opposition. Notably, registered organizations – and particularly service organizations – that provide humanitarian aid *do* enjoy both beneficial partnerships with UN agencies based in Damascus and support from the Syrian Government. Additionally, they have the freedom to move, a higher sense of security, and can easily appear in the media, to the envy of unregistered CSOs.

However, unregistered organizations, refusing to submit to the government's registration process, enjoy the support, funding, and knowledge empowerment of donors, while registered organizations are left wanting. Making matters more contentious, the unregistered CSOs perceive the registered organization within GHAs to be in league with the authorities and therefore view them with suspicion. According to one participant, "the

workers in these areas are accused of Altashbeeh[5] and Ba'athism[6]." For their part, registered CSOs also report mistrust, as they believe the unregistered CSOs are too close to their western donors. Importantly, these intra-territory accusations directly resemble those thrown across territorial borders. This division is crucial because there is a mutual interest between the two parties. Namely, one of them has funding support, while the other can move with less risk. Still, the division and mutual suspicion prevent an effective cooperation process between them.

The AANES, too, has intra-territorial hostility between CSOs. Their division is manifested along ethnic lines, between the Arab institutions in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa and the Kurdish organizations in Al-Hasakah. For example, American donors tend to support organizations in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor at the expense of Al-Hasakah, partly to avoid provoking Turkey (who has a contentious relationship with the Kurdish population) and partly to rebuild the areas that were destroyed by the war against ISIS. On the opposite side, most organizations in Al-Hasakah enjoy the support of the Autonomous Administration.

Arab and Kurdish CSOs also differ in their levels of experience. Older Kurdish civil society and political movements before 2011 provided a legacy and knowledge base for Kurdish institutions that are not available to newly established Arab organizations in the AANES. Further dividing these groups is a remarkable lack of trust between the Arab organizations and the Autonomous Administration, which means that the Arab CSOs are less involved in intra-territory dialogue with the Kurdish organizations and in cross-territory Track II political dialogues. Here too, unfortunately, organizations that work across communities and different regions are rare.

Contrary to the other two geographies, there is no radical division in OHAs based on association with the opposition authorities, whether HTS, the Turkish government (and its institutions), or the various oppositional bodies such as the coalition and the interim government. However, they have a unique division, namely, the rift between secular and religiously conservative organizations, especially concerning issues of women's rights. Most CSOs in the OHA overtly oppose the religious conservatives in control and benefit from

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[5] Altashbeeh: a particular group in Syria, the term was used later to denote every (civilian) person subject to authority, but who aggressively attempts to satisfy that authority. In short, this is intended to describe a government thug or apologist.

[6] The party and ideology associated with Hafez al-Assad and his son, Bashar al-Assad.

Western support for their stances. This is because the religious territorial authority is still classified as a terrorist group and is less experienced than the rest of the de facto authorities in controlling civil service organizations.

Although these divisions were the most prevalent in their territory, each dividing factor exists to some extent in all other territories. Additionally, it does not deny the myriad of other political or social divisions that stop CSOs from effectively networking.

One form of intra-territorial division that exists equally throughout the country is the rivalry between CSOs (of any region) who place their headquarters within that region against those that operate in the same area but are headquartered outside of Syria. Inside CSOs perceive those with headquarters abroad as monopolizing and gatekeeping financial support, knowledge, and relationships with influential donors and institutions. For example, speaking on the situation in OHAs, one participant responded, "The organizations in Turkey have a strong and high guardianship view over northwestern organizations as if they were the official spokesperson for civil society in Idlib and Aleppo." This frustrates those CSOs with their headquarters inside Syria, as they feel they are closer to the people and better understand their needs. On the other hand, the organizations abroad regard the CSOs inside as having little experience, few resources, and being incapable of managing projects, such as those required by the Syrian reality today.

The divisions range in their polarization and hostility. Some disputes are extremely hostile, such as issues of women's rights, the role of women's institutions, and religious conservatism. However, there are also milder divisions, such as the inside/outside CSOs cases above, which do not entail much hostility. For example, organizations in OHAs cooperate in numerous advocacy campaigns, such as their collective attempt to pressure Russia to renew Resolution 2642, related to cross-border aid to Syria.

Within and across borders, humanitarian work is the most spared from polarization. For example, the Western donor is willing to support humanitarian organizations close to the government and religious organizations in opposition areas. Despite this, there are no alliances or networks yet to be established, and the number of humanitarian institutions operating in more than one geographical control area is low for reasons listed in the previous section.

One noteworthy finding from this research is that <u>donors fund along political lines instead of choosing civil society causes</u>. For instance, they generally support organizations in

OHAs areas over the other two geographic areas, and more often fund secular institutions than conservative ones within the OHAs. Likewise, donors more readily support unregistered CSOs in GHAs and prefer organizations far from the Autonomous Administration (regardless of whether they are Arab or Kurdish). The notable exception to this rule in all territories is humanitarian work, which seems to escape the secular/conservative dichotomy in OHAs, and which is made more effective in GHAs by having freedom of movement as a licensed organization.

3.1.3 Organizational division

Even within organizations, there are critical divides that prevent the effective working of CSOs. The first of these occurs when an organization has workers both within and outside of Syria. Workers inside Syria see those working abroad, normally the leadership, as monopolizing knowledge and resources, and making decisions unilaterally while working in easy and safe conditions. On the other hand, those who work abroad perceive the workers inside as non-professional. They accuse those in Syria of having limited knowledge and claim this makes their participation in high-level processes risky. They also fear that the Syrian workers may be endangered by the de facto authorities where they reside.

This leaves those in Syria lacking important experience and contacts, as most of the networking is confined to the leaders. A participant from Turkey says: "There is no leadership process inside Syria because the youth teams have little experience, and those inside have more ability to implement than those outside, and they know the problems. No one turns to the youth, so they resort to working with other organizations."

Relatedly, but perhaps more pressing, is the organizational division between the CSO workers and the elites, defined as those who are attending the international conferences, are party to negotiations, and have a monopoly over the connections with donors. These civil society figureheads had become famous since the start of the revolution and generally dominate the scene. In most cases, this has an inside/outside Syria component, however, it occurs even when the entire organization is confined to any of the three territories. Elites generally have extensive experience, power, and access to international decision-making circles and the donor community. Most importantly, they communicate with each other across geographies. The workers of the organization, on the other hand, are often far from what is happening in the circles of these elites. The relative trust that the elites were able to

build among themselves through repeated meetings in neighboring countries and Europe did not permeate down to the workers in Syria, and attitudes between CSOs remained stagnant. Thus, the bridge between these organizations is limited to elite individuals, and not the organizations at large, without any significant impact on society. This gap between elites and workers can be explained by four factors.

Security. Elites fear the security repercussions as a result of their high-level contacts, whether due to the pressures imposed by the territorial authorities, the countries interfering in Syrian affairs, or even because of the fear of harming the reputation of the individual or the organization. For example, during the so-called "Days of Dialogue" in the Brussels Conference "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region," backchannel conversations between CSOs resulted in a message sent to the conference by 36 organizations from different Syrian geographies. However, the letter's content faced a storm of criticism, which led many participants to withdraw from signing it after being accused of treason and negligence, especially by the staff and members of their institutions (Magazine 2018; Orient 2020). A similar thing happened when the Women's Advisory Board was subjected to an intense campaign after issuing a press release (Suowar 2016). These cases have made the process of sharing the results of such dialogues a delicate matter. Elites fear that sharing this knowledge with staff and other workers will lead to security and reputational consequences, so they confine them to those high-level inner circles.

There is also an issue related to the CSSR as a knowledge-sharing venue. Since the forum cannot accommodate every member, they rotate the attendees. Because of this, CSOs may have a gap of one or two years before they are invited to participate again. This means that there is never a unified knowledge base spread to every member.

Travel logistics. Unfortunately, many individuals working with CSOs cannot move between countries for security or/and logistical reasons related to the lack of appropriate travel documents or the inability to obtain a visa. This factor was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, as Europe and Lebanon refused to host venues for Syrian dialogues and Syria's neighbors enacted movement restrictions. This lockdown affected all forms of divisions, whether across or within geographies. However, the period of the pandemic opened the way for virtual dialogues that were not previously possible.

Knowledge Gap. This can be related to the first factor, as some elites take issues of reputation and security as an excuse to monopolize access and knowledge. In addition, gaps

in knowledge and experience between the elites and lower-level workers have become very large. This is because the elites are consistently engaged in Track II dialogues and meetings with national representatives. The CSO actors without this experience lost confidence in themselves and became hesitant to enter into dialogues with the elites operating in the same geography, and with their counterparts elsewhere.

Administrative Workload. Administrative requirements take up a significant amount of time for CSOs. The requirements of donors in terms of documentation, setting policies, and writing reports have transformed a large number of CSOs into mechanical organizations in which non-elites have essentially become employees whose focus is on the interior issues of the organization to satisfy its donor, instead of working with their target communities, their interests or counterparts in other geographies.

Adding to all this is the barrier for any of the second generations of CSO actors to displace the elites or assume their responsibilities. Thus, there is an absence of younger CSOs and activists from the Track II dialogues. Instead, 12 years on in the Syrian conflict, there is a monopoly by those – often far away – leaders. This significantly limits the impact of these dialogues and prevents them from reaching the Syrian civil society workers. As one respondent confirms, "Another tremendous failure of the Syrian civil society is the absence of the second generation. The faces are the same as ten years ago, and the mechanisms of dialogue and narrative with the second generation do not work, and this is our fault."

Indeed, it is hard for the second generation to even get the experience required to participate in Track II dialogues and help fill in for the long-standing elites, which further entrenches the idea of a high-level closed loop. The elites have the necessary knowledge and networks, while the experience and knowledge gap has become so large that it discourages second-generation organizations from entering into critical dialogues and processes. A female participant from Idlib describes it as such, "The same female faces dominate the women's scene, the same women see them everywhere, and when a new group comes, they are not supported. No one is interested in supporting or connecting new young women or including them, neither in the governance bodies at home nor places of governance or decision-making abroad."

3.2 Four factors influencing divisions in Syrian CSOs

Looking one level deeper, we found that the territorial, sociopolitical, and organizational divisions above are influenced by several factors: de facto authorities, donors, and political polarization. Like the divisions, we will see that these factors can also overlap. The donor policies can affect (and can be affected by) the authorities. These policies may also burden the CSOs with sufficient administrative work to prevent civil society actors from seeing the big picture and building a common cause.

Here we review these influencing factors, some of which are internal, and can be controlled however slightly by the CSO. Others are external and completely out of their power to influence. The first three factors are external: geography, the de facto authority, and the donor. The last factor, CSO political polarization, is internal. The three divisions and the factors that influence them often intertwine and influence each other. Their general relationship is shown below:

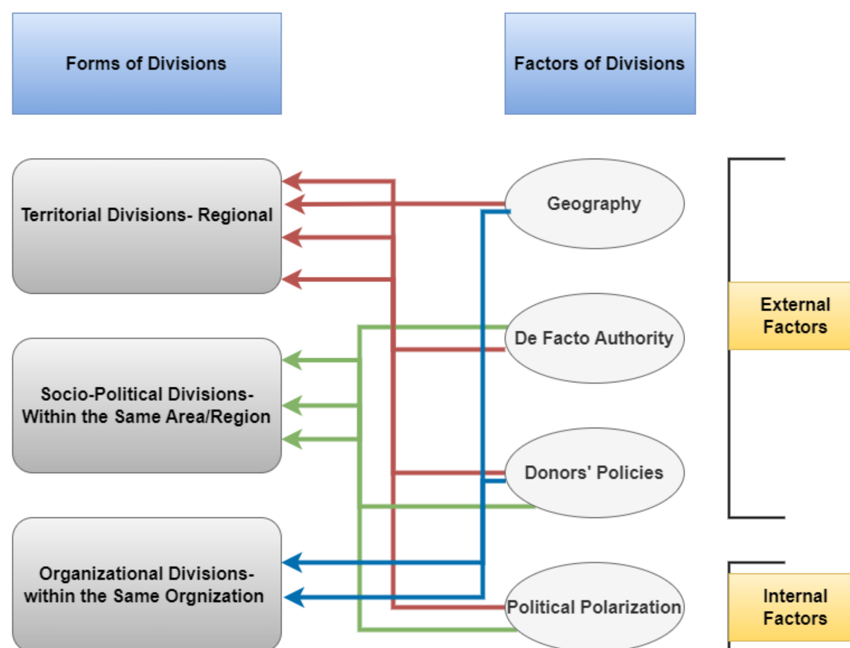

Figure 2: Divisions and influencing factors in Syrian CSOs

3.2.1 Geography

Geography is in the background of each division and even each factor. Although every major Syrian territory shares a border with the others, the centers of activity can be very far from those of their cross-border counterparts. For example, most CSO activity in

GHAs is centered around Damascus. Between this and the center of the AANES CSO activity exists a forbidding stretch of desert. The remoteness of the AANES contributes to a limited relationship with the GHAs, along with limited transportation means and the lack of economic exchange (previously, informal markets engendered some crosstalk here). Even at the level of education, students from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor mostly study in the universities of Aleppo, while a minority study in the universities of Homs and Damascus.

Notably, this factor is directly affected by the de facto authorities. As military battles are lost and won, borders shift, and the political landscape for the CSO changes. The same is true as e.g. Arab or Kurdish groups expand and occupy more territory.

Lastly, geographical separation heavily influences the divide between elites and workers in many CSOs. Due to their distance, organizational communications and alignment become more complex and less efficient.

3.2.2 The influence of de facto authorities

There was a consensus in the interviews that the territorial authorities negatively impact CSOs. However, the depth and form of this impact varies by location. Surprisingly, this has less to do with the *desire* of the de facto powers to control CSOs than their *ability*. Experience and funding also play large roles here.

3.2.2.1 Syrian government-held areas

"In the regime areas," a female participant tells us, "the security intelligence and Ba'ath party decide who is allowed to be registered or not." This registration, in turn, determines much of a CSO's fate in this region, particularly as it concerns monitoring and freedom of movement.

The government's policies of strict monitoring of CSOs in its areas, and the support for registered organizations over unregistered ones, significantly contribute to the division of CSOs in GHAs and across borders. For example, registered organizations enjoy official work facilities, the ability to move and travel, and moderately safe working conditions, while unregistered organizations do not. At the same time, the registered organizations are exposed to direct and intense interference from the regime, which has been known to make decisions on the CSO's behalf. Additionally, a representative of the security authorities often attends the meetings of the CSO's board.

However, this does not mean that unregistered organizations are free from monitoring. It simply takes a different form. The unregistered actors' travel and funding sources are under an ever-watchful government eye. Further, their leaders and staff are liable to be investigated and even arrested. Thus, these unregistered organizations are aggrieved by such policies and see themselves as victims of both the government and CSOs outside the GHAs (who consider them as tools of the regime).

The regime accomplishes this surveillance and influence of CSOs partly due to its longevity. Syrian government institutions predate the CSOs and have the most experience in governing them, compared to those in the AANES and the OHAs. Even with the stifling economic crisis, it is more resourced than its neighboring territories. Still, government policies vary from one sub-region to another. For example, CSOs in Sweida have much larger spheres of influence than in Damascus, Tartous, or Latakia. In contrast, there are relatively few CSOs – regardless of registration status – present in the so-called "reconciliation areas", where the government restored control from the opposition, including Daraa, and the countryside of Damascus, Homs, and Hama. Although some organizations work secretly in Daraa, their number is very limited due to the pressure from the authorities and the decline in donor funding.

In addition, the conditions of the registered organizations in the GHAs vary according to the nature of their registration. Approval from the Ministry of Social Affairs does not mean the organization can obtain donor funding without question. It also requires getting the Foreign Affairs Ministry's approval (either legally or illegally). Perhaps unsurprisingly, organizations that cannot obtain the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' approval view every organization registered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with suspicion.

These policies led to divisions within this region and beyond. Although CSOs in the GHAs are seen as government tools by outsider CSOs, those organizations in Sweida, with their relative freedom and donor policies, are seen more favorably. Because of this, CSOs in Sweida were able to build bridges with other CSOs, particularly those in OHAs.

3.2.2.2 Opposition-held areas

OHAs stand out, in that they are not affected solely by the policies of one political party, as in GHAs or the AANES. For example, CSOs in Idlib are affected by the HTS policies and its Salvation Government, while the CSOs in the northern and western

countryside of Aleppo, and some areas of the northern countryside of Raqqa, effectively answer to Turkey and the factions it has propped up within the OHAs. Compared to the impact of the Syrian government in GHAs, or even the Autonomous Administration, the HTS has a limited grasp on CSOs. This is due to several reasons. First, HTS is too weak to control a CSO that is robust and deeply rooted. Neither HTS nor its predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, was able to establish service institutions that compete with CSOs. The truth is that the HTS and its Salvation Government cannot fill the gap in civil society, because they cannot effectively run many services such as health, humanitarian aid, and others managed by CSOs. It is only since the establishment of the Salvation Government in late 2017 that they have begun to catch up. Second, Western funding obtained through CSOs remains vital to the economy of these regions. As such, the organizations of the OHAs enjoy financial power that most other CSOs lack. Third, in their attempts to gain legitimacy, HTS (and the Salvation Government) were unwilling to confront CSOs head-on, to avoid sending a negative message to the West and the donor class. Accordingly, they are concerned about clashes with the community if support were to stop because of their policies. However, the HTS is emboldened by the increasing experience of the Salvation Government and the reduction of Western funding for CSOs.

Turkey has sufficient expertise and resources to dominate CSOs in areas under its control, yet it tightens and eases this pressure according to the internal political situation. For example, the Turkish intervention in Idlib is similar to the American intervention in the AANES, in the sense that it leaves the administrative issues to the ruling authority, despite its military presence.

In the areas of the Turkish-backed factions, the Turkish government intervenes to the point of gatekeeping permission to work in these areas. Yet, after this permission is given, Turkish overwatch is reportedly mild, particularly among non-humanitarian affairs since they receive less funding. There are two exceptions to this trend. The first is in the Aleppo countryside, where Turkey differs from other countries intervening in Syria's affairs, such as the USA, Russia, and Iran. In this area, Turkey controls administrative issues, including spaces for civil action (particularly when it concerns humanitarian work). Here, Turkey is more akin to a territorial authority than a military force of intervention.

The second exception to Turkey's light touch governing is on the issue of networking with the CSOs across territorial borders. Although not explicitly forbidden, CSOs in this

region fear the Turkish government and its factions in this regard due to the increasing interrogations, investigations, and other disturbances. This led to a limit in the communication between these organizations and other CSOs, especially with organizations operating in the Autonomous Administration areas. A participant from Idlib clearly demonstrates this, saying:

> "We are unfamiliar with the efficacy of the organizations in the regime areas because of the security situation, and we do not know how the situation has become there. They certainly have some affiliation or a connection to a security branch to work without registration. I cannot understand how they work there without these links and connections. The same is true in the northeastern regions due to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. I do not want to know what is going on there, nor do they want to know because any contact between us will cause us trouble."

On the opposite side of this, the increase in the number of donors in the AANES prompted organizations from the OHAs towards cross-border communication, indicating that the "donor effect" may be higher than the effect from territorial authorities. In addition, the social pressure in the work environment may be higher than the pressure of the de facto authorities. Lastly, along its southern border, UN platforms and other Track II have made efforts to break the stalemate between the OHAs and the Syrian Government, with some success.

3.2.2.3 Areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration

The Autonomous Administration's control over CSOs is perceived as weak, due to asymmetric experience levels between the administration and the CSOs. Although the AANES has resources, many Kurdish organizations were formed before the administration, gaining experience, and building influence. Additionally, the Autonomous Administration tries to present itself as open to the West and the values of democracy. Giving space to CSOs is thus a way to communicate with the West and gain legitimacy. At the same time, CSOs are influenced by the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), a coalition of ethnic militias. A respondent from Al-Hasakah reports that "The military advisor to SDF has become the head of the civil society organization coalition."

Two biases exist in the AANES concerning CSOs. The first favors organizations that oversaw the formation of the administration over those independent of it. One participant from this region claims that “organizations not affiliated with the Autonomous Administration are not given permission or registration.” A second bias favors Kurdish organizations over Arab ones. As one CSO director puts it:

> A year ago, the movement [to improve relationships between Arab CSOs and the administration] began, and the relationship with the Autonomous Administration was regulated, but there is always dissatisfaction because it is afraid of any organization that it does not control, and they have no experience, and the organizations’ law is under discussion, and it is very bad.

Concerning communications, the Autonomous Administration does not prevent CSOs in its areas from networking with the actors in GHAs, although there are restrictions on communicating with those in the opposition areas. Even so, networking with GHAs is almost nonexistent due to the Syrian government's interference with *its* CSOs. The result is that there is in fact more crosstalk between the AANES and the OHAs.

While Track II and UN dialogues existed along OHA-GHA lines, these spaces could not create relations in the AANES due to the remarkable absence of administration representatives in the Geneva platforms, such as the Civil Society Support Room, the Constitutional Committee, and other Track II platforms. As such, OHA-GHA communication remains much greater than the AANES with either area, with the Arab regions of the AANES having the weakest networks.

3.2.3 The influence of donors

Donors decisively affect the networking between CSOs in the three geographies, by either empowering or isolating them. The donor's policies effectively define the areas of operation for the CSOs and the type of projects eligible for funding. Thus, they create the landscape in which the CSOs must strategize. For example, as the regime expands its territory, donors in those locations often close their wallets. One participant from Daraa echoes this: “if we had stayed out of the regime's control, our funding would have continued.” Thus, after the government takeover of the Daraa and Homs countryside, CSOs moved to Idlib and northwestern Syria in pursuit of funding.

On the other hand, as funding flowed towards Sweida, cooperation started to form between that area and the OHAs. Thus, sometimes funding development projects creates real bonds and ties among the civil society actors. Additionally, active communication between the civil society actors in the OHAs and the AANES began after the donors moved funding eastward, particularly after the HTS control over Idlib.

Yet, each donor plays by their own set of rules; no one policy encompasses the American, British, French, and German donors. Further, donors often do not talk with one another. Funds, however, do tend to be allocated foremost to the OHAs, then the AANES, and GHAs lastly. Another trend is the general reluctance to fund projects with cross-territory footprints and even those who partnered with CSOs outside their borders.

The common result is that projects are unequally funded. This creates competition and envy among CSOs. On one hand, donor policies empowered CSOs in OHAs. On the other hand, this resulted in a knowledge gap which made CSOs in other regions hesitant to work with those in the OHAs. If they *did* collaborate with them, this line of thinking goes, the OHA organizations would take advantage of the smaller, less funded organizations and any networking would be one-sided. Adding to this envy was the fact that the CSOs in the OHAs could afford higher salaries for their staff, while CSOs in other regions suffered from poor funding, on top of a general economic crisis. There is some reason to hope for increased networking, though, including the efforts to dialogue at donor-supported platforms, such as the Basel platform[7], the CSSR, and the European Union virtual platform. These helped bridge communication between CSOs in the competing territories.

Notably, donors influence not only the CSO landscape but also the very nature of civil society work. At the beginning of the uprising, CSO work was mostly voluntary, intricately linked with the community, and gave the impression they were working *with* the community rather than *on* it. Years on, partly due to funding dynamics, civil society work has turned into an industry that often aims more to appease the policies, procedures, and knowledge of the donor class, than for the benefit of the people. One effect of this is that civil society workers took on the appearance of employees in a mechanical institution, utterly different from the organic and spontaneous form it used to be.

[7] The Basel Platform is a cross boarder platform that includes organizations and public figures belonging to all the geographical areas of Syria.

3.2.4 The influence of political polarization

"Stop blaming the donor!" demands a respondent from an international organization, "blaming donors is nothing but a cover on which we hang our mistakes. CSOs have become lazy and unwilling to change anything." Indeed, CSOs often accuse both the de facto authorities and donor policies of their current situation. However, some participants claimed that CSOs' biggest obstacle was other CSOs. As another respondent puts it: "CSOs no longer have a common cause and common goals. We no longer have passion, despair, frustration, and difficult circumstances that make us unwilling to seek to break any deadlock." What they now have – in place of despair and frustration – is polarization.

The fragmentation between CSOs widened as military actions became commonplace. In the early days of the conflict, the polarity was characterized by the government supporters against the opposition. Shortly after, CSOs also separated along Kurdish lines. The division became more complex from there, so that civil society actors were not debating causes or priorities, and instead were acting in full partisanship to an ideological platform. Those who demand state sovereignty, the protection of its institutions, and the fight against terrorism see the CSOs trying to defend human rights as inextricably linked to the West and its agenda. In turn, human rights and democracy advocates see those wanting to fight terrorism and protect institutions as merely promoting the dictatorship. All civil society actors are taken in bad faith. Minority rights and decentralization advocates are accused of being secessionists while they accuse others of being apologists for tyranny (in GHAs) or terrorism (in OHAs). However, these causes are not strictly contradictory, and it is feasible to, for example, simultaneously want protected state institutions, human rights, and empowered minorities. Alas, none of the causes were at the core of the dialogue.

Until 2017, stark polarization among CSOs was matched only by their vitality. Soon after, the military intensity waned and was exchanged for other crises. The slowdown of political processes, the pandemic, geographical isolation, and economic woes all contributed to provincialism in CSOs. As a result, the divisions between borders deepened, and new sociopolitical divisions within each territory took shape. This was further exacerbated by a decline in funding, when, in addition to the community, CSOs now had to worry about funding their employee salaries. CSOs quieted in their isolation and organizations were primarily stirred by their own self-interest and organizational survival. One respondent from an international organization notes that "no party has a common Syrian issue, nor a procedure

that includes the Syrians." Further, each individual within Syria now had to fight to keep their job, with some founders leaving to look for an opportunity outside the country.

Common causes are mostly absent. Political entrenchment and polarization have stood in the way of women's rights, poverty alleviation, justice, and other causes that lacked adequate solidarity between the three regions. Until the first humanitarian, feminist, and justice organizations were eventually set up, each civil society actor looked suspiciously at its counterparts in other regions.

4. Recommendations

Respondents gave a broad range of recommendations to improve CSO relations in Syria. We categorized these thematically to identify strategies for mending the divides between Syrian CSOs (for a list form, see the executive summary).

Leverage what works. Not every aspect of civil society is driving Syrian CSOs apart; some entities and processes are helping organizations cohere against all odds. These things should be amplified for maximum effect. This includes leveraging shared causes, such as women's rights, to build cross-territorial CSO networks. Relatedly, early recovery programs should be used to encourage cooperation between CSOs serving different social groups and territories, avoiding isolated interventions in the humanitarian phase. We also know that some areas more readily work across political and territorial lines. It was suggested to utilize these less polarized areas with larger networks (i.e., Sweida, Salamiyah, and Daraa) as a pass-through for equitable funding across the regions.

Increase dialogue inclusivity. Some processes are working unequally across and within CSOs. There was a common suggestion to make Track II dialogues and events more inclusive. For example, we should broaden cross-territory communication via virtual dialogue platforms, such as the virtual civic platform supported by the European Union. Additionally, organizations such as the WAB and CSSR should be expanded to ensure wider participation from all regions, all ideologies, and particularly all age groups. This is because youth leaders are devising local initiatives more closely linked to community needs and carry a higher potential for impact.

Rethink funding. The current system funds on partisan lines.

To address the organizational divide, funding should be allocated based on the alignment of organization administrators and the workers in Syria. Administrators have

access to funds, development expertise, and relations to CSOs in other territories (not to mention easier lives). On the other side, local Syrian workers are close to the communities in need and can more directly impact the situation.

Across all levels, funding should be optimized for impact. The current funding bureaucracy and application process prioritizes organizational structure, compliance reporting, and documentation over effectively helping those in need. In addition to reducing these onerous reporting requirements, the system should reward social entrepreneurs who are solving community problems instead of CSO contractors singularly concerned with securing grants.

Create new foundations. Respondents acknowledged a need for civil society conferences to galvanize organizations with a common mission, especially the reunification of the country. Additionally, some advocated for the creation of a cross-territory (and cross-sociopolitical group) consortium for Syrian CSOs. This would localize civil work based on building cohesive national networks, bypass outside NGOs, and directly fund impactful organizations.

On the ground in Syria, respondents see benefits in establishing a civil media platform. This allows for unified messaging among CSOs, gives organizations a platform to work together, and enables organic initiatives of all sizes to form and coordinate with each other.

Apply pressure where appropriate. Syrian CSOs do not exist in a vacuum. Accordingly, participants said we should advocate in neighboring countries, specifically Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government), to facilitate cross-territory meetings. Practically, this could mean relaxing, or at least standardizing, visa requirements and covid restrictions across Syrian areas of control.

However, nowhere is pressure perhaps more important than in the territories of Syria. The territorial authorities as well as intervening military forces in Syria must open economic channels and facilitate mobility between the various regions of Syria. This increases cross-territory communication at a local level and enables CSOs to work together more closely.

To the donors, the territorial boundaries should be de-emphasized. Often, funding will be denied to a CSO merely because of their location. This associates CSOs with the respective territorial authorities to an excessive degree. After all, a distinction must be made between these service organizations and military institutions. CSOs should be allowed to deal with the territorial authorities to facilitate their work and enable them to network with other geographical areas.

5. Conclusion

This research attempted to study the reality of the Syrian CSO landscape after a decade of conflict in Syria, focusing mainly on the state of networking between CSOs operating in GHAs, OHAs, and the AANES. It showed that Syrian CSOs are just as polarized as the military and political landscape of the country. The resulting divisions are based on rivalry and hostility, and less on the way they differently prioritize causes. The three primary divisions we found were territorial, sociopolitical, and organizational. These divisions manifest as pro- vs anti-government, Arab vs Kurd, conservative vs secularist, and elites abroad vs the civil society worker in Syria.

Deepening these divisions are four influencing factors. The first is geography, which determines how easy it is for CSOs to physically interact and meet. Of course, this is itself determined by the second factor: The de facto authority. This factor determines the security, legal, and even logistical restrictions they impose on organizations operating in their control areas. Third, there is the critical role of the donor, who sets policies, priorities of work, administrative requirements, and eligible areas of operation. Of course, they also control which CSOs get funded, which has spillover effects on how civil society actors work with or avoid each other. The last factor is the political polarization of Syrian CSOs since the start of the conflict, whereby each CSO adopts a particular narrative that reinforces the divisions. When a sharp polarization began between actors operating in a single geography and affiliated with one side, fragmentation increased. In the end, almost every organization works individually and far from coordinating with other organizations even within the same geography.

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