

LEVANTINA CONSULTING

CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA

Origins, Trajectory, and the Post-Assad Transition

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A NOTE ON THIS PUBLICATION

This paper originated as a lecture on civil society development in Syria, co-presented with PAX at Radboud University in 2017, and was subsequently adopted into the department's examination materials for two consecutive academic years. Part I is presented substantially as it was originally developed, and should be read as a record of the period it describes, from the late Ottoman era through the first six years of the Syrian uprising. Part II is a new postscript, written in 2026, addressing the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the civil society landscape under Syria's transitional government.

PART I. CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA: THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Introduction

Before the popular uprising of March 2011, international organisations working in Syria on cultural, political, and development programming routinely found themselves operating in a vacuum. Many abandoned years of effort to build constructive relationships with local civil society institutions. The absence of an active, independent civil society was itself one of the structural conditions behind the country's crisis. Understanding where Syrian civil society stands today, and what its renewal might look like, requires looking back at the decades preceding and during Ba'ath Party rule.

Before the revolution, Syrian civil society was organised largely around charitable associations, which played a central role in social solidarity, and religious organisations, which were active in education, social assistance, and welfare provision.

Phase I: Before the Ba'ath Takeover (pre-1963)

The establishment of charities, educational associations, and cultural clubs in Syria began in the mid-nineteenth century. The first recorded charity, Bond of Love, was founded in 1874 as a scientific and educational initiative. Under French occupation, most such initiatives were suppressed precisely because they spread education and national consciousness; only organisations that posed no challenge to colonial policy were permitted to continue. Despite this, the period saw the establishment of political parties, newspapers, magazines, and theatre groups, evidence of a civil society that remained active through the 1940s and 1950s.

Phase II: The Ba'ath Consolidation (1963–1970)

After Hafez al-Assad took the presidency in 1971, he launched what was termed the Corrective Movement, sidelining the leftist and nationalist parties that had briefly shared power and installing the Ba'ath Party as, in the language of the 1973 constitution, the leader of state and society, a status that held until the 2012 constitution introduced after the uprising. The clubs and associations that had been genuinely active in the party's early years were gradually absorbed into its apparatus; only organisations aligned with its goals were permitted to operate, and the media came under comprehensive party control.

Phase III: Bashar al-Assad's Syria (2000–2011)

Under Bashar al-Assad, media remained under the control of the security services and the information ministry, which permitted only channels broadcasting support for the regime. Successive governments postponed legislation that would have enabled genuine political pluralism, citing external pressure, while framing civil society organisers as foreign agents seeking to topple the state. This produced waves of arrests targeting educational, social, and political figures. The effect was not to eliminate the movement but to deepen political consciousness among a generation of young Syrians, for whom debates on freedom of expression and human rights became increasingly current despite the risk.

From the early years of Bashar al-Assad's rule, international engagement grew, with the EU, Western embassies, and a handful of European NGOs working to identify and support Syrian civil society, and diplomats following legal cases against activists. Some Syrian activists took part in regional and international civil society networks, including on women's rights. The impact of this support remained limited throughout, constrained by the need to avoid endangering the people it was meant to protect.

Phase IV: The 2011 Uprising

The uprising began in Daraa in the south and spread nationwide as Syrians demanded political reform. The response was immediate and violent repression, which within weeks shifted popular demands from reform to the removal of the regime. In an attempt to project the appearance of dialogue, the government elevated the profile of the weak, state-controlled organisations nurtured for years by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, presenting them as partners in a national conversation. The attempt convinced no one, including many of the organisations themselves.

As mobilisation continued, informal but increasingly organised structures took shape. Local Coordinating Committees emerged across the country to organise demonstrations, manage public communications, build networks, and raise funds. In areas that came under opposition control, some of these structures were institutionalised as Local Councils, which took on the delivery of public services from healthcare and education to waste management and the judiciary, with capacities that varied significantly from one area to another. Citizen journalism filled the vacuum left by the expulsion of foreign correspondents. Medical and humanitarian networks expanded rapidly, supported by newly founded organisations inside Syria and abroad. Civil society groups formed across nearly every sector of social life, including independent student movements and new currents within trade unions that had long functioned as an arm of the party-state.

International organisations, whose principal obstacle had previously been government bureaucracy, now faced a different challenge: partnering with fragile, newly formed organisations operating under extreme conditions. This required a degree of flexibility and an assumption of good faith that sat uneasily with the procurement and due-diligence rules of many donor institutions, a tension that has never been fully resolved. Early international solidarity took concrete form. US Ambassador Robert Ford's visits to demonstrations in the spring of 2011 briefly helped restrain police violence and were followed by regular contact between European

diplomats and activists. In Germany, Syrian exiles and German civil society launched Adopt a Revolution to support nonviolent local groups, a campaign PAX joined in the Netherlands, alongside separate initiatives supporting independent media and women's rights organisations.

Civil Society on the Ground

By the middle of the decade, the country was militarily fragmented among regime forces backed by Hezbollah and Russia, ISIS, other Islamist factions, more moderate opposition groups, and separately administered Kurdish-controlled areas in the north. This fragmentation was mirrored in the scale of displacement it produced: at the time of writing, close to 4.9 million Syrians were registered as refugees, including some 29,000 in North African countries, alongside an estimated 110,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria across the region. A further 6.3 million people were internally displaced, including 280,000 displaced Palestinian refugees.

Civil society organisations grew in step with these needs. A mapping exercise conducted by Citizens for Syria identified 1,012 organisations founded since the uprising began, of which 837 were verified as active inside or outside the country.

Successful Stories

Women's role in the uprising was substantial from its earliest days. Women took on the protection and care of men and young men at risk of arrest, managed the logistics of moving protest materials, and, through their media coverage, documented some of the conflict's worst episodes of shelling and bombing. Aleppo became one of the first local councils to include women in political leadership positions; Daraya later held elections in which women stood as candidates.

A number of women-led organisations took shape around this momentum. The Syrian Women's Network, known as Shams, was founded in May 2013 to work on gender equality, education, and human rights, and grew to encompass around 30 member organisations and 200 individuals, concentrated in Damascus and Latakia. The Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy pursued a more explicitly political mandate, working to expand women's participation in negotiations and taking part in the Geneva talks, operating entirely from abroad. The Syrian Feminist Lobby, an independent political platform, advocated for equal participation of women and men across all levels of political decision-making. The Women's Cultural Forum in Qamishli created a space for cultural exchange and capacity building among women in the north-east.

Individual recognition followed as well. Majed Shurbaji received the US government's International Women of Courage Award in March 2015 for her advocacy work through Enab Baladi, one of the most widely read magazines to emerge from the revolution. Her recognition sits alongside the record of Razan Zaitouneh, the human rights defender who, together with colleagues, was abducted from her office in Eastern Ghouta in December 2013 after years documenting regime violations. She would go on to receive five international prizes, none of which she was able to accept in person.

Grassroots organisations built durable models of civic action under extreme conditions. Kesh Malek, or Checkmate, was founded by a group of young people in Aleppo in January 2012 to promote nonviolence. Its first major project, the Freedom Calendar, paired each month with a quotation from Syrian poets and intellectuals including Nizar Qabbani, Saadallah Wannous, and

Muhammad al-Maghout. The group ran campaigns opposing the regime's 2012 constitutional referendum and later parliamentary elections, organised demonstrations, and delivered grassroots programming that included a children's festival in the Bustan al-Qasr neighbourhood, cleaning campaigns, a school named for a fallen member, and psychological support for children affected by the conflict. As conditions worsened, many of its activists moved into humanitarian work or left the country, while the group itself remained committed to grassroots civic action.

Displacement also produced new forms of mutual aid organised around digital connectivity. Dubarah, a colloquial Syrian term for resourceful, improvised problem-solving, began as a Facebook page run by a small group of volunteers and grew into a registered nonprofit active across more than 30 countries, connecting the diaspora around scholarships, employment, training, and practical support in adapting to life abroad. As reported at the time by Syria Untold, informal courier and delivery networks also emerged to move goods, documents, and even flowers and cakes into Syria by hand, circumventing a postal system that was by then blocked, heavily monitored, or simply unreliable.

Baytna Syria positioned itself differently again, as a convening platform for Syrian civil society inside and outside the country, hosting events and lectures, connecting civil society actors with donors, and creating space for young artists.

International Support: Achievements and Limitations

International engagement with Syrian civil society had been present, in limited form, since the early years of the uprising, when embassies in Damascus still played a role. Most Western missions closed by early 2012, after which diplomatic engagement shifted to Turkey and Lebanon, particularly following the EU Foreign Affairs Council's 2012 recognition of the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Gaziantep, close to the Syrian border, became a hub for Syrian civil society, the opposition, and the international organisations supporting them.

That support was significant, but it came with recurring structural problems. Many international organisations concentrated on training and capacity building, particularly once rising violence made direct operations inside Syria unsafe, yet coordination across these programmes was often weak. Between 2013 and 2016, when support to civil society was at its peak, some Syrians moved from one training to the next without a realistic opportunity to apply what they had learned. International organisations frequently set their own priorities without adequately consulting Syrian civil society on the needs of the population, producing programming that was donor-driven rather than locally grounded. Overhead funding was often insufficient to allow organisations to build lasting institutional capacity, compounding the effect of short funding cycles.

Coordination problems extended to the relationship between donors, the Syrian Opposition Coalition and its successor structures, and civil society itself, as well as between Syrians operating inside the country and those working from abroad. Most civil society groups remained closely tied to the aims of the revolutionary movement while holding a critical view of the Coalition's leadership. Instances of misused funding, inflated salaries, and corruption were documented, a

familiar pattern in large-scale aid and civil society programming, though the sums involved remained modest set against the running costs of the UN's own operations in and around Syria.

Syria in 2017: A Snapshot

By 2017, the regime, with Russian and Iranian backing, had consolidated its hold on Homs and Damascus, retaken parts of Aleppo, and reached Deir ez-Zor, with Russian-brokered arrangements locking in its gains in the west. Opposition figures were right to point to the role of foreign support in these advances, but the more consequential shift was the steady decline of international backing for the Syrian opposition itself, and the fraying of the coalition of states that had once championed it. More than 60 nations attended the first Friends of Syria conference in Tunis in February 2012; by 2017 that coalition had shrunk considerably, as the political opposition grew visibly detached from the Syrian public it claimed to represent, more focused on its own standing in international meetings than on translating that standing into change on the ground, a detachment compounded by credible allegations of corruption among some of its representatives.

Support to armed and exiled opposition groups continued in more limited form, largely where it served the interests of foreign sponsors, Turkey's use of Syrian allies against Kurdish forces being the clearest example, but serious international backing for the opposition as a political project had by then effectively ended. Support for civil society followed a different trajectory. Many projects closed, though some continued in areas still outside regime control, and new Syrian-led political movements formed around the conviction that a negotiated, democratic outcome remained achievable. Western and EU funding for civil society and the diaspora held broadly steady even as political support waned, sustained in large part by the EU's continued framing of civil society development as one of the few unambiguously positive outcomes of the Syrian revolution, and by its ongoing commitment to the Brussels conference process on humanitarian aid and reconstruction.

On accountability, the Netherlands stood among the more consistent supporters of documentation and justice mechanisms, though the pace of such processes, illustrated by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's conviction of Ratko Mladić some 25 years after the Srebrenica genocide, offered a sobering measure of how long meaningful accountability can take to arrive.

PART II. POSTSCRIPT, 2026: CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER ASSAD

Bashar al-Assad's regime fell in December 2024, after a rebel offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham reached Damascus and brought Syria's thirteen-year civil war to a close. Ahmed al-Sharaa, the movement's leader, was declared transitional president the following month. A constitutional declaration for the transitional period took effect in March 2025, and a 23-member cabinet, dominated by al-Sharaa's closest allies alongside a smaller number of technocrats, civil society figures, and holdovers from the former regime, replaced the caretaker government that had governed since Assad's departure. An interim legislative assembly was selected through an indirect process in October 2025.

For Syrian civil society, the transition opened a door that had been closed for decades: the possibility of operating openly inside the country. Within days of the regime's fall, a coalition of some 44 independent civil society organisations submitted a legal memorandum to the caretaker authorities calling for a time-bound, inclusive transition that would guarantee civil society's meaningful participation and lay the groundwork for a political order consistent with the demands of 2011. Diaspora organisations, many built over a decade of exile, have had to rethink their role in parallel, as the centre of gravity shifts back toward organisations working inside Syria for the first time since the uprising began.

That opening has not resolved the structural problems this paper set out in 2017; if anything, it has restated them under new conditions. Accountability remains highly selective. Some prosecutions have proceeded, including of figures directly implicated in the abuses that triggered the 2011 uprising, but the transitional government has yet to articulate a clear transitional justice framework, and individuals with documented records of serious abuse remain in senior positions. Security has not stabilised uniformly: violence targeting Alawite communities on the coast in March 2025 and Druze communities in the south in July 2025, alongside continuing friction with Kurdish-led forces in the north-east into 2026, has tested the transitional government's claim to represent all Syrians, not only its own wartime constituency. The funding environment has proven just as fragile as during the uprising years, with the 2025 suspension of USAID funding forcing established organisations, including the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center, to halt programming overnight, even as EU and other donor support has continued in more limited form.

The scale of return is real and significant, with roughly 1.3 million Syrians going home in 2025 alone, nearly triple the number the previous year, and global refugee numbers falling from close to six million to under five million. It is also, on its own, an incomplete measure of recovery. Returnees are met with insecurity, war-damaged infrastructure, weak public services, and a labour market that has yet to absorb them, and reintegration now ranks among the transition's central and unresolved challenges.

Professional engagement with governance and social cohesion programming inside Syria through 2025 and 2026 confirms much of this picture from the ground. Local governance structures are reconstituting themselves faster than public trust is following them. Civil society remains fragmented along both old, wartime lines and new fault lines opened by the transition

itself, including real tension between those who stayed through the war and those returning from abroad with stronger donor relationships but weaker local legitimacy. Participation channels between citizens and local decision-makers remain structurally weak, often amplifying the voice of the same familiar, externally connected actors rather than the communities programmes are meant to serve. These are not new findings so much as the same civil society dynamics this paper described in 2017, now operating in the more open, and in some ways more exposed, conditions of a country rebuilding its institutions from a genuine transition rather than managing a stalemate.

What has changed is the terrain of possibility. For the first time since the period this paper opened with, before 2011, Syrian civil society has a real chance to build durable, locally rooted institutions rather than parallel structures designed to survive repression or war. Whether that chance is realised will depend less on the volume of international support, which history suggests will fluctuate as it always has, than on whether that support is finally structured around the same principle Syrian civil society has been articulating since the charitable associations of the nineteenth century: that legitimacy is built locally, and cannot be substituted by funding, however well intentioned, arriving from outside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Khayyata is Founder and Senior Advisor of Levantina Consulting, an independent advisory practice specialising in governance, social cohesion, conflict-sensitive programming, and HLP rights across the MENA region and Europe. Her career spans more than fourteen years, including roles as Senior Advocacy and Communications Officer with The White Helmets and Project Leader for HLP rights at PAX for Peace. She advises international organisations and donor agencies on governance and social cohesion programming in Syria, and has been published and quoted in NRC and Pharos. This paper draws on a lecture originally co-presented with PAX at Radboud University.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Citizens for Syria, mapping study on Syrian civil society (2015) <https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/CfS-mapping-phase1-EN.pdf>
- Rana Khalaf, research with Badael and Chatham House <http://st-andrews.academia.edu/RanaKhalaf>
- Local to Global, on funding agencies and contractors in Syria <http://www.local2global.info/area-studies/funding-syria>
- The Day After, survey studies <http://tda-sy.org/en/category/publications/survey-studies>
- Dr. Zaidoun al-Zoubi, on medical civil society organisations in Syria [http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/syrian-medical-ngos-in-the-crisis\(1\).pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/syrian-medical-ngos-in-the-crisis(1).pdf)