

# Getting the Message Out:

Coordinating International and Regional  
Communication in the Syrian Conflict



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# Getting the Message Out: Coordinating International and Regional Communication in the Syrian Conflict


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The logo for Bellingcat, featuring the word "bellingcat" in a white, lowercase, monospace-style font centered within a solid black rectangular background.

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Maintaining and preserving an institution during a war is a very difficult task, so what about building one from scratch?

–Munir Mustafa, Deputy Director of Syria Civil Defense

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# Executive Summary

Tracing the evolution of communication in the Syrian conflict reveals complex networks of coordination. The lack of direct access is at the core of this evolution—for international actors to provide humanitarian and monitoring support, for regional actors to be included in the decision-making process, and for civilians’ concerns and experiences to be considered.

Changing approaches to communication have taken center stage to overcome these barriers. While communication strategies develop to leverage the strength of representative messaging, more effective coordination among regional and international organizations is needed.

Through mapping the coordination of regional and international networks, surveying capacity-building efforts, and analyzing changing theories of change, this report assesses how communication has shaped and been shaped in the Syrian conflict. Prepared by graduate student consultants at the Central European University School of Public Policy for Bellingcat, this report is based on findings from 30 interviews from international and regional organizations working in the context of the Syrian conflict. Upon surveying the sort of networks formed, it analyzes their effectiveness. The report further discusses strategies to bridge the work of local and international organizations. It concludes by observing possible organizational theories of change. This report seeks to offer support for organizations working in the context of the Syrian civil war. For other conflicts likewise, this report seeks to understand the opportunities and challenges that arise when designing a communications strategy.

Key findings include:

- Organizational networks and coalitions in the region, particularly in Turkey, seek to shape advocacy and coordination efforts by linking critical voices from within Syria to the international community. It is critical that organizations based in Gaziantep be proactively included and represented on the international level.
- International organizations play a critical role in facilitating the representation of regional interests. Connecting with Syrian diaspora communities plays a crucial role in their resonance. Challenges include finding ways to remain neutral to work in all regions of Syria and to comply with donors who might not be aware of the best ways to provide support.

- Syrian organizations involved in professionalism and training activities aim at reaching international organizations to build collaboration and produce joint projects. These activities support their participation at the international level and increase the visibility of the situation on the ground.
- In the context of grave violations and disinformation campaigns, strategic advocacy emerged to produce change. The practice is still incipient, but its development can further bridge actors working toward the same goals. Strengthening relations with international organizations and regional actors with the goal of better understanding the local context is critical in the pursuit of justice and accountability.

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# Introduction

Many humanitarian aid, media, justice and accountability, and civil society organizations (CSOs) formed to address unprecedented needs arising from the Syrian conflict. While efficiency in communication among these organizations requires complex planning, the conflict exposed unforeseen challenges—one that transformed communication and coordination into an ongoing experiment.

Ongoing organizational development involves the need to communicate information among each other (coordination) and outwardly (advocacy) in innovative and creative ways. Efforts in the latter stress the need to get the message across to supporters and funders, challenging in the face of increasing fatigue rather than sympathy from the international community. Organizational reinvention in this matter is a crucial task to minimize the deaths of Syrians and to hold those who violate international law responsible for crimes.

This report examines the existing regional and international organizational networks working in the Syrian conflict. Interviews of individuals working in key organizations helped inform the best and worst practices of coordination and advocacy. Further, gaps in this field of work have been identified and recommendations for organizations working in a conflict setting or planning to work in such a setting are given.

The first two sections of the report map regional and international efforts of coordination, concluding with how such coordination has or has not achieved goals set out. The third section examines the divide between international and local organizations and how capacity-building programs have helped bridge or disconnect them from each other. The report ends with an analysis of three theories of change that organizations should consider. These involve the use of communication strategies, the need for regionally-based organizations to pursue a better understanding of Syrian needs and priorities, and the tentative solutions organizations are coming up with to overcome the world's fatigue with the Syrian war.

## Section 1

### Mapping of regional networks

There is a lack of access for international humanitarian, justice and accountability, and media actors to provide humanitarian relief and monitor conflict incidents on the ground. With the heavy presence of displaced Syrians in the region and, particularly, in Turkey, several Syrian-led organizations were established to address these gaps in direct international support. These organizations have pioneered communication efforts through the development of networks to increase the visibility of Syrian needs. The impact of these networks is demonstrated through providing ongoing humanitarian relief, surveying the needs of Syrians, and connecting international justice and accountability actors to eyewitnesses. As a critical link between international organizations and on-the-ground efforts in Syria, regional networks should be proactively included and represented at the international level.

This section looks at the formation of networks among primarily regionally-headquartered and based organizations in Turkey focusing efforts on the Syrian conflict. The sectors looked at include humanitarian, civil society, justice and accountability, and media. It also maps existing networks and regionally-driven coordination, seeking to answer the following questions:

- Why and how were these networks formed?
- How have or haven't these networks produced desired results?

#### Humanitarian Networks

Providing sufficient and timely humanitarian relief has been challenging because of barriers to international humanitarian access in Syria. Regionally-based networks seek to address these challenges by maintaining direct ties of communication and coordination efforts with affected communities. The types of coordination are classified here in two ways: first, cooperation among regional Syrian humanitarian organizations that have links on the ground in Syria; and second, cooperation between regional and international organizations aimed at facilitating external support. The networks were formed with the overall mission to have sustained and planned humanitarian support rather than that which is ad hoc and reactive.

The Syrian Networks League (SNL) has been vital to represent the interests and priorities of Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the humanitarian response. They act

through coordinated press releases and outreach with various international actors. They were involved, for example, in implementing the selection criteria for the limited number of seats for Syrian NGOs in the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) in Turkey in 2016.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Whole of Syria approach, the HLG, as well as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) Clusters, and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), among other groups, are involved in the cross-border humanitarian response between Turkey and Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Among SNL members is the Gaziantep-based Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA), a key actor in cooperation efforts among regional humanitarian organizations.<sup>3</sup> Formed in 2014 to leverage a voice in the international humanitarian response among Syrian-driven humanitarian efforts, SNA has 18 members. Most member organizations are registered in Turkey and have field offices or strong ties in parts of Syria.<sup>4</sup> SNA Coordinator Mohammed Alhammedi said that the network was formed as a response to a lack of inclusion of Syrian NGOs in the decision-making coordination bodies available for the humanitarian response, although most of the humanitarian work was being done by local NGOs and Syrians, in particular. Likewise, SNA was formed to improve coordination and information sharing among Syrian-led efforts. Through collecting information from locally-based member NGOs, the SNA conduct representative needs assessments.

Regarding the direct, on-the-ground response to emergencies, Syria Civil Defense (SCD), also known as the White Helmets, started out as a voluntary network of defected fire brigade members in areas not controlled by the regime.<sup>5</sup> The team in Al Atarib, in the Aleppo Governorate, learned about similar volunteer teams forming in other areas and began to coordinate and cooperate with them to improve their response. In 2013, the various teams formed a directorate and began establishing a centralized administration. This was also the year that they started receiving donor support from Netherlands-based Mayday Rescue. By March 2014, the national body of the SCD was formed with representation in eight provinces as well as bylaws and regulations. With the introduction of GoPro cameras as an initiative by Mayday, the SCD started providing on-the-ground footage of their emergency response activities.

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<sup>1</sup> “Interview with Mohammed Alhammedi, Coordinator of the Syrian NGO Alliance,” 11 February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “Turkey Cross-Border | HumanitarianResponse,” accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima>.

<sup>3</sup> “Interview with Mohammed Alhammedi, Coordinator of the Syrian NGO Alliance,” 11 February 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Syrian NGO Alliance | Home,” accessed June 6, 2018, <http://syrianna.org/en>.

<sup>5</sup> “Interview with Munir Mustafa, Deputy Director of Syria Civil Defense,” February 8, 2018.

## How have or haven't these networks produced desired results?

In lieu of access for international humanitarian actors, regional and on-the-ground actors have developed important networks to coordinate humanitarian responses. This led to issues of representation among the international humanitarian community. The Gaziantep-headquartered SNL and SNA have organized efforts primarily among regionally-based humanitarian organizations so information about humanitarian needs in Syria reach the international community.

One example of the issue of representation arose in 2015 during the preparation of the 2016 humanitarian plan. The plan that included contributions from Turkey's HLG and Amman based on needs assessments required a final consultation with the Syrian government. This led to the removal of language regarding protection as well as an indication of NGOs working outside government-controlled areas. The UN country coordinator approved of these changes. SNA Coordinator Mohamad Alhammadi noted, "At the end, the Syrian government is a conflict party, so you cannot give the plan to them to change it, especially when you have something related to protection."<sup>6</sup> In response to this, 73 Syrian NGOs in Turkey signed a letter suspending information sharing with the UN's Syria structure, with the Clusters based in Gaziantep, which also share the information with Damascus and Jordan. Their agreement on the terms to suspend information sharing led to a full review for the Syria humanitarian coordination systems, leading to improved communication with the HLG and a plan representative of their priorities in 2017.

Another positive outcome for coordination among humanitarian actors is the implementation of a standard data collection and verification process. Within the SNA, upon receiving said confirmation through an established channel of communication from several members based in Syria, the SNA determines how best to act. That includes solving issues through informal networks with actors on the ground. For example, if an incident caused by armed groups is reported, the SNA would facilitate strategic communications to determine if armed groups will respond better without drawing public attention to the incident.

Members of the network have also learned from experience. One example is the communication of the humanitarian situation in besieged Eastern Aleppo in 2016. Although some hospitals were operating and food and medical resources were still available, miscommunication among media and humanitarian actors spread the message that there were no longer any health

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<sup>6</sup> "Interview with Mohammed Alhammadi, Coordinator of the Syrian NGO Alliance," 11 February 2018.

facilities or supplies available. Civilians reacted by demanding to surrender and leave. Despite the messaging of dire conditions, the government military operations in Aleppo advanced. As a result, the SNA and other networks sought to communicate better and avoid the same mistake in besieged Eastern Ghouta.<sup>7</sup>

Principled action and transparency now guide various regional humanitarian networks' approach, besides the improvement of communication channels, effective advocacy, and on-the-ground coordination.<sup>8</sup> However, international humanitarian organizations have limited access to Syria, which prevents them from responding directly to victims' needs.

## Civil Society Networks

With the growth of Syrian civil society after the uprising, several locally and regionally based organizations formed to advocate for a democratic Syria. Locally-based grassroots efforts in opposition-held areas started and expanded. Many relocated their efforts or at least their headquarters to Turkey to formalize their operations and to receive support from donors.<sup>9</sup> As they grew to be more institutionalized, coordinated networks came about to enable information sharing and cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

One of the key players that emerged from that landscape is Baytna Syria. Established in 2013 and headquartered in Gaziantep, it serves as a hub for civil society organizations (CSOs). Baytna gives grants for projects and supports capacity building inside Syria. In Gaziantep, it provides facilities where CSOs can meet and the space for trainings and workshops.<sup>11</sup> Field officers on the ground in six provinces enable them to directly develop and maintain a network of sub-grantees of community-based organizations.

Prior to Baytna, grant-making activities were primarily done by foreign donors, which required documentation and provided training in English. By providing grants and conducting activities in Arabic, Baytna reaches a much wider community inside Syria. Being a Syrian organization brings them additional advantages: their sharper understanding of the local context drives them to respond directly to local needs rather than using pre-packaged international models.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Interview with Mohammed Alhammedi, Coordinator of the Syrian NGO Alliance," 11 February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Interview with Fadi Hakim, Program Manager of the Syrian Civil Society Coalition/Shaml," 12 February 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria," February 12, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria," February 12, 2018.

The Syrian Civil Society Coalition, or Shaml, was established in 2015. Headquartered in Gaziantep, it is a coalition of six CSOs: Basmeh & Zeitouneh, Emissa, Kesh Malek, Local Development and Small Projects Support, Olive Branch, and Women Now. Formed to better coordinate civil society activities and avoid overlapping, Shaml is implementing a strategic approach to build on organizational capacity, outreach, and advocacy efforts.<sup>13</sup> Similarly to connect civil society activities, Gaziantep-based Citizens for Syria has been mapping civil society and community-based organizations and conducting capacity assessments since 2015.

### **How have or haven't these networks produced desired results?**

With decidedly political agendas, CSOs formed from among the networks of activists after the uprising. The formalization of these organizations through networks and the coordination of activities helped to map who is doing what and how their efforts can be improved through more community-based and Syrian-led needs assessment and capacity building efforts. Among the most important roles of the civil society networks is their ability to connect local civil society—through access and the ability to operate within these areas—to the international community, a connection which was lacking, and which remains an issue.

The process of selection of international meeting attendees remains opaque and creates frustration among many Syrian CSOs who are excluded. Further, regional networks noted that there is a lack of understanding by the UN of the needs for a meaningful Syrian civil society participation. Currently such civil society groups and networks as Baytna and the SNL either conduct lobbying efforts or produce press releases with a high number of signatories.

There is a lack of formal coordination with those inside regime-held areas. Assaad Al Achi noted that while Baytna, for example, maintains lines of communication with the Syrian opposition, it does not mean they are supportive of much of its actions. As many of the CSOs and networks take a human rights-based approach, they have no lines of communication with and are not tolerated by the Syrian government.<sup>14</sup> Barriers to accessing actors based in regime-supported areas made matters worse. Eyad Al Khattab explains his concern with the lack of coordination with the regime-held areas, especially because family members of many involved in CSOs live in these areas and need support.<sup>15</sup> In regime-held areas, civil society is virtually silent and operating with

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<sup>13</sup> "Shaml," Shaml Alliance, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.shamlcoalition.org/branding-strategy>.

<sup>14</sup> "Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria," February 12, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> "Interview with Eyad Khattab of Citizens for Syria," February 11, 2018.

significant risk, if at all.

Despite the amount of coordination, institutionalization, and organizational development, regionally-based civil society networks are still struggling to have their advocacy reach the international audience in a way that results in a meaningful response. There seems to be a demand or expectation from the international community that Syrian civil society should make a “palatable ask” of international decision-makers. One issue addressed by Syrian organizations is the gap in the coordination with the Syrian diaspora where international decision-makers are based to effectively advocate and reach the international community. Assaad Al Achi noted the importance of mobilization on the international front, which is where increased networking with the Syrian diaspora could be most helpful.<sup>16</sup> Lubna Kanawati of Women Now for Development in Syria notes that there are important ways in which coordination between various networks within Syria and internationally can happen.

A campaign for Daraya, for example, helps illustrate how improved coordination can result in successful actions. The campaign, Women for Daraya, was facilitated by a partnership with Women Now, the US-based Syria Campaign, and the Daraya Local Council. Women in Daraya advocated to break the siege and called for urgent aid to the city. “It was a powerful campaign that reached very high levels, including a response from the Parliament of the UK,” she says. “This kind of advocacy campaign created a network among local women in different areas and also reached international women.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, networking with community-based efforts and grassroots activities on the ground in Syria remains among the most effective ways to attract support. Further, a planned, networked strategy set out before the launching of a campaign is vital—and currently an exception—for effective advocacy and outreach.

## **Justice and Accountability**

International justice and accountability organizations lack direct access to Syria, despite it being one of the most documented conflicts. Filling this gap, regional organizations are taking the lead in facilitating networks for documentation. Aiming at justice and accountability efforts, they have maintained direct links with international actors to ensure that evidence collected on the ground meets international standards and reaches the international community. Besides bringing attention to violations, they also focus on archiving evidence that might lead to prosecutions of war crimes.

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<sup>16</sup> “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> “Interview with Lubna Al kanawati, Country Manager of Women Now for Development,” February 12, 2018.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) was formed in 2016 in Istanbul by people who witnessed the conflict on the ground and were familiar with the local context. Their goal is to verify and document the high volume of information coming out of Syria in an unbiased manner.<sup>18</sup> “To have a strong approach to justice, we have to start with justice in documentation,” said Bassam Al Ahmad of STJ. Acknowledging the need to coordinate efforts with legal experts in data verification, STJ has been focusing on these connections. Besides working with direct eyewitness reports from members and activists known for pursuing higher technical standards, STJ partners with organizations to draft reports, including Syria-based Justice for Life Organization.

There are other organizations working on similar efforts. The Violations Documentation Center (VDC) has been conducting documentation efforts since 2011 with a strong presence on the ground throughout Syria.<sup>19</sup> In addition to adhering to international legal standards, the VDC has formal links with international donors and partners, including Open Society Foundations, the Asfari Foundation, International Media Support, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

## **How have or haven't these networks produced desired results?**

Regionally-driven Syrian justice and accountability efforts are networked among one another and with international actors, contributing evidence in the form of witness testimonies, videos, and social media. Organizations like STJ facilitate direct access to trustworthy and credible sources, seeking to empower Syrians to document and speak out against violations. As such, they play a key role in coordinating documentation of conflict incidents. More of the formally-established networks of justice and accountability are internationally based. Organized on-the-ground monitoring efforts are hampered by a lack of access for international justice and accountability organizations. Without direct access, the difficulty of documenting incidents increases, which will be further elaborated upon in the next chapter.

## **Media**

The uprising and start of the conflict led to the establishment of several media agencies and citizen journalists providing active reporting of incidents. Many Syrians active in the media landscape

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<sup>18</sup> “Interview with Bassam Al Ahmad, CEO of Syrians for Truth and Justice,” February 8, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> “Our Story,” Violations Documentation Center in Syria, <http://vdc-sy.net/our-story/>



professionalized and expanded their efforts to fill the gap in the lack of international direct access to reporting on the ground. Regionally-based media organizations were established to institutionalize independent media efforts.

Enab Baladi, consistently in operation and established in Daraya in 2011, was a crucial player in the early days of the conflict in providing an independent and free outlet when the media was monopolized by the Syrian regime.<sup>20</sup> In addition to several news media products, Enab Baladi has a robust offering of training for Syrian journalists. The trainings incorporate the latest trends in media and journalism, qualifying journalists with the most up-to-date skills of the industry.<sup>21</sup>

Amman-based Syria Direct was founded in 2013 by Jordanian Amjad Tadros, the Middle East producer for CBS News and 60 Minutes.<sup>22</sup> It was established when the international war reporting community was no longer able to report from inside Syria with the goal to apply “the experience of the international war reporting community with the local grassroots-level perspective, knowledge, and connections of Syria’s nascent citizen journalism community,” according to Managing Director Justin Schuster.<sup>23</sup> The organizations’ staff is connected with most sectors analyzed in this section. Noura Hourani, managing Arabic editor of Syria Direct, noted that she has been in touch with various sources including justice and accountability bodies at both local and international levels. Such connections resulted in more stories related to this field being published by the outlet, a sign of cross-sector collaboration in media coverage from Syria.

Verify.sy, a website dedicated to fact-check news related to the conflict and better inform the international organizations working in the context of the conflict, was established in 2016 in Aleppo. Ahmad Primo, a programmer and founder of the news platform, said he has received support and offered his to regionally-based organizations working in different fields as a way of further checking and correcting fake content published on social media or news platforms. Most of his 800 fact-checked pieces on Verify.sy counted on volunteers and stringers on the ground in Syria and on collaboration with other organizations’ representatives, including Kesh Malek and networks of regionally-based organizations.

## **How have or haven’t these networks produced desired results?**

Despite starting from a landscape of no free independent press, efforts of media organizations like

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<sup>20</sup> “Interview with Jawad Sharbaji, Chief Editor of Enab Baladi,” February 8, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Interview with Justin Schuster, Managing Editor of Syria Direct,” April 5, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Enab Baladi emerged and earned a highly reputable status on an international level. “In terms of the value of our content, Enab Baladi was cited for the third year the most influential and effective among Syrian media outlets. BBC website mentioned five Syrian newspapers, four of them are governmental or regime oriented. “They have cited us as the only independent Syrian media outlet,” said Chief Editor Jawad Sharbaji.

The connections between the media and other sectors also helped shape their own coverage. By establishing sources with representatives of these sectors, the media further broadened the scope of its reporting and included issues and experts’ views on justice and accountability, as in the case of Syria Direct and Enab Baladi. This is among the reasons why the media has been one of the most successful sectors in channeling the international community’s attention to victims of the war in comparison with other sectors analyzed here. Because of its nature, it’s also one of the most well-connected sectors. Still, their power in getting stories replicated or further developed by international media outlets depends more on the latter’s interests than in local outlet’s capacity to attract their attention to day-to-day coverage.

While it remains an achievement to have independent Syrian media, the future remains bleak with ongoing challenges related to a lack of funding, as well as challenges operating in Syria and even Turkey among media outlets. Further, in a sector developed on activists turned journalists, the establishment and organization of media outlets is threatened by the need to protect journalists.

## **Overall gap and recommendations**

Greater coordination among sectors could help strengthen the efforts of regional organizations. Mapping and needs assessment research such as that of Citizens for Syria is a crucial way to further build these relationships and determine where efforts are overlapping. Gaziantep has played a significant role as a hub among Syrian-led organizations establishing and developing networks. As a hub, as previously mentioned, it meets some of the practical needs of Syrian organizations, namely, the need for a way to register and receive funds to carry out activities on the ground in Syria. It addresses the lack of direct access to Syria of international communities. However, it is not a replacement for direct access and headquarters within Syria. Due to the security situation and fragmentation of efforts, this remains a gap, and makes it critical for regional networks to further strengthen their cooperation with international organizations. Gaziantep has been a central space for the organization of meetings and discussions among such actors as the governorate of

Gaziantep, or Syrian actors, such as the Syrian Opposition Coalition, the Syrian Interim Government, or UN bodies. It is critical that organizations based in there, who are an important link to efforts on the ground in Syria, be proactively included and represented on the international level.

## Section 2

### Mapping of Internationally-based networks

While having the capacity and ability to put substantial amounts of resources into supporting Syrians, international organizations run into such challenges as being constrained by donors and having to fight against international fatigue with the Syrian conflict. The creation of internationally-based networks is an attempt to combat these challenges.

International organizations should increase their cohesion not only with other international organizations, but also with local Syrian civil society. These organizations can use their larger capacities and ability to get resources from their host countries to create platforms and project maps for all organizations and donors to better coordinate in Syria. This is essential in a conflict setting.

Focusing on humanitarian, justice and accountability, and research and advocacy efforts, this section will look at cooperation among international organizations as well as connections between international organizations and actors based in Turkey and on the ground in Syria. Through mapping these cooperation efforts, this section seeks to answer the following questions:

- Why and how were these connections formed?
- How have or haven't these efforts produced desired results?

#### Humanitarian

While many international humanitarian organizations have been around since the beginning of the conflict, their communication and advocacy strategies have changed over six years. The formation of coalitions is common with international humanitarian organizations to increase effectiveness in advocating for support from the host government.

Mayday Rescue,<sup>24</sup> a Dutch international organization with offices in Turkey, Jordan, and Dubai, partners with communities that are entering, enduring, or emerging from conflict or natural disasters by providing training and equipment, advocacy and outreach, and organizational capacity building for grassroots emergency response groups at the local, regional, and national levels. They are most known in Syria for training and supporting Syria Civil Defense (SCD). Mayday Rescue has also partnered with governments of the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the

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<sup>24</sup> Mayday Rescue, <http://www.maydayrescue.org/>.

Netherlands, as well as the United Nations Security Council and Turkish international search and rescue non-governmental organization (NGO) AKUT.

A powerful component of successful communication and coordination among international humanitarian actors is the formation of coalitions. The American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS)<sup>25</sup> is a coalition of Syrian-American humanitarian organizations, all of whom are based in the United States but almost all of them working regionally. The ten ARCS member organizations are Karam Foundation, Mercy Without Limits, NuDay Syria, Rahma Relief Foundation, Swasia Charity Foundation, Syria Relief and Development, Syrian American Engineers Association, The Syrian American Medical Society, Syrian Community Network, and Syrian Forum USA. Matthew Chrastek, program manager of ARCS, does advocacy on the Hill and with the US State Department on behalf of and for member organizations, builds capacity of smaller member organizations, and coordinates among member organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Besides communicating with its member organizations through an internal sharing platform, ARCS often reaches out to media and other organizations to solve specific issues. For example, for the issue of Temporary Protected Status for Syrian refugees in the United States, ARCS worked with immigration and refugee rights organizations such as Mercy Corps and Save The Children to better inform their advocacy message to the US Department of Homeland Security. ARCS also partners with Charity & Security Network, Crisis Action, Refugees Welcome, and Oxfam.<sup>27</sup> While there are other coalitions doing humanitarian work in Jordan and Turkey, ARCS' mandate keeps them working only with organizations and coalitions in the United States.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)<sup>28</sup> is a nonpolitical, nonprofit medical relief organization working on the front lines of crisis relief in Syria and neighboring countries to ease suffering. Mohamad Katoub, a former doctor from Eastern Ghouta and current advocacy manager for SAMS, started with SAMS when the organization started working with medical relief in Syria in 2011. There was a big push in 2011 and 2012 from the Syrian diaspora to establish more medical relief organizations to help the people on the ground in the southern part of Syria.<sup>29</sup> In

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<sup>25</sup> American Relief Coalition for Syria, <https://arcsyria.org/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria," April 26, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> "Coalition Member Organizations & Partners," American Relief Coalition for Syria, <https://arcsyria.org/content/coalition-member-organizations-partners>.

<sup>28</sup> Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, <https://www.sams-usa.net/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Interview with Mohamad Katoub, Advocacy Manager of The Syrian American Medical Society," February 1, 2018.

the report “Slow Death”, SAMS said as of February 2015, 640,200 Syrians were living in at least 49 besieged communities across Syria, over three times the United Nations (UN) estimate.<sup>30</sup>

Besides working with a strong Syrian diaspora in the United States, SAMS is part of many coalitions and partnerships. SAMS is a member of the UN health and nutrition cluster (SAMS is the head of this cluster in Turkey), the Syrian NGO Alliance, the Turkey NGO Forum, the Syria INGO Regional Forum,<sup>31</sup> and ARCS. SAMS also coordinates with the Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Commission of Inquiry (COI), the fact-finding mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Crisis Action, and Interaction. In February 2018, SAMS brought doctors from Aleppo to speak with missions of the European Union and NGOs and media in Brussels, Belgium.

Based in the United States, Karam Foundation, a diaspora organization and member of ARCS, develops innovative education programs for Syrian refugee youth, distributes aid to Syrian families, and funds sustainable development projects started by Syrians for Syrians.<sup>32</sup> Yisser Bittar recently joined Karam Foundation office in Gaziantep as the Head of Advocacy.<sup>33</sup> The Karam Foundation’s current major project is working with local organizations to coordinate distributions of breakfast baskets in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>34</sup>

Karam Foundation does not directly communicate with key members of the international community like large governments. They focus most of their attention working directly with grassroots organizations in Syria and on advocacy campaigns. For their projects inside of Syria, Karam Foundation has their own in-country team coordinating with local councils and education ministries. Earlier, the Karam Foundation had a strong media presence since their CEO Lina Sergie Attar is a writer and has ties with multiple media outlets. Yisser said that it has become harder to get press releases and other statements picked up by key outlets because global fatigue related to the Syrian conflict has set in.<sup>35</sup> Karam Foundation also does work with the Syria Campaign and was a fiscal sponsor for projects related to the SCD.

Syria Relief and Development (SRD)<sup>36</sup> is a Syrian diaspora non-profit organization also

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<sup>30</sup> Szybala, Valerie. Slow Death. Syrian American Medical Society, 2015.

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Slow%20Death\\_Syria%20Under%20Siege.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Slow%20Death_Syria%20Under%20Siege.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> A network of about 50 organizations from Jordan and neighboring countries.

<sup>32</sup> “Karam Foundation,” accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.karamfoundation.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Interview with Yisser Bittar, Head of Advocacy of Karam Foundation,” February 14, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> “Emergency Aid: Eastern Ghouta — Karam Foundation,” accessed June 6, 2018,

<https://www.karamfoundation.org/eastern-ghouta/>.

<sup>35</sup> “Interview with Yisser Bittar, Head of Advocacy of Karam Foundation,” February 14, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Syria Relief & Development, <https://srd.ngo/>.

headquartered in the United States, with offices in Amman and Gaziantep. SRD has been providing humanitarian aid to Syrians affected by violence, hunger, poverty, injury, and displacement since the beginning of the conflict by distributing aid (including in-kind donations) to Syrians in need.<sup>37</sup> Originally located in Amman, SRD expanded to Gaziantep due to new restrictions placed on the border between Jordan and Syria in 2014 and because of the need to reach communities in Northern Syria.

SRD is a member of many coalitions, including ARCS, The NGO Forum in North Syria, The Syria International NGO Regional Forum (SIRF), and The Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA). These coalitions have helped SRD communicate and coordinate with other similar organization while also improving their effectiveness in advocacy efforts. Due to SRD's large Syrian diaspora backing, USAID and other organizations have provided SRD with support and funding.<sup>38</sup> Having hubs in Amman and Gaziantep, SRD also regularly works with local councils in Syria through the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).

## **Justice and Accountability**

Without a direct presence on the ground in Syria, international organizations involved in justice and accountability face unprecedented barriers to monitoring and documenting incidents. To address this, many international organizations cooperate with regionally and locally-based organizations and individuals to channel documentation efforts on an international level. Through this cooperation, international organizations use their leverage to channel documentation efforts to key decision-making audiences. In addition to the necessary channeling, international organizations contribute through experienced monitoring, testimony collection, and open source investigation methods.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) plays a vital role in conducting such investigation through cooperation with international and regional actors. Involved in human rights monitoring in Syria before the uptick in violent conflict, HRW representatives like Priyanka Motaparthy have been on the ground since April 2011, conducting interviews in person.<sup>39</sup> She notes, however, that as the conflict evolved it became more difficult to get access to the country as well as access to activists, who faced the risk of being detained for their work. With this shift, HRW interviewed those who

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<sup>37</sup> "Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative," February 12, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> "Interview with Priyanka Motaparthy, Senior Researcher of Human Rights Watch," April 25, 2018.

fled to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. With the increasing rigidity of borders, phone, Skype, and WhatsApp interviews were done in lieu of the preferred in-person investigation.

One demonstrative example of the remote monitoring cooperation is the investigation of photos released by Caesar, code name for a defected military police photographer of Syrian government detentions. HRW worked closely with the group given the original files transmitted to them by Caesar, including over 50,000 photos used as evidence of torture, executions, and conditions of military hospitals in Damascus. This cooperation with the group was formalized through a memorandum of understanding on how they could use the photos. HRW worked with several groups and activists focused on issues of detention who helped connect them with the relatives of those who appeared in the photos, including the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) and Mansour Al-Omari, and Zaman Al-Wasl, among the first opposition media outlets to publish some of the photographs. HRW reached a wide audience through the release of these findings in several publications.

Cooperation among international monitoring organizations has been a crucial way of reaching wider audiences. Investigation of the Al-Jinah mosque bombing is a model of such cooperation, which resulted from the combination of HRW's connecting with on-the-ground witnesses, Bellingcat's open source investigation, and Forensic Architecture's spatial model analysis.

International monitoring efforts are strengthened through the connection of local monitors and journalists whose content is central to the work of Airwars. A London-based transparency project, they track and archive civilian casualties and international military actions in Syria. Airwars combines open source investigation and direct outreach to locally-based media to corroborate information and cross-reference and verify incidents. As Syrians in the diaspora Kinda Haddad and Abdulwahab Tahhan of Airwars speak Arabic and have a contextualized understanding that facilitates a level of access between media outlets based on the ground and Airwars publications that would reach a global audience through strong connections with major news organizations like the New York Times, BBC, and the Washington Post.<sup>40</sup>

With so many actively fighting groups on the ground in Syria who were never professionally trained, a need arose for these groups to learn more about international humanitarian law (IHL). This is the reason Ibrahim Olabi founded the Syrian Legal Development

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<sup>40</sup> "Interview with Kinda Haddad and Abdulwahab Tahhan, Reporters of Airwars," February 21, 2018.



Program (SLDP)<sup>41</sup> in 2013 after conducting trainings on his own in Aleppo and Idlib with support from the University of Manchester and Amnesty International. SLDP addresses complex legal needs arising from the conflict, and operates as a non-political, non-governmental organization.<sup>42</sup>

SLDP has created and delivered trainings in collaboration with the UN OCHA and other international organizations in the United Kingdom and in countries bordering Syria. One of SLDP's most successful projects was a media series for Syrians called "Virtues," which taught the principles of IHL as accessibly as possible. Currently, SLDP is working on a project funded by the Swiss Ministry of Affairs, where they are building the capacity of humanitarian, human rights, and media organizations in Syria. These organizations include SCD, VDC, and Syria Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

The Connected Civil Society Initiative, a project jointly run by Benetech<sup>43</sup> and the UNs' International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and further supported by Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs), uses machine learning and computer vision to identify, document, and verify human rights or IHL violations from publicly available sources (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube).<sup>44</sup>

Through this initiative, Benetech has worked closely with the Syrian Archives, Bellingcat, and the Syria Justice and Accountability Center. At a convening of experts in The Hague, hosted by the Dutch government, Benetech made the most connections.

The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) has been working on Syria since 2012, pursuing accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by high-ranking officials within the Assad government. In Germany, where the principle of universal jurisdiction applies, ECCHR submitted four criminal complaints addressing systematic torture in prisons run by the Syrian Intelligence Services. Three complaints, which were prepared and filed together with 24 Syrian torture survivors and Syrian lawyers Anwar Al-Bunni (Syrian Center for Legal Research and Studies) and Mazen Darwish (Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression), are based on extensive research and the testimonies of numerous witnesses, as well as on reports by Syrian and international human rights organizations, including the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Violations Documentation Center, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In addition, ECCHR worked with the "Caesar Files Group" to submit

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<sup>41</sup> Syrian Local Development Projects, <https://www.syrianldp.com/en/>.

<sup>42</sup> "Interview with Ibrahim Olabi, Executive Director of the Syrian Legal Development Program," March 29, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Benetech, <https://benetech.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> "Interview with Benetech representative," April 30, 2018.

another complaint to the German Prosecutor's office along with photograph files containing metadata of high evidentiary value.

In June 2018 the German Federal Prosecutor, Peter Frank, issued an arrest warrant against the head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, Jamil Hassan, on the basis of the findings and evidence provided in the criminal complaints as well as structural investigations by prosecutors. Hassan was named in the complaints along with 26 other high-level officials from Assad's government. ECCHR hopes that further arrest warrants will follow in Germany and in other states.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria,<sup>45</sup> was established on August 22, 2011 by the Human Rights Council with a mandate to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in Syria.<sup>46</sup> The scope of the COI's work—backed by the international community—is very limited to its specific mandate of conducting an international, transparent, independent and prompt investigation into abuses and violations of international law.<sup>47</sup> The commission's aim is to hold to account those responsible for violations and abuses, including crimes against humanity and war crimes.

## Research and Advocacy

In an environment with so much information constantly coming out, strong research and advocacy efforts are necessary to understand what is happening and to translate this information to the public. While the above international organizations do have projects related to research and advocacy, the following organizations more explicitly focus on these activities.

Dutch peace organization PAX supports the struggle of peaceful activists in Syria to create a democratic Syria by funding and advocating for Syrian civil society groups.<sup>48</sup> When PAX began working in Syria in 2003, the focus of their work was to support Syrian civil society groups. After the Arab Spring in 2011, Marjolein Wijninckx, Senior Program Officer for Syria, changed the focus of PAX to advocacy and mobilizing solidarity in the Netherlands. Since 2015, PAX has focused more on the issue of besieged communities in Syria.<sup>49</sup>

Since so many international organizations working in Syria have a humanitarian focus,

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<sup>45</sup> Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>.

<sup>46</sup> "Interview with OHCHR Commission of Inquiry on Syria representative," April 18, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 21/26. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/G12/176/37/PDF/G1217637.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>48</sup> Pax for Peace, <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/our-work/programmes/syria/>.

<sup>49</sup> "Interview with Marjolein Wijninckx, Senior Program Officer of PAX," March 16, 2018.

they have different priorities from advocacy organizations like PAX. PAX is part of the Crisis Action network, which has 59 core member organizations, including Amnesty International and HRW. By taking advantage of its connections in Brussels and New York, PAX also acts as a bridge between grassroots Syrian organizations and policy makers.

The Siege Watch project began in 2015 as a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute. It was created as a spin-off of the early-2015 SAMS report “Slow Death,” which involved talking to doctors on the ground in besieged areas that were affiliated with SAMS. Author of the “Slow Death” report, Valerie Szybala, now works for the Siege Watch project. This project monitors and reports on Syria’s besieged areas using data collected monthly from an extensive network of reporting contacts on the ground. Background information and updates on each besieged community are shared in the Siege Watch interactive map, and through in-depth quarterly reports, thus ensuring that the international community has access to timely, accurate information on the ongoing sieges.<sup>50</sup>

The Syrian American Council (SAC)<sup>51</sup> is one of the leading grassroots Syrian-American organizations in Syria. It empowers the Syrian-American diaspora community to organize and advocate for a free, democratic, secular, and pluralistic Syria through American support.<sup>52</sup> SAC has chapters all over the United States, each with their own leadership structures.

As a purely advocacy organization, SAC’s main connections are its own members, US government officials, media outlets, and other opposition groups in the United States. SAC is a member-driven organizations and conversations about the direction of SAC are often held over social media or over WhatsApp. Due to SAC’s reputation as being the voice of Syrian Americans in the United States, Bassam Rifai, government relations board member for SAC, is asked to advocate for Syria on news outlets such as Fox News, CNN, NBC, and BBC. SAC sometimes works with Iranian and Russian opposition groups, and Bassam occasionally speaks at their events to promote shared interests.

## **Informal Diaspora Networks**

Informal Syrian diaspora networks play a significant role in keeping the global focus on the conflict

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<sup>50</sup> “Interview with Valerie Szybala, Representative of Siege Watch,” May 3, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> “Syrian American Council,” accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.sacouncil.com/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Interview with Bassam Rifai, Government Relations Board Member of Syrian American Councils,” May 2, 2018.

in Syria and trying to push for funding to support Syrians. When the Syrian conflict began in 2011, the main budgets of Syrian diaspora non-governmental organizations were coming from private funds of the Syrian living abroad.<sup>53</sup>

The Syrian diaspora is active and influential for several reasons. Besides the US, the Syrian diaspora community is affluent and active in countries like Canada. Many Syrians living in both countries are physicians or engineers in positions of power.<sup>54</sup> The Syrian diaspora is also large and spread out in each country: for example, SAMS has over 700 members, with 20 to 50 people living and working in each country.<sup>55</sup> An added reason the Syrian diaspora cares so deeply about the Syrian conflict is that many members of these communities are not even first generation.<sup>56</sup> Many still feel connected because there are not many degrees of separation between themselves and the country—they still have friends and family and possibly property in the country.

However, not everyone agrees that the Syrian diaspora network is particularly strong, especially when talking about guaranteeing funding from their host countries. The humanitarian relief budget of the UN, for example, currently has about 10 percent of what they need.<sup>57</sup> Further, the support from the Syrian diaspora could be correlated with the global recognition and support of the Syrian conflict in general and could potentially only be weakly connected with the diaspora's "connection to home."<sup>58</sup>

## **How have or haven't these efforts produced desired results?**

When international organizations want to work inside of a country, it's usually a very straightforward process. But in a conflict setting like in Syria, this quickly becomes difficult as many parts of the country become cut off from the world.<sup>59</sup> The solution taken by many organization has been to implement an archaic tiered system. For instance, USAID would connect with international non-governmental organizations, which would connect with local or diaspora organizations, and eventually those organizations would connect with their ground networks.

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<sup>53</sup> "Interview with Mohamad Katoub, Advocacy Manager of The Syrian American Medical Society," February 1, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> "Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative," February 12, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> "Interview with Mohamad Katoub, Advocacy Manager of The Syrian American Medical Society," February 1, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> "Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative," February 12, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> "Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria," April 26, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> "Interview with James Le Mesurier, Founder of Mayday Rescue," February 8, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> "Interview with Priyanka Motaparthy, Senior Researcher of Human Rights Watch," April 25, 2018.

There is sometimes six degrees of separation, leading to needs not being communicated.<sup>60</sup>

However, there are some stand out international organizations who are directly connecting with Syrians inside Syria. Airwars reaches out to a list of local monitors and journalists on the ground daily to find out what is happening in the country.<sup>61</sup> Karam Foundation also does most of their work from a team managed in Syria: for their health project delivering nutrition supplements to children inside Eastern Ghouta, they work closely with the directorate of health and the provincial council.<sup>62</sup> Larger organizations like HRW connected directly, as well, with Syrian civil society in the country to create the 2014 Caesar report.<sup>63</sup>

International organizations should be able to address language barriers.<sup>64</sup> Although the Syrian community is educated and many can speak English, only focusing on those who speak English leads to inequalities in which groups receive aid. Plus, the ability to communicate in Arabic makes the process of gathering information quicker.

Mostly followed by humanitarian organizations, a best practice for international organizations wanting to work in Syria is to remain as neutral as possible. This allows for more access around the country.

Airwars chooses to monitor incidents rather than media outlets themselves. Instead of focusing on what one source says, they will write about what various sources (e.g. Russia Today, New York Times, etc.) say.<sup>65</sup> That way, it is up to the reader to decide what to believe. Members of ARCS stay away from working too closely with political organizations.<sup>66</sup> PAX makes it clear to all parties that they work with everyone.<sup>67</sup>

The main challenge with neutrality is that no matter how neutral an organization tries to be, they are accused of not being neutral enough.<sup>68</sup> Some organizations may have more connections in opposition-held areas, while other areas may choose not to allow any international organizations (e.g. ISIS-held areas).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative," February 12, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> "Interview with Abdulwahab Tahhan, Reporter of Airwars," February 21, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> "Interview with Yisser Bittar, Head of Advocacy of Karam Foundation," February 14, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> "Interview with Priyanka Motaparthi, Senior Researcher of Human Rights Watch," April 25, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> "Interview with Abdulwahab Tahhan, Reporter of Airwars," February 21, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> "Interview with Abdulwahab Tahhan, Reporter of Airwars," February 21, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> "Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria," April 26, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> "Interview with Marjolein Wijninckx, Senior Program Officer of PAX," March 16, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> "Interview with Kinda Haddad, Reporter of Airwars," February 21, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> "Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria," April 26, 2018.

Some individuals also argue that “neutrality” as a practice is impossible in a conflict setting. Any piece of information will always have a reason behind it. Trying to be completely neutral may be useless and a waste of time and resources.<sup>70</sup>

A major difficulty international organizations face when working in the Syrian context is working with donors. Although donors are necessary to fund humanitarian aid and capacity-building projects, they often also add conditions that make sense on paper but do not make as much sense in the local context.

Donor funds usually do not give the flexibility to work on capacity building. In general, donors don’t want to see their money used for organizational development. They would rather see the purchases of tangible goods like ambulances and food. This stops international organizations from expanding into Syria through capacity building.<sup>71</sup> While donor funds should have some rules attached to them so that they aren’t used inappropriately, trust must be increased between donors and international organizations so that these organizations have more freedom with funds.

Saturation maps from OCHA also uncover a large problem: donors want to support areas that they know about or hear about, leading to certain geographic areas covered by services while other areas sit empty and neglected.<sup>72</sup> Saturation maps, such as the one managed by OCHA, are extremely important for telling where projects are happening and should be expanded so that all organizations and donors working in a country such as Syria can consult them before planning and/or funding a project.

The conflict in Syria has been going on for seven years and has only gotten worse. The number of players on the ground and the number of countries involved has only grown.<sup>73</sup> All sides are becoming very fatigued from this conflict, which makes it extremely difficult for international organizations to gather resources to help those who most need it. Governments and large international organizations continuously say that each new event in the conflict is a “turning point,” but after each “turning point,” nothing changes.<sup>74</sup>

It has become difficult for international organizations to gather support to help Syrians as new events happen in the conflict because the media has become fatigued with Syria. Even when

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<sup>70</sup> “Interview with James Le Mesurier, Founder of Mayday Rescue,” February 8, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> “Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria,” April 26, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> “Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> “Interview with Priyanka Motaparthi, Senior Researcher of Human Rights Watch,” April 25, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> “Interview with Ibrahim Olabi, Executive Director of the Syrian Legal Development Program,” March 29, 2018.

an atrocity in Syria is covered by the news, the coverage is much shorter than in the early days. The media reporting on besieged Eastern Ghouta has been vastly different from the reporting during the siege of Aleppo.<sup>75</sup>

International organizations are also finding it difficult to recruit international staff. Burnout is extremely high for employees who work in high conflict zones like Syria.<sup>76</sup> This leads to disjointed leadership in projects working with the Syrian people.

Syrians on the ground are also fatigued. International organizations have started to receive pushback by Syrians when they conduct needs assessments and other surveys.<sup>77</sup> Syrians who are being interviewed by international organizations are not seeing any changes and are beginning to shut down from the process.

## Overall gap and recommendations

Organizations, donors, and governments are flooded by the amount of information available. Almost every Syrian has a cell phone where they post photos and videos of events, send message through Facebook or WhatsApp, and tweet real-time updates.<sup>78</sup> Since there is so much information, there is a need for an entity to sift through all this information to give a full picture of what is happening. However, giving that much power to any single entity to act as a gatekeeper of information could be a dangerous thing.<sup>79</sup>

International organizations must also improve their coordination from abroad. This would involve the creation of internal sharing platforms for organizations in different fields, or a single internal sharing platform for all organizations working in Syria. ARCS has a very basic version of this platform for its member organizations but hopes to expand to more organizations working in Syria in the future if resources allow.<sup>80</sup> On this platform, organizations can share information and post internal documents.

Increased coordination between international organizations also requires project mapping efforts in the country. There have been many instances when organizations and donors focus

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<sup>75</sup> “Interview with Yisser Bittar, Head of Advocacy of Karam Foundation,” February 14, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> “Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> “Interview with OHCHR Commission of Inquiry on Syria representative,” April 18, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> “Interview with Kinda Haddad, Reporter of Airwars,” February 21, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> “Interview with Emma Winberg, Director of Mayday Rescue,” February 8, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> “Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria,” April 26, 2018.

projects in the same areas while neglecting others. Those areas already receiving projects and support will not be burdened by an over-supply of resources, while other areas which require support will more likely receive it.<sup>81</sup> Mapping would also help organizations cooperate on the ground. For example, an organization wanting to build a school in a specific town can see what other organizations are already in the area who can help them with this project.<sup>82</sup> Both ARCS and OCHA have these types of maps.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Matthew Chrastek, Coordinator and Program Manager of The American Relief Coalition for Syria,” April 26, 2018.



## Section 3

### **Bridging regional and international organizations through capacity building programs**

Due to the lack of an international response to regionally-based organizations' work in Syria, Syrian civil society has faced the need to undertake professionalization efforts. These have expanded since 2011, with the goal being to foster coordination and information sharing with vital international stakeholders. This section will specify key professionalization and training efforts and provide examples of communication strategies and capacity building. These includes the development of communication strategies, capacity building, justice and advocacy trainings, media trainings and research. The idea is that, by becoming more professionalized, organizations are more likely to get a response from the international community. Further, regionally-based organizations believe these activities can help them produce joint projects with the international community, with the advantage of shedding light on the situation on the ground in Syria. Challenges identified by the organizations in this process include the emergence of fragmentation and competitiveness among organizations, an issue that will be explored further in this section.

#### **Institutionalization of Syrian civil society**

The development of regionally-based Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) took time, and remains a work in progress, since the activist model from which it emerged does not fit with the demand for neutrality from international donors. Some organizations that maintain political principles face barriers. Kesh Malek, for instance, took time to realize their political views didn't fit with their relationships with international organizations. "Donors wanted us to omit the name of who is killing us, so it was very difficult for us to receive funding at the beginning," says Mohamed Kanjo of Kesh Malek. The same was true for international organizations connecting with regionally-based organizations, like the United Nations (UN), in meetings held in Gaziantep, Turkey. Kanjo added that, over time, he learned how to behave in those meetings by avoiding the word regime, as an example. This shift came with training and professionalization. It was also, as noted by Assad Al Achi, executive director of Baytna Syria, a paradoxical process, because the institutionalization filters the initial zeal seen in 2011 to a more bureaucratic model.

During the professionalization processes, different communication strategies and trainings

emerged, always under high pressure and high stress conditions. Such efforts aimed at preparing Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Syrian people to have their voices heard by decision makers. According to many Syrian NGOs, if people use the right ways of connecting with external supporters, they would be more effective in informing policy decisions.

Baytna Syria has become a hub for Syrian-led trainings. They offer CSOs established in Gaziantep space and facilities to meet and organize such trainings. They hold conferences with civil society NGOs on improving communication, giving practical knowledge about creating networks to strengthen efforts in pursuit of a democratic Syria.<sup>83</sup>

Over time these efforts have led to training of trainers activities. Door Beyond War, a leading organization in capacity building and consulting, has developed and trained Syrian community leaders on how to empower their communities and local councils. They aim to make changes inside Syria, by targeting communities on the ground through advocacy and sustainability projects with minimum involvement of donors to maintain their independence. Founder Karam Hilly shares one story among many that shows a lack of response to practical and immediate needs.

The story is about a village that became unapproachable due to the mud produced by heavy rain during winter, which caused inhabitants to starve. “When it is raining, they cannot buy a loaf of bread,” he explains, noting that such issues are often ignored even by provincial councils. Door Beyond War seeks to address such practical issues by building on networks and communities. They help create partnerships with local councils and NGOs to deliver trainings to support economic empowerment and community-building. For instance, one of their recent trainings inside Syria called “I am the future” assisted Syrian students in accomplishing their studies to become future leaders and trainers. Door Beyond War focuses on trust-building techniques, essential for leadership. By aiming at interpersonal skills, they expect trained leaders to share knowledge with others, without further need for coaches.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the increase in training activities, it remains challenging to communicate what takes place in besieged or hard-to-reach areas to the international community. To overcome this hurdle, Citizens for Syria is mapping Syrian CSOs already established in Syrian communities to assist in capacity building. This program is dedicated to addressing grassroots’ needs.<sup>85</sup> It helps them identify the right audience, the proper channels, and the right language to advocate for their

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<sup>83</sup> “Interview with Eyad Al Khattab, Citizens for Syria,” February 11, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> “Interview with Karam Hilly, director of Door Beyond War,” February 11, 2018.

<sup>85</sup> “Interview with Karam Hilly, director of Door Beyond War,” February 11, 2018.

needs. For example, it can show them how to connect with the Syrian diaspora to amplify their message, and how to network with other organizations across the country. For that, Baytna Syria developed a network of trainers on the ground to develop these skills.<sup>86</sup> The local training is offered in Arabic and developed in response to participatory needs assessments, in contrast with pre-packaged programs often used by international institutions and foreign donors which don't effectively address the local context of Syria.

Justice and accountability organizations have launched trainings that aim to equip activists with legal literacy and skills. "Organizations move from just being activists or human rights activists who may not have the legal knowledge to people who have technical capacity in research," explained Ibrahim Olabi, founder of the Syrian Legal Development Program (SLDP).<sup>87</sup> The organization, for example, holds legal development sessions for humanitarian and human rights actors on improving their communication to inform their needs. They also receive training on documentation standards and how courts assess evidence.

Because of their work, the media is a step further in training and the development of communication strategies. Enab Baladi, a pioneering independent Syrian media organization shifted from political, revolutionary origins to establishing the basis of professionalism in Syrian news media production. First, they created trainings for aspiring Syrian journalists, turning them from activists to professional journalists. "Media literacy programs are key for success because they fill an academic gap in Syria and keep the staff at media outlets in a state of constant progress, building upon new tools and skills," noted Chief Editor Jawad Sharbaji.<sup>88</sup> Later, Enab Baladi launched a similar program to the public focused on objective, accurate information, paying particular attention to fact-checking to resist political bias.

## Challenges

Despite these efforts, the work of many of these organizations goes unnoticed in the international community. Because the institutionalization is a recent process, particularly for regionally-based organizations, the competition with international organizations seems almost unsurmountable. One reason is that international NGOs, already funded by big donors and established worldwide much before the uprising broke out in Syria, had filled the vacuum in the corridors of power in

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<sup>86</sup> "Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria," February 12, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> "Interview with Ibrahim Olabi, Syrian Legal Development Program," March 29, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> "Interview with Jawad Sharbaji, Chief Editor of Enad Baladi," February 8, 2018.

the first years of the conflict—the moment in which organizations in Syria were more grassroots and less connected the world. The critique is that international actors try to shape the future of Syria without considering locals needs or ideas.

When international players needed to coordinate with local bodies, there was a lack of engagement with local needs.<sup>89</sup> This left local organizations in Syria distrustful of international organizations' intentions. They felt exploited as if transferring their knowledge to foreign actors in exchange for insignificant change on the ground. This further undermined collaboration according to a diagnosis of local and international organizations' activity in Syria.<sup>90</sup>

Sometimes, larger international NGOs that partnered with UN agencies have abandoned efforts over time in Syria, leading to discontinuity in programs on the ground. This affected humanitarian aid organizations, both local and international and forced them to better coordinate with local actors. A greater reliance on local actors required flexibility in the work as local groups developed professional standards over time. “[Local organizations] took a lot of time to improve standards since documents would be scanned and sent over WhatsApp,” noted a representative of Syria for Relief and Development.<sup>91</sup>

Many times, despite regionally-based organizations' professionalization and capacity building, the international response failed or was negligent to these efforts coming from Syria. This has been visible during international meetings. Although many Syrian organizations—including Baytna Syria—try to take part in shaping the agenda and selection of participants of these meetings, they face an inadequate response from the international side. Baytna Syria shares a story where they experience this phenomenon. While taking part in an international civil society support meeting, Shabiha, Syrian criminal gangs associated with the regime, were also invited to participate.<sup>92</sup> According to rights groups, Shabiha are used by the government to take severe action against dissent. “We need to make sure that these incidents do not happen again, and whoever is coming to take part in that civil society support room has a minimum standard of decency, which does not include those participating in the killing machine at the moment,” Assad Al Achi said.<sup>93</sup>

According to the Shaml Alliance, international organizations also fail to provide instant

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<sup>89</sup> “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018

<sup>90</sup> “Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> “Syrian Thugs are Assad’s Tool in Protest Crackdown, Groups Say,” Business Week, June 1, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131022211913/http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-06-01/syrian-thugs-are-assad-s-tool-in-protest-crackdown-groups-say.html>.

<sup>93</sup> “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018;

English to Arabic interpretation during meetings, although Arabic is an official UN language. Thus, not taking into consideration this need, they fail to ensure accessible participation of Syrian NGOs.<sup>94</sup>

The consequence, in the eyes of several Syrian civil society actors, is that international organizations slow down processes, sometimes cause more harm, and foster dependency; one in which international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) do not exit the process after providing development tools and delivering capacity building. International support can further complicate situations and impose more bureaucracy, which, according to the Syrian for Truth and Justice (STJ), results in spending three months on issues that can be quickly solved on the local level.<sup>95</sup>

The lack of a proper understanding of the Syrian context and, therefore, weak communication on the international side has hampered trust-building, particularly when local representation is excluded from international meetings, working groups, or conferences on Syrian issues.<sup>96</sup> That does not mean that Syrian organizations object to international participation: they believe it is key and vital. A Syria Relief and Development (SRD) representative said that, because of this hierarchical system, a lot of organizations have proven that they don't necessarily need a middle man every step of the way.<sup>97</sup>

While professionalization has aimed at facilitating documentation and cooperation, improved coordination, and information sharing, there are many challenges ahead. As Syrian local organizations are small, there is a substantial risk of emerging fragmentation and competitiveness among them, which can affect their ability to act on a larger scale. Organizations are now devising new ways of moving forward, focusing on different approaches and strategies, further elaborated in the next chapter.

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<sup>94</sup> "Interview with Fadi Hakim, Shaml Alliance," February 12, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> "Interview with Bassam Al Ahmad, Syrian for Truth and Justice," February 8, 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> "Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative," February 12, 2018.

## Section 4

# Advocacy, disinformation campaigns, and the future of civil society in Syria

Following the Syrian uprising, a Syrian civil society emerged driven by democratic values: freedom of expression, equality, human rights, justice. The grassroots dream of a free Syria has never taken off after seven years of a broken revolution, because their efforts got stuck in the face of international geopolitics established generations before. Making matters worse, their dissonant methods of achieving democracy fell short because of a mismatch between objectives and means to achieve them. The fatigue with the Syrian war that followed is what organizations now try to overcome with redefined theories of change: from the media to the justice sectors, be them based in Turkey, Syria, or elsewhere. With the dual task of working to end the conflict and achieve democracy, newly-formed organizations understood later the need for adopting different methods of coordination and communication. These aim at establishing small steps first before achieving broader goals later. Although they are still figuring out new strategies—changing their theories of change on media efforts, coordination with international actors, and the need for understanding Syrians’ interests and priorities—their stance on democratic values continue to drive their efforts.

### **New Theory of Change 1: Advocacy**

“We can’t live in dignity and freedom yet because of the Russians, the Iranians, the regime,” said Mohamed Kanjo of Kesh Malek. “The US and allies, who claim to be with us in the revolution, don’t work to stop the regime from killing us. Nor do they help us make our dreams of democracy come true.” With little changed in Syria after seven years, his organization now is all about advocacy. “Thousands of people died because of our dreams. We will always remind the world about this. That we are still here. That our dream should come true even if it takes 100 years.”

Apart from media outlets, no organization in the justice, civil society, or humanitarian aid bodies have either devised or prioritize communication strategies when the conflict broke out. Recently formed, organizations didn’t have the knowledge nor the expertise to plan for this. The circumstances of the conflict, which demanded not only quick but streamlined responses that consumed most of their time, also did not allow for it; the rule of survival was uncoordinated, segmented, and inefficient. Humanitarian aid organizations had victims to save, civil society had

cases to reveal to the outside world, and justice and accountability efforts were still setting up.<sup>98</sup> There was little room on the agenda for strategic and targeted advocacy.

The need for advocacy sparked when organizations noticed little has changed over time despite the battles fought: the international community became tired of the conflict. “The biggest obstacle we’re facing is the fact Syria has fallen out of the news. We create a message and push it out, but the engagement is so limited because—just because Syria is not popular anymore,” said Yisser Bittar, head of advocacy of Karam Foundation. But if the conflict makes victims, organizations continue to devise and embrace advocacy efforts to get support and shift the international community attention back to the conflict. In the discourse, local organizations feel that advocacy efforts are priorities. In practice, their outreach is incipient and responsive rather than planned and proactive, which helps explain their shortcomings.

### **Advocacy message: the battle for human rights**

The core of advocacy is perceived by regionally-based organizations as “things that resonate” — in the heat of the war, it’s a portrait of a child being rescued from the rubble by the Syria Civil Defense (SCD), also known as the White Helmets, and the symbolism it conveys—or messages that illustrate a goal: the call for human rights, freedom of expression, peace, and democracy. The way the message has been conveyed, though, does not translate into organically shared symbolic photos on social media, nor in planned media campaigns. Methods for outreach have included issuing statements signed by multiple organizations on events related to the war. Or it can manifest through reports posted on organizations’ webpages. In the first case, by betting on a unified, signed statement among local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Syrian organizations from various fields believe they make their way to reach out to international organizations stronger. It has been a good start for regionally-based organizations, but messages haven’t effectively disseminated beyond this.

The lack of clear goals of who are target audiences channel information in wrong directions, leaving diaspora communities unaware of facts happening on the ground.<sup>99</sup> Advocacy in Arabic, although a United Nations (UN) language, remains stuck in the Middle East, and an eventual lack of international mobilization ensues. Many of the statements signed by a coalition of

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<sup>98</sup> “Interview with Syria Relief and Development representative,” February 12, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018.

organizations or by single bodies themselves released through social media have no translations into English.<sup>100</sup>

So far, one of the most successful cases in advocacy that went through international channels took place spontaneously. The Mayday Rescue foundation used communication efforts to grow their scope and make more effective their goals through support of the SCD. James Le Mesurier, the organization's founder, mentioned it was not until he watched video footage taken by one of the humanitarian teams he trained in Syria in 2014 that he realizes its advocacy powers. "At that moment we didn't have external communications nor branding (of the White Helmets). I set up a Twitter account and posted some of these videos. Within three weeks, we had about 1,500 followers," he said. "That was our starting point into connecting with the broader support network of people interested and passionate about Syria."

## **The threat of disinformation campaigns**

Communications also brought about challenges for organizations. As soon as disinformation campaigns flooded social media with misleading or fake contents, organizations saw themselves trapped in a conflict on the cyber-realm. Russian disinformation campaigns made them victims because of their efforts of unveiling crimes perpetrated by the Syrian government. This made organizations redefine their workflow by trying to fight back. The higher the exposure on the media was, the greater the need for them to do so became.

The Mayday foundation was a victim of a disinformation campaign released by actors calling themselves "independent journalists" such as Vanessa Beeley, a British blogger who made her way through Russian-controlled media outlets. The campaign tried to claim the White Helmets didn't exist but were actors instead, or that they were a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria.<sup>101</sup> "We didn't design ourselves to do that [counter-attack disinformation campaign]," said James Le Mesurier. He investigated these attacks on social media and found resemblances with Russian information warfare techniques getting disseminated by small segments of pro-Assad, pro-Russia, or anti-Western profiles on Twitter. The anatomy of his work shows prominent levels of coordination by these actors. By investing an organic and authentic approach to advocacy, Le Mesurier believes trustworthy information gets across and is reflected in Western media outlets or

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<sup>100</sup> Many examples can be found at Kesh Malek's Facebook page. See [www.facebook.com/kesh.malek.syria/](http://www.facebook.com/kesh.malek.syria/)

<sup>101</sup> "Interview with James Le Mesurier, Founder of Mayday Rescue, and Emma Winberg, Director of Mayday Rescue," February 8, 2018.



decision-makers at the UN level—even if it comes at odds with the Russian media.

The proliferation of fake content on social media has also led organizations to be born. Verify.sy and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) are two examples of media and justice organizations that embraced fact-checking missions. While the first fact-checks content in detailed investigations, the latter aims at collecting evidence to support justice; it has documented witness accounts and collaborated with national and international organizations. Both are growing databases of evidence. According to Emma Winberg from Mayday, there is an increasing tendency of international organizations' awareness in understanding, if not accepting, the role of such efforts in substantiating evidence of war crimes.

Other organizations—civil society organizations (CSOs) and humanitarian aid bodies—have neither the plan, nor the capacity to act likewise against fake content. By taking a strong stance against the government on human rights violations, the Karam Foundation has had to react rather than act against fake content against their work on child protection. To work around this battle, it will invest now in forming coalitions with other NGOs, a strategy the organization thinks of as “working smarter not harder.” This includes helping fact-checking organizations. The formed relationships with these organizations resulted in accurate information substantiating statements they release on their platforms. Their perception is that trustworthiness brings two key things: first, respect from international players (e.g. donors). Second, this collaborative exercise is giving them a better understanding of Syria. In a later stage, they believe they will know the path for pressuring decision makers on behalf of Syrians. It's impossible to defeat disinformation campaigns, but the goal is to prevent partners from believing in them.

### **Can independent media thrive in a Syria post-conflict?**

Problematic in the media is a lack of clear goals among independent outlets and a lack of objectivity among most Syrian outlets. Aiming at professionalization, the independent media outlet Enab Baladi established by activists. When the conflict drew multiple actors to it, the outlet left its political views aside to fill its reports with stories ranging and capturing issues arising from all sides of the conflict—or as many as they could. “Sometimes our coverage gets biased because we don't have access to relevant sources. Yet the multiplicity of parties to the conflict pressured our work because we were accused of being biased,” says Jawad Sharbaji. “It's this professional trait we hold on to resist this political pressure.” This trait is what they try now to harvest among other established media outlets. To Sharbaji, independent media in Syria also depends on outlets that

safeguard journalists from abuses and threats regardless of the perpetrators. Yet, if journalistic access to places or sources remain blocked by the government, there can be a backlash on the media.

A current gap relates to intersections between the media and transitional justice organizations on a shared goal: verified information. Through its active and independent reporting, Enab Baladi is trying to fill this gap. Media outlets play a significant role with investigative reporting that can contribute to and are up to the standards of evidence collection that justice organizations require. Although justice and media organizations formed around these goals, increased justice-media collaboration has the potential to strengthen the means of achieving common goals and to strengthen independent Syrian justice and media sectors. Actors like Enab Baladi have the potential to export their ambitious standards in investigative reporting and thus, their contribution to the justice sector, to other media outlets, even in the absence of planned strategies.

## **New Theory of Change 2: Improvement of relations with International Organizations**

“The future of civil society is a double-edged sword,” noted Assaad Al Achi, of Baytna. For him, the professionalization of CSOs came at the price of their activism zeal. One consequence of this dichotomy will shape the organizational scape. According to Al Achi, organizations are in a transitional phase. The formation of Syrian hubs in Turkey was one step in that direction. That allowed for better coordinating between clusters and networks, empowering common narratives on the Syrians and their needs with international actors. That helped organizations keep a strong political stance while getting less dependent on “pre-package” policies imposed by international donors. But that also means that organizations are likely to merge or be acquired by bigger ones.<sup>102</sup> As a result, the future of civil society would look less like the activism witnessed in 2011 and more bureaucratic. This could lead them to become less connected with the concerns and priorities of Syrians and, thus, less able to respond to Syrian peoples’ needs.

In a scenario where the Syrian government regains control of areas it had lost, the lack of continuity for programs established in opposition-held areas is seen on the horizon. “If the regime wins, we won’t be able to access places we’ve been working,” explained Karam Hilly, of Door

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<sup>102</sup> “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018.

Beyond War. “But If there were a transitional period, we could work together, being part of this change even if the regime controls most Syria.” To avoid the lack of continuity, most CSOs, justice organizations, and networks are trying to expand their programs (more schools in opposition-held areas, larger databases on war crimes evidence). Kesh Malek, for example, wants now to build more schools beyond the Aleppo governorate, and for that they are seeking funds. They currently have seven schools and believe expanding this number will increase their leverage at education meetings held with international organizations. “Your voice gets stronger if you have 100 schools, and your transformational power on ideal schools for Syria increases,” he noted.

The involvement of the humanitarian responders goes down to the practical level when presenting themselves to the international community when the conflict comes to a long-awaited end. “People don’t realize that war has destroyed the country. If there’s a political settlement, we want to be part of that by helping reconstruct the country,” said Munir Mustafa of SCD. “But if the regime ends up controlling the whole of Syria, we won’t have room to operate because we are taken by them as enemies. But cleaning the streets, removing the rubble, reconstructing the country is important, and we want to provide them with this service.”

For organizations dealing with justice and accountability issues, the challenge has been getting their message across to international players. One critique is that the international community took over the political future of the country. That caused international actors to neglect justice and accountability efforts of locals. “That does not mean we don’t need international organizations. It’s more about trying to find a political solution with international cover,” said Bassam Al Ahmad, CEO of Syrians for Truth and Justice. “We are working to do that by bringing transitional justice at the political level. No one likes that because they are negotiating their involvement in war crimes—and therefore they won’t sign anything that takes them in front of a court.” Al Ahmad noted that they are pursuing a balance between the need for a political transformation that does not neglect transitional justice and reparation for victims of human rights violations at the international level.

International bodies have relied on their own methods for enriching databases on war crimes. Yet, there’s uncertainty on how crimes committed in the Syrian war will be handled. “We are in a transition period now,” said a member of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria, about the role of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), in charge of the investigations on war crimes in Syria. Most of the evidence, interviews, and databases collected by

the Commission are being handed out to IIM. “But if that’s going to lead to a tribunal who the hell knows,” said the source at the Commission.

### **New Theory of Change 3: Better Understanding of Syria**

One way regionally-based Syrian organizations think of better working with international organizations and bodies is through developing a better understanding of what happens in their country. Regionally-based organizations are adopting outreach efforts as part of their redefined methods. Engagement, research, and advocacy efforts have become the new rule, taking off slowly. By better informing themselves about what happens with people in Syria, they feel better prepared to address locals’ concerns with the conflict and to advocate for these issues with international diasporas, states, and donors abroad. Nonetheless, results have been diverse.

Most organizations do not have the capacity to undertake such initiatives. Struggling to get their messages across, regionally-based CSOs hope their posts on social media about how the conflict affects people’s lives<sup>103</sup> get replicated in Syria. The strategy aims at achieving long-term objectives. By exposing civilians with accurate messages on government abuses, organizations believe they are laying the groundwork for future mobilizations toward democracy.

Baytna and the Shaml Alliance are a step further in these efforts. Baytna has strengthened interview methods and hired advocacy experts to map organizations’ needs in Syria and help them achieve their goals, regardless of the field, through capacity-building grants and trainers. Engagement raises awareness and helps tackle the uncertainty about the future likewise: by trying to bridge the Syrian divide about what the country’s future should look like. Shaml is working with more sophisticated advocacy efforts to reach the same goal.

For that, Shaml Alliance is working to improve its own members’<sup>104</sup> organizational capacities, by launching a cloud-based content management system—a sort of communications channel—where they can pull data together from different partners. With that, they aim at making their advocacy strategies more relevant and streamlined. It has also developed its own media division and is hiring media experts. For example, a year of partnership with PAX resulted in a website called Ghouta.com. It collects information from a network of sources on the ground in

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<sup>103</sup> “Yisser Bittar, head of advocacy of Karam Foundation,” February 14, 2018; “Interview with Assaad Al Achi, Executive Director of Baytna Syria,” February 12, 2018

<sup>104</sup> A coalition formed of Basmeh and Zeitooneh, Emissa, Kesh Malek, Local Development and Small Projects Support Office, Olive Branch, and Women Now for Development. See <https://www.shamlcoalition.org/copy-of-who-we-are>

Ghouta. The media division has compiled the information in a series of videos, infographics, news, reports (published by a variety of organizations), and offers ways of connecting activists in Ghouta with the outside world.

The branding was disseminated by thousands of social media users, leading to engagement, and is part of their future goals: seeding theories of change inside Syria and building up locals' support, while empowering organizations at decision-making tables with donors, states, and UN agencies. Efforts, however, are still at an early stage. And the question of how effective current efforts are varies from organization to organization. "Those who have witnessed war crimes are not willing to come out because of fear," noted Ibrahim Olabi, of the Syrian Legal Development Program (SLDP) about Syrian refugees being requested to give account on their testimonies when seeking for asylum abroad. To him, once better outreach is planned and deployed, it will help them overcome such barriers. "Once we can tell that something is working, I think more people would come out."

"There's a narrative saying we are not the only Syrian civil society, and people tell us that there is a free civil society in regime areas, and why don't you talk with them?" says Mohammad Al Hammadi, about the regionally-based organizations in Turkey. The Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) is planning weekly workshops to help overcome the uncertainty hovering over Syrian actors and locals—with the goal of guaranteeing their own existence. "We ask ourselves: 'Can we go back and be a civil society inside Syria?' Many of us were medical doctors and engineers, and we left Syria because we couldn't stay. The civic space was shrinking. So, the debate now is 'Is there really a civil society in government-controlled Syrian areas? Is the government allowing a civil society there and do we need to communicate with them?'" That remains an open question.

Representatives' perceptions are that they can move forward by being better prepared to answer, with a growing professional accuracy, what takes place on the ground in Syria, and in their experience in sorting fact from sheer propaganda on social media. "We simply know the truth," says Kanjo Mohamed of Kesh Malek. "Many friends, kids, and staff in our schools died because of the regime's bombings. That shouldn't be normal. We know people that are careful about what they say and do, and we do everything we can to help those. For instance, we won't share some organizations' statements on our Facebook page because we know their work—and they might be wrong." It's the organization's commitment to the reality that keeps driving them.

## Conclusion

To get the message out about conditions on the ground, regionally and locally-based organizations failed to compete with the power of disinformation campaigns, the massive amount of information being channeled in cyberspace, and the regime's readiness to respond to activists in the physical and digital realm. To combat this, many organizations established headquarters in Syrian hubs in neighboring countries. They also undertook professionalization efforts. The goal was to address ongoing human rights and international humanitarian law violations by bridging the gap between locals experiencing the conflict and international organizations seeking to help. Yet, little has changed after this process.

The international community continues to respond ineffectively to a conflict that has taken the lives of over 500,000<sup>105</sup> and displaced over 5.6 million outside Syria<sup>106</sup> and over 6.3 million inside Syria.<sup>107</sup> As the regime continues to retake remaining opposition stronghold areas, organizations question whether their work will survive. In a context in which punitive action in response to grave violations can be swept aside in part because of disinformation campaigns, as well as the effects of decades of a complex terrain of symbolic power,<sup>108</sup> strategic communication and coordination is ever more important.

Barriers to direct access for international humanitarian, justice and accountability, and media actors are at the core of communication and coordination failures. To counter this, regional Syrian-led organizations seek to amplify the voices of grassroots actors on the ground. Despite this, information warfare and disinformation campaigns have made it difficult to bridge local experiences with the international community. Fatigue of a protracted conflict complicated the organizations' task of conveying what is taking place on the ground in Syria. To overcome this, organizations undertook professionalization efforts, with new capacity-building and advocacy strategies. Yet overall, strategic communication is caught in the webs of evolving networks, proving to be particularly challenging for newly-formed organizations to overcome. As a result, advocacy and outreach programs continue to take center stage among regional actors' efforts to reach out to the international community.

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<sup>105</sup> "Death Tolls." I AM SYRIA. Accessed June 6, 2018. <http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html>.

<sup>106</sup> "Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response," accessed June 6, 2018, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew Smawfield @msmawfield UNHCR, "UNHCR Statistics - The World in Numbers," [popstats.unhcr.org](http://popstats.unhcr.org), accessed June 6, 2018, <http://popstats.unhcr.org>.

<sup>108</sup> Lisa Wedeen, "Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria," *University of Chicago Press*, 2015 (72).

Among capacity-building approaches, regionally-based actors identified that traditional, pre-packaged models for advocacy are likely to fail as they are not developed with the local context in mind. Syrian-led organizations continue to conduct on-the-ground needs assessments to develop impactful trainings and programming. A deep understanding of locals' sensitivities, ways of communicating, and context is required to succeed in effective communication. If there are different methods and ways of doing advocacy and outreach, though, key components should not be missed: information must follow through appropriate channels; the way a message is conveyed—the language—is vital; and most communication efforts can be at risk if diaspora communities are not engaged in amplifying it.

If their ideas of change translate into tangible results on the ground is difficult to say. Efforts toward these goals are still taking off, and results may prove ineffective for reasons outside these organizations' control: a political agreement may be established between the Syrian government and international actors, leaving Assad empowered to avoid being held to account. The Syrian government has been regaining control over areas that allowed these organizations to start their programs in media, justice and accountability, civil society building, and humanitarian relief. At this rate, locally-based organizations are likely to see their efforts terminated.

But even in this alarming scenario, if organizations are successful in effectively communicating their needs, building up civil society efforts, and collecting information on the ground that can be used against war crime perpetrators, efforts wouldn't be deployed in vain. They could still help to bring justice for victims of the conflict through further coordination with international organizations. In this way, regional and international organizations can continue to support Syrian civil society interests and long-term goals of justice and accountability.

For regionally-based and local organizations, advocacy that aims at key international actors, including diaspora communities, engagement strategies pursuing a deeper understanding of locals, and the institutionalization of civil society that goes beyond the goal of settling the conflict are key elements to survival. Should the largest refugee population in the world coordinate effectively with Syrian diaspora communities and international decision-makers, this expanded Syrian diaspora has the potential to promote change and pursue democratic values as a newly-formed geopolitical power.



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