The Crushing of Syria's Civil Actors

Survival of Grassroots Structures is Crucial for Country's Future
Petra Becker and Friederike Stolleis

The Syrian regime's strategy of using sieges and bombardments to force rebel-held areas to surrender is bringing it closer to its goal of eliminating independent civil-society engagement and alternative governance structures. Over the past six years, civil structures – that is, non-state non-military organisations and institutions – have been established and consolidated across Syria in areas out of government control to organise local affairs and provide the most essential community services. With the international debate on Syria concentrating on local military developments and regional power struggles, Syria's civil actors have been shifted out of focus. However, the marginalisation of these local and decentralised actors and structures represents a major risk for Syria's future. They not only constitute the bedrock for implementing any potential political agreement on the ground, they are also crucial for providing Syrians with an alternative to so-called Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist groups, which cannot be fought successfully by military means alone.

From the beginning of the uprising in 2011, civil engagement has been the backbone of efforts across Syria to build a free and democratic society after forty years of authoritarian Ba'ath party rule. Civil actors, increasingly under attack by both the Syrian regime and later IS, have shown an extraordinary resilience and adaptability. Clearly, the increasingly militarised context and destruction of rebel-held areas as well as the strategy deployed by the regime and some armed groups of besieging and starving populations limit the scope of civil activities. Nevertheless, after close to six years of conflict, civil actors continue their efforts to create alternatives to the authoritarian practices of both the regime and radical Islamist groups.

The Awakening of Civil Society

The emergence of a great variety of grassroots initiatives was a direct outcome of the 2011 uprising. In the four preceding decades of Assad family rule, practically all forms of civil engagement had been severely restricted. The few non-governmental organisations active in this period were subject to strict government control.

In 2011, predominantly young men and women of diverse class and religious backgrounds began to gather spontaneously and

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engage in acts of civil disobedience. These activists quickly set up a network of Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) which organised demonstrations, managed public relations, built up contact networks and raised funds. The first of these committees was created in the Daraya suburb of Damascus. As of February 2012, 14 LCCs existed in cities and towns across the country. In parallel, informal news agencies emerged, allowing self-appointed citizen journalists to make their information available to the world. Grassroots initiatives emerged in civic education, which held secret workshops across Syria on human rights, democratic values and the potential of pluralism. As the insurgency spread and the number of casualties and displaced persons increased, the same activists also helped deliver medical and humanitarian aid to citizens.

These activities were carried out at high risk. Activists were among the first victims of arrests and, in many instances, faced death by torture at the hands of the regime. When the Free Syrian Army (FSA) together with allied rebel militias gained control over parts of the country in 2012, civil activism flourished. The prospect of being able to work without fear of arrest encouraged activists to set up a large variety of often non-formalised civil society groups (CSGs) in rebel-held areas. With the transition from grassroots movements to organised groups, many groups also set up headquarters in neighbouring countries. In September 2015, the Syrian NGO "Citizens for Syria" listed more than 800 Syrian civil-society groups active within Syria and outside it.

Civil Governance in a Militarised Context

Since 2012, residents in areas no longer controlled by the regime have set up hundreds of Local Councils (LCs) similar to the Local Coordination Committees, often in cooperation with them and local civil-society groups. They ensure administrative services and manage the affairs of their communities in the absence of state institu-

tions. This model was soon adopted by the Syrian National Council (SNC), the biggest and most significant Syrian opposition grouping in exile and the main interlocutor for external support to the opposition. LCs were to work like "small governments", coordinating with development and service institutions to lessen the chaos of war and provide support to citizens. They were also intended to become the nucleus of future municipalities in a transitional government and ultimately assist in the formation of an elected government.

The councils' degree of legitimacy on the ground varies considerably. While some, such as the Aleppo Local City Council, were established through semi-democratic elections, the majority are formed by consensus or nomination of local figures on good terms with notables, tribes and influential families. With the continuous shrinking of opposition-held territories, the number of Local Councils has fallen from around 800 in the first quarter of 2015 to an estimated 395 active LCs in March 2016, most of them in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates. It has been declining since.

Dependence on External Funding

A key challenge for Local Councils has been funding, as donor policies towards Syrian non-state actors over the past six years have been erratic and non-coordinated. LCs and CSGs alike suffer from the absence of long-term and coordinated strategies. When the first LCs were established in early 2012, wealthy Syrian expatriates as well as some European governments supported them financially. However, with the creation of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which replaced the SNC in November 2012, many countries decided to channel their funds through the Coalition to strengthen its legitimacy.

Since 2013, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an administrative body attached to the Coalition, has sought to exert control over Local Councils and streamline their funding mechanisms. But the SIG itself ran

out of money and backing due to internal conflict and uncoordinated donor policies. Technical and financial support for LCs through the Coalition has therefore been much less than expected. Funding for aid and services remains too low, and council members are usually not paid a regular living wage. This presents a major obstacle to the effectiveness and professionalism of LCs.

Civil-society groups are in a similar situation. With few exceptions, funding is insufficient and, even more problematically, it is mostly project-based and therefore unsustainable in the long run. Many groups do not have access to international funding, not least because of language barriers. Those with direct access to donors through their headquarters in neighbouring countries or Europe are in a better position to employ qualified personnel and apply for project funds. While many Syrian CSGs direct their work into Syria, the tight control and even closing of Syrian borders has made cooperation very difficult and widened the gap between those working inside and outside the country.

Relations with Armed Groups

The efficiency of local civil actors depends largely on the local power balance and the military groups active in their area. At first, armed groups under the FSA umbrella encouraged and endorsed the creation of LCs. In many places, council members (usually civilians) and fighters shared similar social backgrounds, which facilitated a harmonious relationship. FSA brigades have generally not attempted to take control of LCs by force.

However, Islamist armed groups – such as Ahrar al-Sham, the al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra (re-branded Jabhat Fath al-Sham in summer 2016) – have started to develop their own administrative structures. These too aspire to being municipal administrations, and are hence in direct competition with LCs.

Armed groups and their charitable branches, financially backed by Gulf States, are often better equipped to tackle the needs of impoverished local communities. Furthermore, LCs have a certain authority over civilians, though not over combatants in armed groups. Thus, in Kafranbel, the stronghold of civil engagement in Idlib governorate, Jabhat Fath al-Sham keeps intimidating civil actors who stand up for civil rights. These factors have significantly weakened the LCs and encouraged the spread of administrative chaos. The takeover of some areas by IS has further undermined the work of both LCs and CSGs. Many had to relocate internally or seek refuge across the border in Turkey. By contrast, in areas where LCs are relatively safe– such as regions near the Jordanian border under FSA control – they have been able to mediate between armed groups and civilians. Often they are the only structure capable of bringing together local power players, organising the implementation of agreements or coordinating protective measures for local communities.

Conflict and Cooperation among Civil Actors

Although the establishment of Local Councils was in many cases closely coordinated with local activists, their institutionalisation under the SNC umbrella, and later the Syrian Interim Government, initially fostered a feeling of mistrust towards them. This was compounded by the lack of transparent and democratic elections. Few civil society groups inside Syria were willing to cooperate with LCs, which in their eyes had lost their legitimacy as local structures. Since 2014, however, new dynamics of cooperation have emerged. The dwindling of financial and human resources and the increasing military pressure along with the failure of the Interim Government to deliver aid has produced a rapprochement between the local civil actors operating on the ground.

Targeting Symbols of Civil Activity

Since 2012, the Syrian regime has deliber-
ately targeted and besieged areas in which
local civil actors were considered particu-
larly successful. In November 2016, accord-
ing to the UN, more than 900,000 people
were living under siege. When the largest
besieged area, Eastern Aleppo, was retaken
by the regime in mid-December 2016, a sec-
ond symbol of successful civil engagement
was destroyed by the regime's brute force.

The first such symbol was the Damascus
suburb of Daraya, which had been under
the control of local rebels since 2012. Here,
despite enormous challenges, the Local
Council had succeeded in establishing
offices and providing services to civilians.
After four years of siege and heavy bom-
bardment by government forces, a deal to
evacuate and relocate all civilians and rebel
fighters to Idlib and other parts of Syria was
reached in August 2016. The emptying of
Daraya marked the end of a remarkable ex-
perience of non-violent resistance and self-
organisation, which inspired many civil-
society activists throughout the country. It
was followed by the surrender of its neigh-
bouring city Moadamiyeh and the suburbs
Qudsaya and al-Hameh in October as well as
Khan Eshieh, Zakiya and al-Tall in Novem-
ber and December 2016. Some inhabitants,
including local council members and activ-
ists, were forced to transfer to Idlib gover-
norate along with the rebel fighters.

The fall of Aleppo to the regime marks
the end of one of the largest concentrations
of civil-society engagement anywhere in the
country, including dozens of free media
outlets, and emergency and relief organi-
sations. Aleppo's Local City Council had
managed to replace basic state services
since 2012. The intentional targeting of
civil facilities of all kinds in rebel-held areas
reveals the extent to which the regime has
seen attempts to replace state institutions
as a major threat to its legitimacy. Their
representatives face the most severe con-
sequences wherever the regime regains
control, and it is hard to imagine indepen-
dent civil activism continuing to exist.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survival of Syrian civil actors is crucial.
In the short-term, their local structures are
vital for effectively distributing humanitar-
ian aid and services to communities in non-
government controlled areas. Only if local
civil actors have the means and capacity to
provide services can they present an alter-
native to Islamist groups. Moreover, local
civil actors can serve as role models through
their daily activities, indirectly promoting
social cohesion and preparing the ground
for future peace-building by working on
education and human rights. With the in-
creasing scarcity of resources, the media-
tion role of councils and civil-society groups
will also become even more central.

Even if an immediate political agree-
ment is unlikely, in the long term any deal
will have to be implemented on the ground.
Local civil actors are predestined to play a
key role through their networks, adminis-
trative structures and personal relation-
ships. This would be of particular impor-
tance in case the regime would make con-
cessions in favour of a decentralised system.

However, if international support to civil
actors in Syria and in exile is not continu-
ous and long-term, this potential is lost.
Financial support should not only be pro-
ject-oriented, but also provide the resources
civil actors need to plan more effectively,
strategically and sustainably. Capacity-
building measures need to include institu-
tional-management skills. Moreover, as
many Syrian civil activists in Lebanon, Jor-
dan and Turkey do not obtain work permits
and are unable to open bank accounts or
register as NGOs, donor agencies should
explore ways of solving these restrictions.

Ultimately, however, nothing would be
more effective than preventing the military
strangling of Syria's cities and towns. If the
current onslaught and large-scale destruc-
tion do not stop, no amount of external
funding and support will be able to save
Syria's local civil actors.