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Syrian Civil Society during the Peace Talks in Geneva: Role and Challenges

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Syrian civil society witnessed a new birth in 2011 following decades of hibernation due to oppression. The fast growth and maturity of civil society organizations gave them the opportunity to occupy a formal space in the ongoing peace talks in Geneva. The presence of the Women's Advisory Board, the Civil Society Support Room, and the recently established Experts Room during the peace talks in the Palais de Nations allows them to influence the negotiation process. This article is the first published documentation of the role of civil society in the peace process and the challenges that face these talks.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) witnessed a new birth during the current crisis in Syria. Although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were established before the crisis, they were under the control of the Syrian government and took the form of charities. Before the crisis Syrians rarely used the term “civil society” and considered its use a Western way of culturally invading the country. The government, however, which preferred the term “community-based organizations,” interfered in the appointment of their boards, controlled their operations, and to some extent owned these organizations. Although this interference did not prevent the formation of a few CSOs, such as the Syria Trust and the Syrian Enterprise and Business Center, which were established and supervised by the First Lady, Asma Al-Assad, a CSO sector in its generally accepted form cannot be considered to have existed before the crisis.¹

In the first six years of the crisis, the number of Syrian CSOs has at least doubled. Between 1959 and 2010, only 1,047 organizations were registered in Syria.² After the start of the uprising in 2011, however, many activists created CSOs in reaction to a range of issues. For example, in response to the severity of the violence inflicted by government forces in the first six months of the crisis, CSOs, such as the Syria Violations Documentation Center, undertook to document human rights violations. Others tackled issues related to supporting people in need. When pacifists found themselves sidelined after the transformation of the civil movement into an armed conflict, especially after the second half of 2012, to compensate for the role they had lost in the uprising, many of them established humanitarian and developmental CSOs. Also, after the last quarter of 2012, many parts of Syria gradually slipped beyond government control. When the opposition failed to establish a body to fill the vacuum that resulted from the withdrawal of Syrian government agencies, CSOs stepped in.

January 12, 2014, was an important date for Syrian civil society. More than fifty Syrian women convened in Geneva to launch the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD). The purpose of the initiative was to influence the Syrian peace talks in order to protect women's rights. A spokesman for the group explained: “We cannot remain silent regarding events in Syria, such as daily death, massive destruction, starvation, displacement of hundreds of thousands of families (in Syria and abroad); and the spread of terror, violence,

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ongoing detentions, acts of kidnapping, destruction of infrastructure and the spread of disease, particularly among children.”³ But when Geneva II was held ten days later, Lakhdar Brahimi, UN–Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria, was unwilling to include any form of civil society presence in the talks.⁴

Syrian civil society had to wait until early 2016 to have a role in the Geneva peace process. Two spaces were created for women and CSOs on the sidelines of the talks. SWIPD became part of the twelve-member Women’s Advisory Board (WAB) when the UN special envoy (SE), Staffan De Mistura, invited six women from SWIPD and six from other women’s initiatives and organizations to be his advisers on women’s issues and other matters.⁵ Also, another space called the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) was created to have meetings for the civil society on the sidelines of the peace talks. More than twenty organizations, the majority of which operate in opposition-controlled areas and few in government-controlled areas, were invited to Geneva during the peace talks.

In Geneva IV, which took place between February 23 and March 5, a new space for civil society was opened under the name the Experts Room. Twelve men, mainly academicians and representatives of civil society, convened for the first time to discuss a constitution, a national dialogue, and governance.⁶ Another group involved in the talks, called the Oslo Group, was made up mainly of religious leaders and civil society activists. Unlike similar groups that stayed “outside” the process during many other peace initiatives, this group was present in the Palais de Nations during the talks, though it had no institutionalized presence in the talks.

Role of Civil Society in Geneva

Notably, civil society has gained a big space in the Syrian peace talks. Although it is common to have civil society support the peace process,⁷ Geneva IV could be the first UN-led peace talks in which civil society had an institutionalized presence. That presence was represented by three spaces: the WAB, the CSSR, and the Experts Room. As defined by the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE), the WAB had the clear task of providing the SE with advice about women’s issues but also about other negotiated matters. The CSSR was expected to provide advice on humanitarian, legal, and resilience and recovery matters.

The undeclared role of the WAB and the CSSR, however, was to create a track II negotiation that fed directly to the negotiation process. Because the twelve women who made up the WAB were from the government, the opposition, and Kurdish regions, they had a clearly diverse set of political views and affiliations. The CSSR had a similar composition, though it lacked any Kurdish, PYD affiliation.⁸

The importance of this undeclared role cannot be overstated. Before Geneva IV there had been no direct negotiation between the Syrian government and the opposition. Beginning with Geneva IV, however, these two spaces were the only place where various political issues were directly negotiated, and the results immediately fed the ongoing, difficult peace talks. Also, because of a Turkish veto against direct PYD representation, the WAB was the only space where the Kurdish interest (specifically PYD) was present. Moreover, in the large areas where government institutions did not exist and in other areas under government control where such institutions were weak, civil society became the major service provider. Consequently, civil society was closer to the people and, at least in opposition-held areas, better able to express their needs than the negotiating parties.

The Experts Room held its first meetings in the fourth round of talks. This group was supposed to discuss constitutional matters but was tasked this time with designing a national dialogue conference. Its effectiveness is still unknown.

Challenges

The greatest challenge for the current peace process has been the division of the country's civil society into three different civil societies. The first adopts the government narrative of the crisis and operates mainly in government-held areas. The second adopts the opposition narrative and operates from Gaziantep, Turkey, in opposition-held areas. The third operates in PYD-held areas and supports that party's narrative. A few organizations operate across the country, but they do so with a low profile. Some other organizations are closer to the opposition narrative but work in government-held areas. During the first four rounds of negotiation, the division between the people who come from government-held areas and the people who come from opposition-held areas was heavily reflected in the positions they took during the discussions. On one hand, the people from government-held areas complained that they had less training than people from opposition-held areas, and that those people were currently living outside the country and were therefore less able to express the needs of the Syrian people. On the other hand, people from opposition-held areas complained that they had been forced to leave the country and were now living under extremely bad conditions, that their homes had been destroyed by the government and its allies, and that their family members who remained in the country were under heavy bombardment by the government and its allies.⁹ Also, the people from the government side complained that organizations from opposition-held areas were collaborating with the West in its sanctions against the Syrian government, and people from opposition-held areas accused their counterparts of supporting the "brutal" Russian and Iranian attacks on civilians and civil facilities in opposition-held areas. Very few organizations took a middle ground on the subject of sanctions and attacks on civilians from both sides. Despite this division, people from both sides were able to talk together and agree on principles and documents. They were even able to socialize together. During the current round of negotiations, however, socializing between the negotiating parties is impossible.

The second challenge for the current peace process was the need for the OSE to decide whom to invite in order to get the right representation of civil society from among the three "civil societies." The first question was which CSOs are Syrian? Almost all CSOs from opposition-held areas are not and cannot be registered in Syria. They are registered in Turkey, Europe, or the United States. To avoid bank-transfer issues, some had to remove any form of the word "Syria" from their name. Thus, De Mistura and his team committed to a wide range of consultations with UN agencies and international NGOs with civil society spaces to ensure that they invited a representative set of organizations. They also invited representatives of Syrian civil society networks, such as the Syrian Civil Society Alliance, the Syrian Union of Civil Society Organizations, the Syrian NGO Alliance, and the Public Union of Syrian Charities and Organizations, all of which work in opposition-held areas. Similar networks in government-held areas are still less structured. In the end, to achieve the best possible representation, the OSE relied on advice from UN agencies operating in the country, consultations with a wide range of activists, and a process of rotation to include as many organizations as possible. The rotation process, however, posed another challenge related to the continuity of the group and accumulation of knowledge.

A third challenge has been that the government delegation and the opposition delegation have both opposed the presence of civil society in the negotiations, fearing it would undermine their position in the peace process. De Mistura responded to this challenge by inviting two women, one from the WAB and one from the CSSR, to the opening session on February 23, 2017. During his welcoming statement, he said that he wanted to remind the two delegations about the importance of the presence of women in the talks. He may also have wanted to remind his listeners of the importance of the presence of civil society in the Palais. Opposition to the presence of civil society in the talks had come not only from the two delegations but also from

civil society itself. During the second and third rounds of talks, some representatives of civil society, mostly from the opposition side, vehemently attacked the WAB, accusing the group of unbalanced representation, of providing nothing more than decoration, and of monopolizing the women's movement in Syria. Also, a strong movement in Gaziantep was initiated against the presence of civil society in the talks, claiming that the civil society should defend the opposition delegation and adopt the "revolution" narrative.¹⁰

A fourth challenge has been the imbalance in representation among the "three civil societies." CSOs working in opposition-held areas outnumber those coming from government- and PYD-held areas. Organizations operating in PYD-held areas are hard to reach and do not have representation in Gaziantep or Damascus, because the Turkish and Syrian governments do not allow them to register. The WAB member from a PYD-held area, for example, must cross the border illegally, timing her trip during dark nights, and then walk for hours to reach Sulaimaniyya in Iraq in order to be able to come to Geneva. Furthermore, the government of Syria has strongly discouraged organizations registered in Damascus from going to Geneva.

A final challenge involves passports and visas. Several people coming from Gaziantep had no passports to travel, and the Swiss government, especially in the fourth round, tightened its visa regulations, complicating several people's efforts to obtain a visa to attend the talks.

Conclusion

The fourth round of peace talks ended on March 3, 2017, with a greater presence for civil society. Thirty-nine people from various CSOs and academia tackled technical matters and negotiated among themselves in support of the peace process. Although De Mistura and his team are fully convinced of the importance of giving civil society a role in the negotiations, and some evidence suggests that the presence of civil society with a direct link to the negotiations is helpful, more data are needed before a definite assertion can be made. We must wait to see how this role unfolds, taking into consideration the complexity of the Syrian context.

Notes

¹ Zedoun Alzoubi, *Syrian Medical NGOs in the Crisis: Realities, Perspectives, and Challenges* (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2015),

http://noref.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/a845303e7869958a226f5215c661f8bd.pdf.

² Mohammed Jamal Barout, *The Past Decade in Syria: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Al Dhaayen, Qatar: Doha Institute, 2012).

³ UN Women, "Conference of Syrian Women, Convened by UN Women and the Netherlands, Ends with Strong Recommendations for Upcoming Peace Talks," press release, January 13, 2014, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/1/press-release-on-syrian-women-meeting>.

⁴ Mokhtar Lamani, deputy of the United Nations and Arab League's Joint Special Representative for Syria, several interviews with the author between January 2013 and March 2014.

⁵ The author is a co-facilitator of WAB meetings.

⁶ The OSE claimed that two women were invited but were unable to come.

⁷ Soliman M. Santos Jr., "The Role of Civil Society in Peace Processes in the South and South East Asian Regions," Oslo Forum, Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005.

⁸ PYD (Partiya Yekitîya Demokrat) is the major Kurdish party controlling the northeastern part of Syria.

⁹ One of the attendees lost two of his relatives, who were killed by an alleged government airstrike while he was in Geneva for the talks.

¹⁰ Samir Alsayad, "A Statement to the Public" [in Arabic], End of Horror (blog), January 26, 2016, http://arab-worlds.blogspot.com/2016/01/blog-post_26.html.