



Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the Representation of
Civil Activism in Northeastern Syria (NES)
“Incentives and Obstacles to Inclusion in Change Issues”

Paper based on Survey of Civil Society Workers in NES
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Introduction:

Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have come a long way in building their institutional structures, despite working under extremely challenging circumstances. They have undertaken to bridge the gap in vital needs resulting from the withdrawal or failure of the governmental service institutions; which made their existence more important despite being often criticized for their performance.

In the midst of challenging conflict circumstances and the NGOs' task to meet the communities' priority needs, an important question arises: **To what extent these different civil society organizational structures were successful in representing the essence of civil activism, especially that these CSOs criticize the status quo, with the aim of improving and developing it to better protect individual rights and freedoms and to push for a governance model based on justice, equality, and participation.**

In exploring its research question, the paper focuses on civil space in NES as a case study. It relied on quantitative data collected from 160 persons working in CSOs in NES, 22 percent of whom are Syrians working in international organizations. This quantitative data was supported by four interviews with local male and female activists to reach an in-depth understanding of some aspects addressed in the paper.

In the context of the first establishment and revival of civil society:

The 2011 uprising marked the beginning of civil work expansion throughout Syria, including NES, expanding beyond the boundaries that had been drawn by the Syrian regime authority prior to the protests. Civil society began to shape its orientation and ideas towards society and the desired change in parallel with the escalation of the anti-regime measures. Civil society activities focused on expanding and maintaining civil space, human rights, freedoms, organization, peace-building, and humanitarian response to a lesser extent.¹

The civil and organization work that has been carried out, was not destined to survive in most areas of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor and the rural parts of Al-Hassakeh, particularly with the control of the Islamic State (IS). The latter completely banned all forms of civil work and activity in its areas of control, directly and violently targeting any operating CSO or any person who would undertake any kind of civil activity. Al-Hassakeh was the only region which IS failed to

¹ With the beginning of the revolutionary movement in Syria, CSOs focused on the desired political change mechanisms, so emphasis was on sectors that worked on developing these mechanisms and building the form and model of change, while the humanitarian relief sector was not given similar attention. Later, in view of the gradual escalation of military actions led by the Syrian regime against areas involved in the revolution and the consequent humanitarian crisis, priorities were reordered based on the different needs.

control despite strenuous attempts. Still, this resulted in almost entirely evicting activists from IS-controlled areas.

In light of the extremist organization's tightened control over Raqqa, the area witnessed a four-year intense conflict until IS was almost entirely defeated by the Global Coalition in cooperation with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2017. This control, however, took a heavy toll on all levels, particularly the widespread destruction of infrastructure, which Amnesty International estimated at eighty percent. Destruction included schools, hospitals, and private homes; with 30 thousand houses completely destroyed and 25 thousand partly destroyed². The same applies to Deir Ez-Zor where destruction or damage estimates reached up to 90 percent³.

This scale of destruction was accompanied by widespread displacement along with the suspension of most economic activities of an agricultural nature among others. This prompted the intervention of international parties, particularly the Global Coalition, to reconstruct and revitalize the region.

Ample Funds and New Civil Players:

Donors launched a range of funding programs aimed at reconstructing the region, where civil society represented a key actor to respond to the humanitarian crisis; a significant incentive for the creation of CSOs in the region in large numbers. For instance, the number of CSOs in Raqqa, from which IS had been expelled, exceeded 128 within five years⁴. The same scenario was experienced in Deir Ezzor, given the concentration of funds in 2020 in this region, where the number of CSOs reached nearly 100 in 2021, similar to Al Hassakeh where the number reached 150⁵. Despite these large numbers compared to the geographical area, population, and short period of duration, they not only highlight the great level of humanitarian need but also point to other key factors behind the decision to create CSOs; primarily seizing opportunities. This made the decision to create or close CSOs easy and ordinary. At times, a CSO would be established to implement a single project and then closed due to a lack of new funding. At other times, it would not implement any project, but only obtain a license from the Organizations Affairs Office in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in the hope of obtaining funding⁶.

When funding would only be granted within a set of conditions, including the existence of internal regulations, policies and procedures, these institutional pillars (conditions) would be

2 A Year After IS expulsion: Raqqa without buildings and bridges while destruction takes over (17.10.2018) Deutsche Welle, <https://p.dw.com/p/36gNG>

3 Deir Ezzor Destruction rate reaches 90 percent amid astronomical reconstruction costs (9.11.2017) Snack Syrian, <https://bit.ly/3wmdz34>

4 Disclosing the numbers of CSOs in Raqqa governorate (10/11/2021), Bissan Newspaper, <https://bissanfm.com/news/49845>

5 Figures extracted from a mapping of organizations in NES conducted by IMPACT in 2021. <https://impactres.org/ar/mapping-civil-society-actors/>

6 WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from Raqqa on 22/5/2022.

stripped of their initial functions to represent mere policies, systems, and working mechanisms formalities aimed at attracting funds rather than governing the organization's workflow.

On the other hand, the concentration of most donor funds in NES on the restoration and infrastructure services caused these CSOs, directly upon their creation, to focus on building schools and hospitals and paving roads among other infrastructure restoration projects. This made them more like service companies, as per an activist⁷, after they worked with great momentum in the human rights, peace building, and media sectors upon their creation in 2011 and before the control of IS as mentioned earlier.

Legal Framework and Domination Attempts:

As for the CSOs' regulatory framework, civil space should be free and not dominated by any authority, as these organizations represent society's conscience that voices its needs and problems. However, civil society which is still reconstructing its path still faces all types of domination attempts.

On the legal level, despite the importance of regulations in principle and the ease of obtaining licenses from the AANES, the latter tightens its grip over any civil activity implemented in the region by complicated laws that bind the operating organizations. In fact, CSOs operating in its areas of control must obtain approvals for any activity they wish to implement. The Organizations Affairs Office sometimes interferes with the content of activities and trainings, going as far as changing or modifying titles and topics in line with the AANES' direction. Representatives of the Organizations Affairs Office even attend the activities carried out to ensure all aspects are consistent with the AANES' vision. This does not end here, but rather reaches practices that may amount to violations, such as the AANES entitling itself to prevent any of the CSOs operating in its areas of control from contracting or working with some civil activists in the region if they criticize the AANES' performance or are not in line with its approach, as reported by an interviewed activist from Al Hassakeh. In fact, she was prevented from entering into contracts and operating in her governorate for two years due to her continuous criticism of the AANES' performance. She then contracted with an international organization operating in an area where the AANES' hegemony over these organizations is less important.⁸

Aside from the general standpoint and in terms of how the AANES handles areas outside IS control, the worst fear of activists and newly appointed workers in CSOs is being accused of belonging to IS by the AANES authorities or parties, which often affects their activism and leads them to compromise and conform. In addition to limiting their freedom, this method of dealing with workers in the civil field jeopardizes or even violates their basic rights that must

⁷ WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from Al Hassakeh on 23/5/2022.

⁸ WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from Al Hassakeh on 19/05/2022.

be preserved, including their right to work, freedom of association, and freedom of opinion and expression.

Thirty-four percent of the surveyed sample indicate that in its present form, the legal framework regulating civil work has a negative impact on both significant and limited scales. In addition, 26 percent of the respondents do not know whether the legal framework has a positive or negative impact, which indicates that a quarter of the sample of organization workers is either not well involved in civil work or fears the local authority (Figure 1).

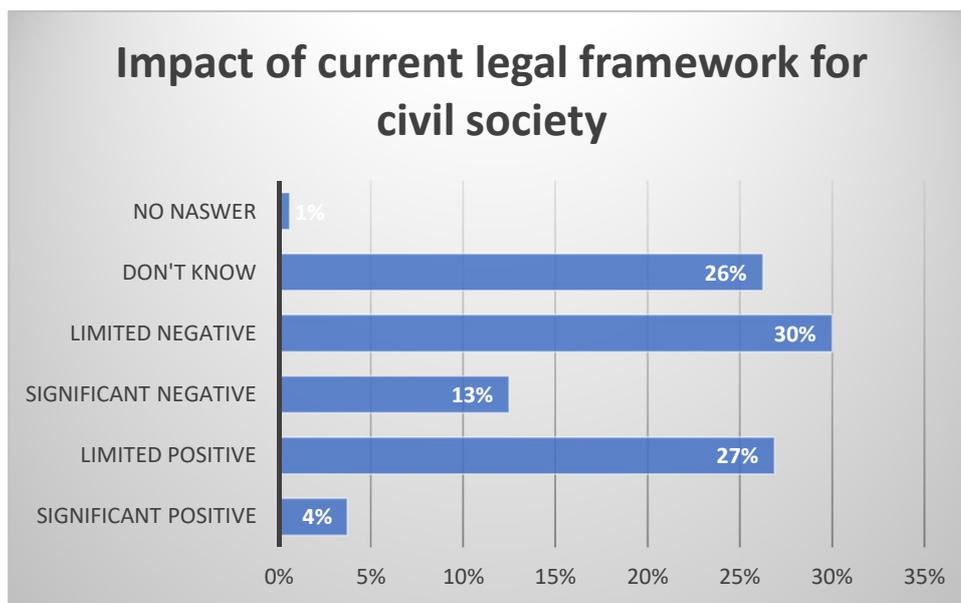


Figure 1 Impact of current legal framework for civil society

According to the graph below (Figure 2), more than 80 percent of the sample indicate that external factors, whether donors or local authorities, clearly limit the independence of the civil space in which they operate but do not control. They are indeed subject to the donor support areas and the decisions of local authorities rather than ones based on the organizations’ internal activity addressing local society needs. This leads to the conclusion that CSOs are closer to an implementing party for activities designed by donors⁹ while also satisfying the controlling party.

⁹ WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from Al Hassakch on 23/05/2022.

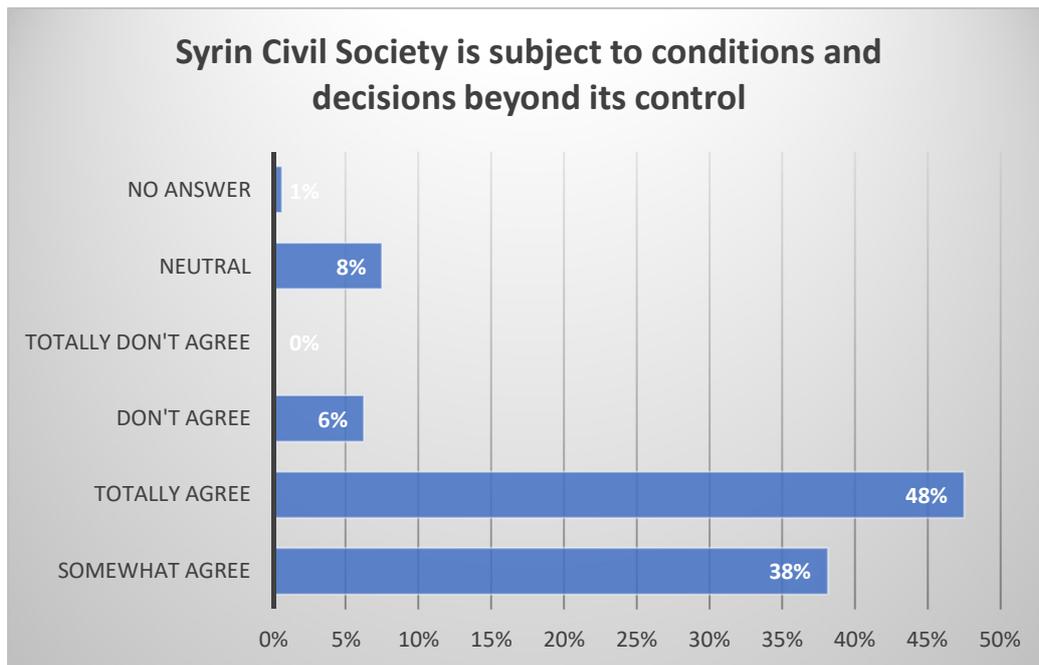


Figure 2 to which extent do you agree with the following statement: Syrian Civil Society is subject to decisions and conditions beyond its control (donors, local authorities, political factions)

Civil Activism Representation among CSO workers:

Data collected from organization workers reflects the limited understanding of the key role civil society should theoretically play as an actor of change. In fact, the first and second items in the figure below (Figure 3) suggest that two-thirds of the respondents limit the work of CSOs to humanitarian response and response to conflicts. Despite the important role CSOs are currently playing in humanitarian response in light of the increasing needs and absence/lack of basic services, the essence of the role must be implicitly present during the provision of humanitarian response services. The same applies to political neutrality where civil society activism lies at the heart of the transformative process towards democracy and the preservation of rights and freedoms, which affect the political and social systems to varying degrees according to their position within these values. In this sense, CSOs are not politically neutral but are among the most important actors of societal change in its broad sense.

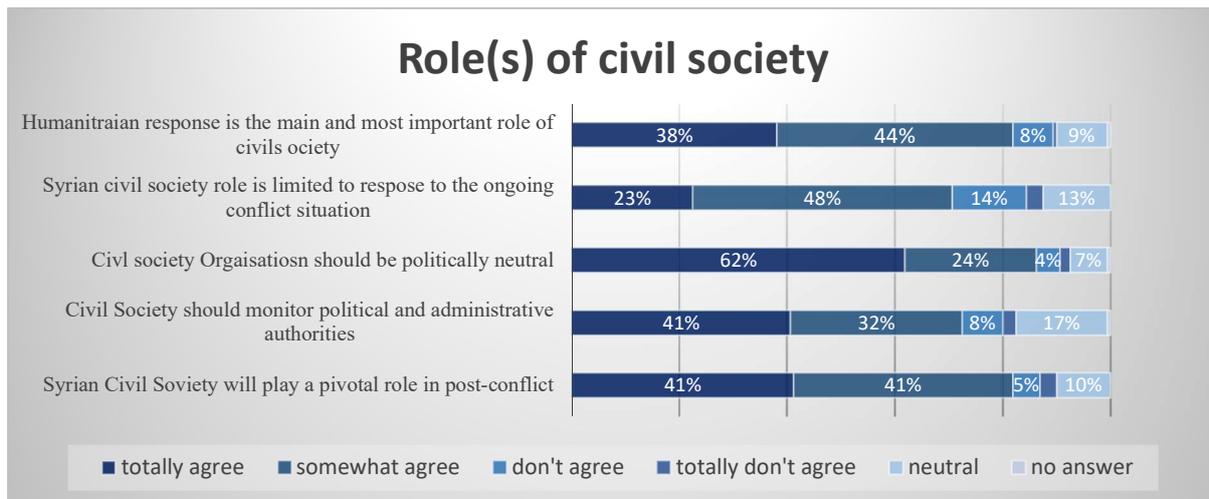


Figure 3 to which extent do you agree with the statement about role(s) of civil society

While other indicators point to an undeniable positive aspect, as the CSO's workers surveyed consider monitoring the authorities as one of CSOs' responsibilities along with their pivotal role in the post-conflict phase. This aspect may probably prove to be later reliable in making a difference if accompanied by a relevant build-up of experience and practical work among CSO workers, and among CSOs as institutions.

On the other hand, the belief of more than 95 per cent of organization workers that they must receive compensation according to the graph below (

Figure 4) clearly highlights the level of understanding and representation of the essence of civil activism as a struggle for democratic transition and individual rights and freedoms, including the high risks in countries ruled by dictatorships and traditional and conservative social structures. The percentage confirms the hypothesis that CSOs operating in NES are a space for work like any other economic sector, rather than a space for civil activism.

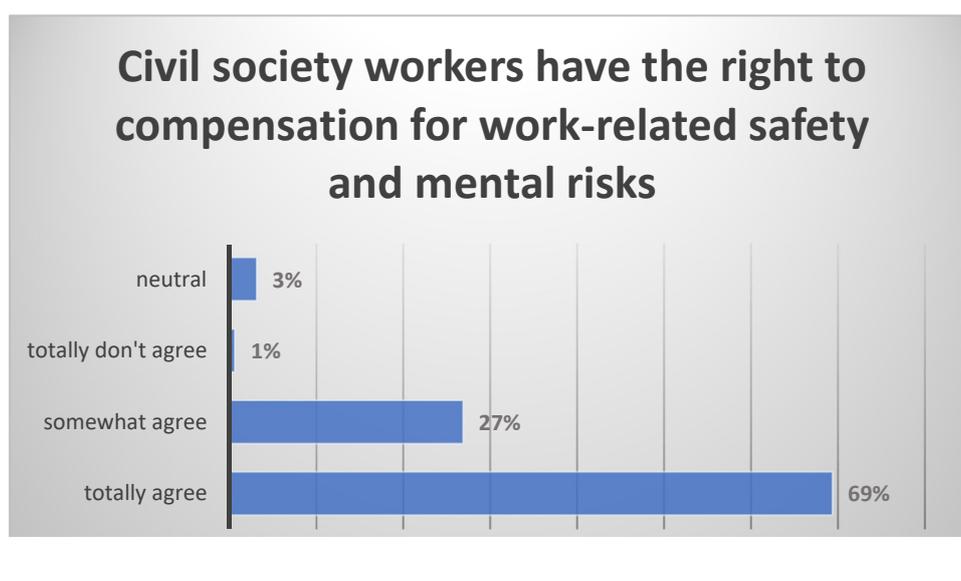


Figure 4 to which extent do you agree with the following statement: Civil society workers have the right to compensation for work-related safety and mental risks

Repercussions of the weak perception of the civil society concept:

The weak perception of the civil society concept as a mirror that reflects the diversity of views within the community, in light of the availability of funding opportunities associated with relatively high financial privileges in local organizations and the population enduring a severe and prolonged economic situation, leads to adverse repercussions on the position of the CSOs in society. On the one hand, this weak perception reinforces the idea that working with organizations is but an opportunity in the labour market rather than a space for civil activism, as confirmed by most respondents. On the other hand, it creates a gap between those who work in local organizations and the community, particularly with the increasing deterioration of the economic situation due to the constant depreciation of the Syrian currency and the staggering inflation. CSO workers would receive their (relatively high) salary in US dollars, hence they are the least affected by the depreciation of the Syrian pound against the US dollar. This resulted in the emergence of a socio-economic class of CSO staff with their own lifestyle, behaviour, and places they frequent; creating a barrier between them and their community, which soon turned into hatred for CSO workers who are considered to be stealing citizens' financial and in-kind allocations. This sometimes led people in Deir Ezzor to attack some CSO centres or target and abduct CSO workers for economic reasons¹. This comes as a dangerous sign, especially that in the past, CSO staff were targeted in an attempt to silence voices calling for change.

As an initial conclusion, one could say that the circumstances that led to the emergence of civil action as an external instigator exceeded the capacity of CSOs' internal mechanisms to operate and develop, and largely contributed to stripping CSOs of their meaning and robbing them of their credibility; turning them and their workers into mere tools to implement the donors' programs and activities. This led to a state of alienation between the civil society actors and the activities they carry out within the community; a situation reinforced by the hegemony and control exercised by the AANES over civil space.

A White Spot on a Black Page

Development of civil practice constitutes a key pillar in creating a civil culture. Despite the gaps caused by funding, the accumulation of various types of awareness, development, and relief activities contributes to the development of civil work in the region. This could be achieved through member involvement. Although the motive for working with CSOs is primary financial and economic, this engagement contributes to the transfer of experience and change of mentalities and ideas, as expressed by a civil activist working in Raqqa. According

¹ WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from Al Hassakeh on 10/05/2022.

to her, many young people who initially joined a CSO only because of the job opportunity, later changed their priorities. They no longer prioritized this objective as they did upon their joining, because they were affected by the civil activities carried out on the ground. Indeed, the various types of civil activities (such as distributing leaflets, hanging road signs, and participating in dialogue sessions, among others) contributed to enhancing their social responsibility and belief in the value of civil work for them and the community alike.¹ In the meantime, both the presence of CSOs as daily life pillars and the severe criticism directed at them by all social groups are beneficial in two respects. First, they contribute to increasing the level of familiarity with the presence of organizations in the public space as well as promoting individuals' awareness. Second, they raise society's awareness and encourage people to critically assess any activity or practice that affects them or does not represent their needs.

Areas of Influence:

The previous review of CSOs' work environment and degree of integration and compliance with the values of civil society requires reflection and work on several fronts to increase the efficiency of the best practices civil society has developed. These can be summarized in two paths:

First, the legal and organizational path: Protecting the civil work space from the interference of AANES whose role should be limited to regulation, and preventing interference in the content of activities, as stated by the respondents who suggested the creation of a special body for CSOs similar to a union that protects them and defends their interests.

Second, the funding path: This is of paramount importance and has the greatest impact on the functioning of CSOs. It is necessary to push for the design of funding programs based on several approaches, including funds granted to be managed by the local CSOs themselves:

- ◆ Adopting the local approach at the level of the projects to be funded, which is based on exploring the priority needs of the local population, and the level of implementation by relying on local workers from the regions' stakeholders in particular.
- ◆ Raising the awareness of CSOs staff on the key issues of civil society, such as the struggle for rights and freedoms, in addition to technical empowerment.
- ◆ Supporting sustainability through the equitable distribution of funding grants and avoiding their concentration in large CSOs with professional staff trained in project implementation; supporting the strategic development of institutions

¹ WhatsApp interview with a civil activist from AlHassakeh on 22/05/2022.

and institutional structures that improve the governance of programs and activities.

- ◆ Linking funding to issues of positive change (including, but not limited to, employment of women in CSOs, sub-diversity, not limiting services to a certain category or region that promotes regression, etc.), noting that this linkage must be consistent with the local engagement approach and developed accordingly.