

www.dawlaty.org

دولتی

# The Syrian Non Violent Movement

## Perspectives from the Ground

### Executive Summary





# **THE SYRIAN NON VIOLENT MOVEMENT**

Perspectives from the Ground

Executive Summary

## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Revolution is today suffering from various predicaments, from the decline of the non-violent civil movement, which had been its civilizing force, to the complex continually shifting military reality, to the international and regional players which have become more influential and active within Syria than Syrians themselves. Yet despite this grim reality, there remain a number of Syrian activists working in obscurity and in the public eye, at home and abroad, each according to their capacity and whatever margins, however narrow allow them in order to keep the flame of Revolution alive. These activists explore their tools and role anew in a series of discussions and dialogues facilitated by Dawlaty.

This report provides an overview of the reflections of Syrian activists on the reality of their movement, as well as the movement's role, potential and ability to regain the lead. This report documents a process from and for activists, hence its value and significance. It aims to stimulate debate and critical thinking in light of the changing realities on the ground, and through its discussions and recommendations, inspire strategies to open up new spaces and opportunities for the non-violent movement in Syria.

A movement torn and scattered across a disconnected geography, amongst diverse forces with different agendas, faces an extremely difficult reality today. This is reflected in the discussions of the activists who had animated debates and commiserations on many issues, ranging from the definition of Syrian civil movement and whether it includes relief work or not, to the role of militarization, as well as current role of the movement as well as possibilities of restoring the positive role it enjoyed at the onset of the Revolution.

## METHODOLOGY

Over a period of six months in the first half of 2013, Dawlaty engaged 129 Syrian non-violent activists from across Syria and in neighboring countries to gauge their views on the first three years of the non-violent movement, its strengths, drawbacks, lessons learnt and its possible future role in the Syrian context. 72 activists participated in focus group discussions which took place in Syria (Rural Aleppo), Lebanon and Turkey, while 66 activists participated through individual interviews and online questionnaires. The different engagement methods allowed Dawlaty to reach participants from across Syria. However, the team faced difficulty in engaging women in the study, as only 30% of the respondents were female activists. This was particularly an issue in the North of Syria and in Turkey (where participants had traveled from Northern Syria).

Upon consolidating the preliminary findings from the survey, Dawlaty held a workshop in Beirut bringing Syrian activists from various areas of Syria, as well as displaced activists from Turkey and Lebanon, together to interpret the results and deepen the analysis. In addition, a researcher was brought in to consolidate the results and analysis into a report and conduct follow-up interviews on various subjects. The current report aims to document and interpret the results of the discussions and identify areas for further discussion and deliberation amongst Syrian activists, in the hopes of further deepening the reflection of the non-violent movement on its role and tactics.

## FINDINGS

This study has revealed an absence of a buildup of thought, culture and activities of a non-violent movement in Syria prior to the revolution, suppression of attempts to found a Syrian civil society leaving it feeble. This absence weighed on the Syrian non-violent movement in the beginnings of the Revolution, as activists learned from their everyday experiences, accumulating expertise through their contact with the outside world, with international organizations and with the press. This trial by fire allowed them to nonetheless form a movement of which they are proud today and upon which they look favorably—especially in its earlier peaceful stages. They had been able to break the regime's monopoly on the public realm, stepping into the sphere of action and presenting themselves to the world, free from the hegemony of an authority that had, for decades, dominated their voices and actions.





Notwithstanding the weakness of civil society prior to the Revolution, this study has revealed the extent to which Syrian civil society has developed in recent years, becoming more institutionalized and experienced. However, the development of civil society and its institutions has coincided with the decline of the civil movement. This is due to the violence unleashed against it by the regime, militarization, which has reduced civilian spaces of activity and mobility, and by the ruptured Syrian geography. It appears as if the two ends of the equation that activists had awaited to be connected did not connect after all. While the non-violent civil movement formed in the beginning of the revolution without a mature civil society to host and nurture it, we are today faced with a relatively strong, if atypical and loosely structured, civil society and a weak civil movement.

The current situation can still be interpreted in a positive light, as the growing civil society is a positive factor for the civil movement now and in the future. We are currently faced with activists, forces and institutions with a greater awareness of the movement's meaning and of its role, strategy as well as its successes and errors. More importantly, this experience has been molded according to the lived experiences of activists who are, in spite of all the grim realities, searching for pockets of hope to activate, develop, and reinvigorate the role of the movement. This has been reflected through the important debates in the discussion sessions that brought activists together.

The discussions were a reminder to activists that they had not been able to meet for quite some time now, which in turn was reflected in the difference of opinions, and hence the civil movement, between one region and the other. The movement's situation was analyzed according to the areas under the control of the regime, the Free Syrian Army [FSA], the Islamic Front [IF], the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS], al-Nusra Front [NF], and the Kurdish Democratic Union [KDU]. The areas of divergence and contiguity between activists' experiences in each area were discerned, as well as how best to cooperate to activate their role. Activists felt that each region should have its own movement stemming from the realities of its indigenous experience, its activists' situation, the nature of the military forces in control therein, as well as the type and severity of violence it faced. Working with movements in each area separately, without linking them to the rest of the Syrian geography and without having a strategy for the activation of a movement on the national level poses a threat. This regionalization increases the disparity between the demands and concerns from one area to another, demonstrated, for example, in the modesty of the demands of activists in regime dominated areas compared to those of activists in other areas.

There is a necessity for a strategy at the national level, one which we hope shall be formed as a result of these discussions, and as a result of the understanding gained by the activists themselves after reflecting on their experience. During the discussions, activists stressed the need to give organization, strategy, and protection mechanisms a more prominent role in organizing. In addition, there was acknowledgement of the fact that a peaceful struggle is not linked to a specific duration. Activists talked about the movement's need to have its own media, and to vigorously scrutinize sources of funding and donors. These conclusions, in essence, reflect the evolution of activists' vision and their accumulation of experience. Discussion of the various topics occurred without resorting to absolutes, as activists were willing to address both the positive and the negative sides of all issues.

Based on all of the above, activists' vision on the reactivation of the movement can be summarized by the need to find a new strategy, thus reflecting the necessity of developing a political vision for the movement. There is a need to search for alternative tactics, as well as to mitigate the effects of human rights violations and the prevalence of arms in Syrian society. At the same time, there is a need to bridge the gap between civic- and service-oriented civil society work, involving both in the movement and creating a nurturing environment for exiled activists returning to Syria. There is a pressing need to also continuously promote the goals of the Revolution to help sustain it. Last but not least, more needs to be done to reactivate the role of women in the movement, which was dramatically marginalized as a result of the omnipresence of arms.

## ADDITIONAL CONCLUSIONS:

- The peaceful Syrian movement is not faring well today. It suffers from weakness, fragmentation, and rupture due to the geographical rupture of Syria itself; reflecting negatively on both the movement and activists.
- Activists are quite aware of weakening of the movement and of the need to overcome this weakness. The grim reality has not deterred them from expressing the importance of this movement regaining its role. This is due to their awareness that the end of their role means the end of their Revolution. They have not given up that dream—not yet.
- Activists clearly realize the weakness in the non-violent movement and the need to address these weaknesses. However, they do not have a strategy to overcome these weaknesses, which is why we suggest that activists be trained on how to build such a strategy.
- Activists are well aware of the tragedies brought about by militarization and the ongoing war, including the way it has led to their marginalization in some cases and to their being overwhelmed in their efforts to contain its effects in other cases. They, finally, also realize the need to overcome this attrition to return to working on the ground for their movement.
- Activists realize that militarization has become a defacto reality, whether they agree with it or not; and they do disagree with it. A unified vision on how to deal with armed groups has, therefore, become a must. Either awaiting “the fall of the regime,” or putting an end “militarization” are no longer options: There will have to be new mechanisms of action coming from within the current reality, making use of existing margins of action.
- Women’s role has been marginalized in today’s movement due to the prevalence of militarization, arms, a masculine mentality, and the acceptance of women themselves of the stereotyped roles granted to them. But all involved (male and female activists) are in agreement on the need to activate this role, with one strand of thought stipulating that today there exist specific roles that can only be played by women. This is highly salient in terms of understanding the need for change and the importance of women’s work. The difficulty of implementing this on the ground notwithstanding, activists are currently working on finding mechanisms to overcome this obstacle.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS:

Perhaps the first step to be taken by civil society groups may lie in an initiative developed in cooperation with most activists. This initiative can take the form of a decentralized gathering, allowing agreement on an overall strategy with differences in tactics to take into account the specificities of each area in which groups are working. These meetings would allow the development of a national civic covenant laying the foundations for a new civil movement, taking into account the need to develop solutions, work mechanisms as well as answers to the above mentioned dilemma, namely:

- A clear separation between extremism and Revolution. During the course of the Revolution there had been activists who at times worked with NF, while others worked with Islamic brigades, who hoisted the Islamic State’s logo. Such actions placed the movement in an unenviable position in terms of the loss of media promotion, especially with NF having been placed on international terrorist lists. This requires a clear separation between extremism and the Revolution on the one hand and between those who raise the slogan of the civil state and raise the logo of the Islamic State, on the other. Such clear and precise separation should help in classifying all those calling for a civil state as being part of the movement, and as partners; while isolating others or at least not working with them.
- Work on finding a clear vision of how to deal with armed groups. The armed conflict has today become a reality that cannot be bypassed, and activists need to deal with it. This can be done



by finding a formula enabling work with those militants not involved in war crimes, and who display belief in the democratic state. There also is a need to develop a long-term strategy to place the military under the authority of local councils—or any official civilian side—that then can form a link between the military and civilian activists in a particular area. Groups should have flexibility to develop mechanisms and a formula for cooperation with insurgents depending on the circumstances of each region, provided this formula ensure that civil activism remains able to make its own decisions and to carry out activities without fear of any other party.

- Work to create a national media charter, rejecting cooptation by the military, and striving to tell the truth as it is—free from amplification or belittling of events.
- Work on finding a strategic, thorough and practical link between activists abroad and those who remained in Syria, so that they complement one another and end their current dispersion, which sometimes makes their efforts appear sporadic and reactionary. In addition, there needs to be work on the return of activists to Syria permanently, not vice versa.
- Work on linking civic activism with local communities at home to develop their awareness of civic activism. Thereby, not only working with them in the fields of relief, education, and psychosocial support, but also working to restore confidence of this host environment in civic work.
- Distributing the goals of the peaceful movement between the strategic and the tactical. Thereby, the strategic goal is to build a civil democratic state that respects all its citizens and is committed to Syria as a country for all its citizens regardless of religion, creed, or race; and that rejects arms, once the need for it ends. The tactical, on the other hand, is determined by what can be done on the ground, depending on the circumstances of each region; taking into account that the civic and peaceful struggle is a long-term one, not linked to a specific time or duration, and whose objectives cannot be achieved overnight.
- Work to develop a strategy to activate the peaceful movement in the areas from which ISIS, NF, extremist battalions, or the regime are evacuated. This should be part of a mechanism that takes into account the experiences of the past, wherein each side leaves the other enough space to work. through a three-pronged formation: Those carrying arms to protect civilians and their areas; activists and civil society organizations to activate the non-violent movement; and the local council to manage administrative affairs. All three parties shall be subject to a higher council—comprising representatives from all of the above parties—and be solely responsible to make decisions, until the new Syrian state becomes capable of restoring its legitimacy, and its capacity to impose its authority on the ground after a political settlement has been reached. It should be borne in mind that this phase may prove protracted; meaning a willingness to perform the tasks of the state that have been weakened presently, for a longer period.
- The fact that the Syrian situation today is fragmented, complex, and not amenable to the establishment of a singular activity on a national level of the country as a whole notwithstanding, it seems essential that the activists continue making their plans on a national level. Within the framework of the overall strategy mentioned above, each region should take action as it deems appropriate, according to its situation. This should be maintained alongside the necessity of integration with the whole of the Syrian geography, thereby allowing the movement to maintain the unity of Syria, while at the same time stressing the particularity required by each region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY:

- The civil society organizations and their workers should strive to reduce the gap between activists and international organizations. This should begin by explaining the role of these organizations and their objectives, through which it is clarified that they are more than merely supporting institutions throwing money out haphazardly; but rather are organizations aimed at the development of communities and individuals—within the respective competence of each organization. Emphasis should also be made on the existence of organizations with particular political agendas; meaning the need for a two-fold type of work: The role of the organizations, their objective, and the nature of their work, so as to mitigate the negative vision prevalent among some activists of these organizations, as well as proper work to ascertain an organization's objective before working with it; by reading its history and role to find possible hidden agendas—if any, and train activists on how to do so.
- Civil society organizations should look toward working at home more than abroad. They should transfer their headquarters into the country when the opportunity presents itself; as their work abroad causes a partial loss of their credibility—especially when activists suffering from siege and fatigue witness the safety and luxury enjoyed by these organizations' staff.
- The staff of these organizations—especially the Syrians among them—should provide information and expertise to activists in a non-condescending, non-moralizing manner, that relies on dialogue and clear role definition. They should place focus on the fact that the role of these organizations is to provide the expertise that the activists should, in turn, transfer to the field based on experience—rather than dealing with it as ready-made recipes.
- Intensify training and workshops for those inside the country. A mechanism allowing the measurement of how these exercises and workshops reflect on activists' awareness on the one hand, and on the ground on the other hand, should be established.
- Civil society organizations should be transparent about their finances and backers, so as to allow activists themselves to determine whether or not they will deal with these organizations.
- Civil society organizations should transparently clarify to activists in workshops that such workshops are for training purposes, not to make money. It should also be explained, even if indirectly, that the staff of these organizations receive payment not because they are revolutionary activists, but because of their experiences and qualifications. Meaning that their experience supersedes the Revolution not vice versa—even if these experts are revolutionary activists, in their own way.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND DONOR AGENCIES:

- Ensure that aid/support is given to activists active on the ground, or to organizations with an effective link with the Syrian interior.
- Focus first on the support of activists inside the country.
- Focus on supporting projects in the Syrian interior, thus encouraging the return of activists to the country, by creating operational mechanisms with activists.
- Support projects that mitigate the disadvantages of militarization and armament.
- Train activists on how to build new strategies that incorporate lessons learned from previous experiences and mistakes. There is also a need to emphasize the need to take activists' operating environments into account; meaning that those strategies should be created with those activists who will be implementing them, and are not merely ready-made solutions to be implemented.





- Work on expanding the ranks of relief workers, so as not to deplete activists' efforts in civic work and allow them to regain their role.
- Work on building links between civil society organizations active today and the movement on the one hand, and between activists inside and outside Syria, on the other.
- Support many of these types of discussions and workshops, as they lead to activists becoming acquainted with one another on one level, and to determine errors committed through a reflection and review process, on the other. This shall help develop insights and solutions that shall go into supporting the community and the movement.

# دولة

مساحة لنتصوّر دولتنا

دولتي مؤسسة غير ربحية لبناء القدرات  
وتطوير مواد تدريب عن التحول الديمقراطي  
والعدالة الانتقالية وسيادة القانون في سوريا

