



المنطة المدنية السورية
Syrian Civic Platform

De-Escalation Zones Agreement in Syria

-Special Report-

October 30, 2017

Contents

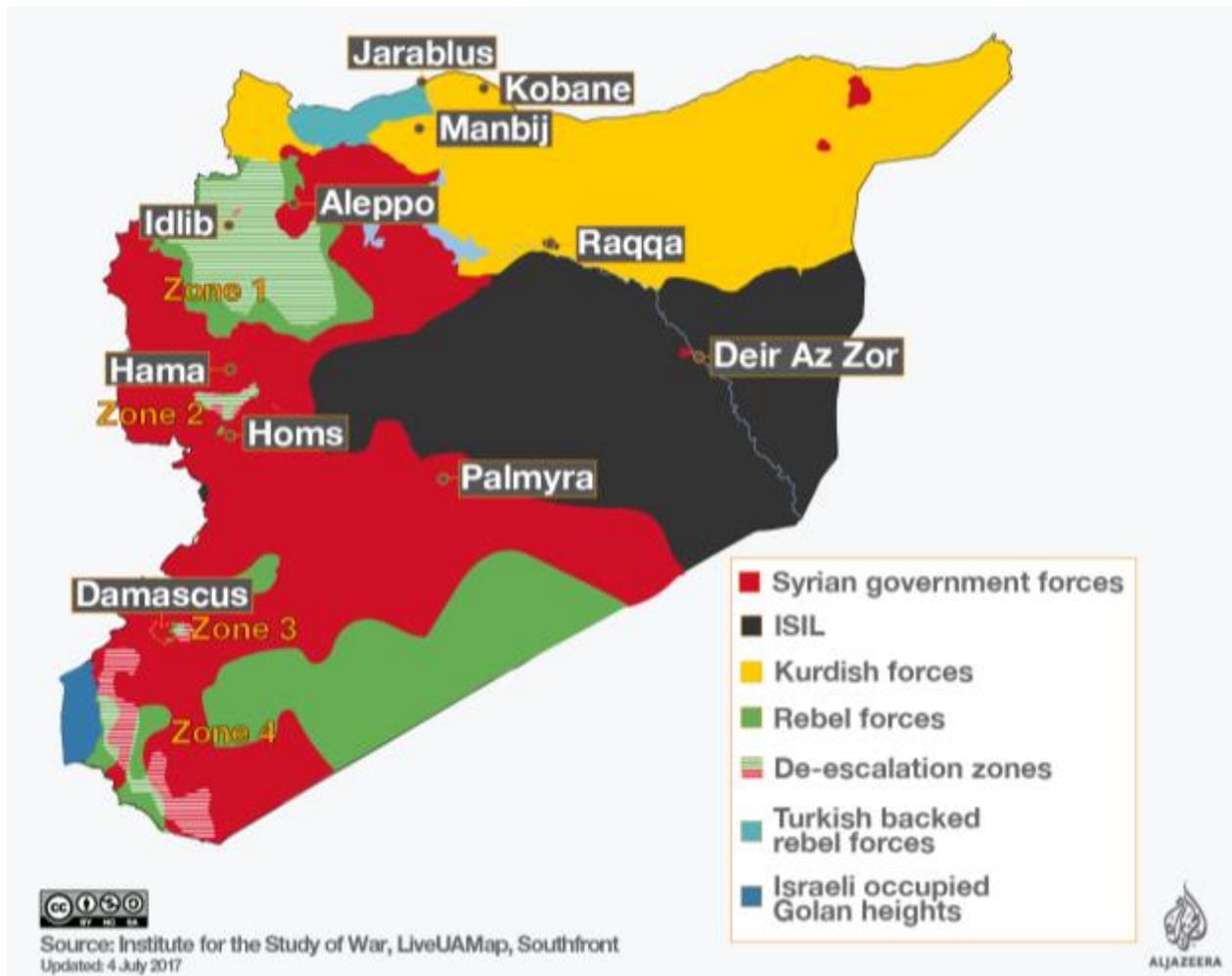
	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction	3
II. Impact of the Astana agreement on civilians	5
III. Pitfalls of the agreement	6
IV. Civilian concerns	7
V. Civilians Recommendations	8
VI. Conclusion	11
About Syrian Civic Platform.....	12

I. Introduction

Syria talks in Astana, sponsored by the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, have provoked a great deal of controversy amongst a diversity of Syrian people. The sixth round of Astana talks in September 2017 produced a signed agreement delineating four de-escalation zones in Syria.

According to the final communiqué of Astana VI, the arrangements in the so-called Agreement on De-escalation Zones are considered provisional; a temporary measure for a fixed term of six months. The agreement would be automatically extended if needed, based on a consensus between the guarantor states of Turkey, Russia and Iran.

The agreement laid out the areas where opposition armed forces and government forces should halt hostilities, including air strikes, for six months. The agreement covers all or part of the following places, grouped into four zones: Idlib province, Eastern Ghouta in Damascus countryside, and parts of Homs, Lattakia, Aleppo, Daraa, Quneitra and Hama.



Zone 1: Idlib province, as well as northeastern areas of Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and northern areas of Hama province. There are more than one million civilians in this zone and its rebel factions are dominated by an al-Qaeda-linked alliance.

Zone 2: The Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province. There are approximately 180,000 civilians in this zone and its network of rebel groups includes al-Qaeda-linked fighters.

Zone 3: Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside. Controlled by Jaish al-Islam, a powerful rebel faction that was participating in the Astana talks, it is home to about 690,000 civilians. This zone does not include the adjacent, government-besieged area of Qaboun.

Zone 4: The rebel-controlled south along the border with Jordan that includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces. Up to 800,000 civilians live there.

Collins, Dylan. "Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained." Al Jazeera. 4 July 2017.

The de-escalation zone agreement has sparked controversy and created a stark division between Syrian supporters and opponents, with many Syrians expressing their concern about its consequences. The agreement has successfully reduced violence in the zones, though not completely halting it, yet some important unanswered questions include: How do Syrians view this agreement? To what extent has the agreement contributed to reducing violence in their areas? What do they hope for in the future? In order to answer these questions the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP)¹ conducted a survey of Syrians living inside and outside of the de-escalation zones. Their responses are covered in this report, and it is important that they are taken into account by national and international decision-makers. Doing so will strengthen efforts for a comprehensive political solution for Syria, and thus improve conditions for stability and sustainable peace.

Methodology

The de-escalation zone survey collected feedback from the members of the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP), who are active civil society figures in the communities in which they are present, working directly with Syrians on the ground. This target group is well-positioned to know the views of the public and comment on the prevailing atmosphere related to issues of concern to Syrians. The survey included questions such as:

- Has the Astana Agreement contributed to a reduction in violence?
- How did this agreement affect people's lives in your area?
- Are you optimistic that this agreement will lead to a political solution in Syria, and why?
- What are your fears about what could happen after the agreement?
- What is needed to improve living conditions in your area?

¹ See section About Syrian Civic Platform for information on the background of the initiative.

The survey was completed by 173 people, 33% of whom were women. The respondents represent 150 civil society organizations and live in Syria (Idlib, Homs, Damascus countryside, Daraa, Hassakeh, Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Sweida), as well as abroad (Lebanon, Jordan, Kurdistan, and Turkey).

The survey was conducted between August 20 and September 27, 2017.

II. Impact of the Astana agreement on civilians

The agreement was very controversial amongst Syrians at the start, but following its implementation it garnered more positive responses, particularly regarding the decrease of violence as a result of the de-escalation zones. The survey results showed that 55% of the respondents indicated that the agreement has partially contributed to reducing levels of violence; 25% that it has led to a significant reduction in levels of violence; and 20% that it did not contribute to reducing levels of violence in Syria.

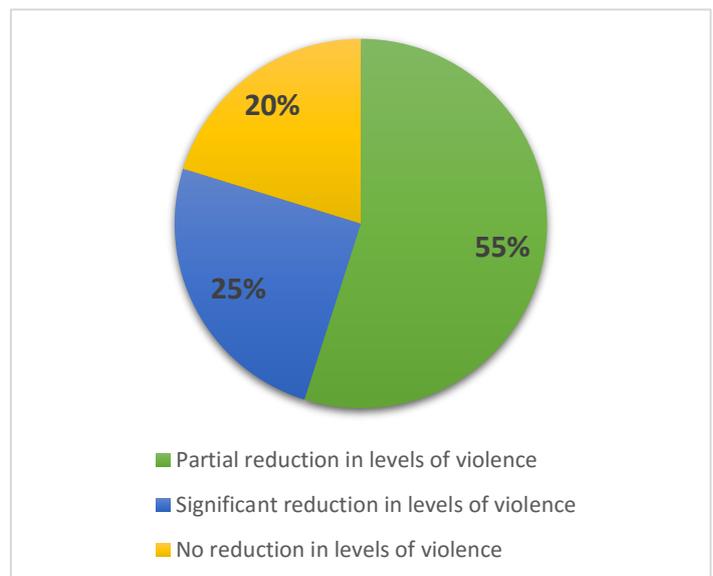
Overall, the discernible, though not complete, reduction in levels of violence has restored hope to Syrians inside and outside the country. Markets in Syria have witnessed an unprecedented economic recovery in the areas that have been experiencing continuous violence since the beginning of the popular movement in 2011. A trend towards the reconstruction of houses and shops, which were destroyed by bombing, as well as the founding of new micro-enterprises, has begun to appear.

In addition, internally displaced people (IDPs) have begun to return to areas from which they had been displaced. UNHCR has documented the return of more than 600,000 IDPs to their areas from the beginning of 2017 until August.

The agreement has also contributed to the prevention of internal displacement, due to a decrease of intense shelling in different areas. In addition, it has facilitated the movement of civilians between various areas; freedom of movement has been extremely restricted in the past due to shelling and armed clashes.

As for Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries, their discussions have focused on the issue of returning to Syria. According to Turkish government statistics, an estimated 47,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey returned to Syria through the border gates during the two Muslim holidays, Eid al-Fitr in June and Eid al-Adha in August/September; some 14% of them have remained.

The positive responses to the Astana de-escalation zone agreement were the result of its contribution to reducing the killing, destruction and indiscriminate shelling of civilians. This agreement has raised expectations of a total cessation of violence and a serious negotiation process that will pave the way for a political solution. The other aspect causing respondents to be optimistic about the agreement were its

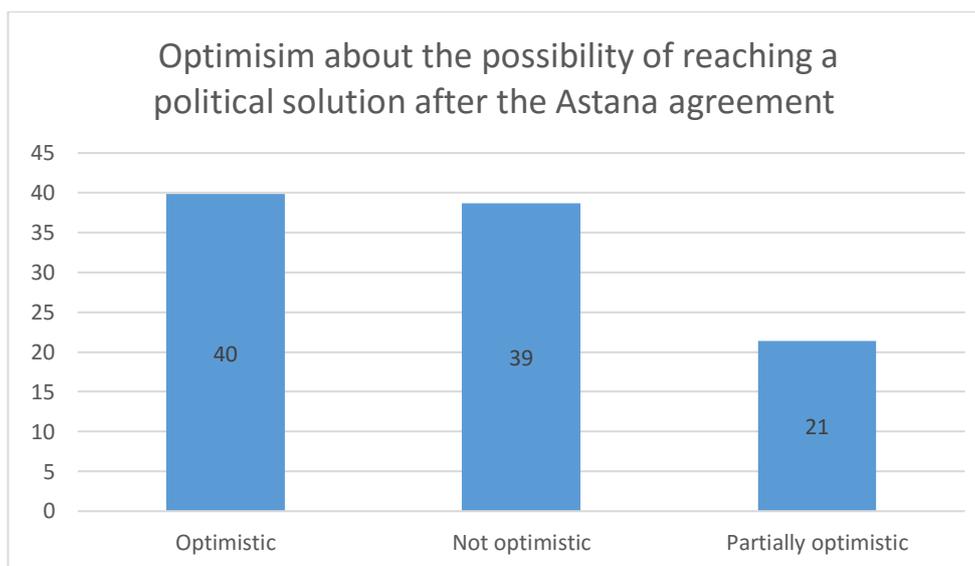


direct results on the ground, in addition to its relatively good duration compared to the previous agreements. The fact that the guarantors of this agreement, Iran Russia and Turkey, are among the most influential parties on the Syrian issue also contributed to this optimism.

III. Pitfalls of the agreement

The survey results reflect the fact that, although Syrian people support efforts to reduce violence in general, there are many caveats and fears that emerge during discussions between them. Many Syrians have lost hope in the continuity of such agreements as a result of what they have experienced in the past. Such agreements have been used by many parties, particularly the Syrian government and its allies, to make political and military gains. That has led to the failure of agreements, and to the escalation of violence and hostilities on a larger-scale comparing to what preceded such agreements. According to the survey, the pitfalls of this agreement can be summarized in the following points:

- The de-escalation zones agreement has failed to include the whole of Syria as well as all actors in different areas. This has increased concerns about the risk of division.
- There is a lack of clarity of the agreement's limits and its implications in the future, and it is not linked to a plan for political transition.
- There is little faith in the guarantors of the agreement because of their political interests in the Syrian file, which creates additional apprehension about the lack of integrity in implementing the agreement on the ground.
- The absence of international guarantees for the agreement is the biggest concern of Syrians.
- The fact that military actors and parties are responsible for the agreement and the exclusion of civilians from its creation makes its implementation on the ground



something that is forced on civilians, rather than a solution that takes into account the interests of civilians in different areas.

- Individual agreements within the framework of reducing violence are being controlled by each armed faction in its area according to its interests. This makes a comprehensive solution more difficult to achieve, and it widens social and regional divisions.
- The agreement is based on the principle of combating terrorism rather than of reducing violence in order to pave the way for launching a political process aimed at a comprehensive solution to the Syrian crisis. This is a major problem in the post-Astana phase.

IV. Civilian concerns

The main concern of the survey respondents is the possibility of the collapse of the truce and the return of fighting and destruction with more violence than in the past. At the same time, these other fears and concerns emerged from various survey respondents:

- The fear of the Forced displacement which is implicit and undeclared, and could result in demographic change in the de-escalation zones.
- The agreement could be in place in the long-term, further delaying a political solution and a transitional phase and leading to an even larger-scale civil war.
- The sponsors of the agreement could ensure their interests at the expense of the interests of Syrian civilians.
- The spheres of influence handed over to military factions by the agreement are not approved by civilians, and do not represent their interests.
- The agreement could support the Syrian government politically, as a prelude to re-establish its control over the opposition-held areas. This could lead to the almost inevitable reprisals by the Syrian government against its civilian opponents in these areas, and the occurrence of human rights violations on a large scale.
- The agreement changes the form of the Syrian government from the outside without changing its political and security structure and the continuation of the dictatorship.
- The agreement is likely to be a prelude to a more destructive war by the Syrian government and its allies in the de-escalation zones under the pretext of combating terrorism.
- The cessation of violence could open the door to problems of a different kind, which would likely take the form of intra-local conflicts due to the multiplicity of armed forces. This could lead to clashes, assassinations and reprisals due to the absence of effective and competent judicial and executive authority on the ground. This situation could also lead to the spread of disputes over services as a result of their lack of availability in general.
- There were concerns about the fate of areas not covered by the agreements, especially the areas inhabited by a Kurdish majority, thus reinforcing concerns about the future of these Kurdish regions in general, as well as areas under the control of extremist groups.
- There were also fears that the agreement would reduce violence in some areas while escalating it in others, especially in the eastern areas not covered by the agreement, which would lead to widespread human rights violations by the Syrian government and its militias.

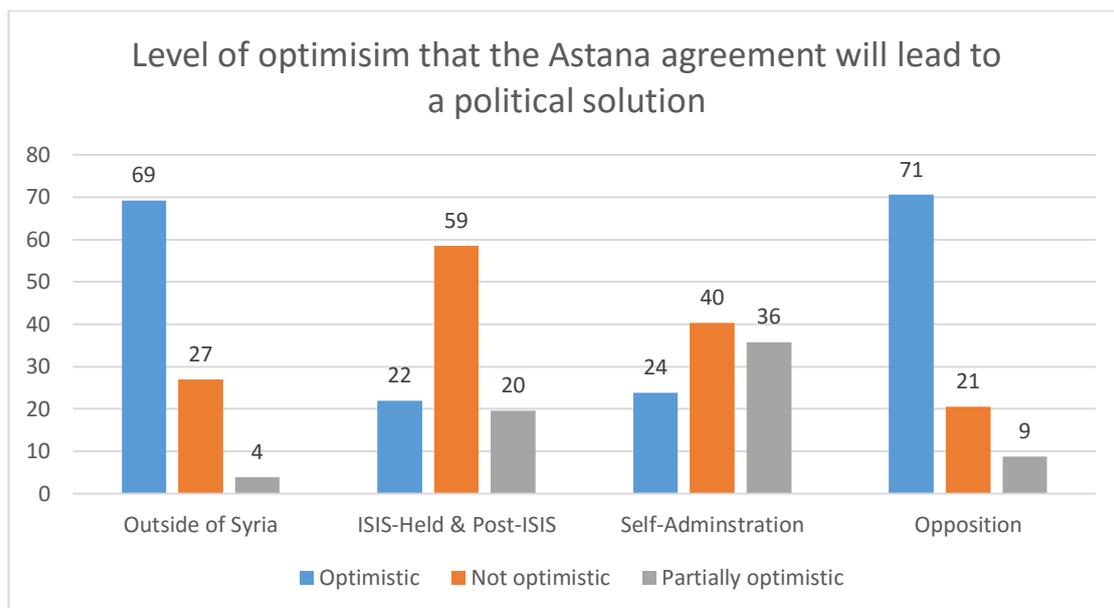
V. Civilians Recommendations

On the question of what conditions would improve living conditions in each area, the survey results differed according to whether the respondent was located in an area covered or not covered by the agreement.

According to concrete results on the ground, the level of optimism about the possibility of reaching a political solution after the Astana agreement is very low in the cities of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. This is a reflection of the massive military escalation that began in these two cities after the conclusion of the agreement.

In the Self-Administration areas which are not covered by the agreement, the level of optimism about the agreement is somewhat lower, but better than the results from the aforementioned eastern areas. The responses also showed that views are still ambiguous towards the agreement.

As for the opposition-held areas, the level of optimism is high. The respondents in neighboring countries are also optimistic about the possibility that this agreement could lead to a political solution.



When respondents were asked what could improve their living conditions, the answers differed according to each area and the forces in control.

a. In the opposition-held areas:

Following the de-escalation agreement, we found that levels of optimism for reaching a political solution are high. The agreement has had an immediate impact on the quality of life in these areas, with shops reopening and more people returning to their normal lives. But people still fear the failure of the truce and the return of violence. In addition, there are many additional concerns about the possibility of geographic and demographic division on a sectarian basis, or an attempt to defeat the revolution and derail the democratic political transition process in the country. According to the respondents present in

opposition-held areas there are many actions that should take place to ensure that living conditions improve:

1. An international party outside of the current guarantors must guarantee the agreement, such as the United Nations or the European Union.
2. The UN Security Council must propose a resolution which obligates local and international parties to adhere to the agreement.
3. The role of the Syrian Interim Government must be activated on the ground, and an effort must be made to unify its efforts with civil and local councils as a counter-balance to the military dominance and expansion in these areas.
4. The opposition's military factions must be unified.
5. Efforts must be made to define a unified legal code that governs all areas.
6. Remove the armed manifestations from within the cities, and remove the military checkpoints from the entrances of cities.
7. Efforts must be directed to development projects that would help create job opportunities, with special attention to the agricultural sector.
8. Support must be provided to the education and health sectors, as they are the most affected sectors in these areas.
9. Work must be done on the reconstruction of the infrastructure which was destroyed during the war.
10. Humanitarian corridors must be opened.
11. Support for the voluntary return of displaced persons and refugees to their homes and provide guarantees for safe return.

b. In ISIS-held and post-ISIS areas:

The level of optimism about the agreement is low among residents in the cities of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa because the agreement did not cover these two cities. There is a fear that all the military powers will be directed to the eastern areas which are still under ISIS control, resulting in humanitarian tragedies for civilians in these cities. There is also a fear of tribal revenge, separation and ethnic displacement. According to people present in the two cities, efforts to improve conditions there must take into account the following points:

1. It is important to rely on local forces during the military operations to recapture the areas under ISIS control, and involve people with different affiliations and backgrounds who are from those areas in military operations against ISIS.
2. Civilians must be considered neutral from the conflict and there is a need to open safe corridors for civilians.
3. Intensify efforts in mine clearance; landmines are widespread throughout these areas.
4. Areas should be handed over to moderate local forces for management after they have been taken out of ISIS control.
5. Establish camps with good conditions to maintain a decent standard of living for those fleeing from the war.

c. In Kurdish Self-Administration areas:

Public opinion towards the agreement is mixed, but it is less optimistic that the agreement will lead to a political solution. In the opinion of those respondents, living conditions would be improved by these steps:

1. Real partnership with the current political parties present in the Kurdish Self-Administration areas.
2. The participation of Syria's diverse communities in the ongoing negotiations for comprehensive solutions.
3. Abolition of conscription in the Self-Administration areas.
4. Support for the voluntary return of displaced persons and refugees to their homes.
5. A focus on the rehabilitation of infrastructure.

d. : In Regime areas:

Although the regime controlled areas are not included in the de-escalation zones agreement, there remains a state of anticipation of what the agreement will lead to and if it will give the regime the space to reorganize itself in the areas it controls and strengthen its security and military control. The demands for a cease-fire agreement covering the entire Syrian territory and a political solution continue.

According to the respondents present in the regime controlled areas, the following points should be considered to ensure that living conditions improve:

1. Control the influence of the regime's militias in its areas of control.
2. Ensure freedom of movement of civilians between the different areas.
3. Reducing checkpoints within cities.
4. Abolition of conscription and militarization of civilians.
5. Improving basic services and achieve economic development.

e. Outside Syria:

The responses of the survey participants outside Syria indicated optimism about the agreement as the first step towards reaching a political solution. However, they felt that living conditions should be improved by these steps:

1. Abolition of military conscription by all parties.
2. Pave the way for voluntary return of displaced persons and refugees to their homes
3. Protect basic rights for the diverse communities in Syria
4. Delivery of power to local councils representing all components and parties.
5. Exit of military forces to outside of cities.
6. The unconditional release of detainees.
7. Ensure freedom of opinion and expression for all Syrians.
8. Peaceful transition of power in Syria.
9. Improve economic conditions and reform institutions.

VI. Conclusion

In principle, the de-escalation zones agreement is considered by many Syrians both in the zones and outside to be a positive development because it has partially and in some cases significantly reduced violence in some areas. However, many Syrians – including those living in the zones – still seek solutions that will pave the way for a political solution that achieves their aspirations for a democratic transition of power. The results of the agreement were clearly reflected in the lives of civilians eager to return to normalcy, free of daily bombardment and direct targeting of their lives and livelihoods. While this respite has been extremely important and positive, their fear remains that it will sacrifice stability and peace in the medium- and long-term for a short term gain.

Based on the results of the survey as well as ongoing consultations with Syrians both inside and outside the de-escalation zones, the SCP summarizes several points that must be taken into account in any discussion about the de-escalation agreement or future ones:

- This agreement has contributed to the increase of political and military initiatives with contradictory visions regarding the shape and future of the solution in Syria. It has also exacerbated differences between local, regional and international parties, demonstrating the weakness of the agreement.
- The agreement has legitimized the intervention of many regional and international forces in Syria and the illegal establishment of their military bases in Syria considering that it didn't happen within the framework of an agreement by the Security Council allowing these countries to intervene in Syria.
- The major beneficiary of this agreement is the Syrian government and its allies, and the post-agreement period has witnessed the clear progress of its military forces. In addition, there has been talk by some governments about the restoring diplomatic relations with the Syrian government, a step that would be detrimental to progress towards a political solution.
- Holding discussions about the issue of reconstruction, including conferences and meetings on this topic, before reaching a political solution pose the serious risk of continuing dictatorship and the devastating war.
- The imposing of the agreement by the Russians is very similar to what the Syrian government has done with the Syrian people over the past seven years. The Assad regime, through its policy of systematic bombing, siege and starvation, has imposed its conditions on these areas, either directly or indirectly. This is exactly what Russia is doing with the international community. It has been defending the Syrian government since 2011, and now the international community has been forced to accept the de-escalation agreement as separate from the Geneva process.

About Syrian Civic Platform

The Syrian Civic Platform (SCP) seeks to strengthen efforts for a political solution to the Syrian conflict by channeling the diverse voices of Syrian civil society from the ground to high level decision-makers. This stronger feedback loop will strengthen solutions to reflect the needs and contexts of local communities. More than 150 local Syrian civil society groups and nearly 100 independent community leaders from diverse backgrounds participate in the SCP. They work together through:

- **Fostering inclusion:** The SCP uses a methodology of dialogue and discussion to establish the local platforms and to ensure the inclusion of all of Syrian society's diverse communities in the negotiation process.
- **Monitoring:** The SCP seeks to play an active role in monitoring the negotiation process and reporting on the violations and factors that could threaten the whole process.
- **Mobilization and Advocacy:** The SCP, through community consultations and communication with international actors, mobilizes and advocates to gain support for the various issues on which it is working, with a view to positively influencing the progress of the negotiating process to the benefit of Syrians.
- **Consultations and Recommendations:** The SCP provides recommendations based on its ongoing consultations with a large number of Syria's diverse communities. These recommendations reflect the aspirations and needs of the different communities locally and nationally.

The SCP was founded in February 2016. It consists of 14 local platforms, 11 representing provinces in Syria and 4 refugee communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. Each platform is run by local civil society groups and community leaders representing diverse cross-section of the communities in its area; their common values include respect for human rights and coexistence amongst diverse Syrians. Women comprise roughly 25 percent of local platform membership.

Since its founding, the SCP has:

- Held one-on-one and small group consultations with over 2,000 Syrians on political and humanitarian issues relevant to the peace talks, producing reports and statements detailing their needs.
- Produced over a dozen Situation Reports, rapidly providing information about humanitarian conditions on the ground that could support or threaten political solutions in Aleppo, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, Madaya, and Raqqa among other places.
- Monitored and reported violations of the US-Russia cessation of hostilities agreement (September, 2016) and the Aleppo evacuation (December, 2016).
- Produced a Road Map to Political Transition based on community consultations, as well as recommended Confidence-Building Measures and Principles for Successful Intra-Syrian Talks.

The Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) acts as Executive Secretariat for the SCP, providing the necessary organizational capacity and training to deliver the objectives. CCSD is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization from the guidance and will of its members. CCSD seeks to build a stable society of justice and sustainable peace in which each person is free and enjoys their full rights. Since its founding in 2012 CCSD has contributed to building a strong and cohesive civil society through support provided to organizations and individuals.

For more information, including the SCP's publications, see: <http://www.scplatform.net/en/>