



CIVIL SOCIETY VISION FOR POLITICAL TRANSITION IN SYRIA

**Based on consultations with over 600 diverse Syrians
Conducted by the Syrian Civic Platform**

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CONTEXT

After seven years of conflict, Syria is still unable to find a way forward. The main reason lies in the internationalization of the Syrian crisis, which has led to the involvement of multiple local, regional and international parties, all with conflicting interests. The UN-led Geneva process has only produced minor achievements, and these have been ineffective in stopping the violence. The Astana track - initiated by Russia with Iran and Turkey - was initially successful in reducing violence, but after failing to continue with the same approach, violence re-emerged more ferociously than before.

Since its inception, the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP) has worked to convey the voices of diverse civilians to decision-makers at all levels, aiming to include their views in any political transition process to ensure a genuine transition that reflects civilians' needs and demands. This document was formulated in line with the same vision, and is part of the documents related to political transition that SCP has periodically produced.

The SCP consists of over 300 members, organized into 15 local platforms. The platforms represent the following provinces of Syria as well as refugee communities: Aleppo, Damascus/Damascus Countryside, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Hama, Hassakeh, Homs, Idlib, Iraq (Kurdistan region), Jordan, Lebanon, Quneitra, Raqqa, Suweida, and Turkey.

CONTEXT

All members of the SCP are civilian civil society leaders in their local communities, representing nearly 200 local civil society groups that focus on issues such as humanitarian needs, social cohesion, livelihoods, local governance, and more. SCP members have worked diligently to hold consultation sessions with local communities in all areas they have access to, both inside Syria and in neighboring countries. The aim was to explore Syrians' opinions regarding the political process, particularly what kind of process they hope to witness.

The consultation sessions were based on the issues raised in the four agenda baskets presented by Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria, at the end of 2015. These four baskets are: governance and political transition, constitution (including national dialogue), elections, and counter-terrorism. The consultation sessions included various community groups, local community leaders, and political and civic leaders, as well as women and youth - two essential demographics that should not be marginalized. The significance of these sessions is that their contribution will enrich the negotiating process by ensuring that the visions and ideas of civilians are reflected.

FIGURES AND DATA

Between September and October, 2017 SCP conducted consultation sessions focusing on five themes: constitution, national dialogue, elections, governance, and counter-terrorism. The participants felt that the topic of national dialogue should be discussed separately from the constitution, as it is something worthy of a wider focus.

Seventy-one sessions were held with 623 Syrian leaders, 35% of whom were women. During the data collection process, SCP ensured that the following criteria were met:

- Commitment to the gender ratios, with the attempt to raise the participation of women as much as possible.
- Target young people aged between 18 and 30 years old.
- Provide adequate information on the political process and UN resolutions on Syria.
- Include diverse groups from Syrian society.
- Provide the appropriate space, and take into account the security situation in each region.

FIGURES AND DATA

Target group statistics		
Women	218	35%
Men	405	65%
Subtotal	623	100%
Organizations	183	30%
Community leaders	300	48%
Political leaders	89	15%
Military personnel	38	7%
Total	623	

Statistics by platform							
Platform	Number of sessions	Women	Men	Organizations	Community leaders	Political leaders	Military personnel
<u>Idlib</u>	13	19	31	13	35	2	0
Jordan	5	16	33	3	35	6	5
<u>Hassakeh</u>	2	15	15	15	0	15	0
Raqqa	4	20	30	7	36	7	0
Turkey	3	10	13	0	23	0	0
<u>Daraa</u>	5	15	57	22	34	6	10
<u>Deir Ezzor</u>	4	22	40	6	52	0	4
Homs countryside	5	24	27	14	26	0	11
Rural Damascus	9	7	5	11	1	0	0
Kurdistan	4	19	43	28	27	4	3
Lebanon	5	14	26	27	12	1	0
<u>Quneitra</u>	7	10	35	22	13	5	5
<u>Suweida</u>	5	27	50	13	21	43	0
Total	71	218	405	181	315	89	38

METHODOLOGY

In order to create balance in the consultation sessions, and to include diverse segments of local Syrian leadership, SCP members followed a clear methodology. This consisted of four main stages:

- The main aim of the consultations was to explore the views of a wide variety of Syrian people on the political process, and to voice their opinions to stakeholders and decision-makers at the national and international levels.
- A round of consultations with SCP members took place to form the initial vision of the political file. Consequently, a plan was drawn up to identify the following target groups: civil society organizations, political leaders, community leaders, youth, and women, with a minimum requirement of 35% women's participation in each consultation group.
- After this first phase was completed, local platforms launched consultation sessions with communities in the following governorates in Syria: Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Homs, Idlib, Suweida, Rural Damascus, Hassakeh, and Daraa. In addition, sessions were held in neighboring countries where the largest number of Syrian refugees are concentrated: Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan.
- After the community consultations were completed, the local platforms revised their visions of the political file in accordance with the input provided. Then, all visions were analyzed and common points, as well as points of difference, were extracted.

CHALLENGES

Many challenges occurred during the data collection phase, largely due to violence and instability, as well as political intransigence. These challenges can be summarized as follows:

- It was difficult to reach civilians in the Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates. The two platforms representing these areas were able to reach a sufficient number of people from these governorates within Syria, yet relied mainly on refugees who were living in the Turkish city of Urfa.
- It was difficult to hold consultation sessions in the Aleppo and Damascus governorates, as these are under control of the Syrian government.
- It was difficult to hold consultation sessions in some areas due to the control of armed groups.
- It was difficult to reach areas in Hama governorate due to the lack of security and because there are active battlefronts in some of these areas.
- The implementing team faced pressure from the Kurdish self-administration in Hassakeh and Qamishli, and they were unable to secure authorization to work in the towns of Afrin and Kobani.

■ POINTS OF AGREEMENT ■

GOVERNANCE

PILLARS OF THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNING BODY

The participants in the consultation sessions discussed that a political solution for the Syria crisis must be based on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 and relevant UN resolutions. In particular, UN Resolutions 2254, 2118, 2139 and 2165, as they provide a credible governing body that leads the political transition process in Syria; establish pluralistic democratic rule based on non-sectarian foundations; promote economic, educational and social life; and guarantee citizenship rights and non-discrimination on ethnic or sectarian grounds.

In addition, the participants concluded that the work of the Transitional Governing Body should focus on:

- Preparing the country to move to a new democratic system based on universally recognized standards (legislative).
- Working to restructure and rehabilitate public institutions in the country, especially the security institutions (executive).
- Relying on judges capable of proceeding with the transitional justice process (judicial).

PRINCIPLES OF ESTABLISHING THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNING BODY

The participants agreed that a Transitional Governing Body can be established in many ways, but it will not be effective without consensus within Syria, and with the support of regional and international states. The participants also agreed that a set of criteria must be established to build confidence and credibility among Syrians to put an end to the conflict.

Inclusion

The Transitional Governing Body must be inclusive of all the diverse communities and groups across Syria, without discrimination. It must ensure the participation of all segments of Syrian society without using a quota system, whether sectarian, religious or ethnic. It must also represent all powerful and influential actors on the ground, as well as those who enjoy popular support and acceptance. The governing body should represent Syria's political diversity. In the governing body, representation of youth and the military should not exceed 30%, and the representation of women must be guaranteed at a level of at least 30%. Representation must be based on choosing figures according to their competencies and they must not be individuals accused of human rights violations, regardless of who they are affiliated with – in other words, regardless of whether they are with or against the current Syrian government.

Authority

The Transitional Governing Body should have full executive authority. It must be ensured that the working mechanism of this body is participatory, meaning it must operate through multiple and integrated institutions. In doing so, the continuity of state institutions will be maintained and local government institutions will be integrated into the state system.

FUNCTIONS OF THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNING BODY DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

The participants in the discussion sessions believe that the Transitional Governing Body must carry out the full functions of the executive authority entrusted to any transitional government. The participants also believe that the governing body is responsible for providing and creating a judicial and security environment for the success of the transitional phase.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

The parliament must first be dissolved and a Constituent Assembly formed to legislate and write a permanent constitution, in which all Syria's diverse groups and parties will participate. The Constituent Assembly will consist of 250 to 300 Syrian figures. It should be considered the supreme legislative authority of the country.

It is the task of the Constituent Assembly to appoint a committee of experts to draft the constitution and a draft law for elections, as well as to call for parliamentary elections - to form a permanent government - in light of the new constitution and a new electoral law. The Constituent Assembly should be responsible for the elections of local councils and provincial councils.

JUDICIARY

The Constituent Assembly should facilitate the process of establishing a preparatory committee that will form a High Judicial Council. The Council will issue a new draft law which the judiciary will submit to the transitional authority for approval by the Constituent Assembly. The Interim Supreme Constitutional Court will oversee the application of the constitutionality of laws and elections, in addition to the appointment of judges, advisers and prosecutors at all levels in the country, and will issue orders of their appointment, rank, authority and scope of work.

SECURITY

The Transitional Governing Body shall form a neutral Supreme Military Council, in accordance with the constitution, that will be supervised by the interim government's Ministry of Defense. The Supreme Military Council is concerned with reconstructing a political national military institution whose mission is to preserve the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the unity of its people. Its work should focus on disarmament and returning troops to barracks. The task of the Supreme Military Council is to restructure the security institutions based on the rights of citizenship, and restrict their action to homeland security and safety. In addition, it has the responsibility of overseeing the work of these security institutions. Furthermore, it is necessary to begin rebuilding and deploying police forces across the country, and simultaneously all foreign forces and fighters should be removed from the country without exception.

ADDITIONAL CRITICAL ISSUES

For the success of the political transition process, there are a number of issues that cannot be disregarded, and must immediately be resolved. According to participants in the consultation sessions, these issues are: preparing legal, administrative and suitable living conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons; the immediate and unconditional release of detainees and disclosure of the fate of missing persons; the abolition of all discriminatory decisions (laws that discriminate against specific groups of Syrian people), and; reparations for damage.

HUMAN RIGHTS

According to the participants, the Transitional Governing Body should work primarily on the issue of human rights by establishing a body based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This body is responsible for monitoring and documenting violations, and submitting reports that are accredited by local and international bodies. It should also prepare judicial files of those involved (the convicted). A constitutional provision guaranteeing human rights and public freedoms - as stipulated in international charters - must be enforced, and the reports issued by the Syrian Human Rights Body should be taken into consideration.

The principle of transitional justice, including the prosecution of crimes against humanity and war crimes, must be recognized through international tribunals such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, as well as trials conducted internally for ordinary criminal offenses.

TIMELINE OF THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNING BODY

According to participants, the timeline of the Transitional Governing Body must not exceed 18 months, based on the aforementioned UN Resolutions. They also state that none of its members should be allowed to run for office in the government until at least three years after the formation of the first government.

OVERSIGHT MECHANISMS

Participants believe that the Constituent Assembly should oversee the Transitional Governing Body as it is considered to be the legislative authority.

In addition, there is a need for international supervision that ensures the implementation of the concluded convention. The UN supervision should be primarily composed of the state guarantors of the political agreement as well as the Syrian working group.

Internal oversight should also be provided by establishing an independent monitoring body, in addition to external oversight through international bodies, agencies and organizations.

Finally, the monitoring role of civil society organizations and the media is very important to protect the interests of Syrians.

■ CONSTITUTION ■

BASIC CONSTITUTIONAL PRINCIPLES

Participants stressed that the constitution must include all Syrians, without excluding any party or group. It must also ensure that human rights violations are not repeated, and that authoritarian rule shall never return.

In view of the multiplicity of projects related to drafting the constitution, it must be written by Syrians. The Syrian constitution should include the territorial integrity of Syria; its independence and the sovereignty of the Syrian national decision. It must also guarantee public freedoms and the principle of equality before the law.

The participants also believe that the constitution should not reflect the current balance of power. The separation of powers must be ensured as well as allowing for the pluralism of authority through participatory governance.

As a result of years of dictatorship, the Syrian participants believe there is a need to limit the President's powers in terms of duration and responsibilities. Furthermore, the state system must be a civil, democratic, and pluralistic parliamentary-presidential system.

The majority also believes that in order to express the true identity of Syria, a specific national identity must not be defined. As the majority consider Syria to be a multi-ethnic state, the name of the state should be the "Syrian Republic". Respect for human rights principles as well as democracy should be guaranteed. In addition, the rights of Syria's diverse communities and groups, especially women's rights, should be guaranteed and safeguarded in the constitution.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE CONSTITUTION DRAFTING MECHANISM

Most participants believe that the drafting of a constitution should be done by a Constituent Assembly that represents all Syrians and serves as an interim legislative authority, and which works on the following:

- Assigning a committee of experts to formulate a general legal framework for the electoral law (referendum on the constitution, parliamentary elections).
- Including the outputs of the national dialogue, issues related to rights and freedoms, democracy as well as the rule of law in the draft constitution.

EXPECTED CHALLENGES THAT MAY FACE THE CONSTITUTION WRITING PROCESS

- Continuation of war, violence, extremism as well as armed militias.
- The referendum will be difficult to conduct, taking into account the geographic dispersion of Syrians.
- The absence of a precise census of the population may provide for the possibility of fraud, which requires international monitoring of elections.
- The fear that the collective rights of specific groups could prevail at the expense of individual rights through, for example, a quota system. In addition, the diversity of geopolitics must be respected, and one region or group must not dominate over others.
- Constitutional vacuum of the legislative authority during the process.
- The influence of regional and international external powers imposing their political agenda, which could lead to the politicization of the constitution drafting committee, and a system of political quotas which entrenches sectarianism and ethnic tension, as in the cases of Lebanon and Iraq.
- Prevention of experts and technocrats from participating in the drafting process.
- The constituent assembly or the body mandated to write the constitution does not represent the entire Syrian population, and that a specific segment account for drafting the constitution, which leads to re-producing tyranny and dictatorship with new faces. This would bring Syrians back to square one; i.e. the situation before the popular movement.
- There is a risk that a truly representative democratic approach could be undermined by the entrenchment of local power structures/networks – i.e., that existing local powers co-opt the democratic process making the result of elections a foregone conclusion.
- The tendency to address the causes of the war at the tactical and instantaneous level rather than at the strategic level. The process of drafting the constitution after periods of social-political unrest is often hampered by the process of appeasing the conflicting military parties. Instead, problems must be strategically resolved at the population level, regardless of the prevailing political forces as well as parties.

Participants believe that national dialogue must be a comprehensive process for all Syrians, and should be sustained until stability and community safety are achieved. At the same time, they believe that a range of issues must be raised, such as human rights and freedoms, in addition to the system of government, reconstruction, transitional justice, national reconciliation and the restoration of trust among Syria's diverse groups. Participants also see the need to discuss secularism, as well as religion's role in public space and building the economic system. In the end, the national dialogue should contribute mainly to the reconstruction of the Syrian identity, which should be adopted as a central issue for the national dialogue.

- Mechanisms of dialogue

The majority of participants believe that the national dialogue should be conducted via different mechanisms according to the issues discussed. Such mechanisms may take the form of national community dialogues, consultations with local leaders, interviews with stakeholders. The consultations must begin before and during any process raised for discussions. A mechanism for receiving input during the process is determined in closed sessions at the level of each administrative unit (e.g., district or sub-district) and then followed by open sessions at the national level to discuss outputs.

- Roles

Participants believe that a National Dialogue Commission should be formed to play a key role in supervising the entire process. It should be formed by the Transitional Governing Body. Civil society should be one of the facilitators in planning and managing the process, in cooperation with the National Dialogue Commission.

ELECTIONS

During the consultation sessions, participants reached interesting conclusions. Their ideas and visions about the electoral process were similar, as they thought that the elections should be the result of the transitional political agreement, not an end or goal in itself. Therefore, the work should be done according to several steps.

EXPERTS COMMITTEE

The Constituent Assembly should assign the experts committee - which drafts the constitution - to establish a legal framework for the legislative elections in accordance with United Nations standards. The legal framework established by the experts committee shall determine the High Electoral Commission, the Appeals Committee and Nomination Committee, and it should conduct the electoral process. The experts committee shall determine the electoral system on which the electoral process is based, while ensuring the proportional representation of all Syria's diverse groups, parties and forces. The experts committee shall announce the results and supervise the evaluation of the entire process to ensure the holding of the referendum as well as the local and presidential elections. In the case of referendum on the constitution and direct elections for the presidency, the electoral right of Syrian participants in the diaspora is required and should not be excluded. As for the legislative and local elections, they should be conducted according to a proportional representation system.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM

As for the electoral system, on which the electoral process will be based (electoral district model), it should be based on the opening of internal and external electoral centers, taking into account civil records in all governorates. Citizenships granted after 2011 must be withdrawn, with the exception of the Syrian Kurds who received citizenship after 2011. Syrians' right outside the country to participate in the elections should also be granted unless they are convicted of crimes in their countries of residence.

CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITTEE

The Supreme Constitutional Committee is the body that supervises the electoral process, the referendum and the adoption of the constitution, and is also responsible for electoral disputes and appeals.

ROLES

The role of civil society and international human rights organizations is to contribute to monitoring the integrity of the electoral process and supporting it.

■ COUNTER-TERRORISM ■

According to the views expressed by the participants in the consultation sessions, terrorism is generally defined as every violent act aimed at spreading panic and fear among individuals in a society. It is based on racial, religious, national or sectarian extremism, and it carries a political or ideological agenda.

The features of terrorism include indiscriminate killing, force, excessive force, intimidation and torture, political repression and religious extremism as well as the bombing of civilians.

Terrorism is a behavior that can be carried out by individuals or groups or by the governing authority of the state.

FACTORS LEADING TO TERRORISM

According to participants, terrorism is the result of several factors. The most important of these can be summarized as follows:

- Disparities in the distribution of wealth due to inappropriate economic policies compared to the social reality experienced by individuals in society. This disparity contributes to a large gap between all classes. In addition, unemployment contributes to spreading terrorism and violence, as individuals become incapacitated and frustrated, and thus tend towards violent and extreme behavior towards society as a whole.
- Authoritarian regimes that suppress freedom of expression and political action. Authoritarian regimes adopt the grip of security as a method of managing all spheres of life. As a result, society suffers from the absence of democracy, the lack of hope for peaceful change as well as administrative corruption.
- International and regional conflicts have a major role in nurturing terrorism and extremism. Furthermore, depriving racial, ethnic, and minority groups of their rights and excluding them also leads to extremism.

ACTION AGAINST TERRORISM

The participants defined measures by which to combat terrorism, classifying them into two main categories.

The first category (related to the nature of the conflict):

1. Coordinate the efforts of international forces under the auspices of the United Nations to ensure a sustainable and genuine ceasefire.
2. Establish a High Military Council that supervise the Ministry of Defense in the Transitional Governing Body, thus working on the following issues:
 - Remove all foreign fighters immediately.
 - Restructure all intelligence agencies and merge them into a single one. Identify their tasks and responsibilities, limiting them to a sole focus on security issues in accordance with international standards.
 - Judicial control must be established over the work of the administration, including the intelligence apparatus and military, and the exclusion of the military judiciary from this jurisdiction for a limited period.
 - Security services/agencies must be under the supervision of the transitional government.
 - The police should be under the direct supervision of the Ministry of the Interior.
 - The national security apparatus should be under the supervision of the Transitional Governing Body.
 - The judiciary should have an active role in monitoring, supervision and accountability.
 - Ensure that the role of local communities in meeting their needs is activated.
 - Reduce unemployment and activate the role of youth in society.
 - Spread awareness against violence.
 - Mainstream a culture of peace, non-violence, acceptance of the other and freedom of opinion and expression.

ACTION AGAINST TERRORISM

The second category (general anti-terrorism measures):

- Develop comprehensive strategic plans based on field studies and research to combat terrorism.
- Build, develop and activate counterterrorism institutions.
- Hold conferences, seminars, workshops and research related to combating terrorism.
- Change the conditions leading to terrorism and activate the role of educational institutions to spread social awareness to reject extremist and alien ideas from Syrian society.
- The participants believe that combating poverty and unemployment, improving standard of living and the equitable distribution of wealth will reduce terrorism.
- Fight against administrative corruption, enact strict laws against terrorism and strengthen the judicial role to combat terrorism.
- Finally, spreading the ideas of tolerance and acceptance of the other and real reconciliation between Syrian society's diverse groups and communities, and strengthening confidence-building measures between the various parties will help to reduce terrorism in the future.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

The previous narrative of the participants' views on political transition in Syria does not mean that the participants from their different regions share the same view on all the issues mentioned. The different reality and conditions experienced by people in each Syrian governorate as well as members of diverse groups results in multiple points of view.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

1. GOVERNANCE

All platforms focused on establishing a Transitional Governing Body, but differences in the visions about the structure and authorities of this governing body remain.

Some of the platforms believe that all authorities should be granted to the Transitional Governing Body – legislative, executive and drafting of the constitution – along with restructuring public institutions, maintaining the form of current administrative divisions (governorates) and not involving any corrupt figures who served in the Syrian government in any of the governance structures.

Another group of the platforms suggest that the role of the governing body should be limited to follow-up, after establishing competent bodies to work on drafting the constitution. Or establishing laws and electoral systems as well as establishing a military council to build a new national army. These platforms believe that the majority of the governing body's members should be comprised of opposition figures, with the inclusion of some figures from the current Syrian government who had not participated in repression. In this scenario, the work of public institutions should be maintained. As for the form of the state, some platforms have proposed to push for a pluralistic civil state (which would allow for some religious influence), other platforms for a pluralistic secular state (in which no religious influence would be allowed), and others have proposed that the system of government be a federal parliamentary system.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

2. CONSTITUTION AND NATIONAL DIALOGUE

There were different views on the reference for drafting the constitution – specifically whether it should be a local institution such as the Transitional Governing Body or under the supervision of the United Nations. Another view was to assign a council of experts to draft the constitution and then submit it to a referendum.

As for the national dialogue, the differences were focused on the party or body responsible for managing and supervising it. Some suggested that dialogue is the responsibility of civil society organizations and the national dialogue body should be charged by the Transitional Governing Body. Others held that the national dialogue must be under neutral international supervision as well as international human rights organizations.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

3. ELECTIONS

Discussions on issues related to elections focused on who will oversee the process, as well as who will address appeals and irregularities. A group of the platforms suggested that a greater role should be given to international participation, and they suggested that the elections should be under international supervision and under the auspices of the United Nations.

Another section of the platforms suggested that the electoral process should be overseen by a higher committee established by the Transitional Governing Body, and civil society organizations should play a supervisory role, while the Constitutional Court should decide on appeals and irregularities.

Some platforms also see civil society as part of the electoral commission.

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

4. COUNTER-TERRORISM

Discussions between local platforms focused on two points. The first discussion focused on the causes of terrorism, while the second focused on priorities to eliminate it.

A group of platforms considered the direct causes of terrorism to be poverty, the economic situation and the spread of illiteracy. Other platforms attributed the emergence and spread of terrorism to political reasons such as repression, restrictions on freedoms, rights and tyranny, and the non-application of democracy.

With regard to the fight against terrorism, some platforms saw the need for rehabilitation, attention to children, curriculum renewal, awareness-raising and improvement of the economic situation. For other platforms, their first priority was to combat terrorism by removing all foreign fighters and withdrawing and restricting weapons within the state and its military and security institutions, while also activating the role of the judiciary and governance of security services and police.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian conflict faces steep challenges at the moment, diverse Syrian civilians and civil society groups on the ground believe that a political transition is necessary and feel that their participation in its creation is crucial. This is an important factor to note, given the current international climate of 'normalization' with the Syrian government.

In other words, while the Syrian government and their Russian and Iranian allies have made military gains, the tendency towards international inaction and paralysis on the Syrian issue has grown. This urgently needs to be countered. Syria is still in need of serious efforts towards a comprehensive political solution, despite the challenges of that path. The results of the extensive consultation process described in this paper, as well as the consultation process itself, demonstrate that it is possible to productively grapple with the difficult questions surrounding a political solution and transition in Syria. They also demonstrate that the will exists on the part of key actors on the ground. Perhaps one of the main stumbling blocks to progress is that the civil society actors who are willing to discuss these thorny issues, even when they have vast differences of opinion, are not meaningfully included in international discussions for a political solution. Their inclusion in every stage and level of the process – with an eye to women's participation in particular - will enhance and strengthen the search for a comprehensive political solution.