

Against the Odds: Civil Society in the Intra-Syrian Talks

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Introduction

On March 15, 2018, the Syrian armed conflict entered its eighth year. Since 2011, attempts to facilitate a political solution to the Syrian conflict have either failed or stalled. The conflict, which began with anti-government protests demanding democratic reforms, has claimed over 500,000 lives,¹ and there are more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees and 6.1 million internally displaced persons.² Yet the efforts of UN–Arab League Joint Special Envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, both seasoned diplomats and mediators, did not succeed in bringing the conflict to an end. Current UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has already put forward a number of initiatives, including a “freeze” of the conflict in Aleppo, consultations in Geneva, and the intra-Syrian proximity talks, but has not yet managed to convince the parties to directly engage with one another.³

Amidst this deadlock, one track that has not stalled is the civil society track. Against the odds, progress can be observed at this level as Syrian civil society has become better organized and more tightly interconnected, and as its voice in the process has grown stronger.

Under de Mistura’s leadership, the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-S) established the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) in January 2016 to create the conditions for civil society to play an important role in the intra-Syrian talks.⁴ The CSSR is a meeting space in the UN’s Palais des Nations in Geneva put at the disposal of Syrian civil society actors during official talks. It allows Syrian civil society actors to engage in discussions among themselves and with the special envoy, his team, and members of his Women’s Advisory Board, as well as with UN member states, representatives of UN agencies, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The CSSR is a novel approach to including civil society in a peace process that could become a model for other processes to follow. It is therefore important to understand what it is, what it can achieve, and what its limitations may be. After a brief description of the CSSR, this analysis outlines three

1 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “About 500,000 Persons Were Killed in Syria during 81 Months after the Syrian Revolution Started,” October 12, 2017, available at www.syriahr.com/en/?p=80436.

2 UNHCR, “Syrian Emergency,” accessed on February 1, 2018, available at www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html.

3 See “Plan to ‘Freeze’ Conflict in Aleppo ‘Concrete, Realistic,’ Says UN Syria Envoy,” UN News Centre, November 11, 2014, available at www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49308#.WnM5nXxG2U1; “In Geneva, UN Envoy Meets Stakeholders amid Ongoing Consultations,” UN News Centre, June 10, 2015, available at www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51112#.WnM5yHxG2U1; UN Office at Geneva, “Intra-Syrian Talks—Key Dates of the Peace Process.”

4 See UN Office at Geneva, “Staffan de Mistura, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Briefing to the Security Council on the Outcomes of Geneva 4,” March 8, 2017.

of its central functions, three key contributions civil society can make to the intra-Syrian talks, and the three main challenges encountered, as well as ideas on how to alleviate them.

The Room

The idea behind the CSSR is to provide Syrian civil society a physical workspace in the Palais des Nations, in proximity to the OSE-S and the intra-Syrian talks. The CSSR is managed by two implementing partners of the OSE-S—swisspeace and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF)—and funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the European Union. It is led by a senior political affairs officer within the OSE-S who serves as the main interface between the formal talks and the CSSR.

During a typical round of intra-Syrian talks, the CSSR team prepares an agenda based on a combination of the needs and interests expressed by the civil society actors invited and the issues the OSE-S deems relevant. While in Geneva, participants prepare key messages, briefing notes, position papers, and other inputs that they relay to the OSE-S as well as to other actors with whom they have the opportunity to interact. Beyond the opportunities it provides during the intra-Syrian talks, the CSSR has also become a platform for civil society actors to consult with one another in between official rounds of talks and to influence the political process by sharing their views and ideas with the OSE-S team.

The OSE-S has adopted a broad definition of civil society to avoid disqualifying relevant actors operating inside Syria in both opposition-held and government-controlled areas, as well as persons whose expertise would have otherwise been discounted due to their political past or current political leanings. In spite of this pragmatic approach, a set of criteria has been applied in the selection of participants. To be invited to the CSSR, participants must not only be Syrian, they must also be actively engaged in a civil society organization or civilian initiative or possess relevant

technical expertise. Reflecting the principles that frame the work of the OSE-S, participants must also be committed to making constructive contributions to the intra-Syrian talks and to a lasting negotiated political solution to the conflict in Syria.

Participation in the CSSR is based on a rotational system, with some civil society actors being invited to several rounds to enable continuity of discussions while others are rotated to allow for greater inclusivity. By December 2017, more than 300 persons had traveled to Geneva to attend CSSR rounds during intra-Syrian talks.

Functions

If managed well, the CSSR can build a constituency in support of a political rather than a military solution to the conflict. De Mistura has repeatedly underlined his belief that the Syrian conflict will not be resolved by the military victory of one of the conflict parties, but by a mutually acceptable agreement forged at the negotiation table.⁵ This statement has been put to test countless times, particularly when information about gruesome attacks made the headlines. To this day, some parties continue to pursue a military rather than a political solution. Syrian civil society's engagement in favor of a political solution can help build popular support for a negotiated solution. It can also exert pressure on the conflict parties and create momentum for a mediation process.

Further, the CSSR has built bridges among Syrian civil society actors from a wide range of backgrounds. This has not been easy or straightforward. Many civil society actors found it difficult to be in the same room with, let alone talk to, persons with different views on the conflict. Regular and gruesome attacks that tested the efforts to reach a negotiated solution had even deeper reverberations in the CSSR. Over time, however, a process of confidence building has happened, as actors with diametrically opposed views have started to discuss their differences respectfully and built relationships in the process. While preparing for CSSR rounds, some civil society actors have also created networks and coalitions and merged into more institutionalized bodies. At a moment when the positions of the

5 “‘Moment of Crisis’ in Syria Calls for Serious Search for Political Solution—UN Envoy,” UN News Centre, April 12, 2017, available at www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56552#.WnM-wXxG2UI.

official negotiation delegations in Geneva could not be more opposed, the CSSR is proof that bridges can be rebuilt across conflict lines.

No negotiations last forever; actors must ready themselves for post-agreement peacebuilding and reconstruction. Any peace process requires national ownership to be sustainable. The CSSR prepares Syrian civil society for its role in the transition phase. Engagement in the CSSR is familiarizing Syrian civil society actors with high-level political processes. This has impressed upon them the need to build a strong network and to connect with one another to increase the impact and efficiency of their activities beyond the CSSR. Engagement in the CSSR has also exposed these actors to the key substantive issues that arise in any transition. It provides them with the opportunity to prepare substantively by working through disagreements and finding points of consensus about the next phase, for instance by discussing topics such as governance institutions in a political transition period, the future role of civil society in service delivery, and the design of a potential national dialogue.

Contributions

Syrian civil society is making noted contributions to the intra-Syrian talks. First and foremost, its participation in the CSSR contributes to linking what happens in Geneva to what happens inside Syria and in the region. During each round, civil society participants share information with the OSE-S and with one another about the situation on the ground, helping identify priorities, gaps, and needs. After each round, civil society actors relay the gist of their discussions in Geneva to their constituencies and networks. In the process, the OSE-S gains insights into the perceptions and concerns of ordinary Syrians, while ordinary Syrians get more information about the intra-Syrian talks. This has helped to better connect the negotiations in Geneva with peacebuilding efforts inside Syria and in the region and has enhanced the transparency of the peace process.

Civil society also contributes to broadening the Syrian views represented in Geneva beyond the ambit of the official delegations. The rotational participation system mentioned above balances continuity and diversity. While some civil society

actors are repeatedly invited to CSSR meetings, new actors also join with each new round of intra-Syrian talks. Thereby, a particular focus is put on ensuring geographic, societal, and demographic representation. This provides the OSE-S team with a much more diverse spectrum of views, ideas, and regional and thematic perspectives than expressed by the negotiating parties. Taken collectively, these improve representativeness.

Civil society also brings thematic expertise and contextual knowledge to Geneva. Many civil society actors are highly knowledgeable on topics under discussion and on conflict dynamics on the ground. Their knowledge is not simply theoretical. These are actors that, because they are based inside Syria or receive regular information from their networks in the country, know the specifics of issues and understand nuances and variations that may escape outsiders. This has been particularly relevant with regard to their knowledge of the humanitarian situation, especially in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. More generally, as they provide inputs on specific themes and act as a sounding board for ideas the OSE-S would like to test, civil society actors working through the CSSR can contribute to increasing the relevance of agenda items and to sharpening the tenor of discussions.

Challenges

Civil society participation in peace processes is a fragile endeavor that needs to be carefully designed and constantly adapted. The CSSR process has faced three main challenges to date.

First is the fluidity of the political process and the reality of negotiating during an ongoing armed conflict. The CSSR takes place in a highly politicized and constantly changing context. When the process stalls, and when the Geneva talks fail to provide tangible outcomes in terms of reduced violence, civil society actors raise questions about the usefulness of their participation. They also have to field similar questions from their networks.

This creates a dilemma for civil society participants and for the CSSR. On the one hand, civil society's participation lends the efforts of the OSE-S support from additional sectors of Syrian society. It also attests to the possibility of bridge building and prepares civil society actors for their

role in the transition phase. Important reasons therefore exist for Syrian civil society actors and for the OSE-S to protect and ensure the continuity of the CSSR.

On the other hand, without tangible results and an improvement in the living conditions of Syrians inside Syria and in refugee camps abroad, civil society organizations that attend the CSSR and are thus associated with the intra-Syrian talks risk being criticized by their constituents for continuing to attend the talks despite the lack of progress and the urgency of the work on the ground. While there is no clear-cut solution to this dilemma, some civil society participants have articulated it, and some have chosen not to attend specific rounds when they felt that the situation on the ground made the dilemma too acute to bear.

The second challenge is achieving balanced participation, which can be described as walking a tightrope. For the CSSR to achieve its role as a sounding board and transmission belt, and for it to contribute to increasing Syrian ownership of the mediation process and the subsequent transition phase, the actors invited to attend must reflect the broadest possible diversity of views.

Yet there is a natural bias toward inviting civil society actors that are easily identifiable because they are well established, institutionalized, and accustomed to dealing with their international counterparts. This may result in over-representation of a specific type of civil society voice at the expense of informal actors, who are more difficult to identify and reach out to. Selection bias can contribute to skepticism about how “local” the knowledge is that civil society actors involved in the CSSR bring into the peace process and can create competition among them.

The challenge of achieving balanced participation is further amplified by logistical and security considerations. Even the most ardent promoters of balanced participation cannot overcome some of the difficulties created by the situation on the ground. Civil society actors are sometimes unable to secure the required documentation to travel abroad, and visa processing times do not always coincide with the tempo of the intra-Syrian talks. Furthermore, some civil society actors have abstained from participating in the CSSR, citing

personal security concerns.

The third challenge is ensuring substantive engagement. As much as the CSSR mechanism can be useful, the mere presence of civil society actors in the room is not enough. Without strategic management and inclusive and careful planning as well as clearly spelled out and shared objectives, any such mechanism will rapidly lose credibility. Yet what may be obvious in theory is more challenging in practice.

Two examples illustrate this. The first relates to agenda setting. The agendas for the CSSR meetings in Geneva are usually drafted in an iterative process between the OSE-S and civil society participants. Participants have a variety of expertise on different topics that they would like to see prioritized in the agenda. At the same time, while some prefer to discuss topics directly related to their daily activities, others favor tackling the more political issues that are on the agenda of the official delegations. Tackling these political issues, however, provides the OSE-S with a challenge in terms of maintaining the confidentiality of the official talks. The path to consensus on the agenda of CSSR discussions is thus far from obvious.

A second example is the challenge of ensuring sustained interactions between CSSR participants and the mediation team. The tempo of the talks and the vagaries of engaging with the negotiating parties often create a situation where OSE-S team members have to juggle competing priorities. They sometimes find themselves unable to give civil society actors the level of attention they would like. When the CSSR meets in parallel with the intra-Syrian talks, participants risk having fewer opportunities to engage with the OSE-S team members, but they gain the opportunity to engage with different stakeholders, potentially including the negotiating parties. If the CSSR holds its meetings immediately before or after a round of intra-Syrian talks, civil society actors gain better access to the OSE-S team members, but the opportunities to interact with other stakeholders may be more limited. Moreover, the presence of CSSR members in Geneva while the conflict parties are negotiating holds a symbolic importance that cannot be matched by meetings at a different time or place.

Forging Ahead

The model of civil society participation used in the intra-Syrian talks is innovative. If successful in overcoming inherent challenges, the experience of the CSSR is likely to inform future mediation processes. While real, the challenges are not insurmountable. Three measures can help alleviate them.

First, an open discussion between the OSE-S and CSSR participants about the scope of the latter's role in the process is essential. The extent of civil society's engagement will necessarily vary with changes in the circumstances surrounding the mediation process. Thus, such transparency not only fosters Syrian civil society's ownership of the CSSR process, it also deepens trust between civil society actors and the OSE-S.

Second, the OSE-S's efforts to reach out to and engage with civil society actors located in hard-to-reach areas inside Syria and in refugee camps in the region, as well as those who may be less visible because they are not institutionalized, can go a long way toward increasing inclusivity and representativeness. For instance, using modern telecommunication technologies, by December 2017, the OSE-S had connected with close to a hundred civil society actors in hard-to-reach areas or refugee communi-

ties whose circumstances prevented them from traveling to Geneva. Together with the rotation in participation, the extension and intensification of these efforts should allow the OSE-S to address criticisms about the selection of participants that have been leveled in some quarters.

Third, it is important to shift attention away from Geneva as the center of gravity for the OSE-S's engagement with Syrian civil society. In fact, what happens at the Palais des Nations is only one of many avenues for civil society to engage in the intra-Syrian talks. The OSE-S has already identified this as an important issue and regularly conducts outreach missions to the region to meet with civil society actors who have not yet attended a CSSR round in Geneva. Moreover, in summer 2017 it began to organize regional consultation meetings in Beirut, Gaziantep, and Amman in an effort to maintain continuous substantive engagement with civil society actors in between the official rounds in Geneva.

The CSSR process is new, and its future is far from predetermined. Even so, it has already established new standards for mediation practice with regard to providing organized and institutionalized space for civil society actors that go beyond cosmetic forms of participation toward real engagement in peace processes.

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