



# PeaceRep

Peace and Conflict  
Resolution Evidence  
Platform

## Key Findings: Syria

The landscape of the Syrian conflict is divided and fragmented in many shapes and forms. Our research explores how this fragmentation plays out in practice, across different areas of control and at different levels of public authority. Browse our key findings below.

[Read more about our Syria research focus and teams.](#)

### Peace Processes

The practices of the guarantor states within the Astana peace process fostered the emergence of ‘power peace’, or the pre-eminence of pragmatism, geopolitical interests and statecraft over any ideal of peace (Beaujouan, forthcoming 2024).

Power peace failed to effectively transform the conflict into an inclusive, sustainable peace system. While the UN-led peace process promoted an ideal of long-term conflict termination, the guarantors implemented short-term conflict stabilisation and endurance of the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. At the local level particularly, their peace practices eluded the UN accountability standards for human rights violations (Beaujouan, forthcoming 2024).

European countries and the US remain the largest donors of aid and humanitarian programs. Reconstruction might become the main bone of contention for future mediation efforts; Astana’s pragmatic desire to start rebuilding the country will need to be reconciled with Geneva’s refusal to allow the Syrian regime to sidestep its responsibility for repeated violations of international law during the conflict (Beaujouan, forthcoming 2024).

Despite signs of normalisation, Syria is still in a state of political transition. The intervention of the guarantor states stabilised the political unsettlement, but the Syrian state remains contested – externally by the UN, the West, and Turkey, and internally by three opposition governments. While deeply illiberal authoritarian at its core, this fragmentation of authority has enabled some

liberalness to breathe into local opposition political and civil governance institutions in terms of inclusion and tolerance ([Beaujouan, 2022](#)).

At the local level, the private sector plays a key role in poverty reduction and building peace. International support directed towards the business sector, with a focus on micro and small enterprises while being cautious not to empower crony capitalists and warlords, can significantly contribute to peace and stability in Syria while also reducing the need for humanitarian support ([Mehchy, Turkmani, and Gharibah, 2023](#)).

Private businesses in Syria often refrain from direct involvement in peace processes due to political sensitivities, but they indirectly contribute to local peacebuilding in many ways, for example by hiring individuals from diverse backgrounds and supporting deprived families. Business collaborations across different areas of control play a constructive role in peacebuilding by dismantling barriers and cultivating trust ([Mehchy, Turkmani, and Gharibah, 2023](#)).

As evidenced by six years of local agreements in Homs, ongoing local talks can lead to a reduction in violence and fatalities even when higher-level talks fail to deliver such results. Local agreements can be seen as a process rather than a discrete event reached on a particular date ([Turkmani, 2022a](#)). Influencing local agreements has become a new form of third-party intervention in wars, as unilateral external actors often get involved in the negotiation of local agreements ([Turkmani, 2022b](#)).

Analysis of power dynamics and sharing across various control zones in Syria reveals that, regardless of the de facto authorities in control, security and military entities

have the greatest governing power, yet receive the least support from local communities. Conversely, civil actors possess the lowest power but enjoy the highest level of support from local communities. Consequently, any international intervention should focus on altering these power dynamics by empowering civil actors ([Mapping Syria](#)).

Research on [engendering civiness in peace-making](#) examines the role and impact of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), a novel formal mechanism to involve civil society in the UN-led political talks and it shows how it developed to an important process in its own right that is having a transformative impact on those participating in it.

## Humanitarian Negotiations

In Syria, as in many conflict-affected countries, negotiations with armed groups are a humanitarian necessity. The practice of humanitarian negotiations reflects the changing, increasingly fragmented and complex nature of conflicts ([Beaujouan, 2023](#)).

To enable Syrian partners to implement safe and effective humanitarian action, a number of actions are needed ([Beaujouan et al., 2023](#)):

1. Donors should support the localisation agenda by including Syrian non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and experts in the development of humanitarian priorities and programmes.
2. Donors should require a duty of care allocation in budgets by all (international) NGOs working in Syria (and in conflict-affected countries generally) to cover evacuation costs and accommodation and subsistence costs in case of unexpected termination of projects for field partners.
3. (I)NGOs should reform mechanisms of accountability to create a cycle of responsibility that flows between donors, (I)NGOs, field partners and receivers of aid, and should prioritise accountability along with access.
4. (I)NGOs should acknowledge the excessive security risk borne by field partners and standardise procedures for reporting violent incidents from all warring parties. Except in situations of military siege, donors should attempt to source goods locally where possible, to avoid crossing borders and conflict lines.
5. Embassies and consulates should take on a more pro-active role in humanitarian assistance by facilitating the work of INGOs based across the Syrian border who can provide fast administrative support.

6. The international community should continue efforts to secure an independent UN border crossing between Turkey and Syria.

In Syria, humanitarian aid and its transit through borders is inextricably linked to politics and the political manoeuvres of some of the warring parties. As a result of the many constraints on their work (weaponisation of humanitarian aid, limited access to local communities; protracted nature of the conflict), international humanitarian actors have come to be described by the vast majority of Syrians as politically biased and unfair ([Beaujouan, El hafi and Ghreiz, 2021](#)).

Analysis of Track 1 and local level Syrian peace agreements shows that the domination of the guarantor states – Iran, Russia and Turkey – over the Syrian peace process marked a shift from humanitarian concerns to the securitisation of peacemaking ([PA-X Peace Agreements Database](#)). The deteriorating humanitarian situation is used to justify al-Assad’s political project, that is, to initiate the rebuilding of the country and foster a discourse of normalisation. Reduced access also hinders the process of monitoring needs and aid delivery, rendering humanitarian providers less accountable in terms of neutrality and equity.

Yet, humanitarian aid is also a vital stabilising factor and the return of aid to all Syrian regions – both under the control of the Syrian regime and the opposition – is vital. By providing immediate relief to populations in need, humanitarian aid reduces socio-economic tensions and distrust and contributes to “small peace” ([Beaujouan, 2023](#)).

## Education

In both areas of control, school curricula (primary and secondary education) are highly politicised and largely reinforce intra-Syria divisions, if they do not simply erase ‘other’ groups. The manipulation of the education sector overwhelmingly prioritises political rehabilitation and power consolidation over social cohesion and reconciliation ([Al Sakbani and Beaujouan, 2024](#)).

The power vacuum left by the conflict across the country resulted in the multiplication of private schools and cultural centres and the rising influence of external actors – mainly Russia and Turkey – who use formal and informal schooling as a tool of (soft) power ([Al Sakbani and Beaujouan, 2024](#)).

These dynamics render the prospect of an inclusive reunification of Syria unlikely, or at least, extremely challenging. The erasure of history and identity markers in official narratives and curricula also jeopardises the future of Syrians ([Al Sakbani and Beaujouan, 2024](#)).

## Human Rights

Despite a national ceasefire and several so-called reconciliation agreements signed between the regime and opposition forces from 2018 to 2021, evidence shows that human safety and human rights have been weakened ([Beaujouan et al., 2023a](#)).

In areas under the control of the Syrian regime, main roads are dotted with military checkpoints. Beyond systematic searches and control of identification documents, regime forces are infamous for their violent practices towards civilians, including harassment, extortion and arbitrary arrests. They also monetise freedom of movement. Secondary roads are raided by armed groups and gangs that carry out criminal activities such as killing, robbery, and kidnapping for ransom. Men in general, civil activists, media staff and humanitarian workers are particularly at risk ([Beaujouan et al., 2023a](#)).

In opposition-held areas in the northwest of the country, movement within cities and regions of control is relatively easy and risk-free (during the day). Still, residents avoid travelling to the city and countryside of Idlib for fear of arrests by Tahrir al-Sham and the imposition of high taxes at checkpoints. The lack of a unified legal framework to regulate the transportation of people and goods, and practices at checkpoints across the northwest is a key obstacle to the free movement of residents. Syrians who were smuggled and/or forcibly displaced to the northeast from regime-controlled areas are particularly vulnerable to the process of crossing checkpoints ([Beaujouan et al., 2023b](#)).

Beyond physical and psychological insecurity, these challenges to free movement have adverse consequences on a number of key drivers to the return to durable peace, such as trade and economic activities, trust and social cohesion, and justice and security institutions ([Beaujouan et al., 2023b](#)).

## Local Resilience

Resilience-building and humanitarian early recovery can reduce both immediate and protracted basic needs, and enable communities to cope with prospective future shocks. To enhance the resilience of local communities, major sectors including agriculture, education, business and health should be supported. Amidst delicate political dynamics, at times the red lines of donors can be an obstacle at the operations level. These red lines could be interpreted and operationalised to meet their main aims without hampering humanitarian and resilience-building responses ([Turkmani, Mehchy and Gharibah, 2022](#)).

Regarding security, despite a reduction in military operations between various de facto authorities in Syria and a relatively stable military situation, especially in regime-controlled areas, the security of local communities continues to decline. Illegal activities have surged after the conflict, including drug trafficking and production, alongside a sharp increase in negative social phenomena such as thefts. These factors have significantly diminished the sense of security among individuals in local communities. Therefore, the fragile military stability at the macro level in Syria does not accurately reflect the ongoing deterioration of the “feeling of security” at the local level ([Turkmani, Mehchy and Gharibah, 2022](#)).

All regions of Syria confront significant ecological challenges. Deforestation has intensified during the conflict, driven by wildfires, illegal logging, and military operations. Additionally, drought and soil salinization exacerbate environmental strain, while unregulated and excessive consumption of national water reserves leads to water depletion. Illegal oil refineries and inadequate waste management infrastructure further contribute to air pollution. Despite the severity of these ecological issues, authorities across Syria have not prioritized addressing them. Thus, there is an urgent need for the international community to raise awareness of these challenges and offer necessary support ([Turkmani, Mehchy and Gharibah, 2022](#)).

Approximately 35% of Syria’s population are internally displaced persons (IDPs). Discrimination against IDPs persists in numerous areas in Syria and has escalated amid severe economic decline. Addressing IDP issues is intricately linked to achieving a comprehensive solution in the country. Meanwhile, there is a pressing need to enhance civil society and establish independent mechanisms to safeguard their rights and ensure equitable access to humanitarian aid without discrimination ([Turkmani, Mehchy and Gharibah, 2022](#)).

Throughout the conflict, Syria has experienced a shift in gender roles, with an increasing number of women assuming the role of primary breadwinners and pursuing employment in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, systemic discrimination persists, and women often lack adequate protection mechanisms and face discriminatory working environments. Many international programs on women empowerment within Syria are scattered and lack sustainability. It is crucial to bolster projects led by local civil actors that address the institutional, social, and economic barriers contributing to the exclusion of women at the macro level ([Turkmani, Mehchy and Gharibah, 2022](#)).

*\*When referencing these key findings, please cite the individual research paper or blog referenced in the text.\**

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