acting for peace in Syria: Initiatives and Challenges
Focus Mali: 
Fragility, Conflict & Statebuilding

Dialogue Project Run by swisspeace
Independent Media in Dialogue
Media and the War of Words in Ukraine
Working as an SCI Volunteer in Kharkiv
Ukraine – Decentralisation under Difficult Conditions
Switzerland’s Involvement in Settling the Conflict in Ukraine
Dialogue Event on Germany’s

Ukraine – Decentralisation under Difficult Conditions
Switzerland’s Involvement in Settling the Conflict in Ukraine

Ukraine – Decentralisation under Difficult Conditions
Switzerland’s Involvement in Settling the Conflict in Ukraine
Independent Media in Dialogue
Media and the War of Words in Ukraine

Upcoming Events
Acting for Peace in Syria: Initiatives and Challenges

editorial

250,000 victims, 4.7 million refugees, 6.6 million internally displaced persons, 13.5 million people dependent on humanitarian aid: despite the vast figures and the urgency of the humanitarian situation, a peaceful solution to the Syria conflict does not yet seem to be in the cards. In a context where traditional media give special attention to military interventions, the international dimension of the conflict, and diplomatic negotiations, it is rare to hear about the peace initiatives taken by the local population. However, whether this is through humanitarian actions, mediation work, or development projects, many Syrians are getting involved every day in order to find a sustainable and peaceful solution to the conflict.

This edition aims to not only review the situation in Syria and its impact on neighboring countries, but also to give increased visibility to these local initiatives, the support given to them by Swiss governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the challenges they face.

Marie Seidel, Editor
Peace in Syria: Why the Local Matters

Peaceful change in Syria is not possible without a genuine inclusion of local actors. However, in order for this to have positive effects, it should be based on needs and abilities of actors, rather than norms.

“Speak to us please, don’t speak only about us”: these were the words of Dr. Rouba Mhaissen in her speech during the “Supporting Syria and the Region” conference that took place in London in February 2016. Dr. Mhaissen criticized that Syrians were invited on an ad-hoc last minute basis and not as partners. The conference aimed at raising pledges for humanitarian aid, but also included discussions of long-term strategies of civilian protection and process support.

As the conflict is worsening and several military fronts are escalating, Syrians on the ground are the first to bear the humanitarian and political repercussions. And while most narratives refer to Syrians as the primary victims of the conflict, local actors continue to be side-lined as “agents of change” whether in humanitarian planning or peacebuilding processes. It would be delusional not to acknowledge the internationalized nature of this conflict, but it is also unrealistic to believe that change will happen without a genuine inclusion of Syrian local actors. However, in order for these actors to have a real effect, inclusion should be based on needs and abilities, not merely on normative standards or cosmetic approaches.
Findings from “Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace”, a recent study conducted by swisspeace, FarikBeirut.net, Conflict Dynamics International, and commissioned by Finn Church Aid, show that a number of local actors are still engaged in significant peacebuilding activities despite the persistence of high levels of violence. This includes community leaders, women’s initiatives, youth groups, non-governmental and community-based organizations (NGOs and CBOs), local councils, and reconciliation committees. These actors are involved in various activities including negotiations for the release and exchange of detained and abducted individuals, conflict resolution and mediation, the promotion of peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric, relief work and development, as well as human rights activism. Stemming from these activities, local Syrian actors are indispensable for any process because of their networks and influence, their legitimacy on the ground, and their monitoring abilities.

First, all local actors in the research have important networks that could be drawn from for any process. For example, community leaders identified have a major influence in conflict resolution, negotiations, and mediation at a local level; with varying influence from one area to the other. In Sweida, they played a significant role in calming a situation with a neighboring town that could have escalated into an armed standoff. Therefore, if a cessation of hostilities would take place as was discussed in the recent security conference in Munich, community leaders could be a vital asset due to their strong network and influence on the ground, both with civilians and armed groups. They are considered one of the influencing pillars either due to traditional position, resources, or access to particular groups. Nevertheless, as with all actors, at other instances community leaders are referred to as having a negative or conflict-inciting role. Therefore it is important to carefully analyze each case rather than to assume a collective savior or culprit role.

Second, in a time where locals are getting more cynical and untrusting of international and national actors, there are those on the ground who are providing services granting them trust and legitimacy within their communities. This is especially the case for actors involved in relief and development work, whether they are youth groups, women’s initiatives, or organizations. These groups have an intimate understanding of the needs and priorities on the ground, which is important for designing any international programs. By securing basic needs, they are also engaging in peacebuilding, as one actor in Rif Damascus explained how some people “are carrying arms as a means to secure food for their children”. The same goes for those engaged in education as a method of protection against joining ISIS. Others use relief work as an entry point after which they work on other peacebuilding activities such as mediation. The intertwining of humanitarian and peacebuilding work must be taken into account, especially given the fluidity of the context. However, it should be approached in a conflict sensitive manner as to not hamper the work of local actors.

Finally, local actors remain involved in human rights monitoring and documentation despite the overarching security threats that they face. These organizations and individuals are essential for providing accounts of what is going on the ground and whether it mirrors stated agreements. In the case of cessation of hostilities or humanitarian agreements, their work as monitoring organizations and documenters is vital. As recently declared by the Office of the Special Envoy to Syria during the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, the general approach is moving more towards the inclusion of a broad range of members from Syrian society in processes. However, several points need to be taken into account in regards to
any engagement. First is to allow for local actors to have room to produce their own definitions and narratives of what peacebuilding means for different Syrians rather than work with them using pre-defined concepts. Second, rather than normative approaches that are sometimes coupled with romanticizing, international actors should adopt a pragmatic approach in regards to the inclusion of different local actors. Third, the international community should not limit its civil society engagement in Syria with only established organizations but should expand to include informal actors such as community leaders or grassroots organizations. Finally, Syrian local actors should continue to enhance efforts of collaborating and building networks with one another to facilitate partnerships and visibility.

swisspeace
Yosra Nagui
Program Officer, Mediation

links

- Overview of swisspeace’s activities on Syria
- FarikBeirut.net
- Conflict Dynamics International
- Finn Church Aid

2 reports

swisspeace’s Expertise on Syria

swisspeace has developed expertise on Syria through trainings and conferences, process support, and research. In October 2014, the Syrian Peacebuilding Advisory Unit, swisspeace, LSE, and NOREF organized a conference on the Syrian war economy bringing together academics and policy-makers. Moreover, the 2015 edition of swisspeace’s Summer School focused on Syria attempting to increase participants' understanding of the conflict by learning from peace and conflict theories. KOFF has organized roundtables on Syria assessing the gender specific characteristics of the current conflict. Since fall 2014, swisspeace has also been involved in an initiative led by the Carter Center and jointly implemented with NOREF to convene meetings with Syrian stakeholders to discuss options for a political transition in Syria. More recently, swisspeace and NOREF
have also been engaged in establishing a Syrian-led civil society space.

With regard to research, together with Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net, and commissioned by Finn Church Aid, swisspeace published a report entitled “Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace”. Moreover, swisspeace also conducts research on peacemaking in Syria in the framework of a three-year project on the role of norms in peacebuilding. swisspeace and NOREF also publish the “Syrian Voices on the Syrian Conflict” series in which Syrian authors share their opinions on different aspects of the peace process.

Through these different engagements, swisspeace has developed expertise on the political aspects, causes and consequences of the armed conflict in Syria, the involvement of regional as well as international actors, and international efforts to promote a political solution to the conflict. swisspeace maintains close contacts and works in cooperation with a broad range of local and international partner organizations.

swisspeace
Sara Hellmüller
Senior Researcher, Mediation Focal Point for Syria

links
- Overview of swisspeace's activities on Syria
- swisspeace's mediation program

2 reports

Gender Dimensions of the Syrian Crisis

In November 2015, the Swiss NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security – founded by KOFF – organized a series of events to inform the civil society report on the Swiss implementation of its National Action Plan for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325). The events were focused on examining and discussing different areas of security policy from a critical gender perspective.

In this context, KOFF invited various stakeholders and actors from civil society, arts and media to discuss the Syrian crisis from a gender perspective. The discussion mainly focused on the connection between militarism, violence and masculinity in order to understand gendered dimensions of the war in Syria and specific security risks for women. Moreover, for the reason that gendered issues are either left out of reporting and discussions of security or only surface indirectly in normative gendered constructions, it was emphasized that representational practices of reporting and their entwinedness with gender relations and militarism need to be critically discussed.
A more detailed discussion of the insights from the events will be published in the civil society report on the Swiss National Action Plan for UNSCR1325, due to be issued in March 2016.

KOFF
Marieke Fröhlich
Program Assistant

links

- Swiss NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security

2 reports

Psychosocial Self-Help for Women in Rojava

In the past year, media reports featuring Kurdish women have mostly shown them with weapons in their hands. In Rojava in northern Syria, they have been intrepid in their efforts to fight ISIS and liberate the city of Kobanê. “What many people do not realize, however,” says our partner from the Foundation for Free Women in Rojava (WJAR), “is that their most valuable weapon is not firearms. Their most important battle is one of emancipation and it is aimed at reforming society.” She is alluding to the fact that women make up at least 40 per cent of all municipal and cantonal decision-making bodies and are also playing an active role through their involvement in Yekitiya Star, a feminist Kurdish women’s organization. Through these inclusive political processes, they are ensuring that women and their projects benefit from the funds and resources available. One of the fundamental principles of the WJAR foundation is targeted cooperation between Arab and Kurdish women. Together, they develop projects designed to empower women and girls who have lost everything in the war, have been forced to flee their homes or have even been abused as sex slaves by the men of ISIS.

They support women both in resisting the violence they face and in terms of their mental and physical survival. This does not just involve rebuilding the collapsed healthcare system – it also means raising awareness of the psychological suffering and traumatization of women across the entire male-dominated society and changing attitudes towards sexual violence against women.

Therapists from international backgrounds are working locally to provide training for female psychologists, who – together with representatives of Kurdish women’s organizations – are adapting the psychosocial services on offer to suit local needs. medico international schweiz, along with other donor organizations, is supporting both these training courses and the establishment of a women’s health center in Serê Kaniyê.

medico international schweiz
Nina Schneider, Maja Hess
The Syrian conflict has already driven over four million people from their homes. For the time being, most of them are staying in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon, which poses unprecedented challenges not just for authorities and aid organizations, but also for the local population in these regions. In this context, promoting social cohesion and relieving social tensions between refugees and host communities is proving to be an issue of primary importance.

Studies show that rising social tensions between refugees and locals have the potential to cause conflicts in host countries. This friction can have an impact on access to basic goods and services and livelihood opportunities. If tensions escalate further, there is a major risk that displaced persons will even withdraw into isolation. Competition on the labor market is another factor that can lead to frustration, scapegoating and discrimination, thus hampering refugees’ chances of being able to earn a living.

These challenges form the starting point for a study published by World Vision International on social cohesion between refugees and host communities in Lebanon and Jordan. This report calls for new, more holistic approaches to humanitarian response with a view to ensuring social cohesion for all population groups concerned. It also sets out strategic objectives for national, international and local stakeholders aimed at protecting the fragile stability in these two countries.

World Vision Switzerland
Manuela Eberhard
Media Spokesperson

links
International Track II Coordination on Syria

Traditional Track I diplomatic efforts have been unsuccessful in ending the violence in Syria so far, and Track II peace builders continue to strive for the common objective of a peaceful settlement to the conflict. In the absence of an official coordination mechanism for Syria and considering the various Track II efforts of NGOs and agencies that consult with a diversity of Syrians, there is a need for increased linkages among processes, more effective and less duplicative work, and better information sharing about efforts for a solution to the Syrian conflict. To meet this end, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in partnership with the European Institute of Peace (EIP) have been running a joint coordination process since early 2015, to create a platform for regular meetings and analysis exchange among international Track II organizations working on Syria, building upon the existing process led by SFCG since 2013. The meetings are attended by Track II practitioners, regional analysts, government representatives, and European and international multilateral institutions that actively support conflict resolution efforts for Syria.

Previous meetings have dealt with topics related to regional dynamics and their implications for a solution; international resolutions and roadmaps for peace in Syria; as well as broader discussions on governance and transition, avenues for reconciliation, armed groups and extremism, among others. In addition to increasing coordination, this platform serves to generate practical recommendations and policy options on different substantive issues relevant to the state of the conflict.

The platform has thus far resulted in visible greater information-sharing and complementarity between participating organizations, and has created bridges between the UN-led Track I process for peace in Syria and Track II processes working internationally and locally.

European Institute of Peace
Maria Chalhoub
Program Assistant
links

- European Institute of Peace
Switzerland’s Engagement in Syria

Faced with the gravity of the Syrian crisis, Switzerland is committed to working in a coordinated way. The Directorate of Political Affairs, The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Directorate of International Law are working on behalf of the Swiss government on three pillars: the search for a political solution to the conflict, humanitarian aid and promotion of resilience, and the defense of international law.

Three Priorities for Peace Promotion in Syria

Since the Syria crisis began in 2011, Switzerland has been implementing a peace promotion program to target both the immediate and the underlying causes of tensions in the country. With this in mind, Switzerland’s engagement in Syria has been adapted to respond to the progressively intensifying crisis, and the fact that hostilities are becoming increasingly internationalized.

At present, the Swiss peace promotion program in Syria is based on three axes of intervention: supporting a political solution to the conflict, strengthening local peacebuilding capacities, and defending and promoting international law in Syria.

On one hand, Switzerland is supporting the efforts of Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria, aiming to create the conditions needed for a negotiated solution to the conflict. Using diplomatic channels and a policy of informal meetings, Switzerland is working to facilitate dialogue between the parties involved in the conflict. The fact that Geneva was chosen as the place to hold the intra-Syrian negotiations means that Switzerland has special opportunities and responsibilities.

On the other hand, Switzerland is strengthening local peacebuilding initiatives. These projects include, for instance, creating intercommunity dialogue spaces, working with the media, strengthening local governance or supporting women’s networks. In this way, Switzerland is committed to encouraging the inclusion of local actors in formal dialogue promoted by the UN in order to reduce the distance between local and international levels of the peace process.

Finally, Switzerland understands the importance of law and justice in any sustainable peace agreement. It therefore supports international humanitarian law training courses for those involved in the conflict and ensures that these standards are incorporated into rules of engagement and respected by belligerent parties. In addition, Switzerland supports Syrian organizations that actively document international humanitarian law and human rights violations committed by parties involved in the conflict in order to be able to deal with the past and help with national reconciliation when the time comes.

Human Security Division of the FDFA
Gregorio Bernasconi
Program Officer for Syria

links
3 in depth

Voices of Hope from Syrian Civil Society

This study carried out by Charney Research on behalf of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre is based on in-depth interviews with people from across the full spectrum of the Syrian population. Its aim is to provide a platform for the interviewees – which include Sunnis, Shias, Alawites and Christians, supporters of the Assad regime and opponents of it, as well as displaced persons and refugees – to express their views, opinions and concerns. The study indicates that the desire for peace is still present in many Syrians, in spite of polarization and fragmentation at all levels of society. However, it also reveals a sharp decline in support for an internationally brokered settlement of the conflict. Fostering inclusive negotiations at local level and involving civil society seem to be more effective and could, according to the authors, point the way to a more peaceful future.

links

- Syria Justice and Accountability Centre. “Maybe We Can Reach a Solution”: Syrian Perspectives on the Conflict and Local Initiatives for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation. February 2015.

3 in depth

Governance Without Government in Syria
In this study, Rana Khalaf examines the current state of governance in Syria. According to her analysis, governance has shifted from the state to players at local level during the Syrian conflict. Civil society groups, religious authorities, clan societies and civic movements are filling the power vacuum that has emerged, including warlords and terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Similar effects are evident at international level – foreign governments, international organizations and private institutions are getting involved in determining Syria's fate. Competition and hybridizations of these forms of government are common features across all these developments. However, although these processes do not yet constitute a comprehensive process of state building, they do at least guarantee the Syrian people a modicum of stability while their country is in a state of turmoil and fragmentation.

links


3 in depth

Learning for Peace: Supporting More Effective Action in Syria

The aim of the SyriaLearning.org portal, which is run by the ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) secretariat, is to foster collective learning in relation to the crisis in Syria and thus support coordinated international responses. The wide range of relevant information, data, discussions and analyzes shared via the portal is intended to serve the interests of a variety of users, with particular emphasis on those who are involved in learning processes or in planning and evaluating programs and are keen to incorporate information about ongoing and planned research, studies and other types of learning activities in their work. By encouraging shared learning, the portal is helping to cultivate a common understanding of the evolving situation across various agencies and sectors.

links

- SyriaLearning.org

4 news
Making Peacebuilding Activities More Strengthened, Relevant and Visible KOFF is a well-established dialogue and exchange network connecting 48 nonstate and two state organizations from the fields of peacebuilding, human rights and development. Its mission is to ensure that Swiss peacebuilding activities are strengthened, relevant and visible. With this in mind, the KOFF team will be using its well-known roundtables and dialogue forums in Switzerland to better strategic effect in 2016, aiming to discuss approaches to tackling common challenges, create entry points and encourage exchange. KOFF and its members will also launch mutual learning processes in local contexts in order to boost the effectiveness of peacebuilding activities and enhance the strategic political work carried out by member organizations and partners. KOFF – as a network – is also keen to exert a greater influence on Swiss peace policy and international policy processes and strengthen the cooperation between peace, development and security. Communication between the member organizations, as well as between the worlds of practice and politics, is key to this. By actively contributing their knowledge, working with KOFF to organise roundtables, initiating mutual learning processes and adding to the content of KOFF’s communications, KOFF’s members have a more crucial role to play than ever.

KOFF
Sidonia Gabriel
Project Director
swisspeace
Beispiel Beispiel
Testing Webseite
links

- KOFF website

4 news
KOFF Members

Senior Level Peacebuilding Course

Focusing on “Enhancing Leadership for Peacebuilding”, the “Senior Level Peacebuilding Training Course” took place from 16 to 20 November 2015 in Geneva. It was organized in
partnership with the Human Security Division, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), the International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (IPAT) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The objectives of the course were to better understand the latest developments in sustainable peacebuilding, to create an environment conducive to sharing and evaluating lessons learned and lastly to explore the leadership styles and skills that effectively deal with peacebuilding challenges. Discussions between the 25 participants were rewarding due to the diversity within the group. This diversity also encouraged greater sensitivity in regard to gender issues. The course not only benefitted from attendance by civilian and military personnel working on the ground or within decision-making bodies, but also from the participation of the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva in the opening and closing panels.

FDFA
Claudia Rizzo
Employee
Author
Job

5 calendar

Upcoming Events

5 March 2016
University of Zurich

In March, Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Peace Watch Switzerland (PWS) are organizing an information session at the University of Zurich, enabling visitors to learn more about opportunities to support human rights in their projects, as in Switzerland. These provide a chance to find out more about the work done by volunteers on the ground, the training process and the workings of the organizations. Further information from PBI and PWS.

13 March 2016
Neumarkt Theater Zurich

Swiss Foundation for Art in Regions of conflict

It is just over five years since the creation of artasfoundation: the Swiss Foundation for Art in Regions of conflict. To mark this milestone, the foundation is giving an appraisal of its activities and experience, particularly in the Transcaucasia region, as well as in Russia and Syria. The session, which is part of the “How Artists Approach War” festival, will take place on 13 March in Zurich’s Neumarkt theater.

Further Information
14 April and 18 May 2016
Basel

**swisspeace and the University of Basel**

On 14 April 2016 at 6:15 p.m. in Basel, swisspeace is holding an information event to present its range of postgraduate courses. It will be an opportunity to discover the vast range of thematic courses, training opportunities and various postgraduate courses offered by swisspeace and the University of Basel. A second information event will be held on 18 May 2016 at 6:15 p.m. in Bern.

---

27–29 April 2016

Peacebuilding, development and humanitarian interventions aim at contributing to a positive impact on the contexts within which they take place. The swisspeace training on conflict sensitivity focuses on the concept and aim of conflict sensitivity and practical tools for applying conflict sensitivity in strategic and operational aspects of program management. Further information and registration ASAP.

---

**Further Information**

**Registration**
impressum