

Becker, Petra

Research Report

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Support for Syria's Civil Society – Misguided and Ineffective

Without Military Action, International Support Will Continue to Be of No Avail

Petra Becker

Three-and-a-half years after the start of the peaceful protests in Syria the civil actors have been marginalised. The picture is dominated by a broad range of different militias. Few of them have a vision of Syria as a country based on pluralism and united in territorial, ethnic and denominational terms. Half of the population has fled abroad or has been displaced within the country. Millions of internal refugees are dependent on humanitarian aid. In view of the international military campaign against the group which calls itself Islamic State, the Western supporters of the opposition urgently need to review their original strategy, which focused almost entirely on promoting civilian structures.

When the uprising against the Assad regime began in 2011, civil actors were quick to band together in a whole range of initiatives. They were encouraged by the largely peaceful upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt and the declarations of support from Western states such as the US and the Europeans. Since then thousands of activists have been killed or imprisoned, or have fled abroad. The fact that there are still civil society groups trying to provide humanitarian aid and preserve the infrastructure under such immensely difficult conditions says much about the resilience of Syrian society. While pursuing these goals they not only run the risk of being bombed by the regime or of being killed by the “Islamic State” (IS), but are also compelled to obey the dictates of the local militias.

Tasks and Challenges

The tasks and problems confronting civilian actors differ depending on whether the areas concerned are under the control of the regime, the rebels, the Kurdish Democratic Union (PYD) or the IS.

Areas under the Control of the Regime

In the areas under the control of the regime – which range from Sweida in the southernmost part of the country through Damascus and Homs to the coastal mountains – civilian actors are primarily involved in humanitarian work. They are trying to help the internal refugees and provide them with clothes, food and medical assistance. Since the regime considers refugees who come from rebel-held areas to be terrorists, such

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humanitarian assistance is often a clandestine affair. Anyone who is caught openly providing such assistance runs the risk of being arrested, tortured or murdered. This can happen even to workers of the Syrian Red Crescent. The same risks are incurred by organisers of workshops devoted to the peaceful coexistence of different denominations or to human rights. Nevertheless there continue to be undaunted activists who are willing to organise such events. Lawyers and volunteers document human rights abuses and provide assistance for political detainees and their families. A number of educators, psychologists and artists are trying to help traumatised children to forget about life in a war zone, at least now and then and for short periods of time.

Rebel-held Areas

These tasks are also being performed by civil groups in the rebel-held areas, above all in the southern province of Daraa, in the vicinity of Damascus and in the north-western provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. But here the activists are having to shoulder the additional burden of civil administration. They are trying to keep the infrastructure (i.e. water mains, electricity grids and communications networks) up and running, to supply the population with basic foodstuffs, cooking gas, and fuel for heating and transportation purposes, and to provide educational facilities. For three years the people in these areas have been terrorised by Syrian air strikes and Syrian artillery shelling. Thousands of activists have been killed, and many have been forced to flee. Those who have stayed usually find it very difficult to maintain their civil society activities, especially since it is now very difficult to feed one's own family. Some people have become disillusioned and have joined the militias.

The networks of the revolutionary "Local Coordination Committees" in Syria and similar associations which were all over the country in 2011 have started to crumble. Nonetheless a number of activists are carrying on with their work. Ultimately, their

success depends on the extent to which the various committees are networked with the opposition-in-exile and its various bodies, how much support they can mobilise from abroad, and whether the civil actors can work out a *modus vivendi* with dominant local rebel groups.

Areas under PYD Control

In the Kurdish-dominated areas in the north-east of the country under the control of the PYD, where Kurdish self-rule was proclaimed early in 2014, civil society work has hitherto been possible, though subject to certain restrictions. The PYD, the Syrian wing of the PKK, has adopted a strategy reminiscent of the one pursued by the Assad regime before the outbreak of the uprising. Such activities are integrated into and take place under the auspices of either the PYD or its mass organisations. Sometimes the independent activists are initially given a free hand, and subsequently harassed and eliminated if they become more influential.

Areas under IS Control

Since the IS was unable to take over the civil administration in Raqqa, the only sizeable town in Syria under its control, it has for the time being retained the opposition administration and merely arrogated the areas of education and public order. This means that it can concentrate on indoctrinating the population, recruiting new fighters, and conquering other parts of the country. At the same time the IS brutally suppresses activities that seek to propagate democracy, pluralism or freedom of speech. Civil society actors have been arrested, abducted and executed. But even in these areas, there are still clandestine groups which do media work and document human rights abuses.

International Assistance Ignores Basic Needs

The international community, primarily through the UN, but also through numerous private organisations, has provided assistance for Syria. However, on the whole this does not reach the places where it is needed, and is not enough to ensure the survival of the population and of civil society.

Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian aid is still not reaching the rebel-held areas in sufficient quantities. In July 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165, which states that it is permissible to provide aid and supplies for such parts of the country without obtaining prior consent from the government. However, this decision does not solve the problem of the areas in the vicinity of Damascus and Homs where about half a million inhabitants are besieged by forces loyal to the regime. A war economy has emerged. Rebel groups such as the “Islamic Army” do deals with mafioso members of the Syrian intelligence services, smuggle foodstuffs into the besieged areas, and artificially keep goods in short supply in order to drive up the prices. Forces loyal to the regime extort food supplies from aid organisations and sell them on the black market. At the same time about 45,000 people in the north-west of Syria are besieged by rebel groups.

Institutional Support and Capacity Building

The international contact group “Friends of the Syrian People” supports the institutionalisation of the opposition National Coalition and its committees and of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). There have been repeated complaints that these activities are being hampered by infighting within the opposition and by the latter’s flawed organisation. Although such criticism is certainly justified, it fails to address the central problem which is the fact that the

“Friends of the Syrian People” lack a common strategy, the source of many of the internal conflicts.

The aim of building up new structures requires a reliable budget. However, if only part of the promised financial resources is made available and not entirely disbursed via the National Coalition and the SIG, but actually more or less bypasses them, it is impossible to engage in structured work. This applies to supplies and provisions, to administration and infrastructure just as much as it does to the military assistance which was promised to the opposition. Instead of channelling this aid through the opposition’s Military Council, i.e. through the military wing of the coalition, such financial resources from a number of different states – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and even the US – still continue to be disbursed directly to various rebel groups and individuals within the opposition. This simply exacerbates the fragmentation of these organisations.

At the same time the establishment of local structures continues to be torpedoed by the regime’s military activities. It is no doubt important to set up courses for civil actors in which, for example, they are trained to apply democratic procedures, to do media work, or to provide psychological support to children. However, they will not do much good as long as children continue to be the victims of air strikes, and as long as it proves impossible to establish democratic structures because interests, even on the local level, are no longer the subject of negotiations but are asserted with armed force.

Infrastructure Issues

The same is true of the aid provided by international organisations that is designed to preserve and to repair the infrastructure in the rebel-held areas. The city of Aleppo provides an example of how municipal workers unceasingly repair water mains and waste water drains that have been destroyed by air strikes, even while in other

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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places the systems are being hit and damaged on a daily basis. Elsewhere in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib it can safely be said that reports about the successful completion of projects inevitably lead to new bombing runs. The regime's strategy is obvious. It is unwilling to accept a normalisation of life in the rebel-held areas, since this would facilitate the emergence of a political alternative. In view of the repeated setbacks associated with "construction work" of this kind, some international organisations have terminated their support because they believe that lasting improvements cannot be made under the present circumstances.

The military chaos also hampers activities in the rebel-held areas. Thus activists have reported instances in which newly procured ambulances have been requisitioned by the rebels and re-equipped as combat vehicles. In April 2014 the head of the civilian council of the town of Saraqeb was abducted by rebels and maltreated for days. The council had received a large sum of money earmarked for infrastructure projects, and the rebels wanted to extort some of this for themselves.

Comprehensive Strategy Required

For more than three years the supporters of the opposition in general and the US in particular have excluded the idea of direct military intervention in Syria. In doing so they have succumbed to the illusion that, even if the conflict could not be resolved at the negotiating table, it could at least be confined to Syria. The territorial gains made by the IS has shown that they were wrong. Today, a tenuous coalition under American leadership is conducting air strikes against the IS and other radical groups, and there is a heated debate going on about the deployment of ground troops. However, it is unclear how this might help to resolve the basic conflict. In order to combat the IS and to alleviate the pressure on neighbouring states of the never-ending waves of refugees, there is in fact a need for

military action. However, this must be embedded in a more comprehensive approach containing two key elements:

- ▶ *First*, the imposition of a no-fly zone over the whole of Syria in order to afford protection to the civilian population against air attacks by the regime. Now that the US-led coalition has relinquished its policy of military restraint, it should focus on this type of protection. At the same time this could facilitate the start of ceasefire negotiations and pave the way for a political solution. The regime will only participate in meaningful talks if it is under massive pressure in military terms. And the vast majority of the rebels will probably give their assent to a negotiated settlement if they receive assurances that the inner circle around Assad will be excluded from any transitional arrangement. For the fact is that the rebels are just as war-weary as the people around them.
- ▶ *Second*, the establishment of a fund under the control of the "Friends of the Syrian People" which will be used to finance the interim government and the Syrian Military Council. An external supervisory committee should monitor these financial resources to ensure administrative transparency.

These two measures could help to stabilise the situation in the rebel-held areas and give the civil actors more room for manoeuvre. It would also send out a signal to the people in the areas under the control of the regime. The seizure of the Al-Tabqa military airbase at the end of August 2014, where hundreds of soldiers loyal to the regime were executed by the IS, has seriously weakened confidence in the Assad leadership, even among its own supporters. What these people need in order to escape from the regime's "It's us or the terrorists" strategy is a credible alternative. However, this is not going to materialise anytime soon if the violence in the rebel-held areas persists and the population becomes increasingly radicalized as a result.