

CSSR Statement

VIII Brussels Conference – Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region

29 April 2024

“This is an unofficial English translation of the original Arabic version written by the participants of the CSSR side event in the framework of the VIII Brussels Conference and is ‘Not an Official UN Document’”

Ladies and Gentlemen

With each successive Brussels Conference, Syrian civic activists have renewed optimism that there is still international attention towards the Syrian cause, and that they have partners in the international arena who share their pursuit of a genuine political process that ensures security and peace; a process that lays the foundations for Syria's recovery, and provides for new pillars for stability, and brings an end to this decade-long bloodshed, societal fragmentation and divisions.

Dear Friends

The conflict in and over Syria has reached a dangerous stage, necessitating urgent and extraordinary efforts. Addressing this crisis is not only a moral imperative but also a vital component of international peace tracks. Nonetheless, the current political process remains stagnant, as does the Constitutional Committee and the issue of its venue for reasons unrelated to the Syrian issue.

The recent briefing by the UN Special envoy highlighted the escalation of various forms of conflict, transforming Syria into a battleground for regional and international conflicts, and underscored that serious risks are still spiralling not only to the protection and security of Syrian civilians but also in relation to territorial integrity.

This does not mean that we mean to solely attribute the Syrian crisis to regional or international factors. We do believe that as Syrians we assume responsibility, and this will remain a priority from which we can proceed to a better place if interests of communities were able to come together and unite over fragmentation. We have faith in your ability to champion such an approach.

In the eighth edition of the Brussels conference, we aim to highlight three key points that reflect our vision as one of the groups convening as part of the Civil Society Support Room; the CSSR which is our safe, dynamic space through which we reflect the major interests of Syrian society as part of our responsibility to strengthen its steadfastness and renaissance.

Hence, we identify three key issues aimed at minimizing the ongoing costs our country bears and enhancing the effectiveness of response and support programs over the medium and long term.

First: Fostering local conditions for a safe, calm, and neutral environment

Second: Ensuring an effective balance between the components of the Tripple Nexus: the humanitarian, development files and peacebuilding sector.

Third, we believe that the most honest incubator for advancing efforts on these two fronts lies within civil and civic groups both within and beyond Syria, along with: their extensive network of alliances with their constituencies, as well as with the active positive stakeholders.

We will attempt to present further details on this vision, as we perceive these three issues as directly aligned with several UN resolutions pertaining to the Syrian crisis especially Resolution 2254, which enjoys international consensus and draws a practical road map by explicitly addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Our vision of a safe, calm, and neutral environment

1. Since its independence, Syria had begun a tangible journey in building its state and developing its social contract in line with its historical formation and geopolitical location. It was supposed to exit the unstable risk environment and become today a mature and effective state in the Eastern Mediterranean if it wasn't for a multitude of unresolved political, economic, and social development issues, encompassing societal identity, economic identity, as well as rights and freedoms. These all fuelled repeated waves of political deadlocks turning each time into violence and counter-violence, alongside declines in the levels of economic and social advancement, and a deterioration in institutional effectiveness.

2. We believe that preventing the recurrence of such events in the future, and navigating our way out of the current quagmire, is linked to laying foundations for a safe, calm, and neutral environment. Such an environment will ensure that various problems are addressed through peaceful national dialogue and not through means of violence. The Special Envoy's emphasis on Syrian ownership, confidence-building, and the tangible reciprocal steps that can be provided by the parties to the conflict are certainly part and parcel of such an environment. This effort will be concrete and realistic if it enjoys international support based on the principles of Resolution 2254.
3. Creating a safe environment is not a prerequisite or an impossible condition that must be met before any response or support. Rather, it must be viewed as a local and international pathway in addressing problems that are necessarily intertwined with the tensions surrounding them. A new international approach is required to address local issues through joint action to create safe and neutral environments that prevent the spread of conflicts. National borders alone are no longer sufficient to keep problems exclusively within them. The forms of support provided by all parties for this transformation are intended to ensure a just and sustainable peaceful process. Through this integrated approach, when presenting new options, it helps tackle gaps and outstanding issues, including migration, displacement, extra-legal detention, forced disappearance, and return.
4. We believe that this approach in international policy must act as an umbrella of protection and an evaluation tool that monitors the stages of conflict transformation, develops the concept of safe zones, and reduces conflict escalation. This approach leads to a cessation of targeting civilians, thus providing environments that support social cohesion, uncovers facts of violations, and achieves just community conciliations, which are all indispensable foundations for launching a sustainable peace process.

Our second focus relates to the concept of triple Nexus:

1. We believe that the three pillars of this concept are inseparable. They will become effective and sustainable whenever we ask: did the response programs accomplish genuine humanitarian results that are guided by local community priorities? Ultimately, this approach contributes to reducing violence and reducing the war economy in favour of civilian inclusive economy, strengthening community partnership, breaking through the lines of separation, and beginning a process of societal

peace based on the foundations of justice and fairness, and securing what is necessary to successfully turn the page on the conflict without allowing its recurrence.

2. If it is not protected by a safe, calm, and neutral environment, the triple nexus approach will not yield a sustainable return, even if well-balanced. However, achieving balance between the humanitarian and development responses alongside the peacebuilding process is also part of strengthening that safe environment.
3. Any success and progress for one of these two issues will necessarily reflect progress in the other and vice versa. Several projects have been implemented within the triple nexus in the absence of safe environment measures. We perceived that these projects were not sustainable and did not create a realistic formula for all Syrians, whether in education, health, or food and water security, and it did not create Broad opportunities for community cohesion. This underscores the necessity for impartial and neutral scrutiny of response methodologies, along with the imperative to develop more effective evaluation mechanisms to accurately verify and measure their impact.
4. The approach to supporting resilience and recovery, or early recovery, also needs to be rooted in the triple nexus approach to achieve the expected return. This means that the issues of fair distribution, understanding needs according to existing local resources, and based on local supply chains based on partnerships across different regions are all vital steps that serve the concept of triple nexus and response approaches. However, it will inevitably be fair, effective, and sustainable under the elements of a safe, calm, and neutral environment.
5. If we look at migration from Syria through this lens, we will discover that the solutions presented to date by adopting security and legal measures have not been sufficiently successful. The absence of adequate infrastructure, services and effective local production systems constitute an unattractive environment and push away qualified staff and youth towards new migration waves. This also prevents many who wish to return to their country or region from doing so due to the work environment, education, health, and other services being overburdened, and there is no safe, neutral environment that gives them the confidence to return with dignity and adequate protection standards.

6. The integrated triple nexus approach is effective when it builds an internal balance between its three pillars, and when it ensures that the interests and needs of local communities are met transparently, supported by the umbrella of a safe and neutral environment. In our view, this necessitates a re-evaluation of the power distribution between the central authority and local directorates, aiming to mitigate the excessive centralization in decision-making processes. This adjustment would pave the way for decentralization to enable more effective participation in needs assessment, response methodologies, and evaluation of the impacts of diverse support strategies.

Our third topic is about protecting and consolidating civic practices at the level of the public and at the level of civil society in general.

1. Volunteering teams, civic organizations, and community initiatives have given — and will continue to give — their utmost to support the resilience of the population based on their belief in the protection that civil work must enjoy and stemming primarily from the deep partnership with local communities across Syria and in the diaspora, allowing them to voice community interests courageously and passionately.
2. Given the pioneering contributions by Syrian activists, civil volunteerism should be codified in the constitutional and legal frameworks. This should be done in a manner that incorporates modern guidelines that broaden the public sphere, establishes the basis for civic action without prejudice to the freedom of assembly, access, and implementation.
3. Advocacy and peacebuilding are no less important than the humanitarian action. This underscores the importance of revisiting the triple nexus concept and strengthening collaborations between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding mandates.
4. Engaged organized civic entities are well aware of their scope of work and the support sectors they have volunteered to serve in order to change Syria's present and build its future. Hence, they do not compete on the front of political action or enter into competition with politicians but are rather based on expanded community partnerships and giving the public more options to improve living conditions, security, and freedoms. However, it is still important that they are engaged on different spaces and

discussions on the Syrian file given their role in reflecting the interests of the broadest spectrum of the population without exclusion or marginalization.

As reiterated earlier, we view Brussels IIIV as a fresh window of opportunity to emphasize international policies to articulate nuanced solutions that go beyond crisis management approaches. These policies should engage the underlying causes of the crisis. Establishing a safe, calm, and neutral environment based on the three pillars of the triple nexus, coupled with strengthening the civic sector and fostering deep partnerships with communities all represents a multifaceted approach that offers numerous solutions for sustainable response. This approach also equips civil actors to act on a do-no-harm basis and helps create more areas for the mobilization of local potential that has been disrupted by conflict.

At the beginning of the third millennium, we, as women and men activists, were preparing ourselves to engage in the global principles of this millennium regarding sustainable development, protecting the environment, preserving the human and cultural heritage, stopping all forms of discrimination, promoting full equality between women and men, and education that keeps pace with development and democracy.

Today, we are confronted with a task that results from the circumstances of conflict within and surrounding our homeland; a task we previously accomplished in the mid-20th century. However, it reemerged to become an imperative today: national liberation.

We in the Civil Society Support Room, with our calibres and the rights-holding constituencies we represent, will not forfeit linking the two paths: complete and accomplished national liberation under the title of sovereignty and the democratic state and completing Syria's path in achieving the principles of the third millennium.

We all hope that you support this.