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SYRIA: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

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SUMMARY

The Syrian conflict began as a series of protests and escalated into a violent civil war with a number of state and non-state actors. While women were active in the initial protests, as violence escalated, women's roles and the gendered impact of the conflict has changed. In Syria, women of different backgrounds have been victimised by conflict and violence from a variety of actors, but they have also played key roles as both supporters and instigators of both violence and peace – often using their gender strategically to gain mobility and avoid arrest. The conflict itself has created insecurities that are gendered in nature, as women (and LGBTI people) continue to face issues like displacement (within and outside of Syria), as well as sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). In relation to women's participation in the peace processes, the numerous attempts at creating dialogue, or enforcing a ceasefire, continue to falter. Each step continues to exclude women from any form of substantive representation, although there have been some efforts by the facilitators of some of the talks to include women or create an advisory board for women to inform discussions. Despite this, reports from NGOs on the ground show that women persist in peacekeeping work through grassroots means at great risk to themselves.

STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt 2014

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights	✓					
Development	✓					
Post-Conflict Issues		✓				
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation	✓					
General	✓					

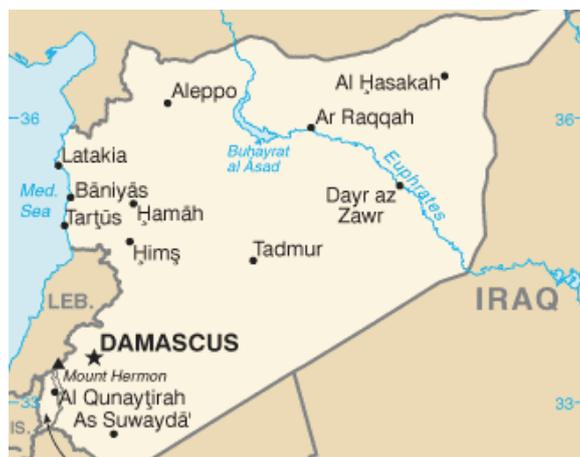
WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

CONSTRAINTS

1. Poor formal inclusion of women in peace talks
2. Gender discrimination in civil and religious laws
3. Ongoing violent conflict and widespread abuse
4. Widespread displacement (within and outside of Syria)

ENABLERS

1. Women's participation in the Arab Spring and protest movement
2. Women's engagement in revolutionary communes (i.e. Rojava)
3. Relatively high level educational attainment by women
4. Support for women's participation by some in the international community



Women played a significant part in the non-violent movements that began in Syria during the protest wave called the Arab Spring.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The conflict in Syria initially began as a series of protests in 2011 that were part of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In Syria, this was in the context of long-held frustrations – there were hopes for reform under President Bashar al-Assad when he came to power after the death of his father, Hafez Al-Assad, in 2000, that never materialised. Initially, small gatherings and demonstrations (illegal under the Syrian Emergency law that was in place at the time) were happening across Syria. It was an incident in Daraa, where 15 school boys were arrested and badly tortured after graffitiing an Arab Spring slogan (Al sha'b yureed eskaat al nizam/The people want to topple the regime), that hardened opposition and began larger protest gatherings (see Al-Saleh 2013). Protests like this grew and a cycle developed, in which protesters would organise to march together after Friday prayers with anti-regime slogans, security forces would react with brutality, and then funerals for the same protesters would gather larger, angrier crowds. Early attempts by the Assad regime to offer reforms were unsuccessful and the situation grew more violent and more divisive. It is in this context that armed insurgent groups began to gather pace and the conflict began to take the shape it has today. According to statistics from the Syrian Centre for Policy Research and UNOCHA (February 2016), this conflict has resulted in half a million deaths as well as the displacement of six million people internally and five million people have fled to other countries.

Syria's population is diverse, particularly along religious lines, and while peaceful co-existence was the reality for many Syrians before the conflict began, divisions between groups have hardened (at times at the efforts of violent groups and regime forces). Today, the ongoing Syrian civil war involves a large number of actors and supporters. The government forces have support from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Russia. Those who fight against them hold territory in different parts of Syria. The Syrian Opposition (the Free Syrian Army) has seen support from Turkey, the US, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, France and Libya for a short time. Ahrar Al-Sham, Tahrir al-Sham (previously Al-Nusra Front

– with ties to Al-Qaeda), IS and Rojava (with support from Kurdish groups within and outside of Syria) are also belligerents in this conflict.

As well as the high death toll, human rights violations are a key concern during this conflict. Key human rights concerns range from the use of torture and mass deaths in government detention facilities, to issues relating to civilians in besieged cities held by rebel forces (or IS in the case of Raqqqa). The sieges that have occurred in this conflict are particularly concerning as civilians caught in densely populated cities have lost access to food, medicine and other necessities as a result.

At the early stage of the conflict, there were a number of reports of women being involved in activism, organising as part of protest groups and as women. As the situation deteriorated and more insurgent groups became involved and violence escalated, the role of women in protest movements was undermined and changed, reflecting the changing security situation. Some of the literature discussed below outlines the roles women have played throughout the conflict. The situation for women is a dynamic one because of the number of actors involved in the conflict, the international actors involved, and the religious and cultural ideologies that the different actors have, especially when it comes to gender relations.

In IS or other rebel held territory (including territory held by Tahrir Al-Sham/Jabhat Al-Nusra), widespread human rights abuses have been documented. These have included abuses targeting women and girls, such as severe restrictions on movement, forced marriage and sexual slavery, in particular of Yazidi populations. Displacement also makes Syrian women vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV). Trafficking into sexual slavery or prostitution is also an issue for Syrian refugee communities living outside Syria, particularly in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. On the other hand, there are reports of some groups (like the Democratic Union Party in Rojava) that espouse social justice and gender parity rhetoric, further diversifying the roles women play in Syria today.

Attempts to broker peace have continued as the conflict have progressed. The 'peace process' in Syria takes the shape of a series of ceasefire agreements, attempts at mediation and talks, initiated by a number of parties including the United Nations and the Arab League. Efforts by the former resulted in UNSCR 2254, endorsing a plan for peace talks for Syria. Literature focusses on peace efforts between 2011 and 2016, though the conflict continues today, as do peace efforts and negotiations. Below is a brief timeline of the key peace efforts at the international level (though it is not exhaustive and not inclusive of smaller, non-state efforts):

Name	Date
Arab League Peace Plans	2011-2012
Kofi Annan Peace Plan	March 2012
Geneva I	June 2012
Geneva II	Jan 2014
Vienna Process	Oct 2015
Geneva III	Feb 2016
Syrian Women's Advisory Board	Feb 2016
Geneva IV	April 2016
Astana I	Jan 2017
Astana II	Feb 2017
Geneva V	Feb - March 2017
Astana III	March 2017
Astana IV/Geneva VI	May 2017
Astana V/Geneva VII	July 2017
Astana VI	Sept 2017

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

Women's involvement in the different aspects of the Syrian conflict is difficult to map holistically. Some movements that involved women have gained international notoriety (i.e. Rojava), while knowledge on others is made up of personal narratives collected by NGO researchers. In terms of literature on women's involvement in the early stages of the 'revolution' or conflict NGO reporting on women's participation and organising provides some important insights. Reports by transnational women's organisations in particular are helpful in gathering information and narratives about the lives and roles lives of women in Syria (for example, Madre, WILPF and Kvinna til Kvinna). Reports by these organisations helps to build a knowledge base around women's work in Syria that might not exist for other countries in this project.

A study by Rajaa Altalli and Anne-Marie Codur (2015) captures the roles women played between 2011 and 2012, and surveyed 20 Syrian women activists about their roles in the various protest movements that they were involved in. Women were a significant part of the non-violent movements that began in Syria during the Arab Spring – the study refers to them as 'civil movements'. As conflict intensified and armed groups activated, civilian movements were challenged and became more difficult to organise and take part in. According to Altalli and Codur's surveys, women engaged in both organisational (collaborative) and individual activism, which took many forms. In one location, women were involved in relief efforts after communities had been shelled following protest. This included coordination of volunteers, fundraising and donor relations (Altalli and Codur 2015: 306).

The peace talks for Syria have been widely criticised for their failure to include women in a substantial way. Despite this exclusion, women and women's groups have attempted to engage in the peace process.

In other locations, women's groups arranged their own marches, slogans and official statements, navigating cultural norms in order to do so within the constraints of social and cultural propriety (Altalli and Codur 2015: 307-308). Other women report eschewing non-violent protest and provided material and logistical support for the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups, including smuggling in weapons (Sohlman 2013).

Human Rights Watch (2015) reporting echoes these narratives, as well as the dangers women faced as activists and in their day to day lives. A key concern for women involved in any public protest or activism was the threat of arrest, and sexual abuse while in custody – as experiences of this are widely reported (Altalli and Codur 2015; Nasar 2015). Women taking part in protests in other MENA states echoed this concern.

Cultural norms around gender and gendered interactions did afford women some protection and additional mobility, and these were used to the advantage of women involved in a variety of movements. At the very early stages in the Syrian conflict, women could use their gender to ensure security not only for themselves but also for their fellow (male) protesters, drawing on cultural norms around propriety and non-violence (Altalli and Codur 2015). In support for more violent efforts, women's dress (such as abayas and niqabs) provided mobility for themselves as well as weapons (Sohlman 2013). Women have also reportedly taken on combat roles across the spectrum of actors. The presence of female fighters in Kurdish troops is well-known, but Assad also reportedly created the 'Lionesses for National Defence' (Sohlman 2013).

An important facet of this conversation is also the Kurdish women's movement and the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria more broadly, as the gender norms within this movement have captured attention in Western media. Rojava (the de-facto autonomous Kurdish region of Syria) has been a site for conflict also, and Kurdish forces have been part of the opposition movement and the forces in Syria fighting against the Assad regime. The social revolutionary policies of this movement and its efforts to govern in this region include a number of progressive ideals including

Women's access to education and other development spaces has not translated into widespread legal reforms.

direct democracy, ethnic minority rights, and most relevant to this project, particular women's rights mechanisms. Some of the analysis of the potential of this movement for wider implications for women in Syria is cautious however (Kapur 2017). As it stands, Kurdish women in the Rojava region do have more visibility and formal power as political leaders.

The peace talks for Syria have been widely criticised for their failure to include women in a substantial way. Despite this exclusion, women and women's groups (both within Syria and outside it) have made a number of attempts to engage the peace process, with varying degrees of success. The first Geneva-based talks resulted in the Geneva I Communique, which included a statement stressing the importance of women's representation in the transition process. This was taken up by women in Syria to push for a larger women's presence in peace talks that followed (Davis 2016).

The most visible presence of women in the peace process might be the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, convened by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The advisory board has been criticised for not being representative and highlighted tensions among women's groups in Syria. Their demands, while taking part in press conferences and meetings with de Mistura in the 2016 Geneva talks, were for 30 per cent inclusion of women in the negotiation processes. They also called for two key aims: 1) the release of peaceful protesters detained by the Syrian government (who were peaceful protesters) and 2) lifting of economic sanctions on Syria that hinder access to food and medicine by the civilian population.

Research completed by feminist organisations (like KTK) documents women's peacebuilding efforts outside of the peace talks framework (KTK and Badael 2015). Some of these activities are small-scale but incredibly vital for maintaining peace within communities affected by the wider conflict. For example, the KTK and Badael report includes a women's empowerment centre in an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp working on small arms proliferation, as this was causing the escalation into violence of disputes over resources in the community. Another women's group began to include information for mothers on the dangers of child soldier recruitment as part of a literacy

workshop for the same women – working on the premise that mothers are well-placed to detect and act in situations where children are vulnerable to recruitment or radicalisation (KTK and Badael 2015).

Most of the peace agreements that have been part of the Syrian civil war ceasefire attempts contain little or no gender provisions. The agreement coded for this project includes one single mention of gender, which pertains to release of detainees ('especially women and children'). The Geneva I Communique, signed in June 2012 by the League of Arab States and UN actors (including the Secretary General) followed the Geneva I talks. The Communique outlines some common objectives for members of the Action Group to shape the cessation of violence in the Syrian conflict. Most relevant to the project is a point in Section II (Clear Steps in the Transition), which emphasises that 'women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition'. Other points relating to access of humanitarian organisations, respect for international standards on human rights, and dialogue and transitional bodies, were included. While this plan has not been enacted due to the failure of successive Geneva-based peace talks, it is referenced by women's peacebuilding groups as an important document to build on for future negotiations (see KTK and Badael 2015).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Syria's political history has similarities with neighbouring Iraq, with a ruling party (the Ba'ath party) coming to power in the 1960s and pushing 'pan-Arab, socialist' politics that supported women's empowerment and access to work, education and other development and participation avenues (Maktabi 2010). This again echoes the idea that women can be considered important symbols for a modern and secular state in the Middle East (Sparre 2008). Efforts by the state to improve the situation of women had a marked effect. For example, women's literacy was raised from 37 per cent in 1981 to 76 per cent in 2007 (Freedom House 2010). State feminist initiatives are also part of this equation. For example, Asma Al-Assad was supportive in setting up an NGO called Modernising and Activating Women's Role in Economic Development (MAWRED).

As some literature highlights, women's access to education and other development spaces did not translate into widespread legal reforms (Freedom House 2010). As such, there is a disconnect in civil

and religious laws in Syria when it comes to gender and discrimination (a common occurrence in many Muslim countries), meaning that equality between men and women under the state's public laws can be undermined by Family Law (Maktabi 2010). It also means that women from different religious communities are subject to (at times), very different legal realities. Syria's Catholic population, for example, has access to less discriminatory Personal Status Laws (PSLs) due to a new law adopted in 2006 (Freedom House 2010). Syria's reservations to CEDAW, which it ratified in 2003, echo conservative religious norms (reservations to articles 2, 9, 15 and 16 cite an incompatibility with Islamic Shari'a as obstacles to ratification of those articles). Some key inequalities include (Maktabi 2010):

1. A Syrian woman is unable to pass on Syrian citizenship to her children if their father is a non-Syrian citizen, while a Syrian man married to a non-Syrian woman can.
2. An article in Criminal Law allows for a milder sentence in the case of honour killings.
3. Within Family Law, issues around male guardianship for women arises frequently – a male guardian is required for women to sign a marriage contract, travel for women is restricted, among other unequal laws.

Women in Syria were first granted the right to vote in 1949, with universal suffrage granted in 1953. There have been two parliamentary elections since the 2011 uprising and currently, women hold 13 per cent of parliamentary seats. Syria also elected its first female speaker of the house (Dr Hadiyah Abbas) in 2016. While this is positive for women's representation in formal political spaces in Syria, these achievements are of course coloured by wider conflict and issues around representation of women in the peace talks.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

In its modernisation efforts in the 1970s-1990s, the Syrian state did attempt to bolster the participation of women in the labour market. However, women's participation was still relatively low in comparison to men's, leading up to the unrest (Freedom House 2010). In 2013, 13.5 per cent of Syrian women were engaged in the labour force, as opposed to 72.7 per cent of men (Williamson 2016). Syria is also still largely agrarian and this has a strong presence in data on women's economic participation; in 2004, almost 50 per cent of the female labour force was engaged in agricultural work. Much of the agricultural work done by women is also unpaid (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016; Freedom House

2010), which impacts not only women's economic well-being, but also girls' access to education in rural contexts. The Syrian economy before the conflict was based on agriculture, oil, tourism and some industrial and trade efforts. Agricultural work was heavily subsidised. Syria, particularly from the 1970s-1990s, was an active borrower from the World Bank, which in turn meant that austerity measures were implemented and the Syrian economy was shaped by this.

Syria's 1973 Constitution promises women equality with men and this includes economic-related rights like the right to own property and control one's own income and assets. In terms of a legal framework supporting women's access to economic activity, Syria has no laws prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of gender, which often means that social norms relating to gender can undermine women's access to equality in economic and employment contexts (Freedom House 2010).

Conflict has had an impact on women's engagement with economic processes and particularly the labour market. The experience of conflict has undermined women's capacity to take up employment opportunities. It is also highlighted that outside of the context of conflict, women overwhelmingly carry the burden of care in households. Childcare responsibilities, as well as mobility, are highlighted as key factors that block women from accessing employment opportunities, or even training. Reports also show that as access to services like healthcare have faltered, women have stepped up to provide those services where possible through their roles in informal humanitarian work (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016). Foreign workers, more specifically foreign domestic workers, face vulnerabilities to exploitation and violence, and this is exacerbated by the unrest. However US Department of State reporting highlights the presence of foreign workers has declined as a result of conflict (US Department of State 2016). Refugee women are also especially vulnerable to economic hardship, as there are many legal barriers to Syrian refugees finding work in their new host countries.

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