

# Function Over Form: Rethinking Civil Society in Government- held Syria

## Annex 1

The front of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in Damascus. Image courtesy of Picasa, via Google Maps.

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC  
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL  
AFFAIRS AND LABOR



وزارة الشؤون الإجتماعية والعمل



# Annex 1: Typologies of Syrian Civil Society

As noted, categorizing Syrian civic space is an extremely difficult process, largely due to the fact that while Syrian civic space is certainly constrained, it is also incredibly diverse. Moreover, as noted, different organizations exist under different frameworks and local restrictions, which are largely shaped on individual and group relationships and interactions. Thus, we have attempted to break down organizations into four broad typologies: CBOs/NGOs/charities; 'initiatives'; 'Syrian' INGOs; and semi-governmental organizations. Each has been further divided into additional subcategories. The following section will define each of these typologies and will provide examples as case studies. While not exhaustive, these examples should help to explore the different manifestations of civic space in Government-held areas. As was repeatedly noted throughout this paper, there is considerable overlap between various categories, and these typologies are — at best — a simple framework. Additionally (and in some ways contrary to a core argument of this paper) these typologies focus more on the 'form' of these organizations over their local 'function'; this is to emphasize the diversity of actors and the way in which these actors use personal relationships and stakeholder interactions to navigate space locally.

## CBO/NGO/Charities

For the purposes of this typology, a Syrian CBO/NGO/charity is generally defined as an organization that has a formal internal structure, a bank account, a defined leadership, and a regular presence in Syria. These organizations generally conduct humanitarian or development programs; some interventions are defined geographically while others sectorally. In terms of political agenda, many of these organizations have a prescribed philosophical or ideological framework (the spectrum, from conservative to secular). For these organizations, there are three avenues for registration: the Endowments Ministry (faith-based charities), the Ministry of Social Affairs (faith-based charities, NGOs, and CBOs), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (available to organizations that are already registered under the Ministry of Social Affairs, as a means of facilitating greater access to funding). There are more than 1,500 NGOs/CBOs registered with MOSA.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Notably, in June 2019, GIZ and EMI completed an excellent mapping and analysis of CBOs/NGOs in Government of Syria-held areas: Needs, Capacity, and Risk Assessment of Civil Society Actors Operating in Non-Opposition-Controlled Areas of Syria.



There are numerous regulatory frameworks for these organizations; however, in general, all of these organizations would technically fall under Law 93, or Law 31 (governing the Endowments Ministry). But, as noted repeatedly, different organizations face different guidelines, based on the degree to which the management of these organizations is able to establish and maintain relationships with local security and political stakeholders. That said, in general, organizations that are established under the Ministry of Endowments face less scrutiny because of their overtly religious character; this is due to their strong links to large religious populations inside and outside the country, which provide something of a buffer against Government of Syria interference. Within the CBO/NGO typology, there are several sub categories, identified and defined below:

### FAITH-BASED CHARITIES

Faith-based charities are organizations that are not explicitly affiliated with religious institutions, but which are religious in character. While similar to NGOs, faith-based charities are either registered with the Endowments Ministry or specifically register as charities with MOSA (and sometimes MOFA) and were — at least originally — oriented towards charitable activities for specific communities or affected populations, such as widows, orphans, or 'the poor'. Faith-based charities are the most common type of organization found in Syria. Nearly every community has a local religious charity, which is frequently associated with a local mosque, church, or area. Most of these organizations have a small portfolio and focus on specific affected communities or issues. Faith-based charities often maintain considerable independence since their funding is normally secured locally from tithings, or from religious institutions. Yet it is important to note that while these organizations are registered as charities (either under MOSA or the Endowments Ministry), many have restructured and now reflect more traditional NGO models and programmatic modalities. Many have also started to work in development, as opposed to purely humanitarian activities. Several have even begun to accept UN and INGO funding; as a consequence, the previous distinction between a 'charity' and an 'NGO' is increasingly legal rather than practical.

### EXAMPLES

[Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya](#)

(Righteousness and Social Services):

Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya was founded in Homs



city in 1956 as a secular charity registered with MOSA. Initially, the organization was primarily funded by local donations and zakat tithing and conducted small-scale programs to support orphans in Homs city and rural Homs. Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya also supported the eponymous hospital in Al-Waer neighborhood, as well as a home for the elderly. In 2011, Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya almost entirely shifted its activities to support individuals affected by the rapidly escalating conflict in Homs city; it began to regularly distribute food baskets and NFIs. Notably, due to its long history in Homs, Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya maintained a reputation for neutrality, and regularly conducted distributions in both Government- and opposition-held areas, while continuing to support its hospital in Al-Waer, even after the area came under the control of the armed opposition. The leadership of Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya was able to negotiate this independence due to its long history in Homs city and its longstanding ties with the upper and middle class Sunni business community in Homs. Bir wa Khadamat Ijtima'iya has also massively expanded since the start of the Syrian conflict; it is now also registered with MOFA, partnered with several UN agencies, and receives funding from and coordinates with SARC. The organization has expanded into new sectors, to include livelihoods programming, small business support initiatives, public health support, and shelter rehabilitation.

**Jamaiyat Dummar Khairiya (Dummar Charity Organization):**

The Dummar Charity Organization was established in 1998; it subsequently registered with MOSA and is primarily funded by the local notables of Dummar, a neighborhood of northwestern Damascus. Prior to the Syrian conflict, the Dummar Charity Organization largely focused on the provision of small-scale support to widows and poor families in Dummar. After the conflict began, the Dummar Charity Organization continued to work in Dummar, although it significantly expanded the scope and scale of its operations. Today, Dummar Charity Organization now supports 350 families with food distributions, and it also pays rent for several IDP families displaced to Dummar. Dummar Charity has also physically expanded: at the start of the conflict, it only employed seven individuals (all of whom were unpaid); now there are 25 individuals working for the organization (they remain unpaid).

The majority of the organization's funds still comes from charitable donations by local notables and zakat; however, SARC has occasionally provided food baskets to be distributed by Dummar Charity. The organization has never worked in opposition-held areas (primarily because it is specifically focused on supporting Government-held Dummar); however, it reportedly operates with limited interference from the Government of Syria due to its narrow geographic focus and its considerable buy-in from Dummar's local notables.

**Hay'at Deir Mar Afram Al-Yaqoubi (Organization of the Monastery of Saint Afram Al-Yacoubi):**

Hay'at Deir Mar Afram was established long before the Syrian conflict (or even the advent of the modern Syrian state); it began as the charitable arm of the Christian Orthodox Mar Afram Monastery in Sednaya, Rural Damascus. Today, Hay'at Deir Mar Afram is registered under the Endowments Ministry, but it only took on a more formalized charitable structure in 2003, due to its activities providing food and shelter to Iraqi refugees in Syria. Like many religious charities, it drastically expanded the scope of its operations following the start of the Syrian conflict. Now, Hay'at Deir Mar Afram essentially functions as a humanitarian/development NGO; it has programs in food distribution, shelter, WASH, livelihoods, education, and shelter rehabilitation. Reportedly, Hay'at Deir Mar Afram has an annual budget of 1.6 Billion SYP (\$2.6 million); some of this funding comes from church donations, some from UN agencies. Hay'at Deir Mar Afram works in numerous communities throughout Syria, primarily in Government of Syria-held areas. However, there are several ongoing programs in SDF-held areas, including Al-Hasakeh city and the Al-Hole camp. Hay'at Deir Mar Afram is considered to be relatively independent, and it manages to maintain this independence because security officials are reluctant to interfere with it, due to perception and reputational sensitivities thanks to its strong link to the Orthodox Church. Hay'at Deir Mar Afram has a very positive reputation in places where it works; multiple sources noted that it is not corrupt and services different religious populations equally.

**Jamaiyat Khairiya Islamiya (Islamic Charity Organization)**

The Islamic Charity Organization is a Sunni charity founded in 1921 in Homs city; it is registered under the Endowments Ministry. Prior to the Syrian conflict, it

primarily provided charity to widows and orphans and supported local schools in Homs. However, like many religious charities, it has drastically expanded its operations and now conducts multiple large humanitarian aid, shelter, WASH, education, psychosocial support, and livelihoods programs, although it works only in Homs governorate. It has partnered with the UN in the past, and regularly coordinates with SARC. Although the Islamic Charity Organization is still registered under the Endowments Ministry, it has created a new body, Aoun for Development and Relief, which was also registered as an NGO under MOSA. In effect, Aoun for Development and Relief functions as an arm of the Islamic Charity Organization. Like many religious charities, the Islamic Charity Organization maintains its independence largely due to the fact that security officials are reluctant to appear to be ‘restricting’ an Islamic institution; however, the Islamic Charity Organization has also taken specific care to avoid associating with or supporting opposition areas. It has a very positive reputation in Homs city.

#### ‘FORMAL’ NGOS/CSOS

A ‘formal’ NGO or CSO is a Syrian organization registered with MOSA. Some are also registered with MOFA; these are often larger in size and are generally considered more capable of receiving funding from outside Syria. NGOs can be sectoral or geographic in focus. They often receive institutional donor funding or act as local partners for large INGOs, although many subsist on private funding or donations. These organizations vary widely in size, capacity, and the degree to which they are perceived as being linked to the Government of Syria. Two characteristics set registered NGOs and CBOs apart from local charities. First, they are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs. Second, they are (generally) structured like traditional Western NGOs, meaning they manage grants, specifically design programs, and adopt organizational protocols. Additionally, many NGOs have changed their original mandates and are now focused on activities beyond basic service delivery, to include local development or livelihoods programming.

#### EXAMPLES

##### [Syrian Society for Social Development](#)

SSSD was founded and registered with MOSA in 1958. Although SSSD is not technically a religious charity, it has always been managed by individuals with close relationships to the Christian clergy. SSSD’s activities were primarily small-scale projects in Damascus City until 2009, when SSSD partnered with Syria Trust and shifted to larger humanitarian and social development activities. This partnership expanded after the conflict began in 2011 and 2012; Syria Trust and SSSD maintain

a close working relationship. In 2014, SSSD successfully registered with MOFA and subsequently gained access to direct UN and international partnerships. SSSD has now expanded to the point where it has projects in nearly every Government of Syria–controlled governorate, and it has increased the size and scope of its food and non-food distributions as well as its psychosocial support activities. SSSD has also partnered with several UN agencies, working in sectors including protection, shelter, early recovery, health, rehabilitation, and support for women. Despite officially being an NGO, SSSD maintains access through its links to prominent Christian religious figures.

##### [Unnamed Organization](#)

One unnamed organization — founded in 2006 in Damascus City and registered with MOSA — was primarily established as a hiking association to support outdoor activities. However, in 2012 it shifted its activities to respond to needs created by the conflict; it now receives funding and support from both SARC and the UN. It primarily distributes food baskets and NFIs, but it is also reported to have several small psychosocial support programs. The organization reportedly has a relatively good reputation with beneficiaries. Notably, one of the leaders of the organization ran for Syrian parliament in 2015 on an independent list. During the election, food baskets distributed by Sa’ad reportedly also contained papers with political party slogans. Like most ‘independent’ candidates in the 2018 local elections, the leader lost his election.

##### [Fareeq Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar \(Damascus Youth Voluntary Team for Development\)](#)

Fareeq Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar was established in late 2011 by the wife of a former head of Air Force Intelligence, and it was registered with MOSA. Fareeq Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar was formed, at least nominally, to respond to the rapidly expanding Syrian conflict. Primarily, the organization distributes food basket and NFIs, in addition to conducting street cleaning campaigns. To a large degree, it is personally funded by the family of the founder, but it also receives donations from prominent individuals in Damascus. Fareeq Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar has closely associated itself with the Government of Syria. Most notably, in 2011 and 2012, its staff members and volunteers regularly staged counter-demonstrations against anti-Government of Syria protests in Damascus; these counter-demonstrations often ended in open violence. Moreover, Fareeq Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar was often one of the first civil society organizations to enter areas recently reconciled or captured from the armed opposition, in order to conduct street cleaning campaigns. Reportedly, its volunteers routinely shouted pro-Government of Syria slogans or songs during these campaigns. Fareeq



Shabab Dimashq Al-Tatawar has considerable freedom of movement and access inside Damascus, largely due to relationships between the organization's founder and Government of Syria security services.

## Initiatives

Initiatives are defined as a group of individuals focused on addressing or lobbying for a single, specific concern. That concern could be at the local, national, or community level. Initiatives are often (but not always) led by local elites; while they are not necessarily perfectly representative of their constituents, they often have some degree of local legitimacy. Initiatives are not formal organizations. As such, they do not necessarily have bank accounts, or even defined leadership. Indeed, the majority do not have a legal registration, because they are not structured as formal organizations. In some sense, these initiatives are one of the purest expressions of civic space in Syria, in that they address a specific concern of a specific population, and sometimes advocate directly to the Government of Syria. In broad terms, initiatives are one of three types: unregistered NGOs/CBOs, local initiatives or voluntary teams, and 'social' initiatives.

### 'UNREGISTERED' NGOS/CBOS

Unregistered organizations are not registered with the Government of Syria, and thus are functionally illegal in Syria. For this reason, the majority of these organizations are able to openly exist and program only in opposition-held areas. There is considerable overlap between unregistered local NGOs and the 'diaspora NGOs' covered below. This is largely because most unregistered NGOs are reliant on Syrian diaspora funding. Because these organizations are often structured as traditional NGOs in opposition-held areas, they also act as partners for Syrian diaspora INGOs or 'traditional' INGOs. In Government of Syria-held areas, many (but not all) unregistered organizations do not actually resemble traditional NGOs. Instead, they essentially function as networks, drawing funding from Syrian diaspora NGOs or INGOs to implement limited, small-scale, and often covert programming. In this way, there is also considerable overlap with the 'local initiatives' listed below.

### EXAMPLES

#### The Equal Citizenship Center

The Equal Citizenship Center was established in 2015 by a group of lawyers in Damascus. The founder was a well-known social and human rights activist prior to the conflict and had been arrested (and released) on numerous occasions. The Equal Citizenship Center works primarily on human rights, citizenship awareness, advocacy for detainees, and provision of pro-bono legal advice. Reportedly, it is currently receiving funding from

international organizations. Many members of the Equal Citizenship Center are Alawite or Ismaili (although it also has Sunni members), which affords a degree of protection, and this diversity is one of the reasons it has not been shut down by Government of Syria security services. In addition, members of the organization are fairly socially prominent — one member was nominated to the Syrian Constitutional Committee — and the organization is therefore somewhat protected. The Equal Citizenship Center is also protected by its active refusal to associate with known opposition political movements and bodies. In effect, the Center and its members have remained staunchly 'neutral' in the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, members of the organization have been arrested on multiple occasions.

#### Unnamed Unregistered Organization

This unregistered organization began as a local initiative in Damascus in 2014, founded by a group of middle-class Syrian activists. Volunteers initially collected small-scale donations to purchase and distribute food baskets in both Government- and opposition-held areas. However, the organization faced considerable pressure from Government of Syria security services because it was unregistered, perceived to be opposition-oriented, and had no leadership figures with deep connections to Government of Syria stakeholders. For that reason, the organization split into two organizations: one located outside Syria, one inside. The organization outside Syria primarily acts as an administrative body and fundraising arm to access INGO and donor funds; it then distributes funds to small, localized networks of individuals to conduct low-profile programs. These programs generally focus on immediate humanitarian assistance in both Government- and opposition-held areas. Occasionally, the organization also discreetly provides cash to formal, Government-registered organizations. Although the organization works openly in opposition-held areas, it conducts its programs in Government-held areas covertly and at high risk. This organization has been listed as an 'unregistered NGO' rather than a 'Syrian INGO' because, functionally, it exists and conducts programs only inside Syria; the external branch is essentially a collection of administrative staff with no formal office.

### LOCAL INITIATIVES/VOLUNTARY TEAMS

Local initiatives are formed to address the concerns of a specific locality. This locality could be as small as a single street or neighborhood, or as expansive as an entire city. These initiatives sometimes conduct one-time programs or distributions themselves, by soliciting community fundraising. Otherwise, these initiatives lobby other organizations or the Government of Syria to prioritize specific issues. Occasionally, local initiatives are registered with the Ministry of Economy as 'Social Companies'.

## EXAMPLES

### The Dahiyet Qudsiya Youth Team

The Dahiyet Qudsiya Youth Team was formed by a group of young, middle-class men and women in Government-held Dahiyet Qudsiya in 2013. The organizers created a voluntary team to help the large number of IDPs fleeing from nearby opposition-held areas to Dahiyet Qudsiya. Members of the youth team initially organized on social media and worked with IDP children in over-capacity schools in Dahiyet Qudsiya, primarily by assisting teachers or providing psychosocial support to children. The youth team also collected money locally to create informal food kitchens and distribute meals, and over time it engaged with UNICEF, SARC, and Syria Trust. Although the youth team did not receive funds from any of these organizations, it did receive food and NFIs to distribute to IDP children in Dahiyet Qudsiya. On the basis of personal relationships, members of the youth team initially received informal permissions from local security officials to conduct their activities. However, the youth team eventually received documentation from SARC, which allowed them to cross checkpoints more easily.

### Ahali Halab (People of Aleppo) Initiative

Ahali Halab was formed in 2012 by a group of local notables in Aleppo City, to include prominent local businessmen and members of large, wealthy, or influential families. The group formed in response to the fact that Aleppo city had been divided between opposition-controlled eastern Aleppo and Government-controlled western Aleppo; Ahali Halab aimed to ensure that services were provided to all the city's inhabitants. Throughout the Aleppo city conflict, between 2012 and 2016, Ahali Halab members personally funded infrastructure rehabilitation, as well as food and NFI distributions. Notably, Ahali Halab worked in both opposition- and Government-held areas, and its members were reportedly deeply respected by the population of both areas. Ahali Halab was also occasionally involved in negotiations between the armed opposition and the Government of Syria. Specifically, Ahali Halab played a critical role in ensuring that the Sleiman Halabi water station, which was controlled by the armed opposition, provided water to all neighborhoods of Aleppo city. Ahali Halab raised funds to rehabilitate the station and negotiated with the armed opposition to allow engineers and fuel to enter and exit eastern Aleppo. Ahali Halab was granted such unprecedented access because its members were prominent community leaders who maintained personal relationships with high-level Government of Syria security, political, and military officials. Reportedly, Ahali Halab has also taken part in negotiations with security services in Aleppo to release detainees, although this cannot be confirmed. Ahali Halab has never registered as a formal organization and still has no defined

leadership or bank accounts.

### Duma Development Committee

The Duma Development Committee was formed in 2019 in Duma city. It was formed by a group of prominent businessmen, business families, and notable families in Duma, several of whom have family ties to the newly elected Duma city council or Government of Syria elites. The Duma Development Committee was formed to conduct, promote, and advocate for development in Duma city in the aftermath of the Eastern Ghouta siege and the Duma reconciliation agreement. The Duma Development Committee has conducted or funded several small-scale projects in Duma, largely using the personal funds of the committee members or soliciting funds from Duma's local notables. These funds are primarily given to the Duma municipality to support specific initiatives. For example, the Duma Development Committee has funded transportation costs for Duma's schoolchildren, built a small football field, donated a vehicle to the municipality to transport dead bodies, and paid for street cleaning. The Duma Development Committee has also used its members' connections to lobby Government of Syria security services to adjust their policies in Duma. For example, in June 2019, members of the Duma Development Committee successfully convinced the governor of Rural Damascus and the Republican Guard to allow registered residents of Duma to leave Duma and return without presenting official identification, on the basis that movement restrictions were hindering the economic development of Duma city. Anecdotally, the Duma Development Committee is highly popular with the residents of Duma City.

## 'SOCIAL' INITIATIVES

'Social' initiatives are initiatives focused on representing a specific social interest group, or sometimes a wider geographic area. Perhaps the purest example would be a tribal council, which can be seen in much of southern and eastern Syria. Another example is the various family councils in many communities, or the negotiation committees seen in southern Syria. While these are not traditional 'organizations' and are often led by an unelected elite (and often hereditary) leadership, they are focused initiatives formed to advocate for or address the concerns of their social or geographic constituents. It is also worth noting that many ad-hoc social initiatives exist. For example, in the early days of the Syrian uprising, local notables in many Syrian cities banded together to jointly create 'peace committees' to negotiate local settlements with both the Government of Syria and the growing population of armed opposition combatants. Many of these initiatives disbanded shortly thereafter, when the issue motivating their creation had been resolved.

## EXAMPLES

**The Negotiations Committee of Dar'a**

The Negotiations Committee of Dar'a was created during the Government of Syria's offensive in southern Syria in June 2018. The majority of its initial members were local notables and representatives of large families from Tafas and Dar'a Al-Balad; it has since expanded and new local notables from across Dar'a have joined. The negotiations committee was initially an integral part of the reconciliation negotiations in southern Syria. Since the reconciliation agreement, the Negotiations Committee of Dar'a has primarily been active in negotiations with Government of Syria security officials on security-related issues (be it for individuals or communities as a whole). They might, for example, negotiate the terms of conscription, or advocate for the release of detainees. While the committee has no role in service provision, it does occasionally attempt to negotiate for increased service provision. Notably, the members of the committee are at least partially selected by the Government of Syria (or, at least, by the local notables and intermediaries with whom the Government of Syria seeks to engage) and are only partially accepted by the local population of their respective communities.

**The Naim Tribal Council**

In effect, the Naim Tribal Council has existed in some form for centuries. The Naim tribe is traditionally located in Quneitra governorate, although Naim tribesmen live throughout southern Syria. The tribe's sheikh and leader is Radwan Muhammad Hamad Al-Tahhan, who was not 'chosen' as sheikh but was born into the role, as the eldest son of the Al-Tahhan family, the traditional leading family of the Naim tribe. The Naim Tribal Council is nominally comprised of Radwan Al-Tahhan and the Naim Shoura Council, which is a collection of the most prominent and notable members of the tribe. Fundamentally, the Naim Tribal council resembles most tribal councils in Syria, in that it includes a defined sheikh (although in many cases several members compete for the role) alongside a Shura Council. The Naim Tribal Council generally resolves disputes: when members of the Naim have personal disputes arising with other tribesmen, or issues with the Government of Syria, they generally appeal to council members for mediation or advocacy. At least nominally, the Naim Tribal Council represents the Naim in dealings with other tribes, the Government of Syria, or other external stakeholders. The council was a critical part of the negotiations for the reconciliation of communities in Quneitra governorate.

**Syrian 'INGOs'**

Syrian 'INGOs' are organizations that are registered outside Syria but are run almost entirely by Syrians and focus almost exclusively on Syrian issues; or are Syrian branches of larger international religious charities that operate in effect as Syrian organizations. Syrian INGOs are either entirely unregistered in Syria (and are instead registered in another country), or are registered under the Ministry of Social Affairs — and, potentially, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Syrian INGOs can be broadly divided into two categories: religious INGOs and diaspora INGOs.

## RELIGIOUS INGOs

Religious INGOs are branches of international religious organizations that, on the ground, effectively operate as Syrian NGOs, in that their management and staff are entirely Syrian, although they maintain links to their international branches. Many of these organizations were registered with the Government of Syria before the conflict. Indeed, these entities frequently have more independence than many Western INGOs due to their long-standing history of operating as NGOs inside Syria, albeit with ties to an international religious organization. The majority of these organizations are Christian, since the Government of Syria is generally suspicious of Sunni INGOs, due to their perceived ties to Gulf States.

## EXAMPLES

**Caritas**

Caritas Syria is a branch of Caritas international, a global Catholic charity, headquartered in the Vatican. Caritas was registered in Syria in 1954, although it was a small-scale organization that primarily worked with the Syrian Christian community. In 2003, Caritas Syria expanded in order to provide assistance to Iraqi refugees in Aleppo and Al-Hasakeh governorates. In early 2012, Caritas Syria began to respond to the needs of IDPs arriving in Christian neighborhoods in Homs city, Aleppo city, Al-Hasakeh city, and Damascus city, reportedly focusing primarily on Christian IDPs. Caritas has expanded significantly, and it has been given considerable autonomy by Government of Syria security services. This is reportedly because security services are reluctant to interfere in the work of an international Christian organization, and because leadership figures in Caritas Syria (among whom are prominent Syrian clergymen) maintain close relationships to leading figures in the Government of Syria. Additionally, Caritas is largely funded by the Catholic Church or parts of the global Caritas network. Since 2016, Caritas Syria has used its relative autonomy to expand programs to non-Christian areas; for example, Caritas is currently implementing several programs in eastern Aleppo. Caritas Syria is reported to occasionally partner with smaller local NGOs or initiatives in these non-Christian areas.

### Agha Khan Development Network

Agha Khan was established in 1967 in Switzerland by the Agha Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili religion. It works in 30 countries, mostly in Asia and Africa, has over 80,000 paid staff globally, and focuses on “health, education, culture, rural development, institution building and the promotion of economic development.” Agha Khan’s Syrian branch was founded in 2001 and registered with MOSA and MOFA; prior to the conflict, it worked primarily in microfinance and cultural heritage preservation. However, at the start of the Syrian conflict, Agha Khan expanded drastically, beginning to focus on agricultural projects, food security, education, health, and humanitarian assistance. Agha Khan primarily works in Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Damascus, As-Salamiyeh, Tartous, and Lattakia. Agha Khan projects are not limited to Ismaili areas; however, its projects are found in every major predominantly Ismaili region of Syria, to include As-Salamiyeh and Masyaf (in Tartous). Agha Khan maintains its access due to the fact that it is an Ismaili charity, and the Ismailis are an important (nominally Shiite)<sup>12</sup> minority group that has largely supported the Government of Syria. Agha Khan reportedly maintains different relationships with Government of Syria security services depending on the community they are working in.

### DIASPORA INGOS

Diaspora organizations are closely linked with unregistered Syrian NGOs. Diaspora NGOs have been a primary point of engagement for international donors since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. What differentiates diaspora organizations from a Syrian NGO or CBO is the fact they have foreign registration, foreign bank accounts, and offices in foreign countries, albeit often with primarily Syrian staff. Sometimes these organizations do implement directly in Syria, through a local implementing arm. More frequently, these organizations distribute funding to networks of individuals in Syria, or to smaller registered or unregistered NGOs in Syria. Increasingly, diaspora NGOs are also working directly with Syrian refugee and diaspora communities in the countries in which they are located, or beyond. These organizations are often oriented against the Government of Syria, which necessitated foreign registration.

### EXAMPLES

#### Basmeh & Zeitooneh

Basmeh & Zeitooneh was founded in 2014 by a group of Syrian and Lebanese youth in Lebanon to work with the growing Syrian refugee population. Basmeh &

Zeitooneh quickly grew and began to work in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. In countries other than Syria, Basmeh & Zeitooneh also now works with host populations in addition to Syrian refugees. The organization works in multiple sectors, to include health, education, shelter, humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, protection, peacebuilding, and livelihoods. Inside Syria, it works primarily in opposition-held areas, since it is not registered with the Government of Syria and was perceived, at least at the time of its creation, as being sympathetic to the opposition. It has a largely positive reputation and receives funds from multiple international donors and INGOs.

#### Unnamed Diaspora Organization

One unnamed organization was founded in June 2011 by a group of middle and upper middle class Sunnis from a major Syrian city; it is now registered and has several offices internationally. It has primarily worked in opposition-held northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and Idlib, although it has also conducted some small-scale programs in Government-held areas. The organization also conducts several projects in Syria’s neighboring countries. The organization works in multiple sectors, to include WASH, humanitarian assistance, livelihoods, and education. The organization is often perceived to have linkages to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, largely because many of the founders and original staff came from families associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, this is an overly simplistic assertion. Although many staff and leadership figures are broadly sympathetic to various strands of political Islam, the organization has no clear, known links to the ‘central’ Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

## Semi-governmental Entities

Semi-governmental entities are to some degree governmental bodies but, functionally, they represent various interest groups in Syrian civil society. In other national contexts, many of the typologies below would be considered classic manifestations of civil society. However, with the rise of the Baath Party and the establishment of new regulatory frameworks in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, many of these organizations were incorporated into line ministries or into Baath party structures as a means of co-opting previously independent organizations into the Syrian state apparatus. Nevertheless, although these organizations were made into formal government bodies, this does not mean they are not, to some degree, representative of and beholden to their constituent interests. Many of these organizations have the power to lobby on behalf of their members exactly because they are semi-formal parts of the Syrian state itself. Semi-governmental entities can be categorized into several types.

<sup>12</sup> Ismaili religious figures would dispute that they are Shiite; practically, however, they are widely considered part of the broader Shiite branch of Islam.



#### UNIONS/PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Unions and professional associations are for all intents and purposes official Government of Syria institutions. In 1968, all existing trade unions were compelled to affiliate with the General Federation of Trade Unions, and thus became part of a single trade union. The leaders of Syrian unions and the General Federation of Trade Unions must be Baath Party members, but individual members are not required to join the Baath Party. While Syrian unions and professional associations are essentially official Government entities, they also maintain their function as associations advocating for the interests of a group of Syrian professionals, or a specific industry. Thus, many are overtly technocratic institutions. Some have been important advocates for specific local issues; in other cases, unions or professional associations have lobbied local governance bodies to implement specific types of programs or technical solutions to problems, or have begun to conduct activities of their own accord.

#### EXAMPLES

##### The As-Sweida Engineers Union

The As-Sweida Engineers Union, like all unions, exists under the General Federation of Engineering Unions. Engineers in As-Sweida are not compelled to join the union, but the majority of engineers do so to take advantage of union-related benefits. Individuals must apply for membership and pay union dues to remain in good standing. Like all unions, the As-Sweida Engineers Union is led by a council elected from among its members; Baath Party membership is a de facto requirement to be elected to the council. Throughout 2019, the As-Sweida Engineers Union regularly lobbied the As-Sweida Municipal Council to prioritize the establishment of a new milk and cheese factory, as the agricultural engineers in the union believe such a factory will bring significant economic benefits to the surrounding rural areas.

##### The Damascus Optometrists Professional Association

The Damascus Optometrists Professionals Association is the sole professional association for eye doctors in Damascus city. It is technically a branch of the Syrian Doctors Union, and although optometrists in Syria are not required to join the association, the vast majority do so. The association is led by a council elected by the dues-paying members of the association. While Baath Party membership is not officially required to be elected to the council, it is in reality a necessity. The association conducts regular charity work and pro-bono activities, and it frequently organizes free eye exams in schools, IDP shelters, and individual clinics.

#### COLLECTIVES

Collectives (or cooperatives) in Syria are either agricultural or residential in focus. The appropriation of agricul-

tural land and the formation of agricultural collectives was a major component of the formation of the modern Syrian state, even before the Syrian Baath Party's rise to power. Today, agricultural collectives are formal state institutions that fall under the Ministry of Agriculture and, as in many parts of the world, are essentially groups of small-holding farmers that jointly manage agricultural areas. When Syrian agricultural land was expropriated and redistributed from large landowners in 1963,<sup>13</sup> those receiving expropriated or Government land were required to join these agricultural collectives. Collectives are expected to provide members with technical support, credit, and joint use of machinery. Today, there are thousands of agriculture collectives in Syria. Practically speaking, agricultural collectives are often the primary and most direct linkage between farmers and the Government. At the same time however, collectives are also de facto state institutions and must balance the interests of constituents with Government policy and practice. Potentially, collectives can also raise specific local or technical issues that would go unnoticed in broader assessments or project monitoring.

#### EXAMPLE

##### Salkhad Farmers Collective

The Salkhad Farmers collective, located in Salkhad in As-Sweida Governorate, resembles nearly every other agricultural collective in Syria. Like all such collectives, it is registered under the General Union for Farmers, which must be led by a Baath Party member. The Salkhad Farmers Collective comprises several dozen small farms, some of which are run by individual families, while others are run by several families collectively. The Salkhad Farmers Collective directly sells to farmers cheap seeds purchased from the Agricultural Directorate or the General Association of Seeds at below-market prices, supports farmers in selling their products, and provides a forum for farmers to share farming techniques or to jointly use shared agricultural equipment. The leadership of the Salkhad Farmers Collective, like most collectives, is a council elected by its constituent farmers.

#### CHAMBERS

'Chambers' refer to the various industrial rooms, trade rooms, or chambers of commerce of Syria's major cities. It is worth noting that many of Syria's chambers actually predate the modern Syrian state; for example, the Damascus Chamber of Commerce was formed during the Ottoman Empire. Similar to chambers of commerce or trade rooms in other countries, Syrian chambers nominally speak for the 'business communities' of a certain city. Unlike in other countries, they are formalized Government bodies; members must

<sup>13</sup> This was accomplished under the Framework of Decree 88. Agriculture collectives were again formalized under Law 21, in 1974.

hold Baath Party membership. Notably, close relations to the upper echelons of the Government of Syria are virtually a prerequisite to becoming an influential businessman sitting in a major chamber of commerce. However, although chambers are Government institutions composed of powerful business figures with links to the Syrian regime, that does not mean they are purely arms of the 'security' state. Chambers still represent the interests of the Syrian business community (such as it is); in fact, several chambers have heavily lobbied Government of Syria security services to alter policies damaging to local business, to include conscription policies, access constraints, or property violations. Therefore, Syria's chambers could possibly be a force for stabilization and sustainable development in Syria, especially where stability and business interests align. There are reportedly ongoing discussions within the Syrian Ministry of Economy to place chambers directly under the authority of the ministry.

#### EXAMPLES

##### Deir Ez-Zor Industrial Chamber

The Deir-ez-Zor Industrial Chamber is comprised of several of Deir-ez-Zor's prominent businessmen. To be a part of the chamber, a businessman must be engaged in local industry and register with the chamber and the Industrial Ministry. Anecdotally, joining the chamber is not a simple process and requires meeting several administrative criteria. The leadership of the chamber is a council elected from among its members. In practical terms, the leadership of the chamber is drawn from among the most prominent industrial businessmen in the community, and the leading member of the council is one of the most powerful businessmen in Deir-ez-Zor. The Deir-ez-Zor Industrial Chamber conducts regular advocacy efforts to attract investment or to lobby the Deir-ez-Zor city council to enact pro-industry policies. For example, in October 2018, the Industrial Chamber held an 'international conference' in Deir-ez-Zor city to attract foreign companies and investment. This conference secured contracts for two companies — an Iranian company that opened a branch in Deir-ez-Zor city and is primarily importing pesticides and an Indian company that works in telecommunications. The Deir-ez-Zor Industrial Chamber also reached a cooperation agreement with the Trade Chamber of Alexandria, Egypt, in order to facilitate trade between Deir-ez-Zor and Egypt.

##### Damascus Chamber of Commerce

The Damascus Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1830. It is the oldest chamber of commerce in the Middle East. Like other chambers, it is comprised of some of Damascus city's most prominent businessmen; it is a massive organization, with over 12 departments, multiple committees, and 40,900 members. To be a part of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, a businessman must demonstrate official commercial

records and register with the chamber, in addition to clearing multiple other administrative hurdles. The leadership of the Chamber is a council that is (theoretically) elected from among its members; the current head of the council is a powerful Damascene businessman, while the deputy secretary is one of the most powerful individuals in Syria. This is partially what makes the Damascus Chamber of Commerce both unique and influential; as the Chamber of Commerce in the Syrian capital, its leadership is effectively a part of the upper echelons of the Syrian regime itself.

##### National Souk Al-Hal Commercial Committee

The Souk Al-Hal Commercial Committee is a committee that represents the interests of the various 'souk al-hals' in Syria. A souk al-hal is a large marketplace selling fruits and vegetables; there is one in nearly every major Syrian city. Every souk al-hal has its own management committee, which is elected from among the vendors in each market, and every souk al-hal committee helps to elect the national Souk Al-Hal Commercial Committee. The committee generally regulates prices, coordinates import and export with other countries, and lobbies for the interests of Syrian fruit and vegetable vendors. Additionally, several souk al-hal committees have lobbied their local municipal council to prioritize rehabilitating the souks damaged during the conflict. For example, in the Al-Waer neighborhood of Homs city, the Souk Al-Hal Committee solicited donations and collected funds to rehabilitate the Souk Al-Hal themselves.

#### GONGOS

Government-organized Non-governmental Organizations (GONGOs) are structured as NGOs, but function either as an arm of the Syrian state or have such close, often personal, relationships to the upper echelons of the Syrian regime that they should not be considered traditional 'NGOs.' Some of the organizations in this category were created by prominent military or paramilitary leaders, who naturally steer the humanitarian and development work of their organizations to align with individual political and economic priorities. Due to the close relationship between GONGOs and the Syrian state, these organizations often partner with the UN or with Damascus-based INGOs to provide the latter with humanitarian access. However, while these organizations are not necessarily politically independent, they must still be counted within the ranks of civil society in Government-held areas. They often play an important, even critical, role in supporting other more independent civil society actors. As noted above, SARC and Syria Trust support many smaller civil society organizations or informal initiatives, and many civil society members previously received training or were employed at these two organizations.

## EXAMPLES

**Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)**

SARC is the primary aid organization in Syria, and almost all other agencies (be they Syrian or international) that deliver services in Syria must coordinate, to some degree, with SARC. Formed in 1942 as the Syrian branch of the ICRC, SARC has thousands of paid and unpaid volunteer staff implementing programs in nearly every sector (both directly and indirectly), and it has branches in all Syrian governorates. The head of SARC is directly appointed by the Government of Syria; Government security services, administrative bodies, and ministries have considerable oversight over SARC activities. However, the degree of formal oversight over programming, autonomy, and access varies widely by branch, and even by community. While SARC remains the primary mechanism through which the Government of Syria exerts control over humanitarian assistance and development programs, this instrumentalization does not mean that SARC programs are uniformly controlled by the Government of Syria, nor does it reflect the fact that SARC staff (especially volunteers) are often highly regarded by both beneficiaries and partner organizations alike.

**Syria Trust**

Syria Trust was established in 2008 by Asmaa Al-Assad, the wife of President Bashar Al-Assad, and is one of the largest NGOs in Syria. Prior to the conflict, Syria Trust was Syria's largest NGO by a large margin and had projects in multiple sectors, to include rural development, cultural development and heritage, education, youth capacity building, and women's empowerment. Thanks to its connections to the president, Syria Trust also has partnerships with numerous Syrian Government ministries. Since the start of the conflict, Syria Trust has diversified its programming even further; it now also conducts emergency humanitarian assistance, microfinance, community mobilization, and legal assistance programs. Syria Trust can (and should) be considered an arm of the Syrian Government. However, it is important to note one key aspect: for many young Syrians, both prior to and during the conflict, Syria Trust offered them their first experience in the civil society and NGO sector. Significant capacity has been built at Syria Trust, and this has resonated elsewhere among newer, more independent civil society organizations, both Syrian and international, working in all areas of Syria.<sup>14</sup>

**Al-Bustan Organization**

Al-Bustan was formed in 1999 in Lattakia and registered under MOSA. The founder of Al-Bustan is both a cousin of President Al-Assad and one of Syria's most prominent businessmen. Prior to the conflict, Al-Bustan primarily conducted small-scale assistance programs supporting lower income communities in Lattakia, with projects included basic humanitarian assistance and agriculture assistance and development. After the Syrian conflict began, Al-Bustan rapidly expanded and began implementing food basket distributions, local livelihoods projects, and health programs in multiple Government-held areas across Syria. Al-Bustan was also an implementing partner of the UN and UNICEF and received substantial funding to support WASH, education, and winterization programs. Al-Bustan also reportedly used funds to directly support pro-Government militia fighters, providing food baskets to the families of pro-Government militia combatants and combatants themselves, as well as supporting injured combatants and families of those killed in the conflict. The UN ceased working with Al-Bustan in 2016. The organization is still fully operational in Syria, although it is now reportedly funded primarily by President Al-Assad's cousin. ●

14 Note: our research and analysis team includes Syria Trust alumni.

The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers that will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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