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**THE ROOTS OF MISTRUST IN COALITION
BUILDING AMONG SYRIAN NONPROFITS:
LESSONS FROM THE TRUTH AND JUSTICE
CHARTER**

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Cover photo: Drawing titled "In Syria, the fate of the disappeared is in Pandora's box". (c) Marinna Al-Tabba.

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Introduction

For the past 13 years, the establishment and management of alliances in Syria have not been one of the pillars of public affairs work, whether in political, relief, or human rights work, and the field of transitional justice is no exception. Despite the harmony of the parties in vision, goal, or even ideology – and their shared struggles whether political, revolutionary, or any other form – a lack of trust between groups often surfaced, hindering the formation of strong and strategic relationships and delaying the unification of their ranks at a time of great need.

This paper attempts to investigate and explore the extent to which *lack of trust* affects the formation of alliances as perceived by actors in the Syrian public sphere. It examines the nature of the existing relationships between Syrian institutions and organizations and their ability to build alliances around a specific demand or cause that unites them. Due to the overlapping factors and different schools of thought in explaining the emergence and success of different forms of institutional cooperation and their gradations, the paper focuses on one crucial determinant in building strategic cooperation and alliances: trust. It raises a general question about the causes of weak trust between organizations working in the public sphere; its impact on collective action; and the lessons learned to overcome the obstacle of weak trust, focusing on nonprofit organizations working in the field of transitional justice and the movements by victims' families and survivors.

The importance of the topic emerges not only in understanding the causes and deconstructing the lack of trust, or mistrust, among Syrian public affairs workers, and the impact of this on building strong relationships and alliances based on deep trust among its members – something that is desperately needed at the political, human rights, and civil work levels in general. Its importance also emerges from the lessons learned from a previous experience in contemporary Syrian history – a coalition of Syrian associations and institutions that built high levels of trust among themselves. This paper emphasizes the ability of Syrian men and women to create a demanding grassroots movement around the issue of detention and enforced disappearance, a movement that is geographically widespread, driven by the people themselves and prominent women leaders.

Methodology

This paper relies on two theoretical frameworks; the first looks at non-violent contentious politics to analyze social movements, political conflicts, and the complex interaction between individuals, groups, and the state in shaping political change.¹ The second relies on the “critical theory of nonprofit organizations and associations”.²

Given the importance of focusing on the historical context, political structures, and cultural norms of contemporary Syrian society in understanding the lack of trust and its effects, and after reviewing published studies and reports on collective action in the field of transitional justice, the tool of in-

1 Sociologist and historian Tilly's (2001) theoretical framework focuses on non-violent contentious politics to analyze social movements, political conflicts, and the complex interaction between individuals, groups, and the state in shaping political change. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.5.

For more, the Carnegie Middle East Center's report “Contentious Politics in Syria: Opposition, Representation, and Resistance” describes the various forms of resistance to the Syrian regime, including the peaceful HIRAK movement since the outbreak of protests in 2011, as having the characteristics of contentious politics, i.e. an interplay between politics, contestation, and collective action. In other words, there are dynamic interactions and actions by individuals that affect and may clash with the interests of other individuals within collective action outside the framework of state institutions, such as peaceful resistance, protests, civil disobedience, and strikes. See Contentious Politics in Syria: Opposition, Representation, and Resistance. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2020. p. 4, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Carnegie_Contentious_Politics_in_the_Syrian_AR_single_HR.pdf

2 The second theoretical framework focuses on critically reviewing the goals and outcomes of policies, practices, and philosophies of giving and helping for nonprofit organizations. Katharyne Mitchell and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Philanthropy and Humanitarianism*, 2023.

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depth interviews was chosen. By researching hundreds of initiatives, groups, and institutions that worked on the issue of the missing in Syria, a survey of 160 organizations, grassroots initiatives, and local and international campaigns that have worked and advocated for detainees since 2011, including networks or allied groups, was conducted.³ What characterized most of these groups was the spontaneity of their public appearance through social media platforms, mostly on Facebook, and the lack of disclosure of the identity of the individuals in charge, or their headquarters. They were characterized by secrecy. Their work in the early years of the protests in 2011 focused on documenting and publishing news about arrests or releases and posts calling for the release of detainees. These groups were not limited to demanding the missing persons in the security centers of the Syrian regime. In later years, some of them demanded the return of missing persons in the hands of the Islamic State, armed Islamist factions, or the Syrian Democratic Forces. Some of them had narrower focuses: for example, a geographical area, detainees from a specific university or college, or women detainees. The activities of these groups also vary between documenting those who were arrested or kidnapped, providing support to survivors, or demanding their release through media campaigns.

Due to the security situation and persecution, activity inside Syria and on the ground was limited. However, after the publication of Caesar's photos in 2013,⁴ and the asylum of many people outside Syria, conditions began to allow the formation of groups of survivors and families of the disappeared. Indeed the announcement of associations with an organizational form, structure, and clear vision began.

Accordingly, 15 interviews were held with a group of victims' family associations, survivors, human rights organizations that deal with transitional justice and support the movement of victims' families, and a group of researchers and politicians, through Zoom or by phone. The interviewees were six victims' family associations, four directors of Syrian human rights organizations that deal with transitional justice and have projects and programs that focus on supporting

3 See the "Detained and Disappeared" guide available at <https://creativememory.org/ar/project-directory/>

4 The images, colloquially known as the "Caesar photos," were captured between May 2011 and August 2013 by a Syrian military police defector who goes by the alias "Caesar." They offer a rare and compelling insight into the Syrian government's apparatus of torture and killing.

victims' family associations and their establishment and five Syrian and non-Syrian researchers and politicians who were active before and after 2011 and who were members of various coalitions. The interviews were conducted between March and June 2023.

Measuring trust

The term *trust* is ambiguous. It is defined according to various categories, either in terms of the benefits it provides (cooperation, reliability, political cohesion, non-dispersion, social safety, etc.) or the behavior of those who grant trust: emotional, ethical, pragmatic, etc. It can also be defined by the nature of the relationship between the trusting person and the supposedly trustworthy person receiving their trust: contractual, exploitative, dependent, reciprocal, etc.⁵

The common view assumes that successful cooperation is achieved when trust is placed in the right people or organizations, and everything will be better if people trust each other.⁶ This requires three elements: sincere efforts to fulfill commitments, honesty in precommitment negotiations, and limited opportunism.⁷ An opposing view finds that cooperation does not require trust, and it is possible to achieve joint ventures without high levels of trust.⁸

5 Jack Barbalet, "A Characterization of Trust, and Its Consequences", *Theory and Society* 38, no. 4 (2009): p.368.

6 Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and David Schoorman, "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust", *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): p.710; and L. L., Cummings, and Philip Bromiley, "The organizational trust inventory (oti): development and validation", In *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, SAGE Publications, Inc., p. 303, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452243610>

7 The various definitions of trust also suggest an interplay of economic and social factors beyond the civil society categorization. Fukuyama refers to trust as a culturally rooted social capital that supports the strength and health of an economy. Fran Tonkiss and Andrew Passey, "Trust, Confidence and Voluntary Organisations: Between Values and Institutions", *Sociology* 33, no. 2 (1999): 257–74; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press, 1995. p. 49. p. 33.

8 Karen S. Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi, *Cooperation Without Trust?* Russell Sage Foundation, 2007. p.1.

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We do observe that individuals who do not trust each other have the ability to cooperate, but under conditions that they negotiate, agree to, and can legitimize and enforce via a system that they create. One consequence of granting trust is the risk that an organization takes, or at least there is an awareness and perception of this risk.⁹

The amount of trust required to achieve cooperation or joint action between two independent entities cannot be measured and is easily interfered with by personal or contextual factors. However, informal forms of collective action in Syria since 2011 have been able to build instant trust between themselves despite the high-security risks, such as organizing large-scale activities such as the demonstrations in Deir ez-Zor and Homs between the peaceful movement coordination committees, or cooperation between local humanitarian relief initiatives to provide urgent aid to those who have suffered air strikes or the destruction of their homes. The informal nature of these coordination or relief initiatives may be one reason why it is easier to build trust among them; the urgency of the situation and the need to respond and cooperate may be another. However, achieving levels of institutionalized, sustainable, and deep levels of trust cannot happen in reaction to an emergency event or in secret with only online names and organizations.

On the other hand, it is worthwhile to detail the levels of inter-organizational teamwork as the risk element of trust is related to the nature and type of joint work. The following table shows that mutual understanding and reaching an agreement does not mean identification and merging within the alliance. Rather, seeing the degrees of joint work determines the roles and the level of expectations, as shown below:

Table 1: Stages of Organizational Trust*

Stage	Outcome
Compete	Focus on opportunities for own institution
Coexist	Awareness of other institutions
Communicate	Sharing information and lessons learned
Cooperate	Teamwork in a pre-established program or activities with a “donor-beneficiary organization” character
Coordinate	Collective work aimed at enhancing the impact of coordination, creating an impact that cannot be achieved individually
Collaborate	Collective work that is characterized by the development of a shared vision for a program, and a transformation in the institutions’ thinking systems
Integrate	Integration of outcomes and of the program or area of interest

*Note: Table 1 represents the spectrum and levels of collective action among nonprofits and NGOs.¹⁰

9 Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and David Schoorman, “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust”, *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): pp.712-13.

10 Impact Alliances, *A Connecting Networks Learning Labs - Workshop Documentation*, November 2021, p.7, <https://www.iac-berlin.org/assets/downloads/211130-Learning-Lab-Impact-Networks-Documentation.pdf>

The Roots and Effects of Low Trust

This section attempts to explore and refute the roots of low trust, based on the concept of trust as accepting a certain degree of dependence on another person or entity, despite uncertainty about their reliability, to achieve a result that is difficult to reach otherwise.¹¹ In other words, it is associated with risk. The study investigates the causes of weak trust based on the data collected from the references and sources available during the study, especially the interviews with actors in the field of public human rights work in Syria. We can summarize these roots in specific factors, some of which are related to internal factors specific to the Syrian case and others related to international supportive policies or other external and historical factors.

Roots of weakness

The causes or roots of weak trust can be summarized by at least six factors: the prevalence of individualism in the work environment; alignments and binary culture; the absence of political life and the overlap of expediency with public affairs; international transitional justice policies that have caused fragmentation and disintegration; excessive reliance on individual stories; and internal factors and dynamics within existing alliances. It is worth noting that Syria-specific factors cannot be separated from international factors that interact and are influenced by other humanitarian or political crises.

1. Individualism

In personal meetings, bilateral conversations in professional meetings, or when attending follow-up meetings of newly emerging coalitions or alliances in Syrian public affairs, there are many opinions about the lack of trust between Syrian groups and institutions, which is fundamentally different from trust between two individuals working in public affairs, or between an individual and the group for which he or she advocates. We assume that there is a minimum level of trust between institutions because of the relationships and structure created by institutional work, which reduces ambiguity and increases certainty and therefore increases

11 Jack Barbalet, "A Characterization of Trust, and Its Consequences", *Theory and Society* 38, no. 4 (2009): p.368.

trust. However, the report "Strategies for European Engagement with Syrian Civil Society Organizations in the Diaspora" described the relationships between Syrian institutions working in the same field as having weak structural ties and stated that existing networks were overly dependent on specific individuals or personal contacts.¹²

This was confirmed by the interviews for this paper when the question about lack of trust and its consequences for joint action was asked. There is a widespread perception in public affairs circles that the reason for this is an organic one: the mentality of an individualized way of thinking that prefers the option of breaking off partnerships or splitting from their partner to work alone, similar to the thinking of small commercial entrepreneurs that is most prominent and popular in markets in major Syrian cities. However, without a doubt, the issue of individualism and the identification of a person with their role in managing an organization is widespread with a large number of cases. Some even refer to an organization by the name of the person who founded it, and the legal identity of the organization is fused with the founder or manager.

2. Alignments and binary culture

Another explanation for the lack of trust is the nature of alignments in public life according to the perspective of absolute binaries. The decades-long totalitarianism of the Syrian regime and the subsequent abolition of political pluralism, the generalization of a one-opinion policy, the spread of a culture of fearmongering, and the suppression of public and private freedoms have all led to the perpetuation of the binary of the brutal enemy or the eternal ally as a single pattern in public political and cultural thought.

There is no doubt that contentious politics exists in both authoritarian and democratic regimes in one way or another, but the absence of political forces independent of the authority or on its margins, along with the political system closing itself off through the repression of its opponents, may push moderate opposition elements to extremism and the

12 Erwin van Veen and Beatrice Noun, "Strategies for European Engagement with Syrian Diaspora Civil Society Organisations", Friedrich Ebert, September 2021. p.12, available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18306.pdf> (Van Veen and Noun, "Strategies for European Engagement")

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elimination of the other.¹³ Thus, the vision of reality as a binary extended to many aspects of public life. When there was any kind of disagreement about a way of working or a vision that was “unacceptable” to someone within the group, that person would be excluded. This extended to a political culture based on exclusions, which developed into divisions and separations within a single party or civil institution.¹⁴ One prominent example is the divisions of the Communist Party in Syria over several decades, and the divisions in the Syrian National Council in 2011, which led to its disruption and the establishment of the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in 2012.

Before 2011, these divisions took an ideological form: secular, communist, Islamist, nationalist, etc. They continued to some extent due to the presence and effectiveness of veteran individuals who entered the political sphere; the younger generation also had a share of these divisions, which continued in a different character and form. The differences in the political and ideological affiliations of pre-2011 political detainees were a double-edged sword. These differences could contribute to enriching the organizational experience and making rapid progress, or they could become a cause of division and result in the expulsion of members.¹⁵

3. The absence of political life and the interference of expediency in public affairs

The absence of public political life for decades led to an inability to create an unrestricted place for political parties and forces, parliament, unions, or popular organizations. It also led to people viewing each other with suspicion, distrusting each other’s intentions or misinterpreting actions, and accusing each other of working for the intelligence and security

13 Maha Yahya (ed.), *Contentious Politics in the Syrian Conflict: Opposition, Representation, and Resistance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2020. p. 6, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Carnegie_Contentious_Politics_in_the_Syrian_AR_single_HR.pdf

14 For more, see the experiences of different political parties in Syria under Baath rule and the divisions within them.

15 “No one will speak for us anymore. The Experience of Syrian Victim Groups.” Impunity Watch. 2022. p. 26, available at https://www.impunitywatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Syria_victim_participation_AR.pdf (“No one will speak for us”, Impunity Watch).

services. Thus, people were unable to engage in a complete political experience due to their minimal trust in political players and were unable to create coalitions or blocs and reshape themselves according to the political circumstances.

This did not prevent intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders from establishing human rights organizations¹⁶ as a strategy to circumvent the current reality and resist the regime.¹⁷ However, political desires and ideological and intellectual backgrounds interfered with the work of the organizations, which were supposed to be limited to human rights issues, and made it difficult to build trust given the previous lines of political divisions and the general climate of repression.¹⁸

The living, legal, and economic pressures inside and outside Syria after 2011 also created the perception that working in civil society was an opportunity to achieve relative economic security and stability. This came with the spread of a stigma, especially in relief and political work, about those who would work in civil society fields. In other words, utilitarianism and public work overlapped. A misconception was perpetuated about the civil society job benefits being more important than the public work of community assistance. The idea of the work being a private benefit, instead of a public service, spread and created an additional layer of skepticism and mistrust of the intentions of those who work in this field.¹⁹

4. International transitional justice policies that have created fragmentation and disintegration

16 Human Rights Committee of the Syrian Lawyers Union 1976. Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria 1989. Arab Organization for Human Rights 2004; Syrian Organization for Human Rights – Sawasiya 2004. Kurdish Committee for the Defense of Human Rights.

17 Researcher’s interview with a Syrian lawyer on March 25, 2023 (Interview, Syrian lawyer, March 2023).

18 Interview, Syrian lawyer, March 2023.

19 Dawlaty, “Syrian Civil Society, Reality and Best Practices: From the Perspective of Civic Engagement, Civic Space, Advocacy, and Financial Planning” 2021. p.71 <https://dawlaty.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A8-1.pdf> (Dawlaty, “Syrian Civil Society, Reality and Best Practices”).

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It is difficult to try to explain the phenomenon of mistrust without looking at the broader picture within which civil and nonprofit organizations in the field of transitional justice operate. They are not isolated from legal frameworks, international courts and treaties, transitional justice norms, standard practices in dealing with gross human rights violations, multiple stakeholders, international or local human rights organizations, supporters, foreign ministries, and other forces.

One of the characteristics of the biosphere created by international transitional justice policies is fragmentation. A series of mechanisms, especially transnational mediation, vertical coordination, and patronage relationships, have led to fragmentation in the pursuit of overall transitional justice goals, especially in the organizing and mobilization efforts of institutions in exile. This has contributed negatively to the ability of local organizations to build trust among themselves. The policies and the relationships they create and the shape of their engagements can be characterized as somewhat competitive, despite good intentions and lofty goals. Activists or the organizations they run in the diaspora establish formal relationships with allies such as political parties or governments. Over time, organizations become more dependent on previous relationships to ensure their survival. As the process is sequential, this coordination can lead to a form of dependency. Competition for patronage can generate divisions between different groups.²⁰ The overdependence and near-exclusive relationship with a single political supporter has contributed to the creation of suspicion and mistrust in that entity.

In other words, this issue is crystallized – especially in the Syrian case – in the almost total dependence of Syrian organizations and institutions on the resources provided by foreign ministries and institutions, either directly or indirectly. The financial dependence on a small number of funders has created two situations: programs and projects are designed and implemented in line with the priorities of the funding governments,²¹ and competition for resources and

uncertainty and fear of funding shortages. There is a subsequent fragility of the work and its quick disappearance when funding stops given the almost complete absence of an official role or a sponsoring body,²² and the absence of large-scale individual fundraising efforts or projects that generate income for organizational sustainability.²³

Adding to the fragility factor is the enormous need for human capital in the form of people working in the field of transitional justice and their experience, relationships, and skills. The lack of local expertise in this field, both in terms of the subject matter and processes related to it, leads local organizations to rely on international organizations or institutions that can provide economic stability.²⁴

One manifestation of the aforementioned biosphere is the international community's adoption of a "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach to supporting and nurturing local groups and institutions around transitional justice; the idea is that if multiple ideas or projects are given attention, support, and nurturing, many of them will blossom and bear fruit in one way or another. However, this approach works on the principles of a free market, supply and demand, and survival of the fittest. Despite the advantages of this approach for targeting a large segment, spreading horizontally at the grassroots level, having a broad reach, and providing opportunities and an environment for initiative, it has created harmful effects in the dynamics and relationships between the competing groups and organizations. The emergence of a "who deserves more" situation and linking legitimacy to entitlement – especially when international organizations have played a

20 Espen Stokke and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "Syrian Diaspora Mobilization: Vertical Coordination, Patronage Relations, and the Challenges of Fragmentation in the Pursuit of Transitional Justice", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2019, pp.6-7 (Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "Syrian Diaspora Mobilization").

21 Van Veen and Noun, "Strategies for European Engagement". p.12.

22 The Syrian state has allowed support for initiatives that support victims of the Syrian army or its militias, and established the Ministry of Reconciliation, but in complete disregard and denial of the reality of detainees in its prisons.

23 Sources of income for nonprofit organizations include individual donations, in-kind donations (e.g., computers), volunteer services (e.g., financial, administrative), donations from for-profit companies, and grants. Their expenses include administrative expenses, project and program expenses, and fundraising expenses. Read more: Strategies for European Engagement with Syrian Civil Society Organizations in the Diaspora, Friedrich Ebert, September 2021. p.11.

24 Dawlaty, "Syrian Civil Society, Reality and Best Practices", p.71.

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role in establishing victim's family associations by allocating relatively limited funding for covering an organization's costs – have established what is now known as the “chronic weakness/hunger cycle for nonprofit organizations”, which is manifested in funders' unrealistic expectations for change and social impact combined with a lack of infrastructure for these organizations and their work.²⁵ This is reflected in the survival dynamics of these organizations and inadvertently reinforces this trend of entitlement and competition.

At the same time, organizations are under pressure from the international community and its response to developments such as wars, humanitarian disasters, and diplomatic trends. This is reflected in the plans of organizations that rely on international grants, which shift their focus from relief to community stabilization or development, for example, without regard for the priorities and emergent needs of Syrians. These organizations also suffer from the international focus shifting from one political or humanitarian crisis to another, as in the cases of the coronavirus pandemic or the Ukraine war. Because of the almost total dependence on foreign grants and the fluctuating general frameworks of these grants, the balance of power in many organizations, whether Syrian or non-Syrian, is on the side of the donor organization.²⁶ This is often reflected in the creation of projects that focus on international public trends and move away from the needs of local communities, which is an inherent crisis in international aid. Not to mention that the international business environment is characterized by a high degree of regulation, competition, fundraising, and a culture of contracts, and thus organizations are increasingly subject to pressures that shift their focus to achieve specific outcomes and outputs based on goal-oriented contracts. The relationship between donors and grantee organizations is reduced, limiting the organization's effectiveness and sense of responsibility; it may see local reality but is unable to communicate its needs freely and without restriction. Local organizations become mere executors of contracts and memoranda of understanding.²⁷

25 The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle. Available at: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_nonprofit_starvation_cycle

26 Sally Reith, “Money, Power, and Donor-NGO Partnerships”, *Development in Practice*, 20, no. 3, 2010: pp. 446-455. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27806721>

27 Thomas Parks, “The Rise and Fall of Donor Funding for Advocacy NGOs: Understanding the Impact”,

5. Over-reliance on individual stories

Building trust between institutions is affected by an over-reliance on people and their individual stories. Advocacy and grassroots mobilization work is often limited to individual stories, especially from victims or survivors, and highlighting personal faces and stories. This is instead of community organizing campaigns that lead to horizontal spread and could reach the largest number of affected people, or conducting research based on statistics and questionnaires and publishing their results, or using experts and specialists with expertise in the issues at hand, or the arts to support and clarify the issues, or influencers to support their issues and make them visible to a local and international public.

This method of communication, often limited to individual stories, has created what could be called “stars”, or icons who receive official invitations to high-level international and UN meetings and receive opportunities to make important connections and relationships. This over-reliance has greatly affected the dynamics of groups seeking to cooperate or form a coalition by creating subtle internal conflicts surrounding the power of influence and opinion among leadership. At times, this phenomenon has confined figures to fragile and empty spaces, limiting their role to telling their personal story at official international meetings or being a speaker at media events; their time and presence are repeatedly demanded but with no discernible role and effectiveness beyond that.²⁸ This has been repeated in the struggles of families of victims and survivors and in many other countries that have had similar experiences.

Sprenkels expressed these concerns in his 2017 study of the movements of victims' families in Tunisia, Guatemala, Honduras, and other countries around the world. Referring to the previous framing of the role of victims, he said: “There is a real danger that without a better understanding of the dynamics of victim participation, this essential element of transitional justice policy may develop into a hollow principle or empty ritual.”²⁹

Development in Practice, 18, no. 2, 2008: pp. 213-222.

28 Researcher's interview with an intermediary human rights organization on April 25, 2023

29 Ralph Sprenkels, “Restricted Access' Promises and Pitfalls of Victim Participation in Transitional Justice Mechanisms”, Impunity Watch, 2017, p.4 <https://www.impunitywatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/>

6. Internal factors and dynamics within existing coalitions and initiatives

Organizational dynamics within a coalition refer to a complex interplay of forces that shape how the coalition operates. Here, there are dynamics similar to the extended family model in organizational work, where the head of the family is the oldest, most influential, or most senior. There are unwritten rules, especially when disagreements arise between members, such as not criticizing in public and resolving by compromise. The model of the large family in institutionalized work, despite the differences and contradictions, has been successful in controlling differences to some extent before an explosion and has brought the members closer to the principle of popular reconciliation. However, it perpetuates the influence of the oldest, founding, or most prominent person, so critical voices have become ostracized and gradually withdraw when they are ignored or excluded. In other cases, disagreements arise over leadership, the position of spokesperson, or the executive committee. Voices that do not agree with those in decision-making positions and top management are excluded. It ends with the separation and division of the coalition.

Factors related to the size of the organizations within the coalition, the number of employees, their spread, their budget, their history, and their relationships with various sponsors and supporters also influence the shape of the relationship dynamics between organizations within the coalition. The subtle power that exists between them influences their interactions. Larger and more fiscally robust organizations occupy a stronger position than emerging or smaller organizations, and internal dynamics arise within the alliance to impose control, which negatively affects the achievement of effective alliances and the development of emerging or smaller organizations or initiatives.

The impact of low trust on the effectiveness of teamwork

The combination of the previous factors in varying degrees created a state of suspicion and distrust in cooperation and work between organizations, which

led to results that were not limited to the inability to work together but had deeper effects, creating a rift and an absence that could have been filled by a cohesive and unified civil society around a cause.

One example of the results of this mistrust is the failure of transitional justice institutions, especially those specialized in documenting violations, to share their documentation for the formation of a database of information on the numbers and details of the missing and disappeared, including testimonies and photos, which could be used effectively in any negotiation process. This is despite the many initiatives and institutions working on documentation, including the UN.

Over time, the siloing of data protection and documentation has increased in the context of declining international interest in the Syrian issue and shrinking available resources. Thus, it is possible to explain this closed-off tendency of groups who wish to have a comparative advantage. If they share what they have, they will lose that advantage in a competitive environment. As a result, organizations keep their data secret and do not share what they are doing when engaging in coalition formation.

Another consequence of mistrust is an overemphasis on details when undertaking a joint venture, and an unwillingness to accept the element of risk that comes with building trust. This overemphasis may look like a demand that the venture starts with establishing a shared vision or strategy and ends with complete agreement on the details and method of implementation. This conservative way of collaborating leaves little room for learning and experimentation, instead often leading to rigid implementation and quick disintegration when certain expectations of the project are not realized. This failure to cooperate arises from a superficial level of trust between the partners and a lack of confidence in each other's abilities. We see the phenomenon in newly formed groups, where they split at the first disagreements.

Indeed, it is undeniable that the authorities' restrictions on Syrian society have prevented the formation and growth of a mature civil society capable of exercising its full role. However, the last 13 years have been an opportunity to learn, and have produced many experiences worth learning from. When focusing on a specific movement such as the movement concerned with the issue of missing persons in Syria, especially detention and enforced

disappearance, we find the emergence of a unique collective work experience in which a group of associations of survivors and victims' families were able to form alliances and agreements on specific work that serves the cause. They were able to achieve small but notable successes, and this is what will be reviewed in the next section as a positive experience that can be built upon and from which we can draw lessons and make recommendations.

The Truth and Justice Charter: Lessons Learned

Several collaborative initiatives involving Syrian institutions working in the field of transitional justice and the missing and disappeared movement have succeeded in coordinating or networking, such as the Transitional Justice Group (2014-2016-) and Bridges of Truth (2021); initiatives involving a group of organizations that issue joint statements on a field or political development; or advocacy and mobilization campaigns. However, the emergence of the Truth and Justice Charter Group (the Charter) went beyond coordination, information exchange, or collaboration on a joint project, and focused on creating a coalition around the issue of detention in Syria, specifically by associations of victims' families, survivors, and survivors. The Charter came into existence in 2021 and consisted of five associations of families of victims, survivors, and survivors of detention, and then expanded to include five new associations and organizations in 2022.³⁰

30 Five organizations have launched the Victim and Detainee Survivors' Archive, namely: the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Saydnaya Prison, the Caesar Families Association, Masar (the Coalition of Families of Persons Abducted by the Islamic State), Families for Freedom, and the Taafi Initiative. These organizations launched the Truth and Justice Charter in 2021, which reflects their shared vision on how to promote victims' rights and the cause of justice and truth in Syria. The Charter calls for uncovering the truth, ensuring justice for detainees and forcibly disappeared people and their families, and holding violators accountable as the cornerstone of a lasting peace in Syria. The coalition has also participated in international lobbying campaigns and consultation meetings, with

At first glance, the relationship of trust that unites the organizations of the Truth and Justice Charter, as found by some of the links, seems to have arisen for very personal reasons: an emotional or professional relationship, based on friendship or respect.³¹ In an interview with Ahmed Helmy, director of the Taafi Initiative, he said:

One of the characteristics of a successful partnership within the Charter group in particular is the existence of an emotional relationship between members, not a competitive relationship, and this does not apply to all coalitions. [When I say] emotional connection, I mean that it definitely eliminates any competition over who shows up or who takes the lead or who gets the spotlight.

Despite the importance of the previous emotional aspect, several factors contributed to building trust, including the legitimacy gained by relationships or other connections, the founders' previous experiences in founding and joining other groups that did not succeed, and their ability to manage disagreements between coalition members, in addition to reading and responding to the political data and changes in the general scene.

Linking trust and “legitimacy” to create a new legitimacy

Some in family coalitions have linked the concept of trust to legitimacy, meaning that trust in an entity increases if it is legitimate. From the literature on the relationship between legitimacy and power, legitimacy arises when a body acquires power and exercises it according to justified rules and with evidence of approval and consent.³² It can be acquired based on elections or by agreement of key players in the political arena, or from international acceptance. However, the legitimacy gained by the associations was, according to some, the cornerstone for building trusting relationships between them and the victims

many successes. The coalition has expanded to include five more organizations: the General Union for Detainees, the Tazer Association for Victims, the Adra Detainees Association, Families for Truth and Justice, and Free Me.

31 Researcher's interviews with several family associations during March and April 2023.

32 David Beetham, “Towards a Social-scientific Concept of Legitimacy”, in: *The Legitimation of Power: Issues in Political Theory*. Palgrave, 1991, p.3, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21599-7_1.

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or other groups. One source of trust comes from the experience of being detained or having a family member detained. Trust also increases when the association grows slowly and organically, building on small activities and projects to become an institution or an association.³³ The identity of those in charge of the associations was not a determinant for building trust, but the stability of the organization's work, its adherence to its goals and community, and its permanence created what some called a legitimacy that made it trustworthy when building a network or alliance:

I see it as a factor in the success of alliances: achievement and production, not drowning in bylaws, memos, rules, etc., and neglecting achievement on the ground. It may bore or tire everyone. Having success within the coalition gives organizations an incentive to continue. Within the Charter, and in the recent period, many successes have been achieved, such as influencing Human Rights Council resolutions, influencing the General Assembly, pressuring the international community and Syrian civil society to allocate a special seat for victims' associations, etc. In 2018, "recovery" was not known. In 2019, when we were talking about the mechanism, no one listened to us. In 2020 we were underestimated. In 2023 the mechanism became a reality. These successes were the reason for our bonding. Ahmed Helmy, Taafi Initiative

Interestingly, there is another factor that was mentioned when addressing the topic of legitimacy. The focus on the size of the organization, the size of its funding, and its relationships (especially its ties to large and political institutions) played a big role in gaining acceptance and recognition:

There is no issue of legitimacy as it is often understood, but in my opinion, it appears not under the heading of legitimacy, but under the heading of large and small organizations. For example, there are large organizations. We don't talk about legitimacy but about the budget and the number of employees, which has nothing to do with the organization but everything to do with the funder. For example, if a funder comes with a huge budget and supports my organization without limit, we become one of the most important organizations, and when that goes away, the impact goes away. Bassam al-Ahmad, Syrians for Truth and Justice

The impact of accumulation and previous experience on establishing coalitions

Most of the leaders of the Truth and Justice Charter had a previous history of civic work, especially women and men who were active and struggled before 2011 to achieve political or social change. These previous experiences contributed to a more mature experience of coalition building among the associations. This was evident first in engaging in previous unsuccessful alliances, coalitions, and networks in various fields, whether political, relief, etc.; and second, in understanding international transitional justice policies, their impact and outcomes, and especially in recognizing the role of funding in changing the dynamics of action and sustainability, and the relationship between allied groups.

The result was the facilitation of an agreement by the Charter's associations and organizations to not let funding play any incentive or disincentive role in expanding or reducing the number of associations in the Charter. They also agreed not to accept financial funding coming to the Charter. They agreed that the Charter is for all Syrian men and women and that anyone can adopt it because the issue of the missing is a national one, not just the concern of the victims and their families. The group also agreed to refuse to have an official spokesperson for the Charter, as this had negative consequences in other collaborations. Everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the media or in high-level meetings. The Charter demonstrates the importance of not getting bogged down in creating detailed internal rules, codes of conduct, and structure while neglecting achievement on the ground, as it is important in attracting talent and giving everyone a reason to continue. The interviews pointed to learning from the negative teamwork model, which was described as "Ya laeba ya khareeba", meaning either staying in the group and playing to win, or leaving and destroying the efforts of others:

We don't want to give the Justice Charter a very administrative or organizational form, and for the Charter to become an institution and have a spokesperson, for example. We are all spokespersons for the Charter. We don't want to deviate from the main objective. The Charter is not a holy book, it is a collective effort and a right for everyone and a right for all Syrians. Anyone can adopt it, the issue is a national issue and everyone has the right

33 Researcher's interview with the Taafi Initiative on 5 May 2023.

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*to speak on it.*³⁴

Members of the Charter were adamant that joining a coalition does not require complete agreement or total identification. Having shared values or a desire to create a joint project is not enough to achieve fruitful collective action. Members found that alliances need a different kind of requirement. One of them is the conceptualization of the alliance: a project or goal that is as specific as possible, within a set time frame, specifying the target audience and the means used. It is imperative to come up with specific recommendations and results from this alliance, and when this is achieved, the alliance can be dissolved. It is not necessary to agree ideologically on everything, and diversity in the use of tools to achieve the goal is required and an enriching factor for the alliance:

I think the alliance should focus on a specific goal, not a general alliance, such as a specific alliance on property rights for displaced people in Syria. It is possible to come up with common outcomes and recommendations on this specific topic. There doesn't necessarily have to be agreement on any other topic or complete ideological agreement, except for the basics at least. This was achieved within the Charter coalition on the issue of enforced disappearance and torture. Ahmed Helmy, Taafi Initiative

We refuse to have an official spokesperson for detainees and the existence of a detainee superstar; the opportunity should be equal for everyone, and we refute that one association should be the guardian of all because it has more funding, organizational capacity, and access to resources.” Interview with Diab Sariya, Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Saydnaya Prison³⁵

Conflict management

The frequency and openness of disagreements within the same organization create a reluctance to build trust in any joint project between two organizations. However, disagreements are not a pathological or negative phenomenon in civil work, and ideological differences exist within each group and among its members. For example, the experience of the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Saydnaya Prison was unique in creating agreement among its ideologically and intellectually diverse

members. They agreed that detention is more than an individual punishment for political affiliation or a suppression of the freedom of expression for a single person from a given religious background. Rather, it is a way to normalize society as a whole and to showcase the power of the regime. This idea brought the members together and took them from thinking of detention as an isolated and targeted experience for a specific political or religious group to a more comprehensive understanding of what was happening. As Sariya said:

The Saydnaya Association contains detainees from different backgrounds: some are Salafists, some are Ikhwanis, some don't belong to any party or don't hold any ideology. Although there is intellectual maturity, there is ideologization. The difficulty was in agreeing on a goal and meeting it. One of the challenges – which we faced in the beginning – was that each group of individuals had a perception of the role of the Saydnaya Prisoners' Association. Some see it as a proselytizing platform or improving the image of jihadists, while others see it as an organization to help the detainees' living conditions. It took the founders a great deal of effort in the beginning to ensure that everyone was on the same page. In the end, it was agreed that membership in the organization would be contingent on none of the members being violators of human rights crimes. The Association does not belong to any ideology, it is not liberal or affiliated with any party or orientation, but rather exists to support victims of disappearance and torture, write their stories and sufferings, and communicate their voice to the outside.³⁶

Given how influential religious and sectarian dividing lines can be, the Truth and Justice Charter has demonstrated the ability to address and transcend divisions. For example, the feminist leaders of the Charter, such as Families for Freedom, were able to break the lines of sectarian and regional conflict in Syria by prioritizing their demands for justice over other dimensions. They demanded justice for women and men together, without discrimination. The organization proved its ability to manage differences related to ethnic and sectarian identities in Syria and the history of oppression of each group and add them to the interests of the cause, while also understanding the lines of division with regional and international allies as determinants of strategic planning.

34 Interview with Diab Sariya of the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Saydnaya Prison, April 6, 2023 (Interview with Sariya, April 2023).

35 Interview with Sariya, April 2023.

36 Interview with Sariya, April 2023.

The ability to read reality and political variables

The ability of associations to read reality and political developments positively contributed to their ability to coordinate among themselves and move effectively and quickly. Those who have been following the conflict in Syria since its first moments are aware of the complexity. Rapid changes and a multitude of players make prioritizing collective action and advocacy around a specific issue a matter of urgency. These changes could be the moment of internationalization, the entry and exit of regional and international players, the start of criminal justice processes and courts in Europe, or the capture of a global desire to establish an international mechanism to know the fate of the missing. This follow-up requires a great effort for any coordinating group or network of institutions to share information and enter the transitional justice ecosystem. As stated by a Syrian lawyer in our interview: “A detention survivor tried to establish a victims’ association in 2012-2013, but it was not the right moment and was not encouraged or responded to at times.”³⁷

Reading the changes and responding quickly to them does not require a change in goals, vision, and structure, but rather in margins and minor deviations to harmonize with what is happening in the world.³⁸ Needs change and community relations evolve, ebbing and flowing between their components in a constant dialectical movement within complex social and political systems. Charter associations have been able to capture these changes as much as possible, responding to what is essential for their survival in harmony with their social environment while recognizing the gains and losses due to change. These marginal changes not only bring the parties closer to what is happening on the ground but also improve the chances of meeting other parties and groups doing the same thing. This translates into understanding and the ability to work together productively.

In practice, the process of change and adaptation is generally met with bureaucratic institutional

resistance and rejection, and a fear that the organization will collapse and move away from its essence.³⁹ The women leaders in associations have been more able to work differently and embrace change, breaking the general pattern of institutional rigidity. The success of the collective work between the groups is not because of this one variable – the presence of women leaders – but because these leaders are survivors of detention and share the experience of loss with many, without interjecting exclusively feminist issues into the priority of the struggle, but rather placing the missing and disappeared as a priority in the work.⁴⁰

There are young people and an older generation within the Charter group, sharing and dividing roles. One of them speaks fluent English, and despite my experience and everything, I turn to him when I need to know something about it. Asking him does not belittle me; he has the ability to communicate, or he has connections with other people. So, the group is complementary, there is no competition, and no one is taking anyone’s place and role. There is mutual respect despite age differences, and decisions are always collective decisions, and when there is disagreement on a topic, we all vote on it. Fadwa Mohammed, Families for Freedom

Recognizing the importance of autonomy

When we move on and focus on the movement of families of victims of detention and survivors, and the impact of building trust on their ability to form strategic alliances, a new determinant emerges that undermines the effectiveness of forming a coalition: how the association itself is formed.

The importance of the emergence of victims’ and survivors’ family associations in the Syrian case appears in giving measure and importance to victims’ self-organization, and the methods of this organization varied. The report “No One Will Speak for Us Anymore”⁴¹ categorized the establishment of associations into three groups. The first category, called “self-awareness”, arose from a group of former detainees who had a strong relationship with each

37 Researcher’s interview with a Syrian lawyer on March 25, 2023.

38 Impact Alliances, *A Connecting Networks Learning Labs - Workshop Documentation*, November 2021, p.5, <https://www.iac-berlin.org/assets/downloads/211130-Learning-Lab-Impact-Networks-Documentation.pdf>.

39 This phenomenon is known as organizational inertia in organizations. Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman, “Structural Inertia and Organizational Change”, *American Sociological Review*, 49, no. 2, 1984: p. 149

40 Interview with Women Now, April 27, 2023.

41 “No one will speak for us”, Impunity Watch.

other and a desire to help other detainees. The second was the result of “external motivation”, i.e. through an intermediary organization that created programs and advocated for the establishment of direct victim links.⁴² The third pattern is a combination of the two, represented by the families of victims – not previously acquainted – united by a common cause, who came together with an intermediary organization to achieve a collective demand, and in this model, women emerged as key actors and drivers in the creation and continuation of this pattern.⁴³ Due to the nature of the associations and their reliance on popular mobilization, it was inevitable that there were supportive organizations that assisted the three previous types in their establishment and functioning, especially in the beginning. However, the establishment itself and what followed played a role in the extent of the association’s autonomy in terms of decision-making and strategic planning, and the consequences of the spread of rumors about complete dependence on the establishment and the loss of trust in the association. This affected the possibility of forming alliances.

Despite the importance of sponsorship in the emergence of associations, it has created an imagined dependency – in most cases – on institutions. In reality, the relationship between the two parties (the association and the nurturing institution) depends on the needs of both parties. The startup organization, which is often a Syrian organization in the diaspora, provides one of the following aspects: logistics, technical expertise, funding, or connections to foreign ministries and diplomats. The association provides access on the ground and a connection to the needs of the community, which increases the legitimacy of the originating organization.

However, the relationship between associations and incubator organizations is not the same. In some cases, the relationship between associations and

incubator organizations is somewhat patronizing. The association is highly dependent on the incubator, due to the latter’s involvement in the transitional justice biosphere and its adoption of its language and frameworks since its inception.⁴⁴ This makes the incubator seem all-knowing and authoritative and creates a hierarchical rather than a reciprocal relationship. Although incubator organizations, especially human rights organizations, are sympathetic to victims’ demands, they sometimes find these demands unrealistic and unattainable due to various legal or political obstacles.⁴⁵ The custodial approach therefore weakens transitional justice.

As a result, the previous prescriptive approach weakens the autonomy of the associations and their ability to bring about change. Indeed, one of the victims’ associations attempted to create distance from an incubator after several years of working together in order to promote autonomy in decision-making and development in the organization; this was met with resistance from the originating organization and rejected. This rejection was evidenced by the association’s refusal to share the database of detainees with the incubator, indicating that there were no efforts to support its independence, as sharing the database would create more dependency. The Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Saydnaya Prison renounced logistical and technical support from the incubator, but this affected the possibility of future cooperation between the two organizations. The incubator organization feared that the association was unprepared, inexperienced, and unqualified for this step, and that there would be confusion in decision-making. On the other hand, the association realized the importance of achieving distance and independence; otherwise, it would remain restricted and unable to represent its target community. The past experiences of victims’ associations in Tunisia, Guatemala, Kenya, and other countries have proven that the independence of associations and their ability to operate without guardianship – for example, in being able to freely choose their political and non-political allies – is pivotal in achieving their desired effectiveness and impact.⁴⁶ Low independence may raise questions about the legitimacy of the organizations.⁴⁷

42 In August 2023, with the support of the European Union, the Syrian Mediation Foundation announced a call for project proposals to support four startups working to support survivors of torture and victims of enforced disappearance and their families. The amount of the grant is 20,000 euros for each organization to be managed over a period of one year. There are also several grants issued by the International Foundation for the Disappeared, where the amount of funding was up to a quarter of the previously stipulated amount for each association or group wishing to establish.

43 “No one will speak for us”, Impunity Watch, p.25.

44 Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, “Syrian Diaspora Mobilization”, p.7.

45 “No one will speak for us”, Impunity Watch, p. 39.

46 Sprenkels, “Restricted Access”, p.47

47 Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, “Syrian Diaspora

Recommendations

- Syrian organizations should recognize that full ideological and value agreement within a collective action and cooperation, whether in coalition building or otherwise, is not a condition for building trust. Organizations should have the ability to take risks when individual action is not feasible.
- The practice of marginalizing, isolating, or excluding critical voices when internal disagreements arise creates mistrust and further divisions. The way to remedy this is through an open and direct communication mechanism between members in an organized and periodic manner, represented by regular meetings, conferences, electronic platforms, etc. Members should make sure that the spaces for discussion and exchange of ideas have an impact on planning and are not a mere formality.
- Civil organizations should adopt a clear, announced, and agreed-upon mechanism for making decisions, which increases trust between civil organizations and between an organization and the community it works with or represents.
- In working within a coalition, Syrian organizations must recognize the traditional lines of division and alignment, whether regional, religious, ideological, or ethnic. It is important to separate political divisions and positions from the issues and human rights work targeted by the coalition.
- Organizations should work to diversify their tools of advocacy and popular mobilization, without relying on only one tool (the individual story).
- Adopt transparency as a working approach in announcing budgets, contracts, and sources of funding (in a way that does not pose a security risk). This increases trust in the organization when cooperating with another organization, or in its relationship with the community it represents, whereas ambiguity and secrecy increase suspicion and distrust.

Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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