

Understanding ‘Syrian Civil Society’

A Case Study of the Areas Controlled by
Syrian Democratic Forces

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Abstract

This research focusses on the state of local organizations working in the SDFCA. Analyzing the state of local organizations is imperative to the localization of peacebuilding agenda. This paper argues that civic space for local civil society working in the SDFCA is limited and disempowering. There is a triple-edged control mechanism from PYD, Turkish authority and international organizations that impact the state of local organizations working in SDFCA and remote aid management in Turkey. One can observe sustained discrimination in levels of funding, partnerships, and training in the case of civil society working in SDFCA than those working in OCA. The paper also raises questions regarding the aid policies of the Turkish government and international organizations and their discriminatory engagement with local organizations working in SDFCA.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

SDF:	Syrian Democratic Forces A multi-ethnic alliance of predominantly Kurdish fighters but also Arab, Armenian etc.
SDFCA:	Syrian Democratic Forces' Controlled Areas Parts of Northern Area controlled by SDF
NGO:	Non-governmental Organization
INGO:	International Non-Governmental Organization
IO:	International Organization
PYD:	Democratic Union Party (Syria) A Kurdish democratic confederalist political party established in 2003 in Northern Syria. PYD is considered as one of the most important Kurdish opposition parties in Syria.
PKK:	Kurdistan's Worker Party A military organization seeking self-determination for Kurds formed in 1984. Ever since, PKK has been involved in an arm conflict with the Turkish government and its oppression acts towards Kurds.
YPG:	People's Protection Unit A multi-ethnic militia with the majority of Kurds, Arabs, and foreign volunteers formed in 2004. YPG counts as the armed wing of the Kurdish (leftist) Democratic Union Party (PYD.)
YPJ:	Women's Protection Units/ Women's Defense Units The Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is a Kurdish military group that was established in 2012 as the female brigade of the YPG militia. The YPG and YPJ are the armed wing of PYD.
OCA:	Opposition Controlled Areas An umbrella term for the areas controlled by rebel groups in Syria.
ODI:	Overseas Development Institute
KDP-S:	Kurdish Democratic Party (of Syria) Kurdish political party founded in 1957 in Syria
DAA:	Democratic Autonomous Administration A structure of local governance systems comprised of local councils and assemblies across three cantons controlled by the PYD.

TWP:	Turkish Workers Party A Kurdish party established in Turkey in 1961. It was banned twice and eventually merged with the Communist Party of Turkey in 1987.
ISIS:	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
UN:	United Nations
UNICEF:	United Nations Children’s Fund
OCHA:	The United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
MSF:	Medecins Sans Frontiers (Doctors Without Borders)
ICRC:	International Committee of the Red Cross
WASH:	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Note 1: All the pictures used in this research paper is captured by the authors during the fieldwork, except a few and the sources are mentioned in the text.

Note 2: Chapter 5 is entirely based on the fieldwork.

Executive Summary

- The areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have a majority of the Kurdish population in Syria. The politics and history of the area are highly complicated due to the existence of multiple ethnicities in the region and continued oppression towards the Kurds. Moreover, there is very less information available on this area which makes it a compelling case to study.
- SDF area is governed by the Kurdish political party PYD after signing the Non-Aggression Pact in 2011 with the Syrian Regime. The government often portrays itself as a democratic alternative to the authoritarian Syrian Regime and takes pride in fighting ISIS and providing adequate service to people. This is the basis of how the Syrian government aims to gain legitimacy from international actors and the local population. However, in reality, the governance structure is highly authoritative and doesn't allow any alternative action.
- International Organizations also face difficulty working in this region due to the Turkey-Syria border closure. Most international organizations are very hesitant to share any information on their work in this region. The rise of PYD has also led to a more oppressive environment in Turkey recently. International and local organizations face harsh crackdowns for supporting civil society working in SDFCA or remote aid management from Turkey. Hence, the Kurdish issue is currently impacting the overall humanitarian landscape in Turkey.
- There is a vibrant civil society both in SDFCA and in Turkey working for SDFCA. Contrary to the widespread Turkish fear, they are neither radical nor violent but rather organizations that envision a pluralist and democratic post-conflict Syria.
- However, the state of local organizations working for SDFCA is very limiting and disempowering. There is a triple-edged control mechanism from PYD, Turkish authority and international organizations that impact the state of local civil society working in SDFCA and remote aid management in Turkey. In the SDFCA, organizations can only work with PYD, and no independent action is encouraged. In Turkey, organizations working for SDFCA face more significant challenges working with both Turkish NGOs and International organizations. Moreover, International actors are often hesitant to provide any insights



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on these organizations or the SDFCA in general. One can observe a substantial difference in the level of funding, partnerships, and capacity building between the organizations working in SDFCA and the ones working in OCA. Hence, policies of discrimination are indirectly employed.

- To sum up, there is a triple-edged control mechanism from PYD, Turkish authority and international organizations that impact the state of local civil society working in SDFCA and remote aid management in Turkey.
- The report also raises a question regarding the policies of both Turkish government and international organization. The findings of the report point that Turkish policy towards these organizations can be counter-productive as local organizations working in SDFCA oppose PYD rule and are not for it. Hence, supporting these organizations might be potential foreign policy. Moreover, discriminatory attitude on the part of international organizations can be counterproductive to democratization and reconciliation in Syria as more and more people in SDFCA are feeling ‘left out.’ Hence, avenues of humanitarian engagement from Europe or a more coordinated ‘whole of Syria’ humanitarian approach can be a potential solution.

Introduction

The Syrian conflict now in the 7th year since its inception has led to disintegrations of the country's political authority. Since 2011, over 5 million Syrians have fled Syria to take refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan. Turkey alone hosts over 3.2 million registered Syrians. Challenges of peacebuilding involve the urgent need of providing humanitarian aid to millions of people. This paper seeks to understand the role of civil society within the premise of humanitarian aid and peacebuilding in Syria. At the center of this paper is to understand the capacity of local organizations to provide humanitarian aid in Syria and the multitude of factors that impact their capacities. Hence, the paper asks “what is the state of civil society in the areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)?” The state of civil society mainly refers to the capacity of local organizations to be efficient in their role and the civic space available for them to act independently.

This research is significant as it aims to bring empirical evidence to understand the various complexities involved in localization of aid and local peacebuilding in Syria. Moreover, the focus of the

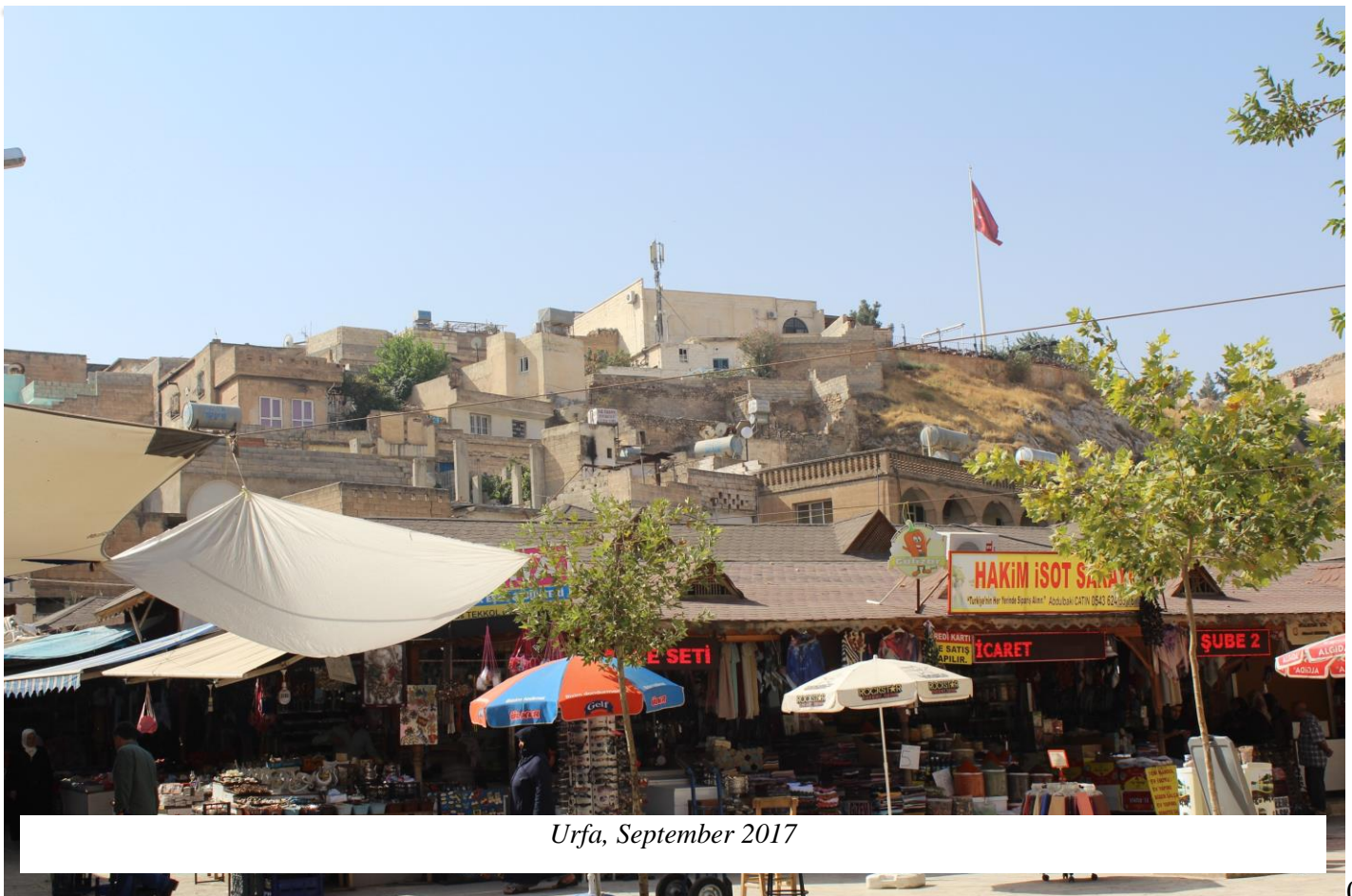
paper is on those areas of Northern Syria that are controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDFCA is a Kurdish majority area of Syria with the existence of multiple ethnic groups. Not only there is very little information available on the region but also the politics of this region is highly complex and sensitive. Hence, this research aims to bring new knowledge about local actors in a highly complex environment. The report also aims to inform policy decisions for more efficient localization of aid in this region.

The main argument of the paper is that ‘there is a triple-edged control mechanism from PYD's authoritative rule, Turkish authority's repressive aid policies, and international organizations discriminatory attitude that impacts the state of local civil society working in SDFCA.’ These Organizations not only face more significant problems working with the Turkish government and international organizations but have lesser capacity too, as compared to those organizations working in (OCA) Opposition Controlled Areas.

Structure of the paper

The first chapter situates the research question within the broader debates of localization of peacebuilding and humanitarian aid to explain why research on Syrian civil society is vital in the first place. The second chapter presents a brief overview of the history of SDFCA, its current political development and its relationship with Turkey. This chapter emphasizes on the historical suppression of Kurds in both countries, the recent rise of PYD, and its consequences. The chapter argues that ‘the complexity, sensitivity, and lack of information are the main rationale behind choosing SDFCA as a case study for this research.’ The third chapter justifies the research design and the methods employed to conduct the research. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of organizations working in SDFCA and OCA is used for data analysis. The fourth chapter explores the dynamics of local organizations within the SDFCA and the various obstacles that they face. This analysis is mainly based on the literature review although some insights from the fieldwork will also be shared. The final section presents the fieldwork data to analyze the state of local organizations working for the SDFCA through remote aid management from Turkey. This section is based on a comparative analysis of organizations working in SDFCA and those working in OCA arguing that civil society in SDFCA have a far lesser capacity and are considerably disempowered.

Chapter 1 – Civil Society and Syria



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As the Syrian conflict now enters the seventh year, almost 13.1 million people require humanitarian assistance, including close to 3 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats¹. Two questions are important in such a context: 1. 'how to end the conflict' and 2. 'how to provide effective humanitarian aid.' To find answers to both of these questions, 'civil society' holds a significant place that needs to be taken into account. In classic political theory, civil society is understood as the distinct space between state and economy which represents the critical voices the people². The common understanding of the relationship between civil society and state is that 'the state exerts power, and civil society resists.' Moreover, the 'new policy agenda' has brought civil society at the heart of international development and donor discourse³. According to the new policy agenda, civil society is a critical element of good governance and democratization⁴.

According to the United Nations, partnering with civil society helps to advance the organization's ideals as well as providing support for its operation. However, the role of civil society is even more crucial in times of conflict or emergency. Since the mid-1990s, one can observe a 'local turn' in Peacebuilding. The local turn of peacebuilding is related to 'peace from below' or 'peace from within'⁵. One can argue that it is a response to the failure of liberal peacebuilding approach and an abhorrence to the 'one size fits all' idea.

Local Peacebuilding mainly exemplifies growing importance of broader local participation, more transparency, local institution-building, and localized capacity- building in peacebuilding efforts. Two themes stand out in international policy actors' responses to demands for a more local focus. While some organizations focus on increasing local capacity building and local dialogues between the government and communities or among different communities, others emphasize on imposing better policies to meet local needs. However, the fundamental point is that most local peacebuilding discourses focus on the importance of engaging with local

¹ OCHA (2017) '*About the Crisis*' Accessed: November 2017

<https://www.unocha.org/country/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis>

² Hyden, G. (1997) '*Civil society, social capital, and development: Dissection of a complex discourse*' *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 32(1), p. 3–30.

³ Edwards, M & Hulme, D. (1996) '*Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations*' *World Development*. 24 (6), p. 961-973

⁴ Fowler, A. (2000) '*Civil Society, NGDOs and Social Development: Changing the Rules of the Game*' *Geneva 2000 Occasional Paper*.X (1), P.3-86

⁵ Paffenholz, T. (2015) '*Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research*' 36 (5), p.857-874

communities either for reconciliation, inter-community dialogue, national dialogue or aid management⁶. Hence, local organizations and members of the civil society are central to the local peacebuilding agenda. Chandler argues that engaging with the local organizations adds to local capacity to deal with occasional ruptures of society. Hence, localization makes society more resilient, he argues⁷.

Within the local peacebuilding turn, localization has become primarily central to humanitarian aid management. Widely referred as ‘Localization of Aid’ focusses on working with local communities for providing humanitarian aid to the affected population⁸. According to OCHA local knowledge, network and access can lead to faster, more effective and sustainable aid provision (OCHA, 2015). Almost 30 INGOs have signed the charter for Change (2015), an eight-point charter which emphasized on increasing funding, partnership and training for local organizations to increase local capacity and effective aid delivery. Here again, the role of civil society in effective aid management becomes important. For instance, CARE International (CARE Philippines, 2017) has built Humanitarian Partnership Platform in Philippines which consists of 19 local organizations that CARE partners to deliver effective humanitarian aid. Moreover, in a conflict situation like Syria, the idea of ‘remote management’ has gained prominence in the recent years. Remote management is a type of humanitarian operation that is based outside the conflict area which is in opposition to the idea of ‘direct management’⁹. In the context of Syria, rising insecurities and safety threat to aid workers has led to international organizations operating remotely from the cross-border base, such as Turkey or Jordan¹⁰. Civil society organizations both within Syria and the bordering countries hence become a valuable source of aid. This lack of direct access has brought to the fore the role of local organizations¹¹, including professional bodies such as medical associations, NGOs, faith-based charities, diaspora networks, entities aligned with armed groups and business people¹².

Analyzing the above arguments one could argue that the role of civil society is very crucial for both post-conflict governance and humanitarian aid management in Syria at the moment. However, it is important to explain what do we mean by ‘the state of civil society’ – which is the center of this research study. State refers to ‘the particular condition that someone or something is in, at a specific time.’ Therefore, questioning the ‘state of civil society’

⁶ Paffenholz, T. (2010) “*Civil Society and Peacebuilding*” p.43–64

⁷ Chandler, D. (2015). ‘*Resilience and the ‘everyday’: beyond the paradox of ‘liberal peace’*’ P.41, pp 27-48

Chandler, D. (2014) ‘*Beyond Neoliberalism*’ p.47-63

⁸ Glennie, J., Rabinowitz, G., (2013) ‘Localizing Aid’

⁹ Howe, K. (2016) ‘Planning from the Future’

¹⁰ Reis, C., Bernath, T., (2016) ‘Becoming an International Humanitarian Aid Worker’

¹¹ Haddad, S., Eva, Svoboda, E. (2017) ‘*What’s the magic word? Humanitarian access and local organizations in Syria*’ HPG Working Paper

¹² Howe, K. (2016) ‘Planning from the Future’

points to issues that are beyond simple existence of civil society. State of civil society refers to the capacity of local organizations to actually perform the task that they intend to perform. It points towards an understanding that mere existence of local organizations is not enough, but rather their capacity is important for effective aid delivery. State of civil society is also closely related to the concept of civic space which is a qualitative conceptualization of the autonomy of civil society and the free space available for them to act¹³.

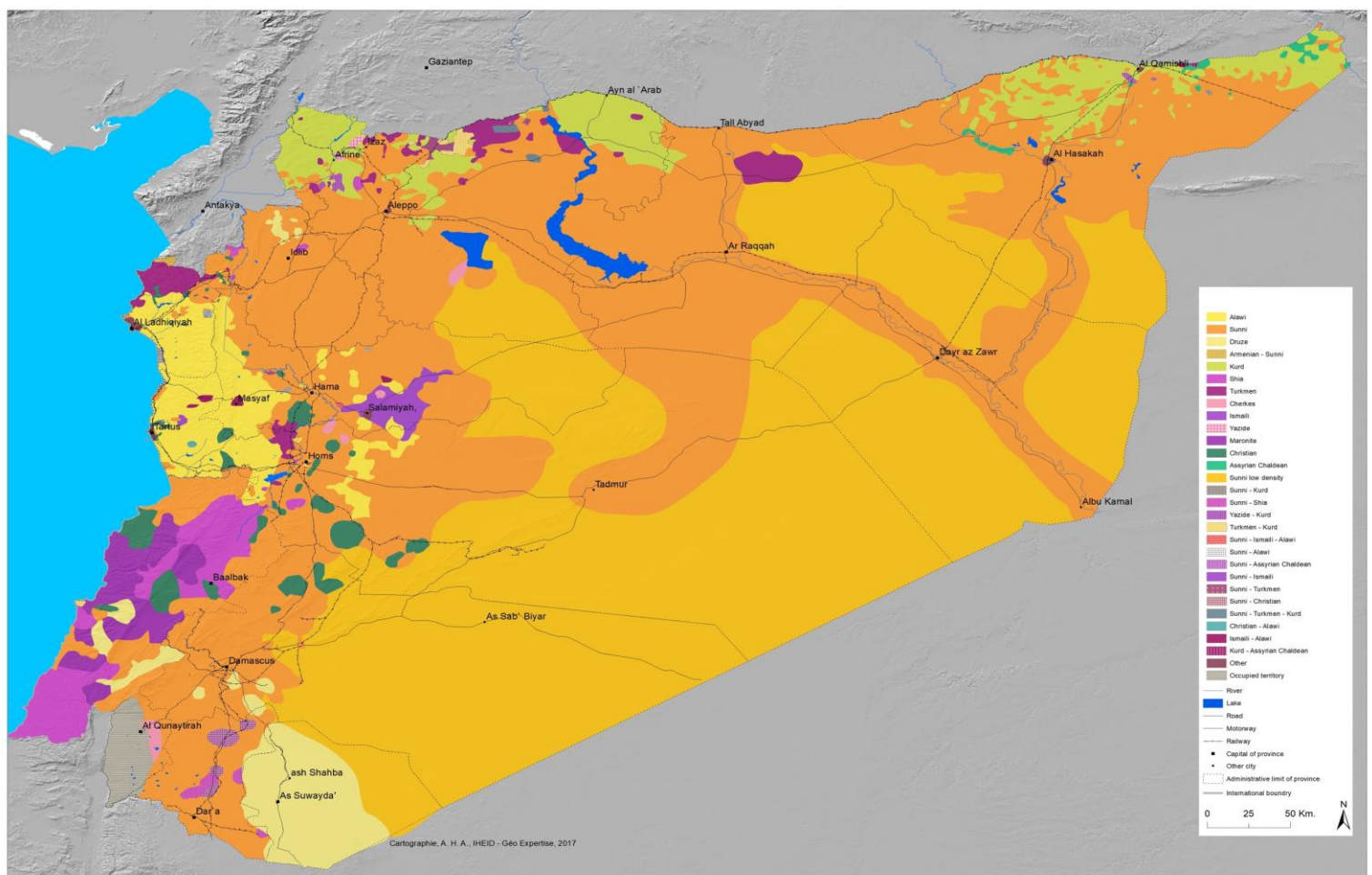
Hence, the question ‘what is the state of civil society in the area controlled by SDF’ can be a focal point for understanding the capacity of the local organization for effective humanitarian aid provision and other peacebuilding efforts in Syria.

Moreover, while there are plenty of research done on the civil society in other parts of Syria, there is a dearth of knowledge when it comes to areas controlled by SDF. For instance, “What’s the magic word? Humanitarian access and local organizations in Syria’s working paper published by ODI focus on the plethora of local actors and how they deliver aid in cross-border aid management (Howe, 2016). However, the focus is mainly on the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo. Similarly, other reports also have the similar bias. It is primarily important to have enough understanding about local actors in all the regions of Syria for any effective aid management or peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, the areas controlled by SDF also presents a kind of complexity which makes it a major research focus. The next chapter will focus on the areas controlled by SDF and why is it an important area to be studied?

Chapter 2 – Areas Controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces

¹³ CIVICUS, ‘Civic Space’ <https://monitor.civicus.org/whatis-civicspace/>

Syrian Democratic Forces is an alliance of Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Assyrian and Armenian militias mainly fighting against ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other Jihadist groups in the Syrian Civil War. SDFCA hence, are parts of Northern Syria with a majority Kurdish population along with many other ethnicities as pointed in the *Figure 2*. The goal of the group is to establish and protect areas of Northern Syria as independent and autonomous Kurdish Governed region. In order to understand the current dynamics of SDFCA and Kurdish political developments in the region, it's important to situate these in the wider Kurdish history in Syria.



The Ethnographic Map of Syria, Geo Expertise 2017 Figure 2– Ethnic Groups in Syria, Geo Expertise (2017)

2.1. History

‘The Syrian Baathist Arab regime not only denied basic cultural rights such as using Kurdish names and language but also economic and political rights.’

For most of their history, Kurdish political formations in Syria have run up against the precepts of Arab nationalism¹⁴. The first Kurdish political party was KDPS established in 1957. However, a few other parties that exist today do not have their genesis in the original KDPS. One is the Future Movement, founded in 2005 under Mishal Tammo and the other is The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party. One of the most important, however, is the Democratic Union Party, better known by its Kurdish-language initials, PYD. The PYD was founded in 2003 by former members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the well-known organization in Turkey whose fighters have waged an anti-government insurgency off and on since the 1980s¹⁵. While the existence of these parties represents the Kurdish Movement in Syria, it has not translated into political victory. Throughout history, Kurdish Movement in Syria has experienced oppression similar to Kurdish suppression in Iraq or Turkey.

For instance, Kurdish people have been historically denied high-level position in government. Perhaps the most severe institutionalized discrimination against Kurds resulted from a 1962 decree, which, by the estimate of Michael Gunter (2014), stripped around 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian nationality and classified them as Ajaneb (foreigners). As the status is inherited, Gunter estimates the total number of Ajaneb amounts to 300,000 at present¹⁶. Moreover, agricultural reforms in 1984 led to the amount of certain agricultural products in Al-Hassakah were minimized and controlled by the regime as a form of controlling Kurdish farmer’s income.

A turning point in the history of Kurdish Movement in Syria however, is the events of 2004¹⁷. In March 2004, Syrian Kurds held large-scale demonstrations in many villages of northern Syria to protest against the oppression inflicted by the Syrian Regime. The scale and intensity of the demonstrations alarmed the Syrian authorities as they responded with violent measures. More than 36 Kurds were killed, and more than 2000 Kurds were detained with widespread reports of torture. However, the March 2004 event is considered as a turning point in the relationship between Syrian Regime and Kurdish Movement. At one hand Kurds became more assertive and

¹⁴ Sinclair, C., Kajjo, S. (2011) ‘*The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria*’ Middle East Research and Information Project, Last Accessed: December 2017 <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111>

¹⁵ Hevian, R. (2013) ‘*The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide*’, Middle East Review of International Affairs
<http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>

¹⁶ Gunter, M. (2014) Out of nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘*Group Denial*’ https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1109webwcover_0.pdf

confident about their political and social aspirations (they were also inspired by the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan). On the other hand, Syrian regime responded by announcing zero tolerance towards Kurdish gathering and political activity. Hence, what is clear is that the history of today's Kurdish political development in SDFCA is not only highly complex but also a constant tussle between the Syrian regime and Kurdish Movement.

2.2. Present day political developments

In between the complexity, constant tussle and a series of resistance and oppression by Syrian Regime, PYD signed a Non-Aggression Pact with the Syrian Regime.

Since the Syrian uprising, PYD was willing to negotiate its position with the Syrian Regime. It not only marked itself out among the anti-regime opposition but also agreed to help the regime to prevent rebellion in return that PYD would assume responsibility to govern Northern Syria. With this understanding, PYD signed a Non-Aggression Pact with the Syrian regime¹⁸. This became clearer in July 2012 when the regime turned the administration of some Kurdish majority area to the PYD¹⁹. Hence, PYD has been highly opportunistic and pragmatic to achieve their political aspirations.

Within the SDFCA, PYD aims to represent an alternative to the authoritative Syrian regime and establish democratic, bottom-up governance based on ideas of self-governance and cooperative economy. The party emphasizes heavily on decentralization and call the respective governance structures as cantons. There are three cantons in the SDFCA- Cizîrê in the east, Afrîn in the west and Kobanê in the middle²⁰.

Each canton has its own judicial, legislative and executive councils and one general coordinating council acting for all the cantons. These cantons also have academies, committees, commissions and cooperatives operating within them. Decision making even within the cantons is based on a federal structure where decisions federate from communes to neighborhood/district councils, to city councils, and then to the cantons. In Cezire canton, for

¹⁸ Burchfield, E., (2017) 'PYD Governance in Northern Syria'

https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1109webwcover_0.pdf

¹⁹ The Observers – France 24, (2012) 'Are Syrian Kurds putting their support behind Bashar Al-Assad?'

<http://observers.france24.com/en/20121105-are-syrian-kurds-putting-support-behind-bashar-al-assad-pyd-pkk-aleppo-clashes-fsa-rebels-turkey>

²⁰ The Observers, France 24, (2012) 'Are Syrian Kurds Putting Their Support Behind Bashar al-Assad?'

instance, Qamishli city has six neighborhoods or districts, each has 18 communes, and each commune is made up of 300 households²¹. What is important is that the constitution called the Social Contract of the Rojava Cantons opens with a sentence that reads: 'We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrîn, Cizîrê and Kobanê, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter²². Notwithstanding this recognition of the multi-ethnic composition of Rojava's population, interethnic relations remain tense. Due to decades of the indifferent policy of Syrian Regime towards the various ethnic groups' hostility and mistrust is a part of everyday life. Moreover, PYD focusses extensively on gender equality. There are parallel all female institutions that run at all levels. Khalaf argues that with the transfer of duty from Syrian Regime to PYD, PYD has been working towards gaining legitimacy both from local and International actors²³. According to her the project of democratic governance as an alternative to the Syrian regime is also a mechanism for legitimate governance. She presents a two-fold structure in which PYD aims to gain legitimacy.

Firstly, PYD has been projecting an image of 'effective security provider' in the region. They not only openly opposed ISIS but also took bold steps to defeat the same²⁴. For instance, the ISIS offensive in Kobane, which commenced in September 2014 ended with the recapture of Kobane and its nearby villages from ISIS by early 2015. This automatically generated an international legitimacy for the rule of PYD in northern Syria as they manage to get support from the United States which has also generated a considerable amount of local support too. Secondly, PYD has been projecting themselves as 'effective service provider' in the region. The Democratic Administrative Assembly is the structure of local governance constituting of local councils and assemblies across three cantons. It provides all essential services including fuel, education, job provision, electricity, water, etc²⁵. Similar to the political project, PYD aims to organize the economy by cooperatives so that people can work through a joint and cooperative effort²⁶. Just as the national state and local autonomy are meant to co-exist

²¹ Systematic Disorder (2017), 'Creating a participatory system of economic democracy in Rojava'

<https://systemicdisorder.wordpress.com/2017/08/30/participatory-democracy-rojava/>

²² Çiviroglu, Mutlu (2014) The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons: The Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in Syria, <http://civiroglu.net/the%25C2%25ADconstitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>

²³ Khalaf, R., (2016) 'Governing Rojava—Layers of Legitimacy in Syria' (Middle East and North Africa Programme, December 2016)

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-12-08-governing-rojava-khalaf.pdf>

²⁴ Üstündag, N. (2016) 'Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava, or How to Unmake the State', (South Atlantic Quarterly 115.1: 197–210)

²⁵ Flach, A.; Ayboga, E. and Knapp, M. (2015) 'Revolution in Rojava,' Hamburg: VSA Verlag

²⁶ Press, S., Harvey, R. (2016) 'Ownership and equality in northern Syria'

[https:// www.thenews.coop/author/rebeccaharvey/](https://www.thenews.coop/author/rebeccaharvey/)

peacefully, so are capitalist and cooperative production: 'Private capital/property is not forbidden, but it is put to work for the communes/cooperatives,' complementing one another²⁷. In fact, DDA has also built bakeries and covered shortages of key items like gas cylinders and food material unavailable in the market, like sugar. Meanwhile, it has also built new educational structures like that of the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy, forming the second public university in the Al- Hassakah region. To conclude, the rise of PYD has brought new political developments in the region. PYD portrays an image of effective security and service provider in the region and a party that promises democratic alternative in Syria.

source: Rudaw (2016). 'Will a Federal Region in Syria's north break up the whole country.'



²⁷ Yilmaz, S (2014) 'Efrîn Economy Minister: Rojava Challenging Norms of Class, Gender and Power', (The Rojava Report, 22 December)

<https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/efrin-economyminister-rojava-challenging-norms-of-class-gender-and-power/>

2.3. Relationship with Turkey

Both historically and in present day Turkey, Turkish government deploys discriminatory and oppressive policies to suppress Kurdish identity.

When in the late Ottoman Empire, a debate ranged between proponents of a centralist state under Turkish domination and defenders of a decentralized and more pluralist polity (Hanioglu 2001, esp. ch. 5, 10); Turkey chose the former. The assimilation into Turkish society caused a significant reduction in number of Kurdish speakers as well as the Turkicization of the names of Kurdish villages and towns²⁸. Hence, the Turkish government has constantly rejected the recognition of Kurdish identity and their cultural and 'national' rights. In fact, in the 1960s around 500 Kurds were detailed and 55 most influential Kurds of western Turkey were exiled²⁹. However, Kurdish Movement in Turkey has been advancing over the years. During the 1960s, the contemporary 'Kurdish national movement' was created in Turkey to challenge the 'Kemalist' regime.

First, in 1965, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Turkey (KDPT) was created and then in 1978, Abdullah Öcalan established The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK's ideology was originally a fusion of revolutionary socialism and Kurdish nationalism, seeking the foundation of an independent, socialist state in the region, which was to be known as Kurdistan.³⁰ PKK has been involved in an armed conflict with the Turkish state. However, after the arrest of Öcalan in 1999 and the withdrawal of PKK's guerillas, the permanent ceasefire was declared and reduced the political tensions in Turkey.³¹ The Turkish government often framed the 'Kurdish issue' as a security threat and impose restrictive policies and laws on Kurds in Turkey. Labels such as radicals, terrorist, separatist and threats are often used in generalized terms for Kurds in Turkey.³²

²⁸ Bilgin, F., Sarihan, A. (2013) '*Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*' Lexington Books

²⁹ Gunter, M. (2014) '*Out of nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war*'

³⁰ Bilgin, F., Sarihan, A. (2013) '*Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question*' Lexington Books

³¹ Balci, A. (2016) '*The PKK-Kurdistan Workers' Party's regional politics*'

³² Barrinha, A. (2011) '*The political importance of labelling: terrorism and Turkey's discourse on the PKK*', Critical Studies on Terrorism. Vol 4.

2.4. Relationship with Turkey: since 2011

“no opportunity would be given to such an attempt as a referendum for Kurdish independence.³³” (Erdogan)

Since the rise of PYD in Northern Syria, Turkish authorities have become even more cautious about Kurdish issues in Turkey. In July 2017, Erdogan the Turkish president, stated in an interview with France24 that ‘in Turkey, there is no ‘Kurdism’ as an ideology; we have Kurds, Turks (etc.) and they all coexist in peace and harmony—we are one, we are all brothers and sisters, and we have eternity.³⁴’ Moreover, Erdogan added that ‘no opportunity would be given to such an attempt as a referendum for Kurdish independence.’³² Hence, the Turkish Government has become even more restrictive about Kurds and Kurdish identity in Turkey as they fear a similar uprising as Syria might start in Turkey too. For instance, after the Syrian crisis, Turkey opened its doors to the refugees including ‘Syrian-Kurds’ although, has not yet been able to satisfy this population. Kurds have more difficulties finding jobs, accessing social services, etc.

Similarly, there is an increasing crackdown in international organization with repressive laws that always suspects groups to be supporting Kurds.³⁵ This has made the landscape of humanitarian aid provision in Syria much more difficult. “Whether fueled by Erdogan’s desire to consolidate power or a fundamental belief that the organizations are assisting groups that oppose the Turkish government, stories from aid workers and diplomats across the region reveal a structured crackdown on NGOs”.³⁶ Similarly, Turkey’s border with Syria some 800 KM long of which more than 500 km of the border is mined on the Turkish side. Moreover, Turkish-Syrian border closure has created difficulty in accessing many regions of Syria including SDFCA.³⁷

³³ France 24/English, (2017) ‘Kurdish Independence Referendum: What impact on the region?’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URUWkk0y3Y0>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mellen, R., Lynch, C. (2017) ‘*Inside Turkey’s NGO Purge*’, Foreign Policy

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/inside-turkeys-ngo-purge/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ OCHA, ‘*Turkey/Syria: Humanitarian Dashboard – Cross Border Response Jan – Dec 2016*’ (Issued on 30 March 2017)

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syr_xbturkey_humanitarian_dashboard_2016_jan_dec_en_final.pdf



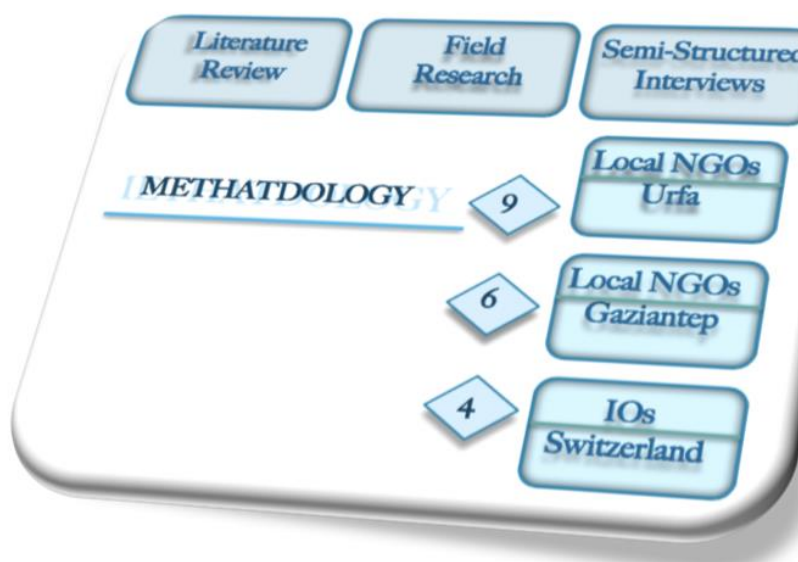
Urfa, September 2017

To conclude, SDFCA has a highly complex history and projects interesting political developments in Kurdish Movements in the past few years. From relentless suppression of Kurdish Movement in Syria to signing a Non-Aggression Pact with Syrian Regime and now promising effective security and service provision through radical democracy- the politics of the region presents a major turning point for Kurdish Movement. However, the present day SDFCA also remains highly complex. While at one side PYD promises democratic governance, the region remains ethnically complex with issues of mistrust among groups. Alongside, the Turkish government measures towards Kurdish suppression has only become harsher since the rise of PYD. This has impacted the landscape of humanitarian aid to Syrians immensely. Moreover, what is most important is that ‘there is a lack of information on this region due to the sensitivity of the topic (in present time) and relentless suppression of research and knowledge production historically’. However, it is this sensitivity, complexity, recent developments and lack of information that makes SDF an interesting point of research. The endeavor of understanding the role of civil society in this region hence not only stems from the significance of civil society in humanitarian aid and peacebuilding but also from the very complexity that the region presents. Hence, this research aims to understand the place and state of local grassroots organizations in a region that is highly controversial and complex.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods to understand the state of civil society in the areas controlled by SDF. Underpinned by a preliminary literature review of secondary sources, the majority of the data accumulated by this research comes from a range of semi structured interviews. Interviews were held with representatives of organizations working for SDFCA and OCA based in Gaziantep and Urfa in Turkey. Post-field work three interviews were interviewed in Switzerland too. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of 8 days in September 2017. The overall data is generated from 16 interviews which form the primary basis for this study.

Throughout the study, a lot of emphasis was placed on collecting primary data through field work. This is essentially because there is a lack of information about local organizations working in SDFCA. Consequently, the semi-structured interviews not only provided a greater room for expressing concerns but also helped in building considerable level of trust for organizations to express themselves openly.³⁸



Conducting fieldwork and face-to-face communication with local actors also helped in making observations regarding emotions, sentiments and hesitation on certain issues along with the atmosphere in which organizations generally operate. For instance, visiting offices of organizations and meeting their employees or members one could make observations regarding the level of structure and sophistication within the organization. Similarly, one could observe discomfort among interviewees while answering certain questions which revealed a lot about the sensitivity of issues as well.

Moreover, one of the important methodological questions was “how to measure/analyze the state of civil society.” With that regards too, the semi-structured interview was a thoughtful choice as it gives the space to establish an

³⁸ OPDENAKKER, R. (2006) ‘Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research’, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/175>

iterative process of research. The first few interviews focused on very open-ended questions regarding operational challenges in Turkey, obstacles to international partnership and how does politics impact aid work. However, one could observe specific patterns such as most organizations expressed concerns regarding partnership & funding with international organizations. Hence, following interviews focused on three kinds of questions. The first set of questions included initial questions regarding the organization. These questions focused on ongoing projects, the structure of organizations, geographical reach, etc. The second set of questions focused on local dynamics of operation in Turkey. The second set of questions focused on local dynamics of operation in Turkey. Hence, questions regarding ‘problems faced by Turkish Authorities,’ ‘whether or not they had local partners’ and ‘the problems related to accesses were vital. The third set of questions focused on international dynamics. Questions regarding available funding, sources of funding and international praetorships were key here. The aim was to understand all aspects of operational challenges (both local and international) that local organizations in Turkey have to face on a daily basis.

Furthermore, data analysis was also done within these subs categories 1. landscape 2. Local Dynamics and 3. International Dynamics. Within each sub-category, a comparative analysis was done between the organizations working for SDFCA and those working in OCA. With few exceptions, the majority of the organizations agreed to have interviews recorded, and the length of the interviews varied from 20–30 to an hour and a half.

However, there were some methodological challenges faced during the research. Firstly, the language barrier was a significant obstacle to our fieldwork. An interpreter was employed to communicate between Arabic and English. However, the use of Arabic was methodologically challenging as some information was lost in the process of interpretation. Moreover, establishing a friendly rapport with the interviewee was considerably challenging due to the language barrier as the researchers were often perceived as ‘outsiders.’ Secondly, the short duration of the fieldwork due to budget constraint was another significant challenge. A more extended field work could allow ethnographic research or a more extensive sample of the interviews. Lastly, due to the inaccessibility of the SDFCA, field work was only limited to Turkey.

Chapter 4 – State of local organizations in SDFCA

“We are treated as if we are all members of ISIS, until proven otherwise”

This chapter looks at the state of civil society within the SDFCA. In particular, it tries to answer the following questions:

- 1. Can civil society work freely in the region?**
- 2. What kind of support do they receive from international organizations?**

As analyzed in the last chapter, there is no doubt about the landscape of security and service provision by PYD which is also appreciated by some international and local actors. However, there is also a high level of dissatisfaction among many sections of the local population about the same. With this same sentiment, Rana Khalaf argues that PYD's work in the area is nothing more than smoke and mirrors which presents a facade of democratic governance. Her assessment comes from the numerous interviews that she conducted with the local organizations and activist networks in the region. Some of the common sentiments among the local activists and NGO workers are as follows: 'We are treated as if we are all members of ISIS until proven otherwise,' or When comparing the PYD with ISIS, one Arab activist described them as 'two evils, the better of which is bitter'.³⁹ The question is why are there such sentiments among the local population and what does it mean for a so-called independent and robust civil society?

Firstly, local organizations have to work through PYD affiliations⁴⁰. One NGO working for the SDFCA said “can you believe political parties have their own NGOs in the region⁴¹? The political party is making NGOs for everything so that there is no critical voice in the region⁴². The interviewee further asserted that PYD is a government of control and that local organizations have to often work with government or else their license is seized. In fact, in August 2017 PYD banned four NGOs in the region claiming that they are ‘unnecessary’⁴³.”

³⁹ Khalaf, R., (2016) ‘*Governing Rojava—Layers of Legitimacy in Syria*’ (Middle East and North Africa Programme, December 2016)

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-12-08-governing-rojava-khalaf.pdf>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴² Authors interview with NGO working for SDFCA in Urfa, Turkey in September 2017

⁴³ Sherwani, L. H. (2017) ‘PYD Bans Four Civil Society Organizations in Rojava’ (BASnews August 8, 2017) <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/middle-east/374388>

PYD's Social Affairs and Labor Board said, "the decision to ban and not renew the license of these organizations is in public interest."⁴⁴ Rana Khalaf argues that the idea here is to 'monopolize service' to gain legitimacy for being the only actor to provide public goods⁴⁵. Moreover, all the positions in the government are filled with PYD affiliates including local governance which is apparently supposed to represent bottom-up democracy. One political activist said, "PYD conducts elections where they force local organizations to either campaign for them or seize their existence."⁴⁶ Similarly, PYD has also taken control of the central hospital (Al- Mashfa al Watani) and another privately-owned hospital (Al-Mashfa). Apparently, local organizations to either pay very high tax or face harsh crackdown in the region.

One activist stated, "humanitarian work in the region is politicized beyond limits and human rights and civilian organizations are often chased by the government." ⁴⁷

Secondly, there is no accountability, and civil society does not have enough power or space to demand the same. For instance, governance institutions generate a significant wealth from oil and agriculture. The Syria Report estimates the area generates around USD 10 million a month from its export of crude oil, thanks to a recently built 8.9km pipeline extending from Rumeilan – north Syria's largest oil field – to northern Iraq, from where the oil is exported to Turkey. However, it remains unclear who is exporting the oil, to whom and how much net income the PYD makes out of it.⁴⁸

Thirdly, local organizations and activist networks are scared to raise voices against injustice or question PYD. Protests and critical voices are often met with harsh resistance as it happened in the case of Amude in June 2013.⁴⁹ On 27 June 2013 YPG forces used excessive force against anti-PYD demonstrations killing three men and detaining more than 50. According to a Human Rights Watch report "The Kurdish-run areas of Syria are quieter

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Khalaf, R., (2016) 'Governing Rojava—Layers of Legitimacy in Syria' (Middle East and North Africa Programme, December 2016)

⁴⁶ Authors interview with NGO working for SDFCA in Urfa, September 2017

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The Syria Report (2015) '*New estimate for Kurdish revenues from oil exports*', (September 28, 2015) <http://www.syria-report.com/news/oil-gas-%20mining/new-estimate-kurdish-revenues-oil-exports>

⁴⁹ Humans Rights Watch, (2014) '*Under Kurdish Rule—Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*'

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>

than war-torn parts of the country, but serious abuses are still taking place.”⁵⁰ Apart from this, local population also face injustice in other areas of governance. For instance, DAA provides most public services for a fee and raise the tax from sources such as construction permits, land, business revenue, etc. which many feels are too high.

Moreover, at times people have to pay ‘double tax’ to both PYD and Syrian Regime because of parallel institutions working in the same space. For instance, in Qamishli, both PYD and regime work in the same building, each with their own budget. Across many services, PYD and regime work through mutual partnership. However, the problem is that such partnerships do not often work very smoothly and locals are sometimes forced to pay taxes to both parties. In Al-Hassakah, the regime still pays the salaries of the majority of state employees. However, there are some exceptions, such as in the case of school staff whose salaries the regime stopped paying after the PYD decided to change the main teaching language for Kurdish students to Kurdish.⁵¹ However, the fear of violent crackdown over protests makes local organizations highly vulnerable to raise their voice.

One International organization said, “we don’t work in that area and have no information about the region at all”

On the fronts of International Humanitarian engagement in the region, there is very less information about the organizations working on the ground. Anderson & Egret (2016) describe as they walk around Kobane that there were no international organizations in the city.⁵² While there were a few foreign aid workers, there was absolutely no sign of any construction work as the city lay in complete rubble. They argue that the closure of Turkish and Iraqi border is the main cause for this suicidal environment. One NGO worker said, “since Turkey has closed border we can’t even send children’s book in the SDFCA”.⁵³ On one hand, Turkey closed humanitarian corridor as a form of oppression and control to the Kurdish uprising in Turkey. On the other hand, Barzani who is the President of the Iraqi Kurdish region finds PYD governance in Syria in conflict with Kurdish values as they

⁵⁰ Humans Rights Watch, (June 18, 2014) ‘*Syria: Abuses in Kurdish-run Enclaves ... Arbitrary Arrests, Unfair Trials; Use of Child Soldiers*’

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/18/syria-abuses-kurdish-run-enclaves>

⁵¹ Khalaf, R., (2016) ‘*Governing Rojava—Layers of Legitimacy in Syria*’ (Middle East and North Africa Programme, December 2016)

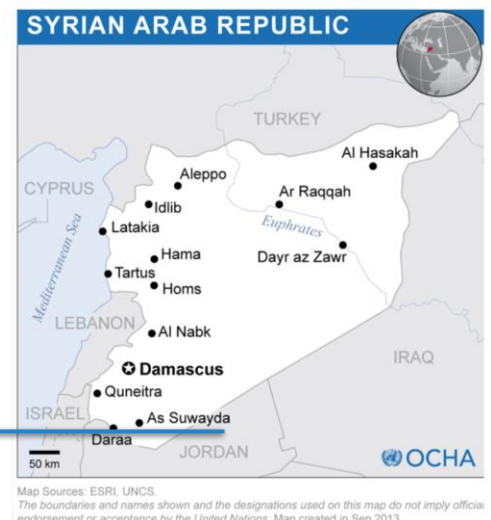
⁵² Anderson, T., Egret, E. (2016) ‘*Rebuilding Kobane*’, (Co-operative Economy in Rojava, March 23, 2016)
<https://cooperativeeconomy.info/rebuilding-kobane/>

⁵³ Authors interview with NGO working for SDFCA in Gaziantep, September 2017

alongside the Syrian regime. What is surprising is that out of all the major INGOs Doctors without borders is the only organization which is working on ground in that region. However, one doesn't know the ways in which MSF is operating. Just like most other International Organizations, MSF showed extreme reluctance to talk on this issue and said, "this is a very sensitive issue". However, as mentioned on their website "MSF works alongside the Kobane Health Administration since early March 2015 to re-establish basic health facilities, provide outpatient health services, re-establish vaccination services, and create psychosocial support programs. Water purification tablets and jerry cans were also distributed to approximately 4,000 households in cooperation with the local community."⁵⁴

Another employee of an international organization simply rejected to say anything beyond "we don't work in that area and have no information about the region at all". OCHA which is the UN coordinating body for humanitarian aid doesn't even work in the all cantons SDFCA. It only works in Al-Hassakah. However, out of the 14 governorates in Syria where OCHA currently works, operational Presence of Syrian Civil Society Organizations was lowest in Al-Hassakah across all sectors.⁵⁵ Moreover, the sector which has the most number of operational presence of Syrian organizations is human rights while other core sectors such as WASH & shelter remains ignored. On the human rights issue, international organizations such as Geneva call and ICRC have been working to maintain prison standards in the region.⁵⁶

Summarizing the section, one can conclude:



1. Within the SDFCA, civil society actors cannot act independently and autonomously. This is because while PYD promises effective security & service to the people, the aim is to monopolize power. Hence,

⁵⁴ Medecins Sans Frontiers, (September 29, 2015) 'Syria: Kobane Health Administration Launches a Measles Vaccination Campaign with Support of MSF'

<http://www.msf.org/en/article/syria-kobane-health-administration-launches-measles-vaccination-campaign-support-msf>

⁵⁵ OCHA (2017), 'Turkey/Syria: Operational Presence of Syrian Civil Society Organization' (October 2017)

<https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/turkeysyria-operational-presence-syrian-civil-society-organizations-1>

⁵⁶ Swissinfo, (September 5, 2011) 'Red Cross visits Syrian prisoners'

<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/red-cross-visits-syrian-prisoners/31063030>

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-redcross-exclusi/exclusive-situation-in-syria-constitutes-international-armed-conflict-red-cross-idUKKBN17924V>

affiliation to PYD is not only important for political position but also for social work. Organizations need to register through PYD and work with the party in order to continue their work. Those organizations or people who stand against the government or represent the critical voice are often shut down violently. Hence, the civic space for organizations to act is very limited and disempowering in the region.

2. There is very little information available regarding the work/ role of International Organizations in the region as most of them express reluctance in sharing information due to the sensitivity of the region. However, based on the limited information not many major international organizations are working in the area and MSF is the only INGO which is based on the ground.

Gaziantep, September 2017

Chapter 5 – State of local organizations working for SDFCA in Turkey



Since the beginning of Syrian conflict many Syrians from different ethnicities and region within Syria have come together to provide humanitarian aid from

Turkey⁵⁷. These organizations are not only supporting refugees based in Turkey but are also

⁵⁷Nouh, Y., (September 15, 2015) 'Organizations Helping Syrian Refugees that You Might Not Have Heard Of' (Updated December 15, 2016, HuffPost)

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/yasmin-nouh/syrian-refugee-relief-organizations_b_8142492.html

engaged in remote aid management to Syria too⁵⁸. Many of these organizations work in partnership with International Organizations or other local organizations. These organizations are working in different parts of Syria including the areas controlled by SDFCA.

This section tries to understand the state of those

5.1. Landscape

local organizations that are working for the SDFCA. The question then becomes how efficient and capable are these local organizations to perform the task they aim to perform? Do they have the required financial, management and training support and do they enough freedom to act in support of providing humanitarian aid?

"We are doing a unique experiment of combining political and civilian work as aim to establish a peaceful and democratic post-conflict Syria".

Theme	SDFCA- Organizations	OCA- Organizations
Vision & Agenda	Multi-Dimensional	Multi-dimensional
Geographical Reach	SDFCA & OCA	Only SDFCA
Structural	Informal	Formal

The landscape of organizations working in SDFCA in the two cities is very diverse in their vision, scope of work, structure as well as their geographical reach.

⁵⁸ Broomfield, M., (December 19, 2016) '*Aleppo evacuation: Here are 16 Syrian aid organizations that need your help*' (INDEPENDENT)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/aleppo-evacuation-syria-war-crisis-help-aid-organisations-donations-red-cross-white-helmets-pro-a7484181.html>

Moreover, most organizations working for SDFCA have a *wider geographical reach*. Their area of work was spread out from Kobane to Afrin while also operating in some OCA. Member of an organization from Al- Hasakah said “the aim of the organization is to reach out to all Syrians in need, without any discrimination based on ethnicity or region.” This was a further testimony of their vision for pluralist Syria. However, many of the organizations working in OCA didn’t operate in SDFCA and were not willing to talk about the region due to political sensitivity. In terms of the structure of the

organization, most organizations working in SDFCA were informally and loosely structured. Most organizations were either voluntary association, neighborhood associations or secret gatherings. In one of the meetings, having asked about the organization’s office location; the interviewee said, “this is our office”; pointing to the small room we were sitting in. This experience was in stark contrast with organizations working in OCA who were highly organized with offices in multiple locations along with well managed finance, Human resource and Operations department.

5.2. Local Dynamics

“they closed the organization blaming that the organization worked with terrorist group i.e. Kurds”.

Theme	SDFCA- Organizations	OCA- Organizations
Problems with Turkish Government	Mostly Yes	Mostly No
Local Partners	Mostly No	Mostly yes
Coordination Strategy	Informal & Unstructured	Formal & Structured
Problem of Access	Mostly yes	Always No

Most organizations working for SDFCA expressed concerns regarding working in Turkey due to *problems with Turkish Authorities* and Turkish discontent towards Kurds. Most organizations shared concerns regarding “funding”. A lot of funding comes through the National government. However, these organizations often do not get funding as they do not have partnership with Turkish

government. Many organizations expressed concerns regarding “trust” as they are often assumed to be “radical” within the Turkish context. This was most apparent when a Turkish NGO with majority Kurdish employee was banned recently. “they closed the organization blaming that the organization worked with terrorist group i.e. Kurds”.

“Parents of Kurdish students are often worried about Turkish-Kurdish student integration and the potential of violence in school”

On a more extreme note, some organizations showed concern regarding “security” issues. According to them, the Turkish humanitarian landscape is very restrictive towards Kurds due to which they often have to hold meetings in secret. Other concerns regarding employment and education also came up. One of the school teachers said, “parents of Kurdish students are often worried about Turkish-Kurdish student integration and the potential of violence in school”. Similarly, “the monthly salary for Syrian teachers is less than half the salary of Turkish teachers”. However, the members of the organizations were scared to express these concerns openly. Moreover, most organizations felt there is a lack of platform to express their concerns in Turkey. For instance, a lawyer who is also a member of a voluntary organization from Kobane mentioned “there are no employment opportunities for Syrian lawyers in Turkey and the lawyer community is in crisis.”

Only one organization working for SDFCA didn’t say anything on this issue. This NGO was one of the most well organized and structured organizations out of all others. When asked about their experience with Turkish Government or working in Turkey the interviewee simply nodded and said, “we have no problem”. This experience was once again substantially different from organizations working in OCA. None of these organizations had any problem

with Turkish authorities. When asked questions on this issue they always nodded and said, “we don’t face any such issues”.

In terms of *coordination strategy*, most organizations working for SDFCA didn’t have a formal structure for coordination. Similar to their organizational structure that was loose and informal, their coordination was also based on informal channels. Most organizations had a Facebook page but that was only in Arabic and not English. However, the organizations working in OCA had a much more advanced or organized coordination strategy. For instance, after finishing one interview when requested for email address, the interviewee said, “you can go on our website and contact the media & information department for any further queries”. Such reply testified the level of sophistication and organization among the organizations working in OCA as opposed to those in SDFCA.

Observations about **local partnerships** also followed similar trend. While all organizations working in SDFCA expressed interest in partnering with local organizations none of them had local partners. Here again, they stressed on the problem of “funding”. Due to lack of funding to carry on any project, they were unable to make sustainable partnership with other local organizations. Quite the

contrary, organizations working in OCA had multiple local partners. One interviewee in Gaziantep when asked about local partners responded with pride and said, “we have more than 30 local partners”.

Apart from the operational challenges, many organizations working in SDFCA expressed concern regarding **“problem of access”**. This problem of access is both about ‘geographical’ and ‘political’ access. One organization based in Urfa mentioned “one of the reasons why carrying out humanitarian work is difficult in the region is because of PYD’s authoritative rule”. Member from another organization said, “since Turkey has closed its border even sending a box of medicine has become difficult”. A lawyer and political activist lamented “we can no more carry our activity in the region”. The problem of access is both political and geographical because since Turkey has closed the humanitarian corridor, one cannot access the Kurdish region directly. Finding local ties to connect

to the region means either having connection with the political parties based in the region or major business ties. Small association and organizations based in Turkey don’t have such capacity mostly. Hence, accessing the region becomes problematic.

Only one organization which is also highly organized and structured (exception) expressed no concern about problem of access. In fact, one of the board members later spoke with pride “We have been part of the revolution and reaching any region in Syria is not a problem”.

Quite the contrary, none of the NGOs who worked in the OCA expressed “problem regarding access”. One NGO that works in water rehabilitation program in OCA said, “we work through local councils” and sounded very confident about accessing the region. However, the interviewee said, “we would also like to work on the norther bank of river but we can’t access that region due to PYD’s rule”. Hence, the problem of access is particularly intense in SDFCA.

“Since Turkey has closed its border even sending a box of medicine has become difficult”

International Dynamics

Theme	SDFCA- Organizations	OCA- Organizations
Funding	Mostly No	Always Yes
Partnership	Mostly No	Always Yes
Training & Capacity Building	Mostly No	Always Yes

Most organizations working for SDFCA expressed discontent towards International Organizations for being discriminatory, ignorant and insensitive.

The biggest concern for all organizations was 'lack of funding'. Majority of these organizations didn't have partnership with International Organizations. They were either self-funded or received funding from private network such as Kurdish businessmen. However, they all were facing a 'funding crisis'. One organization from Al-Hasakah said "this organization if supported properly can save lives". Another member of a Kobane based organization said, "United Nations rather than helping local organizations has contributed to more bloodshed". On similar note, an Afrin based organization working in the field of water rehabilitation said, "the water is totally contaminated in the region but we cannot do anything due to no funds". They further asserted "funding for development & water project is even more difficult because all international organizations want to fund emergency programs and not long-term development projects".

Similar concerns were shown regarding training and knowledge transfer. All organizations were deeply interested to receive training from international organizations. A member of an organization working in Al-Hasakah said "International organization can help us in directing the path towards Syrian revolution". Similar statements were made by people working for free media, "independent press needs both funding and capacity building".

What was astonishing was that many organizations showed general discontent towards the attitude of international organizations for being partial and highly selective. Member of an organization from Al-Hasakah who worked for fair media said, "international organizations only portray what they want to portray such as terrorism and radicalization in Syria". According to him what is missing is that "they don't represent the views of local organizations". The interviewee further asserted, "our organization has records of human rights violations within Hasakah region". However, "these

are of no use”, he said.

Similar to the trends in organizational landscape and local dynamics, the international dynamics were also drastically different among organizations working in OCA. While one organization had “more than 100 partners” and an annual funding of “600 million dollars”; others received regular training from

organizations such as UNICEF. One organization based in Gaziantep mentioned, “we are working with OCHA in three core sectors and we have 35 different projects at present”. Hence, the international dynamics is particularly challenging in the case of organizations working for SDFCA than those in OCA.

Gaziantep, Turkey – September 2017



5.4. Analysis

Having discussed the findings of the field work, a threefold argument can be made about the state of local organizations working for SDFCA from Turkey.

Firstly, organizations working for SDFCA have far more problems working in Turkey and with International organizations.

Within Turkey, these organizations not only face problems in working openly but also remain fearful to express their concerns. Similarly, most of these organizations do not have any partnership with International Organizations. In fact, most of them expressed discontent towards IOs. This experience was in complete contrast with other organizations working in OCA who did not express any problem working in Turkey. Consequently, they had not only numerous partnerships with International organizations but also shared positive views towards them. Hence, the civic space in Turkey is quite limited for organizations working for SDFCA.

Secondly, organizations working for SDFCA have far lesser capacity than those organizations working in OCA.

Most of them had a loosely structured organization with weak coordination strategy. Quite the contrary, the organizations working in OCA were usually very well structured with formal coordination strategy. This is primarily because most organizations working in SDFCA did not receive funding from either Turkish government or International organizations. Whereas, those organizations working for OCA received large funds from the international community along with regular training and well-established monitoring mechanisms. Hence, organizations working for SDFCA have lesser capacity to work efficiently.

One can observe a sustained difference or we may call ‘discrimination’ between the state (capacity) of local organizations working for SDFCA than those working for OCA.

The usual problems of localization of aid only become more intense in the case of these organizations. Such sustained difference exists because of a multitude of factors in which the ‘Turkish repression on Kurdish issues’ and ‘discriminatory attitude of International organizations’ towards local organizations working in SDFCA are critical. At one hand, local dynamics of humanitarian aid operation has become extremely difficult in Turkey. While local organizations working for SDFCA face funding challenges among many others, there is a harsh crackdown on International Organizations too particularly if they work for Kurdish people. This is because more

than a dozen INGOs have been suspended from Turkey in the past years and many of those supporting Kurdish movement. In such a limiting environment, most international organizations are concerned about their reputation and mandate as they chose to not even talk about this issue. The discrimination towards local organizations

working for SDFCA also testifies the complexity and sensitivity that surrounds the politics of SDFCA. The history of Kurdish oppression and the present-day sensitivity of the issue plays a major role in shaping humanitarian operations in Turkey. In such a complex environment, the landscape of humanitarian aid then becomes highly politicized too. However, these reasons cannot justify the discriminatory attitude of the international community towards local organizations working for SDFCA.

Urfa, September 2017



Conclusion & Discussion

Having presented findings from the fieldwork, one thing is certain- ‘There is no dearth of active grass root local organizations in SDFCA in Syria.’

Men and women, old or young have not only come together in different forms to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians but also envision a peaceful future for post-conflict Syria. This brings a new understanding regarding civil society in the region. Local organizations working in SDFCA are not radical or separatist but rather envision democratic and pluralist post-conflict Syria. This is in contrast with popular Turkish fear that Kurdish people and Kurdish movement are inevitably separatist, violent or radical. In fact, all local organization working for SDFCA also criticized the PYD led governance. This raises questions regarding whether or not Turkish authorities should continue their repressive policies towards local organizations working in SDFCA from Turkey or International organizations who support these local organizations. One argument could be that not supporting these grassroots organizations can prove to be counter-productive for Turkish authorities since these local organizations do not support PYD and separatism but rather oppose PYD and aim for a democratic and pluralist Syria. Hence, supporting local organizations working in SDFCA and from Turkey can be a potential Turkish foreign policy strategy too.

Moreover, the civil society organizations working in SDFCA is very diverse. They range from neighborhood associations, secret gatherings to organized NGOs. However, the civic space for local organizations is limited both within the SDF controlled areas and in remote aid management in Turkey. In the SDFCA, PYD has been trying to legitimize their rule. One of their agendas, in that regard, is to provide efficient service to the people. With that in mind, PYD aims to monopolize power and hence, doesn't allow independent and autonomous actions by local actors. Local organizations can only exist and work until when they are a part of the government mechanism. In such an environment, the critical and independent voice is harshly suppressed. Hence, the civic space within SDFCA is very limited due to the authoritarian character of PYD's governance. Moreover, there is very little information about the work of international organizations in that area. Due to border closure, there is a 'problem of access'. It has become increasingly difficult for international organizations to work in this area. None of the international organizations were willing to share information due to the sensitivity of the issue and the complexity of the region. However, a few organizations mentioned that they now coordinate aid from Europe and especially Germany. The question then becomes whether there are opportunities for international organizations to engage with the SDFCA from Europe?

In Turkey too, the civic space for organizations working for SDFCA controlled areas is quite limited and disempowering. Most of the local organizations expressed concerns regarding the Turkish humanitarian landscape for not being inclusive. A few organizations also expressed a sense of fear amidst the local Kurdish community. What was striking was the sustained difference between the landscape, local dynamics and

international dynamics of the organizations working for SDFCA and those working in OCA. Organizations working in SDFCA not only faced more significant challenges working with the Turkish government and international organizations but also had far less capacity than most organizations working for OCA. Hence, one can observe a very clear distinction or ‘discrimination’ between the state (capacity) of organizations working for SDF controlled areas and the ones working in other parts of Syria.

The current situation is likely counterproductive concerning democratization and reconciliation in Syria. There is a feeling of ‘being left out’ among the local organizations working in SDFCA. Moreover, lack of supporting local organizations operating in SDFCA is legitimizing an authoritarian government. While there is no ready-made solution as to how to support the local organizations, a coordinated action to support all Syrian civil society organizations is the ‘need of the hour.’ Along the same lines, a coordinated effort of information gathering is also necessary since very less information exists on this issue. Lastly, one can observe a triple-edged control mechanism from PYD, Turkish Government and international organizations that impact the state of local organizations working in SDFCA and remote aid management in Turkey, While PYD restricts work outside its premise; Turkish authority has created a stifling environment for organizations engaged in remote aid management for SDFCA. Furthermore, international organizations do not see organizations working in SDFCA as potential local partners. Hence, the many challenges of localization of aid become even more intense in the case of organizations working for SDFCA and from Turkey in remote aid management. While it is simplistic to say that local organizations can articulate their position on PYD governance, sustained effort to understand their position should be the priority.

Annex: Information Tables – Civil Society in SDFCA

Non-Kurdish Areas in Syria	Atta	✓	✗	✓	✓
	<u>Jassor Al-Amal Org</u> (Hope Bridge)	✓	✗	✓	✓
	International Middle East Peace Research Center (was shut down by the Turkish government in 2016)	✓	✗	✓	✓
	Oppressed Supporters Association	✓	✗	✓	✓
	Syrian Engineers for Construction and Development	✗	✗	✓	✓
	Horizon NGO (recently established)	✗	✗	✓	✓
Organization		Multi-dimensional	Operating in Kurdish Areas in Syria	Operating in Non-Kurdish Areas in Syria	Standard Structure
Kurdish Majority Areas	Bihar Relief Org	✗	✗	✓	✓
	Independent Syrian Kurds Association	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Kobane Lawyers Association	✓	✓	✓	✗
	<u>Al-Hasakah National Rescue Movement</u>	✓	✓	✓	✓
	National Salvation Movement in Al- <u>Hasakah</u>	✓	✓	✓	✗
	<u>Alkhavar Intellectual Institution</u>	✗	✗	✓	✗

Non-Kurdish Areas	Atta	—	✓	✓
	Jassor Al-Amal Org (Hope Bridge)	Funding, needs assistance for the refugee camps, Complexity in working with IOs	×	✓
	International Middle East Peace Research Center	Political issues with the Turkish government	✓	✓
	Oppressed Supporters Association	Funding, failed approaching the EU Council, Complexity in working with IOs (e.g. Global Fund)	✓	✓
	Syrian Engineers for Construction and Development	Funding, Difficulties in providing documentation to receive fund	✓	✓
	Horizon NGO	Looking for international partnerships and assistance in capacity building	×	×

Organization		Multi-dimensional	Formal	Local
Kurdish Majority Areas	Bihar Relief Org	Difficulty in working with IOs, Complexity	✓	✓
	Independent Syrian Kurds Association	Funding, Sectarian & tribal issues among Kurds, Difficulty in working with IOs regarding the restrictions of the Turkish government	×	×
	Kobane Lawyers Association	Funding, Lack of support from Media, Lack of trust to the Turkish government, Advocacy issues	×	×
		Funding, Looking for international partnerships		
	Al-Hasakah National Rescue Movement	Funding, Lack of support from IOs, Complexity in working in Turkey	×	×
	National Salvation Movement in Al-Hasakah	Funding, Looking for international partnerships-lack of connection	×	✓
	Alkhavar Intellectual Institution		×	×

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