



## **POLICY BRIEF**

# **NAVIGATING THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON SYRIA'S ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND TRIBAL COMMUNITIES (2011-2024): TOWARDS PEACE FORMATION**

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## NAVIGATING THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON SYRIA'S ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND TRIBAL COMMUNITIES (2011-2024): TOWARDS PEACE FORMATION

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## Introduction

Ethnic, religious and tribal identities in Syria are non-homogeneous, complex, overlapping and dynamic. Therefore, studying the 2011 conflict's impacts on Syrian communities requires a historical, relational, contextual and intersectional approach. This policy brief stems from a larger report that follows such an approach to better understand the changing needs and experiences of 'community' membership in contemporary Syria, including its varied relations with the government of Syria (GoS), non-state governance and military actors, as well as with other communities. This knowledge informs policy toward localised solutions for peace formation which refers to *the mobilisation of indigenous local and grassroots movements in cultural, social, religious, customary and local governance settings to resolve conflict and foster peace*.<sup>1</sup> Considering the country's frozen conflict, the report forwards as the most viable policy option the hybridisation of these solutions with international pressure on conflict parties to foster peace. Five critical case studies survey challenges and opportunities towards peace formation, informing case-specific and more generalisable recommendations in this quest.

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1. See Richmond, O. and Pogodda, S. (2016). *Introduction: The Contradictions of Peace, International Architecture, the State, and Local Agency. In Post-Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Peace Formation and State Formation* (p. 1–26). Edinburgh University Press.

## Lessons Learnt from Five Critical Case Studies

### Case 1 - Unpacking Recent Escalations in Deir Ezzor Governorate: Arab Tribal Dynamics and the Kurdish-led Self-Administration

In parallel to the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Deir Ezzor, the US-backed and Kurdish-led Self-Administration (SA) established a governance system on behalf of the local, largely Sunni Muslim and tribal population. More recently, tensions escalated when Ahmed al-Khbeil, a Deir Ezzor Military Council leader, diverged from the SA with a private militia with his clan, al-Bukhair. This move challenged the SA's authority through unauthorised checkpoints and covert dealings aimed at expelling it with the support of the GoS. Al-Bukhair's arrest by the SA sparked a tribal insurgency, transforming the conflict into an Arab-Kurd dichotomy and fuelling resistance.

The root of the discord extends beyond the Deir Ezzor Military Council to deep-seated grievances encompassing political, economic, and security dimensions. Politically, Arab residents decry Kurdish dominance in governance, feeling marginalised in decision-making processes and opposed to the imposition of secular ideologies that conflict with tribal norms. Economically, controlling and distributing natural resources, especially oil, are contentious issues, with locals feeling deprived of their region's wealth, exacerbating economic hardships. Security-wise, the SA's anti-IS operations have sometimes harmed civilians, fueling resentment among tribes. The GoS exploits these tensions, using tribal connections to foster instability, aiming to oust the US-backed SA. Amidst this turmoil, Sheikh Hajim al-Bashir's mediation efforts stand out, advocating for peaceful reforms and dialogue to address the grievances, underscoring the intricate mosaic of tribal politics, international interests, and local discontent in Deir Ezzor's post-IS landscape.

This recommends that international actors 1) work with local authorities to ensure that decision-making processes are transparent, participatory, and representative of all communities, and 2) back local mediation efforts and peace formation agents, who foster communal dialogue between conflicting parties at the grassroots level to address grievances and build trust whilst cautiously approaching tribal authority.

### Case 2 - Demystifying the Late (2023) Uprising of Sweida's Druze Community

The Druze community's protests in Sweida against the GoS articulate a deep-rooted frustration over economic despair and systemic neglect in the midst of the Syrian conflict. Triggered by the GoS's removal of fuel subsidies, this move exacerbated an already dire economic situation, deeply affecting agricultural productivity and highlighting disparities in state support. Such actions revealed economic mismanagement and a broader pattern of governmental indifference towards the needs and security of its citizens, particularly in regions like Sweida. The situation worsened following the 2018 attack by the Islamic State, which underscored the GoS's failure to protect its people, shaking the community's faith in the government and propelling the formation of self-defence groups. This growing distrust was inflamed by issues surrounding mandatory military service, with many Druze youth resisting conscription due to fears of being thrust into conflict zones, which intensified calls for protest.

Amid these challenges, religious leaders and civil society have played pivotal roles in mobilising the community, voicing its grievances and economic and safety concerns, and challenging the GoS injustices whilst advocating for a more just and responsive governance through innovative protests and strategic use of social media. Through these protests, the Druze community of Sweida demonstrates a united front, demanding recognition, protection, and fairness from a state that has

long overlooked their plight. In solidarity, including Sweida's perspectives and priorities in international peace negotiations and reconstruction efforts is critical to ensure their voices are heard and their interests are represented.

### **Case 3 - Criss-Crossing Syrian Christians' Sectarianisation and Counter-Sectarianisation**

GoS, regional and non-state forces and gatekeepers, including Church leaders, increasingly advanced sectarianisation in Syria post-2011 via sectarian rhetoric and behaviour. This rendered Syrian Christians vulnerable populations and victims of violence. Coupled with this is Syrian Christians' historical fears, ranging from the *toushet al setteen* (the 1860 anti-Christian rioting in Damascus) and the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the 1980s, to regional Islamists' violence against Christians in Iraq and Egypt. These fears and sectarianisation led to Christians' *Security Dilemma* engaging some in arming for self-defence that may ultimately endanger their and the community's safety. Examples of Christian militias range from the Syriac's Sutoros in Hasaka to the Eagles of Whirlwind in Homs. In fear of the Sunni and/or Kurdish 'Other', many sided with the GoS. However, the latter's aggression and diminishing governance capacity threaten Syrian Christians' loss of privilege and suffering from Islamist retribution.

Amidst this, low-visibility individual and collective Christian peace formation agency rose to counter sectarianisation via advocacy, acts of solidarity with others and aid. These peace formation agents were largely challenged by gatekeepers that included Church leaders and Christian business elites invested in maintaining the status quo of Church-GoS relations. Additionally, the impact of these peace formation agents is hard to measure as they remain hidden and have become increasingly dispersed. Yet such acts have also helped foster inter-communal understanding.

To further promote such peace formation agency, this brief specifically calls for a relational approach that considers Christian communities' cultural, security and material interests and needs in light of their relationships with the 'Other' as well as with the Church and its gatekeepers.

### **Case 4 - Unpacking the Layers of Displacement to and from Afrin, Northwest Syria - Communal Implications of Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Issues**

In early 2018, an offensive backed by Turkey was launched on Kurdish-majority Afrin in the northwest. This coincided with the Syrian government finally taking control of and expelling rebel groups and civilians from Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus. These two military developments each produced widespread displacement. At this juncture, an international agreement took place between Turkey and Russia (the latter representing the interests of the Syrian government) whereby people who evacuated from rural Damascus as it fell from rebel control would be relocated to territories of Afrin that Turkish-backed rebels had recently taken over. This relocation included both civilians and fighters within armed factions that had fought against the government and resulted in large-scale violations of the Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights of the local population. This case highlights how HLP disputes arising from conflict-induced displacement can result in ethno-communitarian tensions.

Against the backdrop of seeming intractable sectarianisation, formal mechanisms have failed to effectively address HLP issues. In contrast, more ad hoc efforts initiated by activists show some promise for solutions. If entanglements of forced displacement and HLP violations are not addressed, there will be no possibility for Syrians to sustainably return to their locations of origin (from abroad or elsewhere in the country), instead intensifying sectarian tensions and the possibility of new waves of



displacement. This case highlights the need for policy-makers to integrate HLP considerations into other interventions, particularly those focused on social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, as well as considering the potentially positive role of non-formal actors that bring together IDPs and locals to address the HLP issues in order to promote peace formation.

### **Case 5 - Bringing in the “Forgotten Sect”: Idlib’s Arab Sunnis and its Politically-Contested Education under Haya’t Tahrir al-Sham, Regional and International Governance**

The Idlib Directorate of Education (IDE) founded by local teachers as an example of a Sunni Arab peace formation agency to preserve the community’s post-Islamist identity and serve it with quality non-ideologised education, comes at the heart of this contest. Many of Idlib’s Sunni community deem limited education availability as existentially threatening their community with a generation lost to violence. This adds to conflict-boosted perceptions of victimisation and marginalisation against Sunnis due to historic sectarian injustices, notably under a minoritarian rule.

At odds with this, many donors tend to securitise and/or essentialise the Sunni Arab identity. Meanwhile, both the HTS-based Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the opposition’s Turkey-based Syrian Interim Government (SIG) tend to back education in a manner that politicises this identity to serve their own legitimisation and governance. The SSG treats the local community as a sect that can be ideologised and radicalised, while the SIG likely considers it as part of a regional trans-state Sunni community.

However, the IDE seeks to serve Idlib’s Sunni populations’ needs as citizens and to protect their identity and dignity as a community by providing them with an education as a social good that can enable better future opportunities. Accordingly, the IDE tries to maintain independence by siding with neither the SIG nor the SSG or their ideologies and politicisation. Thus, it is critical to back IDE’s peace formation to ensure its independence, accountability, and transparency. This necessitates careful evaluation of the political context while exploring meaningful ways to support the next generation of Syrian communities.

## Cross-Case Constraints and Opportunities towards Peace Formations

Overall, Syria's diverse communities face common challenges towards peace formation. Pre-existing structural constraints and grievances linked to Syria's state formation and its sectarianism drive such challenges. Constraints to peace formation are: 1) imposed from below vis-a-vis both the GoS and non-state governance actors in inequitably contesting and capturing local resources and in their constitutive rule-making; 2) from within local communities, especially as these are increasingly driven by security dilemmas and by communal fragmentation; and 3) from above by regional competitive intervention, that has sectarianised and militarised the conflict, and international neoliberal peace interventions that have yet to better coordinate and back peace formation that include all of Syria's communities.

Importantly, peace formation agency in response to the Syrian conflict is a common positive feature across its diverse communities. This agency has, for example, taken the form of tribal Sunni Arab leaders promoting non-violence whilst calling for more just solutions to tensions in Deir Ezzor; individual and collective Druze mobilisation in Sweida to advance communal cohesion; local advocacy, relief and solidarity work by Christian groups to counter sectarianisation across Syria; communal Kurdish and Arab groups informally promoting fairer HLP agreements in Afrin; and local Arab Sunni teachers advancing education that supports Sunni Arabs' citizen identity in Idlib.

In support of this, while sustaining international pressure on conflict parties, German and European policymakers should advance meaningful localised interventions. This can be done by providing political, technical, and financial support to peace formation agents while using intersectional and contextual understanding to mitigate constraints.

## General Policy Recommendations

To advance peace formation, German and European policymakers should focus on:

### 1) Pre-existing and structural constraints linked to Syria's state formation

#### Historical grievances

➤ Be mindful of historic (pre-2011) grievances and factor these into policy formulation; address conflict within a transitional and transformative justice paradigm.

#### Sectarianism

➤ Amplify locally driven initiatives that serve counter-sectarian objectives.  
➤ Advocate and apply international pressure to enable governance that ensures communal representation at the local level and the participation of Syria's regional, ethnic, religious, and tribal groups in decision-making nationally.

### 2) Constraints imposed by the GoS and non-state governance actors

#### Resource competition and capture

➤ Enable equitable access to, and fair distribution of, locally available resources.  
➤ Promote unbiased and sustainable humanitarian and development engagement that addresses the needs of Syria's diverse communities; explore ways to invest in their areas' infrastructure, education, health, job creation, and economic opportunities without consolidating exclusionary governing forces' monopoly over resources.  
➤ Maintain a unified position on conditional engagement concerning post-conflict recovery, ensuring that HLP concerns are taken into account within all interventions and negotiations.  
➤ Ensure HLP audits are carried out by all actors implementing programmes in Syria and in consistency with a Do No Harm approach.

#### Constitutive rule-making

➤ Support education that encourages critical thinking beyond primary-level schooling.  
➤ Promote education for tolerance and coexistence, e.g. via initiatives that focus on dialogue, mutual respect, and the history and culture of Syria's diverse tribal, ethnic and religious groups. Sustained funding and training of teachers invested in peace formation can help cultivate a more inclusive generation that values diversity and cohesion.  
➤ Back efforts countering propaganda and misinformation (including by the GoS and governance actors) which seek to fuel inter-communal tensions for political gain.

### 3) Constraints from within local communities

#### Local communities' security dilemmas

➤ Facilitate dialogue between Syrian stakeholders on security arrangements and reconciliation efforts; engaging third parties as mediators can be useful.  
➤ Advance programs that help counter radicalism and extremism against the 'Other'.  
➤ Monitor and prevent arms proliferation into Syria; this can be via intelligence sharing, maritime and border security measures in neighbouring countries, and enforcing existing sanctions against entities involved in the arms trade.  
➤ Protect and ensure the respect of human rights and the international humanitarian law by local, state, regional and international stakeholders in Syria by promoting such a culture and holding

perpetrators accountable internationally and locally.

#### **Communal fragmentation**

- Encourage and fund initiatives that promote dialogue and reconciliation at the community level, such as bringing together various ethnic and religious groups.
- Integrate peace with justice interventions to de-escalate daily inter-communal tensions and fragmentation, i.e. address underlying grievances and human rights violations to promote reconciliation and sustainable peace.

#### **4) External constraints by regional and international forces**

##### **Competitive regional intervention**

- Be mindful of and counter regional and international forces' sectarianisation of Syria's communities in their rhetoric and actions.

##### **International neoliberal peace interventions**

- Improve donor coordination at the strategy and policy planning, not just the implementation level.
- Advocate for the meaningful inclusion of Syria's diverse tribal, ethnic and religious communities' perspectives and priorities in peace negotiations and humanitarian interventions.
- Continue to engage in international diplomacy, including within the European Union and United Nations, to mobilise support for a resolution to the Syrian conflict that prioritises local communities' needs and aspirations.

#### **5) Opportunities: meaningful localised solutions towards peace formation**

##### **Who to engage with?**

- Include local voices and perspectives that seek to serve the local beyond the governing power structures in place, whether state or non-state actors.
- Consider peace formation agents that extend beyond just registered CSOs to locally respected, representative and impactful societal members; pending on their agency, these may include teachers, religious leaders, tribal members, etc.

##### **How to engage?**

- Advance localised solutions based on realistic and reflective assessments that respect the specificities of each local context and community they are intended to benefit.
- Follow a relational approach that understands the workings of power at different sites of politics. That is the: 1) local and communal; 2) gatekeepers, GoS and/or local governance; and 3) regional and international site of politics.
- Do not essentialise identity by treating it as uniform and in dealing with communities as homogenous blocs.
- Partner long-term with and offer trusted peace formation agents flexible funding and other resources that would enable them to engage in decision-making processes and promote locally driven solutions to inter-communal tension.
- Advocate for and help protect freedom of expression, association, and assembly.
- Beware of the international implementers and INGOs' instrumentalisation of localisation discourse to serve their own budget and footprint.

**Localised solutions should prioritise:**

- Participatory/representative engagements with local communities and their peace formation agents that counter gatekeepers' monopolisation of power.
- Dialogue and relationship-building across communities, especially vis-a-vis education.
- Sustainable peace that comes with justice.
- Constant recalibration and reorientation of what works in context.

**Potential challenges and limitations:**

- Peace formation agency tends to be invisible and difficult to locate and measure.
- The issue of communal representation remains contentious.
- Localised solutions remain dependent on top-down international backing. Considering the limited resources and enabling space for the locals, this can foster local dependency.
  - To bring about future peace, localised solutions need to align with the strategic interests of more powerful national and regional stakeholders; this may disserve the locals.
  - Adapted to local customs, norms and religious practices, localised solutions may not align with Western-centric ideals.
  - Peace formation agents can change or shift in context and relative to forces cooperating or competing with them, e.g. they can fall victim to predatory violent state formation or exclusive power dynamics.
  - Issues pertaining to local reconciliation, notably justice, truth, security, trust, and recognition of the rights of the self and the 'Other' can be paradoxical as one gain (truth) may be another's loss (social cohesion). Reconciliation, thus, requires calculated risks.<sup>2</sup>

**The potential impact of localised solutions includes:**

- Preparing for a locally relevant and sustainable future peace: Localised solutions build on pre-existing communal relations and networks as well as grassroots initiatives that set the foundations to engage opposing sides towards peace settlements.
  - Fostering decreased violence and the ability to dampen conflict during periods of escalation, considering their investment in local relations and attention to local needs.
  - Struggling with different, and sometimes disjointed, policies across areas/communities which can risk the entrenchment of Syria's fragmentation. This is because localised solutions may lack coherence across regions, leading to varied and inconsistent outcomes.

Critically, locally and culturally focused processes can help foster peace; they provide a wider reach and can be delivered with fewer resources, greater speed, and potentially greater community involvement. However, they should not be over-romanticised for this capacity or dismissed if not conforming to dominant liberal peace norms. Also, as noted, localised solutions are neither without their costs nor will they be the 'silver bullet' for all of Syria's problems. Nevertheless, as explained in the report's introduction, localised solutions offer the most viable short-term policy option to serve the needs of Syria's diverse local communities while potentially also enabling a more meaningful and sustainable peace in Syria long-term.

2. See Kelly, G. (2021). Reconciliation and Peacebuilding. In O. P. Richmond & G. Visoka (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Peacebuilding, Statebuilding, and Peace Formation* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.



## About the Authors

**Rana Khalaf** is a recognised Syrian-British scholar. She specialises in local governance, peace and state formation in Syria. With over 14 years of experience studying Syria and its local communities, her work bridges academia with the realms of activism and policymaking. Rana's influential works include the papers “Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State-building during Conflict ” and “Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria,” presented at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council. A fellow with the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews, she also collaborates with other Russell Group universities and prestigious institutions, such as the University of Manchester, where she undertook her PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies, and Chatham House, where she published in-depth research on the self-administration in northern Syria. Rana has provided evaluations, evidence-based research, and policy advice for reputable clients, including the European Commission, UN-ESCWA, the Asfari Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and the League of Arab States.

**Haian Dukhan** is a British-Syrian scholar renowned for his research on the intricate relationship between Syria’s tribal networks and state politics. His upbringing in the historic city of Palmyra and experience living under an authoritarian regime afford him a nuanced comprehension of the complexities within Syrian society. Dukhan's academic journey led to a PhD from the University of St Andrews and his seminal publication, "State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns," in 2019. He is currently part of the "Variations in Sectarianization in Syria" project at St Andrews and is anticipating the release of an edited volume with detailed case studies. Dukhan’s research thoroughly examines the Syrian conflict's repercussions on ethnic and religious groups, mapping their historical narratives, evaluating the conflict's effects on their social, political, and economic conditions, and scrutinizing their shifting relations with the Assad regime and other key players. His analyses delve into these groups' internal dynamics, transnational affiliations, and the media's role in framing sectarian narratives. Focusing on the functionality of pivotal actors in service provision and conflict resolution, particularly regarding internally displaced persons, Dukhan’s contributions aid academic discussions and provide practical recommendations for policy approaches to fostering conflict transformation and social cohesion in post-conflict Syria.

**Thomas McGee** is a British researcher with a focus on the legal and social dynamics affecting the Kurdish community in Syria. His PhD research at Melbourne Law School examines the evolving landscape of statelessness in Syria since the onset of the civil war in 2011. Thomas' scholarly and policy-oriented publications include contributions to the Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration and the Forced Migration Review, among others. Prior to his PhD studies, he spent a decade as an analyst and advisor on humanitarian and development programs in Syria, with a particular focus on ensuring operational access to Kurdish-majority regions. Fluent in Arabic and Kurdish, Thomas has directed teams of field researchers throughout northern Syria for initiatives associated with the UK FC(D)O and USAID. Furthermore, he has acted as a Country of Origin expert for European asylum proceedings involving stateless Kurds from Syria. Thomas is currently the MENA Coordinator at the European University Institute's Global Citizenship Observatory (Globalcit) and co-coordinator of the MENA Statelessness Network (Hawiati). He has also co-edited a journal special issue on “Genocide and the Kurds.”

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