



How the EU can promote a civil society in Syria

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Policy Recommendations

1. While the establishment of a new Syrian civil society has to remain largely a Syrian project, the EU should actively support this process.
2. In Syria, the EU's aid should be concentrated on the exchange of best practices as well as financial support in the areas of modernization, education and transitional justice.
3. The major task, however, lies within the EU borders: How EU member states now choose to treat their Syrian refugees will have the most direct and lasting impact, as these Syrians will form a major part of any future Syrian society.

Abstract

Once a peace-settlement for Syria is found, the most difficult task ahead will not be the economic and political reconstruction of the nation, but first and foremost, the reorganization of the Syrian society that must go hand in hand with the evolution of a new civil identity. This policy brief argues that the EU as an external actor can only assert an indirect influence

on the emergence of a civil society in Syria via supporting the processes of modernization and transitional justice. The EU however could have a direct effect on a re-definition of values in a future Syrian state via the promotion of civil societal norms amongst the Syrian refugees currently hosted in its member states.



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Ethnic divides within Syria's society

The ongoing war in Syria has exacerbated ethnic cleavages and sectarian divides that have been present within Syrian society since the country's independence in 1946.¹ Back then, the emergence of Syria as a nation state following de-colonization efforts had little historic tradition. The strongest identification in an arid region of trading cities and nomadic tribes came from sub-state units, such as clans, villages and cities, but also from religious sects or the attachment to the larger Islamic *umma* (community). With Hafez-al-Assad taking power in 1970, the minority group of the Alawites – an offshoot of Shia Islam – gained control of the political centre in a country with a majority of Sunni Muslims. To ameliorate the minority appearance of the regime, Assad used a mix of governance methods that ranged from careful co-option to more coercive tactics of fierce repression. These ruling methods, combined with the unifying Pan-Arab programme of the Ba'ath party, kept the Assad family firmly in power.² However, when the popular protests inspired by the Arab Spring reached Damascus in 2011, Bashar-al Assad's violent curtailing of peaceful protesters triggered a brutal and ongoing civil war. The entry into the conflict by regional and international players in addition to the returning circles of violence, only exacerbated the ethnic cleavages that have been ever so present in the country. Five years after the war began, the opposition to the Assad regime is therefore split into a multitude of actors whose identity and loyalties still primarily reflect traditional sectarian and ethnic groups.

1) Rogan, E. (2013). *The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System*, in: Fawcett, L. (Ed.). *International Relations of the Middle East*. 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 37-59.

2) Hinnebusch, R. (2013). *The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations*, in: Fawcett, L. (Ed.). *International Relations of the Middle East*. 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 148-166.

The call for a Syrian civil society

While ethnic and sectarian divides provide ammunition to the Syrian civil war, out of all the groups, Assad's own minority group, the Alawites, have recently issued a declaration of identity reform that disconnects them from the Assad regime and breaks the accepted coalition between ethnic identity and political loyalty:

*"The ruling political power, whoever embodies it, does not represent us nor does it shape our identity (...). Nor do we, the Alawites, substantiate it or generate its power. The legitimacy of a regime can only be considered according to the criteria of democracy and fundamental rights."*³

Such a statement is not surprising in the wake of the looming threat of revenge that the Alawi minority is facing from the Sunni majority. But if the Alawi representatives are serious about their declaration, the document could certainly serve a much broader purpose. In fact, it is, what I would call, a first step towards a civil society where the identity of the individuals that constitute it, is "civil" rather than "ethnic". In such an understanding, one of a multitude of diverse definitions of civil society that scholars use is of particular importance: The dimension that emphasizes the "civility" of a society by referring to a set of attitudes and ideas that characterize the social milieu: i.e. the values of plurality, tolerance and moderation.⁴ Article 23 of the Alawi declaration emphasises exactly this element of "civility":

"We as Alawites adhere to the values of equality, liberty and citizenship. We believe that these

3) Declaration of an Identity Reform, Article 26, online at: Die Welt, <http://www.welt.de/politik/article153931109/Erklaerung-der-Alawiten.html>.

4) Rex, B./Korany, B. and Noble, P. (Eds.) (1995). *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab world*. 2nd edition. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.



are actual principles to organise and maintain social unity.”⁵

The Alawites hence propose to create a civil society rather than an ethnic one in a future Syrian state. Such an idea is certainly not new. The triangular solution of “democracy, federalism and civil society” has been repeatedly promoted by academics and policy-makers in order to alleviate Middle Eastern states’ ethnic and sectarian challenges.⁶ However, the fact that this suggestion comes from an ethnic group with strong exclusive characteristics and representation in the ruling power is certainly a novelty.

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The EU, as an actor which stands for the values of “civility” like no other international player, should take this call from within Syria seriously. Moreover, the construction of a Syrian civil society will indeed be the essential element for a lasting peace in any post-conflict setting.

From an ethnic to a civil society

While a transformation from an ethnic society to a civil society might be desirable for both Syrian and outside actors, the question remains how such a shift happens, and how this process could be aided by an external actor like the EU. In order to answer this question, I will explore two causal

pathways that explain how group-based societies elsewhere developed into individually-based civil societies. The first refers to the long-term project of modernization and the second is concerned with the more abrupt form of social change: conflict and wars. Both open windows of opportunity for the EU to use its soft power to indirectly channel social transformation processes in the desired direction of creating a civil society.

1. Modernization and the emergence of a civil society

Historically, scholars associated the transformation of societies from family and kinship-relations to a free-contract based “civil” society characterized by individualism and a complex division of labour with a process that can be broadly summed up under the term “modernization”. Ferdinand Tönnies’ famous characterization of the dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Society) hints at exactly this kind of social transformation. His notion of *Gemeinschaft* resembles the ethnically organized Syrian society that consists of diverse groups in which individuals are born into and orientated towards due to common mores, beliefs and responsibilities. Examples are the family, the mosque, the village, or the ethnic group. Tönnies’ *Gesellschaft* on the other hand is characterized as an association of individuals who are held together by self-interest, free contract and secondary relationships. Such a *Gesellschaft* can be regarded as “civil” rather than “communal”, as it harbours the potential to integrate a multitude of individuals based on their free will.⁷ European societies could be viewed in their ideal typical form as modern examples of Tönnies’ *Gesellschaft*.

The actual movement from a *Gemeinschaft* to a *Gesellschaft* has been described by Henry Maine

5) Declaration of an Identity Reform, Article 23, online at: Die Welt, <http://www.welt.de/politik/article153931109/Erklaerung-der-Alawiten.html>.

6) Ofra, B. and Ben-Dor, G. (Eds.) (1999). *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Eddin Ibrahim, S. (1997). Management and Mismanagement of Diversity. The case of ethnic conflict and State-building in the Arab World. *UNESCO Discussion Paper Series*, No. 10, online at: <http://www.unesco.org/most/ibraeng.htm>.

7) Tönnies, F. (1955). *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.



as a movement from “status to contract”⁸, or by Emile Durkheim as a shift between a “mechanical and an organic solidarity”⁹. What they explain is nothing less than a substantial social transformation process that is triggered and sustained by economic development and its complex causal entanglement with urbanization and the expansion of education, communication and transportation. Modernization as such is hence born in the societal division of labour that generates a variety of cross-cutting economic and political interests that undercut ascriptive, primordial identifications with ethnic groups. These changes and their expansion thus sustain new patterns of state-society relations which are characterized by individualism, citizenship and legal personhood.¹⁰

„Rather than focussing on bilateral trading contracts only, the EU’s developmental aid has to shift its attention on the reconstruction of Syria.“

Taking this broad, historically comparative and theoretical perspective on the transformation of societies already makes clear: modernization with its inherent rise of a civil society takes time and is highly context-dependent. “Modernization” can therefore not be “exported”. It can rather only develop in a complex bottom-up process within the specific regional environments. While an external actor like the EU can certainly only support such a process at the margins, it is exactly this area of socio-economic development where the EU’s soft power can best be applied. Rather than focussing on bilateral trading contracts only, the EU’s developmental aid has to

shift its attention on the reconstruction of Syria. The EU’s aid should concentrate on the exchange of best practices as well as the financial support of educational institutions, infrastructure projects and the rehabilitation of local governance structures within the different parts of Syria which – in the ideal case – will trigger the social transformation processes that are needed for a Syrian civil society to develop in the longer term. Most crucial hereby will be the EU’s success in circumventing the well-known, negative side-effects of modernization that pose a high danger of triggering a retreat into religious and ethnic identities rather than the birth of a Syrian civil society.

2. The legacy of the war and the emergence of a civil identity

While modernization and education eventually transform a diversity of primordial group identities into a civil society over the longer-run, conflict and wars – in the midst of all the devastation they unleash – are likely to trigger social change more instantly. When societies experience ruptures that shake up their social and political order to its foundations, the demand for the formation of new identities is at its highest.¹¹ This increased demand for something “new”, however, is also dangerously accompanied by the arousal of salient, existing identities in the wake of conflicts with the “other” in contexts of civil war.¹² What form any future Syrian identity will take, will hence be closely connected to the question of how the Syrian war will be “remembered” collectively.

„Conflict and wars – in the midst of all the devastation they unleash – are likely to trigger social change more instantly.“

8) Maine, H. (1963). *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

9) Durkheim, E. (1933). *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Macmillan, 1933.

10) Rex, B./Korany, B. and Noble, P. (Eds.) (1995). *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab world*. 2nd edition. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

11) Zerubavel, Y. (1995). *Recovered roots: collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

12) Hinnebusch, R. (2013). *The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations*, in: Fawcett, L. (Ed.). *International Relations of the Middle East*. 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 148-166.



Collective memory is “a widely shared knowledge *from* the past, as opposed to knowledge *about* the past”¹³. Conceived as such, this concept makes the past present rather than history, and links it to identity, norms and culture.¹⁴ Interpretations of past legacies therefore endow the collective with emotional and normative underpinning via a common myth of origin.¹⁵ Hence, memory and identity are mutually dependent concepts: Any group identity provides its members with a sense of sameness over time and space which is sustained by memories. In turn, what is remembered is defined by the identity that has been assumed.¹⁶

„The formation of a collective memory of the civil war will thus be crucial to the emergence of the new Syrian identity in the post-war years.“

The formation of a collective memory of the civil war will thus be crucial to the emergence of the new Syrian identity in the post-war years. Moreover, any inclusive national narrative must exhibit the ability to legitimize the emerging order by offering an acceptable view of the past that serves as a

point of reference for the targeted in-group.¹⁷ This group should ideally be the new Syrian civil society.

These theoretical considerations about the functions of collective memory and narratives should in no way be mistaken as a suggestion to policymakers to rewrite history according to their specific aims. I am simply pointing to the window of opportunity that opens for social transformation in the wake of wars and their legacies. On the one hand, the grievances and losses of the Syrian civil war can pose a major obstacle to reconciling the divided groups into a Syrian civil society, and on the other hand, they also offer new and quicker pathways out of primordial group identities. The respective outcome will crucially depend on the success of what broadly falls under the term “transitional justice”.

In post-war environments, the different warring parties usually put forward diverging interpretations of the past, which – if not reconciled – only exacerbate the divisions and grievances of the conflict years. A complex mix of judiciary and non-judiciary measures such as the establishment of truth commissions and reparation programs for victims, criminal prosecutions of perpetrators and a broad institutional reform of the bureaucracy will need to be designed according to the specific Syrian post-war environment. While the painful process of facing the war and its legacy will ultimately be the task of victims and perpetrators alone, the EU can aid an open and fair transitional justice period by providing legal advice and guidance from its own past experiences which were successful in creating the civil societies that make up the EU today.

13) Bell, D. (Ed.) (2010). *Memory, Trauma and World Politics. Reflections of the Relationship between Past and Present*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 2.

14) Assmann, J. (1997). *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schwartz, B. (2000). *Abraham Lincoln and the forge of national memory*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

15) Berger, T. U. (2012). *War, guilt and world politics after World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schudson, M. (1989). The Present in the Past Versus the Past in the Present. *Communication 11*, 105-112.

16) Gillis, J.R. (1994). *Commemorations: the politics of national identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

17) Hobsbawm, E.J./Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.



Conclusion: The EU's "secret weapon" are the refugees

It was the aim of this policy brief to show how ethnically divided societies can turn into a civil one. I have examined two general pathways through which such a social transformation can take place: First, the long-term process of modernization, and second, the instant effects of conflict and the legacy it leaves to societies. Both of these pathways provide a window of opportunity to create a new Syrian civil society, but at the same time, both also pose a significant danger to exacerbating the retreat into salient ethnic and religious identities. Rather than interfering with what ultimately has to remain a Syrian project, i.e. the socio-economic reconstruction of the nation and the creation of an inclusive national narrative and identity via a fair and open transitional justice process, the EU can only indirectly use its conventional soft power tools to channel these efforts in the direction of a Syrian civil society.

If the EU desires to have a direct and lasting impact on the development of a future Syrian civil society, it should not start acting in Syria but at home, in the EU countries themselves. After all, the Syrians who have found refuge in the EU will form a major part of any future Syrian society. On their

return, they will be crucial in instigating the new Syrian identity which, after the exposure to war, flight and their European host societies, will never be the same again.

„Hence, if the EU now chooses to embrace its own “civility” and meet the refugees with the values of tolerance and moderation inherited in this notion, the Syrians might be incentivized to model the new Syria in the image of their European host countries.“

Hence, if the EU now chooses to embrace its own “civility” and meet the refugees with the values of tolerance and moderation inherited in this notion, the Syrians might be incentivized to model the new Syria in the image of their European host countries. If, however, the encounter with the refugees triggers a fearful retreat into group divisions among Europeans, making its very own civil society obsolete, the idea of civility will hardly find its way into a new post-war Syrian identity. Neither will the EU have any credibility in promoting these values in a post-conflict settlement. The refugees hence will become the ultimate test of the successes of the concept of civility for the EU itself and for a future Syria. Let them be the “secret weapon” of the EU to achieve its long-term goal of creating a civil society in Syria.



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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a nongovernmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for an open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has long-standing experience of promoting a European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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