ENDURING SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY PEACEBUILDING IN LIBYA AND SYRIA

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This research report was written by Alice Alunni, Mark Calder and Stefanie Kappler of the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University and commissioned by the British Council Civil Society and Governance team. Our work in this sector aims to promote good governance, support the growth of productive civil societies and encourage stronger engagement between citizens and state. Our programmes focus on four key areas: capacity building in civil society organisations; inclusion – identity and community cohesion; transparency – voice and accountability; and influence channels – how citizens relate to the state.

FOREWORD

In times of great social change and conflicts, understanding the role played by diverse civil society actors in local conflict resolution is vital for inclusive and peaceful processes of change. As the conflicts in Libya and Syria persist, civil society organisations continue to fulfil important functions of peacebuilding together with more informal civil society actors whose role remains relatively unexplored. Examining the role of not only formal civil society originations but also other traditional social institutions such as tribal networks helps us comprehend the needs and effectiveness of the informal peacebuilding processes.

Non-formal civil society networks and traditional social institutions often enjoy significant access and legitimacy within local communities. However, the international community has limited access and perhaps understanding of these important peaceful resources. The British Council commissioned this study to illuminate the role played by various civil society actors in fulfilling peace functions in the current conflicts in Libya and Syria. We hope this report will increase sector knowledge about the role and possible needs of local peace actors and inform international peacebuilding policies.

Supporting inclusive civil society networks is one of the key priority areas in the British Council's response to the crises in the affected countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). Our programming in this area is aimed at investing in grassroots enablers of peace, security and recovery, namely: values-based civil society organisations and informal social networks, youth and female community leaders, artists, citizen journalists, social entrepreneurs, teachers and school leaders. We believe that peace can only come with genuinely inclusive locally led processes regardless of when political choices result in a peace agreement.

Indeed, for any agreement to be effective in creating lasting peace, we will need people on the ground prepared and able to be part in delivering peace. Therefore, local peacebuilding actors and long-standing social institutions have a key role in creating peaceful transition following political agreements. In times of crisis, the role of informal civil society actors is important and should be further explored and exploited in building durable peace within the conflict-affected communities in both Libya and Syria.

Abdulhamid Qabbani, Programme Adviser, British Council, Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates the functions that civil society actors fulfil vis-à-vis peacebuilding operations and is based on in-depth research with participants from Libya and Syria. The study comes to three broad conclusions:

Peacebuilding demands attention to socio-political environments as interconnected relationships for reconciliation

In Libya and Syria, peacebuilding functions are being fulfilled by a range of actors whose interests may diverge. Key actors include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), emerging governing institutions and enduring, identity-salient social institutions such as tribes and sects. However, these actors are not always discrete entities and are not static. They sometimes overlap and intersect with other actors through shared personnel, sometimes pull in more than one direction, and sometimes take on the form of other actors under certain conditions. For example, sects may become tribe-like, councils may become NGO-like and NGOs may become tribe-like. So, while some of these institutions cohere around authorities which exert a great deal of influence over – and command a great deal of loyalty from – their members or participants, a focus on types of actor – NGO, tribe, sect – may be less helpful than attending to types of environment in which those actors operate.

Attention to enabling environments goes beyond the recognised need to conduct a thorough context analysis and instead demands a more organic account of the social context pre- and post-intervention. The success of peacebuilding functions taken in isolation ought still to be measured, but this should take place alongside some assessment of how much more (or less) conducive the environment is in which this intervention has occurred. Peacebuilding interventions cannot be evaluated only in light of their functions – e.g. successful provision of humanitarian aid – but also with respect to the extent to which they have contributed overall to a peace-enabling environment.

Sustaining relationships beyond the peacebuilding field is key to supporting the peacebuilding process

This finding is related to, and in part an expression of, this organic approach. Cultivation of sustained relationships with the leaders of resilient social institutions produces benefits in terms of identifying needs and constraints, capitalising on shared interests, and, perhaps most importantly, bridging trust gaps where agendas diverge. The cultivation of relationships between international organisations (IOs) and multiple stakeholders, rather than a single trusted local partner, in a peacebuilding intervention may be a culturally intelligent way of reducing trust deficits, tailoring interventions and monitoring their delivery. This is especially important where the benefit of the intervention is less obvious or deferred in time.

In this context, we note a tendency of actors to be suspicious of being labelled political actors. The discourse of politics, which all of the actors we consider here deploy, may sometimes work against the pursuit of common ground in the rebuilding of a post-conflict society. Moreover, in the context of a considerable lack of trust between civilians, social institutions and the development sector, social change during traumatic social upheaval runs the risk of looking opportunistic when supported by IOs and international NGOs, whose agenda is not always evident. IOs have a role in facilitating dialogue between different actors with different agendas in which they agree parameters for their divergent roles in the light of potentially contrasting agendas and support the idea of toleration towards the establishment of pluralistic societies and support the creation of spaces in which difference is not only respected, but actively encouraged and openly discussed.

Mainstreaming inclusion in peacebuilding, especially of women and youth, is essential in producing social cohesion and a key contribution of NGOs

The role of NGOs in social-cohesion activities has emerged clearly from the analysis. In this respect, once armed violence stops, social cohesion, advocacy, monitoring and service delivery are key functions that civil society actors should collectively contribute to. Our finding is that this role could be enhanced in scale and scope by focusing on NGOs' capacity and capability to complement the intermediation and facilitation functions of resilient institutions and local authorities. Social cohesion is perceived by some of our interlocutors as the playground of NGOs, who sometimes remain the sole vehicle for the contributions of women and youth, but there are instances in which these actors have interplayed with resilient social institutions, which provided access and tribal cover for their activities to take place.

Moreover, interventions that focus on enhancing the rights of people most susceptible to marginalisation, such as women and youth, can be counterproductive when limited to empowerment or capacity building in isolation from the environment in which these people live. Therefore, these ought to be oriented towards challenging the political, social and economic constraints that disproportionately affect women and young people. This would be a way to involve communities at the grassroots level in the restoration of relationships within and between those communities that continue to receive little attention. It is in this way that new collaborative spaces for peacebuilding and reconciliation can be created for women and youth to make their voices heard in the realisation of peaceful societies.

These findings can be elaborated for each country respectively:

Libya

The relevance of tribes across Libya is evident and yet contested. Formalised expressions of tribal authority perform important social and political functions although they regard themselves and are regarded as apolitical actors by the community. Families and tribes remain a key mobilising factor in the appointment of members of *majalis al-hukama wa al-shura* (councils of wise men) which are at the forefront of mediation efforts, but this does not ensure the apolitical nature of these institutions nor their capacity to resist political pressures coming from other actors. The three cases examined – Misrata-Tawergha, Kufra and Benghazi – provide clear examples of this. Tribes and formalised expressions of tribal authority continue to be seen by our interlocutors from NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and INGOs (international NGOs), as well as by the tribal leadership itself, as the glue that keeps together the Libyan social fabric. While the role of *hukama* (wise men/elders), *sheikhs* (tribal leaders) and *ayan* (heads of clans within a tribe) is said to be more prominent in the east than in the west due to the Qadhafi regime's neglect of Cyrenaica, which had led communities in the region to resort to tribal leadership, the collapse of state institutions after the revolution increased the role of elders in the west. Our research explored their work in peacebuilding particularly in the context of ad-hoc structures for mediation and in relation to armed groups, youth and women.

After 2011, wise men, tribal leaders and heads of clans found themselves performing functions beyond the resolution of social disputes. Our research confirms that they perform peacebuilding functions with a focus on mediation, arbitration and protection from violence, but also shows that the scope of functions and activities to prevent, manage and solve small-scale conflicts is broader and goes beyond the peacebuilding functions categorised by Paffenholz[1] to include other social functions that have an important impact on peacebuilding – first and foremost the removal of tribal cover from individuals. Throughout these peacebuilding efforts, wise men and tribal leaders intersect and interact with other civil society actors, local and national authorities as well as INGOs and international organisations.

Ad-hoc mediation structures function as platforms – both physical and non-physical spaces – where these actors come together in search of a common understanding and solutions to localised conflicts and disputes. New actors and structures for peacebuilding are established by tribesmen to deal with conflicts, and through these processes new actors and spaces for peacebuilding are created. Tribal connections played an important role in establishing the dialogue committees in the Misrata-Tawergha mediation that engaged in the mediation and social-cohesion activities within and between the two communities. In the case of Kufra, the council of wise men and the crisis committee of the Zway and Tebu communities have decision-making power within their communities when it comes to peace and conflict. The crisis committees can go beyond their negotiating function by supporting social-cohesion functions of other actors on the ground. In general, in these localised disputes where armed conflict is overcome, enhancing the ability of grassroots-level actors to enhance understanding within and between communities should receive greater attention from peacebuilding actors.

The ability of tribal leadership to establish peace in a locality is linked to the influence these resilient social institutions exert on armed groups and the young people that populate them. The extent to which tribal leaders retain de-facto control over armed groups in Misrata, Benghazi and Kufra remains contested. The shared opinion that holding weapons is the main, if not the only, key to power, is contradicted by the relevance of social tools such as the removal of tribal cover and the existence of strong family and tribal relations that affect the actions of armed groups on the ground. One would expect that where relations between families/tribes and armed groups are strong, so is their ability to influence each other and effect social change.

If the ability to control armed groups remains subject to contextual factors, so does the role of young people and women in peacebuilding. On the one hand, this report provides a couple of examples of youth involvement in peacebuilding – Kufra and Misrata-Tawergha – and strengthens the case for further considering and researching the role of youth in peacebuilding efforts in Libya and the way they foster human relationships, bridge differences and counter violence. On the other hand, the role of women was hardly mentioned by the male actors at the forefront of these peacebuilding efforts with the exception of references to women as one of the main target groups of social-cohesion activities.

Indeed, social cohesion continues to be perceived as the playground of youth, women and NGOs, while elders, tribal leaders and local authorities engage in functions of mediation and protection, which are considered dangerous or not appropriate for youth and women. Nevertheless, the tendency to separate functions and actors engaged in intermediation and social cohesion is evident and risks producing short-lived peace. The absence of violence negotiated by *hukama* and tribal leaders will not translate into restored relations within and between communities unless initiatives are devised to address inequalities and the impact of conflict on local communities.

Tribal connections can play an important role in overcoming the practical challenges NGOs encounter in building peace. Access to cities and communities remains a challenge for Libyan NGOs wanting to operate across the country. Armed groups and resilient social institutions are the main providers of security to NGOs and give them access to local communities. Identifying entry points within mediation processes or in their immediate aftermath seems key to translate the negative peace – the absence of violence – into a positive one: the restoration of relations within and between communities. It is in this way that new collaborative spaces for peacebuilding and reconciliation can be created.

Syria

Our research concludes that peacebuilding resources in Syria are by no means concentrated in civil society organisations, but are distributed across a wide range of networks and groups. These include more or less formal expressions of enduring social institutions such as tribes and sects, which are sometimes wrongly thought of only as drivers of conflict rather than sources of security and agents of peacebuilding. They also include emerging governing structures in opposition-controlled areas, especially local councils, and networks of activists, professionals, recognised notables and other individuals.

At the root of this analysis is the identification of two decisive realities. The first is the radical diversity of Syria, both in terms of sociocultural variation and, of course, in terms of state or quasi-state authority. The second is the relative lack of a clearly recognisable civic sphere, in which the domain of public, non-governmental activity is secured and regulated by transparent law although, again, the extent to which civil society activists have eked out such a space varies greatly across Syria. This makes the boundaries between organisations and other social institutions somewhat fluid. Instead, organisations can come to resemble these other institutions which have somewhat domestic characteristics such as strong solidarity around a patriarchal leader, kinship ties and lack of transparency vis-à-vis third parties, while social institutions can formalise their solidarity by setting up organisations and associations.

As a consequence, our initial interest in peacebuilding actors was challenged by the apparent reality that these social and institutional configurations are not only diverse but overlap and intersect. One implication of this is that it may be unhelpful for donors to identify the type of partner it seeks to work with in Syria – NGOs, tribes, sects, councils – and that, instead, it is important to allow the choice of partner to be governed by an assessment of the actor's relative local effectiveness and legitimacy. The second implication of this is that, where possible, it is greatly advantageous to have more than one local partner in the design, delivery and evaluation of an intervention for the sake of building a multi-dimensional picture of competing agendas.

Notwithstanding the fluidity of these actors' borders – for example, the point at which a person is acting no longer as an expression of an ethno-sectarian group but as a representative of an NGO – our research pointed at a de-facto division of labour between certain kinds of actor and others. For instance, in some areas of Syria, it is groupings of tribal leaders that are the first port of call in resolving new armed hostilities and forging ceasefires, or in negotiating the release of hostages. Meanwhile, NGOs are expected to deliver functions such as relief, education and social cohesion initiatives. There was only limited evidence of organisations and enduring social institutions adding value directly to the one another's interventions, although NGOs and councils have collaborated more effectively in opposition areas.

One key feature of the interventions of tribal and sectarian leaders is their orientation towards stability. This is both a strength in that it creates the domestic interior in which activists can pursue their interventions unmolested by the state, and a weakness in the delivery of some peacebuilding interventions. While donors and some of their local partners may explicitly pursue social change, the danger of being seen to capitalise on the opportunity of conflict risks antagonising those enduring great hardship as well as some more conservative actors who may nevertheless be valuable partners. Reconciling these agendas may sometimes require a sustained practice of threshold-crossing hospitality that entails some level of risk on the basis of which to build long-term relationships with traditional leaders. This may be more likely to succeed where there is also systematic collaboration on shared areas of interest such as the delivery of quick wins.

Something similar is true of working with local government partners who are critically important in the success or failure of some peacebuilding interventions. While their democratic credentials vary, and their co-option by powerful third parties creates ethical and practical dilemmas for donors, they are typically well connected and well placed to mediate between competing interests. Moreover, they often comprise a wealth of technical expertise, and are the nearest thing to representative or participatory government in many areas. However they suffer from dependence upon diverse third parties, usually being unable to establish themselves as financially sustainable, and from the burden of expectation for the delivery of services that may be expensive and difficult, especially in the context of a siege. In some areas, NGOs' access to external resources creates an unfavourable balance of power for local councils, which can be disadvantageous to the perceived legitimacy of an intervention where the donor's exclusive trusted local partner is an NGO.

Finally, our research shows that a focus on peacebuilding functions is useful as a way of describing the delivery of existing interventions, but that it is not necessarily sufficient to design or evaluate interventions according to the fulfilment of these functions. In isolation, the fulfilment of one function may in fact undermine the peacebuilding processes of a given context. In contrast we noted that some donors work with multiple partners towards the production of peace-enabling environments beyond the delivery of a given intervention. Such a focus seems to promise more sustainable outcomes.

Social cohesion is perceived by some of our interlocutors as the playground of NGOs, who sometimes remain the sole vehicle for the contributions of women and youth, but there are instances in which these actors have interplayed with resilient social institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The conflicts in Libya and Syria comprise dramatic, traumatic and unpredictable processes of change. Providing an account of the social realities that enable or disrupt civil society peacebuilding in the midst of these changes therefore entails an ambitious attempt to apprehend phenomena which, once described, are likely to be on their way to becoming something different. This attempt to hit a moving target is somewhat shared between ourselves, as researchers, and the development-sector practitioners we take to be our core readership.

Our report therefore does not seek to provide a static snapshot of Libyan and Syrian societies at a given scale and in a given moment, but is based on our attempts to capture the dynamic processes, especially narrative processes, by which those involved in peacebuilding in these countries make sense of such disorienting processes of change. In particular, we pay attention to the ways individuals account for the successes and failures of peacebuilding interventions, and the key relationships and resources that produce peaceful and conflicting outcomes, both as they are described by our interlocutors and as we perceive them in practice.

The research explored the question of how, and how effectively, those enduring social institutions such as tribes and sects, membership of which is experienced as a marker of identity (henceforth identity-salient), fulfil peacebuilding functions in Syria and Libya, particularly at the local/grassroots level. It looked at their relationships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), armed groups, local government authorities, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), international organisations (IOs) and state institutions and asked what factors enable or hinder their respective interventions.

The findings point towards the necessity for dialogue, not just between conflicting parties, but between prospective peacebuilding partners who may have radically different, sometimes conflicting agendas, and which at other times may overlap with one another. In the process of listening to a diverse array of these activists, development workers, clerics, strategists, tribesmen, councillors, civilians, military personnel, academics and healthcare professionals, some working in the most trying of circumstances, we have received the patient hospitality of people who take a risk every time they allow strangers such as ourselves into their spaces. As we in turn host their accounts in this report, we acknowledge the risks they have taken and our responsibility to present our account of their narrations and practices with the utmost sensitivity. We also see in their willingness to engage in risky hospitality a possible model for peacebuilding interventions that professionalisation may occasionally obscure.

Key concepts

Our analysis revolves around two key concepts: civil society and peacebuilding, both of which are highly contestable. We therefore present a brief explanation of our usage and our particular focuses.

Civil society

We deploy the concept of civil society informed by the Libyan and Syrian contexts, such that it captures the agency of diverse non-state peace actors in Libya and Syria. It is similar to that articulated by Paffenholz:

> *A broad range of local and national actors: from professional associations, clubs, unions, faith-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations to traditional and clan groups and other community groups.*

Within this civil society landscape we are interested in illuminating the way in which certain especially enduring social institutions interact and intersect with other civil society actors. These institutions, such as tribes and sects, are of particular interest because they are often strongly associated with group identities, which persist even when national unity disintegrates. We suggest that 'groupness' is the symptom-catalyst of fluid and contested, but nevertheless powerfully imagined group identities attributed to these groups by their members and others alike.[2] Certainly, these actors are not static, but constantly navigate in response to changes in the wider socio-political and economic environment.[3]

Peacebuilding

We examine the role of civil society in peacebuilding as preventing and managing armed conflict and sustaining peace within phases of conflict.[4] This definition of peacebuilding is not limited to conflict or post-conflict interventions aimed at absence of violence and war – Galtung's idea of negative peace – but extends to the manifold activities that take place during and after war and pave the way towards positive peace and the integration of human society, which includes enhanced understanding within and between communities through communication, peace education, conflict management and dispute resolution.[5] Moreover, our understanding of peacebuilding includes the everyday concerns of human security: the safety of individuals, their protection, and empowerment.[6]

We will assess the contribution of civil society actors according to broadly understood peacebuilding functions, with reference to the categories formulated by Paffenholz.[7] These are protection from violence; monitoring, advocacy and public communication; in-group socialisation and peace education; social cohesion across groups or integration; intermediation and facilitation; and service delivery.

Methodology

This research adopts a predominantly qualitative approach based on in-depth interviewing, observation and focus group work. It entails an empirical investigation of specific Libyan and Syrian contexts, providing an account of civil society functions that incorporates the perspectives of actors involved in peacebuilding and where possible beneficiaries. We view our contribution within the constraints of the project as being not to represent the whole country, but to draw to light certain dynamics that are ill-reflected in prevailing policy discourses. In other words, we are pursuing an understanding of a situated peacebuilding process as intimately as possible, rather than taking a representative sample of the wider situation. The research therefore establishes micro-scale case studies that illustrate the peacebuilding dynamics of this analysis. The research design was adapted in dialogue with these stakeholders and in response to the evolving situation on the ground with its numerous political and security constraints.

For more information, please see the detailed methodological note given at the end of this report.

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LIBYA

ALICE ALUNNI

INTRODUCTION

In the power vacuum left by the collapse of Qadhafi's regime, local forms of authority emerged in Libya during and after 2011. Wolfram Lacher suggests that the rise of tribal politics in Libya is part of a larger phenomenon of the 'ascendency of the periphery over the centre', a process through which the local level becomes the main arena for political and military action.[8] However, as Cherstich points out, tribalism was never politically peripheral in so far as it was used by the regime to maintain its grip on power through tribal management and the redistribution of resources at the local level.[9] More recently, anecdotal evidence and research suggests that tribes have re-emerged as key social institutions and reinvented their role in the public sphere and, in particular, in the domains of justice and security provision, conflict management and conflict resolution.[10]

Libya is divided into 140 main tribes of which between 30 and 40 play an important socio-economic and political role.[11] Going back to the time when Libya was a province of the Ottoman Empire, the notables were tribe and clan leaders, local dignitaries, religious leaders, family elders or businessmen in charge of local governance outside administrative capitals. The state had to work with and through them to impose its control over the territories controlled by that tribe or clan. By controlling state-security services at the local level, the notables and tribes gained social status and political influence in a system that arguably remained resilient through the colonial occupation, the Libyan kingdom, Qadhafi's regime and until today. This system, the literature suggests, is what ultimately leads Libyans back to their tribes in the absence of state institutions capable of providing security and services.[12]

Against this background, this report explores the peacebuilding functions and activities performed by notables and formalised expressions of tribal authority, such as *majalis al-hukama wa al-shura* (councils of wise men). Understanding tribes as a group of individuals who invoke a perceived or real common origin and conceive of themselves as therefore united in some form of solidarity,[13] allows including in the analysis clan and familial relations within and across tribes, as well as non-Arab ethnic groups like the Tebu that feature tribal social structures.

We examine the ways in which tribesmen and their formal institutional expressions prevent and manage conflict and sustain peace in their respective localities and communities by drawing examples from three case studies of peacebuilding efforts: **Misrata-Tawergha**, **Kufra** and **Benghazi**. It shows how tribal solidarity is invoked as a mobilising tool by different actors, and to what effect for the realisation of peace. The analysis refers to peacebuilding efforts conducted between May 2014 and April 2017.

Furthermore, we explore the ways in which these actors interact and intersect with other civil society actors such as NGOs and looser networks composed of activists and NGOs. Indeed, after the 2014 outbreak of violence, Libyan civil society organisations (CSOs) started to focus on peacebuilding through service delivery, social cohesion and peace education as well as intermediation and facilitation.[14]

Their interaction with other actors and structures of authority that engage in peacebuilding remains underexplored. The interplay of these civil society actors with armed groups, local government authorities, INGOs, IOs and state institutions is also addressed tangentially.

1.   Case studies

Location-specific dynamics are key factors in understanding the relevance of resilient social institutions and CSOs in peacebuilding. In order to further explore these variances, this report draws examples from three case studies and different contexts: west (Misrata and Tawergha), east (Benghazi) and south (Kufra); urban (Benghazi and Misrata) and rural (Kufra); displacement (Tawergha); and Saharan border land (Kufra).

In particular, Cyrenaica, which comprises the entire eastern part of Libya including the al-Kufra district in the south, is characterised by a plurality of competing power centres: tribal, state-like, Islamic and civil urban forms of political organisation.[15] In this region, tribes have historically played a stronger role in governance and dispute resolution than in the west.[16] In the city of Kufra, tribalism and ethnicity have a profound influence on the social fabric and politics of this borderland south-eastern oasis town whose economy and politics are heavily affected by its geographical location and smuggling routes. In a city like Benghazi, tribal identity is often deemed important against the common opinion of those who would expect urbanisation to have weakened links to tribes in an urban context, as seems to be the case in Tripoli and surrounding areas.[17] Finally, exploring the Misrata-Tawergha agreement is an opportunity to look at the role of tribal actors and dynamics in the urban west, often referred to as less tribal, and the way in which these structures and actors evolve in the context of displacement.

The local dynamics of peace and conflict observed in the three cases are influenced by actors and dynamics at the national level. In the spring of 2017, the internationally recognised Presidency Council, with a loose power base and presence in the capital, Tripoli, and in the west of the country, remained challenged by the Tobruq-based House of Representatives and government, allied with the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), General Khalifa Haftar, whose power base and presence is established in the east and south-east of the country. These two political alliances and affiliated armed formations compete for power, authority and the loyalty of local power holders. The role of these actors in the three cases presented below is briefly discussed.

1.1   Misrata-Tawergha: from revolution to conflict settlement

In the first months of the 2011 revolution, the city of Misrata, the major opposition-held city in the west of Libya, was subject to a siege and a brutal military campaign against military targets and residential areas by forces loyal to the Qadhafi regime.[18] The city of Tawergha, 40km south-east of Misrata, was used as a base by regime forces in attacks against Misrata. When opposition forces gained control of the area in August 2011, fighters from Misrata attacked the town of Tawergha and its civilian population. Some 40,000 people were forced to leave.[19] To this day, Tawergha is a ghost town and its population displaced across Libya. Abuses were reported and documented on both sides.[20]

In August 2016, the dialogue committees of Misrata and Tawergha signed the Agreement on the Return of the Displaced and Compensation of those Affected.[21] The agreement is the outcome of a process of mediation initiated in January 2015 in Geneva within the framework of the municipalities track in the Libya Political Agreement. On that occasion, the representatives of the Municipal Council of Misrata and the Local Council of Tawergha proposed the establishment of a joint committee to deal with the dossier of the two communities. The agreement was mediated by the UN and developed within a human rights framework that included issues of accountability and justice, reparations and return.[22]

The legacy of the 2011 revolution in the two communities, although traumatic for both, differs profoundly in terms of outcome. The city of Misrata emerged from the revolution strengthened in many respects: social bonds between families and individuals have been reinforced; strong armed groups provide security in the city; their representatives' political power at the national level has been enhanced; a greater identification with and pride in the Libyan nation has emerged; and there is increased support for local authorities.[23] In contrast, the people of Tawergha experienced a break in social and family bonds due to displacement, which in turn led to unemployment, economic deprivation and a lack of basic security and services.

As of 2013, Benghazi, Tripoli and Sabha hosted the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Tawergha, respectively 18,000, 13,000 and 7,000, but smaller communities exist in Sirte, Tarhouna, Khoms, Jufra, Ajdabia, Sorman and Bani Walid.[24] The majority of IDPs live in camps that are crowded, with poor sanitation facilities and precarious security. Overall, the two communities had different experiences of change after 2011 which in turn had a profound impact on the ability of actors to mobilise support and influence the outcome of the agreement.

Armed groups from Misrata provide security to the city and control the surrounding areas including Tawergha. The city of Misrata is politically aligned with the internationally recognised Presidency Council. The Tawergha Local Council also recognises its government authority but the Tawergha political and tribal leadership in the east tend to side with the political and military actors that control Cyrenaica.

1.2   Kufra: ethnicity and the political economy of smuggling

The oasis town of Kufra sits in a basin rich in oil and water reserves. It is a nexus for legal and illegal trade networks and an agricultural hub. With an estimated population of 43,500, Kufra is home to around 4,000 Tebu,[25] one of the three ethnic groups that inhabit Libyan Saharan towns. A marginalised community under Qadhafi, Tebu are ethnically and linguistically connected to Sub-Saharan populations and have cross-border ethnic and family links in Chad, Niger and Sudan.[26]

The majority of inhabitants in Kufra are Arabs from the Zway tribe while other Arab tribes represent around three per cent of the population.[27] Zway took control of the city from the Tebu in the 19th century and dominated the cross-border economy in the Kufra region, its civil and military councils, and economic life until the 2011 revolution.[28] Tebu played a central role in the fight against the regime in 2011 when old antagonisms between Tebu and Zway were temporarily forgotten, but old patterns of inter-communal violence re-emerged at the end of 2011.[29]

At the time of writing (April 2017), the conflict between Tebu and Zway has claimed over 500 lives. Three main issues explain the revival of conflict after 2011. First, the smuggling economy in the borderland provides massive sources of revenues to those who control it. During and after the revolution, Tebu armed groups established their control of the southern border and checkpoints and this translated into control of smuggling revenues to the detriment of Zway smugglers who were determined to keep partaking in this business.[30] Second, before and after the revolution, the participation of Tebu in governmental institutions and in the economic life of the city, particularly in the banking, oil and health sectors, was very limited. Tebu resented this marginalisation and wanted to take part in the economic and political life of the city. Third, for the Tebu minority, the conflict is also about citizenship rights. A regime crackdown in the 2000s led to many Tebu being stripped of their citizenship and denied access to health and education facilities, social welfare and employment opportunities, while being subjected to house demolitions and arrests. The 2011 revolution did not reverse this curse of marginalisation for the Tebu in Kufra, who live segregated in the neighbourhoods of Qader Fey, Shura and more recently Kufra Jadida.

Two main ceasefire agreements were reached in July 2012 and September 2015, the latter holding to this date. Control of infrastructure and roads was at the heart of the agreements in which tribal leadership played a central role. The city is under the military control of the Libyan National Army, which appointed a military mayor in 2016 and, therefore, local authorities recognise the Tobruq-based eastern government as their central government interlocutors and Haftar as their commander-in-chief.

1.3   Benghazi: a city under fire

Benghazi is Libya's second-largest city and the birthplace of the 2011 revolution. In the aftermath of the 2012 national elections, a series of assassinations of journalists, human-rights activists, judges, prosecutors and military personnel was carried out by unidentified assailants. In October 2014, the leader of the LNA, General Khalifa Haftar, responded by launching an operation against the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (SCBR), a coalition of Islamist militias that had gained control of the city after the revolution. The stated aim of the military campaign was to counter terrorism, retake the city from the SCBR, and re-establish the rule of law.[31]

Fighting between the LNA and the SCBR in residential areas considered to be Islamist strongholds caused civilian casualties and extensive damage across the city in 2014 and 2015.[32] The fighting displaced some 90,000 people[33] while hundreds of civilians remained caught up in the violence with some trapped in the Ganfouda neighbourhood without access to humanitarian aid until March 2017, when the neighbourhood passed into the control of the LNA.[34] At the time of writing, fighting continues between the two factions in the coastal Sabri district and the adjacent city centre where about 100 SCBR fighters remain.[35]

Civil society actors intervened before, during and after the fighting erupted in 2014 to restore peace in the city and provide those in need with humanitarian aid and protection. We acknowledge their efforts in this report but limitations in the scope of this research and sensitivities related to the role of military authorities in the city mean that we were only able to speak directly to the INGOs and NGOs directly involved in these efforts.

2.   Resilient social institutions, politics and peacebuilding

The relevance of tribes across Libya is evident and yet contested.[36] Formalised expressions of tribal authority perform important social and political functions although they are regarded as apolitical actors. Among these functions we explore their work in peacebuilding particularly in the context of ad-hoc structures for mediation and in relation to armed groups, youth and women.

2.1   Tribal connections and councils of wise men: tribal politics and the quest for the apolitical

Academic research on tribalism across Libya is outdated.[37] Recent research has begun to explore the mobilising power of tribes in peacebuilding while unveiling some of the modalities and variances of tribal influence.[38] A study on the role of tribes as security and justice actors observed that the word 'tribe' in Libya maintains a sense of bloodline and heritage but it has come to define, at least for those tribes that became influential political actors:

> a political entity consisting of a small network of leading notables at the head of tribes that, for reasons of history, have come to have a big say in local affairs. This political sense of the word has also been observed – wryly, by Libyans – to apply to townships such as Misrata, which also acts tribally in this way, even though they are not (wholly) descended from Arab Bedouin tribal societies and do not consider themselves to be a tribe.[39]

Thus we may identify a tendency to identify with tribal structures not exclusive of formalised tribal institutions. Meanwhile, defining tribes as political actors, while reflecting the reality on the ground, as this report also shows, is controversial. The perception of *hukama* (wise men/elders), *sheikhs* (tribal leaders) and *'a'yan* (heads of clans within a tribe) as wise individuals, standing above politics, impartial, neutral and apolitical, was shared by many of the interviewees which, however, attributed important political functions to them. As explained by an MP in the House of Representatives:

> We depend on these wise people. There is unofficial contact between 'a'yan *from Misrata and from Tawergha who have been trying to find a solution to the crisis. [...] Many problems are solved by* 'a'yan. *They have a great role in fighting terrorism, standing by the military leadership, collecting donations, and travelling across the country to find a political solution to the crisis.* [40]

The role and functions of *hukama*, *sheikhs*, *'a'yan* and their institutions after the revolution went from predominantly social to markedly political. Indeed, they became more involved in politics and in reconciliation efforts. In particular, *'a'yan* act as negotiators and represent their tribe in a mediation effort. *Hukama* act as mediators in a dispute between tribes other than their own across the country: working on reconciliation between armed and political groups, they extended their role in the public sphere beyond that of social arbiters. However, this was perceived as a problem by one of our interlocutors in Benghazi who observed that, in so doing, they took sides. An example was provided of the tribal leaders who came out in support of the Libyan National Army in the east. [41]

Traditionally, *hukama* have resorted to '*urf* (customary law) to adjudicate on social disputes between families and tribes over accidental death, land, marriage and divorce. This authority derives from tribal leadership, religious authority, wealth and social activism which often overlap. [42] A member of the *majlis al-hukama wa al-shura* in Kufra described the selection of members of the council in these terms:

> I was chosen by my tribe [...] You know, tribes include a number of families and these families will choose me.

> You will need to have different features and qualities in order to be chosen as the tribal leader. They [majlis al-hukama wa al-shura] ask that we provide a piece of paper that says that X families support me with the signature of the head of that family. [43]

Families and tribes remain a key mobilising factor in the appointment of members of the *majlis al-hukama wa al-shura*, but this does not ensure the apolitical nature of the institution nor its capacity to resist political pressures coming from other actors. The three cases examined provide clear examples of this. In the case of the *majlis al-hukama wa al-shura* of Tawergha, one of our interlocutors observed that the *majlis* do not represent the entire tribal leadership of the city and that it is divided with *'a'yan* in the east and in the west. [44] Indeed, a council of tribal leaders and wise men of Tawergha was set up in the east in 2017 and it was said to include representatives from the three main Tawergha tribes. The fact that the two Tawergha councils of tribal leaders in the east and in the west claimed to have representatives from the three Tawergha tribes shows that tribes, far from being monolithic entities, can flow across political and geographical boundaries and this is even more so in the case of a displaced community. In this respect, the divisions existing at the national level with two governments competing for power was perceived as detrimental to the resolution of this local dispute. An interlocutor from Tawergha stressed that:

> There is a government in the east and a government in the west and Tawerghas have to endorse the place or the structure of governance where they live in order to live in peace or get their life normal. [...] Your presence in a certain geographical location imposes certain ideas on you sometimes. [45]

Nevertheless, direct and indirect communication continues between *'a'yan* from Tawergha in the east and the west and they proved able to coalesce and find solutions to problems. For example, as pointed out by one of our interlocutors, when a fire raged in a camp in Sidi Alsayah in March 2017, *'a'yan* from the west and the east worked together to obtain financial support from the eastern government.[46] Most importantly, regardless of the existing divisions, the Tawergha leadership stressed that they are now looking at tribal structures for a solution and that mending these divisions is the only possible solution to solve the conflict. An *'a'yan* in the east said:

> In the east we require that there should be a third party who is sponsoring this process of dialogue and reconciliation and it has to be a tribe. Not the UN, not the security council. This is a Libyan issue and has to be sponsored and guaranteed by Libyans. We are emphasising on a third party, a tribe that is not involved in this conflict to ensure this process.[47]

Another Tawergha *'a'yan* in the west said:

> The dialogue led by the UN, it has to happen again, between the people of Tawergha or the tribes of Tawergha and the entire tribes of Libya. We say in Islam that if there are two groups fighting each other there should be another group that supports the one who is just and that's why we think it's important to include in the dialogue the tribes of Libya for them to see who is wrong or who is right and adjust solutions.[48]

Although the mediation of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) was initially requested by the Tawergha side as they were the weak side,[49] today our interlocutors from Tawergha see the role of UNSMIL, and more generally that of the international community, as a hindrance – one detrimental to the unity of its leadership and the resolution of the dispute. One of them blamed the UN for 'screwing up' the role of NGOs, local and tribal leadership and for taking away from them the space to act.[50] Regaining that space is seen by them as the only way to move the agreement forward.

Tribes and formalised expressions of tribal authority continue to be seen by our interlocutors from international NGOs and NGOs, as well as by the tribal leadership itself, as the glue that keeps together the Libyan social fabric. While the role of elders is said to be more prominent in the east than in the west due to the regime's neglect of Cyrenaica, which led communities in the region to resort to tribal leadership, the collapse of state institutions after the revolution increased the role of elders also in the west.[51] An NGO worker pointed out that in areas in the west like Gharian, Asaba, Zintan, Zawia, and Warshefana, working with tribes on peacebuilding is just as important as in the east.[52]

2.2 Resilient social institutions and peacebuilding functions

As pointed out above, *hukama*, *sheikhs* and *'a'yan* found themselves performing functions beyond the resolution of social disputes that they used to attend to before 2011. In the words of a wise man from Kufra:

> As leaders and wise men, we are burdened with government responsibilities. We are doing government work. We are fighting enemies, smugglers. We are fighting the Sudanese outlaws and militias from Sudan, war traffickers, drug dealers and irregular migration. These are the new problems that are causing a lot of trouble to our city.[53]

The literature reviewed for this study suggests that *hukama*, *sheikhs*, and *'a'yan* perform peacebuilding functions with a focus on mediation, arbitration and protection from violence.[54] This research confirms this initial finding but also shows that the scope of functions and activities to prevent, manage and solve conflicts is broader and goes beyond the peacebuilding functions categorised by Paffenholz to include social functions that have an important impact on peacebuilding, such as the removal of tribal cover from individuals.

In the case of the mediation between Misrata and Tawergha, although it was initiated by the representatives of the Misrata Municipal Council and Tawergha Local Council with the support of UNSMIL, *hukama*, *sheikhs*, and *'a'yan* were involved at different stages throughout the process: through informal consultations at the grassroots level, when solicited by other forms of local authority in order to identify and appoint members of the dialogue committees; as members of the dialogue committees in the case of Tawergha; as participants in dialogue workshops at grassroots level; in the establishment and management of steering committees, in the case of Tawergha, to provide for and represent IDPs and maintain communication with local authorities and dialogue committees; and in maintaining indirect and secret communication with their counterparts.

In Kufra, the *majlis hukama wa al-shura* of the Zway and Tebu communities, and the respective crisis committees in particular, had a key role in negotiating the ceasefire agreements and so did wise men from across Libya who were involved in an intermediary function. The involvement of these actors was based on pre-existing contacts and relations between them. However, compared to the Misrata-Tawergha mediation where tribal leadership was invoked and mobilised in support of a mediation process with only partial direct involvement of notables and tribal leaders from Tawergha, in Kufra tribal leadership is at the forefront of the mediation in which international organisations are not involved.

In the absence of clearly defined rules of law, the *majlis al-hukam wa al-shura* in Kufra set up a social charter to sanction punishment for crimes.[55] It also enabled the delivery of humanitarian aid through the crisis committee. *Hukama* and *sheikhs* secure the property of foreigners such as traders and investors in the city but also guarantee the regular functioning of services such as schools, shops, bakeries and hospitals to minimise the impact of the conflict on the life of the people.[56] Another example was provided of *sheikhs* intervening in situations such as that of a pedestrian shot and killed, to avoid an escalation of violence.[57]

In the ceasefire talks in 2012, tribal leaders and elders from Tripoli and Tobruq were involved in an intermediary function together with the Libyan Dialogue and Reconciliation Organisation (LDRO). In 2015, a committee was set up that included a group of *sheikhs* and youth from Bayda and Benghazi and a parliamentary group from the House of Representatives. Elders from Zawya, Ajdabia and Misrata were also involved in an intermediary capacity.

One of our interlocutors in Kufra, however, was critical of the role of the *majlis hukama*, which he described as being limited to the release of hostages or the resolution of thefts and subject to bigger power issues. He stressed that *hukama* can only be a force for good if they act as a third, neutral party. He observed that during the conflict the role of *hukama* from Kufra and their ability to contain hostilities remains limited.[58] This point of view, while recalling the difference between the role of *hukama* as mediators between two parties in a dispute outside their own community, and that of *sheikhs* and *'a'yan* as negotiators representing their own community, seems to disregard the importance of the latter in negotiating the agreement and their ability to present it to their communities and get their buy-in.

One of our interlocutors in Benghazi observed that in the east of Libya, with the appearance of Islamic State (IS), *sheikhs* started to use tribal cover as a means to fight this phenomenon:

> If some family has children working or following Daesh, they [sheikhs] oblige the family to call them or announce that they have a son that follows Daesh in Syria or in Libya and if they don't do it they withdraw the social cover. That is very important here in Libya because it means that he does not belong to his tribe anymore and will lose support of the tribe.[59]

Even in Benghazi, in the absence of government, tribes stepped in and in 2012 and 2013 created a *hukama* office composed of members of the 127 tribes present in Benghazi.[60] An interlocutor from Benghazi recalled the feeling of being in a police station when visiting the centre for meetings. When the LNA established its presence as the main security actor in the city, the elders focused once again on avoiding tribal confrontations within the city.[61]

Throughout these peacebuilding efforts, wise men and tribal leaders intersect and interact with other civil society actors, local and national authorities, as well as INGOs and international organisations. Ad-hoc mediation structures function as platforms, both physical and non-physical spaces, where these actors come together in search of a common understanding and solutions to localised conflicts and disputes. New actors and structures for peacebuilding are established by tribesmen to deal with conflicts. Through these processes new actors and spaces for peacebuilding are created.

2.2.1 Ad-hoc mediation structures: dialogue committees and crisis committees

Tribal connections played an important role in establishing the dialogue committees in the Misrata-Tawergha mediation, although tribes in Misrata were said to have a minor role compared to tribes from Tawergha. The representatives of the Misrata and Tawergha municipal and local councils engaged in consultations within the respective constituencies to establish the dialogue committees and initiate an official process of mediation. In the words of the Misrata Municipal Council's representative:

> *Each side tried to make their own committees in the way that served them and benefited them most because they are different. For example, for Misrata it was very important to have the affected victims involved in the committee but for Tawergha it was very important to have the tribal component and the main tribes involved in the committee.*[62]

However, it should be noted that not only key personalities involved in the mediation such as the head of the Misrata Dialogue Committee and the representative of the Misrata Municipal Council belong to important tribes,[63] but also that there is a close connection between armed groups and *hukama* in the city.[64] Therefore, tribal connections seem embedded in structures of power and mediation, such as the municipal council, armed groups and dialogue committees, rather than absent.

On the other hand, the Tawergha local council leadership, faced with the challenge of representing a displaced community, resorted to tribal representation to appoint its dialogue committee. An *'a'yan* from Tawergha was eager to stress that the *majlis al-hukama* had a key role in appointing the committee.[65] However, an interlocutor from Tawergha was critical of the role of *'a'yan* and *hukama* of Tawergha, as they appeared divided and in a lower position compared to that of the local council and its leader, who is also head of the Tawergha dialogue committee. This interlocutor lamented that there is no influential bloc that could influence the decision-making process within the dialogue and this leaves a huge space for the head of the local council to act without conferring with *'a'yan* and *hukama*, whose influence is limited.[66]

Although it remains difficult to assess the real power of *'a'yan* and *hukama* in the process of the selection of the Tawergha Dialogue Committee and throughout its work, the fact that the Tawergha local council was keen to ensure and claim tribal representation is an indication of the symbolic resource that it represents. The local council invokes tribal representation to establish its legitimacy and that of the committee. This choice probably reflects not only the need to appease the Tawergha tribal leadership across the country, as an activist from Misrata suggested,[67] but also a strategy to unite the Tawergha leadership and claim legitimacy in the eyes of the scattered Tawergha community.

The Joint Dialogue Committee established through the mediation process and comprising the members of the two dialogue committees is charged with restoring trust and dialogue between the two communities and supporting the mediation at grassroots level. The Joint Dialogue Committee was supported in this endeavour by the Finnish organisation Crisis Management Initiative,[68] which described the Joint Committee as the real dynamo in the reconciliation work conducted at grassroots level. They organised four dialogue workshops in Tripoli, Tunis and Misrata that targeted activists, women, youth, wise men and notables from the two cities. The reach of the workshops was limited to 200 to 300 individuals. In particular, the involvement of elders was considered instrumental to rally support within the community by convening religious leaders and spreading ideas of tolerance and reconciliation during Friday prayers.[69]

When it comes to the involvement of the Tawergha community in this work, it was limited to those Tawerghas living in the west. However, more recently, the Joint Committee and the Crisis Management Initiative have been working towards the creation of a committee to bring together notables from Tawergha based in the east and in the west. [70]

Another example of collaboration with an INGO, BBC Media Action, was provided by the head of the Misrata Dialogue Committee as an effective media initiative, realised in collaboration with the dialogue committee, that in his opinion had resonance within the two communities and was helpful in advocating and rallying support for the agreement. In one of the workshops organised in Tunis, a short documentary was released that showed youth from Tawergha and Misrata working together. [71]

The dialogue committees therefore engaged in the mediation as well as in social-cohesion activities within and between the two communities. It is through these activities that space for interaction between different civil society actors and for dialogue between the two communities is created. However, the scope and reach of their work remained limited. [72] In this localised dispute where armed conflict is overcome, enhancing the ability of grassroots-level actors to work towards positive peace that enhances understanding within and between communities, should receive greater attention from peacebuilding actors. The risk of these low-reach activities is that it involves few individuals, most often those already predisposed towards peace, without producing a positive and larger impact within the two communities.

In Kufra, the crisis committees were set up within the *majlis al-hukama wa al-shura* to represent the Zway and Tebu communities in the ceasefire agreements when armed conflict erupts. In the aftermath of armed confrontations, the *majlis al-hukama* in Kufra split and is now divided into two councils, the Arab one comprising Zway leaders, and the Tebu council. Consequently, each council has its crisis committee. The crisis committees ensured the delivery of food and humanitarian aid during and after the violent conflict. They met with an intermediary, a tribe from outside Kufra or a Libyan civil society organisation and their role was described in these terms:

> *The crisis committees will try to reach a ceasefire. Then they will try to move from ceasefire to truce and from truce to reconciliation but that takes time.* [73]

Meetings between the two committees are said to take place in spaces considered neutral like a university or a military meeting room. [74] A Tebu activist also referred to a police body, part of the Tebu crisis committee that was in charge of securing the neighbourhood where Tebu live and the roads that separate these neighbourhoods from Zway areas. The *majlis al-hukama* and the crisis committee have decision-making power within their communities when it comes to peace and conflict. Those *hukama* members of the crisis committee, by interacting with other civil society actors, have the opportunity to establish relations beyond their closely knit group. While their role in establishing a negative peace through ceasefire agreements is essential, they are not in the position to work towards enhancing understanding within and between communities unless they engage in other peacebuilding functions and activities that are conducted by other civil society actors. The crisis committee can go beyond its negotiating function by supporting social cohesion functions performed by other actors on the ground.

2.2.2 Armed groups

The ability of tribal leadership to establish peace in a locality is linked to the influence that these resilient social institutions exert on armed groups and the young people that populate them. A notable from Kufra said, referring to the *majlis al-hukama*:

> *We are leaders in our municipality. We are able to control youth and armed groups. We are able to tell them to do things and not to do things. Depending on the security situation, we are able to stop them from doing things.* [75]

A Tebu interlocutor, however, expressed criticism towards this position and in particular with respect to the ability of the *majlis al-hukama* to control and influence the LNA, which exercises military control over Kufra through the presence of army units and a military mayor who replaced in 2016 the one elected in 2014. Mabrouq al-Ghazoui, in charge of the Kufra military area since 2012, was said to be trusted by both sides. At first glance, the role of the LNA seems one of third party in the conflict and one might consider the appointment of the mayor as the key event that allowed for the truce. However, an interlocutor in Kufra described the units composing the LNA being far from neutral since their members belong mainly to either the Tebu or the Zway.

The LNA has patrols outside the city and guards governmental buildings, but when it comes to intercommunal clashes it is difficult for the military to intervene.[76]

The appointment of the military mayor was presented by Tebu and Zway as a way to resolve the inactivity of, and tensions within, the municipal council that was detrimental to the delivery of services to citizens. While the Tebu leadership was more sceptical of military rule, eventually they realised that under the current circumstances that was the best option available:

Haftar imposed this. It was imposed on all of us. […] But the idea I want to transmit is not one of imposition of order. It's a positive one. Haftar takes his power from tribes who support him and then he imposes his role as an army commander. He did this after consultations with the tribes. There was a threat of freezing the municipality [interruption of funding for the delivery of local services to citizens]. […] We had to accept this because citizens need municipal services.[77]

At the time of writing, the Tebu and Zway armed factions had integrated into the LNA, but Tebu armed groups, referred to as Chadian Tebu, exist and oppose the Tebu faction that seeks dialogue and reconciliation. In the words of an interlocutor in Kufra:

Those who hold weapons are much stronger […] they hold weapons and have the power. This group does not want to reconcile. For them any reconciliation is not in their favour because with the establishment of state institutions they will lose the leverage they have now. […] They do not want reconciliation to happen because they get benefit from the conflict and from smuggling.[78]

The extent to which tribal leaders retain de-facto control over armed groups in Misrata, Benghazi and Kufra remains contested. The shared opinion that holding weapons is the main, if not only, key to power, is contradicted by the relevance of social tools such as the removal of tribal cover and the existence of strong family and tribal relations that affect the actions of armed groups on the ground. One would expect that where relations between the two are strong, so is their ability to influence each other and the outcome of the peacebuilding effort.

An example of this was the attack by the LNA against the Petroleum Facility Guards, led by Ibrahim Jadhran, to gain control of the Oil Crescent in September 2016. Elders intervened and threatened Jadhran and his men with removal of their social cover if they did not put down their weapons against the LNA, and so they did.

2.2.3 Youth

If the ability to control armed groups remains subject to contextual factors, so does the role of young people in peacebuilding. Far from being a homogeneous category, young people's experience of conflict and their engagement in peacebuilding are affected by age, class, race and gender.[79] The scope of this research did not allow for an in-depth examination of these aspects, but the participation of young people in peacebuilding emerged in two cases discussed below.

In the case of Kufra, the importance of involving youth in the second ceasefire agreement was clear to the NGO involved in the monitoring of the agreement and aid workers in the city. People between the ages of 15 and 35 were the ones threatening the 2012 ceasefire agreement as they would abuse alcohol and start fighting over previous killings and this risked precipitating new and larger-scale violence.[80] One local leader stressed that often trouble starts with young people and elders are called upon to find a solution.[81]

An aid worker in Kufra highlighted the importance of bridging the gap between *sheikhs* and youth. Young people lamented the inability to make their voices heard and share their point of view with elders. More recently, however, youth groups have been involved in meetings with *sheikhs* and this had a positive effect on the truce:

In 2015, we had a truce four times but it was a fragile one. The ceasefire is now holding because of the interaction between youth and the other actors and civil society organisations to overcome some problems. […] we believe that if we involve the youth in these talks it will be much better to reach a concrete truce or perhaps even reconciliation in the future.[82]

An NGO worker asserted that in the east, and in particular in a context like Kufra, youth listen to elders and elders control youth. The staff of the NGO monitoring the agreement in Kufra realised the need to establish a dialogue between young people and elders in order for the truce to be sustained, and acted as a linchpin between them. It also acknowledged the need for investment in infrastructure and projects to develop young people's skills and prospects for the future in this context, but was confronted by lack of resources.[83]

The dialogue between youth and *sheikhs* in Kufra seems to show the benefit of involving young people in the process of reaching an agreement, not just at the end. Youth are often targeted in peacebuilding activities for social cohesion, like in the case of the Misrata-Tawergha workshops organised by the Joint Dialogue Committee, but they are hardly involved in mediation processes. An interlocutor from Tawergha explained that youth can fall easily prey to manipulation exercised by influential armed groups when they are not provided with opportunities and answers to their concerns and problems:

> *Haftar is calling upon Tawergha youth to fight with him in order to have leverage afterwards, take revenge on Misrata and free Tawergha.*[84]

This requires acknowledging the risks connected with disregarding the demands and needs of young people when they are marginalised in their society and the only concrete opportunity to make a living and find a purpose in life is joining an armed group.[85] The danger of ignoring the needs of young people in post-conflict environments and the potential for renewed conflict as a consequence of youth marginalisation has been highlighted in other contexts.[86] This report provided a couple of examples of youth involvement in peacebuilding and strengthens the case for further considering and researching the role of youth in peacebuilding efforts in Libya and the way they foster human relationships, bridge differences and counter violence. In other words, youth practices of everyday peace.[87]

2.2.4 Women

The role of women in these peacebuilding efforts was hardly mentioned by the male actors who were at the forefront of these efforts, whether tribal leaders, local leaders or NGO workers. A UN official recalled asking the Misrata-Tawergha leadership to include women in the delegations and, although the request was met, the same official was approached by one of the women participating in the dialogue during a break who wanted to share her view. However, she was not able to do so in the general meetings because her male colleagues had ordered her not to. The same official also referred to comments made by Libyan male interlocutors about UNSMIL's obsession with the participation of Libyan women in the events organised by the international community.[88] Logistical problems linked to the issue of financing a chaperone, required by what a Libyan woman working for an NGO described as 'the conservative Libyan society', was mentioned by the same NGO worker to explain the absence of women.[89]

A female interlocutor in Benghazi, however, stressed that while women are not at the forefront of peacebuilding, they have an important function in reporting to their husbands, tribal leaders and elders the situation on the ground and share their 'female' point of view with them. Elders were said to be keen on receiving women's advice in the resolution of social disputes although they remain the ultimate decision-makers. In another example, a female interlocutor in Benghazi recalled the importance of her connections with tribal leaders when summoned by the municipal authority regarding her work in the city. She stressed that calling the *sheikh* of the tribe to which that same official belonged 'got her off the hook'. She noted the importance of establishing good relations with tribal leaders and showing them respect.[90]

In one initiative organised by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, elders and women were brought together to work on reconciliation and while initially there was resistance from the elders, these activities initiated an important dialogue between these two groups. Their representative in Benghazi observed that:

> *In Benghazi, women now have easy access to the* majlis al-hukama *and* hukama *now accept the role of women to be complementary on national reconciliation and now they call them. Now we have women playing a big role in national reconciliation with the* majlis al-hukama.[91]

And yet, another NGO worker in Benghazi observed that women are not present in reconciliation meetings.

Women were mentioned by men involved in peacebuilding in the cases observed as one of the main target groups of social-cohesion activities. Although overall the role of women in the Misrata-Tawergha mediation was minimal, they became central in the eyes of their male leaders in the grassroots work promoted by the Misrata-Tawergha Joint Dialogue Committee. The Misrata and Tawergha leadership involved in the agreement acknowledged the importance of women's roles in the forthcoming implementation of the agreement and in rebuilding trust between the two communities. An elder from Kufra observed that civil society and women especially are the main channels to restoring relationships between the two communities and that women from Tebu and Zway can gather in the same area differently from other actors. The role of women in the family was considered an entry point to foster dialogue and peace within the family with a potential spillover effect within the rest of society.[93] However, it was also noticed by an INGO worker that over the past couple of years, women have become extremely polarised and often less inclined to find solutions than men. This may be explained by the fact that women do not engage in front-line fighting and do not see the atrocities happening there. 'Wiping out' and 'eradicating' the other side has become as common a jargon in some women's narratives as men's.[94]

Overall, the same understanding of a division of labour observed by the side of tribal leadership towards NGOs as explained in detail below, is observed with respect to women and their role in peacebuilding. Social cohesion is perceived as the playground of youth, women and NGOs, while elders, tribal leaders and local authorities engage in functions of mediation and protection considered dangerous or not appropriate for women. However, previous activities directed at challenging this understanding of gender roles in peacebuilding created spaces for communication and interaction whose outcome remains difficult to assess in the short-run. Nevertheless, the tendency to separate functions and actors engaged in intermediation and social cohesion is evident and risks producing short-lived peace.

The absence of violence negotiated by *hukama* and tribal leaders will not translate into restored relations within and between communities unless initiatives are devised to address inequalities and the impact of conflict on local communities.

3. NGOs and networks

Networks and NGOs – henceforth referring to the multitude of clubs, associations, charities and other not-for-profit organisations – were the newcomers of the 2011 revolution together with INGOs and IOs. The presence, functions and activities of NGOs have evolved since then. We explore the way their role is understood and the practical challenges they face in gaining access and creating new spaces for peacebuilding.

3.1 Presence, functions and activities

In the aftermath of the revolution, NGOs proliferated. The 2015 Altai mapping elaborated a list of 1,300 CSOs, including but not limited to NGOs.[95] As a result of the 2014 crisis, many CSOs have switched their focus to more pressing peacebuilding functions rather than developmental activities. CSOs work on service delivery, in-group socialisation and intermediation and facilitation. Activities include dialogue, peace awareness, mediation, prisoner exchanges, IDP-oriented activities[96] and more recently initiatives for reconciliation.[97] Loose networks composed of organisations and individuals also appeared, such as the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace or *Na'mal min ajlik Libya*.

In the Misrata-Tawergha mediation, NGOs and a network of activists worked on social cohesion (dialogue workshops with individuals from both communities, including IDP women in camps in Tripoli and dinner gatherings); advocacy (awareness-raising workshops on the political agreement, reconciliation and peace, representing women from Tawergha and their views in the Libyan Women for Peace conferences); and the delivery of humanitarian aid to the camps. Activists and members of NGOs were also involved in direct consultations with UNSMIL.

In Kufra, there are 70 registered civil society organisations, mainly NGOs and charities, but most of them are not active.[98] Few NGOs and charities headed by activists from Kufra engaged in in-group socialisation and service delivery. More recently, two NGOs, *Kufra al-Khair* and *Hirak Naam*, were working on social cohesion, trying to establish dialogue between the two communities. Two Tebu organisations, the Tebu Youth Council and Markez Annour for Islamic Studies, whose leaders were sons of prominent Tebu leaders, engaged in activities targeting young people such as reciting the Quran, organising races or sports competitions, and playing football.

NGOs in Benghazi have started to return to work after relative security was re-established in the city in 2016. An INGO worker observed that from the 600 CSOs registered in the aftermath of the revolution, about 200 remain today.[99] However, criticism was expressed towards military authorities and the constraints they pose on NGO staff, their work and their ability to travel. An INGO worker observed that communicating with the military mayor to explain the activities of the organisations is essential to operate in the city.[100]

3.2   NGOs and the quest for the apolitical

In the three cases examined, the tribal leaders and NGO and INGO workers interviewed shared the perception of civil society organisations as weak and politicised entities that were expected to be neutral, impartial and apolitical. The Red Crescent was mentioned as a positive example of a neutral organisation across different localities. In the light of the same expectations expressed towards tribal leaders and elders, the perception of what is political and what is not remains difficult to pin down.

An interlocutor in Benghazi noticed how NGOs in the city tend to side with the army by vocally supporting it and this was understood as a political stance. Whether they do it because they believe in the positive role played by the LNA or for their personal security is not clear. Yet in siding with the LNA they were seen as losing their neutral stance and therefore considered unable to play a real role in building peace.[101] In relation to this, an elder from Kufra said:

> We need to raise awareness on their [NGOs'] role. Now what we have is tribal social institutions and if civil society would like to have access to the southern communities

> they must have the endorsement of the Shura council and then they would have the approval of everyone. They have to be developed and they have to avoid any political agendas or political Islam or they have to be impartial [...] They must have good thinking, good ideologies, they have to be able to convince the others and reach out to the society. We want to offer carrots and not sticks.[102]

As the statement of this elder and the attempts at pinning down criteria of neutrality with interviewees throughout this study demonstrate, the concept of an apolitical NGO often refers to NGOs that shy away from political processes including peacebuilding, or organisations and networks that in practice support the political side or peacebuilding effort of the interviewee and therefore, to the external observer cannot but appear as highly political.

For example, the expectation of the Misrata-Tawergha leadership involved in the mediation towards NGOs is that they will conduct dialogue work within the community, supporting this with service delivery and by raising awareness of the agreement, advocating for the agreement and supporting its implementation. Peacebuilding activities such as cultural enterprises like football matches, festivals of traditional and local sports, or talk shows on TV were also considered as important NGO endeavours to breaking down barriers and enabling communication. Workshops for dialogue and peace education among youth and women and other actors from the two communities were deemed necessary regardless of the signing of the agreement.[103] This space is the space within which NGOs are expected to move.

Nevertheless, activists from Tawergha lamented being excluded by the Local Council leadership, although a tendency to exclude activists and NGOs was observed from both the Tawergha and Misrata sides, as one of our interlocutors observed:

> Now there are many councils of notables and dignitaries that want to get involved in the mediation and CSOs as well. There were some CSOs that wanted to get involved even before but there was a refusal from the two sides.[104]

However, a network with clear political objectives like *Na'mal min ajlik Libya* was praised by the Misrata leadership and this contradicts the expectations of neutrality towards NGOs. Indeed, the network reformulated its overall goal from women's empowerment to support of the Libyan Political Agreement in 2015.[105] The participation of a member of the network in the mediation was criticised by Tawergha activists and considered a highly political choice due to the role of the organisation in the Libya Political Agreement and the personal connections of that individual to key political figures at the national level. This showed that NGOs were perceived positively by the Misrata-Tawergha leadership in the mediation as long as they supported the agreement but their advocacy function and critical engagement with local forms of authority of the kind attempted by Tawergha activists remain difficult to accept and manage in the peacebuilding effort.

Elders from Kufra expressed criticism towards those NGOs that consist of a pile of papers and stamps and are used by people to establish a presence, attend conferences or serve personal interests and purposes in stark opposition with the voluntary and unpaid community work of tribal leaders and elders.[106] One of them referred to civil society organisations in these terms:

> As for CSOs in general, that is a group of people that could work towards change so the idea is good. I'm not saying that all CSOs are bad but there are some that are not doing anything good. The fake CSOs are now vanishing. It was more a fashion. There were many of them at the beginning and now they are vanishing and only the CSOs with foundations and basics are able to continue.

Connecting *hukama* to other civil society organisations such as NGOs or the bar association where they operate was considered extremely important in order to ensure monitoring and sustainability of the mediation effort when the *hukama* leave the area.[107]

3.3 Practical challenges and the creation of actors and spaces for peacebuilding

Tribal connections can play an important role in overcoming the practical challenges that NGOs encounter in building peace. Access to cities and communities remains a challenge for Libyan NGOs wanting to operate across the country. Armed groups and resilient social institutions are the main providers of security to NGOs and give them access to local communities. A member of a dialogue club in Misrata, set up as part of the Young Arab Voices programme, was keen to stress how tribal cover is important for members of organisations to travel and operate in communities outside one's own. He gave examples of how this is usually the case in the south and the east of the country. For instance, he and the members of his club were able to work in Ghat, an area where tribes used to support the regime, because of the tribal cover provided by tribes in Ghat. This was possible through a connection established with a young member of that tribe. In this way, youth of a former regime stronghold and the revolutionary city par excellence came together in what he described as a peaceful atmosphere in which they discussed how to build the country. He also stressed how he relies on armed groups in Misrata to provide security to the young people who travel from outside the city for their initiatives. He recalled hosting young people from Zintan, Tobruq and Tawergha, which notoriously are not on good terms with Misrata, but because he had established contacts with members of the armed groups and secured their support they were able to guarantee the security of the participants.[108]

In other circumstances, service delivery is used as a tool to gain access to a community. Not only tribal leaders and elders expressed a favourable opinion towards those INGOs and NGOs who help citizens through service delivery, but this was considered an important function and an entry point by NGOs and charities who deliver aid in order to gain trust within a community. For example, NGOs working in the Tawergha IDP camps were not shy to admit that the delivery of food, blankets, stationery for kids and also support in cleaning the camps was functional to establish trust with the people living there and opened the door to the development of other projects related to female empowerment, violence against women and social-cohesion initiatives.[109]

Access, however, was not the only obstacle encountered by NGOs. Bandwagoning with donors and funding streams was considered problematic by an INGO worker interviewed for this research as it does not allow the development of specific peacebuilding skills among local NGOs. In the Libyan peacebuilding field, the proliferation of NGOs was not matched by the development of expertise within Libyan civil society, as funding streams covered a multiplicity of subjects. NGOs focused on capturing these funds, INGOs and IOs on spending them, and none was paying attention to developing national expertise. [110]

The creation of these spaces has proven difficult. For example, the municipal council in Benghazi, now led by a military mayor, placed constraints on NGOs' work in the city by demanding men between the ages of 18 and 45 obtain an authorisation to leave the city based on the purpose of the trip. This measure was related to the suspiciousness towards the collaboration between NGOs and INGOs and justified as a security measure.

However, there exist positive examples of interaction among these actors that created new actors and spaces for peacebuilding. A local NGO, the Libyan Dialogue and Reconciliation Organisation (LDRO), was set up in 2012 to work on dialogue and mediation. The organisation established itself as a neutral actor vis-à-vis other local and international peacebuilding actors in Kufra and Benghazi. Members of the organisation received training and support from UNSMIL. In Kufra, LDRO engaged in a facilitation function through the presence of local staff from outside the city in the ceasefire agreement in 2012. It was also involved in training local people for monitoring purposes in the aftermath and until today. Through their work, they collaborated with elders, the crisis committee and the municipality.

In Benghazi, LDRO conducted three main activities: an awareness campaign, 'Benghazi is Safe' (2013) to prevent conflict; a dialogue initiative under the slogan 'For You, Benghazi, We Talk and For You We Reconcile', which consisted of round-table discussions with all concerned parties but was not completed due to the deterioration of the security situation; and a mediation initiative and evacuation of civilians in the Ganfuda neighbourhood (2016–17). Throughout this work they were able to establish relations with armed groups, political parties, NGOs, tribal councils and state institutions in the east and the west.

Through their work in Libya, LDRO realised that a division of labour between elders and NGOs should be made explicit in peacebuilding. LDRO lets tribal leaders and elders lead on the agreement, then takes the agreement and monitors its implementation:

> *The tribal leaders lead the mediation. When they have an agreement we implement and find the root causes of the problem. […] So far there has been a very short sighted approach to conflict: end the conflict and go home without restoring relationships and safety within the local communities affected by conflict. [There are] No mitigation measures to avoid the fighting from happening again.* [111]

Another initiative successful in bringing different actors together was mentioned by a Tebu activist from Kufra. The Dialogues of Good People are a series of dialogues that brought young people and elders together. These dialogues were an opportunity for young people to provide consultation to the elders in many different respects such as provision of humanitarian aid. A committee of young people is in constant communication with elders. This mechanism was considered important to bridge generational gaps but also for in-group socialisation, and possibly to build social cohesion across the two communities.

Social cohesion is perceived as the playground of NGOs, women and youth, but there are instances in which these actors have interplayed with tribal leaders who provided access and tribal cover for their activities to take place. From their view, tribesmen acknowledge the role of women and youth, in particular, in restoring relations within and between communities. Identifying entry points within mediation processes or in their immediate aftermath seems key to translate the negative peace – the absence of violence – into a positive one: the integration of society. It is in this way that new collaborative spaces for peacebuilding and reconciliation can be created.

'

While in-group (and indeed transnational) solidarity might be a driver of conflict in certain contexts, such solidarities may have potential when it comes to the delivery of peacebuilding functions.

'

SYRIA

MARK CALDER

INTRODUCTION

The conflict situation in Syria is fluid and the range of conflict and peacebuilding environments radically diverse. In order to best represent something of this range, the cases in this section are not specific conflict and peacebuilding scenarios but clusters of localised situations that entail broadly comparable kinds of diversity, as represented on these axes.

Green dots indicate Sunni opposition strongholds, red indicate SARG-held areas, black Islamic State, and yellow TEV-DEM areas. Patterned dots (Qardaha and East Aleppo mid-2016) indicate locales absent from our study but which demonstrate something of the range of these social contexts in Syria. The diagram below is only indicative and not a representation of systematically generated data.

Representing Syrian diversity
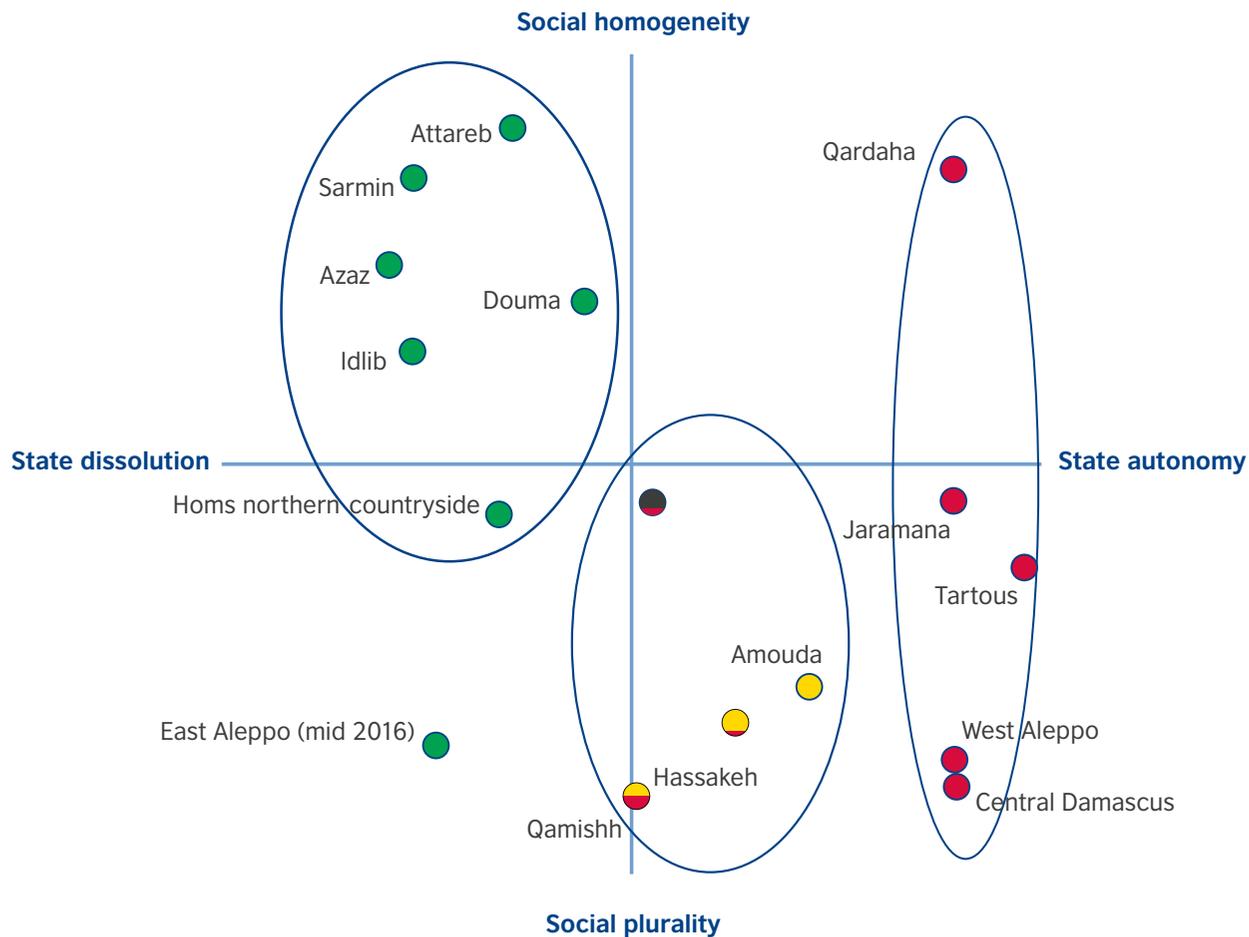
In the absence of a legally secured public space in which civil society, as classically understood, would be active, the Syrian cases have been constructed by thinking in terms of a socio-political dynamic that has decisive implications for conflict and peacebuilding: the relationship of the state (or state-like entities) to those resilient institutions which are linked to social identities. Foremost among these, certainly over the long term, are tribes and sects.[113] Thus we plot state autonomy, on the x-axis, and the plurality or otherwise of identity-salient social institutions on the y-axis. These two metrics, while only intended to be indicative, nevertheless disclose distinct kinds of conflict and peacebuilding environments that may demand different kinds of interventions. To clarify, the autonomy of the state here would incorporate the Weberian account of statehood: effective monopoly over the legal use of force in a given territory,[114] but here the emphasis is upon the extent to which a state is established as a kind of meta-institution over other institutions.[115]

At the nation-state level, clearly, Syria lacks a strong state (in terms of either responsiveness or autonomy, see endnote 115), but within specific regions certain state structures operate with monopoly or near monopoly over the use of force. The regime of the Assad-led Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) has subsumed state apparatuses in its heartlands, especially in the coastal cities and a swathe of land from Damascus to Hama.[116] Meanwhile the self-governing Kurdish-majority cantons of the north, designated Rojava, are governed by the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) which has established state structures which, while not fully distinct from the party itself, may nevertheless be somewhat more responsive to the demands of society as a whole.[117] The Islamic State organisation, in its heartlands, may also comprise a more or less autonomous state. By contrast, in other areas, there is little by way of a state-secured legal regime within which governance proceeds more or less predictably: these are areas where any overarching state apparatus has dissolved, leaving enduring and emerging social, political and military institutions as arbiters of power, including lethal force.

Meanwhile, among the more enduring of these institutions, Syria's sects and tribes comprise diverse power structures, different mechanisms of distributing resources, an array of group logics, and, sometimes, different narratives of their relationship to wider Syrian society, all of which we take to be relevant to peacebuilding. Thus, it is not unproblematic to use sect or tribe as a category of analysis. Sects, for instance, are not different instances of the same thing. Some of them are defined doctrinally, such as the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Other sectarian identifications are experienced as ethnicities in a stronger sense. Druze, Alawis, Syriac-Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenian Christians, Kurds (who are majority Sunni Muslim) or Turkmen might fall into this latter category, but each are associated with different prevailing political expressions of peoplehood, formalised institutions and logics of authority.[118] Importantly, all of these are ethnic in the sense of inherited identifications, whether these identifications are imagined to be essential, such as received through blood, or more symbolic inheritances, such as received revealed truth.[119] Thus some sects may be considered to cohere according to a more kin-based logic than others, evoking the phenomenon of tribeness more than other sects.

Likewise, the experience of tribal identification in a diverse urban milieu such as Hama may differ from that of a resident of the villages around Deir az-Zor.[120] Tribal identifications may be more comparable than sectarian identifications, referring to real or fictive kinship[121] in a way that sects need not. Still, not everyone who identifies with a tribe is necessarily subject to tribal authority to the same extent, and the distribution of power within different tribes contrasts greatly. Importantly, and somewhat differently from Libya, the Syrian context makes available alternatives to both sectarian and tribal commitments (and protection) through the Ba'ath Party, opposition politics, armed groups, organisations and, in some urban areas, a limited liberal space of individual expression outside of politics. Perhaps above all, it is important therefore not to reify tribes and sects as being clearly defined actors.

1.   Case studies

1.1   Sunni opposition heartlands

Five of the six conflict and peacebuilding contexts that comprise our first case are in the north-west, namely Attareb, Azaz, Idlib city and countryside, Sarmin and the Homs Local Council area to the north of Homs city. With the exception of the latter, which is encircled by SARG forces, this is contiguous opposition-controlled territory. The other, geographically removed locale considered within this case is that of Douma in the besieged Eastern Ghouta near Damascus.

What unites these locales is their relative homogeneity in the sense of lacking a plurality of powerful tribal and sectarian structures, while there is also a lack of an autonomous, even identifiable, state. Sunni Muslims are the overwhelming majority in each of these locales, with small pockets of Christians, Shia and Druze in the north-west, and Alawis near Homs. Tribal affiliations are locally salient, but less so in the Idlib and Eastern Ghouta areas than in the rural areas surrounding Homs where, for instance, the al-Turki tribe, whose leader Sheikh Mohammed Mzeid we spoke to, populate 19 villages. There has been sect-based violence in these areas, with Christians fleeing or driven out of Idlib city by Jabhat an-Nusra in 2015 and the reported massacre, by the same group, of Druze in Qalb Loze. [122]

Meanwhile, even when there is one armed group guaranteeing security, it is likely to be preoccupied with protecting its position vis-à-vis other groups, rather than establishing the institutional (or meta-institutional) framework that might be considered a state. Having said that, as we shall see, none of these seven areas are completely lacking in recognisable civilian governance structures, and most of these have proven more resilient even than the security regime of a given armed group.

As heartlands of the opposition, these areas are under frequent attack from SARG forces and, in each of them, everyday life is defined by the somewhat routinised responses to violent hostilities, not least devastating aerial assault. Alongside casualties and loss of property, the most frequently mentioned effect of the conflict in each of these areas is shortages in essential goods such as food, medical supplies and fuel.

The severity of these shortages varies considerably between the large north-western region, availed of a somewhat open border with Turkey (and from which some government employees still commute, for example, into SARG-held Hama), and the besieged area of the opposition-held Eastern Ghouta around Douma, which is now only around 12–15 km from east to west and similar from north to south. Douma council staff told us that the current situation involves near-daily shelling by air, missiles and mortars, resulting in severe poverty and, in some cases, starvation. There are no warehouses for food. However, they added that there exists very strong social solidarity in Douma and mutual assistance has become part of everyday life. The opposition-controlled areas of the Homs countryside, to the north of the city of Homs, is around 40 km from east to west at its widest point and therefore has more capacity and resilience in the face of the regime's blockade, but international aid has reached these areas sporadically and, at the time of our workshop in Gaziantep, not at all in the previous four months. [123]

The presence of IDPs is a significant social and economic effect of the conflict, and a catalyst of change in each of these three areas. For instance, according to our council interlocutors in Sarmin, a town population of 30,000 has grown to 40,000 due to IDPs, who are now competing for limited resources. One told us:

> It is becoming crowded in Sarmin because of IDPs and there is a lack of resources for flour, bread, water. Sarmin needs these. There is a high price of fuel so we can't use even our old cars […] We most need bread and flour, and diapers – there is no diapers material in the markets. And the householders are often only children with no parents. This is the struggle for all. The only bread store was struck by the Syrian regime. [124]

The aside here, regarding child householders, is a striking reminder that the most enduring social institution of all, the nuclear family, has suffered a dramatic reconfiguration during the conflict. This has greatly exposed many children to risk, not least due to the need to eke out a living in the greatly constrained, and highly risky, economy of war. [125]

1.2 Sects and tribes in the north-east and east

In stark contrast to these Sunni opposition heartlands, an eastern strip of Syria, from Qamishli on the border with Turkey, south-west to Hassakeh and further to al-Shaddadeh and Deir al-Zor, is characterised by a double pluralism of tribes and sects. This second case includes three regimes fulfilling state functions with varying degrees of autonomy: SARG, TEV-DEM and IS. While violent conflict between SARG and TEV-DEM is sporadic, there is some communication and co-operation between them, especially vis-à-vis the common enemy of IS.[126] Tribal institutions are relevant in the whole area, and successive governments from the Ottomans to the Assads, via French and British interlopers, have pursued the co-operation of tribal leaders in order to control the vast and porous eastern border.

Within Hassakeh and Qamishli, during our research, hostilities were sporadic and our interlocutors referred mostly to emergency situations that occurred between 2012 and 2015, with a brief exchange of hostilities between the Syrian Democratic Forces and SARG forces in the summer of 2016. Emergencies recalled by our Syriac interlocutors included those blamed on the regime and those blamed on IS, such as kidnappings, forced migrations, extortion, attacks on churches (in the case of IS) and the lack of electricity and water. However, they also said that the blockade of Rojava by the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey and SARG had led to continuing shortages of medicines.[127]

Further south, the situation remains more urgent, with Deir al-Zor almost entirely under IS control. We were unable to speak directly to any interlocutors still resident in IS-controlled areas, although we had interlocutors from these areas, based elsewhere, who gave us their best assessments of the situation. Clashes between IS and SARG, which retains an enclave in Deir al-Zor, and occasionally with other opposition groups, are continuing, and seemingly, for opponents of IS and non-Sunnis, life is barely tolerable. Having said that, the involvement of tribal leaders in managing a transition of sorts from SARG to the opposition to IS was credited by multiple interlocutors with limiting the deadly hostilities. This transition, however, did not make space for minorities: the once large Armenian population had fled or been expelled by the end of 2015, by which point its famous genocide memorial church had already been destroyed.

1.3 Regime heartlands

During our research, SARG consolidated its control over strategically important centres such as Aleppo. It therefore became especially important to us to speak to at least some individuals with experience of peacebuilding interventions in SARG-controlled areas. This was difficult by phone due to the illegality of working for organisations with external funding and the pervasive surveillance apparatus of SARG. We were, however, able to speak to interlocutors with recent experience of working in SARG-controlled Damascus and its suburbs, Aleppo and Tartous while they were outside of Syria.

Those areas of SARG-controlled territory that have remained so throughout the conflict, especially Alawi-strongholds such as Tartous on the coast, have suffered much less from the continuing hostilities. Indicatively, at a time when it is commonly accepted Syria has a lost generation when it comes to accessing education,[128] towns in these SARG strongholds have actually seen an increase in school enrolment.[129]

Nevertheless, SARG-controlled Syria remains deeply authoritarian, despite the repeal of the Emergency Law in 2011, entailing the severe suppression of any unsanctioned activities deemed political.[130] Activists, including some of our interlocutors, report continuing threats and harassment.[131] Some of those we spoke to echoed the claim of Yassin-Kassab that SARG strategy involved suppressing civic (or liberal or secular) opposition in particular, while allowing more freedom to those associated with proscribed Islamist organisations, because civil society constitutes a more enduring threat due to its potential to garner external support.[132] All of those we spoke to, and who were still connected with projects in the country, were insistent upon anonymity and in general expressed more caution about participating in our research than those elsewhere in the country (although a few interlocutors in besieged opposition areas expressed similar caution, and a number of organisations' representatives in opposition areas also asked that we keep the names of organisations separate from specific interventions).

Since the war began, SARG has continued its policy of subcontracting certain functions to semi-autonomous actors. Historically, this has included tribes[133] and sects,[134] but in the context of the uprising in 2011–12, SARG also distributed weapons to households encouraging them to form local defence committees, which continue to operate across Syria as part of the National Defence Force.[135] This creates a 'fuzzy' boundary to the state, comprising more or less formalised institutions, in SARG-controlled areas. It too is by no means an actor with a single will and intention: it is rather a vehicle for the regime's network of patrimonial interests which can be mobilised, or weaponised, by SARG when it becomes desirable to do so.[136]

Likewise, since the brief opening up of the Damascus Spring of 2000–01, SARG has sought to encompass civil society within its own functions and deploying much of its vocabulary, such as, indeed, peacebuilding, through the conflict-era Ministry of Reconciliation.[137] This encompassing of the civic space appears to be a central feature of SARG strategy to exclude alternatives to itself. Indeed, during our Beirut workshop we heard reports from NGO activists of previously tolerated organisations which were closed because they refused to display the image of President Assad inside their offices, a refusal expressed on the basis that they sought to be apolitical (which is, arguably, a potently political aspiration in the absence of a secure civic space).[138]

Our interlocutors in SARG areas, therefore, worked in less than ideal situations and in ways that did not disclose nor, as we shall see, necessarily depend on, their connection to organisations. Some of these had worked in dangerous situations such as Yarmouk, the Palestinian refugee camp near Damascus and near the former Aleppo frontline, but our more involved conversations were with people who had worked in SARG heartlands within minority communities.

2. Resilient social institutions

Here we look at sect and tribe within a more overarching category of enduring, resilient social institutions, noting their persistence over time and despite quite fundamental changes in the structures and boundaries of Levantine polities. We look at them together because, in Syria, sect and tribe sometimes overlap and intersect. Dawn Chatty describes Syrian tribes as tied together, 'in networks of real and fictive kinship; these bonds provide the tribal members with a solidarity and cohesiveness which the state has not been able to suppress despite decades of effort.'[139] But this applies also to Syriacs, Druze, Armenians and others in Syria, who would normally be conceived of as sects, and who may also be tied through narratives other than kinship. Indicatively, the 19 al-Turki villages we mentioned earlier, near Homs and Hama (and which at the time of writing are under IS control) are scattered across a territory in which there were also Alawi villages. While the al-Turkis are Sunni by sect, it is quite intelligible to speak of the (sectarian) Alawi group and the (tribal) al-Turki group as comparable in the local frame, as indeed Sheikh Mohammed did in our conversation. Reiterating that there is this categorical blurring, we start by looking at these more or less similar institutions from the sectarian side first, and then from the more obviously tribal side.

In the early days of the conflict, a common refrain of the street protests was, 'One, one, one, the Syrian people are one'. This was both a rejection of sectarian division and a pre-emptory rebuttal of the accusation by SARG supporters that the opposition was to be understood as sectarian agitation by the Sunni majority against minorities.[140] Such a stance took into account the long history of government manipulation of sectarian difference which, while proclaiming the unity of all Syrians as part of a united Arab republic, advanced the interests of sect-based elites and stoked fears that bolstered its perceived role as protector of minorities.[141] Against this context, and recognising the pluralism of the opposition, it is certainly the case that, now, some Syrians do frame the continuing war in sectarian terms, not least as an uprising against the Alawi elite,[142] while sectarian identifications have sometimes been exploited by third parties, such as Iran or Gulf-based actors.[143]

What is less clear is the extent to which sectarian or tribal solidarities can be drivers of in-group and inter-group peacebuilding, as well as of conflict. Studies alert us to the fact that it is important not to take communal identifications for granted as a determining conflict driver, such that we presume to know broadly where someone will stand vis-à-vis the conflict parties based upon their inherited sectarian identification.[144] Indeed, a striking feature of the conflict landscape is the engagement of members of the same tribes and ethno-religious or ethno-national communities on different sides of the conflict. Proceeding with caution, therefore, we will look firstly at the Syriac Christians in the TEV-DEM north, a Druze-majority locality under SARG control, and tribes, before turning to the more cohesive Sunni opposition heartlands.

2.1 Northern Suryoye

Suryoye (Syriac-Aramaic) or *siryan* (Arabic) are Syriac Orthodox Christians who identify with an Aramean or Assyrian heritage which some differentiate from Arab ethnicity.[145] Others intertwine Arab and Syriac identifications, and many, as their name reflects, express a strong and distinctive connection with the lands of the Levant as their patrimony as descendants of ancient Arameans or Assyrians who had vast empires in the region. While some, especially in the diaspora, assert this nationhood as independent from religion, they are inextricably linked to the Syriac churches and many of the most important narratives they use to express their groupness derive from a particular Christian history. For instance, use of Syriac-Aramaic, or the language of Christ, as many interlocutors would have it, is a source of great pride to many, even among those who do not appear to be intensely religious.[146]

Although we accessed diverse individuals in and around Qamishli and Hassakeh, all of our Syriac interlocutors who expressed an opinion in this research identified with opposition to the regime, while the Syriac Orthodox church hierarchy has sought to remain neutral and other groups have aligned with SARG.[147] Still, our interlocutors were slow to criticise the church for their neutrality.[148] This could be deference, but they were happy to criticise the church for perceived in-group pastoral failings, suggesting that the position of the church vis-à-vis SARG was not a major cause of discontent for these individuals. Likewise, they were

only gently critical of those Syriac groups, such as local militias and the Qamishli Sootoro, that had aligned themselves with SARG, suggesting that such alliances are accepted as passing necessities oriented towards protecting vulnerable Syriac lives and livelihoods.

One elder told us:

> Our attitude is based on the idea of stability, but with the new situation there has been a new mood. There are multiple power configurations, a multiplicity of decision-making, a dispersion of allegiances. The Syriacs are committed to the law, but the war has divided them in the region, so on the basis of this mentality, a division of the community might take place in the future.[149]

However, he added, 'The divisions did not affect the Church.' All of the other interlocutors, moreover, asserted that this division was superficial. An activist with Syriac Cross NGO told us:

> Since the revolution most [extended] families have been divided between the regime and the other side, but our relationship together, we can always fix it. We will have our meetings and make our opinion one. Everyone will take different sides but we will always come together to build our community. So we try to understand each other. We have one main goal: to protect our people from other forces. Like where ISIS attacked Hassakeh. Some Syriacs worked with the regime, so we asked them how can we fight ISIS together and help each other?[150]

This was even echoed by the Syrian military personnel we spoke to. Importantly, therefore, wartime allegiances appeared tactical and locally contingent when compared to the more fundamental allegiance with fellow Syriacs.[151] This is not to say that other loyalites are not taken seriously: in fact several of these interlocutors praised TEV-DEM, or simply 'the Kurds', for the multi-sectarian polity they have sought to build. The Syriac elder told us, 'TEV-DEM offers safety and the People's Protection Units (YPG) consists of Arabs, Syriacs and Kurds. Our participation in this is evidence of the mentality of the unit.'

However, it was striking that one of my interlocutors asked that I didn't call the area Rojava: 'that's a Kurdish word', he said. He preferred the Syriac cognate of the name for the Jazeera canton, Gozarto, suggesting not only his preference for Syriac but also his ambivalence towards the Kurdish national project. [152] Commitment to such projects is therefore evidently secondary to the fundamental task of stabilising the environments in which Syriac families dwell. If anything, our Syriac interlocutors seemed to favour a united Syria, but the nature of the polity, and their security within it, was of greater importance than the borders. [153]

Thus, while in-group (and indeed transnational) solidarity might be a driver of conflict in certain contexts, such solidarities may have potential when it comes to the delivery of peacebuilding functions identified by Paffenholz. The church itself, and community groups like the scouts, continue to be involved in the distribution of food and financial support, and provided sanctuary (protection) during aerial bombardments in previous emergencies. However, Syriac Cross started because, according to the founder, no external donor wanted to partner with either the church or the community association so they formed an NGO. [154] Here the reasoning is identical to that of our TEV-DEM-aligned Syriac Military Council interlocutor who explained the need to form a military outfit in order to protect Syriac interests in a destabilised situation. While the Syrial Military Council unsurprisingly described its functions primarily in terms of protection, Syriac Cross emphasised the distribution of aid and medicines. Nevertheless, this primacy of in-group commitment was not expressed as exclusion of the other. Syriac Cross volunteers told us of outward-looking initiatives:

> We help not only our people but refugees from other governorates: from Homs, Aleppo, and other places, those who came here because our area was the safest place at that time. We also have a group in Homs, and we work for Yazidis in the camp who faced Daesh in Shingal [in Iraq]. So we have a lot of projects: food projects, hygiene and so on, and we tried to run a medical project, but… we couldn't guarantee safety or security so [INGOs] wouldn't [facilitate] projects in these dangerous areas. So at first it was just distributing aid packages, but now we try to do other things, like a bakery project in Hassakeh, where we try to involve women to work in it. [155]

We cannot verify this account of Syriac Cross's work and we have no way of reliably triangulating this account with other perspectives, although our other interlocutors in the area had at least heard of their work. [156] Still, we may note that as an expression of pre-existing communal solidarities, Syriac Cross appears well placed to identify vulnerable Syriac beneficiaries and operate with a measure of legitimacy derived from in-group commitments. Moreover, it is relevant that our Syriac Cross interlocutors recognise the value in reaching beyond their own communal boundaries to engage other vulnerable people, and that, by implication, divergent visions of unity may not necessarily be antagonistic. [157]

2.2   A Druze domus in SARG strongholds

Leaders of Syria's Druze are among those with whom SARG has cultivated close relationships, and asserted their role as protectors. [158] However, as with any other of the social institutions, Druze do not collectively comprise an actor. Two of our interlocutors described a situation in a Druze-majority suburb of Damascus, Jaramana, wherein the influence of the Druze *sheikhs* and local notables was instrumental in resolving a conflict situation that arose between SARG forces and a local family. In the interest of our interlocutors' safety, we omit the details here, and jump to some of the implications.

They pointed out that it was because the *sheikhs* and notables had themselves maintained relationships with SARG officials, while being recognised authorities among the Druze families and local defence committees, that they were able to solve a simmering problem that had the potential to develop into protracted hostilities. One Druze interlocutor told us:

> *The* sheikhs *have great power and influence in [the locale] … If you know a key* sheikh *you know a key person with influence in the community and so you can achieve your goals. So even for the government forces, they would find a key* sheikh *or religious leader who is able to convey their message to the community. Even if they want to arrest someone, they will go to the* sheikh *and do it via the* sheikh*. They bring the person first to the house of the* sheikh *and then they go with the regime.* [159]

We note three features of this dynamic. The first is the supposed necessity of having relationships with multiple stakeholders when it comes to resolving emerging hostilities, even when these relationships may be seen as compromising, such as with SARG officials. In conversation with diverse interlocutors, these relationships were portrayed as part of communal leadership, both for tribes and sects, but that these relationships were not without risk. It is hard to identify the point at which such engagements may become a fig leaf to, or co-option by, a conflict party. However, one of our interlocutors suggested that there was a general acknowledgement that certain kinds of relationship were more deniable and effective – such as informal meetings with mid-level officials – than others. [160]

The second is a recurring theme of our interlocutors' descriptions of traditional authorities such as *sheikhs* and clerics, namely their orientation towards stability. As with the northern Syriacs and their ambivalence towards the church's soft neutrality, this was not identified as a decisive problem for our NGO interlocutors' interventions.

Thirdly, this stability orientation may have to do with the semi-private domestic (and sometimes domesticated) space in which they exercise authority, apparently under the protection of an authoritarian regime. This domesticity is not entirely metaphorical: it is evoked by the use of physical spaces in these exchanges. Druze *sheikhs* may be guests of a family in their home and play host to officials as part of resolving conflict. Receiving the regime's officials and the members of one's own sectarian group within a leader's residence communicates something of the inviolability of the community and its right to an interior. There is no apparent pursuit of a neutral space.

For our interlocutors, the main implication of this is that the (admittedly problematic) stability which leaders attempt to guarantee is what makes it possible for activists to work on their projects in these areas without molestation, whereas attempting to carve out a liberal, civic sphere makes it more likely that one's work will be either co-opted or suppressed, as we will see below. One of our Druze interlocutors told us that she has been able to deliver rights-based interventions for children based on the fact that she is seen as, simply, 'a girl everyone knows'.

The *sheikhs* allowed her to do her work because it did not proceed, as it were, in an undifferentiated public or civic space, but within a relationally internal, domestic space. SARG take this to be 'in-house' for as long as the *sheikhs* guarantee good order. It was with this cover that she expected to be able to produce positive outcomes, not only in terms of demanded services or a 'material peace dividend', [161] but in terms of social transformation.

2.3 Tribes

Tribes too have their social interiors in which tribal leaders are left, sometimes told, by the state to perform arbitration and mediation work, a kind of subcontracting that may serve tribal elites as well as the state. This is not a modern phenomenon: as in Libya, tribal *sheikhs* have practised *'urf* law in the arbitration of local disputes for centuries. However, the three tribal *sheikhs* we spoke to have all opposed SARG, while each of their tribes has been divided by the conflict, with some individuals and families supporting the uprising, others SARG, and still others aligning themselves with IS. Once again, these institutions are not discrete, unified actors. Indeed, the most senior *sheikhs* in the Jabour tribe in Syria attempted to remove tribal cover – protection and inheritance rights – from those who joined IS, but were unable to stop the political division of the tribe. [162]

However, we must be cautious about interpreting this failure of the part of a specific tribe's leadership as pointing to the increasing weakness of the tribe. With considerable local variation, tribal connections remain materially and symbolically important, and the conflict parties loudly proclaim tribal support. [163] Put another way, the fragmentation of larger tribal units into smaller units pursuing their own interests does not mean necessarily that tribeness, as a narrative of identification or logic of authority, is no longer relevant, but may indicate a redistribution of influence within a previously more centralised institution. For instance, our interlocutors with informers in IS areas told us that the militants had been very careful to cultivate relations with specific family patriarchs, thus producing new tribal hierarchies out of the sub-tribal *ashiiras*, or clans, but which still conformed to a tribal ideology, especially the preservation of kinship connections and the ability to secure local stability through tactical alliances. [164]

Sheikh Ahmad Abu Radi of the Jabour tribe, who has survived assassination attempts as an outspoken critic of diverse powers, explained how IS had persuaded some of his fellow tribesmen to join them, and suggested that other external parties could learn from their approach.

> *Hafez Assad fought the tribes economically. Daesh [IS] did not do it. It did not humiliate them or fight them, and avoided clashing with them. Therefore, Daesh controlled Deir az-Zor through negotiating … Tribes do not carry an ideology or a political project but work within a local framework. It is a social institution. It is a civil society organisation that has a moral code and does not need promotion or need to advertise for it.* [165]

This may be an idealised depiction of the *modus operandi* of IS, and indeed of the apolitical nature of tribes. Nevertheless, it captures a rather more ambiguous orientation among tribal leaders: a decisive commitment to, for better or worse, stability in their own areas (echoing the comment of our Syriac and Druze interlocutors above). This clearly has downsides, where stability entails reinforcing coercive power relations, but among the upsides is these leaders' enskillment in, and experience of, certain forms of peacebuilding: according to Sheikh Mohammed Mzeid, he still entertains tribe members daily over coffee to solve their problems and resolve their conflicts even though he, with many of his kin, are based in Saudi Arabia. [166] Thus, for several of our interlocutors, NGO representatives as well as tribal representatives, tribes are a necessary interlocutor, partner and sometime instigator in the delivery of peacebuilding functions, especially in the east of Syria.

What tribes can contribute concretely deserves more attention than is possible within the scope of this report. Certainly, many of our interlocutors' accounts echo the findings of Swiss Peace's *Inside Syria* report, which portrays a kind of division of labour between tribal and community elders on the one hand, oriented towards negotiation-based interventions, and NGOs or CSOs on the other, which are expected to be involved in aid distribution, service delivery and education provision. [167]

Sheikh Mohammed, and a number of our NGO interlocutors, thought there could be more effective teamwork (his phrase) between NGOs and tribal leaders, while other NGO activists expressed concern that this would reinforce social models that they saw as outdated. We will return to this in our conclusions. [168] Most, however, recognised that while for many Syrians, NGOs are a source of suspicion due to their external backing, their association with tribal leaders may be a source of perceived legitimacy for NGO interventions, even if NGOs themselves may be suspicious of tribal power.

There are two further points to make about tribes based on our interlocutors' testimonies. The first is that, like sects, they possess transnational connections that can be useful for peacebuilding, and are most definitely useful for sustaining their institutions. This is not just the case for a four-million-strong confederation such as the Aneza, of which the al-Turki tribe is part, but at the mid-level, where *sheikhs* are able to exert influence and provide some leadership from exile, such as with those to whom we spoke. The second point is that, like sects, our tribal interlocutors thought that internal solidarities would ultimately outlast conflict-era division. Sheikh Mohammad speculated:

> *Once Daesh get out, there will be a lot of obstacles to establishing a peace, especially if Daesh members are hidden here and there. But if the members belong to this tribe, or even to a neighbouring tribe, I think we could solve it, because tribal connections between members are stronger than any religious connections between members. The loyalty of the member today who is fighting with Daesh, the real loyalty, is with the tribe. This guy moved to Daesh because it is a source of income and power which, unfortunately the [tribal] leaders could not supply.*

Time will prove or disprove Sheikh Mohammad's optimism, but foregoing centuries of resilience give it some credence.

3. Fragile civic spaces and emerging authorities in opposition heartlands

Thus far we have paid attention to long-established social institutions whose formal expressions in the form of tribal and sect-based organisations and leadership structures emerge as primary actors in the areas considered. In the Sunni opposition heartlands, especially in the north-west, tribal loyalties are less important and, in the specific locales we researched, there is rather less sectarian diversity. Moreover, these are also the areas where social configurations have been most profoundly disrupted with the state's displacement and the proliferation of new, fragmented forms of governance and authority. Thus, whereas the decisive social dynamic in TEV-DEM and SARG areas is that created between their respective states and these social institutions, the relative absence of a state meta-institution or of powerful social institutions such as tribes and sects creates something of a marketplace, represented by SARG as simply chaos, in which emerging actors appear to be of greater relevance to peacebuilding. Still, as we turn to the arena of the greatest social change, we benefit from retaining a sense of what has endured, at least elsewhere in Syria, and perhaps also somewhere in the midst of this most extreme upheaval.

3.1 Armed groups

Crucially, these areas are characterised by the decisive role of diverse armed groups, some of which have recently rationalised command structures, but none of which has established a monopoly over these areas. Moreover, while all of these locales are controlled by armed groups opposed to the Assad government, they also pursue sometimes deadly rivalries with one another, while at other times co-operating. Nevertheless, armed groups are decisively involved in enabling or obstructing the delivery of peacebuilding functions and, ultimately, in providing the function of protection. According to our indicative mapping of conflict in the workshops, opposition armed groups can usually prevent NGOs and councils from delivering certain functions if it is deemed to the latter to conflict with their interests, a point that emerges clearly in the scenarios we consider below. Armed groups are therefore critically relevant actors in peacebuilding.

Frequently, these armed groups are presented as neatly divided between moderates and extremists, which while necessary for official policies of terrorism designation, disguises as much as it reveals. The relationships between these groups are continually changing, with allies becoming adversaries, and vice-versa. If there is a main theme, latterly, it is the growth of Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), the successor since January 2017 to the al-Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front. This growth is the fruit of military success and the consequent incorporation of several former adversaries into its command structures, although in the Eastern Ghouta they suffered setbacks in April 2017 at the hands of their Jaish al-Islam rivals. One other key theme is the fragmentation of the Free Syrian Army, still a reference point for Track One negotiations and once the favoured partner of US and allied governments, which has seemingly become increasingly piecemeal and localised. Indeed, many of its component groups have suffered near=neutralisation, subject to the targeted offensives of HTS and Nusra's most aggressively sectarian splinter, the Jund al-Aqsa, which has recently aligned with IS.

A perhaps more useful comparison, compared with the moderates/extremists binary, would be the relative popularity of these groups among civilians, some of whom have protested the presence of foreign fighters, with al-Nusra their main target. [169] While Jaish al-Islam is also committed to building an Islamic state, anecdotal evidence from interlocutors in this project suggests they have rather more local backing, but this is, again, impossible to measure accurately within the parameters of our research.

Meanwhile, each of these armed groups depends to some extent on money from outside, with Gulf states and Turkey in particular seen as backers of Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar as-Sham, while HTS's international backing is murkier, with it being seen as the successor to Nusra and designated a terrorist organisation by all international conflict parties. Armed groups can generate income through controlling smuggling routes, rentable lands and formal and informal marketplaces.

Many of our interlocutors objected to the militarisation of the conflict in general and the conduct of armed groups in particular, citing their complicity in sect-based violence, for instance. [170] Others, however, including those involved in peacebuilding functions such as service delivery under siege, expressed sympathy for the armed opposition groups in general. Sarmin is bisected at the time of writing, by a frontline dividing HTS-controlled areas to the west and south and Ahrar as-Sham areas to the east. One council representative, however, having described the everyday difficulty in bringing different sides together, urged against writing off the armed groups as extremists, suggesting that at the local level, they were made up of very diverse peoples, united by a desire to fight with the most effective means of resistance against the regime.

> *Armed groups are not terrorists, not extreme as the world says, they are not Islamic extremists, they contain my brothers, nephews, cousins, and carrying weapons is about saving their lives and ours against the Syrian regime, and saving our families from this criminal regime.* [171]

This humanising of armed actors, and personalising of the rationales of their members' participation in armed conflict, draws attention to armed groups as social configurations that impinge upon the environment for peacebuilding more deeply than simply as protagonists of conflict. Armed groups, as our Sarmin council interlocutor pointed out, attract participation from the populations they protect or control. In the absence of strong tribes oriented primarily towards stability, as in other parts of Syria, the social solidarity afforded by participation is a compelling option for people who perceive their lives, families and futures to have been destroyed by the regime, and also, simply, as an employer. The heterogeneity of participants' reasons for participating also draws attention to their lack of clear boundedness or coherence, a feature shared with all the other actors we have described so far.

Nevertheless, projecting a coherent identity for militias is a key concern of their respective leaders, as evidenced by the careful branding and positioning of each group in social, political and theological terms, evident not least by their websites and media departments. Armed groups of all stripes are, according to our

interlocutors, usually supported by some religious specialists, who inform and provide justification for their military-political programmes, and this is a key basis of their claims to legitimacy, especially for the Islamist groups. Several of our interlocutors suggested that these religious authorities were often new and young voices lacking the credentials usually required of religious specialists. However, we were unable to access these individuals for their perspectives during the research.

Finally, while some members of armed groups have been involved in reported atrocities, and many of them advocate programmes that are exclusive of pluralism, they are not necessarily devoid of pragmatism. One of our interlocutors, a Christian leader, had been incarcerated by an armed group during their advances from which Christians fled, but this year has been contacted by them for his input in exploring ways of restoring Christians to an area from which most of them had fled or been driven out. [172]

3.2 Local councils

A feature shared across these areas is the proliferation of local and municipal councils operating outside of a well-established overarching regime of governance, and often lacking demarcated competencies scaled from a national or regional level to the municipal or local level. These councils emerged from 2012, partly alongside, and partly as an attempt to formalise the work of the local co-ordination committees, the nascent structures that responded to the initial effects of SARG withdrawal. [173]

These are more clearly peacebuilding actors in terms of the Paffenholz functions. However, there is a considerable range in the types of council structures that have emerged, sometimes largely appointed, [174] sometimes largely elected, [175] with equally divergent levels of effectiveness. [176] Most comprise some elected component, although the franchise is not always extended to all residents, and nominations by locally recognised authorities such as family elders and community notables also play a role. The question of whether or not these structures can be described as adequately democratic – and some, such as the Douma Council seems to be – need not in any case imply that they are lacking any democratic legitimacy in the eyes of our interlocutors. Instead they are an experimental expression of somewhat participatory, consultative governance. [177]

Arguably a greater problem is their relative dependence, not upon their constituents, but upon armed groups and mediated access to international donors, either via local NGOs or contacts out of country such as our Turkey-based council contacts. Council representatives we spoke to in Douma, Homs and Sarmin each described open lines of communication with armed groups, but each likewise stressed the civilian character of the council itself and asserted a separation between the armed groups protecting the towns and the internal security, or police services within the towns with which the councils co-ordinate most closely. The Douma Council stipulates that councillors must not be participants in armed groups. [178]

Councils also provide a focal point for NGOs and donors, connecting them to the delivery of services for residents. Sometimes funds are directed to the councils by smuggling cash from outside a besieged area, or bribing SARG officials to allow resources to enter, but rarely do councils generate significant income locally. The councils lack a reliable tax base and are therefore dependent upon external funds, either from foreign governments as aid or from INGO donors. However, according to our council and NGO interlocutors, they are rarely the trusted local partners of international donors who, in the experience of our interlocutors, tend to prefer local NGOs. Thus, councils face in three directions: to armed groups, external donors and the civilians they serve.

Sam Heller's report for the Century Foundation [179] provides a particularly useful account of local councils in the Idlib area, painting a picture of groups of often well-respected, well-intentioned individuals walking a tightrope between the expectations of citizens, the demands of armed groups and reliance upon NGOs for access to resources. Our interlocutors broadly shared this perception: some stressed that these local councils are the closest thing to representative government in these areas and that, therefore, any NGO actor should go via the councils before initiating interventions. [180] However, even if the importance of councils is acknowledged by donors, the balance of power favouring those with access to funds does not always promote successful outcomes. Our Gaziantep workshop included a discussion of a scenario in the Homs Governorate Council where a local NGO had applied for

funds from a large international donor to implement an education initiative for children lacking access to public schooling. One of the criteria by which it was adjudicated to have the best proposal was its inclusion of the local council as a delivery partner. According to the councillor in our workshop, upon receipt of the money, the NGO insisted that the council contribute a sizeable percentage of the monies to the NGO's operating costs, and that, if it did not do so, it would abandon the partnership with the council and 'take the money elsewhere'. Whether our councillor's perspective is fair and accurate is impossible to say, yet we had in our workshop one of the donor's employees who had been involved in criteria-checking the initial proposal, and who noted that the way in which the donor had placed all their trust, ultimately, in the NGO for delivering and monitoring the project, left the council at a significant disadvantage and the donor unable to carefully monitor the broader consequences of their intervention, such as undermining the council. [181]

We will turn to the implications of this case below, but here we wish to underscore the difficulty in quantifying the power of these local councils. On the one hand our interlocutor claimed, without contest from other workshop participants, that they could have involved the armed groups to force the NGO to conform to the spirit of the application, but with this nuclear option discounted, the council had no alternative apparatus to which it could turn and, apparently, no direct access to the donor through which to seek redress. The effective power relationship here favoured an NGO rather than the relatively fragile governance structure which, in the medium term, will be called upon to carry the greater burden of civilian expectations.

From our interlocutors' testimonies, and from the existing literature, it is clear that councils' effectiveness and resilience therefore depends upon three main factors: local legitimacy, primarily by demonstrating outcomes for residents; resourcing from external actors, not least INGOs; and largely positive relations with armed groups. In light of this dependence, it is striking that each of our conversations with council representatives included an emphasis upon their technocratic, apolitical character, contrasting with the perceived partisanship of armed groups and some organisations.

Thus the Douma Council has invested a great deal of effort in communications, not least online, with well-designed videos explaining the council's work, demonstrating their technocratic nature and expertise, their revolutionary credentials and their effectiveness. [182] Indeed, the local council is seen as a particular success story by all the interlocutors to whom we spoke, which is remarkable bearing in mind the very unpromising circumstances in which it operates. Its activities range from the mundane and bureaucratic to the highly creative. A department of real-estate records was opened which collected citizens' property records. This allowed residents to buy and sell property even during the siege. According to one of our council interlocutors in Douma, 'The department was shelled by the regime but we brought in photographers and took photos of all the documents, designed them and programmed them.' The council's work on renewable energy and waste disposal has received even more acclaim: 'We established a project for the fertilisation of garbage and extracted agricultural fertiliser from it. This project was also bombed by the regime for more than five times [...] We also supplied water pumped by solar energy.' Another council member, who works from Turkey to co-ordinate with external donors, echoed this emphasis upon creative technocracy, highlighting a livestock project where cattle are smuggled from Damascus to Douma, and a series of 2016 strategic plans for food security, water security and developing the renewable energy and waste-recycling projects.

While Douma was described as a unique case based on its isolation and necessary self-sufficiency for an extended period, it shares with the other councils we spoke to, and described in Heller's report, a tendency to emphasise technocracy and concrete outcomes, although the self-ascribed apolitical stance ought not to be taken as read. Clearly councils are political actors in that they are engaged in the production and implementation of policy. Moreover, it is a necessary condition of candidacy for council elections in Douma that nominees are committed to the aims of the revolution, as well as the principles of the council.

However, councils do not seem to want to be identified with programmes of social change or ideologies beyond the revolutionary consensus (in this recalling, the apolitical politics of tribes). Our interlocutors see their role as the delivery of services in pursuit of a normal life, without apparently engaging with the question of how politics may be part of normal life. Apparently, being seen as apolitical, alongside being effective, was the key to their legitimacy. Our interlocutors on local councils in these opposition heartlands are acutely aware that their effectiveness is dependent upon being able to meet the expectations of residents while constrained by more powerful actors, namely armed groups and NGOs. Our Douma contacts emphasised their technocratic orientation and the electoral basis of their claims to legitimacy. The Homs Governorate, meanwhile, widely publicised its open letter to international relief organisations to demonstrate that it was not sitting by while its people went hungry. [183] Without a clear allocation of competencies, this leaves councils and NGOs sometimes performing similar functions, and pursuing the same funding. One international aid worker noted that in some ways councils were modelling themselves, perhaps unhelpfully, on NGOs. He said, 'The more councils look to NGOs for the delivery of services, the more the councils begin to look like public NGOs.' [184]

Councils do not only overlap with NGOs, however. While themselves a new phenomenon in Syria, they have not emerged from a vacuum but out of the raw materials of existing social structures. Even the most technocratic councils comprise individuals who are part of social institutions that have an enduring relevance in most, if not all, of these locations, and that it can be precisely their closeness to influential families that enables them to stand for, and be effective, in office. [185] Moreover, councils have sought to shore up their legitimacy by connecting their work with advisory or *shura* councils and new *sharia* courts, preserving the role of elders and religious authorities even as emerging authorities, whose status depends upon their revolutionary credentials, are reportedly displacing them in some areas.

Notables is usually used to translate *wujaha'*, literally faces of the town or tribe, and while these may be notable for different reasons – their wealth, personal charisma, expertise or for an inherited social status bequeathed by kinship – the attribute our interlocutors most frequently ascribed to them is their connectedness across political or social divides. Even the relatively progressive Douma Council reserves seats on its council for these notables, open only to those aged 40-plus. Notables, as well-connected but often beneath-the-radar mid-level leaders, play important roles on the advisory bodies and in reconciliation interventions such as the resolution of low-level hostilities. New structures, such as local peace committees and a particular (anonymous by request) network of social committees, have been established with INGO support. These mimic in some ways the role of mediating, advisory bodies which, through the exercise of a more or less ritualised reconciliation of differences, have, for centuries, pursued stability in the Levant, while they seek to be more inclusive of those usually marginalised by these processes. [186]

3.3 Organisations

Such entities seem to straddle the categories of social institution and organisation. While, as the literature makes clear, the proliferation of *mu'assassat* – organisations – is a feature of conflict-era Syria outside of SARG control, [187] the word describes multiple kinds of entity: well-established NGOs, pre-existing or emerging *jama'iyyat* or associations, which are often connected to existing social institutions and thus might be run by a *sheikh* or notable, or even private businesses and more ad-hoc networks. In our research, interlocutors frequently conflated civil society with organisations (and NGOs when speaking in English). Some of our interlocutors pointed out that a number of these are effectively for-profit, entrepreneurial outfits aimed at making money in, it ought to be stressed, a dire economic situation where there are few jobs or opportunities for market-based entrepreneurship. Many others, however, are deeply connected to local communities or they are long-established institutions such as the big humanitarian relief organisations.

However, while there are few similarities between these, they have all benefited, to some extent, from the opening up of a kind of civic sphere in opposition-held areas, in part by default (i.e. by the gaps left by the state) and in part as the fruit of activism. On the one hand, the absence of the state, and the financial precariousness of local councils means there is clear demand for services that can sometimes not be provided except with recourse to external donors, towards which organisations are typically oriented. On the other, and more positively, for many of those committed to the uprising against authoritarianism, particularly those in the heritage of the Damascus Spring, a central goal is precisely this opening up of the public space, a domain of free association and expression guaranteed by law through which social change can be pursued. [188] Still, we are not idealising the relative freedom of organisations to start up and work: to some extent it is a feature of the withdrawal of the state in an unstable area which, indeed, SARG holds up as an example of chaos.

To start an NGO can therefore be a way of accessing resources and providing jobs for friends and family, and can sometimes emerge out of, and overlap greatly with existing social institutions and their (often patriarchal and older) leaderships. Others, meanwhile, are born out of a locally identified need or even as a deliberate embodiment of a revolutionary ideal. Many of these organisations are therefore unique places in which young people and women are active and visible leaders of social change. Despite this latter point, it was striking that, as with councils, a frequent refrain of our interlocutors was the assertion that such and such an organisation's work was apolitical. There is great sensitivity about being seen to be delivering needs-led interventions, and our workshop conversations touched on some of the dilemmas associated with pursuing social change when it is not necessarily demanded by a population deeply traumatised by war, to which we will turn below. Indeed, it is worth noting that it seems, from our interlocutors' testimonies, that when NGOs switch their attention from emergency humanitarian and relief work towards pursuing deeper social change, their work becomes full of hazards.

However, as we saw with our example from Homs Council, problems can arise even when their services are demanded. In the Homs Council case, the problem has many facets: the power of the NGO to design, implement and monitor its own output; the inability or disinclination of the donor to maintain multiple relationships with stakeholders in a single programme; and, to be fair to the NGO, the difficulty of raising operational costs in a donor context which is programme-delivery oriented. Our interlocutors, bearing in mind that the majority were associated with NGOs themselves, reported multiple additional failings related to matching of interventions to needs, and the monitoring of these interventions.

One well-informed interlocutor engaged with peacebuilding in several parts of Syria described the case of a hospital in the north whose generator broke down, requiring a cheap repair from a local mechanic. Lacking a specific budget for this, they instead applied for a new generator, received several thousands of dollars for this replacement and its delivery from Turkey, which they sold upon receipt to an armed group. They then used the profits from this to pay for a mechanic to repair the original generator.[189] Similar stories were recounted by three other interlocutors though, clearly, exact verifiable data on this kind of failure is not easily obtained. Likewise, more nefarious malpractice, such as individuals taking unreported cuts of donations, were mentioned by multiple interlocutors.[190] Clearly, NGOs and their staff are not shielded from the effects of war, including the urgent need to generate livelihoods.

Perhaps the key point here is that NGOs in the north-west, due to their access to external funding and their (relative) freedom to start up and operate, have considerable power but few checks upon their activities. In contrast, one NGO interlocutor told us that he thought Douma Council's success was down, primarily, to its isolation and the consequent inability of NGOs to intervene there early in the conflict. The local council therefore became the primary agent of service delivery.

When the material peace dividend is less obvious, however, or where a peacebuilding intervention is based on contributing to social change, which is likely to affect power relationships, the risks of unintended consequences are likely to be greater.

Our Beirut workshop included a discussion of a recent scenario in a besieged area where an NGO-backed magazine published a controversial article, wryly described by another interlocutor, not involved in the workshop, as 'the kind of thing that wouldn't get published in the Netherlands'.[191] Our interlocutors described a situation in which the editor, based outside the area, elected to publish the article with NGO support, while the deputy editor, based inside the area, requested that the article not be published. The article was published and met with severe criticism from local residents and religious authorities. The deputy editor was subject to a very public campaign, using his image on posters, for his punishment – punishment, that is, for blasphemy, which, in some interpretations of *sharia*, could have been understood to be a call for his execution. Several local NGOs were shut down, and it was only later, on the basis that the education of several thousand local children was negatively impacted upon, that these were allowed to operate again.[192]

In another case, a rights-of-the-child workshop was implemented in one of Syria's big cities and reached dozens of beneficiaries. However, it was a precisely targeted intervention which worked only with children themselves, teaching them about their rights to play, to education, to freedom from work and coercion, and, in the conflict context in which this intervention was made, there was little means by which these rights could be secured. The intervention itself certainly had few resources to make the environment more conducive to realising these rights. Consequently, our interlocutor, who had been involved in delivering the project, reported an increase in family frictions as the primary discernible outcome.[193]

By way of contrast, it is useful to consider apparent success stories. For a start, today in the besieged town in which the magazine controversy unfolded, NGOs still play a critical role in the delivery of education because even their most vehement opponents in the *sharia* court and the armed groups recognise the good at least some of them do. Meanwhile, a closer look at Syria Relief's risk-education programmes in Idlib province and Eastern Ghouta disclose some ways of working that have proven particularly effective in terms of enabling a more peaceful environment beyond the immediate beneficiaries of their 400 or

more awareness sessions in Syria. From our conversations with three members of Syria Relief staff and council representatives in Sarmin who had facilitated Syria Relief's work, it was clear that the risk-education programme was not demanded as such. Their risk education co-ordinator explained:

We reach out, in the first step. To enter the community we get permission from local councils and conduct awareness sessions for the councils first and other influential people. Otherwise, we have a lot of difficulties in acceptance because we don't [do] food baskets or something like that – they see it's 'just information'. [194]

Syria Relief's local staff identified sympathetic partners on the councils and among local notables through whom they were able to promote their awareness-raising sessions. Having secured the support of councils and notables, they identify focal points, individual advocates with good connections who can work with local stakeholders to deliver further sessions. This collaboration with established institutions and authorities is a key to their success.

Meanwhile, and equally importantly perhaps, while Syria Relief pursues the goal of risk education, their donor, Mines Advisory Group seeks to implement complementary technical interventions to connect grassroots' engagement with children and vulnerable people to the work of demining. While it is able to count the participants in its workshops, counting the beneficiaries of the integrated approach of Mines Advisory Group with Syria Relief and with its council partners and focal points, is impossible. Instead, we might confidently assert that it has contributed to an environment which is safer in multiple ways, and thus multiplied the value of Syria Relief workshops immeasurably.

New structures, such as local peace committees ... mimic in some ways the role of mediating, advisory bodies which, through the exercise of a more or less ritualised reconciliation of differences, have, for centuries, pursued stability in the Levant.

Ad-hoc mediation structures function as platforms – both physical and non-physical spaces – where these actors come together in search of a common understanding and solutions to localised conflicts and disputes.

[...] far from being static, these actors change and reinvent themselves through the establishment of ad-hoc peacebuilding structures. This calls into question the way we sometimes think about actors as discrete and bounded agents.

SYRIA AND LIBYA REPORT CONCLUSION

Taking Paffenholz as our reference point, it is clear that peacebuilding functions are being fulfilled by radically diverse, sometimes conflicting, actors, who nevertheless sometimes overlap and intersect. We also observe that far from being static, these actors change and reinvent themselves through the establishment of ad-hoc peacebuilding structures. This calls into question the way we sometimes think about actors as discrete and bounded agents.

Peacebuilding actors are not self-contained entities that co-operate or compete in a flat, undifferentiated public sphere, they are coherent entities as long as they are performed and narrated as such by members and outsiders. These narratives include real or fictive kinship and a commitment to some vision of social equilibrium in the case of tribes and some sects, religious orthodoxy in the case of other sects, an aggregated portfolio of expertise in the case of councils – sometimes augmented with revolutionary credentials – and a patriarchal and patrimonial narrative of protection in the case of all of these, as well as in the SARG and the LNA. NGOs, meanwhile, can relate more or less to these narratives while usually embodying some of the liberal narratives of dominant civil society discourse as well. In the absence of an undifferentiated public space, the type of actor, therefore, does not per-se determine whether it is an effective partner for INGOs and donors in the delivery of peacebuilding functions.

This also calls into question our focus on functions connected to discrete interventions. One successfully completed peacebuilding intervention, identified as a particular function, may or may not contribute to an environment that is more conducive to sustainable peace. For instance, does a cessation of hostilities brokered by or with SARG, which enables population transfer, consolidation of an oppressive state, or the growth of people trafficking, comprise peacebuilding, even if it reduces the number of casualties per day in a given location? If a rights-of-the-child intervention, like that described on page 44, produces dissatisfaction and antagonism without providing children or their advocates the means of securing those rights, or offering support to exercise freedom of speech results in making the field less secure, do these interventions count as peacebuilding? More broadly, what risks are worth taking in the context of conflict to pursue social change?

Answering these questions is beyond our remit, and depends greatly upon the theory of change that a given actor may apply through their interventions. However, reflecting on these questions in the light of the material presented here draws our attention to three practice-oriented findings.

1. **Peacebuilding demands attention to socio-political environments as interconnected relationships for reconciliation**

   Peacebuilding demands attention to environments as interrelated wholes, in which interventions may have unintended consequence. Attention to enabling environments therefore goes beyond the recognised need to conduct a thorough context analysis and instead demands a more organic account of the social context is provided pre- and post-intervention. The success of peacebuilding functions taken in isolation ought still to be measured, but this should take place alongside some assessment of how much more (or less) conducive the environment is in which this intervention occurred.

First, some of the key metrics by which NGOs may measure the appropriateness, or evaluate the effectiveness, of their interventions may have unintended consequences. Some of our examples suggest an over-reliance on one trusted local partner, perceived by our interlocutors to be almost always a local NGO, for the context analysis, implementation, and, to some extent, the monitoring of the intervention. NGOs understandably equip their staff with vocabulary that resonates with donors, but, as in the Homs scenario, the power this gives them to exert influence over other stakeholders can destabilise the development and governance fields. The lack of a clear pyramid of competencies organising different authorities means that in some contexts NGOs pop up at multiple levels and thus displace or obstruct the emergence of sustainable governance structures at these levels. Where it is possible to reach out directly to multiple partners with contrasting perspectives on needs and the scope for change, and for the sake of monitoring an intervention already under way, this seems from our research to be desirable.

Second, many of our NGO interlocutors, when asked about their work, began by enumerating beneficiaries. Included in these numbers were thousands of people whose lives have been genuinely enhanced and made more secure by the interventions of NGOs. Nevertheless, it is striking from a situation such as that described in Homs, or the rights of child intervention, that enumerated beneficiaries do not necessarily add up to a more peaceful environment. There is a need to assess how such an intervention has affected the wider social, political and physical environment such that it has become more or less conducive to sustainable social integration.

However, creating the space for CSOs to work on social cohesion, advocacy and monitoring will require careful articulation of their role and functions with and to other relevant actors. Advocacy and monitoring work, while potentially challenging other peacebuilding actors on the ground and their efforts, can help develop an environment conducive to reconciliation and pluralism. This clearly takes CSOs beyond the uncontroversial domain of apolitical service delivery. The expectation expressed towards CSOs to abstain from politics – at least in the case of Libya – is rooted in decades of efforts undertaken by Libyan authorities, the monarchy before and the regime after, to remove, conceptually and practically, politics and its institutions from the country. Likewise in Syria, the regime has sought to encompass within itself all politics, allowing only some leeway for expressions of Palestinian solidarity and anti-Zionism.[195]

In this quest for the apolitical, CSOs are not the only target but are resilient social institutions. And yet tribal leaders have been engaged in power struggles for centuries and it is not surprising that in the aftermath of the revolution they have proven adept at pursuing their interests in the context of radical upheaval: that is, they have had to play politics. Therefore donors may be able to disincentivise the pursuit of purely technical self-representation on the part of NGOs and others[196] wherever it is deemed to limit the emergence of peace-enabling environments, by enabling dialogues between CSOs and other actors to more clearly articulate aspirations for, and roles in the creation of these environments. Such initiatives have taken place locally within Syria, producing memoranda of understanding between these diverse actors under the supervision of INGOs such as Norwegian People's Aid. The revolution in Libya created an opportunity to redefine Libya's political culture but the quest for the apolitical took over. Rather than pursuing that path, IOs and INGOs might develop initiatives to discuss the role of CSOs within society and in peacebuilding in particular.

This might also help avoid the risk of disconnect between actors operating within the same environment. Evidence suggests, as in the case of Kufra, that when resilient social institutions and NGOs, whose capabilities have been developed through the support of IOs, work together, new spaces for peacebuilding are created that contribute to sustaining peace and preventing a relapse of violence.[197] Creating or identifying discursive and material spaces for dialogue within and between communities is the next step towards restoring relations between communities, that is reconciliation, which is arguably both the goal and primary means of creating peace-enabling environments.

> **Attention to enabling environments goes beyond the recognised need to conduct a thorough context analysis and instead demands a more organic account of the social context pre- and post-intervention.**

2. Sustaining relationships beyond the peacebuilding field is key to supporting the peacebuilding process

Our second finding is related to, and in part an expression of, this organic approach. Cultivation of sustained relationships with the leaders of resilient social institutions produces benefits in terms of identifying needs and constraints, capitalising on shared interests, and, perhaps most importantly, bridging trust gaps where agendas diverge.

We recall the work of the Syriac Cross and the Druze activist, whose organisational support derives from a values-based network of activists such as her, who already have access to areas of need through their networks of patriarchal connectivity. Whether in the diverse Sunni opposition strongholds, under TEV-DEM, or in SARG-controlled areas, organisations do not merely exist in a public space as is commonly theorised. The attempt to create such a sphere is clearly a long game, and a fraught one at that. Instead, activists are often effective to the extent that they are woven into relationships through which they can pursue peaceful outcomes: woven most tightly, perhaps, in the Druze case, and more loosely, one might say professionally, in the case of Syria Relief. Clearly, where there is a material peace dividend, such as in the distribution of aid, agendas are most likely to align and risks are lower. But when an NGO wishes to introduce an intervention that is not explicitly demanded, such as in the case of Syria Relief's risk education workshops, or even when an NGO's goal conflicts with that of these mid-level leaders, such as with the magazine incident, it is arguably especially important that culturally intelligible efforts are made to build relationships with them. Resilient social institutions can choose to function as gatekeepers but they can also provide invaluable access to CSOs and INGOs which are attentive to local cultural sensitivities and agendas. If the delivery of humanitarian aid is easy to 'sell', efforts should nevertheless be made to build more enduring relationships around these interventions which may prepare the ground for future, perhaps even more fundamental, interventions.

Clearly, this may not always be possible, and the emphasis upon quick wins may be the only disclosable element of an intervention. Tribesmen gave somewhat reflexive accounts of their role and the logic according to which tribes cohere and influence their respective societies, and these accounts aligned with those of some of the critical voices among NGO interlocutors: tribal and sectarian leaders tend towards keeping the peace, the negative peace, a more or less conservative, reactive and tactical pursuit of social equilibrium as they see it.

Nevertheless, the endurance of these institutions through radical change over centuries points to a dynamism and adaptability inherent in this pragmatic approach. Tribesmen and sectarian leaders are frequently adept at working with those whose agendas diverge, and many of these leaders are well connected internationally, thoroughly conversant in the prevailing liberal internationalist discourse of civil society, and therefore well equipped to translate the work of NGOs into terms intelligible to those who recognise their authority. Importantly, this does not mean naively throwing in one's lot with a given *sheikh* or cleric, government administrator or warlord. It may, however, mean picking up on Hamad al-Zaruq's comment, going through *shura* councils and gaining their approval, or Sheikh Mohammed Mzeid's comment, entering his space as a guest, drinking his coffee, and thereby acknowledging the social starting point for one's desired intervention. One NGO worker, a self-described atheist, secular activist from a tribal upbringing, told us, 'The donors should sometimes engage directly with the tribes: these leaders don't need to see another activist, they want to hear from the senior political adviser in Istanbul or whatever.'[198]

One way of representing this would be to think of a proposed intervention in terms of three corners of a triangle: quick wins, typically a highly visible material peace dividend; freedom to be transparent about the intervention's long-game, in terms of pursued social change; and the accessibility of widely respected grassroots and mid-level leaders, whether or not these are likely to be explicitly supportive. Where one of these is absent, it could be that the other two become especially important.

This may not be news to the sector. However, we informally sense-tested this approach with some of our NGO interlocutors towards the end of our research and found that they recognised its relative absence in the emerging NGO sector in Syria and Libya, as well as its advantages. Nevertheless, our interlocutors also countered that the way in which donors distribute funds, namely, for programmes, did not allow for this more holistic approach. One objected that it was rarely given money for operational costs – for which it needs hard cash, rarely distributed by donors – or capital investment, let alone for investing in the kinds of relationships that might bridge the trust deficit and connect NGO interventions to the most urgent peacebuilding needs. To what extent these ways of working are adaptable depends on INGOs and donors themselves to work out.

IOs have a role in facilitating dialogue between different actors, supporting the idea of toleration towards the establishment of pluralistic societies and supporting the creation of spaces in which difference is not only respected, but actively encouraged and openly discussed.

3. Mainstreaming inclusion in peacebuilding, especially of women and youth, is essential to producing social cohesion, and a key contribution of NGOs

Galtung's notions of negative and positive peace may help to direct these findings towards the engagement of NGOs, women and youth in peacebuilding. When armed conflict and violence threaten the lives of individuals, a focus on protection, intermediation and delivery of basic services is necessary, mitigating the impact of conflict on individuals, and in some cases leading to the cessation of hostilities – i.e. negative peace. As our analyses show, resilient social institutions have the upper hand in these functions, with NGOs stepping in to deliver humanitarian aid or protection of citizens trapped in war zones in some cases. These interventions, however, do not help in restoring relations within or between communities, i.e. positive peace. In that respect, once armed violence stops, social cohesion, advocacy, monitoring and service delivery are key functions to which civil society actors should collectively contribute.

The involvement of NGOs in delivering peacebuilding functions has been limited, not only by their perceived foreignness and novelty, but also by the deliberate effort of other peacebuilding actors to keep them out of the picture – resilient social institutions among them. This is the case even when, like in Libya in the Misrata-Tawergha agreement, the importance of workshops, media, religious platforms, meetings and various activities to achieve peace, heal wounds and address the impact of the conflict is acknowledged in the text of the agreement.[199]

The role of NGOs in social cohesion activities, however, has emerged clearly from the analysis. Our finding is that this role could be enhanced in scale and scope by focusing on their capacity and capability to complement the intermediation and facilitation functions of resilient institutions and local authorities.

Social cohesion is perceived as the playground of NGOs, women and youth, but there are instances in which these actors have interplayed with resilient social institutions which provided access and tribal cover for their activities. From their end, tribesmen acknowledge the role of women and youth, in particular in restoring relations within and between communities. Identifying entry points within mediation processes or in their immediate aftermath seems key to translate the negative peace – the absence of violence – into a positive one: the restoration of positive relations within and between communities. This would be a way to involve communities at the grassroots level in the restoration of relationships within and between those communities which continue to receive little attention. It is in this way that new collaborative spaces for peacebuilding and reconciliation can be created for women and youth to make their voices heard in the realisation of peaceful societies.

Likewise, in Syria. When Suad Joseph proposed 'patriarchal connectivity' as a way of modelling Levantine social contexts, a proposal we have here largely accepted, she was suggesting a way of better understanding culturally specific obstacles to gender equality. Our research in Syria reflects her (now 20-year old) portrayal of enduring quasi-domestic spaces which are both patriarchal and gerontocratic. Indeed, all of the tribal leaders reached, the senior religious leaders and the councillors were men. However, the picture among NGOs was rather different, with a more encouraging eight Syrian females participating in our research, some of them in senior leadership positions, engaging every day with representatives of the tribes, councils and sects as equals or, in professional terms, superiors. Likewise, young people have been leaders of these organisations and demonstrated frequently their extraordinary creativeness and courage in the face of considerable obstacles. In a context in which, as we have seen, there are considerable risks in explicitly pursuing social change in the context of upheaval and mistrust, this kind of embodying inclusive values should not be underestimated.

APPENDIX

Research methodology

Approach

This research adopts a predominantly qualitative approach based on in-depth interviewing, observation and focus-group work. It entails an empirical investigation of specific Libyan and Syrian contexts, providing an account of civil society functions that incorporates the perspectives of actors involved in peacebuilding and, where possible, beneficiaries. We view our contribution within the constraints of the project as being not to represent the whole country, but to draw to light certain dynamics that are ill-reflected in prevailing policy discourses. In other words, we are pursuing an understanding of a situated peacebuilding process as intimately as possible, rather than taking a representative sample of the wider situation. The research therefore establishes micro-scale case studies that illustrate the peacebuilding dynamics of this analysis. The research design was adapted in dialogue with these stakeholders and in response to the evolving situation on the ground with its numerous political and security constraints.

Research design

The research broadly pursued the following question:

How effective have identity-salient, enduring social institutions and NGOs been in fulfilling peacebuilding functions in Syria and Libya, particularly at the local and grassroots levels, and what are the socio-political factors that support or hinder the use and outcome of these functions?

Consequently, the research was developed in two stages:

Stage one: identification of case studies through a literature review and contextual and preliminary interviews (November 2016–February 2017)

A literature review was conducted to illuminate the role of civil society in the delivery of peacebuilding functions at the local or grassroots level in Libya and Syria respectively. Gaps were identified, including those that our research sought to fill, as well as potential case studies and local contexts for examination.

Through existing contacts in Libya and Syria and a close engagement with the British Council's Libya and Syria offices, we collected evidence that provided us with everyday-life experiences pertaining to the cases and local contexts under examination. In-depth contextual/preliminary interviews conducted by phone with representatives of INGOs and IOs, potential research participants, Libyan and Syrian NGOs working on peacebuilding and members of local communities such as tribal leaders and elders, as well as students and teachers, were conducted by telephone. These interviews supported the researchers in understanding the social and political contexts of the study, thus gathering further information on the research subject, selecting case studies and furthering access to potential research participants. The interviews provided an important insight on the relational issues inside the community and possibly at the national and international level, and framed subsequent comparison of NGOs' service delivery with the agencies examined in depth during stage two of the research process.

Stage two: data collection through workshops (March 2017) and data analysis (March–April 2017)

By adopting primarily qualitative methods of data collection, stakeholders were directly involved in knowledge production, which helped to ground the research outcomes in their personal experiences of the respective conflict.

For the Libya component, on the basis of the selected case studies, 13 stakeholders from the four localities and comprising elders, CSO staff, activists and representatives from local authorities, as well as representatives from INGOs and IOs were invited to a research workshop held in Tunis. During the workshop, case-based focus-group discussions and one plenary were conducted as well as one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the participants to sharpen the comparative account. In parallel, the British Council conducted focus-group discussions to map INGOs' and IOs' work in the three localities.

For the Syrian case studies, we gathered 12 individuals – NGO staff, council representatives and a cleric in Gaziantep, Turkey. Our Gaziantep workshop comprised a gathered wealth of experience mostly from the Sunni heartlands. We also gathered five activists working in SARG-held areas of Syria to Beirut, which gave us insights into peacebuilding dynamics in these areas and gave us the opportunity to speak to individuals connected with such interventions.

In total, 39 people were interviewed for Libya and 53 for Syria, including 39 Syrian individuals currently or recently engaged in peacebuilding on the ground.

Snowballing and purposive techniques were used to identify interview respondents. Consecutive and simultaneous interpretation from Arabic to English and vice versa was provided during the research workshop and interviews. The data collected were analysed through qualitative content and discourse analysis.

Research delimitations and limitations
The study of conflict countries requires posing delimitations at the outset of the research design while embedding an approach responsive to the constraints dictated by the evolving circumstances on the ground, as well as by time and budget constraints. In particular, a six-month research project, while capable of producing an analysis relevant to persistent programming efforts, inevitably poses constraints on the scope and time span of the research.

The project methodology allowed for maximal responsiveness to the fluid research context. By seeking accounts of peacebuilding dynamics, rather than representivity of a supposed whole, it was possible to change location or medium of communication more than in a tightly controlled, sample-oriented study. Moreover, by narrowing the scope of the investigation to few cases, the research aimed from the start to delimit the analysis to a few contexts in order to effectively concentrate the efforts in reaching out to research participants and relevant stakeholders over a time frame of four months before the research workshops. While the specifics of given cases cannot be generalised, the goal was to capture, at least partially, the dynamic processes by which actors come to cohere and adapt, and sometimes come to be effective in the delivery of peacebuilding functions.

Faced with the inability to travel to Libya and Syria due to security constraints, the selection of local actors was based on the expertise and existing networks of the research team and on the support provided by the British Council country teams. Being aware of these constraints, we have maintained a vigilant critical perspective through the data collection and analysis to mitigate the risk of reproducing one-sided narratives through breadth and depth of interviews, as well as through diversifying our points of contact across the two countries.

List of abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organisation
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (Syria)
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IO	International organisation
IS	Islamic State
LDRO	Libyan Dialogue and Reconciliation Organisation
LNA	Libyan National Army
MP	Member of parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SARG	Syrian Arab Republic Government
SCBR	Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (Libya)
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society (Syria)
UN	United Nations
UNSMIL	United Nations Support Mission in Libya
YPG	People's Protection Units (Syria)

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