

# “Maybe We Can Reach A Solution”

## Syrian Perspectives on the Conflict and Local Initiatives for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

Support for inclusive, local-level negotiations to de-escalate the conflict and allow for humanitarian intervention now outpaces interest in an internationally-negotiated settlement. Polarization is increasing — yet many Syrians still yearn to live together again in peace as one nation. Efforts to encourage community-level peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts may help bridge divides — and move towards a resolution of the conflict.

*To better understand opinions and perceptions — and amplify Syrian voices — the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) commissioned Charney Research to conduct in-depth interviews among a diverse group of Syrians, including Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, and Christians; regime supporters and opponents; and internally displaced persons and refugees. Forty interviews were conducted between August and October 2014. This brief summarizes the main research findings.*

### Mood

Syrians remain deeply negative about the situation in the country, but perspectives on the country's direction, current situation, and likely outcomes of the conflict varied according to political views.

- Many, mainly regime opponents, noted worsening conditions in the past year, primarily due to the rise of ISIS as well as regime gains.
- Regime supporters reported improved conditions and increased stability as the army “kills terrorists” and regains control over some areas. Some pointed to the summer's elections and gains made by the army as evidence of Assad's legitimacy as president.

- Many regime opponents look to the armed opposition (principally the Free Syrian Army) to remove Assad and restore peace and order in Syria. Some, however, fear increased fighting among rebel groups.
- The local mood varies with the intensity of conflict and extremist forces: Calm Tartous is positive; in Damascus pro-regime residents cited greater stability due to regime gains; Hamah and Homs residents worry about continued fighting; extremist presence and factional conflict have darkened the mood in Deir al-Zor and Al-Hasakah; and Raqqah residents live in terror under ISIS.

Both regime supporters and opponents were resentful of foreign interference in the conflict, which they perceived as threatening the territorial integrity of the country.

### Service Provision

Service provision is largely a function of territorial control.

- Government supporters and some opponents said the state is providing

electricity, food, media, and water in their areas.

- Aleppo respondents, though regime opponents, noted less fighting and improved services in areas where the regime has regained control.
- In Raqqah, ISIS has a poor record of providing basic services, arbitrarily cutting electricity and monopolizing food and water supplies.
- Kurds credited Kurdish rebels and parties, including the Kurdish Red Cross, with providing services.

### Ability to Speak Freely

Respondents split on whether they can speak freely with people of different political or religious views about the conflict.

- Regime supporters in particular tended to say they spoke freely; so did respondents living in refugee camps outside the country, who were confident that few regime supporters were nearby.
- Others were unwilling to do so, saying too little trust exists between people

and little good would come from debates.

- A few were very afraid to speak their minds, especially Christians and residents of Raqqah, where not one respondent would speak to those of different views.

## Potential Outcomes

Positions of most on both pro- and anti-regime sides have hardened against anything other than a fight until a victor emerges, due to the atrocities and suffering they have experienced. Fears that this will lead to deadly vengeance was voiced, primarily by refugees. Most respondents did not favor a negotiated national political settlement and compromises to end the war. This is a dramatic shift in views on such Geneva-type negotiations since our study last year, when regime supporters and opponents alike favored a formal negotiated agreement to end the bloodshed.

- Regime opponents reject such a negotiated settlement with a government they hate.
- Regime supporters reject national negotiations with those they consider terrorist rebels.
- Only a few spoke in favor of ending fighting by any means.
- Almost all rejected the division of Syria, though some respondents suggested this has already happened.

Reflecting the changed mood, most predicted that in five years' time their side will have won. Many could not envisage a scenario where this is not so, unlike last year, when no end was in sight. Some, particularly refugees, feared continued stalemate and the rise of ISIS.

## Halting Hostilities at Local Level

Local initiatives to wind down the conflict received more support than national-level efforts, but they still divided respondents. Despite these divisions, almost all respondents desired the more normal life that

local ceasefires and an end to sieges would offer, suggesting ambivalence even among those who did not express support for them.

- Respondents were aware of local ceasefires around Aleppo, al-Ghouta (in the eastern suburbs of Damascus), and Homs.
- Many favored the idea of local ceasefires, particularly in hard-hit areas, to end the fighting and stop the bloodshed at least in some places. Regime supporters also saw local ceasefires as evidence of the rebels' weakness and as victories for their side.
- Many opposed such ceasefires, for several reasons: mistrust of the other side; belief (on both sides) that the truces were victories or footholds for the regime; or outright rejection of any type of negotiations with the opposing side.
- When pressed on the issue of local negotiations, many on both sides preferred ending the fighting at the national level rather than just locally, thus bringing peace and security to all Syrians. This was consistent with the preference for outright victory that many expressed, rather than veiled support for national-level political negotiations.
- However, participants expressed a strong desire for the freer movement and greater normality that would flow from local ceasefires. Nearly all respondents, pro- and anti-regime alike, wanted the greater mobility local accords would permit, such as permitting students to attend exams, allowing aid deliveries, and allowing free movement of residents.
- Views of ending local sieges were mixed as well. Those who favored an end wanted the sieges stopped around the country, not just locally. Regime supporters tended to support ending sieges only after the regime re-establishes control.

- Attitudes toward the possible re-establishment of regime control over conflict areas in the wake of local ceasefires break along predictable pro/anti regime lines. Supporters viewed it as the only possible outcome; opponents as the worst possible outcome.

Security coordination between the contending parties goes too far for respondents to accept. Most rejected any proposal that explicitly requires joint regime/rebel cooperation, such as shared checkpoints.

## Local Negotiation and Mediation Efforts

Respondents were quite able to envisage how local-level talks might be conducted, despite their differences over whether now is an opportune time for them.

Among anti-regime respondents, the most frequent suggestion was that the rebels in general or FSA should take the lead in local negotiations with the government. Many pro-regime respondents were open to negotiations that include government opponents, as long as they are Syrian and unarmed, and as long as talks are led by President Assad's government.

Concerning the most appropriate potential local mediators, participants suggested a variety of actors, including religious and tribal leaders, families of martyrs, representatives from minority groups, and local council leaders. Participants also mentioned educated people like lawyers, doctors, and teachers as potential mediators. These types of potential mediators were positively viewed and trusted by both sides.

Despite misgivings about local-level negotiations, some respondents – both pro and anti-regime – reacted positively to the idea of talks aimed at starting to rebuild government structures at the local level.

## Rebuilding Trust, Post-Conflict

Although division runs very deep among the Syrians we interviewed, we also found a continuing desire for postwar coexistence and reconciliation among supporters of the different parties at the local level, as well as interest in ways communities might be brought back together. This was, however, colored by doubts about feasibility and potential exclusions.

- Many respondents said they still have the capacity to forgive and live in peace with their former neighbors, despite deep mutual distrust and even hatred – under certain conditions.
- Some, particularly in Damascus (pro-regime) and Raqqah (anti-regime), found forgiving those who took up arms against the state, killed on its behalf, or cooperated with foreigners unthinkable.

Many IDPs and refugees said they would find it hard to forgive and live in peace with neighbors on the other side who forced their departure, although some said they would consider doing so after apologies or trials.

*Sulha* and *Musalaha*, traditional approaches to reconciliation and compensation, were the preferred methods of local dispute resolution for many respondents. Nearly all respondents were familiar with them.

- Most respondents reacted positively towards the elements of reconciliation, compensation, and prevention of vengeance among people within a local community involved in the processes.
- However, some respondents had doubts that this local, community-based approach could work nationally or resolve Syria's complex national conflict.

Many respondents were skeptical that good faith and repentance by all parties, which this form of local reconciliation would require, is possible or likely.

Most Syrians interviewed said the government must be involved in providing resources for compensation efforts.

## Support for Local Committees

The idea of local committees charged with fact-finding and revealing truth was generally well-received because respondents felt a local committee would know best how to resolve local conflicts and provide accountability. Many respondents expressed support for a local committee taking a leading role in the following types of post-conflict activities:

- **Public hearings** — Well-received for providing a mechanism for people to talk about their experiences. Some feared it would open old wounds.
- **Allocating compensation** — Generally supported, though it raised questions about who is going to pay and how, if at all, certain losses can be compensated.
- **Recommendations to prosecutors for war crimes** — Generally supported for providing input into accountability at the local level and a path to trials.
- **Public apologies** — Mixed reviews. Some on both sides were unwilling to consider forgiveness, even after an apology. Others found it appealing.
- **Alternatives to trial** — Many respondents hesitated to support non-trial alternatives for major crimes if it meant that the guilty would escape prosecution, but were prepared to consider them for lesser offenses.

Most respondents embraced post-conflict trust-building activities, such as economic projects that bring people together and projects for youth from different sides of the conflict. Respondents reacted favorably to job creation, educational, and community building activities. Most respondents said that they and their communities would participate if such projects were implemented.

Many supported jobs and education programs to promote the reintegration of former fighters, though some insisted that ISIS or terrorists be excluded. Few respondents rejected the idea outright.

## Views of Key Actors

The polarization of attitudes on partisan lines we observed in the first phase of this study last year was even more pronounced in this second round.

- **Bashar al-Assad** — Views were more polarized than last year. Assad is seen as the protector of the Syrian people by his supporters, but as an animal, criminal, or ruthless killer by opponents.
- **Syrian Government Army** — The army is heroic among government supporters and deeply disliked by opponents.
- **The Free Syrian Army** — To regime opponents, the FSA is the vanguard of the revolution. Few doubted that it still exists though they said it may not be everywhere. To government supporters, it is a group of terrorist traitors infiltrated by foreign fighters.
- **Syrian Opposition Coalition** — Views of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces were somewhat more positive than last year. Regime opponents generally saw it as doing something to help and protect Syrians in need and as a legitimating factor for the opposition. However, others derided it as a “hotel government” and criticize it for putting interests other than Syrians' first.
- **Interim Government** — The Syrian Interim Government received generally positive views from many regime opponents who described it as their legitimate representation, though this seems largely symbolic; few said it has presence in their area and it is not clearly distinguished from the Coalition. Regime supporters refused to acknowledge it.
- **ISIS** — ISIS was strongly rejected by regime opponents and supporters alike with very few exceptions. Respondents accused it of brutality and of being made up of foreigners. Some argued it has undermined opposition efforts as well as Islam itself.

- **Jabhat al-Nusra** — Views were mixed. Among those who know Nusrah, some praised it for helping in the effort against the regime, while others accused it of brutality and not representing Islam. A few mentioned its connection to al-Qaeda. Like ISIS, some saw it as under the control of foreigners.
- **Jaish al-Mujahideen** — Many were unaware of the group and others dismissed it as an extremist band that is hurting Islam. Others saw it as helping the rebels.
- **Islamic Front** — Anti-regime respondents were more critical of this group than Nusrah or Jaish al-Mujahideen. They referred to it as “one of several armies” or an “unreal army.”
- **PYD/YPG** — Views of the Kurdish party and fighters are quite mixed

and shaped by politics and ethnicity. Some saw them as a tool of the regime, while others viewed them as Syrians whose efforts will result in the division of Syria. Still others saw them as courageous partners against the regime. Some pro-regime respondents viewed them as good partners against the rebels.

- **European Foreign Fighters** — Many regime opponents saw these fighters as providing valuable assistance in the fight against the regime, though some worry they are too extreme or have interests other than Syria. Regime supporters rejected them entirely.
- **Hezbollah/Iranian fighters** — Almost all regime supporters viewed Hezbollah fighters as welcome help against the rebels. Regime opponents saw them as murdering mercenaries.

## Information Sources

Television and friends and family continue to be the most relied-upon sources of information, with the addition of WhatsApp. Friends and family are the most trusted sources. TV is less trusted, but is appreciated for its speed and breadth.

Anti-regime respondents watch *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera*, and sometimes the FSA channel. Regime supporters turn to *Al-Dunya*, *Al-Mayadeen*, *Alikhbaria* and the state channels.

Many respondents on both sides count on Facebook to a greater degree than last year, particularly local pages like Al-Hasakah page, which is quite popular even outside of Al-Hasakah, and Hamah Awal be-Awal.

Syria Justice and  
Accountability Centre 

### 140-CHARACTER SUMMARY

New research from #Syria highlights opinions about local #ceasefires and #reconciliation initiatives. Via @SJAC\_info.

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The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a Syrian-led, multilaterally supported nonprofit that envisions a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law — where citizens from all components of Syrian society live in peace. SJAC promotes transitional justice and accountability processes in Syria by collecting and preserving documentation, analyzing and cataloging data, and promoting public discourse on transitional justice — within Syria and beyond. [Learn more at www.syriaaccountability.org](http://www.syriaaccountability.org).