

Advancing Peacebuilding Through Promoting Human Rights and Inclusive Governance. North and East Syria as a Case Study

by

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This Masters Project is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
Masters in International Development Policy
in the Sanford School of Public Policy
of Duke University.

[Spring 2024]

Executive Summary

Human rights violations, corruption, and weak rule of law are major conflict-driven factors threatening peace and the possibility of democratic governance in the North and East Syria (NES) region, mainly caused by the combined effects of weak political, legal, and technical institutions capacity and accountability mechanisms of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in NES region, and exacerbated by instability and insecurity, economic woes, and a climate-conflict nexus impact.

A big part of the problem is the knowledge gap between theory and practice. As a result, the international community is missing the opportunity to advance peace and democratic governance.

This study seeks to address these problems in the post-conflict and fragile environment. The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in NES region as a case study. Particularly, this study asks what programming, lessons learned, and best practices are suggested by the experiences of local Syrian non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) and civil society to protect human rights and promote inclusive governance in the NES region. How can donors and major international NGOs better connect with and empower the work of the local Syrian NGOs and civil society efforts to advance peacebuilding in the NES region's fragile environment?

The introduction provides a concise overview of the link between inclusive governance, human rights, and peacebuilding, as well as the research question and the client. The Problem section provides an overview of Autonomous Administration in the NES region, which faces multifaceted governance and human rights challenges due to political, legal, technical, environmental, and social problems that cause a fragile environment and relapse into violent conflict in the NES region.

The methodology section is based on utilizing mixed methodology, literature review, and survey of local Syrian NGOs and civil society in the NES region, as well as conducting qualitative and quantitative methods analysis of primary data with heavy reliance on qualitative analysis. In the Search for Solution section, the study argues that human rights and inclusive governance are fundamental for peacebuilding, and international-led peacebuilding faces cultural and structural challenges and provides

'alternative approaches' to address the lack of 'Political Will' in peacebuilding and combating corruption.

The survey results and discussion section provide a platform for the local Syrian voices on issues of human rights and inclusive governance priorities and strategies to address partnership challenges, lack of long-term perspective, and undemocratic practices of the International NGOs and donors that are problematic to advancing inclusive, context-sensitive approach to support peacebuilding in the NES region.

The conclusion and recommendations section suggests an inclusive, holistic strategy that would bring all actors together to establish a clear path toward achieving an overarching strategic vision of preventing relapse of conflict, democratic governance, and building sustainable peace.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my beloved family: my mother, Amina Hamza Mohammad, and my father, MohammadZaki Alhaji, who never had the opportunity to get an education but are the leader and principles for our school of life and formal education. To my beloved siblings, my beautiful sister, Xunav (Khounav), and brothers, Nehad, Gihad, and Ferhad. And to my beloved and beautiful nephew and nieces, Lavnar, Spenta, and Romenta Alhaji. *Ez ji we hez dikim.*

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Acknowledgments

I am very grateful and humbled by the invaluable support and guidance of my Principal Advisor, Prof. Maureen-Moriarty, Ph.D., and the committee members, Prof. Catherine Admay, JD., Prof. Corinne M. Krupp, Ph.D., and Prof. Mara Redlich Revkin, JD., Ph.D.

My most sincere thanks and profound gratitude to my mentor and friend, Prof. Mara Redlich Revkin, JD., Ph.D., for believing in me. I am forever grateful for your sponsorship and mentoring me. This incredible journey would not have been possible without your unwavering support and guidance. You inspire me to dream big, learn more, and do and become better. I will always look forward to paying this gratitude forward.

I would like to extend my gratitude and heartfelt thanks to the Master of International Development Policy faculty, staff, and colleagues at Duke Sanford School for their critical teaching, support, and a wonderful journey of learning full of laughter, kindness, and encouragement. Thank you so much.

Also, I extend my sincere gratitude to all friends and colleagues near and far, from the beginning of this journey up until this very moment in my time. Thank you so much for all your support.

To my parents, siblings, nephew, and nieces, *ez gelek spasdarim. Ez ji we hez dikim. Hûn hêvî û ronahiya jiyana min in.*

My sincere thanks and gratitude to my beloved and beautiful friend, Ms. Jamie, for your thoughtful and unwavering support during the 2nd year of our grad school journey.

Last but not least, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all Syrian and Syrian-Kurds who participated in the survey. Without your perspectives and knowledge, it would not have been possible to have accomplished this project. Your voices and perspectives matter. I commend you from all my heart for your persistence, keeping hope and courage, and working every day toward a peaceful and just future for all.

Advancing Peacebuilding Through Promoting Human Rights and Inclusive Governance. North and East Syria as a Case Study

1. Introduction

Today, human rights violations, corruption, and lack of rule of law and accountability are real threats to peace and democracy. Studies show that inclusive governance (aka good governance), human rights, and peace are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. The UN defines “good governance” as “the process whereby public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources in a manner that promotes the rule of law and the realization of human rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights)” (UNESCAP, 2009, p.1). Therefore, “Human rights promotion and protection builds confidence in institutions and bridges societal divides and promotes peaceful resolution of conflicts grounded in respect for the rights and dignity of others” (OHCHR. 2020, p.3).

For the last two decades, the world has been facing increasing trends of democratic backslides and recession. Unfortunately, international-led peacebuilding aid is missing a critical opportunity to help local non-government organizations (LNGOs) and civil society movements. One reason is that the international NGOs and donors working in the NES region do not consider the experiences, priorities, rights, and perspectives of the local people who want help and inspiration to build peace.

This study seeks to explore these problems and what we can learn from the local people living and working in conflict in everyday life, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. Particularly, this study discusses the lessons learned suggested by the local Syrian people's experiences in advancing peacebuilding through promoting human rights and inclusive governance and how the international NGOs (INGOs) and donors can engage effectively and support the local efforts in the North and East Syria region. Given the essential role of inclusive governance and protection of human rights play as foundations for peacebuilding, the study goal is to develop a strategy that would bring all actors together to establish a clear path toward achieving an overarching strategic vision of preventing relapse of conflict and building sustainable peace.

1.1 Policy / Research Question

What programming, lessons learned, and best practices are suggested by the experiences of local Syrian non-governmental organizations and civil society movements to protect human rights and promote democratic governance? How can donors and major international NGOs better connect with and empower the work of the local Syrian NGOs to advance peacebuilding efforts in NES's fragile environment?

1.2 Client

The client for this study is the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The USIP has been working in Syria since 2011, engaging and supporting local leaders, civil society, local Syrian NGOs, and international NGOs, fostering dialogue between communities and actors to resolve conflicts between communities and facilitating the return of the displaced people to their homes. The USIP has also been providing conflict resolution training and capacity strengthening to the community's local leaders (USIP, 2020). The USIP's main goal is “strengthening governance by supporting inclusive, accountable institutions and a robust civil society. These, in turn, uphold human rights, justice, and the rule of law, and promote public participation in social and political processes” that embody democratic governance (USIP, 2024)

2. Problem

2.1 Problem Context: Political, Socio-economic, Environmental, Technological, and Legal Landscape: (PESTEL) Analysis

Country background

Syria is a republic ruled by the Baath Party authoritarian regime under al-Assad control since the late 1960s. In mid-March 2011, the Syrian people began non-violent demonstrations, calling for dignity and democratic reforms. The Syrian government responded to the Syrian people's demand for freedom and dignity with systematic violence and mass human rights violations and abuses, pushing the country into a complex conflict.

The conflict in Syria has led to the killing of more than half a million and has forced the displacement of 13 million people—more than half of the population before 2011 (UNHCR, 2023, para 1). Over six million Syrian people have been displaced

internally, and approximately 6.5 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Syria has been divided into three controlled geographic areas, namely, the Syrian regime-controlled areas, the Turkish-occupied areas, and the Kurdish-led “Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria region” (DAANES). This paper focuses on the case of the DAANES region (hereafter referred to as the Autonomous Administration or AANES interchangeably). (See Figures 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27 in Annex B).

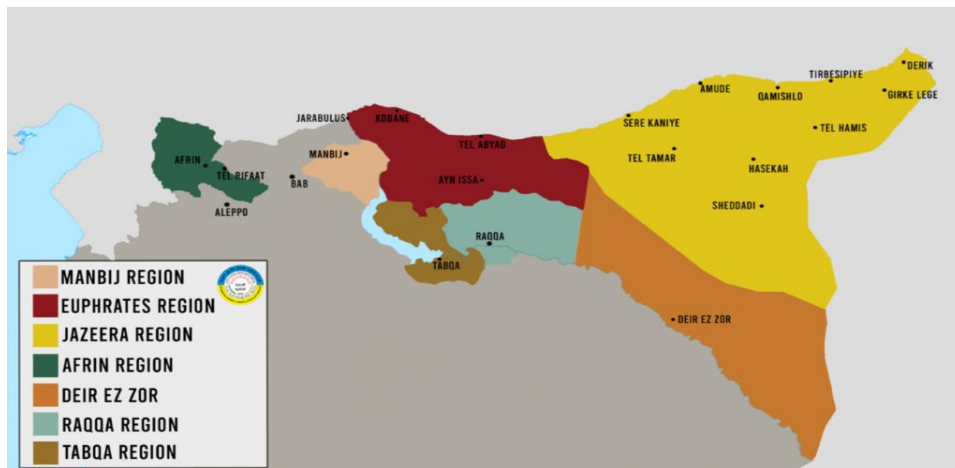


Figure 1. The administrative structure of the seven regional administrations of AANES.

Source: Syria Democratic Council (SDC) - U.S. Mission’s website.

Political context

The AANES is a Kurdish-led de facto state that emerged in 2012 to fill the power vacuum created by the conflict and rise of the so-called Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), also known as Daesh in Arabic. Since 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the military wing of AANES, with the support of the U.S.-led international coalition, combated ISIS and, in the spring of 2019, defeated the radical group in its final stronghold in NES Syria. However, after five years of defeating ISIS, and due to the combined effects of instability, economic crises, human rights violations, and lack of accountability, Syrians doubt that democracy is possible, and they fear the resurgence of ISIS exploiting the socio-political fragile environment.

The Autonomous Administration governance approach adopts and is perceived to implement de-centralized ‘direct democracy,’ a federal region governance structure and socialist policies based on “local councils, [...] gender equality, and ethnic and religious pluralism” (Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 2019, pp.154-166; van Wilgenburg,

n.d. paras.2-3; Hatahet, 2019, p.1). The Autonomous Administration's governance, in theory, has the potential and was hailed by the Western democratic states as a model of inclusive governance, gender equality, and direct grassroots participation. However, the AANES has recently been criticized with allegations of corruption, "increasing restrictions on the freedom of expression," and human rights violations (STJ, 2022, paras. 1-6). According to Hatahet's study of The Political Economy of Autonomous Administration, the AANES is perceived to "lack transparency and infested with nepotism and favouritism" (2019, p.7), and "corruption files, which were raised to the Autonomous Administration, are being ignored" (NPA, 2021). Saleh's article notes several human rights violations and corruption issues in the AANES were "several journalists noted a number of red lines - such as the recruitment of minors into military bodies, corruption in governing bodies and the sale of oil from the region - that they refrained from reporting on critically or at all" (2024, para.20).

These challenges are compounded by an intra-Kurdish disagreement (Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 2019), social tensions in Arab-majority areas where the tribal population is discontent with the Kurdish-led policies, and their "persistent complaints about the power imbalances between Arabs and Kurds in the region" (van Wilgenburg, n.d. paras.2-4; Hatahet, 2019; COAR, 2021, pp.7-8). Notably, according to Hamasaeed (2022), the director of the Middle East program at USIP, ISIS has left a violent legacy and detained '10,000 fighters' by SDF and their alleged families in Al Hol and Roj camps. This has been referred to as the "Problem of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" and threatens international peace and security if not addressed by the international community with collective action. Finally, although the AANES established diplomatic relationships with some countries, the Autonomous Administration is not recognized by the Syrian state or at the international level, and it is excluded from the UN-led peace talks process in Geneva.

Social context

The demography of the NES region is a mosaic society enriched with diverse ethnic and religious communities. The population comprises Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Yezidis, and other minorities. North and East Syria region hosts more than four million people, including over 250 thousand internally displaced people (IDP), Iraqi refugees, and imprisoned affiliated members of ISIS. They are located in twelve large formal and informal IDPs and refugee camps and more than 45 smaller informal camps and

collective centers (ACAPS, 2021, para.3; REACH, 2018, para.1). These issues require many needs and priorities such as humanitarian assistance, economic development to sustaining livelihoods, and peacebuilding efforts such as promoting social cohesion between host and displaced communities and dialogues initiatives between Autonomous Administrations and citizens.

Economic context

Syria is a low-income country and is rapidly experiencing deteriorating socio-economic conditions due to the impact of the protracted conflict. These economic shocks are severely impacting the NES region. The AANES economic activities are mostly “dependent on Syrian state banks to provide liquidity in the market, which is still operating in the area and is the primary source of Syria pounds (SYP) in the market” (Hatahet, 2019, p.7). Although the AANES controls “80 percent of Syria’s oil and gas resources,” it has very limited revenue due to a lack of official status, the impact of financial sanctions on Syria, trade blockades, and the destruction of infrastructure (Hatahet, 2019, pp.1-18).

The AANES “provides relatively good quality services, but in the eyes of the local population, at a disproportionate cost. The fees and taxation differ from area to area in the north-east, creating discrepancies and resulting in protests among certain populations” (Hatahet, 2019, pp.1, 8-9, 12). The region depends on unofficial cross-border aid which “is tightly regulated” by the Autonomous Administration (Hatahet, 2019, pp.1,15-16). Further, according to Human Rights Watch (2023) the recent and repeated Turkish drone strikes on NES region has “damaged critical infrastructure and resulted in water and electricity disruptions for millions of people ...which is necessary for residents’ rights and well-being” (HRW, 2023, para.1).

Environmental context: The conflict and climate nexus

“Water is one of the main factors driving instability in the [north and east Syria] region due to its centrality in all facets of the predominantly agriculture-based economy” (COAR, 2021, p.7). Climate change is exacerbating the water scarcity conditions, causing the depletion of water resources in the region. In 2021, the country experienced the worst water crisis in more than 70 years (ECHO, 2022). Further, the NES region is experiencing a series of environmental degradation due to severe oil

pollution on soil, on the surface, and groundwater resources, causing serious livelihood and health risks in the northern areas of the region (Zwijnenburg and Shi, 2020).

This has resulted in pressing challenges for food production or “climate-related food insecurity and climate aid” (Slim, 2021, p.9). According to the Pax for Peace organization's study, there is a need for a comprehensive assessment of a 160 km-long oil-polluted river in the region's northern areas to identify the impacts of environmental degradation (Zwijnenburg and Shi, 2020). “The years-long pollution of the river has serious health and environmental implications for the thousands of Syrian families spread across 200 communities living along the riverbed, affecting tens of thousands of hectares of agricultural lands and bringing severe risk to drinking water sources through groundwater contamination, as well as potential effects on livestock” (Zwijnenburg and Shi, 2020, p.7).

Technical capacity context

Due to the lack of political recognition, the impact of conflict, sanctions, economic and environmental problems, and the lack of international support, the Autonomous Administration has very limited and weak technical expertise, skills, resources, and technology to build responsive governance institutions, provide public services and tackle environmental degradation and oil pollution. These issues are compounded by the rising corruption trend that hinders its ability to build a healthy environment and livelihood security, thus, economic development and peace in society.

Legal context

According to the International Legal Assistance Consortium's (ILAC) “Rule of Law Assessment Report,” despite “both the structure of the ‘social justice system’ and the nature of judicial decision-making follow several progressive principles,” the AANES has an “undeveloped legal system” (Ekman and Meyer, 2021, p.12). The rule of law suffers from several challenges, mainly political influence, lack of institutional independence of the court system, lack of clarity of laws, and lack of “skills and legally trained personnel” (Ekman and Meyer, 2021, p.12, 112-172).

Also, there is a parallel structure to the official judicial approach. “While most civil conflicts are resolved within the context of the activities of the peace committees, the court system works as a back-up mechanism for those cases that cannot be

concluded through the less formalised mediation efforts” (Knapp and Jongerden, 2020, pp. 303-305; 310). Further, the AANES issued a new constitution (Officially titled the Social Contract) 2023 edition (RIC, 2023), accompanied by the announcement to hold elections in early 2025 and the establishment of several bodies, predominantly “a constitutional court to oversee the implementation of the Social Contract,” monetary court and an independent financial body (Broomfield, 2023).

The new constitution includes several articles about women’s rights, freedom, and role in all spheres of the AANES governance. For instance, Article 19 aims to develop a communal economy and prevent the exploitation of women; Article 24 states that AANES “adopts the system of co-chair-ship in all political, social, administrative and other fields and considers it a principle of equal representation between the sexes.” Article 25 aims to ensure gender equality and women’s freedom, such as Article 17 establishing the “Women’s Social Justice Council” (RIC, 2023).

However, the Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) organization highlights some of the challenges women face in the NES region, including AANES's strict ideological context that imposes gender stereotypes. The combination of lingering ISIS’s ideology and restriction burden (when ISIS had territorial control in some parts of the NES region between 2014 and 2019) and prevailing some social and traditional costumes creates a cultural backdrop of gender inequity remain a barrier to AANES in applying its laws in all areas similarly.

2.2 Prior Efforts: North and East Syria Region Case

The international-led assistance approach or program is heavily rooted in a linear approach, which is not flexible or adaptive to the evolving changes in the context. The IMPACT research (2021) study shows that “as per interviews with major donors in the region, the overall funding strategies they have in NES are tied to their respective countries’ regional strategies and the objectives those countries want to achieve” (IMPACT Research, 2021, pp.3-5).

In collaboration and joint efforts between the ‘Women Now for Development’ organization and IMPACT research conducted an overview study of “common challenges and opportunities for collaboration and effective partnership among feminist and women’s organizations (FWOs) in Syria,” it states that “reliance on funding is

inherent to civil society in Syria due to dire needs, inflation, and scarcity of resources [...] International actors have great influence over local actors, leaving local actors with less agency to provide their insight or in implementing their preferred method of collective action” (Al Taweel, 2020, p.3). See, for example, Frances Z Brown’s (2018) paper entitled “Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria.”

Local actors lack ownership, leadership, and participation in the decision-making processes. The local people working in CSOs, and NGOs become subordinated to the top-down dynamics and established systems and routines. Thus, local actors become agents for stronger external actors’ preset agendas and interests. There is a lack of respect and equal treatment with and among local NGOs and CSOs.

Further, workers have no access to and participation in the decision-making process, design, and implementation of human rights and other programs. See, for example, Junru Bian’s (2022) article entitled “The Racialization of Expertise and Professional Non-equivalence in the Humanitarian Workplace.” As a result, the local CSOs have little power or leverage to influence the priorities and actual conflict-affected society’s needs. For example, IMPACT Research’s (2021, p.4) study in NES highlights, “LCSOs interviewed as part of this research, donors will eventually carry out the projects as they see fit.” Thus, these problems raise questions about the lack of accountability mechanisms towards the local community and addressing the negative impacts of international-led intervention.

2.3 Problem Analysis

The lack of strong legal and political institutions' capacity and accountability mechanisms and the increasing corruption are symptoms of the Autonomous Administration’s government failure. These issues, in turn, contribute to rising trends in human rights violations and corruption that are major causes of democratic recession, relapse of violent conflict, and radical groups exploiting a fragile environment. The Autonomous Administration governance failure in applying a just rule of law and mismanagement of resources lead to market failure, inequality in the distribution of resources, and inequity in applying taxes and laws, thus causing equity failure.

2.4 Problem Summary

Human rights violations, corruption, and weak rule of law are major conflict-driven factors threatening peace and the possibility of democratic governance in the North and East Syria (NES) region, mainly caused by the combined effects of weak political, legal, and technical institutions capacity and accountability mechanisms of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in NES region, and exacerbated by instability and insecurity, economic woes, and collide of climate-conflict nexus impact.

One of the main factors is that international-led peacebuilding aid is not inclusive, insensitive, and undemocratic in its approach in partnership with local Syrian NGOs and civil society. As a result, the international community is missing the opportunity to advance peace and democratic governance in the NES region.

2.5 Study Aims and Objectives

This study seeks to address threats to peace in the North-East Syria region. Specifically, it focuses on the realization of human rights and inclusive democracy as the foundation of peace. It aims to consolidate best practices and lessons learned from the local Syrian NGOs and civil society movements in NES on advancing a strategy to develop peacebuilding practices through human rights and democracy programs. And provide evidence-based policy guidance to donors and major international NGOs on how to engage with and support the work of local Syrian NGOs and civil society. **The main objectives of the study are:**

- (1) Identify and evaluate the challenges local civil society and international non-governmental organizations face in fluid and fragile context environments such as the North and East Syria (NES) region.
- (2) Inform the international community (donors, international NGOs, decision-makers, policymakers, and governance) of the local knowledge and local practitioners' expertise in setting priorities and criteria that will support context-tailored support human rights and promote democratic governance in the NES region.
- (3) Share and communicate the results of this research to provide a strategy with local community members and international institutes to leverage support for locally-led ownership and strengthen democracy's values in knowledge production and dissemination.

3. Methodology and Research Methods

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This paper examined how to advance peacebuilding practice by promoting human rights and inclusive governance in a post-conflict and fragile environment using North and East Syria as a case study. The study utilized qualitative and quantitative data from secondary sources and primary data sources from an original survey recorded response of 57 local Syrian CSOs and NGOs, as well as local journalists, human rights, and humanitarian professional respondents working in the NES region.

The paper used a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods, namely, literature review and survey. Findings were triangulated through data or multi-data sources as a research strategy to achieve credibility and validity of the study's findings and mitigate any issues related to research biases. The research design or approach was primarily driven by and based on qualitative methods and utilizes qualitative analysis.

3.1.1 Qualitative Methods

The data sources for the literature review included scientific publications conducted by academic institutes, think tanks, international and local scholars and practitioners, and academic journal articles such as *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* and 'Local Government Studies.' The literature review also included other grey literature, including anthropological research, and third-party and organization reports such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), reports by local NGOs and INGOs working in the region, the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the US Institute of Peace (USIP), and international and local organizations' reports such as the Rojava Information Center (RIC), Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), IMPACT Research organizations. Finally, the study was informed by policy analysis tools (Power/Interest Matrix).

3.1.2 Quantitative Methods

Because North and East Syria is a data-poor region, the author developed an online survey to overcome the challenges of insufficient data and collect rich data to conduct analysis, answer research questions, and achieve its objectives. The paper's research method relies on conducting mixed methods analysis of primary data with

heavy reliance on qualitative analysis. After collecting the survey data, the author of this study utilized his fluency in English, Kurdish, and Arabic to translate the recorded responses from Kurdish and Arabic into English.

The survey was based on a ‘non-probability sampling’ methodology utilizing two methods: Purposive sampling and Snowball sampling. The Purposive sampling method is utilized for choosing one hundred forty (140) local CSOs and NGOs out of an estimated 162 to 178 organizations working in the NES region (based on the ‘NGO Platform’ and the ‘CSO Coalition websites, respectively’).¹

The reasons and criteria for choosing these 140 local CSOs and NGOs are based on the research objective, paper issues under investigation, survey questions, and the local organizations’ thematic area/sector of work and programming: 1. Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion; 2. Development (including capacity building); 3. Human Rights; 4 Women Rights; 5. Civil Society; 6 Studies and Research; 7. Media and Communication; 8 Health, Disabled, and Orphans. The total number of the anonymous Qualtrics survey targeted/invitation sample was 155.

The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data was based on ‘inductive reasoning’ by using thematic analysis and looking at patterns or repeating themes in the survey’s texts. The author manually grouped similar themes or text into codes (numerical numbers), then summarized each pattern of themes or groups of recorded answers texts into categories. For example, after conducting the thematic analysis of recorded patterns of themes of the human rights texts, the author utilized classification of the themes according to the international human rights conventions, such as the “right to life” as ‘civil and political rights,’ and so forth.

3.2 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This study was limited to the research questions under investigation and time frame. The Qualtrics survey is based on approved Duke University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol number # 2024-0282 and the procedures for recruiting each potential participant population, confidentiality for data collection, and ethical

¹ Last updated information was March 30, 2024. For further information, see the CSO Coalition website: <https://coalition-nes.org/en/>; NGO Platform website: <https://www.ngoplatform.org/ngos>

considerations. The Qualtrics survey questions were general and did not inquire about personal or family-related issues. The questions are not posed and do not involve discussing former or current traumatic experiences, if any. The research did not include any activities that can be distressing or upsetting for the participants. The Qualtrics survey was voluntary, and the participants had the option to not answer, withdraw, or participate at any time.

4. Searching for Solutions and a Strategy

4.1 Literature Review

4.1.1 Theory of Change: Peacebuilding, human rights, and good governance

The United Nations defines governance as “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented” (UNESCAP, 2009, p.1). Based on the ‘good governance’ definition, the UN identifies eight core elements or indicators of inclusive governance as follows:

“It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law. It ensures “minimizing corruption, taking into account the views of minorities and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society” (UNESCAP, 2009, p.1-3).



Figure 2. “Characteristics of good governance.”

Source: UNESCAP, 2009, p.3.

These core elements of good governance reaffirm the Human Rights Council's identified critical attributes of good/inclusive governance, which are as follows:

“Transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, responsiveness (to the

needs of the people)” (OHCHR, 2024). As such, from a human rights perspective, “good governance and human rights are mutually reinforcing” (OHCHR, 2024).

The link between good governance and human rights are organized in the following four areas:

*“1. **Democratic institutions:** Such as creating space for the public to participate in public policy in formal or informal mechanisms and advance civil society role;*

*2. **Public service delivery:** Fulfil responsibility to provide public goods which are essential for the protection of several human rights, e.g., the right to education, health, and food;*

*3. **Rule of law:** Such as advocacy for legal reform, public awareness-raising on the [...] legal framework, and capacity-building or reform of institutions:*

*4. **Anti-corruption:** Good governance efforts rely on ‘accountability, [bureaucratic] transparency and participation principles’ (OHCHR, 2024).*

In the same line, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) states that inclusive governance institutions matter for sustaining and building peace. Particularly, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 16, “peace, justice, and strong institution,” prioritizes addressing the deficits in governance and the rule of law to enable peace (UN, 2023). It focuses on strengthening the formal local governance institutions and utilizing informal structure approaches such as community-based mechanisms and civil society as an effective approach to advance peacebuilding (Öjendal, Leonardsson, and Lundqvist, 2017).

4.1.1.2 The Link Between Human Rights, Inclusive Governance and Peace

The “Pathways for Peace” (2017) study by the UN and the World Bank (WB) found that “unaddressed grievances, inequalities and exclusion, and lack of participation in decision-making that would allow these grievances and inequalities to be addressed” are the main factors causing violent conflict and relapse to conflict (WB, 2018). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2024) states.

“Human rights standards and principles provide a set of values to guide the work of governments [...] a set of performance standards against which these actors can be held accountable [...] principles [that] inform the content of good governance efforts: they may inform

the development of legislative frameworks, policies, etc. On the other hand, without good governance, human rights cannot be respected and protected in a sustainable manner.”

Further, studies show that the role of human rights programming in fragile environments and conflict contexts has a positive impact on preventing, resolving conflict, and sustaining peace. More particularly, it led to a change in individuals' and communities' attitudes, behavior, knowledge, and skills, which are the same qualities and aspects that help with conflict resolution processes (OHCHR, 2021).

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), at the High-level Meeting on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels, adopted a declaration in September 2012 reaffirming that “human rights, the rule of law and democracy are interlinked and mutually reinforcing” (UNGA, 2012, para 5). According to the OHCHR (2020, p.3), “Human rights promotion and protection [...] build confidence in institutions and bridge societal divides [...] and promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts grounded in respect for the rights and dignity of others.”

Further, Walter (2015) argues that strong “political and legal institutions” and “accountability” mechanisms are key factors for conflict resolution and preventing ‘conflict traps.’ Therefore, building an environment of respect for human rights and Inclusive governance is considered a critical foundation for peacebuilding. As such, human rights and good governance are interdependent and inherently address grievances, inequality, and discrimination issues; thus, they are considered the main factors for building sustainable and just peace, as shown in **Figure 3 below**.

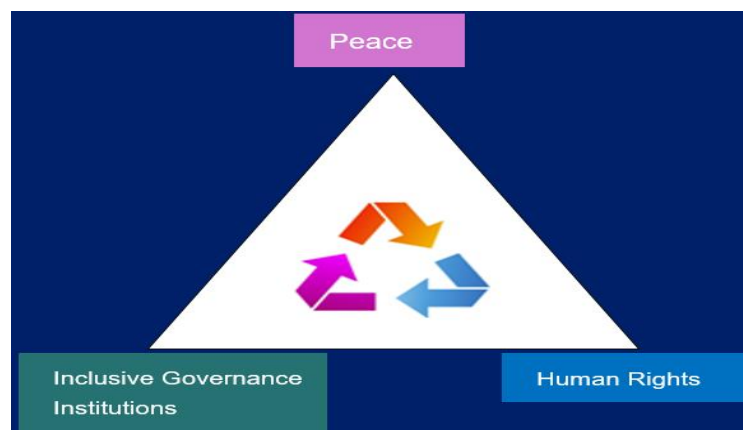


Figure 3. Peace, Inclusive Governance Institutions, and Human Rights Triangle: Illustration of the relationship and reinforcing dynamics.

Source: Imad Alhajj, 2024.

4.1.2 Effective Peacebuilding: A Movement Toward Localization

Localization in this paper refers to the combination of “space” and “perspectives” of local actors (Sullivan, 2022). “The global momentum for locally-led peacebuilding recent frameworks including the Agenda for Humanity (2016), the Grand Bargain (2016), New Ways of Working (2017), [...] alongside unofficial institutional frameworks such as Doing Development Differently (DDD)” [...] “aim to reshape the top-down humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development system into one that is locally driven and led, and designed around equitable, dignified and accountable partnership (Roesdahl, Peet-Martel, and Velpillay, 2021, p.12).

However, despite the fact that international peacebuilding architecture has been moving towards “more participatory-and [local] agency-oriented approaches” aiming towards locally-led peacebuilding, “as well as more radical views based on post-modern and post-colonial perspectives,” many scholars and practitioners highlight a significant gap between the rhetoric level and the level of resources and commitment where the ‘local efforts’ are ignored and marginalized (Öjendal, Leonardsson, and Lundqvist, 2017, p.30).

Literature review and other work on international and local engagement toward building peace show that “foreign and local peacebuilders are most successful when they work together” (Autesserre, 2017a; 2017b). Séverine Autesserre’s ethnographic research (and other peacebuilding scholars and practitioners) “suggests that to be effective, peace efforts must draw on the knowledge, competencies, perspectives, networks, assets, and leverage of both insiders and outsiders” (Autesserre, 2017b).

However, major structural and cultural problems undermine the international-led peacebuilding efforts’ effectiveness. These problems are summarized as follows. The international-led peacebuilding aid is characterized as a top-down, centralized, lack of holistic and affected people-centered approach. It is supply-driven, where major donors have narrow and sometimes conflicting interests, inadequate and exclusive participatory decisions, and processes. At the same time, international NGOs intermediate (when becoming donors themselves and/or in case of partnership with local NGOs) and greatly influence priority setting and marginalizing the local influence and efforts (Autesserre 2014; 2017).

In 2021, the ‘Conducive Space for Peace’ developed a report analyzing the ecosystem for locally-led peacebuilding. It highlights some of the most common and constricting dysfunctionalities of the current system of support as experienced by local CSOs and NGOs working in peacebuilding and promoting human rights and inclusive governance as follows:

“1. Transactional, one-sided power relationships rather than actual partnership; 2. Lack of downwards accountability towards to the local needs and rights; 3. Disconnect between policies and practices; 4. Local organisations (with specific knowledge on what it takes to promote peace in a specific context) face difficulty accessing funds; 5. Local peacebuilders [are] seen as implementers. 6. Current requirements for programming constrain collaboration; 7. Donor requirements on fiscal compliance and risk mitigation greatly restrict access to donor funding; 8. Results-based management and pre-defined frameworks inhibit flexibility, adaptation, and innovation; 9. Lack of funding predictability and timeframes not fit for purpose” (Roesdahl, Peet-Martel, and Velpillay (2021, pp.14-15).

Further, there is a significant lack of investment in the democratization of knowledge, communication, circulating, facilitating, and sharing knowledge and expertise with local community members in their languages, whether related to the project-implemented activities or conducted research on peacebuilding, good governance, and human rights and other issues of concern of local people.

These and other aspects of international peacebuilding aid undermine its effectiveness and can harm affected communities by conflict. This is sometimes attributed to the fact that international aid “overlook [...] and forget the ‘realities’ of everyday life of conflict in terms of hurt, pain, displacement, and destruction” (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016, pp.308–310). So far, to the best of my knowledge, no study has focused on the critical case of Syria.

4.1.3 Political Will in Peacebuilding: Another Pillar in Localization

Political Will’ is defined as “the extent of committed support among key decision-makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem” (Post et al., 2010). Malena’s (2009) “Getting from Political Won’t to Political Will: Building Support for Participatory Governance” presents a critical Political-Will Equation Framework in

political will methodologies. It suggests that we need to understand ‘(lack of) political will’ in a simple formula:

Political will = (political want + political can + political must).

In other words, “for power holders to commit to and act in favour of a certain cause, they need ‘to want to undertake a given action, feel confident that they can undertake that action and feel that they must undertake that action” (Marquette, 2022, p.4). By breaking down these constructs, it is possible to identify entry points for reform needed, namely: “*Political want*” refers to desired changes; “*Political can*” is about having the capacity and skills to make changes; and “*Political must*” implies that *political want*, the desired change, and *political can*, the capacity, “must be accompanied by a compelling force or pressure that demands action and renders inaction politically costly” (Marquette, 2022, p.4). This is consistent with recent Duke Center for International Development’s (DCID, 2023) innovative “sectoral approach” which states.

“By focusing on specific sectors, programs can identify and exploit specific sectoral-level opportunities as an overall strategy in challenging contexts. Key to a sectoral approach is ensuring a focus on sectoral-level policy outcomes (e.g., improved education, health, or infrastructure outcomes) and addressing corruption to achieve these outcomes.”

In sum, the best approach to peacebuilding and tackling corruption is not “trying to directly persuade elite officials to engage in broad-scale anti-corruption reform, which is unlikely to be successful, anticorruption can be achieved indirectly by aligning those efforts with alternative policy goals that the politician wants to achieve” (Malesky et al., 2023, p.xii).

4.2 Survey Results and Discussion

3.1.1 Mapping Local Syrian CSOs and NGOs in the NES region

The CSOs and NGOs in the NES region are diverse and have grown significantly over the last five years. According to the CSOs in NES Coalition website, the number of CSOs in the NES region is estimated to be around 178 organizations (out of 178, 154 are active and registered with the CSOs in NES Coalition) with different capacities, sectors of work, and focus areas. Based on CSOs in the NES Coalition, the distribution of the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs in the NES region is 32 percent in Deir Ezzor province, 26

in Hasaka (Jazira) province, 40 percent in Raqqa province, and 2 percent in other regions (CSOs Coalition website, 2024 English version).

The total number of the anonymous Qualtrics survey targeted/invitation sample was 155. This includes 140 total local Syrian CSOs and NGOs working in the NES region and fifteen total individual persons, which include six journalists (three female, three male) and nine humanitarian and development professionals/experts (two female and seven male) who worked in the region on the ground or currently working on region based in the diaspora. Further, four out of 15 individuals (three humanitarian experts and one journalist are directors/ CEOs of local Syrian NGOs) were reached directly via email. **See Figure 4 below.**

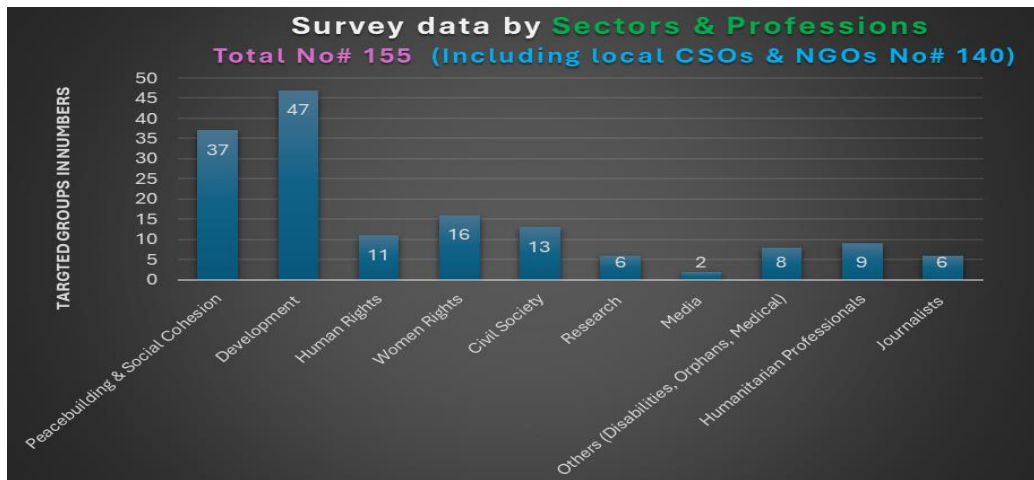


Figure 4. Survey data by targeted sectors and professions.

Total number 155. Source: Imad Alhajj. March 13, 2024.

The survey invitation was sent on March 13, 2024. The total number of recorded responses or survey participants was 57 on March 30, 2024. The later date was selected to allocate a convenient time frame and schedule for drafting the discussion and analysis section and submitting the study for graduation.

The following subsections are outlined to provide the survey results in chronological order based on the survey questionnaires and a discussion and analysis of these survey data.

4.2.1 An Overview of Survey Participants

This sub-section provides an overview of survey data by status of recorded responses, the geographical distribution of the survey in the AANES, demography of

participants including age ranges, perceived gender and nationality by respondents, languages used by survey participants to answer the survey questions, participants’ professional backgrounds and experiences respectively.

Based on the survey methodology, the survey's targeted number is 155, including 15 individuals (humanitarian professionals and journalists) and 140 local Syrian CSOs and NGOs working in the NES region. The distribution of targeted survey participants is as follows. Sixty-two (62) organizations in Jazira region (40 percent), 41 organizations in Raqqa region (26 percent), thirty (30) organizations in Deir Ezzor region (19 percent), four organizations in Tabqa region (3 percent), two organizations in Manbij region (1 percent), one organization in Aleppo region (1 percent) as well as 15 individual persons (six journalists, 4 percent, and 9 humanitarian professionals, 6 percent). The survey did not target the Afrin region of Autonomous Administration because the Afrin region has been under Turkish military occupation since March 2018, making it impossible to recruit local Syrian NGOs and CSOs and thus out of the scope of the study. **See Figure 5 below.**

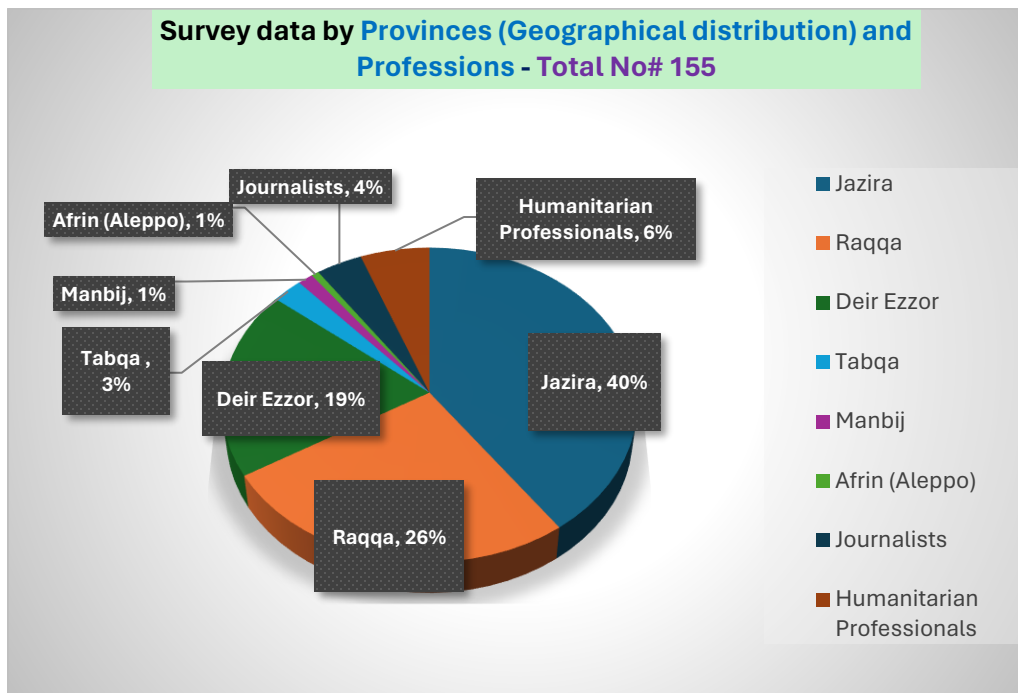


Figure 5. Survey data by regions (geographical distribution) and professions. Total targeted participants No.#155. Source: Imad Alhajj, March 13, 2024.

On March 30th, 2024, the total number of recorded responses is 57 (fifty-seven). Out of 57 respondents, 48 completed the survey, and nine had partial responses, with

an average of 50 percent completing the questionnaire. Regarding the language, out of 57 survey respondents, 53 responses were in Arabic, two responses were in Kurdish, and two responses were in English. See Figures 6 and 7 below.

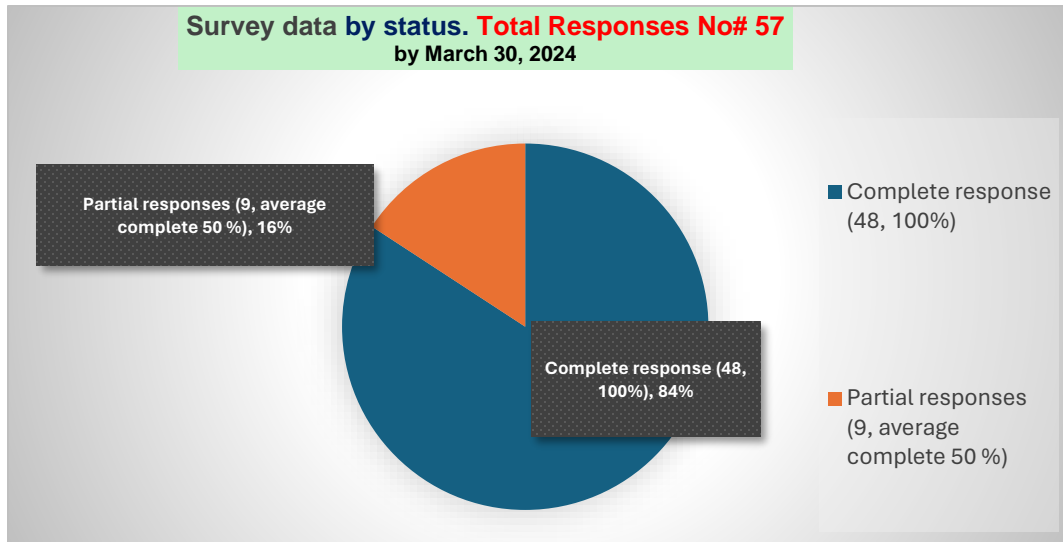


Figure 6. Survey data by response status.
Total respondents No.# 57. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

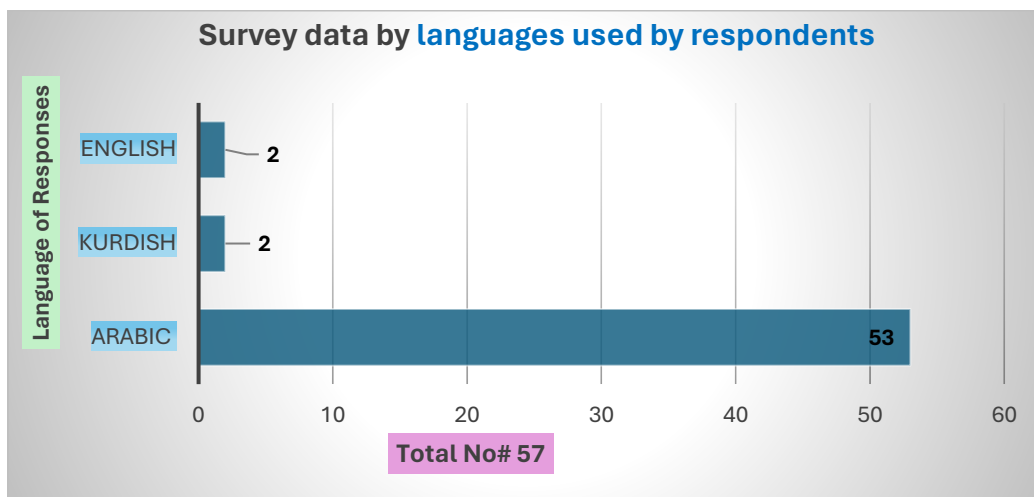


Figure 7. Survey data by language respondents used in their responses.
Total respondents No.# 57. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Regarding survey data by demography, out of 57 recorded responses, 48 answered the demography questions. The age range of participants is as follows. Five respondents (11 percent) between age 24-30 years old, 14 respondents (29 percent) between age 31-35 years old, 12 respondents (26 percent) between age 36-40 years old, nine respondents (19 percent) between age 41-45 years old. The remaining respondents

(16 percent) were between 46-60 years old. The majority of survey participants' age range is between 31 to 45 years old. See Figure 8 below.

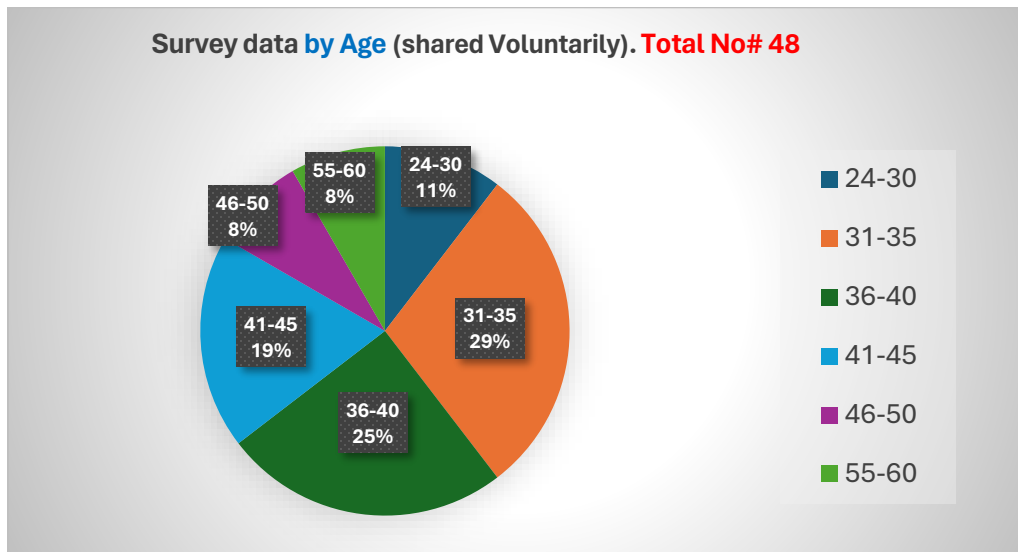


Figure 8. Survey data by age.

Total respondents No.# 48. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Survey data by respondents' perceived gender shows that male respondents comprised the most recorded responses. Out of 48 participants, 35 survey respondents (73 percent) identified themselves as male and 13 as female (27 percent). See Figure 9 below.

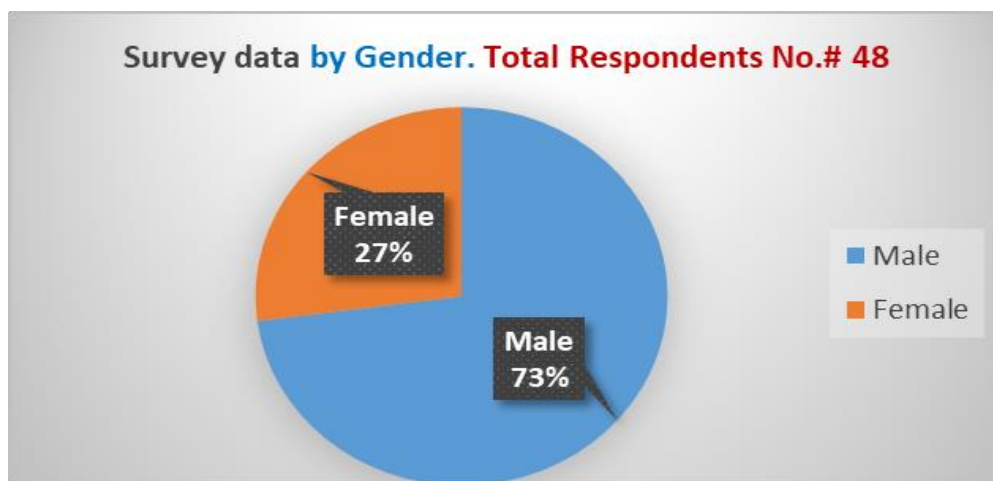


Figure 9. Survey data by gender.

Total respondents No.#48. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Out of 57, 48 participants responded to the question about their perceived nationality, where most of the survey participants identified themselves as “Syrian” (43

responses, 90 percent), two participants identified themselves as “Syrian-Kurdish” (4 percent), two as “Kurdish” (4 percent), and one as a “Kurdish-Syrian” (2 percent) respectively. See Figure 10 below.

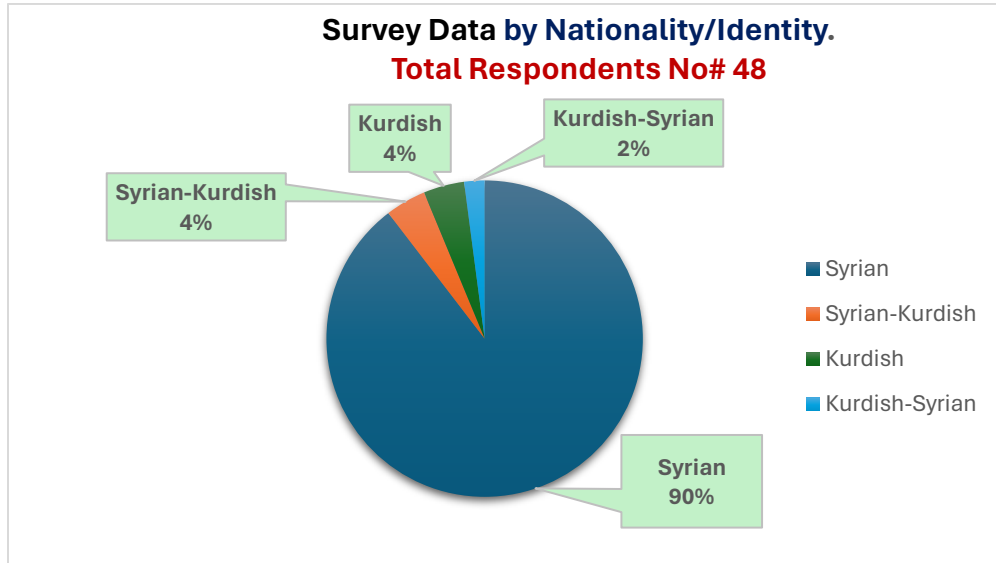


Figure 10. Survey data by respondents’ perceived nationality/identity.

Total respondents No.#48. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

In response to the survey’s question about the participants’ “current or previous job occupation,” the survey used multi-choice answers where the respondents indicated working in multiple sectors. Out of 57 survey participants, the majority of respondents indicated that they are working in the local Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) (37.04 percent) and local Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (29.63 percent) sectors, respectively. This was followed by working as activists (8.64 percent), researchers (7.41 percent), journalists (6.81 percent), and two respondents stated working with INGOs and one with international donors. The overall survey participant’s average years of professional experience is four years. See Figure 11.

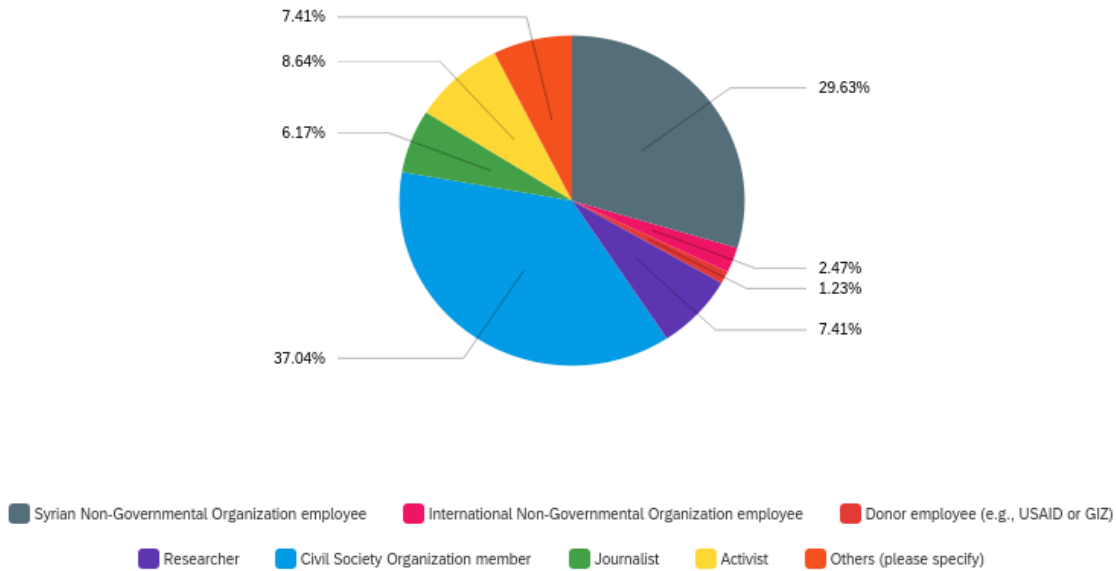


Figure 11. Survey data by professional background of survey participants in percentage (multi choices).

Total respondents No.# 57. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Further, out of 56 survey participants, most of the survey respondents stated that they are working or worked in program management or compliance (29 percent), program implementation/ logistics/operations (23 percent), followed by research and media (17 percent), and communications or media (16 percent). In the ‘Other’ category, four respondents indicated they are directors of a local organization. **See Figure 12.**

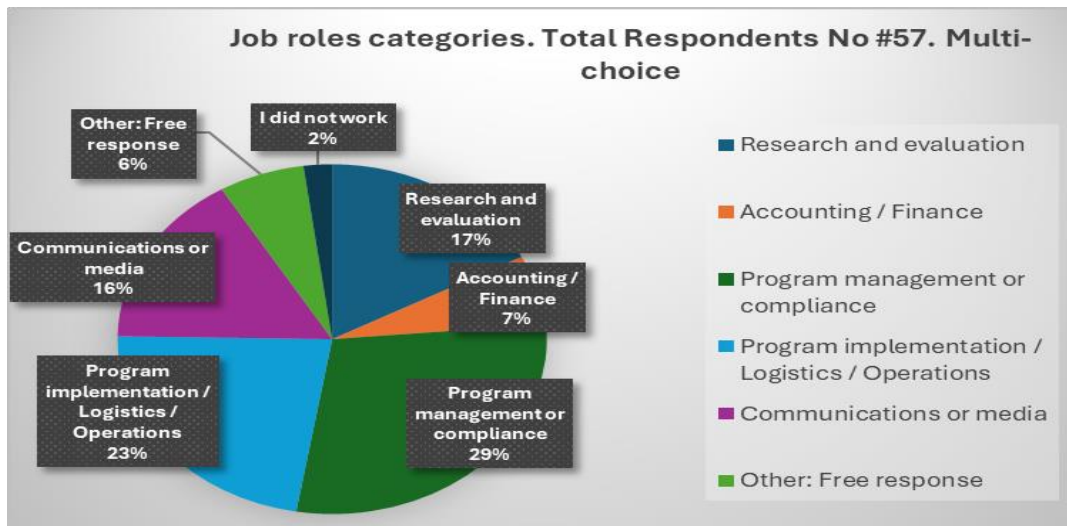


Figure 12. Survey data by respondents' work occupations.

Total respondents No.# 56. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

In response to survey’s question about “the professional experiences in thematic areas of programming,” using multi-choice answers, out of 57 recorded responses, the majority of respondents stated that they are working in peacebuilding and social cohesion (22.48 percent), followed by working in humanitarian protection and gender-based violence (GBV) (18.35 percent), livelihood (16.97 percent), and human rights and democracy (23.86 percent combined), and by working in local service delivery (9.63 percent), and house, land, and property (3.67 percent). **See Figure 13 below.**

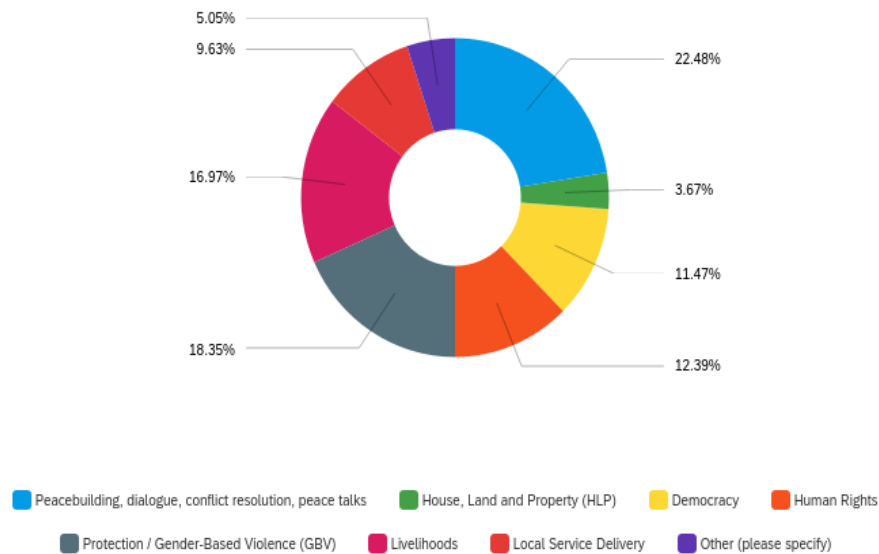


Figure 13. Survey data by respondents' thematic areas of program experiences (multiple choices).

Total respondents No.# 57. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

In sum, the overview of the survey respondents shows a rich diversity of the participants, male and female, with deep knowledge of issues in the region and the diversity of the participants' professional backgrounds.

4.2.2 Human Rights and Governance Priorities: Survey Highlights

This subsection provides a comprehensive overview of survey data about priorities or issues regarding protecting and promoting human rights and inclusive governance.

4.2.2.1 Human Rights

Question 1.1. What is the first priority or main issue(s) regarding protecting and fulfilling human rights?

According to 57 recorded responses, most of the survey participants emphasized the “Civil and Political Rights” priority (34 responses, 59 percent), followed by the “Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights” (nine responses, 16 percent); “Accountability, Rule of Law, and Justice” (five responses, 9 percent) as well as the need to “Awareness Raising and Implementation of Human Rights” (four responses, 7 percent), followed by “Women’s Rights” (two responses, 3 percent), peace and environment (three responses, 6 percent).

Further, three interrelated major sub-themes were observed in the civil and political rights classification of human rights. Out of 57 survey respondents, 11 participants stated “safety and security,” while seven stated “the right to life,” and four responded with the priority to “freedom of expression.” See Figure 14 below.

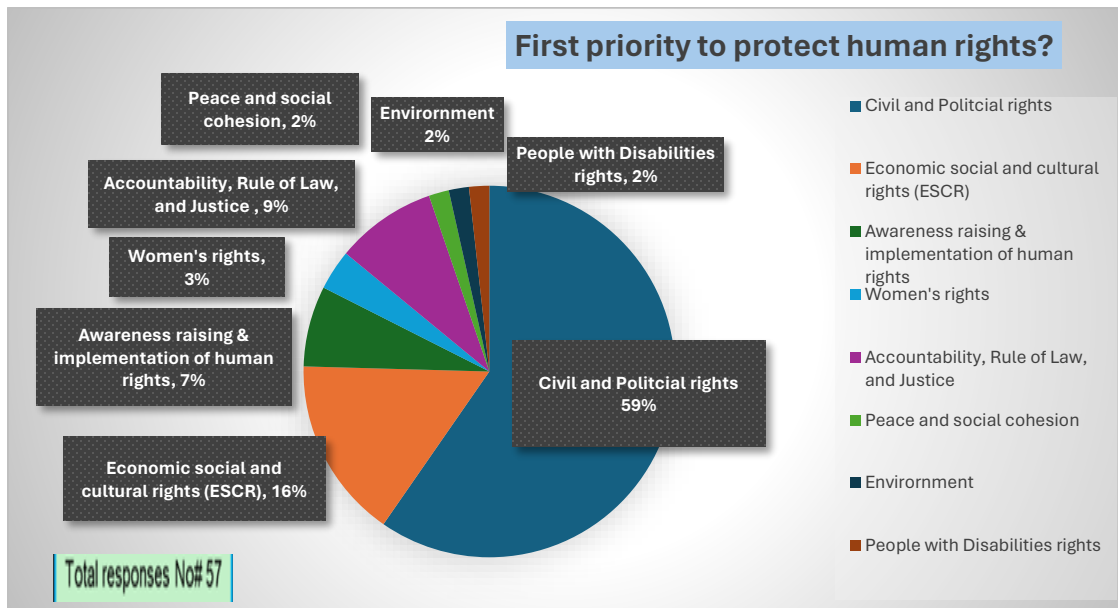


Figure 14. Survey data by respondents’ perceived as the first priority or main issue(s) regarding protecting and promoting human rights.

Total respondents No.# 57. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Question 1.2. What is the second priority or main issue(s) regarding protecting and fulfilling human rights?

Out of 53 recorded responses, most survey respondents indicated “Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights” (24 responses, 42 percent), then “Civil and Political Rights” (22 responses, 39 percent) and “Accountability, Rule of Law, and Justice” (four responses, 7 percent), followed by “Awareness Raising and Implementation of Human Rights” (three responses, 5 percent). See Figure 15 below.

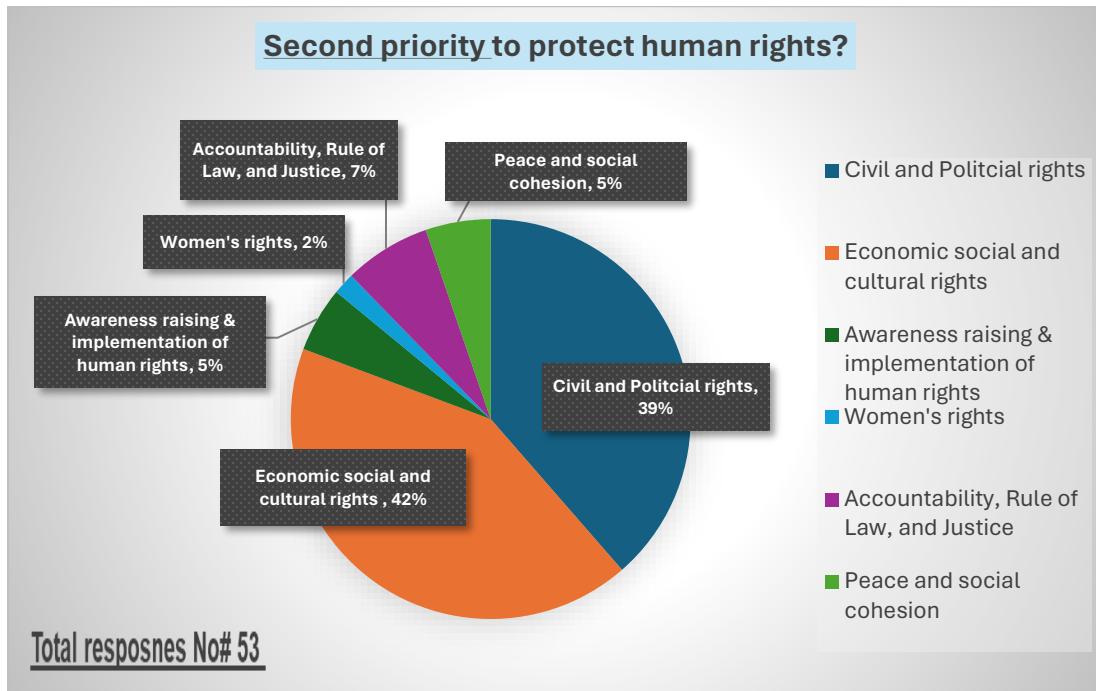


Figure 15. Survey data by respondents perceived the second priority or main Issue(s) regarding protecting and promoting human rights.

Total respondents No.# 53. Source: Imad Alhadj, April, 2024.

Question 1.3. What is the third priority or main issue(s) regarding protecting and fulfilling human rights?

Out of 52 recorded responses to third priority, survey participants re-emphasized both the “Civil and Political Rights” (18 responses, 34 percent) and “the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights” (16 responses, 30 percent) class of priorities to protect and promote human rights. The rest of the survey respondents indicated “Accountability, the Rule of Law, and Justice” (five responses, 13 percent), followed by “Peace” (6 percent), “Environment Rights” (4 percent), “Women's Rights” (2 percent), and “Awareness Raising and Implementation of Human Rights” (4 percent). See Figure 16.

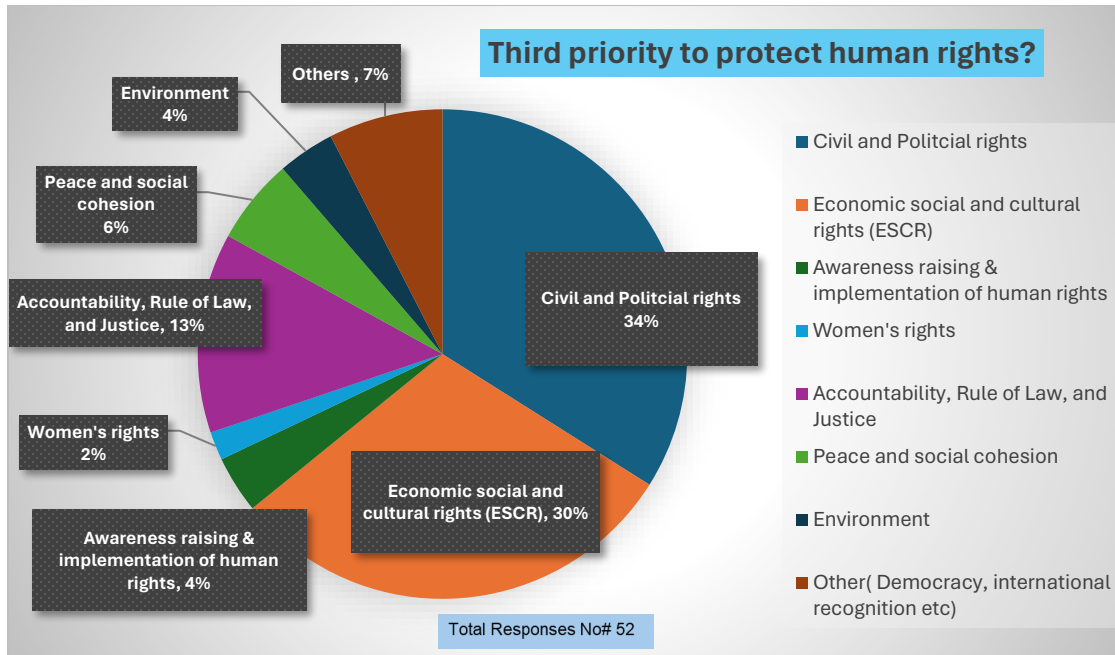


Figure 16. Survey data by respondents perceived the third priority or main Issue(s) regarding protecting and promoting human rights.

Total respondents No.# 52. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

In sum, an overview of survey participants’ responses to three sub-questions (with an average of 54 recorded responses), the most observed repeated patterns in the survey recorded regarding the top three priorities or main issue(s) to protect and promote human rights in the NES region are “Civil and Political Rights” (74 responses, 46 percent), “Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights” (49 responses, 30 percent), and “Accountability, the Rule of Law, and Justice” (14 responses, 10 percent). Also, the survey participants stated there is also a need for “Awareness and Implementation of Human Rights” (nine responses, 6 percent), “Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion” (seven responses, 4 percent), “Women’s Rights” (four response, 2 percent), and “Environmental Rights” (three responses, 2 percent), respectively. **See Figure 17 below.**

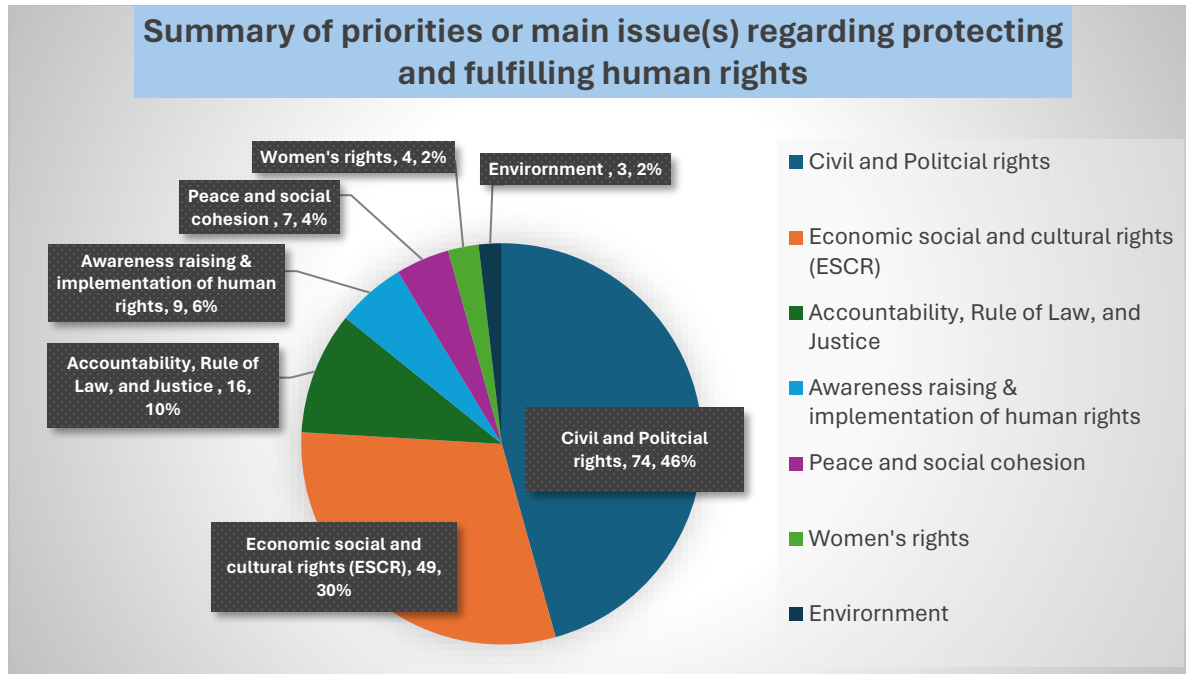


Figure 17. Summary of the survey data by respondents’ perceptions regarding the top three priorities or main issue(s) to protect and fulfill the human rights in the NES region.

Total average of respondents No.# 54. Source: Imad Alhadj, April, 2024.

4.2.2.2 Inclusive Governance

Question 1.1. What do you think are the top three priorities or main issue(s) regarding promoting inclusive governance?

In answer to the survey’s 3 sub-questions about the top three priorities or main issue(s) promoting inclusive governance in the NES region? The total number of recorded responses to the survey is 48 responses to the priority, 46 answers to the second priority, and 45 responses to the third priority. Out of 139 total answers to all three sub-questions, 89 survey responses (64.03 percent) highlighted two significant issues and priorities for inclusive governance in the NES region.

The first observed repeated pattern theme is the need for “Inclusive Participation in Decision-Making (some mentioning ‘elections’) and Non-Discrimination/Exclusion Policies” (Out of 89, 52 recorded responses account for 58 percent). The second observed theme of priority to promote inclusive governance is needed to prioritize “Anti-Corruption, Transparency, and Accountability” (Out of 89, 37 recorded responses, which account for 42 percent).

Further, the survey respondents stated an important and inter-related issue, namely, establishing ‘dialogue and communication channels between the governing institutions and the constituents, including the civil society members.’ The rest of the survey participants' responses are diverse and shed light on critical factors linked to key characteristics/indicators of good governance, such as “Capacity Building of the Autonomous Administration Institutions,” “Independence of the Judiciary System,” the need for “Sustainable Development,” and the fundamental aspects of “Respecting the Human Rights, such as Freedom of Opinion and Expression.” See Figure 18 below.

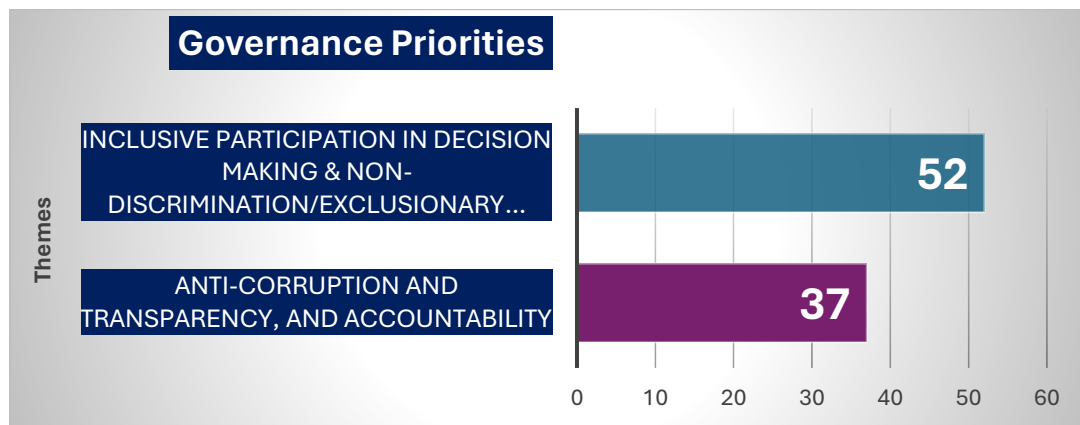


Figure 18. Summary of the survey data by respondents' perceptions regarding the top three priorities to promote inclusive governance in the NES region.

Total recorded responses No.# 89 (out of 139 answers). Source: Imad Alhaji, April, 2024.

4.2.3 Local Syrian Organization's Programs Success and Challenges

This sub-section of the survey's questions focused on the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs' perceived success and unsucess in implementing programs.

Question 1.1. Please tell me about any of your organization's programs that you feel were successful in helping to build peace in the North and East Syria (NES) region?

Out of 52 recorded responses, most survey respondents stated that their implemented programs were successful. The categories of implemented programs were as follows. First, programs that focus on “social cohesion” (17 respondents). As an example of the critical role civil society organizations and international donors' collaboration impact and role in advancing peacebuilding practice in the NES region, survey participant No.#41 stated:

“Beit Al-Jazira program was funded by one of the U.S. State Department’s programs. It aimed to achieve rapprochement between the Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, and Yazidis in northeastern Syria through implementing various social and political communication activities, including Kurdish and Syriac language courses for non-native speakers, the Museum of Popular Works, and the Day of Kurdish and Yazidi Popular Costumes. Arabic, Syriac...etc”

Also, some of the local civil society organizations highlighted the critical role of establishing a “dialogue platform” between intra-groups (horizontal communication) and between the citizens and local authorities of the AANES (vertical communication) (12 respondents) that promote dialogue on the societal issues and provides space between the communities and governance institutions. As an example, the survey participant No.#13 stated:

“Social cohesion and peacebuilding program in partnership with [Swedish International Development Agency] SIDA and [Norwegian People Aid] NPA. The project activities led to enhancing the capabilities of citizens to raise their problems and aspirations with the local authorities by providing a safe platform for dialogue and communication through the Citizens Club platform, which addressed various societal issues that constitute a priority for the local community. These sessions resulted in the response of the authorities and decision-makers, answering questions, and amending decisions and policies according to the needs of the community. The project also contributed to enhancing the municipality’s response to the needs of the local community by listening to the opinions of citizens and updating the ways and methods of accountability, feedback, and communicating with them [the citizens].”

Further, some of the survey participants indicated that they have been successful in implementing programs that focus on “capacity building and livelihood” (seven respondents) and “providing basic services” such as health, food, water, and non-food items (eight respondents), programs with a focus on “youth,” “missing persons,” and “human rights awareness raising” (five respondents) respectively, and environment (two respondents). **See Figure 19 below.**

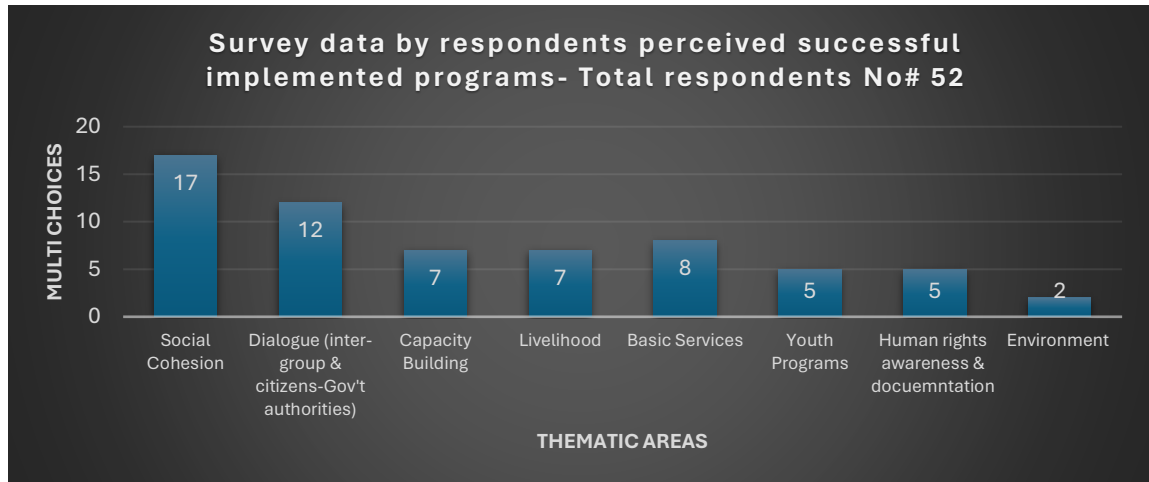


Figure 19. Summary of survey data by respondents perceived successfully implemented programs in the NES region.

Total respondents No.# 52. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Question 1.2. Please tell me about any of your organization’s programs that you feel were not successful in helping to build peace in the North and East Syria region?

Out of 46 recorded responses, 15 stated “nothing.” The remainder of the responses highlighted the characteristics of unsuccessful programs, such as lack of sustainability, a holistic and inclusive approach to address the humanitarian needs in combination with human rights, and peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives processes that help build peace in the NES region. For example, survey respondent No.# 21 stated:

“There is no program that is completely unsuccessful, but the idea lies in the response of all parties to these programs and the extent of their commitment to the follow-up processes and work to implement the program outcomes. We suffer from somewhat weakness in the follow-up processes and dependency in some matters on the part of some parties, so we must work to increase efforts and cooperation to achieve pioneering and successful work on the ground.”

Survey participant No. #25 stated that they were unsuccessful in improving the situation of refugees, the protracted internal displacement situation, and environmental degradation in the NES region, which shed light on the diversity and magnitude of the humanitarian issues. In the same line, survey respondent No. # 6 statement, “Programs not related to recovery, education, livelihoods, protection, and health,” draws attention to very critical cross-cutting issues and echoes many of the recorded responses of survey

respondents' stated challenges. The targeted social change programs, such as peacebuilding activities and awareness raising of human rights, are unsuccessful if they do not address the NES region's humanitarian needs and development issues.

Question 1.3. Please tell me the top 3 challenges you and your organization have faced in your work.

In answer to follow-up questions about why the programs were unsuccessful and the three top challenges, out of 50 recorded responses, most survey respondents perceived challenges as “funding” (40 percent) and “security challenges” (18 percent).

According to the majority of survey respondents, “security problems” are due to the Turkish attacks on civilian and humanitarian infrastructure as well as the ISIS sleeper cells attacks, which make access to the most vulnerable groups and some areas impossible. The third major challenge observed in the recorded responses of the survey participants are “lack of local capacities and resources” (16 percent), followed by “the local authorities constraints” limiting the local CSOs and NGOs' space and work (13 percent), “unequal partnership and power imbalance” (8 percent) between the local CSOs and international NGOs, and finally local Syrian CSOs issues in terms of “nepotism and favoritism” such as reliance on tribal connection in employment that causing “corruption” (3 percent). **See Figure 20 below.**

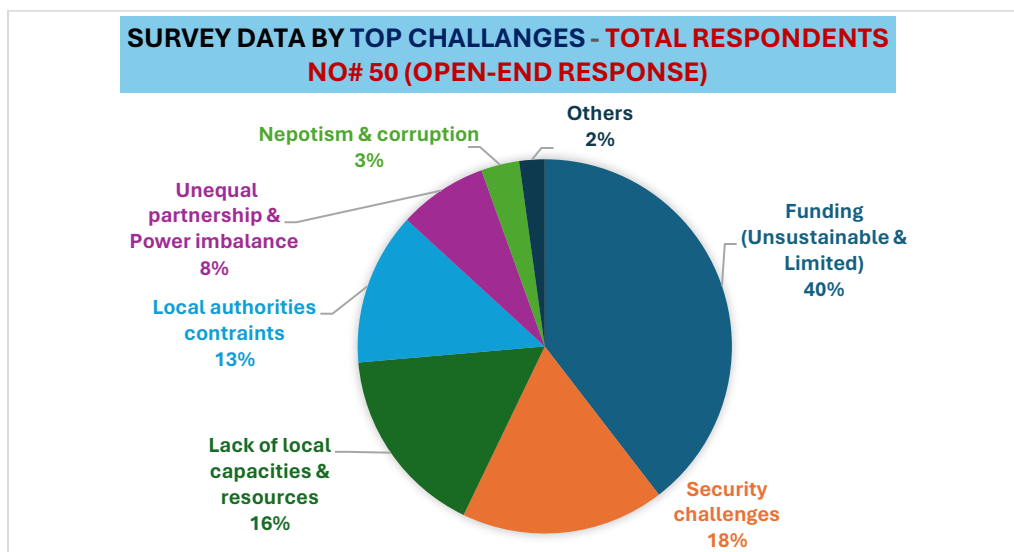


Figure 20. Summary of survey data by respondents perceived challenges regarding implementing programs in the NES region.

Total respondents No.# 50. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Question 1.3.1. How have you or your organization approached and responded to these challenges?

In a follow-up question about how the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs approached and responded to the above-stated challenges in their programs, out of 49 recorded responses, most survey respondents stated they adopted the following strategies: “Hiring more volunteers,” “diversifying their sources for their funding,” “adapting to security situations and working remotely” instead of field visits between offices from different regions to reduce financial costs. Some survey respondents said they responded by enhancing communication involving authorities and adopting the strategy of increasing collaboration efforts with other local Syrian CSOs and NGOs working in the NES region.

4.2.4 Donors and International NGOs

In this survey section, the respondents were asked several questions about their work relationships and partnership experiences with the donors and international NGOs working in the NES region.

Question 1.1 What has been successful in working with INGOs?

Out of 35 recorded responses, most of the survey participants highlighted that the work with INGOs helped get technical expertise, such as “capacity building” of local staff and the benefit of exposure and experience in “policy development” as well as “exchange of experiences” and help the local Syrian civil society and NGOs serve the local communities and meet their needs. For example, survey participant No.#17 response echo many positive aspects of collaboration between the local Syria civil society and NGOs and INGOs working in the NES, which are:

“Working with INGOs has been successful in various ways in addressing humanitarian needs and supporting communities in crisis-affected areas. Some key aspects that have contributed to the effectiveness of collaboration with INGOs include: 1. Expertise and Resources 2. Global Networks and Partnerships 3. Capacity Building and Support 4. Advocacy and Influence 5. Innovation and Adaptation. Overall, collaboration with INGOs has been successful in addressing humanitarian needs and supporting communities in crisis-affected areas by leveraging their expertise, resources, networks, and capacity-building efforts.”

Further, survey participant No.#27 stated that the work with INGOs helped with *“Training on international law subjects. Gain experience from other countries’ experiences in acquiring property rights.”* In the same line, survey participant No.#44 stated the collaboration with some INGOs empowered their work through:

“Strengthening advocacy and support on the issues of northeastern Syria, where through some international organizations we contributed to delivering the voices of citizens in northeastern Syria to decision-makers at the international level.”

Question 1.2. What are the top challenges your organization has faced when working with INGOs and donors?

Out of 36 recorded responses, most survey respondents stated that the international NGOs' top-down driven approach is problematic and insensitive to the context, reality, and needs on the ground. For example, survey participant No. #39 stated, *“Work according to the vision of donor programs, even if they are not appropriate to the region’s environment and needs.”*

Some of the critical issues highlighted by survey participants are that the INGOs’ approaches lack democratic practices in adopting inclusive and participatory decision-making in developing programs and working with local NGOs on the ground. For example, survey respondent No.#44 stated that:

“The desire of international organizations to implement projects directly, which constitutes an obstacle to the progress and development of local organizations and thus the provision of services without the promotion and protection of civil society, there are also challenges in the non-conformity of the agendas and priorities of some international organizations with the priorities and needs of local communities and local organizations.”

Further, survey participant No. #14 highlighted the partnership was weak and limited between them and the INGO and that *“partnerships that existed were unfair and cost our organization huge losses – their view of the local as a service provider rather than a strategic partner.”*

In the same line, survey participant No. #17 response echoes most of the survey responses, which lead to rising very critical issues regarding the power imbalance and lack of locally-led and local ownership, stating that:

“Local organizations in NES face several challenges when working with International INGOs and donors. Some of the top challenges include limited funding and resources, power imbalance, lack of ownership, lack of capacity and technical support, coordination and communication challenges, security risks, and access constraints.”

Another issue highlighted by the survey respondents is the theory-practice gap despite the rhetoric of “localization,” which also draws attention to the ethical and accountability implications due to INGOs insensitivity to local people in the NES region and lack of adopting the imperative principle of ‘Do No Harm’ in their approach. For example, survey participant No.#20 stated that the local actors are:

“Unable to influence the direction of the grant, programs, or strategy followed by the international organization or the donor. Dealing with us as an executor first and foremost, and our margin of opinion is simple and often has no effect. Lack of familiarity of international organizations with the nature of local culture and the dynamics of society and politics.”

A related challenge and the issues highlighted by survey respondents are double standards in accountability and lack of effective communication by the INGOs, causing ‘distrust’ between local actors and the INGOs and donors. For instance, survey participant No. #28 stated:

“Slow response in the event of inquiries or response to any email or sudden change in projects due to the hierarchy in the international system, which requires approvals from several individuals to reach us, which is reflected in the time and quality of work, in addition to holding the local organization responsible for all errors in any delay by it without holding the international organization itself responsible for the delay, which is reflected in the lack of confidence of local organizations in partner international organizations.”

Question 1.3. In your opinion, how supportive or unsupportive are INGOs of the work conducted by Local NGOs and civil society?

Out of 47 recorded responses, survey respondents stated that the international NGOs are “somewhat supportive” (55 percent) and “somewhat unsupportive” (28 percent), followed by “neither supportive nor unsupportive (9 percent), and “very supportive” (6 percent), and finally “very unsupportive” (2 percent). In sum, there is good evidence that the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs perceive international NGOs as ‘supportive somewhat’ despite the challenges in partnership. **See Figure 21 below.**

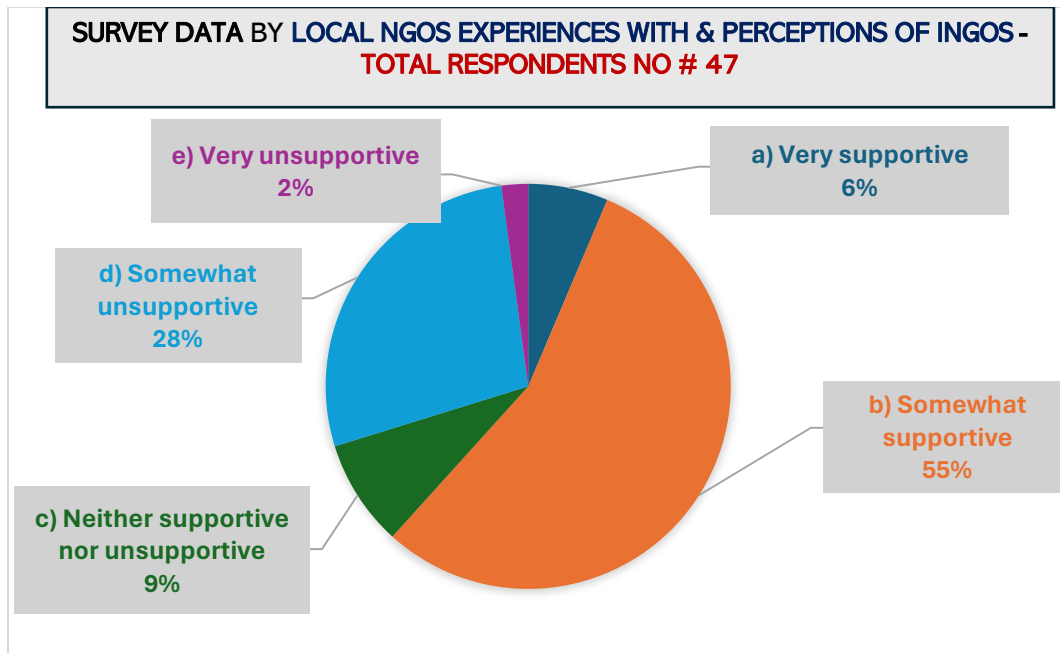


Figure 21. Summary of survey data by local Syrian CSOs and NGOs respondents perceived working experience with INGOs.

Total respondents No.# 47. Source: Imad Alhajj, April, 2024.

Question 1.4. How do the INGOs efforts empower the work of the local NGOs to advance peacebuilding, peace dialogues, and conflict resolution efforts in the NES region, if any?

Out of 50 recorded responses, diverse themes, such as capacity building and enhancing further communication and collaboration, are highlighted. Some of the survey respondents stated there is a need for sustainable partnership and ‘*amplifying the local voices.*’ Survey respondent No.#16 stated that INGOs can do so and empower the work of local actors “*by applying non-discrimination policy*” while survey respondent No.#33 state that the INGO and donors “*will not contribute because [they are] far from reality.*”

Question 1.5. How can international-led peacebuilding institutions, practitioners, and policymakers support the local NGOs and CSOs’ efforts to improve and promote inclusive governance in the NES region?

Out of 37 recorded responses, the majority of survey respondents stated the international community could support the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs by addressing the challenges they stated in the survey, which also mentioned above, such as the need to adopt strategic partnerships, strengthening the local Syrian CSOs and NGOs’

organizational and technical expertise, implementing long-term programs. For example, survey No.#2 stated:

“By building a real and effective partnership with local organizations and not marginalizing them.”

Some respondents stated the need to build the AANES institutional capacity to support the work of local civil society and NGOs in the NES region and work effectively together. In sum, survey participant No. #17 response echoes the majority of survey respondents highlighted issues and some of the important ways the international-led peacebuilding institutions, policy-makers, and practitioners can support the local CSOs and NGOs to promote human rights and inclusive governance in the NES region by applying the following approaches:

“- Provide capacity-building support and technical assistance to local NGOs and CSOs to strengthen their skills and expertise in governance, democracy, and human rights.

- Mobilize financial resources and provide funding opportunities for local NGOs and CSOs to implement governance-related projects and initiatives.

- Facilitate networking and collaboration between local NGOs, CSOs, governmental institutions, and international stakeholders involved in governance and peacebuilding initiatives in the NES region.

- Amplify the voices and perspectives of local NGOs and CSOs in governance and peacebuilding processes by advocating for their inclusion in decision-making processes, policy dialogues, and peace negotiations.

- Promote civic engagement and public participation in governance processes by supporting initiatives that enhance citizen awareness, education, and participation in local decision-making.

- Ensure that international-led initiatives are conflict-sensitive and do not inadvertently exacerbate tensions or reinforce existing power dynamics in the NES region.”

4.2.5 Analysis of Survey Results: Summary and Trends

Given the survey data results, the local Syrian NGOs and civil society movements are growing, and they can play a critical role in advancing peacebuilding practice by promoting human rights and supporting inclusive governance activities in the NES region, whether through humanitarian response, supporting youth, livelihood programs,

or providing safe space for dialogue initiative. The local Syrian NGOs and CSOs have a rich knowledge of the multifaceted and diverse challenges and issues regarding human rights and inclusive governance priorities in the NES region. However, they face overwhelming challenges. The diversity of the local organization's roles, from providing basic services to social cohesion programs, suggests that the NES region remains a complex humanitarian situation with greater and more diverse needs.

Although the number of local Syrian NGOs and civil society movements in the NES region has increased in the last decade, their civic space and role face many challenges. They are not in the driver set yet and are witnessing growing challenges. The local people and organizations are constrained, challenged, and not consulted by the Autonomous Administration because of the lack of transparency and effective communication when developing policies and regulations. One of the pathways to solve this problem, survey respondent No.# 13 suggests that:

“Civil society organizations should be given the broader role and powers to represent the voice of local communities, be a bridge and safe spaces to raise issues and problems, mobilize and advocate for local issues, strengthen local governance, and activate community participation.”

Another important and major observed trend in survey data is the imbalance in power dynamics and undemocratic practices by the international NGOs and donors in their partnership approach with the local civil society organizations. This is exemplified in one of the responses to an open-ended question: Is there a question I should have asked? At your option, please ask and answer it. Survey participant No.# 32 asks:

“Were international NGOs and governance programs fair and transparent in implementing the required project?”

Further, the local organizations face internal challenges regarding organizational capacity, trends related to lack of funding support, and lack of independence regarding the need for financial resources due to the protracted conflict and socio-economic tolls.

In summary, in response to the survey question: Do you have any final thoughts or suggestions about how the NGOs may work to build a responsive government in the NES region? survey participant No.#3 suggested the following strategies as a way forward to address the challenges mentioned above.

“1. Promote community participation: NGOs should encourage and support community participation in decision-making and encourage transparency and good governance.

2. Providing training and education: Contribute to building the capacity of local authorities and local government institutions by providing training and education in management and governance skills.

3. Supporting local solutions: Selectively focus on supporting local solutions and strengthening local capabilities and technology to enable local entities to deal with their own challenges.

4. Contribute to policy development: Engage with local government and local communities in developing government policies and strategies to ensure that community needs are met effectively.

5. Building partnerships: Strengthening partnerships and joint cooperation between NGOs, local government agencies and local communities to work towards achieving responsive government goals. Finally, NGOs must be keen to understand the local culture and unique challenges faced by communities in northeast Syria, and the need to adapt their strategies and programs accordingly.”

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The Syrian government's discrimination, human rights violations, lack of democratic reforms and freedom, as well as mismanagement are the root causes of the violent armed conflict in Syria. The conflict caused huge humanitarian loss, economic tolls, and division of the country. In 2012, the AANES emerged to fill the power vacuum and combat the radical group ISIS exploiting the environment.

Based on the analysis of survey data, the survey results support and are consistent with the theory of change of the study that human rights, just rule of law, such as transparency and combating corruption, accountability, and inclusive governance processes in decision-making are mutually reinforcing. Peacebuilding can be achieved by building a strong foundation of respect for human rights and inclusive governance institutions, mechanisms, and processes.

The survey results suggest that in advancing peacebuilding in the NES region, it's imperative to address cross-cutting and interrelated issues and challenges the local people experience due to the impact of protracted conflict. The humanitarian needs are greater and diverse, stretching from poverty and unemployment, protracted

displacement, lack of security and instability, and destroyed infrastructure, resulting in environmental degradation and economic instability, as well as the challenges related to human rights and inclusive governance in the NES region. Therefore, the NES region is a fragile environment for the relapse of violent conflict.

The international-led peacebuilding efforts are unfortunately undemocratic in practice, and there is a theory-practice gap in advancing the localization agenda to advance the role of locally-led and local ownership of solutions to the local challenges that are also real threats to international security and peace.

Based on the literature review and survey data from local Syrian CSOs and NGOs respondents working in the NES region, it is imperative and prescriptive to have a holistic, inclusive, and gender-sensitive approach linking humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming to address the human rights and inclusive governance challenges to prevent relapse of conflict and advance peacebuilding practice. This ‘triple nexus’ approach has a scalable impact through adopting democratization practices, shifting the power towards sustainable localization, and working together to effectively address the humanitarian needs and conflict-driven factors as a coherent policy toward collective peace outcomes over multiple years.

This can be achieved by adopting the ‘human rights,’ ‘conflict transformation,’ and ‘humanitarian law’ approaches together. Although these three approaches “have different setting of priorities” and perspectives on what and how to tackle the conflict, they share a common ground, “a fundamental commitment to maximizing the human rights and minimizing the civilian harm” (Mertus and Helsing, 2006, pp.7-9). In short, the pathway forward to peace in the NES region is by applying strategic thinking and a holistic, inclusive, and context-tailored approach. Survey respondent No. #13 notes:

“Overall, successful peacebuilding initiatives in the NES region often involve a holistic and participatory approach that addresses the interconnected drivers of conflict and promotes the active involvement of diverse stakeholders, including local communities, civil society organizations, and governmental institutions. These efforts are essential for building lasting peace and stability in conflict-affected areas.”

Despite the localization’s uphill challenges, the shared goal to advance human well-being and flourishing provides opportunities in all spheres of humanitarian,

development, and peacebuilding because instability and democratic recession are impacting not only the local people in the NES region but also considered real threats to peace and democracy worldwide.

Localization across the triple nexus can be achieved by adopting and implementing the “quality peace” concept as an indicator of the partnership between local Syrian CSOs and international NGOs. The quality peace concept’s three criteria, which were developed by peace scholar and practitioner Wallensteen (2015), are: ‘dignity,’ ‘safety in the sense of security’ and the long-term perspective that aims to “create sustainable conditions for the future for all segments of societies” (pp.2-6).

This criterion encompasses key fundamental considerations for ensuring equitable and strategic partnerships to fight the authoritarian forces and reassuring the ability of local people and their equal human rights and dignity (Wallensteen, 2015, pp.1-11).

As such, this paper recommends a peacebuilding framework based on the concept of human rights and the key characteristic of inclusive governance that is indivisible and reinforces democratic governance, the triple nexus policy, and quality peace criteria for strategic partnership as a holistic and inclusive approach to advance peacebuilding practice in post-conflict environments. **See Figure 22.**

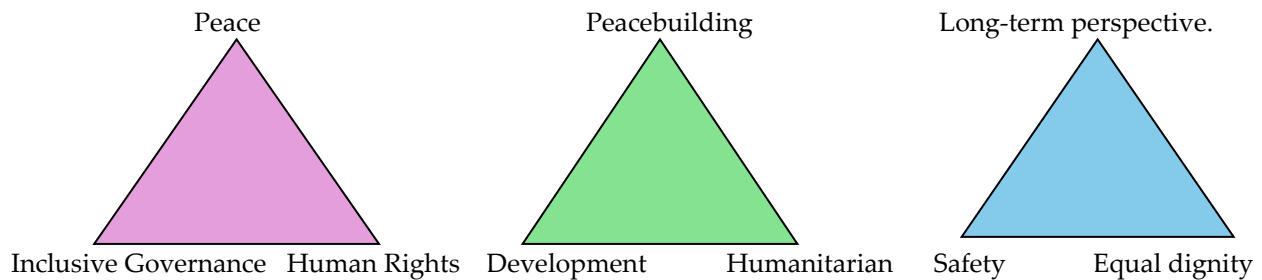


Figure 22. Holistic and Inclusive Framework to Advance Peacebuilding Practice.
From left to right: Peace, inclusive Governance, and Human Rights Approach Triangle; Triple Nexus Approach Triangle; Strategic Partnership Approach.

Source: Imad Alhaji, April 23, 2024.

Finally, the NES region faces many challenges, including increasing corruption, lack of rule of law, and human rights violations, which are obstacles to advancing peacebuilding practice and combating bad governance of local authorities. These challenges are compounded by major donors and international NGOs' characteristics of low Political Will to reform their practices that can better inform their theory of change.

One of the most important lessons learned for the pathway for combating anti-corruption and advancing peacebuilding practice is adopting Malesky et al. (2023) innovative “Alternative Sectoral Approach,” which can be achieved by adopting an indirect approach that focuses on improving sectors such as education, health, etc., instead of directly calling or persuading local authorities elite to improve and engage in broad-scale human rights, governance, and fighting corruption policies.

This indirect approach can help address the human rights and governance problems in the AANES by focusing on alternative policy goals. Major donors and international NGOs need to have comprehensive and “detailed understanding of the powers, motivations, and constraints of elite political actors and bureaucrats to identify specific sectoral strategy, [...] then choose the tactics for achieving the sectoral goals, particularly the interventions that can be best employed to identify and constrain corruption activities” (Malesky et al., 2023, p.xii), that can also address critical peacebuilding opportunities and linking humanitarian, development, peacebuilding pillars with human rights and inclusive governance.

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Annexes

Annex A

1. Survey Questions and Email Recruitment

Imad Alhajj

Master Project's Proposal Summary & Survey Questionnaires

Objective

This study seeks to address threats to peace and democratization in the North and East Syria (NES) region. It aims to consolidate best practices and lessons learned from the local Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) and Civil Society movements in NES on advancing peacebuilding practice through human rights programs such as human rights education and training (HRET) and democracy programs. It also aims to provide evidence-based policy guidance to donors and major International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) on how to connect with and support the work of local Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs).

Policy/Research Question

What programming, lessons learned, and best practices are suggested by the experiences of local Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) and civil society movements to protect human rights and promote democratic governance? How can donors and major International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) better connect with and empower the work of the local Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) to advance peacebuilding efforts in fragile environments?

Survey Questions Target Groups

Interviewee: Potential Local and International NGOs, Civil Society Organization (CSOs) Leaders/ Practitioners, Scholars, Independent Experts/ Work, Worked or Working on promoting Human Rights and Inclusive Governance and Peacebuilding in North and East Syria (NES) region.

Survey Recruitment and Consent Script

Email Recruitment Script

Dear _____:

I am inviting you to participate in a survey that I am conducting for a research study at Duke University in the United States of America.

The purpose of this survey is to gather lessons learned from the experiences of local Syrian non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) and civil society efforts to strengthen democratic governance and improve the protection of human rights in North and East Syria in order to develop evidence-based recommendations for international organizations and donors.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I will not record any identifying information, and your responses will remain confidential.

Please let me know if you have any questions, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks for your time, and best regards,

Imad Alhajj

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Survey Questionnaire

Select Preferred Language:

- English
- Kurdish
- Arabic

Key Information:

The purpose of this research is to gather lessons learned from the experiences of local Syrian non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) and civil society efforts to strengthen democratic governance and improve the protection of human rights in North and East Syria in order to develop evidence-based recommendations for international organizations and donors. This research is conducted by Imad Alhajj at Duke University.

You are being invited to participate in a research survey about your experience with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, journalism, and human rights sectors in the North and East Syria region.

The survey is completely voluntary and confidential. I will not ask for any identifying information. Data from this survey may be published, shared with other researchers, or used for future research purposes but will never be linked back to your identity.

This study was approved as protocol #2024-0282 by Duke University’s Institutional Review Board.

The survey should take about 15 minutes. You may withdraw from the survey at any time or skip any question you don’t want to answer.

Would you be willing to participate in this survey?

- Yes
- No

The following questions will ask about your current or previous professional experience working in the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) sector and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in North and East Syria.

1. What is your current or previous job occupation? Please select all that apply.

- a. Syrian Non-Governmental Organization employee
- b. International Non-Governmental Organization employee
- c. Donor employee (e.g., USAID or GIZ)
- d. Researcher
- e. Civil Society Organization member
- f. Journalist
- g. Activist
- h. Other [Please specify] [To insert answer]

2. Are you still working in the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) sector or Civil Society in North and East Syria?

- a. Yes [If Yes, follow-up question: In what year did you start working?]
- b. No [if No, follow-up question: In what year did you stop working? Numeric entry]

2.1 . In what year did you begin working in the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector or civil society organizations in North and East Syria?

- c. Numerical Entry

2.2. In what year did you stop working in the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector or civil society organizations in North and East Syria?

- a. Numerical Entry

3. Please list any organizations you have worked for in the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) sector or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in North and East Syria?

- a. Free response
- b. Decline to answer

4. Which of the following roles did you serve in, if any? Select all that apply.

- a. Research and evaluation
- b. Accounting / Finance
- c. Program management or compliance
- d. Program implementation / Logistics / Operations
- e. Communications or media
- f. Other: Free response
- g. I did not work in any of the above roles (make exclusive)

5. Do you have experience with any of the following thematic areas of programming? (Select all that apply)

- a. Peacebuilding, dialogue, conflict resolution, peace talks
- b. House, Land and Property (HLP)
- c. Democracy
- d. Human Rights
- e. Protection / Gender-Based Violence (GBV)
- f. Livelihoods
- g. Local Service Delivery
- h. Other (please specify)

6. What do you think are the top 3 priorities or main issue(s) regarding protecting and fulfilling human rights?

Note: “By human rights, I mean to include *anything you have claimed as a human right* within a comprehensive understanding of this idea: social, economic, cultural, environmental protection rights, civil, political, non-discrimination rights and others.”

- What is the First priority to protect human rights?
- What is the Second priority to protect human rights?
- What is the Third priority to protect human rights?

7. What do you think are the top 3 priorities or main issue(s) regarding promoting inclusive governance?

Note: “Governance is inclusive if it effectively engages and serves all members of society.”

- What is the First priority to promote inclusive governance?

- What is the Second priority to promote inclusive governance?
 - What is the Third priority to promote inclusive governance?
8. Please tell me about any of your organization's programs that you feel were successful in helping to build peace in the North and East Syria (NES) region?
9. Please tell me about any of your organization's programs that you feel were not successful in helping to build peace in the North and East Syria (NES) region?
10. Please tell me the top 3 challenges you and your organization have faced in your work?
- How have you or your organization approached and responded to these challenges?
11. The next several questions will be about donors and major International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) working in the North and East Syria (NES) region?
- What has been working and successful in working with International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)? And how?
 - a) Answer:
 - b) I do not know.
 - Please tell me about the top challenges your organization has faced when working with International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Donors?
 - a) Answer:
 - b) I do not know.
 - In your opinion, how supportive or unsupportive are International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) of the work conducted by Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society?
 - a) Very supportive
 - b) Somewhat supportive
 - c) Neither supportive nor unsupportive
 - d) Somewhat unsupportive
 - e) Very unsupportive
 - How do the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) efforts empower the work of the local Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) to **advance Peacebuilding, peace dialogues, and conflict resolution efforts** in the North and East Syria (NES) region, if any?
 - a) Answer:
 - b) I do not know.

- **How can international-led peacebuilding institutions, practitioners, and policymakers support the local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs') efforts to improve and promote inclusive governance in the North and East Syria (NES) region?**
 - a) Answer:
 - b) I do not know.
- 12. **Do you have any final thoughts or suggestions about how Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) may work to build a responsive government in the North and East Syria (NES) region?**
 - a) Answer:
 - b) I do not know.
- 13. **Is there a question I should have asked? At your option, please ask and answer it. [free response]**

Demographic Questions

1. **What is your age in years?**
 - a. Numerical entry
2. **How you would describe your gender**
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Some other identity (text box)
3. **Do you consider yourself Syrian or some other nationality (please specify)?**
 - a. Syrian
 - b. Other [free response]

Annex B

1. Figures

Syria map and areas of Control

Syria's Borders Are Under External Control

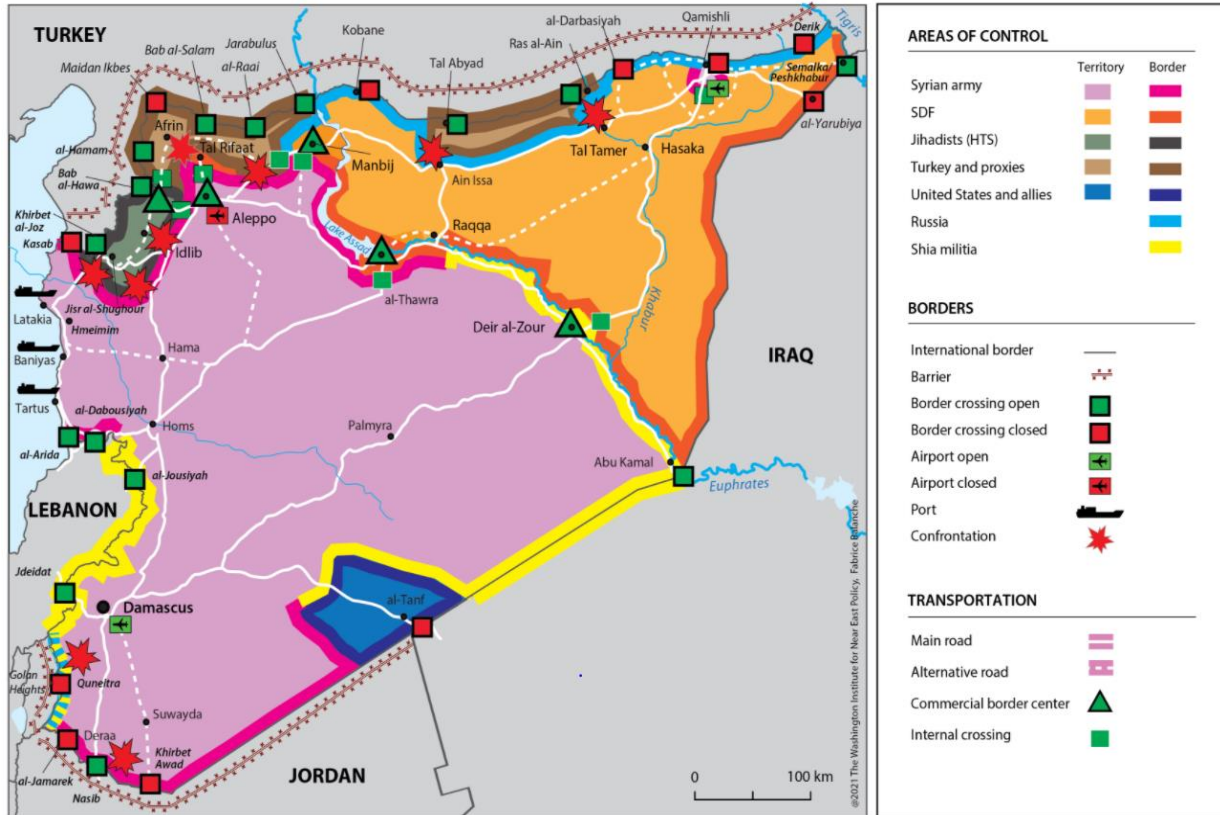


Figure 23. Map of “Syria’s Border Under External Controls.”
Source: (Balanche, 2021).

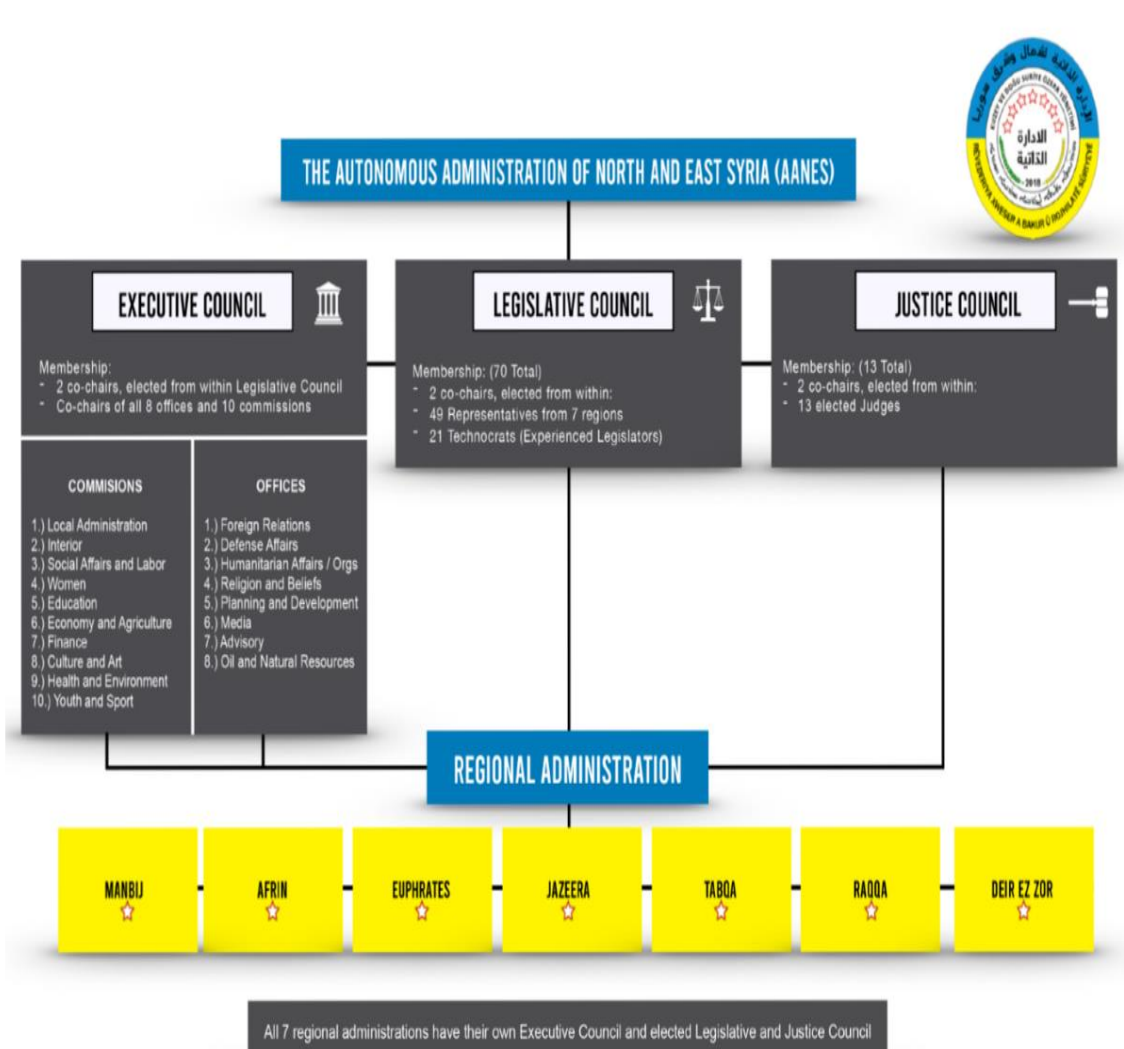


Figure 24. The structure of the governance institutions of the AANES.

Source: Syria Democratic Council (SDC) - U.S. Mission’s website. Available via: <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/1418-2/>

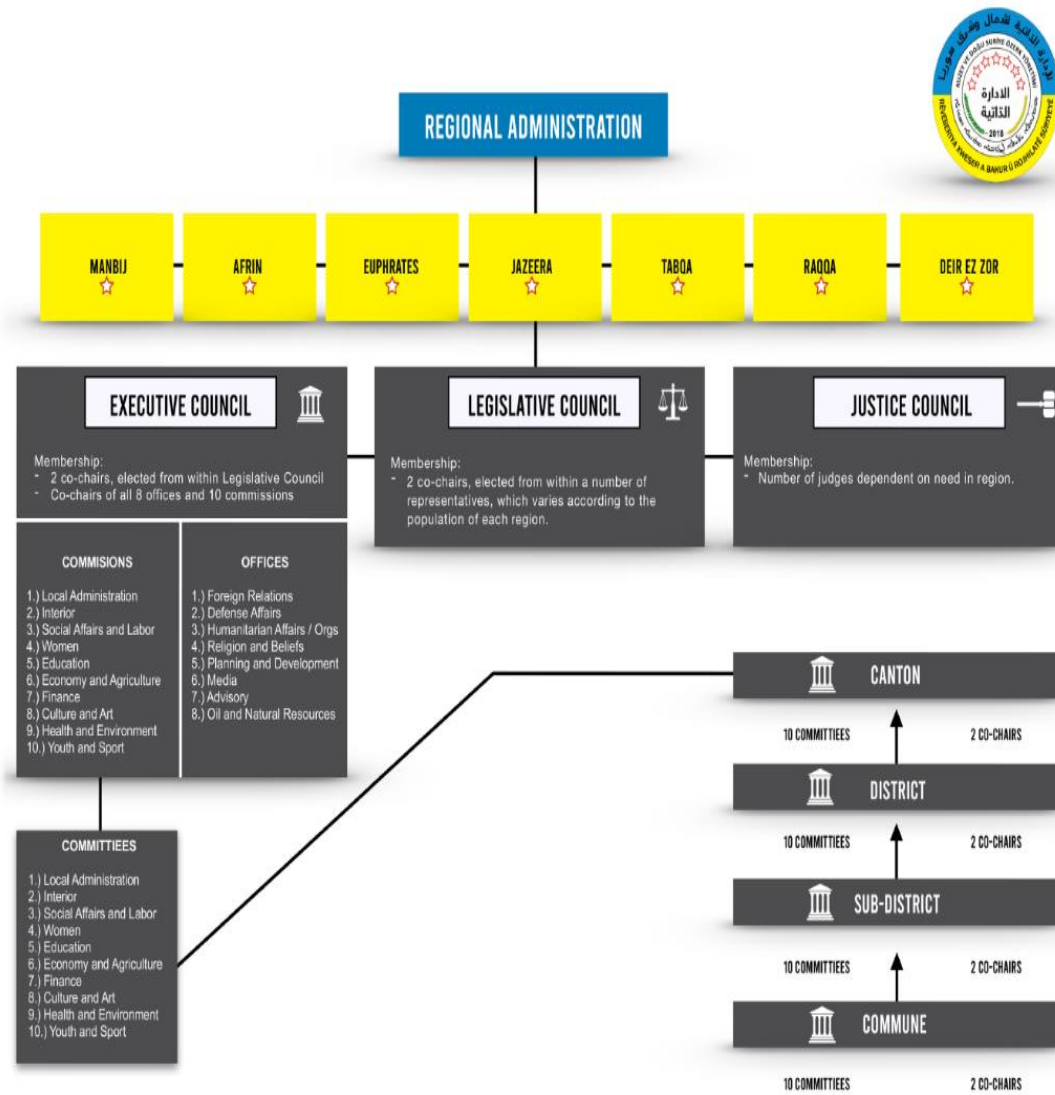


Figure 25. The structure of the regional administration of the institutions of the ANES.

Source: Syria Democratic Council (SDC) - U.S. Mission’s website. Available via: <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/1418-2/>

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Figure 1. Representation of the council structure.

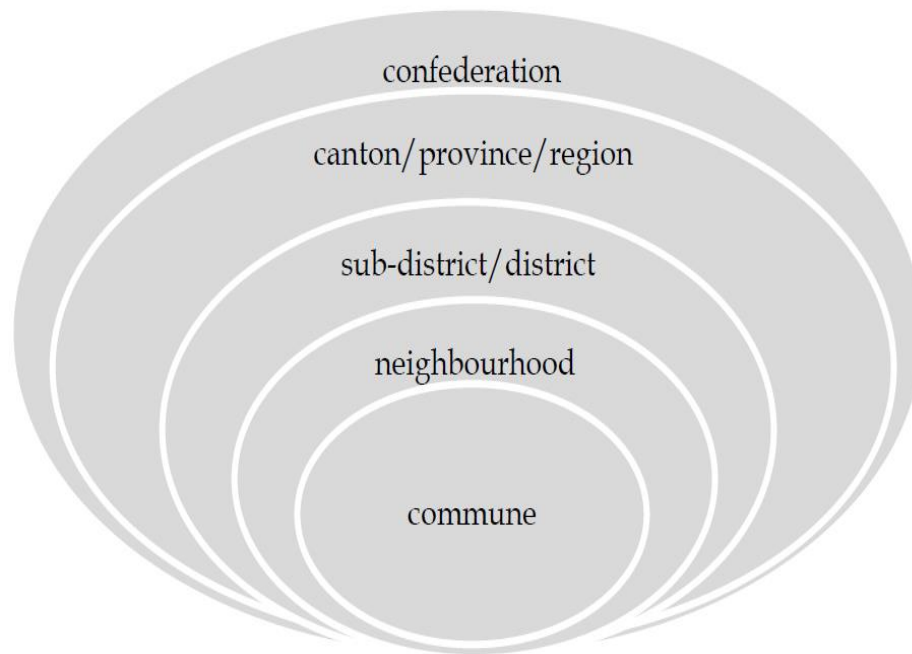


Figure 26. The structure of the “Representation of Council Committee” explained/reconceptualized.

In: Knapp, M., and Jongerden, J. (2020, p.303). Peace committees, platforms and the political ordering of society: Doing justice in the Federation of Northern and Eastern Syria (NES). *Kurdish Studies*, 8(2), pp.297-312.

Power/Interest Stakeholder Matrix Graph

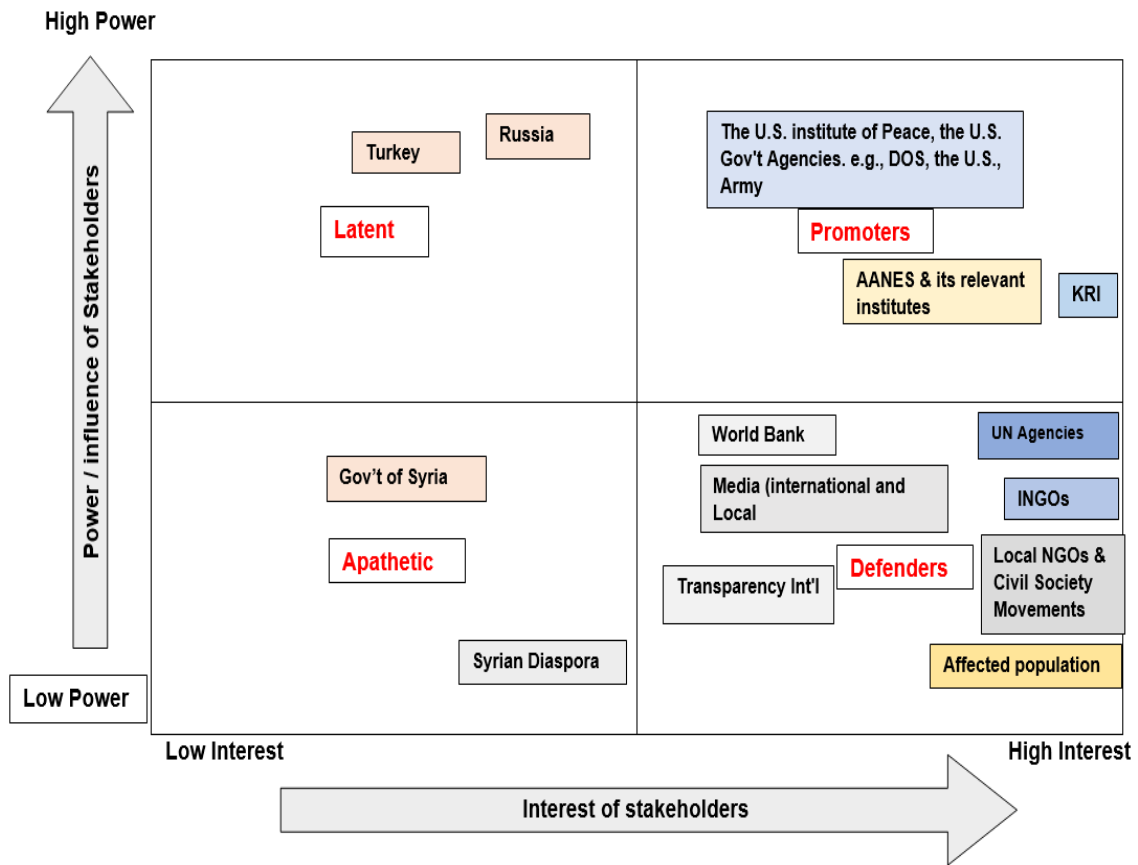


Figure 27. Power/Interest Stakeholder Graph.

Source: Imad Alhajj. April, 26.2024