



Telebriefing:
SYRIA: A ROLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS?
March 21, 2013

Co-sponsored by Ariadne-European Human Rights Funders Network

Speakers:

- [Bassma Kodmani](#), Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative
- [Sussan Tahmasebi](#), Co-Founder, The International Civil Society Action Network
- [Anne-Sophie Schaeffer](#), Program Director, Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders

In this telebriefing, funders explored how human rights grantmakers can effectively and strategically support Syrian activists and civil society organizations in the current state of conflict. The participants surveyed the current political, human rights and humanitarian landscape in the country, including the work and challenges of human rights defenders. They also studied the state of international support for human rights and civil society inside and outside the country and examined the priorities, opportunities/entry points, and caveats for human rights funders.

Bassma Kodmani, Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative

Bassma has been active with the Syrian opposition movement since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. Now focused entirely on the civil society side of the opposition movement, she has set up a non-profit called Initiative for a New Syria.

Bassma provided an overview of the human rights and humanitarian situation inside and outside of Syria, including the role of civil society actors:

- Normalcy in Syria is left only in a few areas: the heart of the city of Damascus as well as a region that is on the coast of Syria (these remain controlled by the regime and are not exposed to daily violence). These areas are flooded by internally displaced people (IDPs). There are an estimated 4 million IDPs as a result of the Syrian conflict, many of whom have been displaced several times.
- There has been an increase in arrests, torture, and killings inside of prisons over the last six months as the regime is now less concerned with its image.
- The humanitarian sector must answer questions regarding their plans for winter, as their ability to distribute food and water, and to provide medical care will be inhibited.

- In some of the “liberated” areas the population is organizing services on its own including medical services, food, security, policing, and community legal organizing.
- Despite incitement from the Syrian regime, there have been no organized confrontations between sectarian communities in the region so far. This incitement does present a challenge concerning social peace, social reconciliation, and security for the major strategic areas of the country, where populations are mixed. Prospects for political solutions are grim.
- The Syrian opposition is not able to organize social services, leaving civil society groups to provide for the population. This is done in a scattered manner but groups at the medical, humanitarian, and legal levels from inside Syria receive a lot of assistance from groups on the outside. Lack of capacity is a major concern.

There are four major actors that distribute humanitarian aid and work with groups committed to the democratic agenda for Syria:

- Coordination committees are present across the country. These groups organized peaceful demonstrations when the movement became militarized and have remained largely peaceful, and have taken on the role of providing/distributing humanitarian aid.
- Lawyers and judges are promoting the implementation of civil, non-religious law. There has been an emergence of local tribunals, but in many cases religious figures are called to serve as judges. This use of Islamic law can be helpful in settling conflict at the community level but has important implications for the future. It is important to promote the work of free associations of lawyers and judges to bolster their presence so that they can step in to local systems and implement Syrian civil law.
- Women’s work was very present when the opposition movement was peaceful but less so when the movement became militarized. They are important in distributing humanitarian aid and providing logistical support to the population and to the resistance. Women’s issues are in limbo—there is no representation of women in opposition bodies and no debate about how women can contribute. During a recent meeting set up by the Syrian Women’s Network a plan was developed for promoting work within different committees for political participation, for women’s status and women’s rights, for social reconciliation and conflict prevention, and for economic empowerment. There will be six or seven committees where women will work in a non-hierarchical way.
- Doctors support medical relief, infrastructure, and equipment for hospitals.

A challenge for the donors will be the possibility of working inside of Syria, which requires tight security, while maintaining some form of transparency and accountability.

Sussan Tahmasebi Co-Founder, The International Civil Society Action Network

Sussan provided some observations and recommendations on priorities for funders, referring to a report “Voices from the Ground: Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis.” The report is a result of consultations with civil society activists from inside/outside Syria.

- Prior to the uprising, NGOs could register in Syria, although it was difficult for completely independent organizations. Many were loosely associated with political parties and had no registration because control outside of Damascus was difficult, but were still active. The women's movement was engaged in legal reform, efforts to change women's status in society, sponsoring events for International Women's Day, addressing honor killings, reforming the criminalization of sexuality, and were working to address early/forced marriage. This was done through the writing of articles, reports, and the creation of workshops, mostly informally in people's homes. This did not have an expansive reach but the level of innovation was noteworthy.
- Religious women worked more on the empowerment of women.
- After the revolution, groups of religious and secular women emerged, while the discourse before the revolution was largely secular.
- Religious groups did humanitarian work, work with women's rights, women's inclusion and, equal citizenship.
- Women consulted for the "Voices from the Ground" report included both religious and secular women with varying levels of experience working on civil society initiatives. However, all agreed that the future of Syria should have a secular civil government.

Sussan laid out some recommendations for funders on the call:

- Fund media and programs to raise awareness about human trafficking and to reduce the stigma of sexual violence; create a national, alternative, inclusive discourse around these issues.
- Work with civil society in order to ensure that IDP and refugee camp residents are involved in service provision and have access to assistance. This must be looked at in terms of capacity building, community mobilization work.
- Work with professional groups (doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc.).
- Support economic empowerment and employment generation projects for women. This would include gender and citizenship training.

Anne-Sophie Schaefer, Program Director, Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders

Anne-Sophie discussed her experiences supporting human rights defenders both inside and outside of Syria. Currently 45% of the resources of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders go to Syrian human rights groups.

- Activism is now conducted in a civil war context, where actors are subjected to internal movement restrictions, constant harassment and questionings, kidnappings, beatings, killings, forced disappearances, torture, and the threatening of family members.
- Human rights defenders often need to hide to protect their own safety and a majority has lost belongings and sources of income due to the conflict. Most are not able to cover the basic resources for themselves and their families. Some have been denied passports and cannot travel outside the refugee-hosting country; only a few have been granted asylum and the majority are

denied basic human rights such as the right to work in the refugee camps or to have access to education for their children.

- Special attention should be given to women human rights defenders. They also suffer rape and sexual violence, early marriage, trafficking, and prostitution both inside Syria and in refugee camps.
- Syrian activists and human rights defenders are doing courageous work, and despite escalating violence, there is a nascent dynamic of civil society work at play inside and outside of Syria. For example, there is work done on monitoring and documentation of human rights violations, providing legal aid and representation, protecting legal documents inside court buildings, promoting civil state building by training judges, raising awareness and creating dialogue, all of which may be done through creative means (art, documentaries, theatre plays, etc.).

Anne-Sophie noted that protecting the safety of human rights defenders inside the country and in exile, covering safe relocation and shelter, travel expenses, medical needs, etc. is a priority right now. It is crucial to allow these human rights defenders to continue their work and to overcome precarious situations. Priority should be given to vulnerable groups, including women, children, and youth. Capacities to document abuses should be reinforced, supplying access to reliable information, ensuring accountability and paving the way for democracy. Regional and international organizations that are providing training should monitor, advise, and advocate for these activists in other countries.

Difficulties and obstacles include increasing militarization and radicalization of the revolution and rebuilding civil state structures without resources. The needs expressed to carry out humanitarian assistance have exceeded the UN targets for Syria.

Recommendations include providing flexibility in terms of type and mechanisms of support as well as ways to channel funds. Funders should understand that actions may not be fully implemented as first agreed upon as the situation is quite volatile. Donors should adopt a holistic approach given the complexity of conflict and should keep regular contact with human rights defenders.

Questions & Answers:

A participant asked the speakers to speak more about the Syrian Women's Network. Speakers responded that it is a promising network, with motivated participants who have an interest in political participation, social reconciliation, and civilian peace. The challenge is how to structure an organization that is loose enough and non-hierarchical so that everybody feels that they can contribute. They want to work with non-governmental outside partners and learn about what to do and how to do it.

A participant noted that no one has mentioned sanctions and the impact that these may have on the ability to fund. How can donors who do not have good in-country networks be able to become more active in funding on the ground? How can a broader range of donors become more involved on the ground? Speakers replied that maintaining the network of people and staying in regular contact with them; word of mouth helps extend the network. Also, there have been mechanisms put in place with regards to humanitarian assistance to waver sanctions.

A final participant asked if there are ways that small grants can make a difference in the situation. Panelists responded that these make a huge difference for the protection of a defender or a project. Some small grants can be used for travel so that women can make it to conferences, capacity building, etc. Grants that have been made between \$5000-\$10,000 have made big differences. We don't want to overwhelm grantees with huge grants that they cannot manage.

To listen to the full telebriefing:

Visit [IHRFG's website](#) (you will need to enter the password: "humanrights").

Resources:

- [Voice from the Ground: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis](#), International Civil Society Action Network
- [Consultative Meeting on Human Rights Issues in Syria](#), Arab Human Rights Fund
- [The Day After Project](#) (a gathering of many Syrian opposition groups, January-June 2012), U.S. Institute of Peace