

Voices of Local Communities in Northern and Eastern Syria to the Brussels VIII Conference



“Local Voices” Conference outlined the general context in northern and eastern Syria, including humanitarian challenges, the situation of human rights, and ways to promote cooperation and coordination between local and international organizations, focusing on activating the role of local organizations, strengthening their capacities and improving their access to grants. The conference also tackled the issue of Syrians emigration abroad, depletion of community resources and stability promotion requirements, as well as the needs and priorities of victims. It yielded recommendations to international actors and donors at the Eighth Brussels Conference

Introduction:

On March 5, 2024, [Synergy Association for Victims](#) and [Analysis and Strategic Study Organization \(ASSO\)](#), in cooperation with the [Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in Northeast Syria](#) (CSO-NES) and the [Civil Society Institutions Platform in Northern and Eastern Syria](#) (NES NGO Platform) organized “Local Voices” Conference, with the aim to convey the voices of local communities in northern and eastern Syria to the [Brussels VIII Conference](#) on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”. The Conference is scheduled to be held on April 30, 2024,¹ in the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium.

“Local Voices” Conference outlined the general context in northern and eastern Syria, including humanitarian challenges, the situation of human rights, avenues to promote cooperation and coordination between local and international organizations, activating the role of local civil society organizations and strengthening their capacities and access to grants. The conference also tackled the issue of emigration of Syrians abroad and depletion of communities resources, stability promotion requirements, as well as victims’ needs and priorities. The conference yielded recommendations to international actors and donors at the Eighth Brussels Conference.

The conference was held in al-Hasakah City, located in northeast Syria, in the presence of 52 participants and 11 panelists, representing local and international civil organizations, [the Northeast Syria \(NES\) NGO Forum](#) (NES Forum), and service entities in the Autonomous Administration, in addition to numerous local and regional media outlets.

Humanitarian Challenges:

The first axis of “Local Voices” Conference concentrated on [humanitarian challenges and the situation of human rights](#) in northern and eastern Syria. It included an analysis of the challenges that have exacerbated the humanitarian situation due to the ongoing conflict in the country since 2011. These challenges include displacement-related issues, lack of essential services, shortfall of food and relief, deterioration of economic condition, insecurity and instability, and the need for further humanitarian support and response.

¹ This year again, the Conference will feature a Day of Dialogue, engaging with Syrian civil society, on 30 April in the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels; and a Ministerial Segment on 27 May in the premises of the EU Council; as well as a number of side events and a dedicated cultural program. With nearly 800 participants attending, the Brussels Conference has become over the years an invaluable opportunity to engage and deepen dialogue with Syrian civil society (from Syria, the neighboring countries and the diaspora), main UN stakeholders and agencies, EU Member States, third countries representatives as well as international NGOs. The Ministerial Conference also aims at mobilizing vital financial support to alleviate the crucial needs of Syrians and their host communities in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, as well as Egypt and Iraq. At the [Brussels VII Conference](#) held last June 2023, the international community pledged close to €5.6 billion for 2023 and beyond, of which over €3.8 billion pledged by the EU and its Member States. The funding helps people in need inside Syria and in neighboring countries hosting Syrian refugees. The EU and its Member States have been the largest donors supporting people in Syria and the region since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, mobilizing over €30 billion overall.



During this axis, a range of points were discussed, among them contingency interventions in the framework of action plans for organizations working in the development sector, where the need to focus on long-term development projects arose.

The needs in different regions of northern and eastern Syria, such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, Kobani, and Manbij, intersect and are similar. Fragility of the health infrastructure, its scarcity, and damage to vital sectors like agriculture, energy, and other essential services, including education and utilities, have resulted in common and similar needs. This applies to Syria as a whole as well, even though the context of damage varies at times. While the humanitarian crisis in areas of al-Hasakah Governorate/ Al-Jazira Province and Kobani exacerbated as infrastructure and vital facilities were destroyed by the deliberate and repeated Turkish drone and aerial attacks, the countryside of Deir ez-Zor, and to a lesser extent, Raqqa, are subjected to concurrent attacks, assassinations, and inciting of unrest by cells of the Islamic State (ISIS), also known as Daesh. Additionally, all residents of northern and eastern Syria, including the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are victims of water-related human rights violations.

This axis also addressed the economic challenges and the ongoing conflict's impact on the local economy, job opportunities, and economic development. It highlighted international and local efforts to rebuild the region and support the local economy. Local civil organizations have struggled to meet the region's needs from products and genuine development, owing predominantly to the inadequate funding allocated for the northern and eastern regions of Syria. This may be attributed to the lack of coherence between humanitarian issues and developmental status, as well as the scarcity of sustainable development projects.

Since the onset of the conflict, the crises of wheat, food, and water in Syria have been worsening gradually. Entire communities were denied, deliberately and discriminately, their rights to access potable water. Crops were burned as a result of the conflict, sometimes as a form of retaliation in other areas. In recent years, northeastern Syria has suffered from water shortages due to the drought crisis that has recently struck the country and the region, leading to critical levels of food and water security.

Economic security is intricately linked to the security and political situation, as one of the most significant economic challenges is instability. For example, the Turkish bombardment in 2023 and early 2024, that concentrated on areas on northeast Syria, destroyed infrastructure and vital facilities and caused the loss of 80% of oil resources held by the Autonomous Administration. Furthermore, oil investments in the region remain modest and the available funding do not meet the region's needs.

According to the participants, one of the main challenges lies in the absence of alternative energy projects, which are closely tied to the reconstruction file. It is worth noting that this file cannot be separated from the overall Syrian situation. Despite discussions about the

region's need for alternative energy projects, the issue is often deferred to be addressed within the broader context of Syria.

The Situation of Human Rights:

The first axis also outlined the situation of human rights in areas of northern and eastern Syria and discussed the worsening human rights situation and the need for sound governance programs, promotion of transparency and development of effective and meaningful mechanisms for reporting, complaints, and effective redress for the victims.

The ongoing and declared Turkish threats and attacks on areas in northern and eastern Syria contributed to jeopardizing and violating fundamental human rights. These areas, inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious components, are under Turkish military escalation destroying vital infrastructure, oil and gas resources, and facilities indispensable to the survival of the population, including Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs/Assyrians and hundreds of thousands of IDPs, mostly women and children, who have come from different Syrian territories. The Turkish assaults fundamentally destabilized the fragile stability in northern and eastern Syria, contributing to increased migration from these areas to countries of asylum and hosting refugees.

Since 2020, the humanitarian crisis and significant challenges have further exacerbated because of the closure of al-Yarubiyah/Tal Kocher Crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border, the solo humanitarian crossing authorized for the entry of UN aid to northeast Syria. In January 2020, Russia forced the Security Council to [close](#) three of four previously authorized border crossings, entirely cutting off UN-led cross-border aid for the northeast, leaving UN agencies at the mercy of often arbitrary and unjustified government-imposed conditions. Consequently, the response to humanitarian needs has weakened and food insecurity has reached high levels while food prices continue to hike sharply. Basic services remain extremely limited and there are approximately one million IDPs, among them tens of thousands residing in makeshift/informal camps².

Tens of thousands of IDPs in camps in northeast Syria [do not receive sustained or adequate aid](#), thereby negatively impacting their basic rights. The [assistance](#) provided by UN agencies to the camps is inconsistent, leaving some camps, especially the “informal” ones- those which have yet to get recognition from the UNHCR- without sufficient or continuous aid. Although international nongovernmental organizations provide limited assistance, multiple gaps have led to health and hygiene breakdowns and shortages in essential materials. According to a [report](#) released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on August 22, 2023, “there is

² Millions of people in northeast Syria, many of whom are IDPs, depend on cross-border food, medicine and other necessary aid. In 2020, Russia vetoed to force the UN Security Council to close three out of the four authorized border crossings towards northern Syria. This, as a result, cut the international cross-border aid totally to northeast Syria and increased the difficulty of distributing aid in the northwest.

an urgent need for weather-appropriate shelter, sufficient sanitation, and adequate access to food, clean drinking water, health care, and education.”³

Concerning peacebuilding efforts in Syria, the participants discussed the situation of exclusion and marginalization affecting local communities in northeastern Syria by depriving them from participating in the political processes on Syria, such as of the Constitutional Committee or Constitutional Dialogue for Syria.

Discussions also focused on the escalating water crisis in the regions of al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa, as a result of water being used as a weapon of war and a bargaining paper by conflict parties. For several years, the Turkish authorities have been decreasing Syria’s share of water from the Euphrates River, an essential source of drinking water for more than five million people in Syria, according to UN estimates.

Furthermore, since the Turkish occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê region in October 2019 as a consequence of the military operation dubbed “Peace Spring” by Ankara, the communities of northeast Syria, deliberately and discriminatorily, have been denied their right to access sufficient and safe water by the Turkish government and by Turkish-backed factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) due to repeated interruptions in pumping drinking water from [Allouk Water Station](#) in Ras al-Ayn countryside. The Allouk Water Station, which experienced numerous disruptions, is the only source of drinking water for approximately 800,000 people in northeast Syria, particularly the residents of [al-Hasakah City](#), [Tall Tamr Town](#) and the adjacent countryside, in addition to being the main source for water trucking for [al-Hol](#), [al-Aresha/al-Sed](#) and [al-Twinah/Washokani](#), and [Serê Kaniyê](#) camps. These camps include tens of thousands of IDPs from different provinces and parts of Syria, as well as thousands of Iraqis and foreigners who used to live in areas formerly held by the Islamic State, known as ISIS, according to the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#).

In 2021, Turkish-backed factions of the SNA built three earth [dams](#) on the Khabur River, leading to the cessation of water flow to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held areas and causing critical damages to agriculture and food security. This interruption coincided with a period when the region was witnessing severe drought and hikes in fuel prices, preventing many farmers from operating their water pumps and rendering them unable to irrigate their farmlands. Vast areas of farmlands were consequently left fallow (uncultivated).

Denying civilians to access safe and sufficient water and weaponizing it by the Turkish government, as well as by other parties to the conflict, exacerbates the existing humanitarian crisis and leave disastrous impacts on local communities and on the

³ Today, more than 350,000 people from Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad/Girê Sipî in north and northeast Syria are IDPs and enforced migrants due to the two Turkish operations “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch”, carried out in 2018 and 2019, among them 36,000 people who reside in three makeshift/informal camps in [Washokani/al-Twaina](#), [Serê Kaniyê/al-Talae’](#), and [Tel al-Samen](#) in al-Hasakah and Raqqa Governorates, in addition to more than 7,000 IDPs in five makeshift/informal camps in al-Awda, Afrin, al-Shahba, Barkhadan/al-Muqawama, and Sardam/al-Asr set up in Shahba Region in northern Aleppo.

ecosystem, biodiversity, and cultural identity in northeast Syria, which accommodates more than one million IDPs, among them are tens of thousands residing in unrecognized camps.

Enhancing Cooperation Between International and Local Organizations:

The second axis of “Local Voices” Conference tackled the role of local organizations in providing support and services to local communities and the major challenges they face under the existing circumstances, as well as the ongoing need to support and enhance their capacities, including facilitating their access to grants and resources.

The issue of local organizations responding to the needs of local communities is closely linked to enhancing their resources and accessing grants, as well as collaborating with international organizations and United Nations agencies. Moreover, assessing needs and priorities should be conducted directly and with the participation of the targeted beneficiaries, namely the victims themselves.

The second axis also discussed the role of international organizations in strengthening the efforts of local ones in providing support and assistance to northern and eastern Syria, and ways to improve cooperation and coordination between international and local organizations in order to achieve the utmost level of effectiveness and impact.

According to the participants that neither the support provided to areas in northeast Syria, nor the local organizations access to resources is sufficient. Therefore, there is an urgent need to convince donors to allocate an accessible financial block to local organizations to address the most pressing humanitarian needs.

The discussions also touched upon capacity-building and outreach, emphasizing the importance of building local capabilities and consolidating partnerships between local and international organizations, given that local organizations own better knowledge on the domestic needs in the areas they cover, but they require capacity building to strengthen their roles. Additionally, there is a deficiency in communication, coordination, and information sharing between local and international organizations, resulting in project duplication.

Stability Promotion Requirements and Victims’ Needs and Priorities:

The second axis discussed the emigration of Syrians abroad and the depletion of communities’ resources, as well as the requirements of enhancing stability and the needs and priorities of the victims. Among the discussed themes was the impact of emigration on local communities, posing a significant societal challenge. Migration is greatly linked to instability, a matter that warrants sufficient attention from both local civil society and the international community.

The participants also touched upon the importance of working towards increasing collaboration and coordination with service institutions of the Autonomous Administration to make a greater impact and meet the needs of local communities, , provided that it is accompanied by the development of sound governance, enhancement of transparency, and the adoption of joint projects aimed at supporting stability in the region.

Advocating for northeast Syria issues cannot be effectively done without collaboration between local organizations themselves and between local and international organizations. It is essential to identify needs, priorities, and demands, to be brought to the Brussels Donors Conference among others.

Furthermore, the IDPs' and the victims' daily needs should be highlighted, especially those residing in camps requiring humanitarian intervention, owing the majority of the camps, particularly those housing enforced migrants and IDPs, require comprehensive review and adequate support. Efforts should also be directed towards mobilizing and advocacy campaigns on the issues of the missing, restitution of properties to the enforced migrants, among other human rights issues closely linked to stability support.

The discussions also touched upon the critical importance of paying attention to vital sectors, such as healthcare, especially given the prevalence of diseases like typhoid, scabies, cholera, and others in northeast Syria. These diseases have resulted in cases, such as miscarriages, severe skin allergies, and other significant health and psychological effects. Additionally, the education sector is experiencing significant deterioration, alongside the widespread proliferation of issues like drug abuse and others.

Recommendations to Brussels VIII Conference:

On April 30, 2024, the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels is hosting a Day of Dialogue, engaging with Syrian civil society as one of the events of the Brussels VIII Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" organized by the EU. The Conference aims at raising funds for humanitarian support projects for the Syrians, providing a valuable forum for international dialogue concerning the future of Syria and the region, and setting the tone and form for global engagement with the Syrian crisis for the next year.

The Conference, is an annual opportunity to reiterate the ethical duty towards the ongoing humanitarian plight that has persisted for over thirteen years due to the conflict in Syria, aiming to ensure that humanitarian aid is not politicized or deviated to directions that can compound the already fragile humanitarian conditions.

Stability-promotion mechanisms should be supported in order to stop the wave of emigration, support the societal resilience, ensure a safe return for the IDPs and enforced migrants, and place attention to the multiple camps across Syria that receive only the

minimum services. Some of these camps are not recognized by UNHCR, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis faced by local communities.

The Brussels VIII Conference, this year, comes at a time when the situation in northeastern Syria is deteriorating. Apart from the general context of the region, which is deteriorating amid crumbling service infrastructure in different sectors, the region has been under coordinated Turkish bombardment by drones and warplanes, targeting points essential to people's lives from vital facilities, including oil and power stations, to civilian objects. These strikes denied more than one million people to access electricity, domestic gas, and petroleum products.

[Water crisis](#) persists. Politicizing water looms over the issue as Allouk Water Station is blocked and water from this station, that supplies approximately 800,000 people, including the IDPs and the enforced migrants, has been interrupted since Turkey shelled electricity stations supplying Allouk Water Station. Besides, decreasing Syria's portion of water from the Euphrates River and constructing dams on different rivers from the Turkish side has impacted the lives of more than 4,800,000 people.

Despite the generosity shown by some donor countries since the first Syrian Donor Conference, the Russian-Ukrainian and the events in Gaza have significantly diverted international attention. However, Syrians, who consider themselves victims, look forward to commitment to assist them despite all of this.

There is a widespread sense of marginalization of areas in northeast Syria, both in the Syrian political process and in their representation in the Constitutional Committee and Syria-related conferences. This sentiment is reiterated in their participation in the Brussels Conference. Representatives of civil organizations are invited more broadly to participate in the Brussels VIII Conference, yet they aspire to discuss their issues directly and for their access to grants and resources to be strengthened to contribute to the local efforts in supporting community resilience and promoting stability.

To convey messages and recommendations from civil society organizations in northern and eastern Syria to the Brussels VIII Conference, [Synergy Association for Victims](#) and [Analysis and Strategic Study Organization \(ASSO\)](#), in collaboration with the [Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in Northeast Syria](#) (CSO-NES) and the [Civil Society Institutions Platform in Northern and Eastern Syria](#) (NES NGO Platform), organized the "Local Voices" Conference on March 5, 2024. Representatives of civil organizations and [NES Forum](#) participated in this event, aiming to deliver the voices of local communities in northern and eastern Syria to the [Brussels VIII Conference](#) on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region".

The conference yielded the following recommendations:

- **To Support Humanitarian Response:**

Main United Nations stakeholders and agencies, the European Union Member States, international donor countries, and non-governmental international organizations should increase the humanitarian funding to meet the pressing humanitarian needs in northeast Syria, including the provision of food and medical assistance, shelter, and clean water.

Food and water security should be prioritized, and pressure should be placed to ensure that all Syrians have access to potable and usable water while safeguarding water resources from political tensions. Likewise, supporting activities to repair agricultural production facilities and securing basic needs for strategic crops like wheat is essential, as well as ensuring modern irrigation systems for all areas. Additionally, enhancing support for local civil society organizations to provide direct humanitarian assistance to the locals and IDPs.

- **To Support Stability-Promotion Mechanisms:**

Adequate support should be provided to community and sustainable development projects and programs in northeast Syria. These initiatives would contribute to strengthening stability and improving life conditions for the locals. Examples include building schools and hospitals, providing employment opportunities, and undertaking projects to construct and improve infrastructure in the area. This includes providing necessary support for efforts to repair infrastructure and vital facilities destroyed by deliberate and announced attacks by Turkey, such as power stations, water facilities, health facilities, and civil infrastructure. Turkish behavior has repeatedly demonstrated a declared intent to target these facilities, with some being attacked more than once and in multiple campaigns.

There is also a need to support efforts of enhancing dialogue and political settlement in the region through funding projects that consolidate dialogue and understanding between different parties to achieve peace and lasting stability.

- **To Enhance the Capacities of Syrian Local Organizations:**

In order to achieve the objective of the Brussels Conference in mobilizing vital financial support to alleviate the crisis of basic needs for Syrians, it is crucial to allocate a readily accessible financial block for local organizations. This fund should be used to address the most urgent humanitarian needs. Additionally, efforts should be made to enhance the capacities of Syrian local organizations, facilitating their access to resources and grants to ensure effective and impactful assistance to communities in northern and eastern Syria. Supporting programs aimed at fostering coordination and partnerships between local and international non-governmental organizations is also essential.

Furthermore, it is important to support the development of local administration in the region, enhancing its capacity to provide essential services and manage local affairs effectively. Likewise, supporting programs aimed at improving governance, enhancing

transparency, and developing effective mechanisms for reporting, complaints, and ensuring effective redress for victims.

- **Justice in Supporting IDPs Camps and Seeking Solutions:**

Tens of thousands of IDPs in camps in northeast Syria [are not receiving sustained or adequate aid](#), thereby negatively impacting their basic rights. The [assistance](#) provided by the UN agencies to the camps is inconsistent, leaving some camps, especially the “*informal*” ones, without sufficient or sustained aid. Therefore, UN agencies should conduct an assessment to ensure that the minimum global standards for humanitarian response in such sites are being met and widen the scale of services provision to encompass the residents.

International donors should increase funding to respond to the protracted nature of displacement in northeast Syria and provide weather-appropriate shelters, sufficient sanitation, and adequate access to food, clean drinking water, health care, and education.

- **To Support Victims and Survivors Initiatives and Advocate for Their Causes:**

International donors should direct their efforts towards providing comprehensive and integrated support to victims and survivors. This includes providing necessary funding for initiatives aimed at supporting victims and enhancing their rights. Additionally, providing the necessary support for their psychological recovery and social integration is crucial. Furthermore, supporting efforts aimed at promoting accountability and justice is necessary for ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

Likewise, it is essential to provide necessary support for programs that aim to empower victims and survivors to represent themselves and advocate for their rights. Supporting programs for effective representation and participation of victims and survivors in decision-making processes and accountability mechanisms is crucial to ensure that their voices are heard, and their needs and demands are met.

- **To Promote an Inclusive Peace Process for All Syrians:**

The United Nations and the European Union must work towards advancing a political solution that includes all components of the Syrian society. Any sustainable and effective peace project in Syria cannot be achieved without being inclusive of all segments of the Syrian population.

For this purpose, the UN should broaden the diversity in selecting members of the current Syrian Constitutional Committee, and particularly provide seats for agents representing communities in northeast Syria that is currently underrepresented. The constitution cannot be expected to be a fruitful step towards a comprehensive peace process unless all components of the Syrian population are involved in its drafting.

- **To Handle Sanctions Carefully and Ensure Their Periodic Review:**

The struggle to combat impunity and achieve accountability is among the top priorities of transitional justice. In light of this, the United Nations, the European Union, and the countries participating in the Conference should support accountability initiatives led by the Syrian civil society and the international community to hold all perpetrators accountable and subject them to sanctions.

While ensuring that the sanctions imposed on Syria do not become a tool exacerbating the economic situation of Syrians, it is imperative to establish an independent mechanism overseen by the United Nations to conduct impartial assessments of the effectiveness of the sanctions and study their impact on civilian populations regularly.