

Syrian civil society message to world leaders at UN General Assembly: justice and accountability are a precondition to lasting peace

As world leaders gather in New York at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Syrian civil society organisations in the ‘*We Exist!*’ coalition reiterate that the only long lasting solution for the conflict that has ravaged Syria rests on a meaningful political transition, guarantees for the respect of human rights and explicit measures for transitional justice. [A recent World Bank report](#), calls for due attention to the root causes of the violence in Syria and refers to the need to invest in ‘*social capital*’ and “*the trust that binds people together*”. The *We Exist!* Coalition however emphasises that ‘social capital’ cannot be reduced to job creation programmes or other purely economic interventions. Instead, social justice and protection is central to the development and flourishing of any ‘social capital’.

“We are warning against hasty quick fixes that include returning refugees to the Syrian warzone without any guarantees for their safety, says Mazen Darwish from the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. As long as Syrians live in fear of both the state and non-state armed groups, then the violence will spiral – with repercussions beyond Syria’s borders. Guarantees for human rights, justice and accountability must be at the centre of the political process, not an optional addition extras.”

Several high-level events on the Syria crisis will take place in the coming week in New York, and French President Emmanuel Macron has announced that France will host a major summit on Syria within the coming months. Moreover, some policy-makers and media commentators already talk about ‘post-conflict reconstruction’ and the potential return of refugees to Syria. The *We Exist!* coalition reminds them all that an active violent conflict remains the reality in Syria and fears that political pressure in countries neighbouring Syria to fast-track the return of refugees should not result in compromising the human rights and safety of refugees. At the Brussels Conference on Syria in April this year, the EU High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini stated: “*Only a political transition can make all Syrians feel home in their own country and be part of a joint effort to give a rebirth to the country.*” [2] The *We Exist!* coalition calls on the EU and world leaders present at the UNGA this week to uphold this commitment and press for a political transition that can allow for stability, peace and then reconstruction in Syria.

“There is no technocratic or economic fix to what the World Bank report rightly calls “the collapse of the trust that binds people together”, says Dr. Rouba Mhaisen from Sawa for Development and Aid. “We, as a group of independent, credible civil society groups must be able to work in Syria without fearing for our lives. Anything short of this means that things have returned to status quo ante, where civil society did not exist.”

Building on a statement on reconstruction in Syria released at the Brussels Conference in April, the *We Exist!* Coalition outlines the following three principles for international policy on Syria at this year’s UNGA and beyond:

1. A political transition in Syria that upholds the aspirations of the Syrian people
 - Inclusion of independent local civil society organizations in all aspects of the international, national and local response to the Syrian crisis.
 - The role of independent Syrian civil society organizations should be affirmed in the political track of negotiations, promoting human rights, justice and accountability, and reconstruction.

[1] <https://goo.gl/YUVLiE>

[2] <https://goo.gl/PEyzGU>

- The political transition from violence towards sustainable peace should be inclusive and representative of the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity.
2. Accountability and Justice
 - Respect of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law should be strongly reaffirmed, including accountability for violations by all parties and the protection of civilians.
 - Violations of international Human Rights must be accounted for in any political process in Syria, in order to ensure the right for safe return for all Syrians.
 - Addressing the political, social and economic root causes of the uprising and the subsequent violent conflict to promote the aspirations of the Syrian people, ensuring rule of law, and to ensure positive effects on development.
 3. Reconstruction for all of Syria and Syrians
 - Without accountability and justice, reconstruction efforts risk becoming new fronts in forced displacement, the dispossession of property, human rights violations and further rounds of violence.
 - Providing funding for reconstruction in Syria cannot be disconnected from the establishment of a credible and inclusive political process.
 - Reconstruction must be preconditioned with full humanitarian access and the protection of human rights and accountability.
 - The UN must ensure that the correct political conditions for reconstruction are put in place.

List of Signees:

1. Basma and Zaitouneh
2. Citizens for Syria
3. CUDOSSY
4. Dawlaty
5. Fazaa for Development and Relief
6. Hurras Network
7. Initiative for a New Syria
8. PEL- The Civil Waves
9. Rethink Rebuild Society
10. Sawa for Development and Aid
11. Sawa Foundation
12. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom
13. Syrian Legal Development Program
14. Syrian Network for Human Rights
15. Syrian Peace Action Centre (SPACE)
16. Syrians for Truth and Justice
17. Syrie MDL
18. Women Now for Development

Contact details:

Bushra Al-akraa, We Exist, bushra@weexist-sy.org
Facebook: @weexist.sy
Twitter: @WeExistSyria

[1] <https://goo.gl/YUVLtE>

[2] <https://goo.gl/PEyzGU>