



## NGOization of the Protest Movement

MOHAMMAD ABU HAJAR  
*Kassel University, Germany*

### Introduction

NGOs are playing rapidly an increasing role in assuring western hegemony and rendering technical development of the west as a sole model in the global south or as described by Glen Wright as “propagators of Western hegemony.” (Wright 2012). Additionally, the logistical and discursive power international NGOs have over social and protest movements in the global south has been best described by Balakrishnan Rajagopal in his book “international law from below”, Rajagopal argues: "As mass radical movements have increasingly emerged around the claims for human rights and democratic entitlement, a host of international organizations have emerged to program this new area." (Rajagopal 2003, p. 155). An observation consonant with William Robinson's assertions in his treatise "Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony". Robinson observes that the "United States and local elites thoroughly penetrate civil society, and from therein assure control over popular mobilization and mass movements" (Robinson 1996, p. 69). Although Robinson's findings primarily address US democracy promotion, I contend that the argument can be extrapolated to encompass interventions conducted by other Western nations and the entirety of the western intervention model.

To provide a clearer understanding of professionalization, I have developed a comprehensive definition by synthesizing the works of Robert Kleidman<sup>1</sup>, Angela Alonso, and Débora Maciel<sup>2</sup>. Kleidman's research focuses on professionalization in social movement organizations, while Alonso and Maciel examine the professionalization of climate activism in Brazil. This definition aligns well with the theoretical discussions presented in the second chapter of this research, particularly regarding the professionalization of workers' unions, as developed by Peter Burnham. The definition of professionalization I suggest is as follows:

the process by which grassroots movements or political groups adopt formal structures and specialized roles, increasingly relying on technical expertise, paid staff, and external funding resources. This process often resembles corporate governance models and involves the development of a hierarchical organization and increased specialization among members. Additionally, professionalization emphasizes fostering cooperative relationships with political authorities and scientific elites.

Sabine Lang in her work on the NGOization of feminist activism refers to professionalization as an integral part of the switch towards the process of NGOizing activism. Lang defines professionalization as “shifts from the creation of feminist spaces for “alternative” modes of life and work to “job” attitudes and to an identification with being a part of the formal tertiary sector.” (Lang 1997). When discussing the NGOization process, it is important to note that civil society has been interpreted in various ways throughout history and across different

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<sup>1</sup> Kleidman 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Alonso and Maciel 2010.



ideologies. Civil society encompasses multiple features that extend beyond the scope of NGOs, including grassroots organizations and other informal networks that contribute to public life. As Shelley Feldman argues (Feldman 1997), these broader elements are not always embedded within the work of NGOs. However, as Paula Lobato Gonzalez contends, the neoliberal transformation has increasingly blurred the distinction between civil society and NGOs, making them “sometimes difficult to separate” (Gonzalez 2021). Furthermore, David Lewis observes that “NGOs became equated with civil society and crowded out the wider range of other actors” (Lewis 2015). Sabine Lang elaborates on this point in her work on the “NGOization of civil society,” arguing that NGOs themselves actively contribute to this equation as they seek legitimacy, stating: “the equation of civil society with NGOs is actively co-produced by NGOs in need for legitimacy” (Lang 2012, p. 61). Regionally, Tariq Dana supports the validity of this perspective, arguing in his work on civil society in Palestine that “are often seen as the “quintessence” of civil society to the extent that the very existence and dynamism of civil society has been equated with the number of such organizations” (Dana 2014).

Evidence supporting this argument can be found in Syria and generally in the Arabic-speaking countries as Nour Abu-Assab argues, “the term ‘civil society’ has come to be used exclusively to denote non-governmental organizations, be they local, national, international, or transnational” (Abu-Assab 2020), especially in the period following the so-called Arab Spring uprisings which was followed by an influx of international NGOs. This equation will be demonstrated in this chapter. Apart from a brief period in the early 21st century when opposition groups moved away from the form of political parties and organizations and attempted to organize around the concept of civil society, I contend that in the Syrian context, the term “civil society” has predominantly been used to describe the segment of activists operating within NGO structures.

Supporting the arguments of both Rajagopal and Robinson, the 2014 OCHA report documented the presence of over 206 international partners operating in Syria between the 2011 uprising and 2014<sup>3</sup>. Notably, the transition from protest movements and coordination committees to the establishment of non-governmental organizations—referred to as the process of “NGOization”—took place during this same period, as evidenced by the findings of this research. Tahseen, the aforementioned activist interviewed during my field study, noted that this transition applied to Syria as “at a certain point, the movement started shifting from coordination committees into NGOs across the country. This shift occurred as the economic and moral responsibilities towards people living within the geographical area of the coordination committees were assumed and carried out by the committee members themselves.”. Ayham, one of my interviewees who played a significant role in the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), noted this shift occurring within the LCCs themselves. He observed, “Following Razan’s<sup>4</sup> kidnapping, specialized organizations began to emerge from the Local Coordination Committees, such as the Violations Documentation Center and the Local Development & Small-Projects Support organization”. Gradually, this shift led to the professionalization of activism, characterized by increasing specialization and the NGOization

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<sup>3</sup> The full report available under: <https://polioeradication.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2014-Syria-Regional-Response-Plan-Overview.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Razan Zeitouneh, a lawyer and a founding member of both the Local Coordination Committees



of activist circles. As Basem, one of the interviewees, noted: "In 2011, it was a dictatorship facing the population. By 2013, this dynamic had changed; there was a regime, a population, and an opposition that ceased to be an organic part of the people, instead gravitating toward NGOization."

### **Civil Society rhetoric in the Syrian discourse.**

The ambiguity surrounding the term "civil society," as discussed in the theoretical chapter, extends to the complexities of understanding the concept within the Syrian context. This ambiguity is not only evident among the general population and activists, both within and outside of my interview sample, but also visible and recognized by civil society groups, political theorists, policymakers, officials, and other actors in Syrian society. In many studies published by Syrian groups, the term "civil society" is often replaced with references to either civil society centers and organizations or, at times, to merely civilians as reference to noncombatants. For example, in a study published by *Dawlati* -an NGO that "aims to support Syrian civil society and enable its active participation in transitioning Syria toward a democratic and just society" (Dawlaty 2017) – the concept of civil society is defined as follows: "entities and organizations, voluntarily joined associations, nongovernmental and not affiliated with any political party, that do not aim to attain power, and engage in peaceful, non-militant activities designed to serve the interests of a specific social group or the broader public interest." (Dawlaty 2022). A similar definition is found in a study published by the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, authored by Syrian researcher Monzir Alsheikh. In this study, civil society is defined as "a diverse and growing set of organizations operating in the fields of services, development, culture, and climate, based on volunteerism and non-profit work." (Alsheikh 2021). The conflation of civil society as a broader paradigm or notion with civil society organizations is evident in these two definitions and in many findings from my interviewees.

#### *Civil Society prior to 2011*

The primary confusion in the Syrian context stems from the difficulty in distinguishing civil society from local society. Historically, Syrian state and regime rhetoric have favored the term "local society," further blurring the distinction between the two. And instead of civil society organizations or groups, the regime favored an alternative called "popular organization" which included trade, youth, students, and women organizations and were all "tied to the Baath Party" (Belhadj 2012) "based on a Leninist Strategy" (Hinnebusch 2011).

It was only in the early 21st century that the term "civil society" began to officially appear in public discourse. As previously noted, following the inauguration of Bashar Al-Assad, various opposition groups—previously silent and operating underground—began to reemerge, starting with the Statement of the 99 in September 2000. Notably, this statement did not reference civil society. In January 2001, one thousand intellectuals, artists, political figures, and other public figures signed the Statement of the 1000, which later became known as the "founding statement of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society." This marked a significant moment in the formal recognition of civil society in Syrian discourse.



Theoretically, the nascent experience of the period known as the "Damascus Spring" inspired three prominent political theorists and thinkers to rapidly contribute to the literature defining the concept of civil society. In 2001, Tayeb Tizini published *From the Trinity of Corruption to the Issues of Civil Society*, marking an early effort to engage with the topic. In the following years, two additional works followed: *When Asked About Civil Society* by Abdulrazzak Eid in 2004 and *State and Civil Society* by Shaher Ahmad Nasr in 2005. These works represent significant attempts to conceptualize civil society within the Syrian context, reflecting the political and intellectual momentum of the time. The three Marxist or former Marxist thinkers employed a Hegelian, teleological understanding of history to argue for the necessity of civil society. Any critiques of the concept were dismissed as rooted in totalitarian or Stalinist perspectives and ridiculed accordingly (Eid 2004). However, unlike many contemporary understandings, these works did not equate civil society with civil society organizations. Instead, civil society was framed as a sphere distinct from state oppression, where public affairs could be subjected to the oversight of public opinion. The authors emphasized elements more closely aligned with democratization than civil society, such as freedom of expression and the ability to form of political parties (Tizini 2001; Nasr 2005), rather than focusing solely on nongovernmental and civil society organizations. Rana Khalaf and her co-authors, in their paper 'Activism at Difficult Times', "the concept was understood mainly to mean a political movement representing those segments of the population that were not organized in state structures." (Khalaf et al. 2014)

Raymond Hinnebusch, in an article published seven years before the emergence of the Damascus Spring, argued that "an independent bourgeoisie is the force most able to carve out room for civil society" (Hinnebusch 1993). He concluded that the growing power of the Syrian bourgeoisie would lead to its push for greater economic and political liberalization, as well as attempts to create spaces for civil society. Hinnebusch specifically mentioned the Seif brothers, prominent figures within the Syrian industrial bourgeoisie at the time. He argued: "two segments of the bourgeoisie-domestic entrepreneurs and expatriates have particular potential to widen civil society. In the vanguard of entrepreneurs who have risen from the local petite bourgeoisie are the Seif brothers, the largest private employers in Syria... Their apparent combination of private enterprise and a welfare network outside of government control could be an indication of the potential for the bourgeoisie to construct an n autonomous civil society embracing wider strata of the population" (ibid). One of the Seif brothers, Riad Seif, would later be recognized as "one of the leaders of the short-lived civil society movement" (BBC 2012).

However, during the first decade of the current century, the difficulty in distinguishing civil society from local society in the Syrian context played a pivotal role in the ideological struggle and as an arena of contestation between state rhetoric and members of traditional opposition parties. Many of these opposition figures had abandoned their parties, joining forces with prominent business owners who were central to the aforementioned Damascus Spring. In 2001, during a press conference, Information Minister Adnan Emran stated that civil society is an "American concept that has been promoted in various regions. While originally not a negative notion, it has subsequently been manipulated and closely tied to foreign embassies," As cited in (Ziad 2001). The attack on the notion later escalated when Emran stated that "The term "civil society", in its commonly understood sense, is associated with neo-colonialism, which no longer requires armies... Neo-colonialism no longer relies on armies; instead, it has taken on a different form." As cited in (Kilo 2001).



The official rhetoric of the Syrian state has consistently favored the term “Local Society.” Shafaq, one of my interviewees, recalled the period when she worked closely with the government to plan the highly controversial Tenth Five-Year Plan. This plan was a significant point of contention among politically engaged Syrians, as it was seen as the official shift toward the privatization of state-owned resources and the liberalization of the economy. Shafaq recounts collaborating with Abdullah Al-Dardari, who had been appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs and, as noted by Raymond Hinnebusch “was counting on elimination of socialism from the party’s program to allow a move toward a market economy” (Hinnebusch 2011). However, the rhetoric surrounding civil society, which attempted to establish a new arena of contestation between the state and traditional opposition, extended beyond these two actors. As Laura Ruiz de Elivra and Tina Zintl observed, following the end of the Damascus Spring and closely tied to its experience, “several business-related NGOs were (co-)initiated by foreign-educated Syrians, for example the Syrian Business Council (SBC, \*2007), the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA, \*2004), and – as a local branch of an international NGO – Junior Chamber International Damascus (JCI, \*2004).” Many of these nascent NGOs emerged from “business families on good terms with the regime” (Elivra and Zintl 2012). Raymond Hinnebusch has predicted that the liberalization of the Syrian economy, as mentioned earlier, would result in the emergence of a “business-centered civil society” (Hinnebusch 1993). (Hinnebusch 1993)

Shafaq remembers that Dardari requested a chapter on civil society, where we wrote the role of civil society, and that it intervenes in everything, in 2007, a brief from the prime minister came demanding that for it to be canceled and replaced by ‘local society’ and it has immediately been changed”

The experience of the nascent civil society platforms was short-lived. By 2001, the state had already taken harsh measures against these groups. A major turning point came when Ma'amoun Al-Homsi, a member of parliament and a prominent figure of the Damascus Spring, declared a hunger strike, issuing a list of political demands that included “the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, curtailment of the mukhabarat, and the formation of a human rights committee in parliament.” “the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, curtailment of the mukhabarat, and the formation of a human rights committee in parliament.” (Ghadabian 2015). Homsi was arrested together with nine other political figures from the movement including Riad Said himself. Thus, ending the brief period of civil society activism and the Damascus Spring “was crushed by the imposition of a ban on discussion forums and the arrest of its leaders.” (Khalaf et al. 2014)

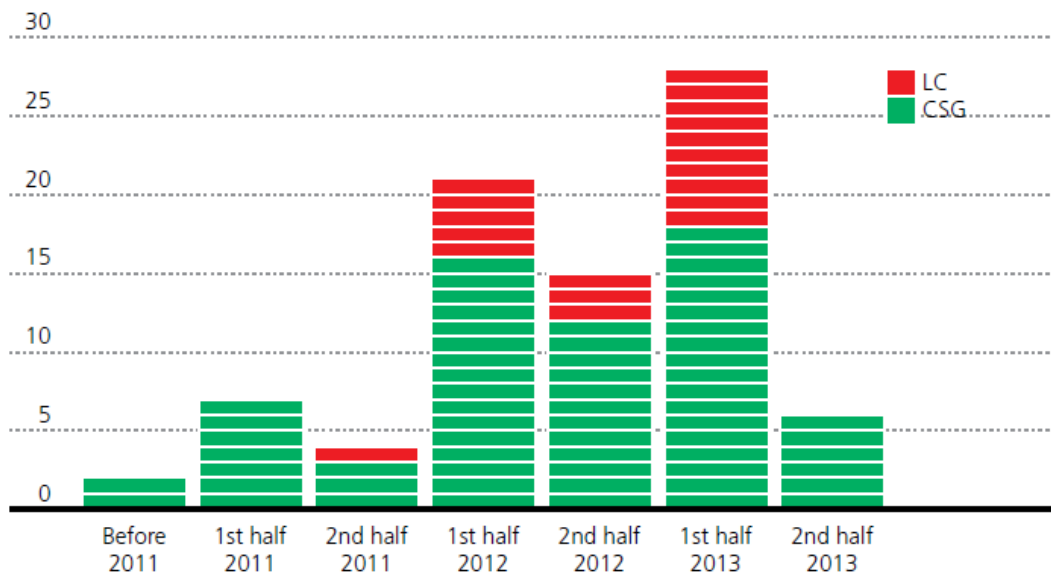
### *Civil Society in post-2011 uprising*

The emergence of the 2011 revolution brought about a significant “revival of civil society represented by youth groups, grassroots civil society movements, local coordination committees, leaders, activists, religious groups, civil courts, religious courts, Local Councils, humanitarian support groups, media groups, etc.” (Khalaf 2015) in the Syrian political discourse. This revival, as noted by activists both within and outside of my interview sample, had minimal connections to the civil society discussions that took place in the early years of the previous decade. Mohammad Aljsem captures this reality in his paper, Syrian Civil

Society: Between Self-Flagellation and Birth from the Flank, where he asserts: “The Syrian civil society is widely recognized as being born out of the March 2011 revolution. Before that, there was little to no notable civil activism, except within very limited circles” (aljssem 2016). Initially, discussions on the topic were cautious and limited to small groups, such as the one founded by Shafaq and her colleagues. However, by the end of 2012, the term rapidly gained prominence, eventually becoming synonymous with a particular group of “elite activists,” many of whom had abandoned or lost their previous employment to become full-time activists. Shafaq herself described the proliferation of this culture and the resulting organizations as “the fungi phenomenon.”.

While exact statistics on the number of civil society groups in Syria before 2011 are difficult to obtain due to security concerns, some information is available. Notably, Badael, a Syrian “non-governmental organization founded in 2013 provided valuable data in their study on Syrian civil society groups. Badael’s authors, Rana Khalaf, Oula Ramadan, and Friederike Stolleis reviewed multiple organizations across the country. In the following graph, we can observe their account of the growth of these groups, which began immediately after the uprising and saw a significant turning point starting in 2012. Where LC refers to Local Council and CSG refers to Civil Society Group

**Figure 1:** Chronological growth of Civil Society Groups



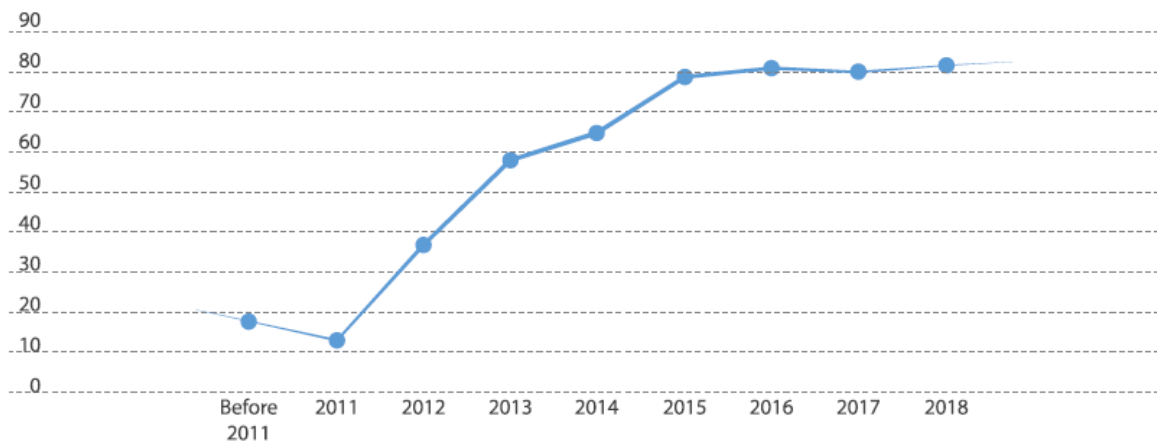
Source: (Khalaf et al. 2014)

Impact Research -a department specializing in civil society and development research within the Syrian non-profit Civil Society Organization Impact<sup>5</sup>- published multiple reports representing four phases of scanning civil society groups, initiatives, and centers in post-2011 Syria. In the first phase, the first report scanned “more than 900 civil entities” (Citizen for Syria 2015). However, in their 2017 report titled “Syrian civil society: Reality and Challenges”, their researcher stated: “Within this context -the context of 2011 uprising-, civil society organizations began to emerge and expand significantly, with their number over a six-year

<sup>5</sup> Previously named: Citizens for Syria

period surpassing their total over the preceding half-century, from 1959 to 2010” (Alzoabi 2017). In a 2019 report titled “Changing Contexts and Trends in Syrian Civil Society,” which mapped active civil society organizations and centers, conducted between August and November 2018, identified a total of 514 different groups and centers. A noteworthy finding is that Only 18 of the mapped CSOs were established before 2011, mostly charities active in fields of relief, social services or health) (Impact Research 2019). However, the Impact Research study provides an accumulated count of Syrian Civil Society Organizations over time, which differs slightly in numbers from the data provided by Badael. This discrepancy could be attributed to differences in the scanning tools, limitations, or definitions used by both organizations in their assessments.

**Figure 2:** Count of CSOs per year of establishment.



Source: (Impact Research 2019)

Later, a report that followed in 2022, by Armenak Tokmajyan based on surveys that were conducted in summer of 2021, his work suggests that “Since 2018, the number of newly established CSOs grew significantly. This is largely due to the contraction of ISIS and the subsequent proliferation of new organizations in parts of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor that are under the Autonomous Administration’s control” (Tokmajyan 2022).

A common characteristic discussed in all of these works, as well as in much of the literature engaging with Syrian civil society, is the significant reliance on international funding. This factor distinguishes the recent revival of civil society from the earlier wave a decade prior, which operated with far less dependence on external financial support. Aljssem in his aforementioned article acknowledges that the formation of Syrian civil society post-2011 is closely tied to donor policies, stating: “We cannot overlook an important and fundamental factor in its formation, which is the policies of the donors, or what activists commonly refer to as ‘this is what the donor wants’ (aljssem 2016). In the same report by Tokmajyan, it is noted that “Approximately 55% of Syrian CSOs in government-held areas reported receiving funds from main donors like EU, USAID, and UN, with 25% of them reported receiving finances only from those donors.” (Tokmajyan 2022)

Based on observations made by multiple interviewees, civil society in post-2011 Syria largely emerged from coordination committees. The concept of civil society itself, however, was not



entirely clear to many of the activists I interviewed. I observed significant challenges in understanding how my interviewees interpreted and defined the term.

One recurring confusion was the conflation of "civil society" with "civilians," a term used to describe anyone not carrying a weapon. This misunderstanding was present in 53% of both the preliminary and final interviews I conducted. Anzoor stated, "In 2012, we started using the term in the media—like civilians and civil society—to indicate that they are not soldiers". In one of the preliminary interviews, Aboud (pseudonym) conflated civil society with civil defense, assuming that they performed the same work. However, my interviews and observations from my time in Syria indicate that the earliest usage of the terms "civil state" and "civil activism," which eventually gave rise to the concept of civil society, primarily served two purposes: to differentiate oneself from militarized groups and armed factions on one side, and as a substitute for the term "secular" on the other. Many believed that using the term "secular" was too confrontational for society, prompting the adoption of "civil" as a more acceptable alternative.

### **Introduction of international fund**

Despite diligent efforts, the researcher was unable to uncover concrete evidence of pre-uprising funding for political or civic activism in Syria. This difficulty can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, receiving foreign funding for political activism was highly sensitive and potentially criminalized, carrying the risk of lengthy incarceration. Consequently, individuals and organizations involved were likely to exercise extreme caution and secrecy. Secondly, although two interviewees alluded to employment contracts with a women's center and a legal center, details regarding their funding sources remained obscure. Further investigation into these specific entities might yield more insights, but the initial hurdle of obtaining reliable information concerning pre-uprising funding remains significant.

As the revolution commences, the pursuit becomes increasingly facilitated and less arduous., as previously delineated, the genesis of the Syrian uprising manifested as an unexpected and abrupt event, confounding all societal stakeholders, encompassing various oppositional entities and the incumbent regime. The advent of this significant mobilization defied conventional expectations, exhibiting scant connectivity to established channels of political dissent. Furthermore, the actors and factions that emerged at the outset of this revolution largely existed beyond the purview of the established political landscape, exhibiting a remarkable degree of heterogeneity. The motivations for participation exhibited considerable variation, influenced by factors such as geographical origin, socio-economic class, and underlying causes. Cities such as Hama, Damascus, Baniyas, and Latakia notably maintained a predominantly nonviolent resistance stance throughout the duration of the uprising. In contrast, urban centers like Aleppo and Raqqa experienced a swift transition towards militarization, with minimal antecedent nonviolent revolutionary activism prior to the intervention of oppositional faction's operative in their environs. Cities and countryside such as Homs, Dara'a, and Deir Ezzor, Damascus countryside meanwhile, witnessed a more gradual accumulation towards militarization.

### *Self-Sufficient Coordination Committees*





Based on insights gleaned from interviews, it is noteworthy that while several activists recounted their initial involvement in the revolution through participation in public demonstrations and other communal endeavors. Shafaq, previously cited for her role in coordinating a cadre of "educators", indicated that during the nascent stages, the financial requirements for her team were met through charitable contributions. She stated: "A prosperous young woman generously contributed the rental expenses for the venue, covered the costs associated with provisions such as food and beverages, and defrayed sundry operational expenditures."

The collective and corroborative insights of numerous activists converge on the premise that the nascent phase of the revolution constituted a period wherein local activists or affluent individuals subsidized the revolutionary endeavors and furnished requisite resources from their personal funds. This observation is echoed by a subset of respondents in my interview cohort, including two individuals who themselves belong to the affluent cadre and contributed their personal finances to the burgeoning revolution. Indeed, a prominent thematic code that has emerged from my dataset is labeled as "self-sufficiency of coordination committees," encompassing 25 coded segments. Within this thematic code, interviewed activists have emphasized the significance of self-sufficiency and the absence of dependency on external funding as a pivotal factor in bolstering the revolution during its nascent phases. This stands in contrast, notably, to subsequent structures commonly recognized as "civil society organizations," a topic that will be explored more comprehensively in a subsequent chapter.

During the interview, Ayham consistently emphasized the pivotal role played by his initial forays into activism during his tenure in the Gulf region. He articulated: "Until the end of 2011, a significant portion of my activism revolved around furnishing logistical support and necessary equipment for the operations of various coordination committees. This entailed the provision of mobile-satellite devices, concealed cameras, and satellite internet receivers". Ayham reiterated a similar stance regarding private funding, affirming that all expenditures incurred during that period were financed solely from his personal resources.

Basem, an interviewee, recounts an anecdote from the initial stages of the revolution wherein the group with which he collaborated encountered a shortfall in international funding. Consequently, he personally financed the procurement of requisite equipment and supplies, drawing from his own resources to fulfill the group's operational requirements. He said: "At the beginning, I actively supported local movements by providing on-the-ground assistance. This involved sending cameras and facilitating the provision of satellite Internet through collaborations with acquaintances who contributed to the cause."

In contrast to the involvement of affluent individuals, both within and outside of Syria, some activists recalled their reliance solely on their own resources during the embryonic phase of the revolution. They shared financial responsibilities and collectively covered necessary expenses. Reflecting this ethos, Melia presents her involvement with the nonviolent movement "Nabd" as entirely self-sustaining. She elucidates: "In Nabd, we eschewed external funding; each member contributed 500 pounds from our personal finances to cover expenses. On one occasion, we prepared a report for CNN and received remuneration for our efforts". A similar sentiment is echoed by Amin Nour, an interviewee, he said that: while the majority of the



group, of which he was a member, were under the age of 18 at the onset of the revolution, they managed expenses by “deducting necessary costs from our own allowances.”

However, as multiple interviewees concurred, the expenses during that period were relatively modest and primarily encompassed necessities such as satellite internet for safety measures and the dissemination of demonstration videos to major news channels, given their accessibility within the country. Additional expenses included the printing of leaflets and the acquisition of cameras and other recording equipment for documenting demonstrations. Gradually, a humanitarian imperative began to emerge and expand beyond locals’ ability to cover, in a drastic change to how at the outset of its emergence as articulated by Shafaq: "Some wealthy merchants sponsored the humanitarian needs of internally displaced families or families of detainees for a year."

However, the self-sufficiency of many revolutionary groups was not always consistent. As a member of the Local Coordination Committee (LCC), I recall receiving funding whose sources were often difficult to trace, particularly within the revolutionary bureau where I was involved. It became clear, however, that funds were being provided from unknown origins. Fouad Marei similarly observes that "LCCs received support from numerous governments, NGOs, and conflict stabilization practitioners, including capacity building, training, funding, program incubation, and expensive technologies and equipment"(Marei 2020). Ayham, who held a prominent position within the LCC, stated during our interview that the “LCC initially had connections with key figures who facilitated access to grants. However, until 2013, the organization retained autonomy over decisions regarding the use of these funds. This changed after 2013, contributing to the eventual dissolution of the LCC”.

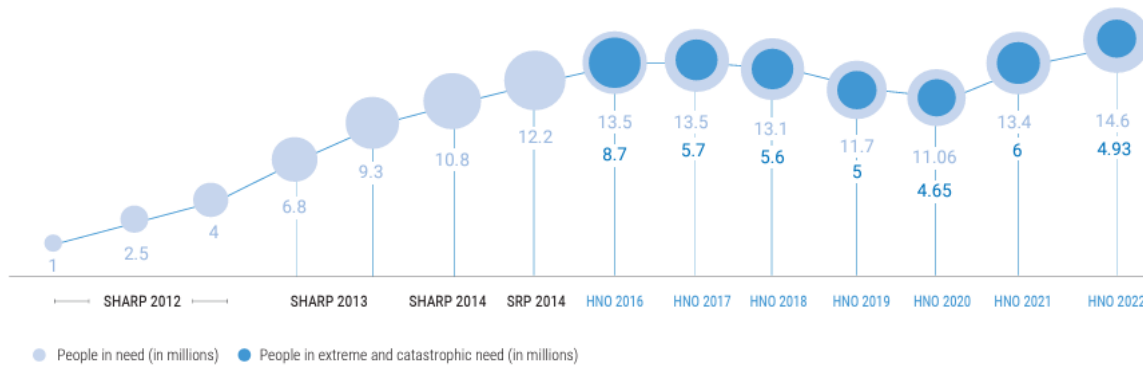
I argue that this influx of external funding facilitated the development of more sophisticated interventions, which in turn paved the way for the NGOization and depoliticization of the LCC’s engagement. This process, as I will explore further in this research, shifted the focus of multiple more specialized organizations that emerged from within the LCCs from grassroots activism to a more structured, project-based, donor-driven model that increasingly aligned with technical solutions and depoliticized agendas.

### *Humanitarian Needs*

As the situation of the ground started getting more complicated and the attacks of the regime started expanding in its tactics and intensity of shelling and bombardment, the rising militarization mentioned earlier brought upon the Syrian enormous waves of displacement and created increasing rates of internationally displaced people.

The following graph shows the increasing amount of people in need throughout the years:

**Figure 3: People in Need in Syria 2012-2022**



Source: Humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic

The new challenge faced by the people in Syria has been primarily addressed by activists who have taken on significant roles in the ongoing crisis. According to my interview sample, twelve out of fourteen interviewees reported that they have engaged in relief and humanitarian work to varying extents. This involvement ranges from organizing and distributing essential supplies, such as food and medical aid, to providing support and shelter for displaced individuals and families.

As the intensity of violence rapidly increased, particularly following the aforementioned post-Ramadan escalation, the number of injured individuals began to rise significantly. Syrian hospitals, however, were not considered safe havens for injured activists seeking medical help. Many hospitals were known to collaborate with the regime to arrest people, particularly activists injured during demonstrations or in conflict zones. In one report focusing on the city of Dara'a titled "We Have Never Seen Such Horror,"<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch documented multiple events occurring in different other cities where "Security forces took control of most of the hospitals" (HRW 2011). I recall N.K., a friend of mine, who was shot in the back due to his political involvement. By the time we arrived at the hospital, he was already handcuffed to the hospital bed. The HRW report continues to reveal that due to the security forces' control of hospitals and medical centers, "most of those wounded avoided the hospitals and were treated in makeshift clinics like the one set up inside al-Omari Mosque or in private houses with no access to proper medical care" (ibid).

Anzoor recalls this period from his own experiences in Damascus. In my interviews with him, he recounted his initial involvement in humanitarian work: "After Ramadan, the regime started invading neighborhoods with tanks. By that time, there were many injuries, so we needed to provide medical tools and necessities such as gauze and blood transfusion bags. I had to smuggle them between different places, leveraging my accessibility as I hail from an Alawi family."

As certain areas began to slip out of the regime's control, the intensity of airstrikes and heavy bombardment rapidly increased, creating a massive wave of evacuations and internal displacement. Activists once again played a crucial role in providing shelters and

<sup>6</sup> Full report available under: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/06/01/weve-never-seen-such-horror/crimes-against-humanity-syrian-security-forces>



accommodation centers for the internally displaced people. Homs, a city in central Syria, was among the earliest to experience such evacuations, which began in late 2011 in neighborhoods such as Baba Amro and Al-Khaldiyeh. Anzoor, who was based in Damascus at the time, noted that his focus and activism shifted from organizing and joining demonstrations to addressing the humanitarian crisis. During our interview, he stated, "By the end of 2011, there were already evacuations and forced displacements to Damascus, so we started searching for families that would host people evacuating from Homs. All the communication happened using Skype".

To address the increasing need for medical personnel to care for activists and participants injured due to escalating violence, "Medics have also taken a significant lead in relief associations, the largest of which was Doctors Coordinate of Damascus" (Slim and Trombetta 2014). For this research, and to understand the reliance on foreign donors within this sector, I interviewed one of the founders of this organization, Tahseen. He played a vital role in the creation of the committee. When asked about the early stages of establishing Doctors Coordinate, he explained that it was when international organizations sought connections to his group through informal channels that they aimed to sponsor and finance the establishment of makeshift hospitals. He noted that, in these early stages, INGOs could not openly discuss reports and documentation of the work and equipment due to the secrecy surrounding these locations and staff. This secrecy allowed issues of corruption and trust among activists to emerge. He recalls an incident that occurred in Dara'a, in southern Syria: "The international NGO where I worked financed the creation of a makeshift hospital in Dara'a. The person responsible sent us a video documenting the hospital's creation. A few weeks later, I met a Western worker from a different medical NGO who mentioned that their organization also financed a hospital in the same village. When I asked to see their video, it was the exact same footage, but taken at a different time of day and naming different donors."

Tahseen's observation offers significant insight into how the involvement of international NGOs facilitated financial capitalization through the crisis due to inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and other factors that will be referred to at a later point in this research. By the time he joined the humanitarian efforts, these initiatives were already fully funded by international organizations, and he lacked access to prior information. In contrast, Shafaq provided valuable insights from her experience, as she was present when the group first received donations from abroad for relief and humanitarian work. She emphasized repeatedly that the educational material and funds necessary for her group's workshops and training sessions were collected from individuals, as previously mentioned. In a tone resembling a confession, she stated the following: "Relief work was certainly funded externally; to be honest, it was the Asfari Foundation. This foundation is well-established and long-standing, and importantly, it has no Islamic tendencies, which was significant for us. We wanted to maintain a civil and secular image, and the Asfari Foundation's reputation in this regard was beneficial."

Montaha also provides a similar argument. Initially, her team operated without external funding or formal funding applications, relying instead on donations from the local community and logistical support from the Local Coordination Committees. However, in 2014, they began receiving external funding due to the increasing demands in the humanitarian aid and relief work sector. During our interview, she stated: "Around 2014, we received funds for



humanitarian purposes from Doctors Without Borders. Prior to that, all our assistance came in the form of food baskets, sanitary equipment, and other in-kind contributions".

In conclusion, it seems evident that the involvement of political groups and individuals in humanitarian work and relief activities significantly contributed to their receipt of funding from international donors. This engagement facilitated the establishment of initial ties with international organizations, enabling these groups to build networks and gain visibility. Additionally, they acquired essential skills in reporting, writing proposals, and navigating the bureaucratic demands of donors. These competencies not only made them more attractive to potential funders but also enhanced their capacity to secure and effectively manage external funding. Consequently, their ability to meet the increasing demands of the humanitarian sector was significantly bolstered, allowing them to expand and improve their relief efforts.

### *Training Workshops*

During the earliest stages of the uprising, while activists were implementing their political initiatives in various public arenas across the country, individuals, particularly those involved in the aforementioned "revival of civil society" efforts, participated in providing training workshops to the activists' community specially in urban cities like Damascus and Aleppo. Initially funded by local resources, these workshops later became avenues for international donors to influence the movement.

In order to investigate the emergence, objectives, and outcomes of these training workshops, I conducted an in-depth interview with one of the pioneers of the initial team focused on educating young Syrian activists on this subject matter. The interview with Shafaq, which lasted one hour and 42 minutes, provided valuable insights into her role and the pivotal significance of these workshops. Shafaq elaborated on the evolving trajectories of these educational initiatives, which initially operated on a self-organized basis funded by local resources. However, as the needs grew, necessitating additional resources, her group transitioned to seeking external funding and eventually formalized their status as a non-governmental organization (NGO) by mid-2012. Shafaq explained that the transition took place because "specific international donors were actively seeking civil formations to support, thereby catalyzing the shift in emphasis."

Ayham, one of my interviewees, highlights how during that period, Gaziantep, the Turkish city bordering Syria, began to play a significant role in education. International organizations interested in engaging with the emerging movement utilized Gaziantep as a hub for remote project management and educational workshops. When asked about the content of the training workshops where he facilitated connections between Syrian activists and workshop curators, Ayham mentioned a diverse range of topics. "Initially, the focus was on media and reporting training, particularly influenced by Naji Al-Jerf<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, workshops covered digital security and included training on humanitarian principles, international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and good governance."

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<sup>7</sup> Syrian activist Naji Jerf was known by many as el-Khal - or uncle - for his mentorship and training of many young people in the revolutionary movement. Jerf was assassinated by suspected Islamic State group gunmen in Gaziantep, Turkey while bringing lunch back to his family in December. Abbas 2016.



When inquiring about the workshop's content from Montaha, who held an implementer role within Syria, and consequently had limited access to international organizations and minimal influence over the training's direction, her response was characterized by sarcasm regarding the workshop's content. She stated, "They provided training on human development, capacity building, and subsequently, they instructed us on the concept of a civil society organization and how to conduct a SWOT analysis... I must admit, I was entirely unfamiliar with the terminology they used".

As certain areas in Syria began to be "liberated" by the Syrian Free Army, it became easier for many activists to access neighboring countries, fostering deeper and more profound connections with international organizations. The trainings, initially held in extreme secrecy within Syria, evolved to become more professional, leading to the establishment of organizational ties. As Anzoor, referenced in interviews, explains: "as these meetings and trainings became more frequent, the regime began to take notice and monitor activities. On multiple occasions, security forces raided the locations where meetings were scheduled. Consequently, workshops began to take place in Lebanon let's say by early-2012, offering longer durations, reduced risk, and greater access to international funding opportunities."

During the initial phase of this study, conducted through preliminary interviews, numerous activists from the inaugural epoch articulated a consistent sentiment of disconnection from the workshops under investigation. Despite lacking prior acquaintance or collaborative endeavors, and originating from disparate geographical locales, these activists collectively presented analogous perspectives. Their shared argumentation line yields valuable insights pivotal to elucidating the underlying rationales and operational dynamics of the workshops. This prevailing sentiment is encapsulated succinctly by the pseudonymous activist, Salma, encountered during the preliminary interview phase:

"They extended invitations to workshops, an abundance of workshops. My attendance was primarily motivated by the opportunity to temporarily depart Syria, coupled with the provision of essential financial assistance, which I desperately required at the time. However, beyond these practical considerations, I found myself perplexed by the didactic nature of the sessions. As grassroots activists immersed in the immediacy of our circumstances, the imposition of lectures on topics such as citizenship rights and the conceptualization of community vis-à-vis the state seemed incongruous with our objectives. I did not take part in the revolution with the expectation of receiving such pedagogical instruction. Moreover, the prescribed definition of citizenship and societal organization appeared discordant with my convictions. Regrettably, there existed minimal scope for dialogue or dissent within these workshops, rendering them devoid of relevance amidst the tumultuous events unfolding in Syria and the multifaceted challenges confronting activists."

In my semi-structured focused interviews, Shafai conveyed that his primary motivation for attending workshops was "to visit Turkey, but I don't know why they organized the workshop". When queried about whether these workshops contributed to his activism or fostered any sense of connection, he contended that "they primarily provided informational value, albeit not at all relevant to the Syrian context. I remarked the incongruity between the content provided, which



often pertained to contexts unfamiliar to participants, and the subsequent ridicule it elicited from peers. I found it audacious to assume that methodologies effective in first-world settings would translate seamlessly to the Syrian regime's dynamics. Look at the lack of tangible outcomes from numerous training sessions aimed at facilitating engagement with the international community, now the same community neglect Syria amidst the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. I am not aware of the motives behind such workshops, whether they might serve as conduits for financial improprieties or hollow expressions of humanitarianism.”

To further explore the concerns voiced by activists such as Salma, I initiated discussions on the topic during my interviews with several activists who have assumed administrative roles within intermediary non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The inquiries sought to ascertain the rationale behind what seemed entirely arbitrary to activists not affiliated directly with any NGO. Basem delineated the essence of their workshops as being "closely linked to Western funding." A prevailing sentiment among the respondents was the periodic evolution of areas of focus, commonly referred to by many activists in the field as "trends".

### **NGOization: The professionalization of Syrian Protest Networks**

The NGOization of the protest movement, as many of my interviewees argued, began by the summer of 2012. This process involved multiple transformations, deeply intersecting with the concept of professionalization that I introduced earlier in this chapter. However, the specific characteristics of NGOization go beyond professionalization alone. NGOization involves the “transformation of social movements into organizations and the increasing dominance of ‘modern’ NGOs which emphasise “issue-specific interventions and pragmatic strategies with a strong employment focus, rather than the establishment of a new democratic counter-culture” (Stubbs 2006). This shift is characteristic of the neoliberal era (Sheppard et al. 2009) and is frequently “associated with the growing centrality of civil society” (Yacobi 2007).

The search for the causes of NGOization in Syria is a complex endeavor, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the conflict and its aftermath. Several key factors contributed to this process, ranging from urgent humanitarian needs to filling gaps left by the absence of the state in areas controlled by the opposition. In many cases, activists had to assume roles as service providers in the face of sudden administrative and social vacuums. Moreover, as some of my interviewees emphasized, working in the NGO sector became a "last-chance work opportunity" amidst widespread unemployment and economic instability.

Throughout my fieldwork, I gathered substantial evidence supporting the validity of this phenomenon. Interviewees such as Abdul, Hiba, and Shafaq consistently highlighted the humanitarian crises they witnessed, stating, "You see people seeking shelter in schools, having lost their jobs, and in urgent need—what can you do?" This sentiment was echoed by Tayseer, Amin Nour, Haval, and Shafai, who pointed out that working for an NGO provided a comparatively good salary, often in a currency stronger than the rapidly depreciating Syrian pound. However, nearly all interviewees concluded that the causes behind the NGOization process were multifaceted, with humanitarian necessity, employment opportunities, and economic incentives all playing significant roles.



In the upcoming section, I aim to explore, through both my fieldwork and participatory observations, the multiple factors that paved the way for the NGOization of the Syrian protest movement. Additionally, I will examine some of the key impacts this process has had on the movement, including its shift from grassroots activism to institutionalized, professionalized forms of civil society engagement. This analysis will draw on firsthand accounts, observations, and existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transformation and its broader implications.

### *NGOization through Training Workshops*

The training workshops mentioned above played a pivotal role in offering fresh opinion to Syria. But neither this knowledge nor the ways that it was reshaping fields of Syrian activist action, can be comprehended if we do not consider what happened in such trainings as a complex site where international hosts and grassroots-activists emerging from within their struggle over Syria met each other to navigate complicated power relationships. This dynamic will be further examined in followed chapters focused on the western hegemony and buyers of it in Syrian orbit over activists' network. The importance of these workshops did not just lie in how they sought to direct international funding, the NGOization of the Syrian protest movement had begun here. Indeed, they helped rationalize the idea of civic organizations as centers where activism was to be confined. In his work *Rule of Experts*, Timothy Mitchell analyzes the role of the international development apparatus in Egypt, highlighting the necessity of training workshops in rendering political questions technical. He discusses how the hegemony of Western technical expertise was imposed on Egypt, noting that this influence was established through "Sending Egyptians to the United States and other countries for training in the "techniques of technology transfer"" (Mitchell 2002)

Evidence of the impact of these training workshops on shifting the objectives of the Syrian revolution toward technical solutions can be observed in my data. For instance, Montaha said that both she and fellow members of her coordination committee began to produce the idea of creating a civil society organization following the attendance of training workshops. This particular concept was introduced to them by the tutors during one of the workshops she attended. She stated, "We had our first training with CCSD on what a civil society organization is. They told us it is the link or connection between the people and the regime. Although we initially found this idea absurd, we were motivated to start our own organization in Zabadani". Montaha later continued later by saying: "we had trainings by international trainers, the aim was initially that we learn to teach others"

Amin Nour, a young activist who later worked for an international organization in Turkey, describes a similar journey toward professionalization. During our interview, he stated that ""the first interaction with civil society organizations occurred when I was invited to a workshop titled 'Societies Architecture.' It was funded by a Dutch organization. The prevailing sentiment at that time was: 'Be quick, there is funding available. Go get your package and let's form an NGO". During our interview, Amin Nour shared that, as a young activist with a strong revolutionary spirit, he often felt deeply disconnected from the realities around him. He humorously referred to this sense of disconnection as "PWSD—Post Workshop Stress Disorder", highlighting the frustration and alienation he experienced after attending NGO-organized workshops. Echoing the frustration expressed by Amin Nour, many participants in





a Facebook event titled “That’s What the Donor Wants” voiced similar concerns. Saria Abo-Naeem, for instance, sarcastically remarked: “Let’s add more transitional justice workshops, more trainings on minorities and constitutional rights—it’s okay, that’s the donor’s desire.” This sentiment reflected on a higher frustration and disillusionment with how NGOs’ workshops are tailored to favor donor’s priorities over revolutionary needs.

A similar argument was made by Haval, an interviewee who joined a coordination committee in her city at the moment of its foundation, Haval reflects on how the transition from direct activism within the committee and in grassroots activism to participating in training workshops shaped a new dimension of engagement in her life, as well as in the activism of her fellow activists. She acknowledges that her first encounter with the concept of civil society occurred during the revolution, noting “We were in the streets, then we started in civil society, as my name was suggested for a workshop.”. Haval's experience illustrates how the shift towards involvement in civil society and the development of formal organizations drew activists away from street-level activism. As she attended the training, Haval later worked as a low-ranking implementer in a local organization. She argued that “at first, we did not have any knowledge or experience. It was international organizations that trained us. Someone from my coordination committee said, ‘You will go to Turkey, get trained by a civic organization, and whoever goes there must bring back the knowledge.’”.

Throughout my interviews, several other activists stated that the training workshop influenced or shaped, to varying degrees, their decision to establish a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a civil society organization (CSO) in Syria. It is worth noting that my interviewees used the terms “NGO” and “civil society organization” interchangeably throughout the entire duration of all the interviews I conducted. However, Abdul from Amude, who, along with his comrades from the coordination committee of Amude, formed a civil society center in his hometown, described their motivation to form an NGO as follows:

“In 2012 and 2013, as the members started going more often to Turkey to join workshops and trainings in transitional justice, negotiations, and conflict resolution, they desired to share this knowledge inside Syria. So, we formed the civil society center. At first, it wasn’t clear what we wanted to do, so we only shared the knowledge we gained from the trainings of international organizations. Later, we started expanding to women empowerment and civil peace, which was threatened as ISIS expanded.”

Similar mechanism towards professionalization could be traced repeatedly during the course of my interviews. During the preliminary phase of data collection for this research, Amal, one of the interviewees, emerged as a noteworthy participant. Having pursued a Bachelor in Law studies, she attained her degree during the early stages of the revolution. Originating from a politically inclined family, Amal's personal engagement with activism remained limited until the onset of the protest movement in 2011. Subsequently, she actively participated in numerous demonstrations in Damascus, where she encountered fellow activists and was extended an invitation to partake in one of the training sessions organized by Shafaq.

Reflecting on her involvement, Amal recounted, “From that point onward, I found myself increasingly immersed in various workshops. Initially, the content spanned a broad spectrum of information, compelling my attendance owing to my nascent familiarity with the domain



and a sincere belief in their vision for a prospective Syria.". Over time, her participation evolved into expertise, culminating in her receipt of multiple Training of Trainers (TOT) sessions conducted in both Syria and Lebanon. Eventually assuming herself the role of a trainer, Amal's journey underscores a transition from novice participant to proficient educator within the activist community. Indeed, the journey of Amal and Abdul mirrors the broader trajectory observed within activism, characterized by a transition towards professionalization. Amal's progression from an impassioned participant to a skilled educator reflects not only her personal growth but also highlights the systemic shifts occurring within activist circles. This transition underscores the complex interplay between individual agency and the structural dynamics shaping the landscape of activism, as it navigates the terrain between its grassroots origins and professionalized manifestations.

Montaha, operating within a distinct constellation of activism, contrasts her experiences with those of Amal. However, when queried regarding the influence of international donors and organizations on the content of her training sessions, Montaha provided insight into her pragmatic approach. She articulated, "Over time, I have learned to adapt to the expectations of specific organizations funding my training initiatives". This acknowledgment underscores the nuanced impacts of external funding on 'professional' activists and the dynamics of donor's hegemony, shaping the trajectory of Montaha's -among others- engagements within the realm of funding international organizations.

Basem critiques the trend toward the professionalization of activism, arguing that the transformation of activists after receiving certain trainings into paid employees has mistakenly become an end in itself. He asserts that this shift has led to a decline in the emphasis on spreading revolutionary awareness, which was supposed to be a cornerstone of the work of the revolutionary structures. Instead, these organizations have started to operate more like "Semi-governmental entities". Basem contends that this change, which emerged naturally as activist circles began receiving increased funding, has significantly contributed to the "NGOization of civil society". He expressed his sadness by noting that, due to these transformations, "we increasingly find ourselves more and more dedicating energy and time to discuss employees' salaries in our meetings...we started requiring fund for our equipment, we later started demanding more fund as to bring activists from Syria and train them".

In conclusion, the significance of educational training sessions and workshops in enhancing technical knowledge among individual activists is indisputable. Many have attested to the valuable technical insights gained through such endeavors. Montaha stated that "the first training I received on journalism and media reporting was very effective. It further aided my revolutionary activism and helped us to establish our magazine later". However, their role played a vital role in the promoting the professionalization of activism. The credibility of an individual activist began to be measured by the number of workshops and training sessions they attended.

It is crucial to recognize their dual role in: a) fostering the professionalization of activism which paved the road to the formation of an elite class among activists, and b) facilitating the adoption of tools and tactics of technical change, often conceptualized as essential components of the Western agenda aimed at reframing political issues as technical challenges. This dual function underscores the complex interplay between technical knowledge dissemination and the broader



socio-political context within which activism operates. "However, although the content of these workshops promoted the concept of civil society, as mentioned earlier, it was frequently equated with civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations in general. In discussions with activists, including Tahseen, regarding the emergence of the term 'civil society,' he identified 2014 as the year it became a dominant discourse. He, along with many others, attributed this development to the intervention of international organizations, saying: "In 2014, the concept of civil society began to gain prominence, alongside organizations such as the OCHA<sup>8</sup>". In this statement we see that civil society as discursively promoted within the Syrian activists' circles, does not relate to the complexity of the term as discusses theoretically, but corresponds fully to the emergence of international organizations.

### *NGOization through donors' recipes*

As mentioned above, the workshops and training lectures that activists attended played a major role in promoting the culture of civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations and the shift towards professionalization, capacity building and other forms of "rending technical" which played a huge role in paving the road towards finding technical solution to what emerged as a political question. Although this transition was observed in multiple places worldwide, as discussed in previous chapters, in Syria, it followed a unique trajectory. There, civil society emerged from within a protest movement and has consistently maintained ties to that movement.

The role of international donors in advancing the process of NGOization has been central to numerous academic studies. Islah Mohamed Jad, in his insightful paper "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements," highlighting this very role as he argued: "Through professionalisation and projectisation brought about by donor-funded attempts to promote 'civil society', a process of NGOisation has taken place." (Jad 2007). However, the process of NGOization within the Syrian protest movement has been briefly addressed in the work of various scholars and political figures (Hearn and Dallal 2019; Alhamed 2022). However, it has not yet been the central focus of any specific academic study. However, as previously discussed, the phenomenon when grassroots activists were compelled to meet the increasing humanitarian demands by assuming roles as implementers of humanitarian responses for both governmental and non-governmental international organizations. This shift was further facilitated by training workshops organized as part of international interventions focused on democracy promotion, civil society development, capacity building, and other elements integral to the New Policy Agenda. Additionally, a significant driver of NGOization was the need to align with donor expectations as funding for grassroots initiatives expanded.

Rana Khalaf and her co-authors, in their 2014 review of Syrian civil society groups, briefly addressed the role of donor policies in the NGOization of the organizations they studied. They noted that "Many CSGs change their goals and objectives frequently, usually for donor-driven reasons" (Khalaf et al. 2014). Basem captures the essence of this transition during our interview, stating: "we never imagined that we would one day be applying for funding and writing proposals. In 2011, our primary goal was to gain international support to change the regime. By 2014, our focus had shifted to securing international donors to help develop the

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs



governance of local councils and similar initiatives. Eventually, we found ourselves increasingly requesting more funding, and NGOization became an aim on its own". While Basem critically described the internal transition toward the NGOization of Syrian grassroots movements and how reliance on Western funding accelerated this process, Tahseen approached the issue more pragmatically, reserving his judgment for a later discussion. When addressing the process itself, Tahseen attributed it to the Western obsession with technicality and documentation—traits he observed as often lacking in Syrian society. He remarked that NGOization signaled the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, with the primary catalyst being international intervention. According to Tahseen, "The international community doesn't engage with a group simply because they like or trust it; they require a formal structure to interact with. Multiple factors in our relationship with international donors didn't align with our preferences, but we were compelled to form NGOs".

A similar argument to what Tahseen, Melia and others from my interviewees' sample stated can be found in the scholarly work of Rana Khalaf in her paper "Governing without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict." In this paper, Khalaf refers to a concept she calls "projectization," explaining that: "To receive financial support and to attract foreign technical support, many local social movements have been forced to be registered as NGOs." (Khalaf 2015)

Melia shared a similar perspective based on her experience, having worked for one of the first international organizations to begin operating in Syria, though based in Turkey. This organization was ARK, which is funded by multiple global powers and defense ministries, including those of the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Melia argued, "We started dealing more with the term [civil society] to emphasize that we wanted a civil society, not an Islamic one. It was understood as the opposite of attempts at Islamization. However, it only gained prominence when international organizations began operating in Turkey in 2012, starting with ARK, then Adam Smith, and others."

Hiba, whom I interviewed for her pioneering role in the NGOization process, also highlights the significant influence of international donors in this transformation. Discussing her own project, she emphasizes the critical role played by the German foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in advancing the NGOization process. Hiba explains that after participating in a course in Germany organized by FES, she went on to establish an NGO, where she now serves as the executive director. Reflecting on FES's involvement in the NGO's founding, Hiba remarks "In 2013, we were essentially a project of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. There was a period, let's say an incubation period, during which FES nurtured us. Six months later, we began to develop a tendency toward NGOization". Hiba herself later concluded during the interview that "donors were a determining factor in the process; their funding played a significant role in shaping activism and in converting everything into NGOization". According to Melia, international funders also sought to shape the Syrian protest movement in a particular direction. When asked about the impact of international donors on the trajectory of the Syrian revolution, Melia, drawing from her own experience, acknowledged several positive effects, such as raising general awareness and challenging the rise of Islamism. However, she also noted that "international funders tried to domesticate and NGOize the protest movement."



While Basem, Tahseen, and Media discussed the role of international donors and funders in the NGOization of the Syrian protest movement on a conceptual level, Montaha brought the conversation to specific events and personal experiences from her work with an implementing organization operating in the Damascus countryside and later in Idlib, following the forced displacement from rebel-held areas in 2017. Montaha argued that "while international organizations initially performed well, they eventually began to follow the political agendas of their home countries, generously spending money as long as we adhered to their predetermined paths. For instance, they pushed us to focus on women's empowerment, but their idea of empowerment was limited to teaching women how to make homemade baskets or food preserves, as if these were the only valid forms of empowerment". Montaha's observations touch on several core aspects of this research. Her reflections strongly resonate with the concept of "taking the power out of empowerment" (Batliwala 2007), which will be further explored in the context of the depoliticizing effects of INGOs' interventions. Additionally, Montaha's statement highlights the increasing professionalization of activist work as shaped by the agendas of international donors. This tendency towards specialization within the nascent civil society sector, which emerged from the protest movement, was a theme echoed by many other interviewees.

Ayham, Shafai, Masla, and other interviewees noted a clear trend toward professionalization and specialization throughout the evolution of the Syrian protest movement. Shafai argues, "As we developed more specializations, the range of fields we could cover began to expand". Ayham, who played a significant role in the Local Coordination Committees, observed that this process began there but became more pronounced within the broader Syrian civil society. He remarked that there is no longer a comprehensive organization addressing all issues; instead, there are now specialized organizations focusing on areas such as medical aid, humanitarian relief, or human rights advocacy. While Ayham acknowledged that this specialization led to significant skill development, he also pointed out a downside: "The negative effect is that when we professionalize all societal activism, it ceases to be activism and becomes merely a profession".

Masla also highlighted another way in which international donors played a pivotal role, not only in NGOizing Syrian grassroots activism but also in shaping the process in a particular manner. She argued that international donors stifled grassroots movements as they sought to expand horizontally. To meet the technical requirements imposed by these international organizations, emerging groups in Syria were forced to hire more individuals, assigning each to a specific task. For example, Masla noted that while initially, only one employee was responsible for monitoring and evaluation, her NGO eventually had to hire two, until it reached a point where a specific NGO was established with the sole task of monitoring and evaluation. Masla contended, "This capitalist form of NGOizing is what they imposed on us". Masla's observation aligns closely with the theoretical work of Sangeeta Kamat, who noted that "Donor monitoring and accounting systems require NGOs to implement social and economic projects in an efficient and effective manner" (Kamat 2004).

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