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The Role of Civil Society in Civilian Protection and Conflict Transformation during Armed Conflict:

The Case Study of Idlib (Syria)

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Abstract:

This research examines the link between civilian protection and conflict transformation and what role civil society plays in it. The qualitative research uses the case study of Idlib, Syria, to show how civil society organizations (CSOs) apply traditional and other nonviolent tools to deal with violence and conflicts on a local level. The findings demonstrate a certain lack of awareness of most CSOs of their transformative potential. The thesis proposes an analytical framework that allows to link civilian protection to conflict transformation and elicits alternative approaches for supporting local CSOs in their efforts in protection and building peace.

To my Swiss and Syrian families

“We try to do our best.
There is no direct way to peace.
We do a little bit here and there, from all sides,
maybe this work can help to build peace.”
(interview 12)

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List of Abbreviations

AP	Additional Protocols of 1977
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984
CC	City Council
CCSD	Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CoSO	Conflict society organization
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GBV	Gender-based violence
GC	Geneva Conventions of 1949
GONGO	Government organized non-governmental organization
GPPAC	Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
HRL	Human Rights law
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGO	Inter-governmental organization
IHL	International humanitarian law
INGO	International non-governmental organization
JN	*Jabhat al-Nusra*
LC	Local Council
LCC	Local Coordination Committees
MSF	Medecins sans Frontières
NATO	North-Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NP	Nonviolent Peaceforce
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

OHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PBI	Peace Brigades International
PoC	Protection of civilians
POS	Political opportunity structure
PSS	Psycho-social support
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SCD	Syria Civil Defense
SINA	Syria Integrated Needs Assessment
SJAC	Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
UCP	Unarmed civilian peacekeeping
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States of America
UXO	Unexploded ordnances
VDC	Violation Documentation Centre in Syria

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Introduction

Context

When the Arab Spring started in late 2010 in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and other Arab countries, no one imagined that five years later Syria would be considered "the largest humanitarian emergency crisis in the world today" (UN, 2015). This unexpected eruption of violence, destruction and suffering gives a hint on the complexities of the Syrian crisis.

Access, security and destruction of infrastructure are the key problems for the humanitarian response. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies have only limited possibilities to work inside Syria. They can only directly work in government controlled areas from Damascus with the approval of the regime. In areas outside of government control, INGOs depend on local partners to work cross-border from Turkey and Jordan. Due to the lack of international presence, the 'local response', carried out by local and diaspora actors, becomes particularly important (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015: 1). The term 'local actor' or 'local response' includes a diversity of approaches and groups; from spontaneous individual initiatives to formalized organizations with international links, from initiatives on the level of neighborhoods to transnational networks.

The space of action for these actors depends greatly on the political environment. Civil society in areas controlled by Daesh[1] has almost no space for action and faces vital risks conducting its work. In regime controlled areas civil society remains vastly controlled by the government. In other rebel-controlled areas, civil society is taking over state functions and has more possibilities to negotiate its space.

Due to the increasing number of Syrians fleeing the conflict to neighboring countries, new restrictions have been established and border crossings have been closed. Many Syrians

[1] Arabic acronym for the „Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant"

do not have the economic backing to live in neighboring countries that are much more expensive than Syria and where job opportunities are scarce. Therefore, many Syrians remain in Syria. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there have been at least 6.6 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) inside Syria in 2015 (IDMC, 2015).

The civilians in Syria are caught in the crossfire of the army, United States (US)-led coalition, Russian forces, Daesh and other rebel groups. As the international community is failing to assume its mandate to protect civilians, local actors are left alone to find ways to protect themselves.

Already in the Syria Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA) of 2013 the lack of knowledge about community-based protection strategies was acknowledged (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015: 17) but the response remained limited in this area, except for studies on the local actors and perceptions on the ground (Swisspeace et al., 2016, SJAC, 2015) and a recent report on survival strategies in Syria by the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (Centre for Civilians in Conflict, 2016). However, protection needs remain far beyond the reachable inside Syria (OCHA, 2015:16).

The conflict in Syria has been named a ‘civil war’, a ‘proxy war’ or a ‘revolution’, depending on political considerations. In this thesis, I talk about the Syrian crisis as an ‘armed conflict’. Some definitions of armed conflict, such as the one proposed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), base the definition on the number of battle-related deaths (UCDP, 2014). Others, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) avoid specific numbers, but talk about “a minimum level of intensity” (ICRC, 2008). Apart from the intensity of the conflict, the involvement of at least one state actor is necessary (UCDP, 2014 and ICRC, 2008). If no state actor is involved, it is not an armed conflict in which international humanitarian law is applied. Moreover, non-state actor involved in armed conflict also need to “show a minimum of organization” (ICRC, 2008) in order to be considered an armed conflict.

In the Syrian case, all of the above mentioned elements are present: an important number of battle related deaths, high level of intensity, implication of state actors and organized non-state armed groups. Therefore, the Syrian conflict is an armed conflict with international and non-international components.

Conflicts have different stages and phases. The simplest model, as mentioned in Paffenholz and Spurk (2006: 15), divides conflicts in three phases: prior to the outbreak of violence, armed conflict, and post-violence. Conflicts often do not evolve linearly along these phases, but circularly. For the Syrian case, there has not yet been a significant period of cessation of hostility to be considered a period post-violence. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the violent phase of the armed conflict, with some considerations of the situation prior to the violent outbreak.

Research Problem and Justification

Even though the academic literature begun to integrate the crucial role of civil society in peacebuilding and conflict transformation[2], theoretical ideas remain rarely implemented on the ground. The discourses on participation and accountability often fail to be translated into practice. Therefore, the potential of civil society's role in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, but also protection of civilians, remains untapped (Swisspeace et al., 2016: 3). The majority of academic writings focus on the role of international and third party interventions when discussing the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. These actors, however, often fail to take into account local specificities and knowledge, and hence, can create reverse effects on the safety of local communities. At the same time, there are many international organizations that do not work in protection claiming that it is incompatible with

[2] Fischer (2006) Civil Society in Conflict Transformation: Strengths and Limitations; Paffenholz and Spurk (2006) Civil Society, Civic Engagement, and Peacebuilding; Ropers (2002) Civil-society peace constituencies. NGO involvement in conflict resolution – areas of activity and lessons learned.

humanitarian principles such as neutrality, even though protection is the most crucial need for civilians during armed conflicts (Mahony, 2013: 4).

Without ignoring important contributions of INGOs and UN agencies, and without perceiving civil society as *per se* peaceful, this research addresses the problem of the invisibility of local civil society organizations (CSOs) in conflict transformation as well as in protection of civilians. This invisibility leaves local contributions and knowledges unexplored and fails to provide local peace initiatives with capabilities to participate in multi-level conflict transformation. By analyzing and understanding local dynamics that lead from protection efforts to conflict transformation dynamics, new strategies to promote community-based peace initiatives can be developed.

Taking into account these problems of invisibility, I propose the following research question:

In the context of armed conflict, in what ways does local civil society engage in civilian protection and how do these protection efforts contribute to conflict transformation?

Goal and Objectives

As mentioned above, the overarching goal of this thesis is to understand local civilian protection efforts that lead to conflict transformation dynamics in order to acknowledge local agency and contributions to peace.

The thesis intents to achieve the following objectives:

1. To reveal conceptions of Civil Society, Protection and Peace in order to link cultural aspects and subjective experiences to the wider academic debates;
2. To map key actors in Idlib's civil society and determine the space for civil society actors;

3. To investigate CSOs efforts to protect civilians from direct, structural and cultural violence as well as civil society's role in local dynamics of dealing with conflicts;
4. To analyze protective actions in respect to conflict transformation, and hence, reveal characteristics of initiatives that contribute to peaceful transformation of conflicts; and
5. To explore the factors supporting and challenging conflict transformation in the specific context of the case study.

Literature Review

Inspired by Francisco Muñoz's (2006) concept of *imperfect peace* and Vincent Martínez-Guzmán's (2005) reflections on making peace(s), I went on a search for these manifestations of peace in the context of an armed conflict. The main argument of Muñoz and Martínez-Guzmán relevant to the present thesis is that people are capable of inflicting violence on others but also of living together peacefully, and that humanity has a rich experience of peacefully dealing with conflicts on a daily basis.

As this thesis is using a case study in the context of an armed conflict, the question how this conflict can be transformed becomes crucial. This research is grounded on the work of Kumar Rupesinghe, Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach and their writings on conflict transformation. The authors stress the role of the affected communities in transforming the conflict sustainably, without neglecting the important role outside actors can play.

In order to link the role of civil society to conflict transformation, this thesis applies the findings of peace scholars such as Martina Fischer, Hugh Miall and Thania Paffenholz who conducted many studies on the link between civil society and peace. Moreover, the writings of Marchetti Raffaele and Tocci Nathalie on the specificities of civil society in the context of

armed conflict are highly relevant for this thesis and provide a framework to analyze the impact of CSOs on the conflict.

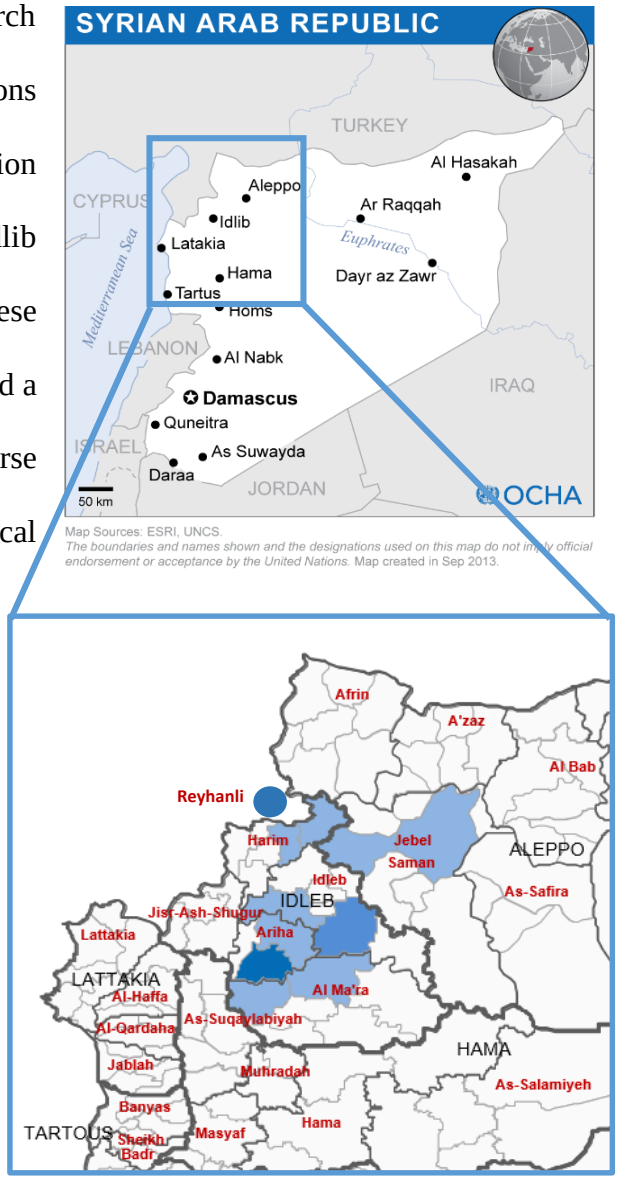
Nonviolence is closely linked to conflict transformation, therefore, nonviolent tools are analyzed and assessed in this research. I base my writings on the contributions of Peter Ackerman and Gene Sharp, as well as the later writings of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan on why nonviolence works. In this thesis, their theories are applied in a violent setting to analyze how civil society can use nonviolent tools to engage with non-state armed actors, and bring in some new insights.

Linking conflict transformation to protection, this thesis can draw upon important contributions to the Protection of Civilians and civilian protection literature based on authors such as Andrew Bonwick, Casey A. Barrs, Robert Schütte, Victoria Metcalfe and Christine Schweizer. Self-protection of civilians has received a lot of attention in academia, however, the link to local civil society remains missing. Often, only the role of outside actors or the role of individuals are assessed. Therefore, this thesis aims to bring in the role of local civil society in civilian protection and linking these efforts to conflict transformation on the local level.

Last but not least, there is a growing literature on Syria and the Syrian civil society. Some important contributions have been made by Raymond Hinnebusch, Rana Khalaf, Charney Craig and Eva Svoboda.

Methodology

Figure 1: Map of Syria and Basis of CSOs in Idlib and Aleppo



Source: own elaboration with OCHA template

This thesis is based on qualitative research in order to investigate in-depth social perceptions and realities of civil society, civilian protection and conflict transformation in the case of Idlib governorate in Northern Syria. In order for these social perceptions and realities to be considered a phenomenological approach and discourse analysis is applied: the phenomenological approach, because it allows revealing subjective perceptions, but also because of the lack of information and literature on this specific topic. Discourse analysis on the other hand, is used to analyze secondary sources of information such as reports, news articles and similar case studies, but also to analyze primary sources in the context of a highly politicized conflict. The study applies a diachronic framework related to the changing dynamics of the conflict since 2011 until early August 2016, because the changing dynamics of the conflict, including levels of violence and displacement, have an important effect on protection strategies and perceptions.

The case study of the governorate of Idlib and related areas in Aleppo and Turkey is chosen due to the importance and relative space of civil society in this area as well as the diversity in level of violence, destruction and displacement that allows drawing comparative conclusions.

Figure 1 above shows the base of the 20 CSOs studied in this thesis on the map of Idlib, the darker colors signify that more than 2 CSOs are based in these areas. This research is based on field work conducted in Reyhanli, Turkey, a border town hosting many Syrians from the area under study.

As this is my fifth field visit to the town of Reyhanli and I know many people from Idlib residing in the town, it allows me to collect qualitative data through participant observation. "Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities" (Kawulich, 2005: paragraph 2). Participatory observation involves "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience" (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002, p.vii as cited in Kawulich, 2005: paragraph 2).

In order to gather background information and a clearer understanding of the actual situation in Idlib, face-to-face informal interviews and conversations are conducted with Syrians in Turkey or through mobile messaging tools with people in Syria. These informal interviews intend to identify main security concerns, living conditions and reasons behind the decision to leave Syria or for internal displacement. Moreover, I use informal interviews to establish facts and events that took place in rural areas to complement news reports[3]. My field visit in Reyhanli took place from late March to early August 2016.

A second method to collect data is through semi-structured interviews with 20 key actors representing civil society and other stakeholders, such as human rights and media activists, women's groups, humanitarian organizations, religious and community leaders, local councils, youth groups and other civil society actors. If possible, the interviews are conducted face-to-face in Turkey, as some actors are frequently crossing the border. If not in person, interviews are conducted via internet calls. The interviews were conducted between April and May 2016.

[3] Field notes are not published to guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the interlocutors. Field notes might be requested from the author under certain conditions.

The guide of the interview includes general questions about the civil society group and their work, particularly in the field of protection, questions about the economic, political and social conditions in Idlib, and questions about personal perceptions of protection and peace[4]. The length of the interviews ranged from half an hour to more than two hours, with an average of around 52 minutes.

Out of the 20 interviews, only two were conducted in English, and four interviews were conducted without translation in Arabic. All the others were conducted with the help of translators in order to avoid misunderstandings. Moreover, respondents felt more comfortable speaking in Arabic, even if they knew English well. Despite the difficult situation, most interviews have been recorded. Only 2 out of 20 interviews were not recorded. The language and translation complications made it very difficult to transcribe the interviews, therefore, interviews have been summarized in English and copies of the recorded interviews are kept.

Moreover, the link between my humanitarian work and my research was highly appreciated and valued. Thanks to my humanitarian work during the past two years in Turkey and Idlib, I enjoy a certain network of CSOs and good personal contacts, which were used as a starting point to find CSOs to participate in this research. However, the more contacts lay between the interviewees and me, the less probable it was that the interview would actually take place. This shows the importance of trust and personal connections.

Case Study

This thesis uses the case study of the civil society in the governorate of Idlib in Northern Syria. Idlib is a very rural area and suffered from neglect after the Islamist Uprising in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The governorate is densely populated, however, without any important city. The governorate of Idlib is mainly populated by Sunni-Arabs and some minorities such as

[4] For details see Appendix 2 'Interview Guide'

Shia, Christians, Druze and few Alawites. By now, most minorities have left the region, except for some Druze and Shia villages that either were spared from the armed conflict or besieged, and new minorities seek refuge in Idlib such as Kurds and Turkmen.

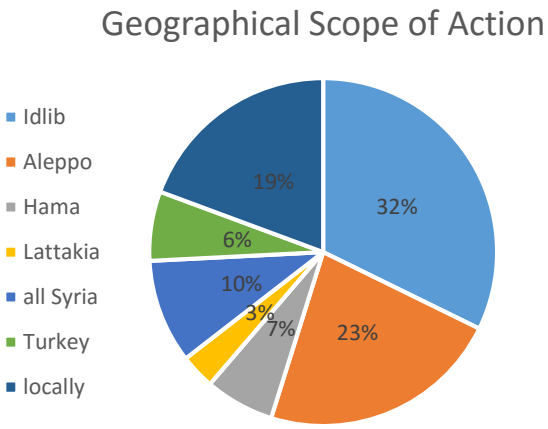
Due to the mountainous geography and the relative safety, Idlib received, after Aleppo governorate and rural Damascus, the most Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) since the beginning of the conflict. This is mostly due to the relative safety as there are no active frontlines anymore since April 2015. Moreover, humanitarian access in Idlib is relatively good as one of the few functioning border crossings for humanitarian assistance is situated only few kilometers from Reyhanli in Turkey. Hence, many IDPs seek shelter in camps close to the Turkish border in Harim district. But also the mountainous region of Ariha hosts IDPs from Hama, Homs, Aleppo and Lattakia. During the research, it became clear that former governorate boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid. Particularly IDP movements change the reality on the ground. Hence, this research also includes CSOs from the neighboring governorate of Aleppo.

The economy of Idlib governorate is mainly depending on agriculture and the food industry. However, due to economic difficulties and mismanagement of natural resources, poverty has been rising before the conflict and livelihood opportunities for the youth were scarce. Therefore, many families sent their children to university, which was government sponsored. These circumstances led to an increasingly well-educated rural youth in Idlib that tried their luck in entrepreneurship. This might be one of the reasons why so many CSOs emerged in Idlib during the conflict. In March 2016, there were 58 CSOs based in Idlib registered at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (OCHA, 2016). Aleppo governorate whose population is more than double of Idlib governorate has only two CSOs more registered at OCHA, namely 60.

Another reason explaining the high number of CSOs in Idlib governorate is the fact, that the whole governorate, except for two enclaves[5], is outside government control, and hence, civil society has more space and took over state functions. However, this study shows that most CSOs have been active since 2011 or 2013. The complete expulsion of government forces out of Idlib in 2015 did not have an important impact on the establishment of CSOs. This can be explained either by the fact that extremist groups took over control of many parts of Idlib and imposed new restrictions, or because rural populations are more active in civil society than the residents of Idlib city, which remained under government control until March 2015.

The geographical reach of the organizations is much wider than the base of the CSOs. Most CSOs are not only locally active, but expanded their work to other governorates or even cover all Syria (Figure 2). Only 19% of the CSOs have an exclusively local scope, meaning the village level. All other CSOs reach the whole governorate, extent to neighboring governorates, or reach all Syria or even Turkey.

Figure 2: Geographical Scope of CSOs



Source: own elaboration

CSOs participating in this research are chosen based on their characteristics, such as size, geographical scope, in order to ensure diversity and be able to draw conclusions. Apart from specific characteristics, personal links between the interviewees and the researcher are important in order to ensure trust and security for everyone: the researcher, the translators and the interviewees.

[5] Fu'ah and Kafraya are two villages which have been besieged by rebels since March 2015.

The following part explains how and why different CSOs have been asked to participate in this research. Interviews were conducted with 3 protection CSOs, 3 youth groups, 2 women's groups, 2 humanitarian CSOs, 2 professional associations, 2 media activists, 1 human rights institute, 1 research center, 1 religious leader, 2 community leaders and 2 local councils.

The members of the protection CSO interviewed for this research worked with a small rural team and with a governorate-wide group based in an urban setting. Unfortunately, it was impossible to conduct the interviews with other centers due to internet and security problems, as well as the deterioration of the security situations in Idlib and Aleppo in Summer 2016.

Three different youth groups have been interviewed for this research. One focusing on sports, one on community organization and co-existence, and one on filmmaking as art. These groups represent the very diverse youth culture of Idlib, and Syria in general. Despite the general image of militarized and violent young Arabs, most young men and women in Syria participate nonviolently in the social and cultural work for the society.

Two humanitarian organizations have been interviewed for this thesis; a big one with more than 800 employees and a small one with 20 volunteers, in order to recognize differences in their impact or approach due to their relative size. Both work in Idlib and its countryside. However, only the big one works in partnership with INGOs, whereas the small one depends mostly on local resources. This might enable some conclusion on the influence of INGOs on local CSOs.

For this research, two women's groups have been interviewed. One is a relatively big one with several centers in two governorates, the other one is relatively small and locally rooted, in order to assess their impact on the very local and broader level. The bigger group provides trainings, counselling, kindergartens and medical services. The smaller group focuses on capacity building, conflict resolution, and education. Both groups are internationally networked and face problems from armed groups.

As representatives of professional associations, interviews were conducted with a group of medical staff (psychologist, general physician and a nurse) that conducts training for first aid and emergency nursing and a second professional association working in demining. The founder of the demining group worked in demining before 2011 and now applies his experience and knowledge to raise awareness and help to safely remove landmines and unexploded ordnances (UXO). These two groups have been classified as professional associations because they base their work on their academic and professional background. Unfortunately, I did not have access to lawyers' and teachers' associations as representatives of professional associations.

The two media activists participating in this study, were both not experienced in media work when they first started reporting. Both also admit that they do this work because they could not find other work in Syria. They made reports for international media and now one is working for a UK based news agency, whereas the other works for an armed group. I was trying to contact a famous radio station in Idlib countryside, however, at this time the station experienced a lot of pressure from armed groups and in June 2016 the station was forced to close. Around the same time, another famous media activist I tried to get in touch with got severely injured in a suspected assassination attempt in which his friend and cameraman lost his life.

It was particularly difficult to find grassroots human rights groups, still based in Syria, particularly in Idlib. Hence, I conducted an interview with a human rights institute based in Turkey. The institute was funded in 2011 in response to the imprisonment of several lawyers in Aleppo.

In situation of armed conflict, information becomes highly politicized and a tool for propaganda on all sides. Thus, research institutes gathering information have an important but difficult job. By chance I found a research institute with a low profile in order to avoid problems. They gather and prepare data on Syria for international actors.

For this study, I met with two community leaders at the same time. One chose a political path, the other a humanitarian one. However, this study does not aim to understand the local power structures and local governance in detail, but to analyze civil society's role in protection. The interview with the community leaders shed some light on humanitarian negotiation and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Also the interview with a religious leader, the imam of a village in rural Idlib, sheds some light on the role of religious figures in humanitarian assistance and mediation, without being representative. The interview with the imam was only possible through direct personal contacts, because many religious leaders are afraid of being used as political tools, hence, trust is very important for both sides.

This study includes two interviews with local councils (LCs), one on the village level, the other on the governorate level. In Idlib there are currently 136 LCs. Local councils are important bodies for international actors to engage with, as they are the only civilian representations, apart from CSOs.

Limitations

Main limitations and problems of this research are: *accessibility* as the case study is inside Syria and interlocutors can only be contacted by internet or phone; *security* for the participants, translators and the researcher, therefore, strict confidentiality and anonymity is applied to gather and analyze the data in order to guarantee the security and privacy of the respondents; *language* can be a major challenge, however, my intermediate knowledge of Arabic together with my previous collaboration with local translators limit the bias resulting from erroneous interpretations. Another important limiting factor is *time*. Due to the emergency situation it was difficult to contact many of the CSOs, and hence, it took two months to conduct 20 interviews because internet connection cuts, electricity cuts, air strikes and other emergencies. Apart from this, the instability in Turkey and the constant feeling of emergency

in the humanitarian response to Syria, make it difficult to plan and work efficiently on the research.

Structure

The thesis is structured in four chapters. Chapter One provides a theoretical framework and clarifies the concepts employed, using an interpretative approach in order to link subjective perceptions to the philosophical discourse. Chapter Two discusses in depth the civil society in Idlib by mapping the key actors and their efforts in protection and conflict transformation. This leads to Chapter Three, in which the main threats and conflicts as well as the main mechanisms to deal with them are discussed. In Chapter Four, the data collected is applied to the theories outlined in order to answer the research question and discuss the results relative to conflict transformation, nonviolence and peace theory.

Chapter One – Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization

“To save one life is like saving all of humanity”

(free after Qur’an 5:32)

Chapter One presents an overview over the relevant fields of Peace Studies and the main concepts for this thesis. In the first part, the chapter introduces the main understandings of peace, namely *Positive and Negative Peace*, *Cultures of Peace*, and *Imperfect Peace*. These considerations lay the groundwork for the rest of the thesis. The second part of the chapter discusses in detail the concept of conflict transformation, based on the writings of Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach, two important theorists in the field. Section two and three present and discuss the two other main concepts, civil society and civilian protection, in order to provide a theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing local dynamics between civil society, protection and peace.

1.1 Peace Studies: From One Peace to Many Peaces

Peace Studies as an academic field emerged in the 1950's and 1960's in Europe, after the enormous destruction and violence of the Second World War. Early founders of peace research, such as Johan Galtung[6], Kumar Rupesinghe[7] and Elise and Kenneth Boulding[8], were alarmed by the focus on studying war and violence and the absence of *peace* in scientific research. During the Cold War, a period neither in war nor in peace, reflections on the meaning of peace deepened and concepts such as 'positive peace', 'Cultures of Peace' and 'conflict transformation' emerged[9]. After the Cold War the concept of conflict transformation experienced a boom because many scholars realized that with the end of the Cold War conflicts did not disappear, on the contrary, conflicts transformed and continued to inflict suffering on many people all over the world. Peace Studies also became increasingly aware of the cultural

[6] Johan Galtung (1975) *Essays in Peace Research*. 6 Volumes. Copenhagen: Ejlers; Johan Galtung (1969) "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3): 167-191; Johan Galtung (1996) *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. London: Sage.
[7] Rupesinghe, K., & Anderlini, S. N. (1998). *Civil wars, civil peace: An Introduction to Conflict Resolution*, London, Pluto Press; Rupesinghe, K. (1995) *Conflict Transformation*. London: St. Martin's Press
[8] Boulding, Elise (2000) *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press; Boulding, Kenneth (1978) *Stable Peace*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
[9] These concepts will be defined later in the thesis

differences and different ways one could understand peace as in the concepts of *imperfect peace* and *Making Peaces*[10].

In the 21st century, Peace Studies is now recognized as an academic field and self-standing discipline. However, Peace Studies differs from other academic disciplines significantly in part because it acknowledges and embraces biases and is based on the values of *peace*. Peace studies does not only study the subject, but takes a normative stand in favor of peace (Barash, 2000: 3).

But what is peace? Peace scholars increasingly abandoned the idea of peace as a final state (*Endzustand*), instead, peace is seen as a continuous process of dealing with conflicts peacefully. This perception, together with the acknowledgement of conflict as part of human relationships, leads to the vision of peace as a normative guidance and, at the same time, as a potential within all human beings.

This section gives an overview of the most important evolutions and concepts in Peace Studies and which are relevant to this thesis. One of the most important contributions introduced by Johan Galtung is the concept of *Positive and Negative Peace*. Elise Boulding developed Galtung's ideas further with her notion of *Cultures of Peace*, which has been acknowledged and integrated in the UN system. The most recent notion relevant for this thesis is Francisco A. Muñoz's *imperfect peace* providing an alternative to the 'utopic' idea of positive peace that sometimes has been understood as 'perfect peace'.

1.1.1 Negative and Positive Peace

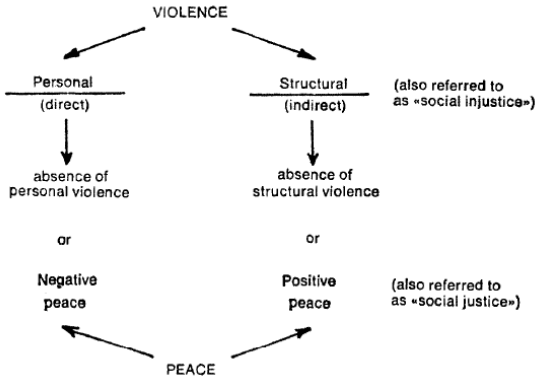
The extensive study of violence and war led to a significant invisibility of peace throughout history. Peace research looks at history of humanity from a different angle, finding examples of peaceful and mutual co-existence. However, as Peace Studies is a relatively new

[10] In the Spanish original: *hacer las paces*, Vincent Martinez-Guzman, in plural to highlight the multitude and diversity of experiencing peace

discipline, the predominant conception of peace as the absence of war (negative peace) is still widespread in Western culture. Galtung, through his reflections on violence, advanced the concept of negative (absence of direct violence) and positive peace (presence of social justice) discussed in this sub-section.

In his attempt to define peace, Galtung starts from the statement that peace is the absence of violence (1969: 167). Hence, in order to define peace, violence needs to be defined first. He argues that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 1969: 168) and only if the actual is avoidable and if there is a possibility to reach the potential. This idea is close to the capabilities approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen[11]. In this thesis, I do not thoroughly discuss this approach, nonetheless, I think it is an important and interesting way to analyze peace and see a new perspective. The capabilities approach brings forward the idea that people should have the capabilities to choose their preferred functioning. Linked to Galtung's quotation above, people should be empowered and given the capabilities to reach the potential of their own choosing.

Figure 3: Concepts of Violence and Peace according to Galtung



Source: Galtung, 1969: 183

Galtung thoroughly analyzes different types of violence and identifies personal (direct) and structural (indirect), and in his later writings cultural, violence. The distinction between direct and indirect violence led to the distinction between negative and positive peace (Galtung,

[11] As the capabilities approach is closely linked to the concept of justice and development, it is increasingly used in Peace Studies. E.g. Randall Amster et al. (eds.) (2015) *Peace Studies between Tradition and Innovation*, Chapter 8; Martha C. Nussbaum (1997) "Capabilities and Human Rights", *Fordham Law Review* 66(2): 273-300.

1969: 183). He defines negative peace as the absence of direct violence, and positive peace as the absence of indirect violence that signifies at the same time the presence of social justice.

This distinction between negative and positive peace represents a milestone in peace research. It had many important implications on the approach to conflict resolution, such as the need to address underlying causes, the need to link peace to development, and the need to look for more complex solutions than ceasefires or merely signing a treaty without transforming the root causes. This thesis includes a section on the Syrian's perception of peace and looks at their views in accordance with Galtung's notion of negative and positive peace (see section 3.1.). However, there are other concepts that might fit better to people's actual understanding of peace such as Cultures of Peace or *imperfect peace* discussed in the following sub-sections.

1.1.2 Cultures of Peace

Building on Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace, as the absence of direct and structural violence, 'Cultures of Peace' reflects the absence of direct, structural *and* cultural violence. The concept emerged during the Cold War, but experienced greater acclaim in 2000 when the UN proclaimed the period 2000-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence. In this sub-section, Elise Boulding's work on Cultures of Peace is discussed. In addition, this sub-section looks at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) approach including its opportunities and limitations.

Elise Boulding defines a peace culture as "a culture that promotes peaceable diversity" (Boulding, 2000: 1). According to her philosophy, peaceableness stands for an active and evolving concept to reshape perceptions and behaviors in order to increase the well-being for all (Ibid.). Like many other peace scholars, Boulding understands peace as an active process; yet, she takes peace a step further and stresses the importance of including the environment. Diversity is the other main element of Boulding's Cultures of Peace. She argues that cultural

diversity is as important as bio-diversity for the survival of the planet (Boulding, 2000: 5) and that the capability to deal with differences determines how peaceful a society is (Ibid.: 2).

The UNESCO was founded to encourage understanding and cooperation among people and nations. Hence, the concept of Cultures of Peace had been embraced by UNESCO and included in many action plans, programs and resolutions of the UN. The adoption of several UN resolutions and strategies based on the Cultures of Peace represents an enormous step in the direction of a more peaceful world order. Nonetheless, it also bears some dangers as the UN is a highly politicized entity. The everlasting question brought up by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci[12] appears: is the UN system an integrated part of the hegemonic system or can the UN function as a counter-hegemonic power to challenge the system? By integrating Cultures of Peace into the UN, will the concept be used for the purposes of the hegemonic war system, or can it change the system towards a peace culture? Without going deeper into this reflection, I argue that both is possible and happens at the same time. On the one hand, the concept had been used for other interests, but on the other hand, the Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence also allocated new funding possibilities and mainstreamed the idea of peace culture and particularly peace education.

Cultures of Peace introduced three important elements to Peace Studies: the importance of the environment, cultural diversity and the relation between the local and the global. The next sub-section focuses mainly on further reflections on the element of diversity and localness by introducing the notion of *imperfect peace*.

[12] For details about Antonio Gramsci's understanding of cultural hegemony and the role of intellectuals, see Sean P Hier (ed.) (2005) *Contemporary Sociological Thought: Themes and Theories*, Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press: Chapter 4.

1.1.3 Imperfect Peace

"Peace is only real when it is imperfect, unfinished and plural" (Dietrich, 2011: 8)

Particularly in the context of an ongoing armed conflict, it is easy to perceive peace in its negative sense and to decry positive peace as a utopia. Interestingly, during a workshop on communication for peace with Syrians, the understanding of peace was much more differentiated than expected[13]. Citing verses from the Quran, the participants were able to convey an understanding of peace that was very close to the idea of positive peace. But at the same time, this meaning of peace was not satisfactory for them, because it is too far away from their lived reality. When they were introduced to the concept of '*imperfect peace'*, many could find a certain sense and satisfaction in the concept.

I base my research and my personal interpretation of conflict transformation on the concept of *imperfect peace*. One reason for this choice is that the concept proves to be particularly relevant in armed conflicts. Another reason is that it stresses the relevance of the many different ways to experience peace.

Francisco A Muñoz highlights the various experiences of peace that human beings make during their lives through the peaceful settlement of daily conflicts. Therefore, he emphasizes, humanity has a rich knowledge concerning peace and each human being and each culture contributes to it (Muñoz, 2006: 12). This consideration leads to the definition of *imperfect peace* as "more than just the sum of all these peaces: it is a practical and theoretical tool that enables us to recognize them, promote them and interrelate them." (Munõz, 2006: 13).

It can be argued that the imperfect character of peace, firstly, renders peace more realistic and closer to human experiences, secondly, recognizes diverse practices and approaches towards peace, and thirdly, helps to prepare for conflictive futures (Ibid.: 14).

[13] Workshop facilitated by a group of students from UJI on photography, filmmaking and communication for peace with Syrians in Turkey in Summer 2015.

The main argument of this thesis is based on the concept of *imperfect peace*, by making local peace initiatives visible and acknowledging the experience of peace and conflict of people directly affected by it. Based on these arguments, conflict transformation offers a framework to identify *imperfect peaces*, connect them and help them transform the conflicts within the local communities and beyond.

1.2 Debates on Conflict Transformation

This section discusses the concept of conflict transformation in Peace Studies focusing on the contributions of Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach as the main authors for this thesis.

The language used is already a controversy and challenge in itself. Many times in Peace Studies special attention is paid to terminology and vocabulary, particularly in the case of *conflict transformation*. The term 'conflict transformation' highlights the importance of *conflict* as a normal part of human relationships and as a motor of change (Lederach, 2003: 4). *Transformation*, in the spirit of Peace Studies, implies the quest for a constructive and nonviolent change to complex problems (Ibid.). Johan Galtung proposes to transform behaviors, attitudes and contradictions in order to effectively transform the conflict (Galtung, 1990).

Conflict transformation is less a theory than a framework suggesting "a set of lenses through which we view social conflict" (Lederach, 2003: 9). This framework takes into account *levels* of conflict and social change, *issues* in a conflict, the *actors* to a conflict and the *spheres and spaces* for conflict transformation. This section outlines the debates around these dimensions of conflict transformation and discusses some *challenges and limitations* of the approach.

1.2.1. Levels of Conflict Transformation

Usually levels of conflict are divided into personal, interpersonal, inter-group and international levels. However, Adam Curle (Woodhouse, 2010: 3) and later John Paul Lederach (2003: 27) focus on the importance of human relationships and propose a division into *personal*, *relational*, *structural* and *cultural* levels of conflict transformation. This relationship-based approach focuses on the connections and relationships instead of identities. This seems more appropriate for the present thesis because all four levels can be applied on the local dimension of the conflict and it pays close attention to the human relationships on which this research focuses.

The categorization analyzes the relationship with oneself (personal), between individuals (relational), between groups or societies, but organized by and identifiable source of organization (structural), and within and between societies without clearly identifiable source (cultural). The following discussion of the four levels is based on Lederach's dialectic approach of descriptive and prescriptive conflict transformation (2003: 27).

On the *personal* level of conflict transformation, the goal is to minimize destructive effects on the person and to maximize opportunities for physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth. This can be achieved through educational, recreational and artistic activities in spaces that are safe from physical destruction and violence. Activities and trainings can be intended for children, youth, women, specific professionals and any other group of the community. Due to the widespread violence in Syria, particularly psycho-social support activities are increasing rapidly and are very important in helping individuals and communities to deal with the traumas experienced during the conflict. However, children, women and injured persons seem to be the main beneficiaries, often neglecting men and ex-fighters.

On the *relational* level, hopes and fears related to interdependence in the relationship shall be addressed by improving communicative skills and mutual understanding. Transformations on the relational level are important and can take place on the level of

neighborhoods, villages, between different regions and nation/international wide. Dialogue should include all opinions concerning the conflict and bring communities together to discuss and understand each other's viewpoints. According to a recent study on the local actors for peace inside Syria, community leaders play an important role in mediating between actors to the conflict, whereas youth groups and women groups are particularly important in fostering dialogue and social cohesion on the grassroots level (Swisspeace et al. 2016: 19).

On the *structural* level, the goal is to understand underlying causes of the conflict, to address them in a nonviolent way and also to create structures that increase the capabilities of all people to be part of the community and decision-making. The structural level is very important in order to actually transform the conflict and its deep-rooted causes. However, in the context of immediate violence, it may be difficult to concentrate on the less visible underlying causes. However, this study shows that even in an ongoing conflict, civil society actors are engaging particularly in structural transformation. There are initiatives introducing democratic governance structures to some areas or innovative development projects that contribute to structural transformations.

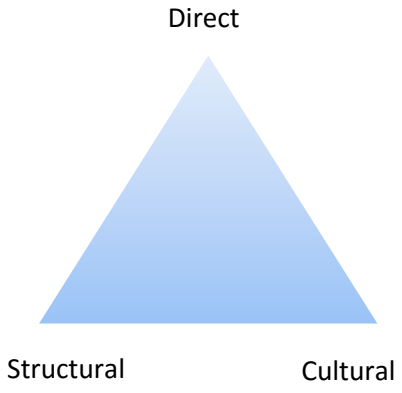
On the *cultural* level of conflict transformation, the main aim is to identify and understand the cultural patterns that legitimate and perpetuate violence and to build upon existing mechanisms to respond to conflicts in a constructive and nonviolent way. The cultural level is the most complex one, as it is influenced by society, religion, international norms, and many more factors. The role of women in Syria illustrates well the complexity and controversy of cultural patterns and changes. Even though in most parts of Syria the space for women to act shrunk, more women are politically active since the Syrian uprising in 2011, but at the same time, many young women are forced to get married early and assume traditional roles due to the absence of other opportunities (Swisspeace et al., 2016: 8-9). The conflict made women more visible, the reactions to this gained visibility, however, are very different. As this example illustrates cultural dynamics can change in many directions.

1.2.2. Issues in Conflict Transformation

Every conflict has specific issues which are in constant transformation during the course of the conflict. In this part, a theoretical framework shall be presented to help categorizing and analyzing the issues in a given conflict. The framework is based on the three lenses – immediate, underlying patterns and framework - proposed by Lederach (2003: 11) and on the three types of violence - direct, structural, and cultural - developed by Galtung (1996: 2-3).

Each of the three lenses proposed by Lederach enable to bring one layer (or issue) of the conflict into focus, but none of the lenses are sufficient in itself to see the whole picture (2003: 11). The first lens allows to clearly see the *immediate events* of the conflict. The second lens permits to look beyond the immediate and recognizes *underlying patterns*. The third lens helps to keep the different layers together and provides a *framework* to envision platforms addressing the context, content and structure of relationships. The interplay of the three lenses allows to go beyond the dilemma between long and short term perspectives by providing a *both/and* approach to the problem (Lederach, 1995: 203). In the context of ongoing violent conflicts, long and short term thinking sometimes seem incompatible; however, by acknowledging the interdependency and importance of all three lenses the dilemma can be transcended.

Figure 4: Galtung's Triangle of Violence



Source: own elaboration adapted from Galtung, 1969 and 1996

All issues relevant to conflict transformation can be summarized by Galtung's three types of violence: direct, structural and cultural violence (Figure 4). A violent conflict, by its broad definition, inflicts suffering on human beings and the environment. Hence, conflict transformation aims to alter the dynamics of the conflict from destructive to constructive impacts by minimizing or even eliminating completely all forms of violence and building spaces and relationships to deal with conflicts in

a peaceful way. The three types of violence are closely linked to each other. *Direct violence* is often the most visible. It is characterized by an actor who intends the consequences of violence which can take a physical or psychological form (Galtung, 1996: 2 and Galtung, 1969). In Syria, direct violence is the most visible as the armed struggle is still ongoing. Some examples of direct violence are bombardments, shootings, insults and beating. *Structural violence* inflicts suffering on people without a clearly identifiable source of violence. The suffering can come from a system or a structure and also take a physical, verbal or emotional form. Common manifestations of structural violence are repression and exploitation (Galtung, 1996). Before the 2011-uprising in Syria, many people suffered from political repression, exclusion and marginalization, all of which are forms of structural violence. *Cultural violence* legitimates the other forms of violence by perpetuating moral and ideological standards (Galtung, 1996). The most common forms of cultural violence are directed against women and minorities, often by silencing their voices. In the context of armed conflict, militarization is another important form of cultural violence, making aggression and violence the only acceptable life-style.

1.2.3 Actors in Conflict Transformation

After having discussed the levels and issues of conflict transformation, this part addresses the question of the actors that should be involved. The answer is simple and complex at the same time. Galtung answers the question with: "in principle anybody" (Galtung, 1996: 103). This includes *stakeholders* from local grassroots organizations, to national elites, and on to the international level; it includes the armed groups as much as nonviolent actors. But how does one connect and coordinate with such a diverse array of actors? Here is where the answer diverges from Galtung's more simple response and the complexity comes in. One proposed

approach to deal with this complexity is the development of *peace constituencies*[14] (Rupesinghe, 1995; Lederach, 1995).

Peace scholar and professor in International Relations, Hugh Miall, based on the writings of Norbert Ropers (2002), presents a pragmatic and classic categorization of stakeholders involved in conflict transformation (Miall, 2004: 12). For the purpose of this thesis, Miall's categorization has been adapted to the Syrian case:

- Foreign states and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs): including Russia, Iran, United States, European Union, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Arab League, UN Security Council (UNSC) and UN General Assembly (UNGA)
- International non-governmental organizations (INGOs): including diverse UN agencies, ICRC, Medecins sans Frontières (MSF), Goal, Oxfam, and Save the Children.
- Government and Interim Government: on the one hand, Bashar Assad's regime and its allies including their military arms, on the other hand, Syria's Interim Government and its allied rebel-groups including the Free Syrian Army (FSA)
- Local civil society organizations: formal and informal Syrian groups and organizations, based in Syria and abroad. (see section 2.2)
- Armed insurgent groups: armed rebel-groups of all backgrounds that are not directly under the authority of Assad's regime, Interim Government of any foreign country.

In every conflict, and particularly in the Syrian conflict, there are many actors with many different interests involved. The complexity and instability of the relationships between these actors make it even more complicated to coordinate and cooperate on all levels. The concept of

[14] According to Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation of 2012, peace constituencies focus on locally owned peacebuilding activities that gives prominence to the local actors involved in social change. See: http://www.berghof-foundation.org/publications/glossary/ (Accessed: 25.7.2016)

peace constituencies discussed below can help to identify the key stakeholders in conflict transformation.

There is a widespread consensus among peace researchers that both, high-level decision makers and grassroots movements, must be included in conflict transformation in order for it to be sustainable (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 2005; Rupesinghe, 1995). Kumar Rupesinghe argues for the development of strategic constituencies of like-minded and unlike-minded actors in order to sustain peace processes and to create inter-linked networks (Rupesinghe, 1995: 82-83). Lederach builds upon this idea and comes up with three main principles guiding the establishing of peace constituencies: indigenous empowerment, cultural relevance and long-term commitment (Lederach, 1995: 212-214). Even though Lederach wrote down these principles more than twenty years ago they remain highly relevant and particularly pertinent for the present thesis. The underlying assumption is that local resources and efforts are undervalued and many times invisible. Indigenous empowerment asks to value local resources the same as resources coming from the outside, cultural relevance puts into perspective dominant knowledge and long-term commitment emphasizes the hard-work behind the continuing process of conflict transformation.

This thesis examines the role of local civil society in conflict transformation. Therefore, the main focus will be on the role of civil society actors among other peace constituencies. The relevant groups will be defined under sub-section 2.2.1.

1.2.4 Spheres and Spaces of Conflict Transformation

This sub-section addresses the locality of conflict transformation. This issue is two-sided: on the one hand, conflict transformation takes place in different *spheres* (local, regional, international), on the other hand, conflict transformation takes place in conditioned *spaces*. This sub-section discusses both concepts and presents Lederach's model of a *process-structure* to bring the different spheres and spaces together.

As follows from the above, conflict transformation takes place in the local, regional and international *sphere*. We have seen different actors that play different roles within one specific sphere or linking one sphere to the other. The reason why I use the terminology of spheres is particularly due to the changing and loose character of spheres. There are no clear-cut boundaries between the local, regional and international sphere and one actor can adopt different roles in different spheres. Moreover, the meaning of a given sphere depends on its constitutive elements and the broader context. Hence, the meaning of 'local' can change, depending on the focus, from village level to the international level.

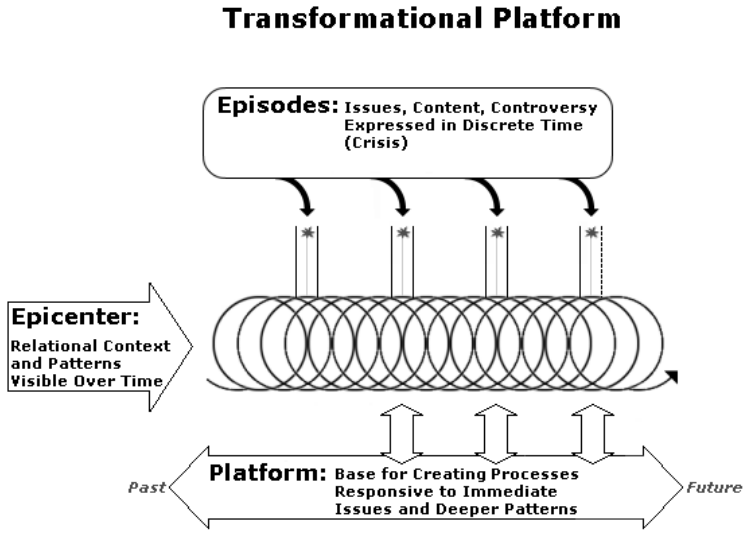
For this research, I use the three spheres – local, regional and international – because they fit best in the Syrian context, where national boundaries have become illegitimate or eroded. Therefore, local refers to the community level on the ground in Syria, regional to the neighboring areas hosting refugees and/or rebel groups, and international refers to the sphere of internationally recognized states. Many Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) engage in all three spheres. On the local and regional level, they often implement humanitarian assistance, engage in education and initiate development projects. On the international level Syrian CSOs connect the diaspora with the homeland and work in human rights advocacy.

For the purpose of this thesis, the term *space* does not primarily refer to a physical place, but more to a relational/social space (Lederach, 2005: 75-76). Even though physical safe spaces are particularly important inside Syria physical safety is not enough for conflict transformation. Conflict transformation is about creating physically, politically, socially and culturally safe spaces for encounters and dialogue in order to build relationships (Lederach, 1999: 150). This can be through conferences, roundtables and negotiations. But also workshops, trainings and virtual exchanges can offer a politically safe space for encounters between conflicting groups (Lederach, 1999: 47).

Today's approach of international decision-makers to conflict transformation is often a top-down approach, intending to reach a ceasefire on the highest level, then an interim

government and finally elections. This approach is based on the assumption that changes on the top will slowly trickle down to the lower levels of decision-making, to the regional and local spheres. However, this approach, also applied to the Syrian conflict, often fails to be sustainable and to take into account all the spheres, from local to global (Lederach, 1995: 210). Hence, Lederach proposes a different approach in order to build peace infrastructures and social spaces open for cooperation, just relationships and nonviolent mechanisms for handling conflicts (Lederach, 1995: 202). He approaches conflict transformation as a *process-structure* which is characterized by being linear and circular as well as adaptive and functional (Lederach, 2003: 44.). He envisions this process-structure in the form of transformational platforms that take into account short-term issues without losing sight of the long-term goal.

Figure 5: Lederach's Process-Structure for Transformational Platforms



Source: Lederach, 2003

It is important to notice that spaces and spheres of conflict transformation are more than physical places. In the spirit of Lederach's thinking, it is particularly the social and relational element that gives spaces and spheres their meaning. Moreover, the process-structure approach encourages peace practitioners to think in the short and long term at the same time by applying a linear and circular understanding of transformational platforms (Figure 5).

1.2.5 Challenges and Limitations of the Conflict Transformation Approach

There are many challenges and limitations to the conflict transformation approach, mainly due to its complexity and broadness. According to sociologist Louis Kriesberg, the

major challenges and issues of conflict transformation lie in the inappropriate employment of the ideas, in the underutilization of ideas and practices and in errors within the approach.

Kriesberg argues that often only certain aspects of the approach have been used and taken out of context (2011: 62). Due to the broad characteristic of the approach, it is often impossible to take into account the approach as a whole. This selection may lead to simplifications and erroneous interpretations. Moreover, the approach has been used for personal or national interests. In Carolyn Nordstrom's[15] words:

> In the traditional politico-military realm, however, conflict transformation all too often entails transforming the same paradigms of warfare from one conflict to the next, rather than transforming the nature of conflict itself. (Nordstrom, 1995: 106)

The second challenge is that ideas and practices have often been underutilized (Kriesberg, 2011: 62). Conflict transformation as an approach challenges the traditional approaches that are perceived as normal, and therefore, only few scholars and practitioners adopt conflict transformation as an approach. The fact that state-centrism and militarization still are important assumptions in international relations makes it difficult to think beyond traditional conflict resolution such as high-level peace negotiations and military interventions. Moreover, the application of the conflict transformation approach is sometimes internally challenged by the lack of democratic values in civil society and NGOs themselves.

A third set of problems stems from errors within the approach. Kriesberg points out that the knowledge has been drawn mostly from countries and cultures with well-established conflict resolution methods and less from violent settings of protracted conflicts. Also, the approach focuses more on interventions from outside actors than on the experiences of the people living through the conflict (Kriesberg, 2011: 63). Nordstrom argues similarly, that the enormous experience and knowledge of the affected people about the conflict is often neglected

[15] Dr Carolyn Nordstrom is professor in anthropology of war and peace at University of Notre Dame

and that their work goes unrecognized and unsupported by larger donors and INGOs (Nordstrom, 1995: 110).

The elicitive[16] approach towards transforming conflicts exhibits a great potential for moments of *imperfect peace(s)* to take root, but is also prone to misinterpretations and over-simplifications which can be misleading and detrimental to the peace process. It is important to critically assess and constantly improve the shortcomings of the elicitive approach, because just as conflicts are continuously changing and evolving so too are the concepts and language we use to understand them. This thesis tries to contribute to the elicitive conflict transformation approach, addressing the critique of neglecting directly affected people in conflict situations, by helping to create spaces for marginalized voices to be heard.

1.2.6 Definition: Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation is not a clearly defined term. Many scholars and professionals have their own understanding of conflict transformation. Therefore, it is important to clearly define the concept for this thesis, taking into account existing definitions.

One common aspect of most definitions of conflict transformation is that it is perceived as a process. Already Johan Galtung said in 1996 "Conflict transformation is a never ending process." (Galtung, 1996: 90). John Paul Lederach, one of the main contributor to the conflict transformation debate, follows the same understanding and proposes the following definition:

> Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice and direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (Lederach, 2003: 14).

Diane Francis also stresses the importance of processes when defining conflict transformation:

> [Conflict transformation] is used to denote a whole collection of processes and their results: processes aimed at making relationships more just, meeting the needs of all, allowing for the full participation and dignity of all; processes through which conflict may be addressed without violence and either resolved (conflict resolution in the more specific sense) or at least managed (that is, kept within manageable

[16] For details see Wolfgang Dietrich (2013) *Elicitive Conflict Transformation and the Transrational Shift in Peace Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan; John Paul Lederach (2005) *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford, MA: Oxford University Press

> boundaries and with its destructive effects minimized); processes through which hurt and hatred may be mitigated and even overcome, and coexistence made possible; processes for developing a 'constructive conflict culture' (Francis and Ropers, 1997), so that new and ongoing conflicts do not become destructive, but are able to contribute to the well-being of a society (Francis, 2002: 7).

Taking the aspect of continuity and process of conflict transformation into account, I propose the definition of conflict transformation for this thesis as *all ongoing efforts, dynamics and processes taking place on different levels that aim to engage nonviolently and constructively with conflicts and social change.*

1.3 Civil Society

The next concept to discuss and define in this thesis is civil society. It has recently become one of the most important concepts in development and the humanitarian field. Despite the widespread use, the concept fails to be defined clearly. It is a concept of many meanings and realities, depending on regional, historical, cultural and political context. The influences of society, the state, the economic system and global norms on the local understanding of civil society are manifold and complex.

Before putting the concept in context by bringing in Arab and Islamic thoughts, I firstly discuss the dominant Western perceptions of civil society. In a further sub-section I also critically assess civil society in order to take into account its connections to direct, structural and cultural violence. Finally, I ground the concept of civil society on the local and grassroots level in Syria while taking into account the international and global links of local actors, particularly through diaspora initiatives.

1.3.1 Western Thoughts

This sub-section presents a short historical and philosophical overview of the Western conceptions of civil society. There are basically three understandings that appeared in political, sociological and philosophical writings: civil society as an association, civil society as a normative model and civil society as a public sphere. The conception that probably comes

closest to reality is writer and activist Michael Edward's understanding which takes into account all three aspects of civil society.

The history of civil society in the Western hemisphere can be traced back for centuries. It is often said to have emerged in the form of professional *associations,* such as guilds, in medieval times. Guilds also played an important role in other parts of the world including Islamic cultures and therefore the early stages of civil society cannot be considered a uniquely Western experience.

The Enlightenment era and the idea of the Social Contract[17] changed the perception of civil society. English and empiricist philosopher, John Locke, considers civil society as the realm of political association with the function to rectify insufficiencies of the state of nature through mutuality of contract and consent (Seligman, 2002: 14). The early philosophical debate was predominantly about the relationship between the individual and society, whereas civil society was considered as a *normative model*. With Marxism, the debate about civil society obtained a global dimension. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's thoughts include reflections on global civil society, either as a part of the hegemonic capitalist system or as a counter-hegemonic force (Katz, 2006: 333). There is evidence for both, civil society as integral part of the dominant system, but also as a space where the dominant system is challenged. This debate is still going on and it would be interesting to analyze which CSOs engage within the framework of the dominant structure and which ones try to provide alternatives.

German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas admits the importance of civil society not only because civil society aggregates individual opinions, but because it creates a public opinion through specific communicative actions (König, 2012: 22). He linked the concept of civil society to the concept of *public sphere* in which deliberation on the important questions for the society takes place (Edwards, 2004: 9). But at the same time, Habermas

[17] Social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, J.J. Rousseau and John Locke developed the idea of a contract or agreement between the members of a society to live together in the Age of Enlightenment.

perceives civil society as a normative concept and recognizes that the concept often fails to reflect reality (König, 2012: 23).

Like Habermas, French poststructuralist Michel Foucault escapes the choice between idealism and realism. According to Foucault, civil society does not exist in itself and is not inherently good. He perceives civil society more as potentialities (Villadsen, 2015: 9). Thus, civil society does not have an inherent function; but rather, civil society adopts functions depending on the political, social and cultural context and the power relations in which civil society emerged.

Michael Edwards brings the three traditional arguments – civil society as associational life, as a normative model of a good society and as the public sphere – together and proposes a synthesis (2004: 73). He argues that the normative aspect of civil society is important to guide social change, admitting, the same as in Peace Studies, that civil society needs to be based on values. Voluntary associations are the means to social change. Through these associations people can express their opinions on what to achieve and how to achieve it. Without a public sphere in which diverse and conflicting opinions can be debated, reconciliation and consensus cannot be achieved, and the diverse expressions of opinions would lose their purpose (Edwards, 2004: 73)

1.3.2 Arab and Islamic Approaches

The dominant concept of civil society has been elaborated on mainly through Western philosophies, often neglecting the richness and diversity of societal understandings in other cultures. In this sub-section, I present a short overview over the Arab terminology and discuss Arab and Islamic thoughts on civil society. The interaction between Western and Arab notions are particularly important in the Syrian context, as Syria's exposure and connection to the Western world has been limited before the uprising in 2011, and now experiencing a flood of

INGOs that are based on Western understandings of civil society. Hence, it is important to be culturally sensitive and aware of different perceptions of societal experiences and norms.

The literal translation of 'civil society' into Arabic (*al-mujtama` al-madani*) appeared in Arab academic writings in the 1980's. Due to the rich history of the Arab world as a meeting point of diverse cultures and philosophies, many concepts exist that express different understandings of civil society, such as the various forms of the root *jama`* (to join, assemble), *umma* (community of believers), *ahl* (kin) and '*asabiyya*[18] (solidarity) (Browers, 2006: 62).

Western dominance introduced new concepts such as 'nation', 'social contract', 'citizens', and 'civil society' (Browers, 2006: 64). However, as Edward Said, professor of literature and post-colonialist, demonstrates in his writings on Orientalism, the West ignored Arab and Islamic conceptions of social and political theory, and argued that the absence of 'civil society' in the Orient demonstrates its 'uncivility' (Ibid.: 67); but also how the Orient adopts the Western perception. The social co-construction of concepts between different cultures is very complex and there is never a pure assimilation, it is always a process of integration and adaptation.

When asking Syrians today how they perceive civil society before the uprising in 2011, the vast majority says there was no civil society, that everything was controlled by the state. One of the few studies on Syria's civil society before the uprising, conducted by Raymond Hinnebusch in 1993 and in the aftermath of the Cold War, shows a different picture. As mentioned above, guilds, religious brotherhoods and professional associations have existed for centuries also outside the Western world. According to Hinnebusch, in Syria, many of these groups adapted and survived all kinds of political systems and turmoil and are still intact in different forms (Hinnebusch, 1993: 243).

[18] Ibn Khaldun, an important Arab philosopher, identifies various solidarity groupings (ahl al-'asabiyya), such as guilds, tribes, brotherhoods and sects. This *asabiyya* groups facilitate social interactions, cultural and intellectual exchange, and the expression of political and cooperative action. In general, these groups enjoyed relative autonomy from central state power (Browers, 2006: 102).

Apart from social and political influence, Islam has a particularly strong influence on Arab societies. In Islam, the community is very important and civil society in this context reflects the societal complexity that exists between society and the individual (Hanafi, 2002: 173-174). As Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi (2002) puts it: "The importance of civil society derives from the need to balance the desires and needs of the individual with the will and needs of society" (Hanafi, 2002: 180). In this sense, civil society assumes a similar function to the Social Contract.

Islam used to be pluralistic and civil society, especially mosques and religious schools commonly engaged in vivid dialogue concerning the different conceptions of and approaches to Islam. During the 5th Century Islam a single hegemonic ideology asserted itself into Islam and led to a significant decline in diversity (Hanafi, 2002: 186). Only in the last century there have been new attempts to revive pluralism within Islam.

Hanafi (2002) believes that people can learn something from both Islamic and Western conceptions if we engage in nonviolent dialogue with one another. For instance, the Western conception of civil society is based on rights, and less on duties, whereas in Islam duties are given a higher priority over rights (Hanafi, 2002: 188). By actively engaging in dialogue, a conception and the reality of a responsible and committed civil society has a higher possibility of emerging.

On the other hand, the findings by Rishmawi and Morris (2007) show that Arab civil society is not only challenged by Western related problems. The changing landscape of Arab civil society also faces important internal obstacles, some of which are:

- Lack of coordination and exchange with other groups that are active in the same field, but also within the organization;
- Limited institutionalization that often weakens organizations when the founder leaves;
- Politicization of civil society by political parties;
- Donor-driven approach of many CSOs;

- Legal and political limitations that hinder the organization's functioning and limit its space for action; and
- Many CSOs do not know how to deal with political Islam, which shows that even within the Arab world there is a lack of dialogue between different approaches to and interpretations of Islam (Rishmawi and Morris, 2007: 34).

Arab societies are changing and adapting to a more globalized but also participatory world. Arab civil society, in its diversity, is engaging in dialogues with the West and other cultures and is discovering an identity and conceptualization that fits in its own historical, political and societal background.

1.3.3 Critical Reflections

In many studies and projects, civil society is perceived as something *per se* 'good'. This leads to the question: Who decides what is 'good' and 'bad'? In a normative approach, such as Peace Studies, the answer is easier than in other approaches. And even if the values that should be promoted are clear, current literature seems to neglect the historic examples in which civil society fueled wars and helped Benito Mussolini in Italy and the Nazis in Germany seize power (Chambers, 2002: 101). Also, more recent examples show that civil society does not automatically equal tolerant or peaceful. The rise of xenophobic and racist movements in Europe and the United States are unneglectable examples. In addition, the example of Lebanon which has one of the highest ratio of NGOs per capita in the Arab world is not considerably more peaceful and democratic when compared to other Arab countries. The question here is less if non-democratic, racist and xenophobic associations should be forbidden, but more why people join these groups (Chambers, 2002: 103).

This sub-section shall provide a critical insight to the most pressing problems concerning Syrian civil society: re-enacting cultural violence, reinforcing the gender roles and perpetuating class divisions. This critical assessment of civil society should help to better

understand the complex relations between culture, power and society, as well as how cultural violence can be addressed.

The *re-enacting of cultural violence* can be explained very well by Antonio Gramsci's writings. Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony displays that power lies less in direct, crude power, but more in hegemony that is used by the elites to dominate and control the masses (Chambers, 2002: 90-91). Civil society plays here an important role by socializing the hegemonic culture and reproducing dominant ideas. Of course not all civil society actors are in the same way involved in perpetuating and re-enacting cultural hegemonies, but the risk is higher in an uncritical and unreflective environment. Apart from hegemonic ideas, also cultural violence can be re-enacted and reproduced partly by civil society. Hence, it is very important to deeply analyze civil society's actions and discourses in order to perceive the degree of perpetuation of violent structures and cultural patterns.

Gender and civil society is another complex relation. Gender is closely linked to the historical and political distinction between public and private spheres. Annika Rabo, professor in Social Anthropology at Stockholm University, goes even a step further and argues that the study of civil society itself is gendered, as female researchers more often study women who are dominant in the grassroots level, and male researchers study the macro level of civil society that is dominated by men (Rabo, 1996: 155). Women's experiences in civil society are very diverse. Some civil society actors perpetuate or even increase the gender gap while other associations are committed to the emancipation of women. And even emancipation itself can be within the dominant patriarchal system, or as a counter-force. Moreover, state rhetoric and the law do often not correspond. Rabo mentions the example in Syria where, on the one hand, the *Ba'ath* regime's rhetoric stresses the role of women in Syria's modernization, and on the other hand, the law still discriminates against women (Rabo, 1996: 160). The contradictory and complexity of the gender-civil society relations is illustrated by the use of headscarves and Islamic clothing by Syrian women to counter the regime's intention to eliminate traditional

traits in society (Ibid.: 170). In this case, the use of traditional Islamic clothes represents an empowerment of women in the public sphere. In the case of Islamic factions in Syria imposing Islamic dress-codes, the same clothes represent oppression. It is important to analyze gender roles and representations in the specific context in order to see underlying dynamics.

Class and patronage are two other factors that can be perpetuated or transformed by civil society. As these aspects of societal organization are a constitutive part of the context in which civil society is situated, they have an influence and are influenced by it. In traditional societies, social relations are often based on patron-client relationships. These relationships are still dominant in rural Syria and civil society is also affected by this cultural pattern. Some reports even claim that patronage and nepotism are increasing since the beginning of the conflict (see: Al-Khabeer, December 13, 2014).

But also class divisions are reinforced by civil society. A comparative study by Janine Clark on Islamic social institutions shows that most charitable Islamic organizations are founded by the middle-class and create a network among middle-class, whereas the links to the poor are limited (Clark, 2004). Political theorist Michael Walzer explains this fact with the Resource Mobilization theory.

> […] civil society reflects and is likely to reinforce and augment the effects of inequality. This is so because every organized group is also a mobilization of resources: the more resources its members bring with them, the stronger the groups. The stronger the group, the more it is able to enhance the impact of the resources it collects. […] The weaker and poorer members are either unable to organize at all – they are excluded or marginalized – or they form groups that reflect their weakness and poverty. (Walzer, 2002: 39)

Often, it is the middle- and upper-class of society who has the educational and economic opportunities to create civil society organizations that are strong. Hence, civil society remains a realm of inequality and needs to be analyzed as such (Walzer, 2002: 41).

The three examples outlined above– cultural violence, gender and class – can remind us to look deeper into the underlying structures and interlinkages between power, culture and society when analyzing the normative impact of civil society.

1.3.4 Definition: Local Civil Society

Local civil society is characterized by its community-based approach, its grassroots characteristics and its civil feature. There are many different definitions of what civil society is: a space outside the state, economy and family, a space linking the state, economy and the family, or even as global civil society as transnational organizations and movements. One important feature is that people gather together in institutions, organizations or movements to advance shared interests (Dörner and List, 2012: 4). These characteristics of civil society, however, do not say anything about their approach in advancing their interests. Implicitly, the positive and nonviolent side of civil society is stressed (Ibid.: 1-2) and most civil society organizations actually do use nonviolent methods to advance their cause. However, the inherently positive characteristics of civil society can be questioned and even have to be questioned in a situation of armed conflict.

The definition of civil society for this thesis, and subsequently the definition of CSOs, focuses on the political and normative dimension as well as the grassroots and community-based approach, whereas the organizational form and the negative definition are less important to define the concept.

For the purpose of this thesis, civil society and CSOs are defined as follows:

Local civil society is a net of relationships that links the governance, the market and the private sphere on the community level. This net is mainly composed by civil society organizations (CSOs), which include individuals, groups, movements and organizations that are rooted in the community, whose members share specific interests and values, and which use nonviolent tools to advance their cause.

In the next section, the meaning of civilian protection is discussed in order to explore what it means when civil society engages in protection of others and itself.

1.4 Protection of Civilians or Civilian Protection?

With the changing nature of international relations and armed conflicts so too did the concept of 'Protection of Civilians' (PoC) change. This change also saw new actors take the stage and brought new approaches with it. Nonetheless, the concept generally inhibits a certain incapacity and inaction of the affected population. Moving towards a concept of 'Civilian Protection', which includes civilians-protecting-civilians, nonviolent protection strategies and community-based protection, the knowledge and experience of local populations is being taken into account and local actors are being considered as resources in their own process of conflict transformation. The concept of 'civilian protection' also takes into account resilience and agency of affected communities and is particularly important in situations where no internationals are present or able to protect civilians from violence. This is the case in regards to Syria and as researched in this thesis.

After outlining a brief *history* of civilians in armed conflict, this section discusses the *actors* in civilian protection and their responsibilities, as well as *tools* and techniques applied. Having discussed the main actors and approaches, I then define *civilian protection* for the purpose of this thesis.

1.4.1 Historical Background

Concepts of 'civilians' or 'innocents' are often defined negatively as the contrary of combatants (Schütte, 2015: 19-20). The centrality of war and armed conflict in history, implies that belligerents benefit from a more sophisticated legal body than civilians, particularly in interstate conflicts through an elaborate International Humanitarian Law (IHL). How did the notion of civilian in the current regime of *jus in bello* emerge and develop? How did civilians experience war and armed conflicts over time?

Researcher and human rights practitioner, Robert Schütte, studies in his book on civilians in armed conflict humanity's history of armed conflict and violence with respect to

civilians. He aims to bring the victimization and use of civilians in the big picture of human warfare. In the past, there have always been some categories of 'innocent' people, mostly women, children and elderly, which are comparable to the modern notion of the civilian (Schütte, 2015: 24). Their innocence is mostly based on the perception that these categories of people are not able or not entitled to fight (Ibid.). The concept of protecting the innocent can be found in many religions: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jews (Schütte, 2015: 25).

In his historical analysis, Schütte identifies three lessons to be drawn from the past. Firstly, mass atrocities and genocides are not at all a new phenomenon, they have always been part of human experiences of violent conflict and violence against civilians was part of warfare throughout history (Schütte, 2015: 104). Secondly, protection of innocent people has always existed in some form; however, protection evolved from purely functional protection as part of warfare, to normative protection based on religion or ethics, and finally to legal protection rooted in the Lieber Code of 1863, The Hague Convention of 1899, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (GC) and the Additional Protocols of 1977 (AP) (Ibid.: 105). The legal instruments are further developed in sub-section 1.4.3. Thirdly, the concept of innocents transformed towards the concept of civilians. This transformation is based on three evolutions. On the one hand, innocence, contrary to civilian, is based on a subjective interpretation and, hence, prone to individual discretion, on the other hand, the development from innocent to civilian reflects the change from collective to individual liability and lay the foundation for the criminalization of collective punishment. Moreover, the transformation towards a concept of civilians goes hand in hand with the emergence of the concept of 'humanity', as not only the members of one's group have the right to be protected, but also civilian members of other groups (Schütte, 2015: 105-6).

This leads us to the contemporary conception of civilian that is closely linked to the nation-state and its monopolization of violence (Schütte, 2015: 23). As the state is the only entity that is legally allowed to use violence, the state defines the legal combatant (and therefore

as well the civilian and the un-lawful combatant) and the state has the main responsibility of protecting non-combatants (Ibid.). Since the end of the Cold War, interstate armed conflicts decreased and with it the number of causalities decreased. However, civilians suffer mostly from indirect consequences of armed conflict such as hunger, diseases, poverty and displacement (Schütte, 2015: 108).

These consequences of war for civilians are not a new phenomenon either. Famines, epidemic plagues and human migration have been related to armed conflicts for centuries. Nonetheless did the protection of civilians broaden and accorded responsibilities to non-state and international actors, such as INGOs and the UN. This is mostly due to the renewed shift towards collective security. Emerging concepts such as humanitarian intervention, human security and Responsibility to Protect (R2P) integrated protection of civilians in their core. However, these concepts have been politicized and often associated with military action. In sub-section 1.4.3 on the tools of civilian protection, these concepts and their political use are analyzed in more depth.

Contrary to the military approach to protection, Mahatma Gandhi inspired a nonviolent approach to civilian protection through his idea of a 'peace army', the *Shanti Sena* (Clark, 2009: 90). On the foundations of nonviolence, truth and justice, this approach to civilian protection is anchored in the community, but open to outsiders (Ibid.). The most important INGOs working on protection, Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), emerged due to the attempt to internationalize Gandhi's idea of the *Shanti Sena*.

As history shows, the concept and protection of civilians changed throughout time and has been influenced by cultural and political dynamics, by the image of the enemy and the cause of war, as well as by gendered norms. During the period of the nation-state a legal framework to protect civilians has been established, however, the increase in intra-state conflict jeopardizes the gained legal protection. On the other hand, non-state actors gain renewed importance and

responsibilities in protecting civilians. Due to these contemporary changes, the international protection system needs to adapt and to take into consideration local contexts.

1.4.2 Actors in Protection

This sub-section suggests a simple categorization of actors involved in protection in order to be able to analyze each actor's role in civilian protection. As this thesis investigates civil society actors in civilian protection, the distinctions proposed are state/non-state and armed/military or unarmed/civilian actors as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Actors in Protection

	Armed/military	Unarmed/civilian
State/ inter-state	State/army UN peacekeeping forces Police International alliances (NATO)	OSCE Civilian Police UN Peacekeeping
Non-state	Rebel groups, militia Self-defense groups Private military contractors	ICRC, UNHCR, UNICEF, OHCHR UN agencies (IASC) INGOs (PB, NP, Oxfam, HRW) Humanitarian organizations Civil Society Organizations

Source: own elaboration

On the state or inter-state level, national authorities have the primary mandate to protect their civilian population (Bonwick, 2006: 273). Since the state has the monopoly of violence and sovereignty, the state adopted the responsibility to protect its citizens. As mentioned earlier, the revival of collective security encouraged states to give away part of their sovereignty in order to benefit from military alliances (e.g. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)). However, not all collective security organizations engage in armed protection. The OSCE provides, for instance, unarmed ceasefire monitors to conflict areas.

Apart from individual states and regional inter-state organizations, the UN integrated the protection of civilians in its core objectives. Over time, UN peacekeeping missions and their tasks shifted and included increasingly the protection of civilians. Even though UN

peacekeepers (Blue Helmets) are armed, their mandate is based on the principle of consent, impartiality and the *non-use of force except in self-defense and in defense of the mandate* (see: UN). Every UN peacekeeping mission includes military and civilian bodies. However, the actors mandated to protect civilians have unfortunately become perpetrators in some cases (Jose and Medie, 2015: 521). Particularly UN peacekeeping missions have been accused to inflict sexual violence in Bosnia, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo or Cambodia, and were allegedly participating in disappearances in the Central African Republic (Ibid.).

Apart from the UN peacekeeping missions, the UN Security Council and the Secretary General have an international authority available to them to adopt resolutions and reports on the topic. The specific documents issued by the UN concerning the protection of civilians will be discussed in the next sub-section.

There are an increasing number of non-state actors involved in not only civilian, but also military protection. International humanitarian law imposes responsibilities to both, state and non-state armed groups. However, non-state armed groups often have less knowledge about and less resources to comply with the international bodies of law and their obligations towards civilian populations (Bruderlein, 2001: 222). Additionally, the distinction between combatants and civilians becomes increasingly unclear. Many armed conflicts are not taking place between two clearly defined and uniformed armies, but between armies and non-state armed groups which are more difficult to identify and often live together with civilian populations. But also state actors use increasingly private contractors or affiliated militia whose legal stand and obligations are not easily discernible. This leads to increased risk for civilian populations.

Moreover, self-defense groups and private military contractors can render internal armed conflicts and international conflicts more complex. Questions regarding responsibility, accountability and impunity become increasingly important, but too often remain unanswered. Even though this research does not go into details concerning non-state armed actors, it is important to notice that armed factions that have close relations with the community are to a

lesser extent a threat to civilians, whereas armed factions that are constituted mainly by foreign fighters pose a higher threat to local communities (Zahar, 2001: 110; Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015: 12).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have specific protection mandates (UN Internal Displacement Division 2004, cited in Bonwick, 2006: 273). Even though, apart from ICRC, they are part of the UN system, I consider them as non-state actors due to their relative independence from direct state power. The humanitarian cluster system of the OCHA, in which diverse non-state actors participate, attributes the responsibility of the protection cluster to UNHCR.

Apart from the officially mandated agencies, there are many INGOs working in protection. The most important INGOs that dedicate their mission entirely to civilian protection are Peace Brigades International and Nonviolent Peaceforce, both inspired by Gandhi, and are predominantly accompanying local actors, providing international presence and capacity building.

Humanitarian assistance and protection are often stated in the same sentence. In many ways, they are very closely interlinked with one another. Hence, humanitarian organizations are also actors in protection. The notion ‘humanitarian protection’ is very common in the world of humanitarian organizations. However, as the term says, humanitarian agencies and staff are the ones to be protected, contrary to civilian protection, which implies the protection of civilians caught in the conflict. Humanitarian protection tries to balance the risk for the staff and the beneficiaries. However, not all organizations have the same standards and some are even hiring private security companies to protect their convoys, without considering the risk for the local population. When implementing activities, humanitarian organizations make assumptions without testing and verifying them, and hence, increase the risk of adverse effects (Bonwick,

2006: 273). It is crucial for humanitarian organization to think of themselves as a part of the conflict, and consider their impact before taking action.

These are all relevant and important actors to take into account in civilian protection. This research, however, focuses on the role of local civil society. Very often in armed conflicts, civilians are left alone when they need protection, either because the state authorities do not want humanitarians on the ground or because the risk is too high (Bonwick, 2006: 274). Therefore, local civil society is the main actor in protection on the local level. Even though some protection efforts may imply arms, most civil society actors are unarmed. Section 2.3 and 3.3 of this thesis further develop on the role of local civil society in civilian protection.

Many authors writing about community-based protection, self-protection, or civilian protection stress the importance of the affected people and the lack of literature including local agency (Bonwick, 2006; Corbett, 2011; Barrs, 2012; Gorur, 2013; Jose and Medie, 2015; Horst and Sagmo, 2015; Svoboda and Gillard, 2015 to mention a few). Very often, protection is perceived as something provided by outside actors and the affected population is seen as passive, even though they are the first ones to be affected, but also to provide basic protection (Svoboda and Gillard, 2015: 6).

When it comes to the application of IHL by non-state armed groups, training, propaganda and coherence influence the group's compliance to IHL. Lack of training and the fragmentation of armed groups in battalions make it particularly difficult in the Syrian conflict to create a common understanding of IHL principles (Centre for Civilians in Conflict, 2012: 2, 6). Moreover, secular and Islamist propaganda render the cause existential and therefore permit all means, even though under Islamic law civilians are as protected as under IHL (Ibid.: 5)

Unarmed civilians cannot stop massive violence, even UN peacekeepers cannot as we have seen in Srebrenica and Rwanda. Nonetheless, civilian actors can play a crucial role in preventing renewed violence, building trust and gain access to vulnerable populations (Wallis, 2010: 29-31). Effective protection efforts need to start from the community level, building on

the dynamics already in place, then, with the help of outside actors, bringing the local concerns to the level where protection can actually be enacted, be it in the UNSC or at the national or local authorities (Bonwick, 2006: 274). Hence, the links and relationships between all actors are the key to successful civilian protection.

1.4.3 Tools for Protection: Legal, Armed and Civilian

Protection is a complex task and requires actions from diverse actors on all levels. The legal basis of protection of civilians in armed conflict lies in the international humanitarian law (IHL) and in the human rights law (HRL). However, there are different tools and strategies in order to implement these international rules.

There are mainly two strategies, either reducing the threat for civilians or reducing their vulnerability. Dealing with the threat implies avoiding it, submitting to the threat or facing the threat, whereas dealing with vulnerability works through capacity-building, advocacy, early warning and ensuring access (Bonwick, 2006: 274-5). In an ideal case, both aspects of protection should be addressed simultaneously.

In order to discuss in more detail the tools available, this thesis discusses the *legal* background of protection of civilians in armed conflict. In the next step, some *military* tools are outlined and their limitations addressed. In the third part, *nonviolent* tools for civilian protection, as it is the core of this thesis, are discussed.

A) Legal Foundations

In 1999 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) developed in a workshop with the ICRC the following definition of protection:

> The concept of protection encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. HR law, IHL, refugee law). (ICRC, 3rd workshop on protection, background paper as cited in IASC, 1999: 21)

This definition has been adopted by most UN agencies and clearly states a right-based approach. Hence, the legal documents and their legitimacy needs to be discussed in order to understand the right-based concept of protection.

The first legal document mentioning the protection of civilians in armed conflict was the Lieber Code of 1863. The document, not a treaty, gathered the laws and customs of war and imposed them on the Union soldiers in the American Civil War (see: ICRC). In article 22 the Code argues for the distinction between individuals from a hostile state and the state itself, and acknowledges "that the unarmed citizen is to be spared in person, property, and honor as much as the exigencies of war will admit." (Lieber Code, 1863: Art.22).

Inspired by the Lieber Code, the Convention of The Hague of 1899 (revised in 1907) further elaborates on the laws and customs of war and represents the first international codification. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 (GC), the core of the current IHL have been built upon The Hague Conventions and include the rules established in 1899. Therefore, I focus on the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols of 1977 (AP) taking into account that prior work has been embodied in them.

Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (GC IV) codifies extensively the protection of civilians. However, most of the rights contained in GC IV are only applicable in international armed conflicts. Only article 3 common to all four Geneva Conventions applies specifically to non-international armed conflicts (ICRC, 1949). Additional Protocol II of 1977 treats particularly with non-international armed conflicts and the protection of victims. However, many countries, among others the US, Turkey, and Syria, did not ratify the AP II. Many IHL rules have become part of customary law applicable to non-international armed conflict, which means that they are binding even for non-parties. Even though the theoretical applicability of large parts of IHL can be clearly deduced from its rules, the implementation of IHL depends on the will of the states and the perception of the righteousness of the war[19]. Hence, common article 3 often remains the only uncontested protection for civilians and other victims of non-international armed conflicts. Common article

[19] More to the applicability of IHL in the context of terrorism: ICRC (2015) " The applicability of IHL to terrorism and counterterrorism", https://www.icrc.org/en/document/applicability-ihl-terrorism-and-counterterrorism

3 represents in itself a small convention on non-international armed conflicts and defines minimal standards in protection of victims, civilians and prisoners of war (ICRC, 1958: Art.3).

However, the protection accorded in common article 3 are very limited. The GC binds the parties to the convention to protect everyone who is not actively taking part in hostilities – e.g. civilians, sick, wounded and prisoners – from violence, inhumane treatment, as well as from arbitrary detention and irregular sentences.

Common article 3 is basically inspired by Human Rights Law (HRL), the second big body of law protecting civilians. It is nowadays uncontested, that HRL continues to apply in times of armed conflict. The two bodies of law apply therefore simultaneously and, even though their relationship is complex, they can be understood as complementary. Many treaties protecting specific categories of civilians are part of HRL and particularly relevant in the context of armed conflict, such as the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) of 1984. All these conventions and bodies of law accord extensive protection to civilians in war, however, the problems in protection come from a persistent failure of compliance with the law by all parties (Svoboda and Gillard, 2015: 8).

A central achievement was the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998 and its entry in force in 2002. Based on the experiences and limitations of *ad hoc* tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Court (ICC) represents a step forward in the fight against impunity of grave violations of IHL and HRL. Nonetheless, the ICC lacks important legitimacy and countries such as the US, Russia, Israel and Syria are not parties to the Rome Statute.

Even though the protection of civilians, particularly in internal armed conflicts, is a sensitive issue, the UN Security Council issued a number of resolutions related to it and the Secretary General reports periodically on the situation. The first specific UNSC resolution concerning the protection of civilians (UNSC resolution 1265) was issued in 1999 calling the

states to respect IHL, HRL and refugee law, as well as to better address negative effects of armed conflicts on civilians. The UNSC resolution 1296 of 2000 elaborates on the resolution 1265 and emphasizes on the importance of including disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in peace agreements. The resolution 1674 adopted in 2006 addresses the problem of small arms trafficking and stresses the need to end impunity by using the national and international judicial mechanisms in place. The latest resolution concerning civilians in armed conflict is the resolution 2150 of 2014 concerning the prevention and fight against genocide and other serious crimes in international law. This resolution also reaffirms the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

There are serious criticisms addressed to the UN concerning protection of civilians. But very often there are tensions between humanitarian norms and a state's sovereignty and lead to protection measures that are not always impartial or many situations in which civilians need stronger protection are not even discussed in the UN (e.g. Colombia, Turkey, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan just to mention a few) (Jose and Medie, 2015: 520). The politicization of protection of civilians not only weakens the UN's legitimacy, but the legitimacy of IHL as a whole, particularly in societies which are experiencing an armed conflict and violations of the IHL.

In Syria, the compliance with the IHL is very weak, so that different INGOs and the ICRC call upon all parties to better respect the law (ICRC, 2014; HRW, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016). A good example is illustrated by this conversation between a Palestinian aid worker from Gaza and a Syrian aid worker. The Palestinian, experienced in living under constant attacks, asked the Syrian, why they hide their hospitals, why they do not put visible signs on schools and health facilities, so that they are not targeted? The Syrian smiled and said: "You see? That is the difference. In Syria, they target civilians and civilian infrastructure, that's why we have to hide them as good as possible, to protect civilians." (field notes, 20.7.2016)

B) Military Interventions

There are some important benefits in using military tools to protect civilians in armed conflicts. Firstly, armies benefit from excellent logistics, communication infrastructures and can be deployed quickly in emergencies. Secondly, they can provide a certain physical protection that unarmed actors cannot (Metcalfe, 2012: 3). Thirdly, there presence alone, particularly for UN peacekeeping missions, may be sufficient to reduce violence because they represent the international community (Wallis, 2010: 28-29). On the other hand, military interventions are often based on short term goals and self-interest, and hence, do not help to transform the conflict constructively (Francis, 2002: 8).

In this part, the most common arguments for military interventions to protect civilians, human security, humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect, are critically analyzed.

With the shift towards internal conflicts after the end of the Cold War, it seemed that the main security threat for individuals came from within the state. This led to the shift towards the new concept of *human security*.

The Commission on Human Security defines the concept as "protecting the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment." (as cited in Oberleitner, 2005: 187). Human security lays the focus on individuals and communities instead of state interests. It demands to protect the population from natural and societal threats and to develop people's capabilities to make their own choices (Ibid.). Human security has been defined more narrowly and more broadly. Oberleitner (2005: 188) mentions three categories: (1) the narrow approach is anchored in basic human rights and concerns mainly the physical integrity of individuals; (2) the humanitarian approach aims to tackle down war and crimes, however, the argumentation leads to the justification of humanitarian interventions and R2P; (3) the third approach is the broadest and considers human security in the globalized context linking security to globalization, economy and development.

However, each definition can lead to severe violations of human rights by securitizing and therefore legitimizing special measures in different aspects of private and public life. It is important to see the human security concept as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the concepts intend to protect the individual and human rights. On the other hand, the concept can be easily instrumentalized and used for ulterior motives other than legitimate humanitarian interventions and thus leading to the control over state-building, to imposed regulations on the economy and to intervention in the educational systems in foreign states, to mention only some of the possible implications.

In a position paper elaborated by Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), the Civil Society Network for Human Security and IKV Pax Christi in 2013, civil society supports a more holistic approach to human security.

> […] the human security approach requires analyzing root causes, mapping existing local capacities for peace, and designing coordinated strategies for civil society and governmental preventive action as part of a long-term commitment to peace. (GPPAC et al., 2013: 1)

The paper states that local capacity, accountability towards local populations, long-term commitment and participation are core values in the human security approach (GPPAC et al.: 2). Moreover, protection and security require complementary strategies on all levels, from local to global, as well as increased communication and cooperation instead of integration (Ibid.: 3). Even though this approach is increasingly integrated in the international security discourse, the political will to implement it is still lacking (Ibid.: 5)

The concept of human security applied in a traditional security framework ultimately leads to a reflection on interventions in states where human rights abuses take place, often under the pretext of *humanitarian intervention*. There is no universally accepted definition of humanitarian intervention. One possible definition, proposed by the Danish Institute of International Affairs in 1999, is:

> […] humanitarian intervention is defined as coercive action by states involving the use of armed force in another state without the consent of its government, with or without authorisation from the United Nations Security Council, for the purpose of preventing or putting to a halt gross and massive violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. (Danish Institute of International Affairs, 1999: 11)

The most famous examples of humanitarian interventions are the NATO interventions in Kosovo in 1999 and in Libya in 2011. Both interventions were highly controversial[20]. The interventions have been criticized mainly because they are not acceptable by the UN Chart and are considered as a means of side-lining the achievements of the UN and the collective security by taking unilateral decisions (Sheeran and Kent, 2016:37). Concerned about the developments in this field, the ICRC published a position paper on humanitarian intervention in 2001. Without abandoning its neutral position, the ICRC mentions the issue of terminology, the difference between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, stresses the role of the UN in legitimate use of force and highlights the international community's responsibility to prevent armed conflicts.

Firstly, the ICRC recognizes the danger to use the word 'humanitarian' in a military or politicized sense as it can blur the distinction between humanitarian and military operation, and hence, limiting the space of action for humanitarian actors. Therefore, the ICRC proposes to use the term "armed intervention in response to grave violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law" (ICRC, 2001: 527). Secondly, the legitimacy of a military intervention is a question of *jus ad bellum* and does not affect in any way the respect of the IHL in the case of an intervention. Thirdly, the ICRC acknowledges that the UN Charter defines the legitimate use of force in Chapter VII, which only allows military action in the case of self-defense or self-determination (ICRC, 2001: 530). Fourthly, taking into account the spirit of the international law, the ICRC argues that humanitarian intervention must be evitable, as the responsibility of the international community is to prevent armed conflicts and the charter provides nonviolent measures to take, even in cases of massive violations of human rights (ICRC, 2001: 530, 532).

[20] For details on Kosovo, see Adam Roberts (1999) 'NATO Humanitarian War over Kosovo', David Wippman (2001) ' Kosovo and the Limits of International Law', Fernando R Teson (2009) 'Kosovo: A Powerful Precedent for the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention.
For details on Libya and Syria, see Zifcak Spencer and Justin Morris on the Responsibility to Protect after Libya and Syria.

To put it briefly, the ICRC implicitly said, already in 2001 that humanitarian interventions are not the solution to the problem and should not become a basis for unilateral military interventions. Nonetheless, in the 2005 UN World Summit, the concept of *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) emerged and can be considered an extension on the humanitarian intervention.

R2P recognizes that states are responsible to protect their population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. If a state is not able to do so, the international community is responsible to intervene, even by force if necessary (Schweitzer, 2010: 53). The concept is based on three pillars: (1) the state has the main responsibility to protect the population, (2) the international community is responsible to assist and encourage the states to fulfil the mandate, and (3) "international community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes. If a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations." (UN, n.d.).

Even though the mandate of the UNSC for humanitarian interventions is neutral, the execution often is not. The case of Libya demonstrated the politicization of humanitarian intervention and subsequently affected international perceptions on civilian protection in the Syrian case. In the end, state interests, perceptions and the norm of non-intervention prevented the UNSC to authorize an intervention in Syria (Jose and Medie, 2015: 520).

Even before Libya and Syria, R2P had been criticized by the global South as another tool to legitimize interventions to bring about regime changes (Schweitzer, 2010: 54). Others criticize the concept to limit state sovereignty, or to serve as a tool to bypass the UN Security Council. Despite these legitimate concerns, R2P can open new ways for local and global civil society to play a role as think-tanks advising policy makers, as monitoring and advocacy actors

and as relief and humanitarian actors (Schweitzer, 2010: 54). In this sense, R2P can also be an opportunity for new actors to come in and participate in international security.

I conclude on the military arguments by citing a study conducted in 2002 that shows that attacking civilians is part of military strategy (Azam and Hoeffler, 2002). Therefore, it is paradoxical to use military interventions to protect civilians. Violence begets violence and every military intervention leads to more people in need for protection. Hence, I focus in my thesis on nonviolent tools of protection.

C) Nonviolent Tools

Nonviolence is a methodology to transform a conflict by peaceful means. The example of Syria, and lately the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, support the evidence found by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan that nonviolent campaigns are more effective and that violence ultimately leads to more violence and destruction (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008). Many other scholars (Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, 1994; Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, 2000; Mark Kurlansky, 2006; Kurt Schock, 2005; Gene Sharp, 1973) have examined the techniques and strategies successfully deployed in nonviolent movements.

The most notable theorist on nonviolent action is Gene Sharp. In his work, he argues that strategic use of nonviolence has the power and means to overcome authoritarian regimes. His argument is based on the vision that power is eventually held by the people and if they retrieve even their passive support, even the strongest dictator will be left with empty dreams of world domination (Sharp, 1973). Sharp's ideas may also hold true in violent settings and armed conflicts, as armed groups and armies also depend on the support of the people under their control. In Chapter Four of this thesis, Sharp's theory is tested in the case of non-state armed groups in Syria and the power of nonviolent action by civil society actors.

Gandhi’s understanding of nonviolence contributes to the theory and practice of power as the ability to transform, instead of dominate, minds and relationships (Francis, 2002: 7).

Hence, nonviolence *is* conflict transformation, as it transforms the common aggressive approach to conflict into a peaceful one.

There are many tools for nonviolent civilian protection; however, it can be difficult to trust in these tools in the context of armed conflicts because they may not answer the call of immediate physical violence or threats in the short term. When talking about nonviolent methods to resist the Syrian regime, many Syrians said: "What do you do when someone is attacking you and your family? You just stay there and let them kill you?". In the long-term, however, nonviolence is an important element of building a peaceful society (Dudouet, 2008: 2). Nonviolent tools can be divided into two groups: one that reduces the threat, the other the vulnerability. Table 2 below summarizes possible tools of civilian protection.

Table 2: Possible Tools for Civilian Protection

	Reducing the threat	Reducing vulnerability
Direct violence	- Truce / ceasefire - Deterrence (presence, advocacy) - Self-defense / join armed groups	- Displacement - Evacuation - Shelters - Early warning - Following the rules
Structural violence	- Displacement - Following the rules - Legal protection - Advocacy - Humanitarian assistance	- Capacity building - Joining armed groups - Economic migration
Cultural violence	- Following the rules - Disarmament - Safe houses /shelters	- Education - Dialogue - Empowerment/awareness - Art/recreation

Source: own elaboration

In common understanding, protection addresses only direct violence. However, when we analyze the possible responses to direct violence, there are three ways in how to deal with direct violence: avoid it (ex: displacement), face it (ex: shelters, early warning systems), or

submit to it (ex: following the imposed rules) (Bonwick, 2006: 274-5). For local actors, it is almost impossible to reduce the threat they face, particularly in rural Idlib, where the main threat comes from aerial bombardments.

The international community could have an influence on the level of direct violence in Syria by negotiating a general ceasefire or by sending international observers/peacekeepers. Even though deterrence through international presence has historically proved successful, it also reinforces neo-colonial power imbalances by using the power of Western states to pressure other governments (Schweitzer, 2009: 113). Moreover, it is unclear if international presence would have a deterrent effect in a conflict of the scale of Syria (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015: 7)

In the case of structural and cultural violence, however, local actors seem to have a wider scope for action. Particularly capacity building, advocacy, education, dialogue and empowerment are crucial elements in vulnerability reduction and local civil society plays an important role in these activities. However, not all strategies actually reduce the threat or vulnerability. Submitting to the rules, joining armed groups, economic migration and displacement can increase, rather than decrease, the need for protection (Jose and Medie, 2015: 528-9).

It is important to analyze what unarmed civilians can do and what they cannot do. Unarmed civilians cannot stop large scale violence (Wallis, 2010: 31). Even UN peacekeeping failed sometimes, like in Srebrenica and Rwanda. However, civilians can play a role in building relationships, gaining trust, and hence, ensuring access to vulnerable populations (Wallis, 2010: 29-30). Studies have shown that unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP) is as effective as traditional military peacekeeping with the benefit to break the cycle of violence and to nurture Cultures of Peace (Janzen, 2014: 47). The goal of UCP is to reduce direct violence and to protect civilians from being targeted. Figure 6 summarizes strategies and techniques of UCP. However,

Figure 6: Techniques for Unarmed Civilian Protection

Source: theglobalobservatory.org

in most cases, UCP is based on the approach of a third party intervening in a conflict. International civilian professionals work closely with local civil society actors. Nowadays, UCP activities go beyond peacekeeping, including many activities in peacebuilding and peace-making (Janzen, 2014: 48). However, most missions are still based on international presence, observing and reporting, as well as protective accompaniment (Ibid.: 54).

1.4.4 Gender

Gender is a crucial element in all stages of armed conflicts. Warfare, military strategies, humanitarian response and also protection are highly gendered. Nonetheless, gender is often not considered as important as it should be in humanitarian assistance and civilian protection. This sub-section discusses some crucial considerations to take into account in the protection debate and sheds light on the importance of adopting a gender lens in humanitarian response and protection.

In any armed conflict, the whole population is affected by the violence, however, in different forms. Gender plays an important role in shaping the difference in threat and vulnerability for men and women and how the conflict impacts their physical, psychological and social safety (Jose and Medie, 2015: 521). Male civilians are more often directly targeted,

whereas female civilians suffer more often from indirect consequences of armed conflict such as poverty, disease and displacement. Direct violence against women, particularly sexual violence, in Syria remains largely under-reported due to the fear of social stigma and the widespread impunity of perpetrators (Nasar, 2013), despite the horrendous violations of IHL and HRL women experience on all sides of the conflict [21]. Yet, how exactly gender affects the different experiences and threats for men and women depends also on the local context and can vary from village to village (Nasar, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the local context when intervening in a conflict setting.

Moreover, in the context of foreign actors intervening in protection of civilians, the concept of gender used by the implementing agency adds to the local views and understandings of gender and gender roles. In this case, the ways in which gender interacts with conflict dynamics becomes very complex and the risk of inflicting more harm on the local community increases, particularly if the agency lacks local knowledge (Jose and Medie, 2015: 522).

Partially, the international protection norms themselves distort protection of civilians because of their approach to gender. Charli Carpenter, specialist in gender and political violence, argues that the international security debate excludes vulnerable male civilians from protection due to their focus on women and children which are more appealing to the international public (Carpenter, 2006: 85; 2005: 302/3). This focus on women and children has also been used by humanitarian organizations for fundraising purposes. Particularly in the current refugee crisis vulnerable refugees were represented as women and children, whereas young Arab men are more often associated with terrorism due to media representations and lead to a distorted perception of refugees. Another important mistake of the international community that affects the protection of men is that commonly gender equals women and gender-based violence (GBV) equals violence against women (VAW) leaving out vulnerable men and boys

[21] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: War's Toll on Women", https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/02/syria-wars-toll-women (27.7.2016); Nasar, 2013.

from the GBV discourse (Carpenter, 2006: 86/7). In order to include vulnerable male civilians in the protection discourse, Carpenter argues that sex-selective massacres, forced recruitment and sexual violence against men must be considered as GBV (Carpenter, 2006).

Apart from a gendered approach to protection, also the definition of 'civilians' is often gendered. The IHL does not differentiate between sexes. Civilians are defined negatively as persons who are not members of any state or non-state armed forces[22]. Everyone, even civilians, who is directly taking part in hostilities loses the protection against attacks and may be directly targeted, but only during the time of his/her active participation in hostilities. However, particularly in armed conflicts, sex and age are often used as a shortcut to this distinction. Women, children and elderly are considered civilians and military-age men and young adolescent are considered as 'potential' combatants, and therefore, a threat (Carpenter, 2006: 88/9). Throughout history and cultures, women have been considered to need protection or to be only a possession of the enemy to be taken (Ibid.).

The implications of these reductionist visions of gender essentialism are multiple and many times counter-productive. On the one hand, many vulnerable male civilians are denied psycho-social support and protection, which may encourage them to take up arms or join armed groups for self-protection (Carpenter, 2006: 93). On the other hand, the victimization of women denies women any agency and ignores women's participation in armed groups even though most armed groups have female fighters and women play an important supporting role.

In conclusion it can be said that the effect gender has in conflicts is too important to be ignored in the protection discourse. The predominant gender essentialism is very problematic, counter-productive and lacks smart flexibility. Gender must play a role in identifying the needs and threats of the entire affected population, should never be a shortcut for defining 'civilians'

[22] For more details, see ICRC, Customary IHL, Rule 5. Available online at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_cha_chapter1_rule5 (Accessed: 12.8.2016)

and the concept of gender must be culturally adapted in order to actually improve the situation of civilians and not deteriorate it.

1.4.5 Definition: Civilian Protection

Protection is inherently linked to peace, and taking into consideration Galtung's work, to the concept of violence. Therefore, the definition of protection depends on the understanding of violence. The civilian attribute is particularly relevant in armed conflict and often refers to the opposite to military. However, the complexity of military-civil relations and armed conflicts in general require a broader understanding in order to do justice to all actors and affected people.

The first concept of protection that comes up in armed conflict is the concept of 'protection of civilians' (PoC) based on the IHL. The concept includes the protection of civilians and persons *hors de combat* from direct attacks and inhumane treatment. Moreover, it protects civilians and civilian infrastructure from disproportionate and indiscriminate effects and obliges parties to the conflict to provide access for humanitarian assistance (Svoboda, 2014: 2). The principle of distinction, between civilians and combatants, must apply at all times to states and non-states actors in an international conflict, and through article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and the customary law also applies to non-international armed conflicts. Unfortunately, the Syrian conflict shows that often the customary and codified IHL is not applied by armed actors, and hence, is not enough to protect people suffering from the effects of armed conflict. Other actors then might fill the void, such as INGOs and local civil society organizations.

International non-state actors broadened the traditionally rights-based approach to protection through their pragmatic approach. Figure 7 below shows some examples of definitions of protection of INGOs.

Figure 7: Definitions of Protection

Box 1: Agency approaches to protection

- ICRC: Protection encompasses those activities aimed at preventing and/or putting an end to violations of the rights of individuals and ensuring that authorities and belligerents meet their obligations in accordance with the letter and the spirit of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and other fundamental rules which protect individuals in situations of violence. These activities seek to affect the causes of abuses, not their consequences.
- UNHCR: a range of concrete activities that ensure that all women, men, girls and boys of concern to UNHCR have equal access to and enjoyment of their rights in accordance with international law. The ultimate goal of these activities is to help them rebuild their lives within a reasonable amount of time.
- UNICEF and Save the Children: freedom from violence, injury or abuse, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation.
- OCHA and International Rescue Committee: all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with international human rights law, IHL and refugee law.
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC): protection of refugees and IDPs involves protection of rights pursuant to internationally accepted conventions, principles and standards.
- Oxfam: safety from violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.
- MSF-H: freedom from violence, abuse and deliberate neglect.
- WFP: safe and dignified programming.

Source: O'Callaghan and Pantuliano, 2007: 2

Using Galtung's three types of violence defined in sub-section 1.2.2 – direct, structural and cultural violence – all approaches to protection address direct and structural violence, however, cultural violence is often not explicitly mentioned. Therefore, I argue that a definition of protection must be based on addressing all three types of violence, particularly as cultural violence is often used to legitimize structural and direct violence.

Community-based protection, civilian self-protection (for definition see Figure 8) and unarmed civilian peacekeeping are three concepts that inspired the conceptualization of civilian protection for this thesis.

The first two concepts stress the grassroots characteristic of protection in cases where international presence is limited or completely absent as it is the case in certain areas in Syria. However, these two concepts may include also violent forms of protection. UCP, on the other hand, stresses the nonviolent approach to protection that is central for this thesis. UCP is a civil and society-driven peacekeeping and includes monitoring ceasefires and other agreements, as well as "protecting civilians from armed violence"

Figure 8: Definition of Civilian Self-Protection

Box 2: Civilian Self-Protection

"We conceptualize civilian self-protection (CSP) as activities undertaken during armed conflict (international or non-international) to preserve physical integrity in which the primary decision maker is a civilian or group of civilians." (Jose and Medie, 2015: 516)

Source: Jose and Medie, 2015: 516

(Engelbrecht and Kaushik, 2015: 45). Taking these approaches to protection into account, and adding the fundamental ingredient highlighted by this statement of Bonwick:

> Protection is fundamentally about people. At its simplest, it is the challenge of helping people affected by conflict to stay safe - free from violence or fear, from coercion, and from the deliberate deprivation of means of survival (Darcy and Hofmann 2003). A protection assessment does not start with an abstract analysis of rights, but with the common sense question 'Who needs protection from what?' (Bonwick, 2006: 271)

I define civilian protection for the purpose of this thesis as *all nonviolent efforts aiming to prevent, reduce or transform direct, structural or cultural violence undertaken by civilian and community-based actors.*

Conclusion

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations for this thesis and explains the backgrounds, evolutions and limitations of the concepts employed. Almost all concepts have been criticized not to take into consideration the people directly affected, but instead to be part of a dominant, Western system. This study tries to broaden the conventional understandings of the concepts and to include a broader range of aspects which are relevant to the Syrian context, such as considerations from Islam, Arabic sociology and Middle Eastern history. The following chapters of this thesis aim to apply and discuss in detail these concepts in the Syrian context. In order to do that, the next chapter discusses the specificities of civil society in the context of armed conflict, illustrated by the case study of Idlib.

Chapter Two – Civil Society in Armed Conflict: Opportunities and Challenges for CSOs in Idlib

Image: School caravan in IDP camp close to Atareb, Aleppo countryside. Source: Kermalik 4U

Chapter Two discusses the impact of armed conflict on civil society, particularly in the case of Syria, in several ways. Firstly, by analyzing the history, meaning and realities of civil society, secondly, by mapping civil society in Idlib. After that, the different roles and functions of civil society are outlined. In the last section, the impacts of armed conflict on civil society's space are discussed and illustrated.

2.1 History, Meanings and Realities of Civil Society in Syria

The understanding of civil society depends on the historical, political and societal context. For most Syrians nowadays, civil society did not exist before the Syrian uprising in 2011. In order to take into account and understand this perception, the historical background and current dynamics of Syria's society need to be considered. Therefore, I divide this section into two parts: Syria's civil society prior to 2011 and since 2011. Being aware of the limited secondary resources available, I intend to present a short and surely incomplete picture of the history of Syria's civil society, principally based on the writings on governance and civil society in Syria of Rana Khalaf and Raymond Hinnebusch[23]. Despite its considerable limitation, this short overview is important in situating the current social and political dynamics, in understanding their underlying assumptions, and hence in creating successful peace talks (Khalaf, 2015: 43).

2.1.1 Prior to 2011: Between Illegality and State Control

In one of the rare studies on Syrian civil society prior to 2011, Raymond Hinnebusch points out that the early civil society in Syria shows some similarities to the European experience. At the early stage of civil society guilds, religious sects, professional associations

[23] Rana Khalaf, an expert on Syria, linking academic work to civil society and policy-making; Raymond Hinnebusch, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St. Andrews

and business groups are often considered to constitute civil society (Hinnebusch, 1993: 243). This holds true for European and Arab history.

During the Ottoman rule, a relatively liberal Law on Associations was proclaimed in 1909[24]. This may explain why many associations emerged in Syria at the beginning of the 20th century. Most of these associations pursued charitable aims such as supporting orphans, widows, elderly and the poor (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6).

Under the French Mandate, movements asking independence gained more support than movements addressing the social questions due to the political situation. During this period, particularly artisans and laborers took advantage of their relative freedom and organized massive strikes that coincided with serious economic and political crises in the Levant and thus threatened the French Mandate. Hence, the mandatory administration aimed to channel the aspirations of the artisan-labor segment through 'professional organizations' with the law on associations of 1935 (Schad, 2005: 202-3). This law represents the beginning of the end of liberal regulations of the associational life in Syria.

In 1958, the restriction and criminalization of associational life tightened up. The Law No 93 imposed a license issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour for every association and criminalized acceptance of foreign funds without prior approval by the state. Due to the restrictions imposed by the new law, many civil society organizations did not register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6). When the *Ba'ath* regime took power in 1963 and imposed emergency rules, the state began to take control over all aspects of political and social life in Syria. During the 1960s and 1970s, only few charities and religious associations that were licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour performed their work legally. Registration of new associations completely stopped as the

[24] This Law on Association of 1909 is still in force in Lebanon, which is considered the Arab country with the most liberal law on associations.

political unrest intensified in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the Islamist Uprising[25], and registration remained suspended until late 1990s (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6).

At the end of the Cold War, some 600 associations were registered and legally working in Syria (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6). With the new era, the regime adopted new goals and worked towards economic integration in the global economic system. In 2000, when Bashar Al-Assad came to power, he intended to convey an image of modernization and economic opening. However, the modernization and liberalization of civil society was done through the First Lady's initiative to revive civil society. Even though restrictions to establish new association were alleviated officially, the regime still controlled the actors, aims and strategies of civil society (Khalaf et al., 2014: 7). Nonetheless, civil society enjoyed enough space between 1998 and 2003 for the nonviolent *Daraya movement*[26] to appear. The regime perceived the anti-bribery messages, the city clean-up and their ability to mobilize people for peaceful anti-Iraq-War protests organized by the local youth as a threat and arrested the activists behind the movement (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6; Mashallah, 2011). In the early 2000s, civil society became increasingly associated with opposition (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6).

The Lebanon crisis in 2005[27] presented a new opportunity for the regime to knock down any citizen movement and reinsert restrictions on associational life. On the other hand, the regime promoted an image of a reviving civil society by creating an NGO platform called Syria Trust for Development that remained under the umbrella of the First Lady and can be considered as GONGOs (Government organized non-governmental organizations) (Khalaf et al., 2014: 6). In 2010, Syria even hosted the first NGO International Development Conference on the

[25] The Islamist Uprising in Syria took place from 1976 until 1982 and were revolts and armed insurgencies organised by predominantly members of the Muslim Brotherhood in response to the marginalization and oppression imposed by the *Ba'ath* regime. The Uprising ended with the bloody crackdown of the movements in Hama in 1982.

[26] A group of students from *Daraya* on the outskirts of Damascus conducted some nonviolent actions of civil disobedience and advocacy such as a silent protest against the war in Iraq, distribution of anti-corruption calendars and city clean up between 1998-2003.

[27] Mass protests in Beirut forced the Syrian military to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005. Syria was present in Lebanon since 1976. The movement is also known as the Cedar Revolution.

emerging role of civil society in development. Even though many active citizens in Syria were reluctant to be part of the Syria Trust due to its affiliation with the regime, it offered the only opportunity to implement important development projects (Ibid.).

Due to the restrictive environment and the difficulties to work legally, many local initiatives remained informal and implemented small-scale social projects. One example is the reactions to the drought in 2008-09 that hit particularly the northeastern regions of Syria and forced many farmers to migrate to the cities where they lived in camps. Informal groups and neighbors tried to help the displaced population as much as they could. However, security forces discouraged private initiatives to help the displaced (De Chatel, 2014: 527).

2.1.2 Since 2011: A new Civil Society?

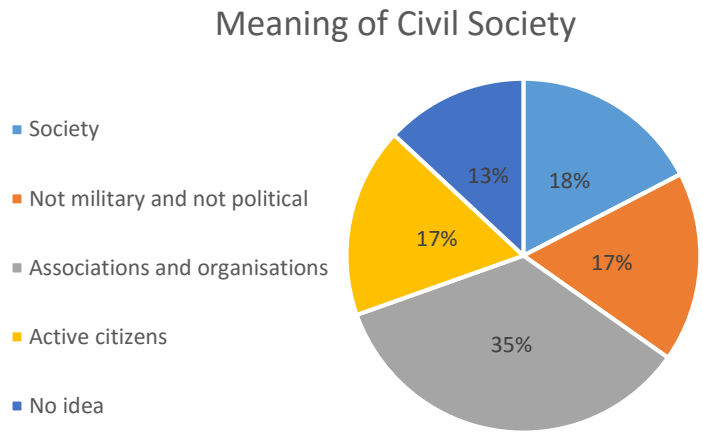
Considering the Islamist Uprising in the late 1970s, the nonviolent *Daraya movement* in the early 2000s and the private initiatives to help IDPs in 2009, it becomes clear that the uprising in 2011 can be traced back to catalysts within civil society. A closer look at the *Daraya movement* shows, that the same persons founding the movement in 1998 were involved in organizing the first protests in 2011 (Mashallah, 2011). Hence, it might be more appropriate to speak about the 'awakening' of Syria's civil society instead of the 'emergence'.

There are many different stories about how the protest turned violent. Each side of the conflict is framing the events differently. The purpose of this thesis is not to explain the resort to violence of either side, but to analyze how civil society is dealing with this violence *post facto*.

With the weakening or the total breakdown of state structures in some areas of Syria, particularly in the North, the civil society stepped in and took over state functions. The Local Coordination Committees (LCC) established in early 2011 to organize local protests have gradually been transformed into CSOs or local councils (LCs).

In a study I conducted in 2015 with 20 humanitarian CSOs based in Turkey[28], on civil society in humanitarian and development cooperation, a questionnaire was developed to inquire about the meaning of civil society for the Syrians working in the humanitarian sector. Questions such as "What does the term civil society mean to you?" and "What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear it?" were not easy to answer for most respondents. Everyone has heard the term before, but for most respondents it was difficult to formulate their ideas.

Figure 9: Meaning of Civil Society for Syrian CSOs



Source: own elaboration

Figure 9 shows that there were predominantly two perceptions of the term: On the one hand, civil society was understood as humanitarian associations and organizations (35%), which reflects the reality on the ground. On the other hand, civil society was seen as society in general (18%) or as the non-military and non-political part of society (17%). Another 17% of the interviewees understood civil society as active citizens in a society. The understanding of civil society as humanitarian organization has an important impact on the society. As humanitarian organizations often claim to be non-political, but civil society is a highly political concept, the emerging civil society is less concerned with grassroots democracy and governance than with fitting the specific donor requirements.

As demonstrated in the previous sub-section, independent civil society is a new experience for Syrians and only possible in areas out of state control. This experience shapes also their understanding of civil society and explains the widespread understanding of civil

[28] See Appendix 3

society as being "society". These specific patterns of Syria's re-emerging civil society explain also the predominant understanding of civil society as "associations and organizations" and "active citizens" that were particularly important in the early stages of Syria's "new" civil society and remain very important inside Syria.

2.2 Mapping the Actors

This section presents the main civil society actors in Idlib and some specific characteristics of Idlib's civil society. The main actors identified are: specialized protection CSOs, youth groups, women's groups, humanitarian CSOs, professional associations, media activists, Human Rights groups, academia, religious leaders, community leaders and local councils.

2.2.1 CSOs: Who Are the Actors on the Ground?

As civil society is a fluid and vague concept it is hard to clearly define its actors. For the purpose of this thesis, I have defined local CSOs as *individuals, groups, movements and organizations that are rooted in the community, whose members share specific interests and values and which use nonviolent tools to advance their cause* (see sub-section 1.3.4). I base my categorization of CSOs on the literature on civil society, adapting it to the Syrian case (Swisspeace et al., 2016; Khalaf, 2015: 48; Van Tongeren et al., 2005). For the purpose of this thesis, ten different types of CSOs and the Local Councils as quasi-governmental organizations have been identified as being particularly relevant[29]. Even though I use the word 'organization', not all CSOs fit strictly into the definition of organizations, as they may be individuals, institutes or movements.

[29] See Appendix 1

1) Specialized Protection Organization (Syria Civil Defense)

When the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas started, people living in the targeted areas, started to help each other. But soon they felt the need to work more organized in order to save more lives. Hence, volunteers created local groups that were the first to be on a bombing site and to rescue the people under the rubble. Soon the different groups started to coordinate with each other and in 2014 the Syria Civil Defense (SCD)[30] was officially founded. However, local teams in Aleppo and Idlib have been working for more than a year prior to the official establishment, depending on the area.

According to the Syria Civil Defense homepage, their mission is "to save the greatest number of lives in the shortest possible time and to minimize further injury to people and damage to property." (Syria Civil Defense [SCD], n.d.). The SCD developed a strict code of conduct and adheres to values such as humanitarianism, impartiality and neutrality (SCD, n.d.; int.) Over time, their field of activities broadened and now includes many different tasks[31].

The Syria Civil Defense enjoys great respect that reaches beyond the local communities. Often, local councils, health facilities and humanitarian organizations work closely with SCD. Volunteers with SCD acquired a lot of expertise and are respected by the people because they risk their lives every day to rescue others. (interview 2, 17, 18)

[30] Syria Civil Defense is also known as the 'White Helmets', named after the helmets they used in their search and rescue work.

[31] Tasks include: warning the civilian population of attacks and dangers, urban search and rescue, evacuation of the civilian population from areas into which fighting is expected, provision of medical services – including first aid – at the point of injury, emergency transportation, fire-fighting, management of emergency shelters, detection and marking of danger areas (such as areas with unexploded ordnance), provision of emergency accommodation and supplies, emergency repair of indispensable public utilities, decontamination, demining and similar protective measures, assistance in the preservation of objects essential for survival, emergency assistance in the restoration and maintenance of order in distressed areas, emergency disposal of the dead, management of blackout measures, awareness campaigns and risk education. (SCD, n.d.; int.)

2) Youth Groups

Youth groups and youth initiatives are initiated by young people or particularly design for youth. There is no strict age limit of who is considered youth, child or adult, the boundaries are fluid (Carter and Shipler, 2005: 148). For this study, three youth groups that work in different fields have been interviewed: in the fields of sports, community organization[32] and art. The three youth groups represent very well the diversity of approaches and dynamics in Syria's civil society.

The art movement, actually a film festival, was founded by a group of young Syrians who did art projects in IDP camps in 2009 with the drought affected population. In 2011, most of the members of this group started to work in the field of media, producing reports and documentaries for the international media. In 2014, they decided to organize a film festival and provided training for citizen journalist inside Syria. The idea was to enable people to improve the quality of their material and to produce the best possible films with limited resources. But also, they want to spread the art of filmmaking, because art remains, whereas news disappears fast. The youth group managed to establish a film festival that has screened the short films inside Syria, but also in neighboring countries and in Europe. This film festival with a growing international reputation is able to spread the voices of Syrians across conflict lines and international borders, mainly thanks to smart phones and social media. At the beginning, they focused more on spreading the film festival internationally, this year however, after taking into consideration feedback from inside Syria, they focused on organizing as many screenings inside Syria as possible, in order to connect Syrians across conflict lines.

The sports club was established by a football trainer, who laid down the arms after the armed struggle did not represent his ideas anymore. As early as 2012, he started to build up football teams for children and youth in rural Idlib. Today there are 40 different teams in Idlib

[32] Community (or social) organization, in Arabic التنظيم المجتمعي, refers to a community-based leadership to bring about social change through capacity building of new leaders.

and Aleppo countryside that play football with each other. But the sport serves at the same time as psycho-social support for the boys and as a space for dialogue. In many villages, there is no part of life left untouched by the war, and it is difficult to keep the children in school[33]. Hence, sports clubs and other recreational and educational groups for boys and girls are often the only alternative to keep children and young adults safe from the armed conflict and its consequences, such as recruitment, trafficking, early marriage, drug abuse and other harmful consequences.

The youth group working in community organization for social change was created in 2015 as a result of a training the founding members attended in Syria. A group of youth that participated in the training decided to stay together and continue working on their ideas. They continued the trainings and workshops in order to be able to build a more participatory society based on dialogue. These workshops can serve as an important platform for social change and dialogue between the different sectors of the society. The problem however is often that not all segments of society are equally represented. For the youth group interviewed, the participation of women is between 15-20% and very low when compared to the fact that women make up half of the society.

Youth groups are as diverse as the Syrian society. Due to the demographic structure of Syria, with an estimated median age of 23.3 years in 2014 (CIA World Factbook), the youth represents an important part of Syria's society. At the same time, the youth is affected disproportionally by the war, together with children. Youth face barriers in continuing their studies, rising youth unemployment throughout the country and particularly young men face forced conscription. For these reasons, many young people chose to leave Syria.

The youth remaining in Syria, however, represents an important and valuable resource for conflict transformation. On the one hand, because of their creative and innovative approaches to the challenges of the armed conflict, on the other hand, because armed groups

[33] Schools have also been used by armed groups to recruit new fighters or to find young brides. Therefore, some parents took out their children from school because it was not safe for the children anymore.

are made up of mostly young men, hence, youth groups have a more direct link to them and are able to open channels for dialogue (Carter and Shipler, 2005: 149-151). This argument can be partly supported by this study; as most young Syrians have friends or relatives that joined armed groups and there is also an increasing number of young men who are looking for alternative employment opportunities in order to leave the armed groups.

The relationship between the youth and older generations can be complicated. Some youth leaders are worried that the 'old elite' is about to take over what young people have started and that this 'old elite' does not represent the ideas and values of the youth (field notes, 28.4.2016). This clash between generations is accentuated by the conflict. (Int. 1, 4, 12)

3) Women's Groups

A women's group is defined by its focus on women and by its members being predominantly women. Because conflicts affect women and men differently, it is important to apply a gender lens, and women's groups are often able to bring specific issues into light that otherwise would be neglected due to the underrepresentation of women (Schirch and Sewak, 2005: 103-4). A good example is the phenomenon of early marriage. For many men, and women too, the consequences of marrying off a girl before a certain age are not clear. Health implications of an adolescent pregnancy for mother and child[34], the effect of illiterate mothers on the children, not to mention the psychological impact for the girl are often not taken into consideration when discussing the marriage of a girl under 18.

The conflict has a significant impact, positive and/or negative, on women. On the empowering side, women are often ascribed more responsibilities because many men are absent during armed conflicts. Hence, women are able to renegotiate their roles in the public and

[34] For more information, see WHO, http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/maternal/adolescent_pregnancy/en/ accessed on 5.9.2016.

private sphere. On the disempowering side, women are particularly vulnerable when their social safety net is disrupted, when they are displaced or when they become the single heads of the household. In some areas in Syria, including some parts of Idlib, the strict Islamic rule imposed by some extremist groups further limits women's participation in public life. Despite serious obstacles and restriction, women's groups emerged throughout the country. There are some big and important women's groups and female leaders that gained respect and acknowledgement from their communities and beyond due to their important work. (Int. 3, 11)

4) Humanitarian Organization

In Syria, most civil society organizations provide to some extent humanitarian assistance, due to the great need and the demand for a more immediate and localized response (see sub-section 2.3.4). However, there are many organizations with an exclusively humanitarian goal. Humanitarian organizations differ in size, approach, services and regional scope.

The impact of humanitarian organization on the communities is two sided. On the one hand, they provide life-saving and urgently needed humanitarian assistance. On the other side, as the organizations working inside Syria are themselves dependent on outside donors, their approaches to provide relief are sometimes destructive, benefitting criminal networks or creating new dependencies. Humanitarian organizations depending on local resources can decide themselves on the allocation of these resources; however, these resources are by far not enough to address the needs of the communities. Bigger organizations with international links and access to foreign funds may be able to mobilize important resources, however, they might be limited in choosing the best allocation due to donor requirements and inflexible funding. (Int. 6, 10)

5) Professional Associations

Professional groups or associations are commonly defined as non-profit groups that aim to further a certain profession through advocacy, training and capacity building. In the Syrian context, many people do not work anymore as per their education and professional experience due to the conflict. Nonetheless, there are some professional associations, especially lawyers and teachers, which have been founded during the conflict in order to help the people with respect to their knowledge and skills.

Due to their previous experience and expertise, professional associations are more confident in their work and are able to assess their work critically, also related to their impact on conflict transformation. However, it is important for professional associations to be embedded in the broader civil society in order to have a constructive impact on all sectors of society. Both professional associations interviewed are working closely with humanitarian CSOs and specialized protection CSOs, due to the scope of their expertise in health and demining. (Int. 5, 16)

6) Media Activists

The repression of journalists and the expulsion of international media gave rise to a new form of journalism in Syria, called citizen journalism. “When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that’s citizen journalism.” (Rosen, 2008 as cited in Lewis et al., 2010: 4). In Syria, ordinary people started to film and document the demonstration at the beginning, and the violence later with their smartphones. At home, they upload the material on social media. Some citizen journalists have been contracted by international media outlets, but their work is very dangerous as they do not benefit from any protection, and moreover, their reports often lack credibility as they are difficult to verify.

According to Annabel McGoldrick and Jake Lynch[35], peace journalism and conflict sensitive reporting can be a way to break the cycle of violent and an entry point for conflict transformation (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2000). However, this study shows that the potential of the media for conflict transformation has been hardly touched. Most media activists work independently and do not receive relevant training and capacity building. Hence, investing more in responsible and conflict sensitive media work could be an entry point for conflict transformation in Syria.

Particularly, as media activists are risking their life to the same extent as medical staff and rescue teams, they should also be offered the possibility to positively impact their communities. (Int.7, 13)

7) Human Rights Group

Their mission is to document human rights violations and train people in human rights and transitional justice. One possible explanation for the absence of human rights organization is that human rights is closely linked to politics in the Syrian conflict and hence it can be risky to work openly in the field of human rights. A second explanation could be the erosion of international law in Syria and the lack of compliance by all parties involved. This led to a frustration and deception of international law and human rights, which became words with no meanings for many Syrians. (Int. 14)

8) Academia and Research

Civil society organizations engaging in the collection, analysis and distribution of information put themselves between the frontlines. The CSO participating in the study is based in Turkey, but works closely with communities inside Syria in order to collect and verify data. Their role is to analyze data and to share their knowledge with international bodies. (Int. 19))

[35] Annabel McGoldrick and Jake Lynch are the main contributors to the Peace Journalism debate.

9) Religious Leaders

Religion is very important for most Syrians in Idlib. Already before 2011, mosques could be a place of dialogue, encounters and discussions about the social problems in Syria (Mashallah, 2011). With the uprising in 2011, mosques experienced a 'revival' and attracted many young people. Often demonstrations took place on Fridays after the Friday prayer. Religious figures, local imams and mosques took over important roles in supervising humanitarian aid distribution, psycho-social support as well as evacuation and providing shelter to many IDPs (NGO Forum, 2015b). But five years into the conflict, with rising extremism, religion is being abused for political power struggles. As in some villages armed groups appoint the local sheikh or imam.

The imam interviewed in this study has been imam of the village for 2 years. The conflict affected the role and the scope of work of the imam. With the increasing need and threats to his community, the imam sees his role adapt to the situation and now his role includes the supervision of aid distribution, awareness raising, psycho-social support and mediation. He perceives the role of religious leaders as being a third part to the conflict that can play an important role in conflict transformation and mediation.

Independent religious leaders are often respected by all sides and are therefore able to transcend conflict lines. However, the dialogue between different religions and sects is becoming increasingly difficult because of the sectarianism that is used for political purposes. Religious figures could play a more active role in bridging between different sects and religions in order to deescalate the conflict. (Int. 8)

10) Community Leader

In a conflictive environment, local leadership is shifting continuously. Old leaderships are reinforced or broken, traditional leaderships gain or lose importance and new structures and personalities may appear. The leadership structures that were in place in rural Idlib directly stem from the Ottoman Empire. The local *mukhtar* (مختار literally 'the chosen') represented

the highest level of community leadership and had an important function in administrative tasks and conflict resolution. However, the *Ba'ath* regime limited the *mukhtar's* role to a uniquely administrative one without any more real power. Nevertheless, local *mukhtar* exerted a certain power in their communities, mostly due to their inherited legitimacy as community leaders. With the uprising in 2011, old structures were challenged, particularly in areas out of state control, and new leaders arose. These new leaders are either backed by armed groups, or they gained legitimacy through their work during the conflict. For pre-2011 *mukhtar* and *wujaha* (Arabic for 'notables') the question on which side they were, became inevitable. Many hesitated and lost legitimacy in the eyes of the opposition from the first day. Others used their relationships to help the people, organized relief work and ensured public goods, such as water and electricity, through which they gained renewed legitimacy. (field notes, 14.5.2016; int. 20)

11) Local Council

Local Councils (LC) emerged in areas out of state control taking over the state administration. Even though LCs are not actually CSO as they are affiliated with the Interim Government, they can play an important role in supporting CSOs. Their scope, composition and functions vary from village to village. Some LCs are democratically elected, others are appointed by armed groups, or they are negotiated, depending on the forces on the ground. Some LCs have been working since 2011, others for less than one year, depending on when the regime forces retreated from their village. LCs are usually responsible on the village level, then there are City Councils (CCs) and on the governorate level the provincial council, which is elected by the local city and village councils. Most local councils have close relations with the local CSOs.

Local council's impact on the community vary greatly. Some local councils have been working for several years, are democratically elected and well established. Hence, they typically have a greater impact on the community and wield more respect from the people. Other LCs are relatively young and depend on the armed groups controlling their territory. The

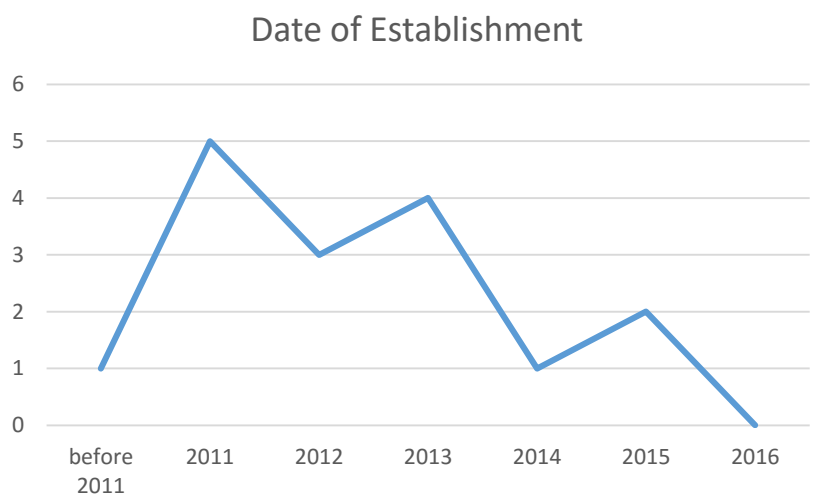
support of the local community for the LCs depend also on the performance of LC; namely if the LC is able to bring humanitarian aid, provide services and protection. (Etilaf (n.d.); int. 9, 15)

2.2.2 Characteristics of CSOs: Context Specific and Based on Voluntarism

Date of Establishment

As mentioned under 2.1.2, most Syrian organizations started off as spontaneous, voluntary, informal associations with very fluid internal structures, vertical links and no formal division of labor (Gidron et al. 2002, 230-1 as cited in Dudouet, 2007: 25). This is also true for the Syrian CSOs. Most of them started to work in 2011, or when the impact of the conflict reached their village. If they had enough funding, CSOs tried to register 1-2 years after they started to work. Due to the obstacles in registration and bureaucratic difficulties, it does not make sense to focus on the date of legal registration, but more importantly of the date of establishment. Many CSOs are not able to register due to political or financial barriers.

Figure 10: Date of Establishment of CSOs



Source: own elaboration

Staff

All CSOs interviewed for this thesis depend strongly on volunteers. However, volunteering does not mean the act is void of money transactions. Some CSOs are able to pay a small salary or some compensation from time to time. However, the money is not enough to

sustain their lives or sufficient to meet the demands of a stable income. Therefore, they can be considered as volunteers.

The size of the CSOs studied fit into three categories: small organizations with less than 10 staff members, medium size organization with 10-30 staff and big organizations with more than 100 staff members. More than three quarter of the CSOs were small and medium sized and less than a quarter are big.

Women's participation in Syrian CSOs is weak in general, but steadily increasing as CSOs become aware of the importance of including women (Khalaf et al., 2014: 21; interviews). Out of the 20 CSOs data on women's participation of 13 CSOs is available. From these 13 CSOs, 6 (46%) have no female participation, 2 (15%) have less than a third of women, 3 CSOs have more than a 30% of women and only the two women's groups have a predominantly female workforce. CSOs with no participation of women were often not aware of the lack of female participation. The sports club could not include girls due to cultural restrictions, particularly within Syria. In Turkey, they are thinking about establishing a team for girls in order to provide opportunities for girls to experience the benefits from sport and the psycho-social support associated with it. Some CSOs have experienced the benefit of an increased female participation, particularly the health professional association and the youth group working with art, and encourage female participation in future projects.

2.3 Function and Role of Civil Society in Conflict Settings

The armed conflict has an important impact on the form, space and function of civil society. This section discusses how violent conflict may affect organizations, their identities, as well as their roles and functions in conflict transformation. There are two common approaches to analyze the role of civil society: actor-based approach and functional approach. I use the actor-based approach to discuss the impact of armed conflict on organizational

structures and identities, and the functional approach to discuss the changing functions and roles brought about by violent conflict.

2.3.1 Actor-Based Approach: Impact on Organizations and their Identity

In a comparative study on peace organizations in South Africa, Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland, it was found that most organizations started off as spontaneous, voluntary, informal associations with very fluid internal structures, vertical links and no formal division of labor (Gidron et al. 2002, 230-1 as cited in Dudouet, 2007: 25). The same is true for Syrian CSOs (see section 2.2) which were created as informal groupings and later institutionalized and while often adopting the form of NGOs. However, this *NGOization* excludes many different CSOs, reduces civil society to one single organizational form and depoliticizes social movements (Gender Dictionary, 2016).

During armed conflicts, there are considerable resources coming into the conflict areas, however, newly emerging CSOs often lack capabilities to deal with huge amounts of funding and resources.

Civil society also becomes divided along conflict lines, which may affect their definition of membership and the organization's identity. On the one hand, CSOs can adopt inclusive memberships and identities open to all people, on the other hand, CSOs can also adopt exclusive memberships and identities, restricting their work on a certain issue, certain geographic area or in association with certain people (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011). Particularly in conflict situation, CSOs adopt exclusive identities in order not to be affiliated with political or armed actors, or in order to protect themselves.

However, the actor-based approach can be problematic because often donors and implementing agencies have a limited understanding of civil society and view CSOs equal to NGOs (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 25; Belloni, 2001: 167). Due to restrictive definitions of civil society and CSOs, only a certain type of CSOs are supported, and often, these are not

grassroots organizations (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 51). Moreover, donor agendas and requirements affect CSOs accountability that is often directed up-wards instead of down-wards towards beneficiaries (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 12; and Belloni, 2001: 173-4).

2.3.2. Functional Approach: Role and Function of Civil Society in Conflict Transformation

Another possible approach to analyze civil society is the functional approach. Civil society's functions and roles in the social sphere changes in the different stages of the conflict. At the same time, the CSOs impact may change as well. There are mainly seven functions of civil society in peacebuilding proposed by Paffenholz and Spurk (2006). I shortly present all seven functions and later focus on the protection aspect in armed conflict.

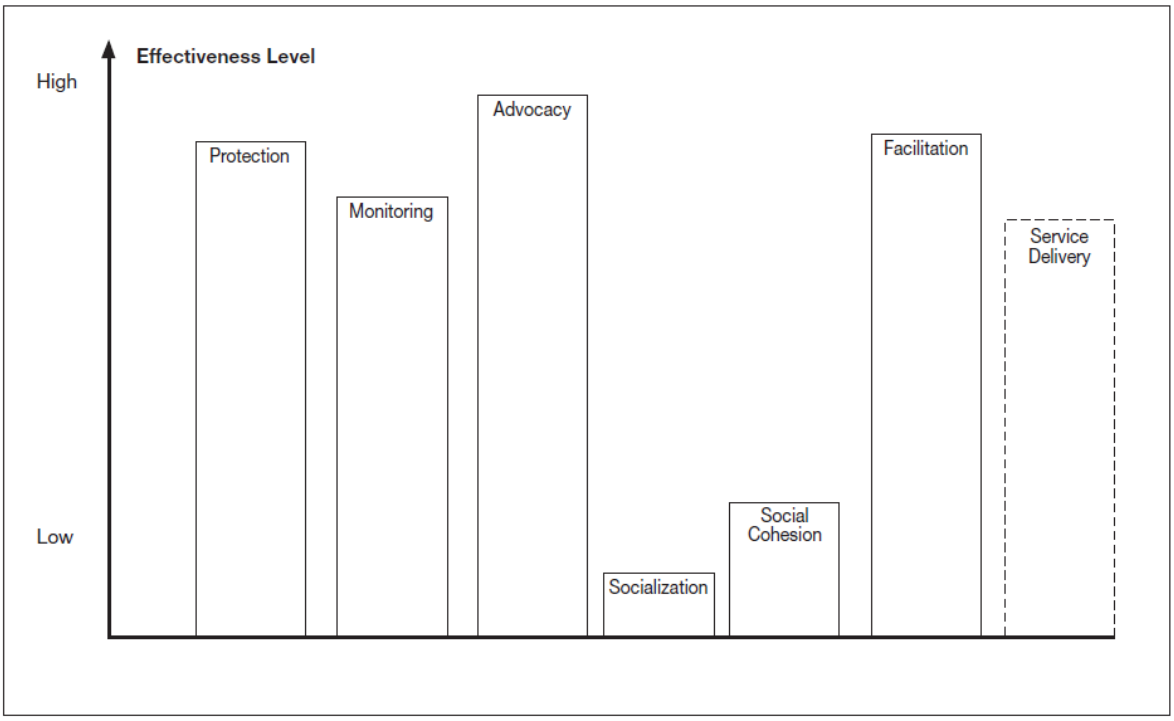
Seven Functions in Peacebuilding

Based on Merkel and Lauth's as well as Edwards' work, Paffenholz (2009) proposes seven functions of civil society in peacebuilding:

- Protection against violence;
- Monitoring;
- Advocacy;
- Socialization;
- Inter-group social cohesion;
- Facilitation of dialogue; and
- Service delivery. (Paffenholz, 2009: 5)

According to Paffenholz, the different functions have different relevance depending on the stage of the conflict. However, often the specific functions are not supported according to their relevance. For instance, during armed conflict, monitoring and protection functions are highly relevant, however, they often remain under-supported (Paffenholz, 2009:8-9). Figure 11 below shows the effectiveness of the different functions.

Figure 11: Level of Effectiveness of Functions



Source: Paffenholz, 2009: 12

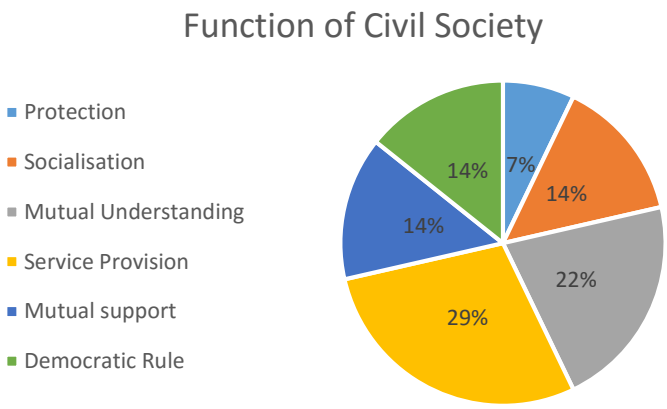
Even though socialization and social cohesion are the least effective, particularly during armed conflict, these activities remain the most supported, whereas protection and monitoring often lack funding despite their high relevance and effectiveness.

These seven functions are also interdependent. For instance, is monitoring a precondition for protection, and protection a precondition for other peacebuilding activities (Paffenholz, 2009: 18).

It is highly disputed if service delivery plays a role in peacebuilding. Some scholars and practitioners support the assumption that service delivery destroys local economies, disempowers local civil society and creates dependencies (Belloni, 2001: 165). Especially in protracted conflicts, there need to be alternatives to simplistic service delivery. In emergency situations, however, service delivery is necessary. Hence, Paffenholz and Spurk consider service delivery not as a separate function for peacebuilding, but as an entry point for other peacebuilding activities (2006: 14).

Nevertheless, in Syria, most CSOs see their main function in service provision. This can be explained by the absence of state structures. Hence, civil society's role is perceived to take over state functions such as service provision (29%), protecting people from violence (7%), promoting values of solidarity and respect (14%) and democratic rule (14%) (Figure 12). The experience of wide spread violence and high levels of destruction explain the special concern of civil society's role in promoting mutual understanding (22%) and support (14%).

Figure 12: Functions of Syria's Civil Society

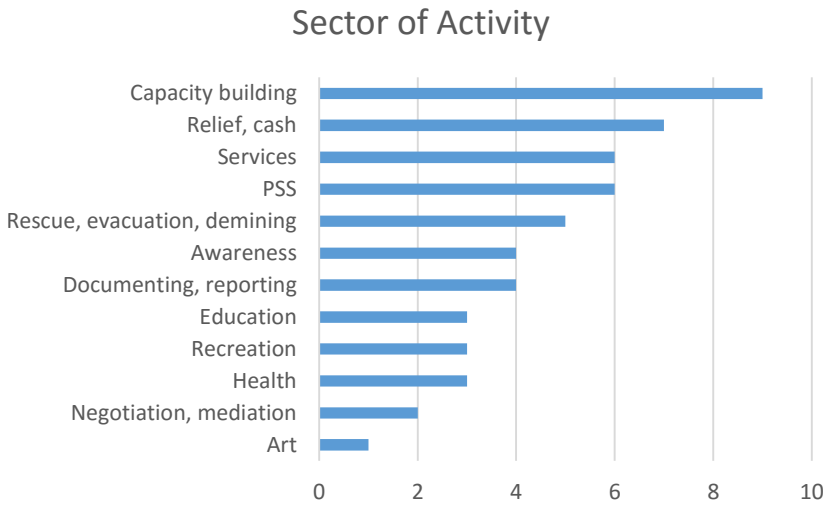


Source: own elaboration

2.3.3 Scope of activities: Addressing Different Issues?

There is a positive correlation between the diversity of Syria's civil society and the diversity of their sectors of activity. Interestingly, almost half of the CSOs interviewed engage in capacity building in different fields. Other important sectors are relief, public services, and psycho-social support. In this sub-section the sectors of activities are discussed in more detail, in order to provide a basis for analyzing their role in protection and conflict transformation.

Figure 13: Scope of Activities of CSOs in Idlib



Source: own elaboration

A) Capacity building

All women's groups, professional associations, humanitarian organizations, human rights organization and youth groups (except the sports club) being part of this research engage in capacity building. All other types of CSOs did not mention any capacity building or trainings. The capacity building is predominantly organized through workshops and trainings. Each CSO provides trainings in its respective field of expertise. Interestingly, the humanitarian organizations focus particularly on first aid training, and the smaller women's group organizes training for teachers and medical training for women.

B) Relief: In-kind and Cash

Relief includes distribution of food and non-food items, as well as cash assistance. Seven of the interviewed CSOs provide relief. For the humanitarian organizations, relief is one of the most important sectors. But also the civil defense teams, religious leaders, women's groups and LCs help in relief work. Interestingly, the LC in the small village and the small women's group engage in relief, whereas their bigger counterparts did not explicitly mention relief as a core sector. This can be explained on the one hand due to the simplicity of relief work such as food baskets, hygiene kits distribution or cash assistance, compared to more sustainable development projects such as WASH projects or infrastructure that need more staff and capabilities. On the other hand, the two CSOs are based in areas that host a great number of IDPs and have important camps in their vicinity, and hence, face a greater need for relief assistance.

C) Services

Services include public goods such as transportation, electricity, water, sewage, infrastructure and maintenance. LC as a quasi-governmental local authority is the main entity responsible for providing services to the community. But also the civil defense helps in road maintenance, civil work and clean-up efforts. The big humanitarian organization also works in WASH, provides water and electricity to camps, and hire people to work in maintenance. The

small women's group also works in the rehabilitation of schools and provides transportation between the camps and the village.

D) Psycho-Social Support (PSS)

Almost all interviewees agreed that the children are disproportionally affected by the armed conflict and that civil society has a special responsibility to limit the impact of violence on children. But also that all people are affected by violence, stress and the bad situation. One tool to deal with this is through psycho-social support. The CSOs providing PSS are both women's groups, the small humanitarian organization, the religious leader participating in this research, the professional association (health) and indirectly the youth group (sport club).

E) Rescue, Evacuation, and Demining

The main CSO working in rescue and evacuation is the civil defense. They are specialized, trained and best equipped to perform this work. Apart from SCD teams, one professional association works in demining and the small humanitarian organizations conduct rescue work and evacuations because they are specialized in working on the frontlines of the armed conflict. However, two critical challenges all actors in the field reported facing are a lack of adequate equipment and a functioning early warning system.

F) Awareness Raising

Civil Defense teams and the professional association specialized in demining, engage in awareness raising on how to behave in attacks, how to deal with unexploded ordnances and how to spot potential dangers. A second type of CSO engaging in awareness raising are the religious leaders. However, the women's groups did not explicitly mention awareness campaigns, they indirectly participate in awareness raising in gender issues and GBV.

G) Documenting and Reporting

In documenting and reporting there are exclusively media activists, human rights organization and academia involved. Due to the highly politicized context, they focus on

gathering data and documenting human rights violations, in order to be able to support international advocacy and later persecution of perpetrators.

H) Education

Education is another politicized topic, particularly in armed conflict. Reports point out how the politicization of humanitarian aid and schooling are responsible for a lost generation in Syria (Al-Jazeera, May 29, 2016; Save the Children, 2015). Often schools are funded by one single donor who then imposes a specific curriculum. Unfortunately, it is out of the scope of this research to discuss all the difficulties of education in Syria.

Only three CSOs work in education, both women's groups and the religious leader. Religious education faces less restrictions as most armed factions promote Islamic values. The women's groups on the other hand, support kindergartens, which are not considered as a threat, or have good relationships with the local communities and are not under control of extremist groups.

Schools are also not safe spaces for children anymore. Apart from deliberate attacks on schools, armed groups and criminal gangs use schools for recruitment or to find brides. Girls have been abducted from schools and later released, but only to face stigma from their communities. After these incidents, many families took their girls out of school in order to protect them, and married them as soon as possible (field notes, 16.8.2016).

I) Recreation

The women's groups and the youth group (sports club) pay strong attention to recreational activities, particularly for children and youth. The aim is to take the children out of violent environments and to temporarily escape the negative stress caused by the armed conflict. For the youth, these recreational activities also present a sort of safe space and an alternative to joining armed groups.

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, 322 non-civilian children have been killed according to the Violation Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC) (Violation Documentation

Centre [VDC], n.d.). This number bears silent witness of what is often going unreported: the use of children as fighters or direct support roles for armed groups. A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) prepared in 2014, sheds some light on the recruitment process and the use of children in Syria. The report states mainly that all armed actors use children, even the ones who have official policies in place to prevent the recruitment of minors. Moreover, the reasons why minors join armed groups are diverse and may include revenge, no alternatives, forced recruitment, friends and families that joined before, normalization of violence and many more (HRW, 2014).

A 2003 study carried out by the Australian Institute of Criminology links sport and physical activity to a decrease in antisocial behavior in youth (Morris et al., 2003). The study shows particularly that the effect is important if there was no previous offer of such sports activities and that the effects are even bigger if community service is included in the activity (Morris et al., 2003). Taking into account that children and youth in war zones are joining armed groups for different reasons than youth in *normal* circumstances resort to antisocial behavior. Boredom and the lack of alternatives can be even stronger determinants during armed conflict. On the other hand, armed conflict adds new incentives such as revenge and the glorification of violence. Also the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognizes the importance of youth resilience and community support in order to reduce the involvement of youth in armed violence (OECD, 2011: 19). This thesis supports these findings and stresses the importance of providing alternatives for youth to joining armed groups. However, the simple existence of alternatives may not be enough in itself to prevent young people from joining violent movements. At-risk youth need to be directly targeted and alternative opportunities for livelihood need to be found in some cases[36].

[36] Even though not all non-state armed groups pay monthly salaries to child soldiers and young recruits, there are some protective, monetary or in-kind benefits that may be offered to the families of the fighters, and particularly when they would die fighting (martyrs).

Apart from the important role of offering alternatives for youth to join armed groups, youth groups can also play an important role in helping young people who want to leave armed groups to reintegrate in society. This aspect, however, did not come up in any interview and is one of the important gaps in protection.

J) Health

The health care system in areas outside of state control in Syria has almost completely collapsed. The deliberate attacks on hospitals, medical facilities, ambulances and medical staff have increased steadily. Apart from the Health Directorate (مديرية صحة) that is affiliated with the Interim Government, mostly CSOs provide health services. Both humanitarian organizations interviewed in this study provide medical assistance and the professional association whom specializes in nursing provides training for nurses to work in field hospitals and as community health promoters.

K) Art

Only one CSO interviewed focuses on filmmaking as art, with the aim to create a collective memory that lives longer than the news. Art can have a transformative effect on the creator him/her-self, but also on the audience. However, the interviewee was not fully aware of the transformative potential of art work.

2.4 Space for Civil Society in Conflict Situation

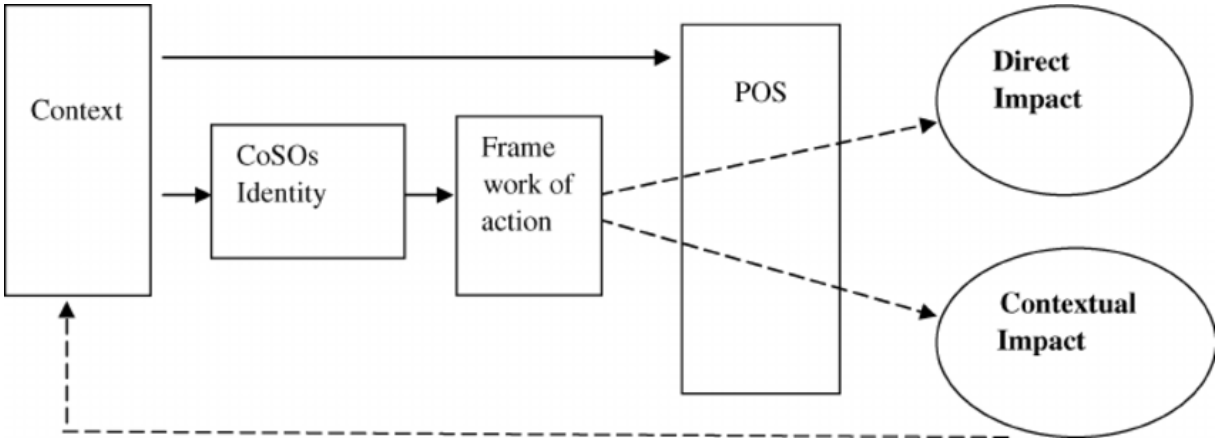
This section deals with the special conditions civil society face in the context of an armed conflict. In a first sub-section, context and the political opportunity structure (POS) are discussed as ways of analyzing the impact of armed conflict on the space of civil society. In the second sub-section, factors affecting the space of civil society are listed and illustrated through examples of the case study in Idlib. Factors can be categorized in direct/physical impact, structural impact and cultural impact.

2.4.1 Context and Political Opportunity Structure

Even though Foucault already stressed the importance of context in shaping civil society, most literature on civil society is based on a Western, peaceful and democratic perspective (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011b: 12). The question arises if this literature is representative for civil society in other contexts? Marchetti and Tocci (2011b) propose an analytical framework in order to assess the impact of civil society in conflict settings[37]. This framework presented in Figure 14 can be summarized as follows:

> A spiral causal chain can thus be stylized as follows: Context shapes the identities of CoSOs. These identities determine their goals and frameworks of actions. In turn, the ability of CoSOs to navigate the POS of conflicts – critically shaped by the original conflict context – determines their overall direct and contextual impact, the latter of which feeds back into the original conflict context. (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011b: 34)

Figure 14: Determinants of the Impact of Civil Society in Conflict Context



Source: Marchetti and Tocci, 2011b: 35

The analytical framework proposed by Marchetti and Tocci includes context, identity, framework of action and political opportunity structure. Context is shaped by the nature of the state (e.g. failed state), legislations (e.g. restrictive laws on associations), socio-economic development (e.g. level of development defines if civil society is more of less modern) and the international community (e.g. international support for NGOs can disempower local civil society) (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 14-16). Identity is crucial in conflict situation. Marchetti

[37] The authors use the term „Conflict Society Organisations (CoSO)" in order to highlight the particularities of civil society in conflict settings.

and Tocci classify identities of CSOs according to the inclusiveness of membership (inclusive/exclusive) and the target public (egalitarian/non-egalitarian) (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 18-19). The framework of action includes escalation of the conflict, conflict resolution, conflict management and conflict transformation (Ibid.: pp.21).

As this thesis is based on field work in the context of an ongoing armed conflict, questions about identity are highly sensitive and have been avoided. Therefore, this study focuses on the context, partly on the framework of action and the political opportunity structure.

POS deals with domestic institutions, domestic development and external actors (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 31). Hence, POS can be considered as a filter that shapes the impact of CSO action (Ibid.). This is a helpful approach to evaluate the impact of CSO in in the context of limited timeframes or other restrictions, as it is the case in studies exploring ongoing armed conflicts.

The most important element of POS, however, is timing. Different approaches might be appropriate in different phases of the conflict (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 31). In violent phases, as positions are polarized, assimilationist and racist/ethnicist CSOs are more likely to have an impact (Ibid.).

Domestic, constitutional and legal settings as well as public institutions and actors influence the possible impact of CSOs through registration processes, the legal protection of freedom of assembly and association, financial requirements and other legislations or bureaucratic requirements (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 32).

Domestic development defines "the degree to which public opinion is open to non-governmental political action and protest [and hence] can significantly influence the wider diffusion and consolidation effects of CoSOs." (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 33). De-development, as it often occurs in destructive conflicts, can reduce the scope of independent local civil society, particularly through the inflow of foreign funds and actors (Ibid.). This process may lead to an ineffective and unrooted NGO sector that eventually weakens the local

civil society (Challand, 2008; Jamal, 2007; le More, 2008 as cited in Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 33; as well as Belloni, 2001).

This consideration leads to the last element of the POS: the international system and actors. If the international community supports the need for violence (as it is the case in Syria, mainly due to counter-terrorism policies) pacifist movements find it more difficult to get support, and on the contrary, combatant groups can more easily find political and material support (Marchetti and Tocci, 2011: 33). International actors can have a big impact on local civil society and even change their *raison d'être* (Ibid.: 34).

The context, together with the POS, determine the space of action for civil society. In the next sub-section, the different impacts on civil society's spaces are discussed in more detail.

2.4.2 Factors Influencing Civil Society's Space

It is important to analyze how the environment influences civil society and CSOs (Dudouet, 2007: 21). CSOs have to adapt to changing political environments and particularly conflicts affect the role, space and nature of civil society. Dudouet distinguishes between CSOs that predate the conflict and are forced to deal to the new circumstances, and CSOs that emerged with the conflict (2007: 23). In the case of Syria, due to the restrictive politics towards civil society prior to 2011, most civil society actors emerged with the conflict, however, as discussed above, not completely detached from their own history (see section 2.1).

As Paffenholz and Spurk put it:

> Armed conflict dramatically changes the life of all people at all levels, from individual changes in attitudes and behavior (trust and confidence) over economic and social change, to ultimate shifts of power relations in communities, regions and the society as a whole. This also changes the enabling environment for civil society (security, legal situation and law enforcement), basic issues and actors. (2006: 12).

This is also true in Idlib. The life of most Syrians changed radically since 2011, the 'old' economic and social structures broke down, and a civil society re-emerged in an environment of insecurity, without any legal framework, addressing an immense humanitarian disaster that is far beyond its capabilities.

The ways in which armed conflict affects the space for civil society are manifold and complex. As an analytical framework, inspired by Galtung, I distinguish between physical, structural and cultural impacts on civil society.

A) Physical Impacts

One of the more salient problems that arises is the physical *destruction of infrastructure* that disables civil society to communicate through the exchange of ideas and information (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 11). In armed conflict, strategic infrastructure such as electricity, telecommunication, strategic roads and public transportation are the first to be targeted. This of course affects civil society along with civilians and armed groups.

In Idlib, the most direct and obvious impact on civil society's space is physical destruction of infrastructure that limits access, movement and communication. Deliberate attacks on internet and radio towers (NGO Forum, 2015a; int. 17), attacks on aid convoys (NGO Forum, 2015a), as well as attacks on centers run by CSOs (int. 11) and limitations on the freedom of movement across state borders and frontlines represent critical obstacles for civil society. Not only does aerial bombardment pose a threat to the infrastructure used by civil society, but also armed groups who confiscate and use public space for their own purposes (int. 4).

A second physical impact of armed conflict on the space for civil society stems from *insecurity*, threats and intimidations that discourage participation (Dudouet, 2007: 24; Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 11). Intimidation, insecurity, deliberate attacks on civil society actors can also lead to mistrust, and hence, impede network building, cooperation, as well as transparency and accountability (Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 10). During the conduct of this study, problems such as intimidation, mistrust and lack of cooperation were mentioned by many respondents. Some of the activists had to leave Syria because of threats from armed groups, others found ways to negotiate with them in order to continue their work. If negotiations were

possible or not depends on different factors, among others the type of work being done by CSOs and their reputation and recognition in the community.

A third important impact on civil society's space is the *disruption of the social fabric and the loss of human capital* (Dudouet, 2007: 24). All armed conflict involves disappearances, migration and displacement through which the social fabric is disrupted. The physical presence or absence of persons affects civil society and its space of action. Displacement and disappearances affects the composition of society on the level of education, class, gender, ethnicity and age and hereby directly affects the composition of civil society because the dynamics in repression and displacement are not free from gender, class and ethnic considerations. In areas that experience a serious influx of IDPs or refugees it can have an enabling effect on civil society because of a more diverse and rich composition of the community. However, displacement can also reduce the diversity within a community (ex: expulsion of minorities) and therefore reduce the diversity of civil society as a whole.

The loss of human resources presents a big challenge for the civil society in Idlib. Many civil society activists faced repression and imprisonment from as early as 2011 (Mashallah, 2011). Since 2011, the prosecution of activists intensified and also armed groups crack down on civil society actors (field notes, 29.4.2016). Many activists never return from prisons, are killed in fighting and aerial bombardments or migrate to neighboring countries or Europe. The loss of human resources and know-how of many civil society activists affect also the space and strength of civil society. Some interviewees stressed the importance of people staying in Syria (int. 5, 20).

Displacement has a considerable effect on civil society. An enabling aspect of displacement is that it rendered the Syrian civil society transnational, mostly due to the many diaspora CSOs that emerged in host countries. But also inside Syria, civil society found a mobile aspect to adapt to the changing situation. Despite the fact that most CSOs interviewed have a fixed base, their work adapts to the changing situation of IDPs. Hence, there were several

ideas to utilize mobile infrastructure in order to take into account the instability and movement of people. For instance, an education caravan provides schooling for children in informal IDP camps (int. 3), mobile clinics provide health services in hard-to-reach areas or a 'Hope Train' that brings hope and relief to villages (int. 6). These examples show how flexible and adaptive local CSOs can be in order to adapt to the difficult context. The story of a young girl in a school in Idlib countryside is exemplary for the feeling of mobility of IDPs: the girl created a house on wheels. When asked why she put wheels on the house, she replied that at least they could take their house wherever they were going.

Not only does civil society adapt to the changing situation of IDPs, but also do displaced people adapt their decision to the availability of security, livelihood, education and humanitarian aid (NGO Forum, 2015b). Then, where CSOs are operating, the access to humanitarian assistance, education, security and sometimes also livelihood is easier.

Despite the fact that there are some constructive and enabling aspects of the mobile characteristic of civil society, displacement has had major negative implications on civil society: brain drain. Many people with higher education have left the country or have been recruited by INGOs. It is difficult to compete with INGOs for the local staff. This has also been the case in Sri Lanka where INGOs recruited the educated youth (Orjuela, 2004: 128). Nonetheless, there are activists that accept the risk and bad living conditions in Syria, because they want to help their communities. However, the longer the conflict lasts, the more difficult is the decision to stay.

B) Structural Impacts

The most vital factor affecting civil society's space during armed conflict and in peace times is the *legal framework*. Both, a too restrictive legislation or no legislation at all, can have a negative impact on civil society (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 11). Examples of such restrictive frameworks limiting the space of civil society are anti-terror laws, complex

registration processes, limiting access and publication of information, restrictions on the right to assembly and limits on funding sources (Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 8, 10).

Inside Syria, most CSOs face problems because of the capriciousness or lack of legislation. In areas inside Syria where opposition took over control, state institutions lost their legitimacy and power. The armed factions, community and religious leaders, as well as tribes and clans stepped into the power vacuum and established alternative governance structures. These structures are highly localized and differ depending on the local context. Khalaf describes the situation like this:

> [The form of] governance that has emerged in Syria resembles a loose constellation of city-states and villages separated by pastoral statelessness across which a dense network of communication and relationships are negotiated and/or fought over for resources and power. (Khalaf, 2015: 47)

An interviewee confirms this perception. He said that it was not true that there was no state in Syria, but each village had its own governance structure (int. 16). These governance structures mainly consist of local councils (LCs), police forces, community leaders, armed factions and Sharia courts.

According to Khalaf, the Sharia courts have first been established to resolve conflicts between armed groups, which then extended the use of the courts into every aspect of civilian affairs (Khalaf, 2015: 46). The composition, function and formation of Sharia courts depend on the local context and hence enjoy different levels of legitimacy. In Idlib, the vast majority of villages have a Sharia court. However, particularly women's groups do not accept their legitimacy and do not feel represented by these courts (int. 3, 11). To avoid going to these courts they try to find solutions through mediation (int. 3).

Most courts are based on the Sharia. This research does not go into depth analyzing the space for civil society under Sharia law, because often, courts are instrumentalized by warlords and extremists and their rulings are highly volatile (Khalaf, 2015: 47). One interviewee mentioned the Unified Arab Law (int. 15) that proposes a middle way between the Syrian state law and the Islamic Sharia and has been developed by the Arab League (Enab Baladi, January

26, 2016). However, in most parts of opposition-controlled Syria the situation is not stable enough to be ruled by any kind of law, except for the 'law of the strongest'.

Many interviewees mentioned that armed groups have an important role in punishing crimes and to enforce the rule of law. However, the accountability of their work is questionable and often these narrow governance structures are centered around interests of the parties in power and "are more likely to undercut local efforts to improve law and order and reduce criminality" (Khalaf, 2015: 48). Due to the illegitimacy of the courts that are backed by armed groups civil society found a role in mediation and conflict resolution (int.9).

Armed conflict also affects the *resources* available for civil society and thereby has a direct impact on the capacities of civil society and its space. On the one hand, local economic and human resources become scarce due to economic crises that come along with armed conflict and due to brain drain and migration (Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 8; Orjuela, 2004: 128). On the other hand, armed conflict often leads to a massive influx of human and economic resources channeled through humanitarian assistance (Dudouet, 2007: 25), but also through criminal networks that take advantage of the lack of state control. These resources from the outside can either enable local civil society or disempower it (Belloni, 2001). The role of outside actors, such as donors, INGOs and government agencies, need to be assessed critically regarding their impact on the space of local civil society.

On the other hand, the informal economy is growing. Bribery, looting, ransoms, drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking and illegal oil trade are on the rise and support new classes of tribal, rebel and extremist groups that fight over access to resources (Khalaf, 2015: 47). This informal economy directly affects the security and hence decreases the space for civil society.

Armed conflict negatively affects the *freedom of movement and assembly*, even indirectly. Due to security problems, fear, lack of transportation, curfews, checkpoints and many other reasons, people tend to be more reluctant to travel and attend gatherings (Dudouet,

2007: 24; Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 8). On the other hand, people are also more politically active and easier to mobilize in conflict settings, which encourages participation in civil society and increases its space for action. Particularly in Syria, the conflict had both a positive and negative impact on participation.

An important impact on civil society's space in Idlib, is the interaction with armed groups, extremist groups and criminal networks. The relations between armed groups and civil society are more complex than often represented. Clearly, the armed groups hold the *de facto* power and can control the space of civil society. However, because armed groups also depend on the acceptance of the local communities, civil society has also ways to negotiate its space (Elhamoui and al-Hawat, 2015: 31; Zahar, 2001). Therefore, particularly CSOs delivering crucial services to people in need enjoy more space to work, because armed groups understand the importance of these services not to undermine their own legitimacy (Elhamoui and al-Hawat, 2015).

The coexistence between armed groups and civilians poses mainly two threats to civil society: on the one hand, the presence of armed groups legitimizes attacks and aerial bombardments and leads to destruction of infrastructures used also by civil society, and on the other hand, armed groups may deliberately restrict civil society's space through intimidations, arbitrary detentions and other restrictions (int.11, 13).

At the same time, many civil society activists and CSOs request more space from the armed groups and engage in negotiations, demonstrations and campaigning in order to enjoy more freedom (Elhamoui and al-Hawat, 2015: 32). To mention two examples: in some parts of Idlib, women and CSOs protested against dress-codes imposed by *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) (Elhamoui and al-Hawat, 2015: 32), and a captured ambulance can be re-used by humanitarian organizations after successful negotiations with armed groups (field notes, 10.5.2016). Some attempts to negotiate with criminal networks however, did not succeed. One interviewee gave

the example of a local employee of an INGO who discovered a case of corruption and it resulted in him being kidnapped for three months by the criminal network (field note, 28.3.2016).

C) Cultural Impacts

Armed conflict also changes the cultural patterns around and within civil society which impacts its space. Brain drain, politicization of education, changes in the social capital, transformation of gender relations, and militarization are only some of the most important cultural changes initiated by armed conflict. These dynamics can broaden or limit the scope of civil society. For instance, brain drain and changes in social capital may reduce the local capacities of civil society but might increase transnational links through diaspora movements; politicization of education may open new areas of work for civil society actors and introduce new approaches to education, but it also may restrict it.

Media representation, censorship and the absence of independent media is another factor that hinders civil society's space for action (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 11; Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 9). On the one hand, it affects civil society's capacity to communicate, and on the other hand, media representation affects outside support either positively or negatively. In the case of Idlib, many respondents were disappointed about the news coverage of the Syrian crisis and the focus on Daesh in Western media, which creates a distorted image of Syria in the West.

Trust and affiliation also has an impact on the space of civil society, particularly through cooperation or competition (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 11; Poskitt and DuFranc, 2011: 10). Armed conflict fuels distrust and reinforces affiliations with conflict parties. Therefore, cooperation is often difficult and civil society actors engage in competition for scarce resources, which finally impairs its space for action. This is also one of the problems faced by Syrian civil society. "Conflict polarises society and destroys social cohesion; it destroys trust, hope and identity" (Pouligny, 2005 as cited in Khalaf, 2015: 48). Many interviewees mentioned the lack of trust between people and how the armed conflict affects the behavior of the people

negatively (int. 14). Social safety nets are disrupted, people are corrupted or change sides, cultural patterns and traditions are used to reinforce control. Extremist groups indirectly pressure workshops, trainings and schools that do not fit into their propaganda to close down (field notes, 28.4.2016). Armed groups take advantage of the vulnerability of children to recruit them (int. 14). And finally, armed groups want to perpetuate violence, because only through force they can keep their power and influence (Khalaf, 2015: 48).

Despite all the challenges and even though many interviewees were not aware of it, conflicts give rise to a revived civil society, particularly as a reaction and counterweight to extremism and mass violence in Syria (Khalaf, 2015: 48). In Khalaf's words:

> With its most basic form of monitoring and lobbying through demonstrations, deals and negotiations, civil society has been able to gain some leverage in pushing state-like structures to fulfil their duties and to be held accountable. While structurally weak, lacking support and technical and financial capacities to counter the power of money represented by the war economy and the power of violence of a shadow state, civil society has the power of the people. (Khalaf, 2015: 50)

In summary it can be said that armed conflict directly or indirectly affects all aspects of civil society as most organization are established in direct reaction to violence and repression (Dudouet, 2007: 24). However, the physical, structural and cultural impacts on civil society's space are very complex and need to be assessed in the specific context as they can change regionally and depending on the political opportunity structure.

Conclusion

Chapter Two discusses civil society in situations of armed conflict, particularly in the case of Idlib. The conflict had an important impact on Syria's civil society, however, it is important to be aware of the social and historical roots of this 'new' civil society, in order to understand its dynamics and challenges. When the roots and history of Syria's civil society is taken into account, it becomes obvious that civil society is much more diverse than humanitarian CSOs and includes protection CSOs, youth groups, women's groups, professional associations, media activists, human rights activists, academia, religious leaders and

community leaders. These diverse actors take different roles and functions in society. Of course, the functions and the space of civil society have drastically changed with the conflict. However, not all results had negative impacts on civil society. For instance, displacement partially enhanced local civil society by rendering it more transnational and interconnected. On the other hand, outside interventions aiming to support local civil society had destructive effects on civil society to some extent, mainly by leading to a brain drain and creating new dependencies. In the next chapter, civil society's efforts in protection and conflict transformation in Idlib are discussed in depth.

Chapter Three - Civilian Protection and Conflict Transformation in Idlib

Images: Campaign in Idlib to stop aerial attacks during the celebrations at the end of Ramadan. Source: Violet Organisation

Chapter Three presents the key findings of the case study of Idlib. In the first part, the chapter focuses on the different meanings and understandings of peace and protection and investigates on the experiences that influence these understandings. In a second part, the chapter outlines the main threats posed by direct, structural and cultural violence. At the same time, conflicts within the society are analyzed regarding their relation to the armed conflict and their impact on civilians in Idlib. In a next part, the strategies and mechanisms for protection and conflict transformation are demonstrated. This part also focuses on the specific role of local civil society in addressing violence and in transforming the conflict on the personal, relational, structural and cultural level. In the last part, this chapter discusses two special issues, local ceasefires and gender, and how they play into protection and conflict transformation.

3.1 Understandings of Peace and Protection

The first section of this chapter discusses the meanings of peace and protection in the Syrian context. The research aims to elicit the local conceptions of peace and protection because these understandings shape and are shaped by the realities on the ground. Moreover, conceptions of peace may also shed light on the perceived preconditions for peace and thus, are important for conflict transformation and reconciliation later on.

3.1.1 Meanings of Peace

The understanding of peace is very personal and depends on personal experiences (Swisspeace et al., 2016: 15). The Arabic word '*salam'*, peace, is omnipresent in the Arabic language and in Islam (which is often referred to as religion of peace[38]). However, more common and closer to Western understanding of peace is the term '*selm ahly'* which literally

[38] For details on Islam, nonviolence and peacebuilding see: Abu-Nimer, Mohammed (2003) *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida.

means ‘peace among people (kin)’ (Swisspeace et al., 2016: 16). The term today implies a long-term peace by keeping good relations with the people one is living with (Ibid.).

For this research, the questions asked to representatives of Syrian civil society were “How do you envision peace in Syria?” followed by the question “What can be done now for a peaceful future?”. The first question addresses more the immediate situation and the most visible dynamics of the conflict. Therefore, most respondents answered that the killing has to stop and the regime (‘Bashar’, ‘Assad’) has to leave. But also aspects such as peace as a dream and a goal, and reconciliation came up. On the other hand, more pessimistic voices mentioned the difficulties to achieve peace, that it needs a lot of time, depends on outside actors, or even, that peace is impossible in Syria.

The second question elicited underlying and less visible, aspects of the conflict. Respondents mentioned that dialogue, ‘working together’, ‘mutual help’, ‘women’s voices’, finding alternatives to violence, addressing militarization and migration, continuing demonstrations, countering extremism and addressing the underlying causes are all part of what can be done now to work for peace.

In the words of one respondent:

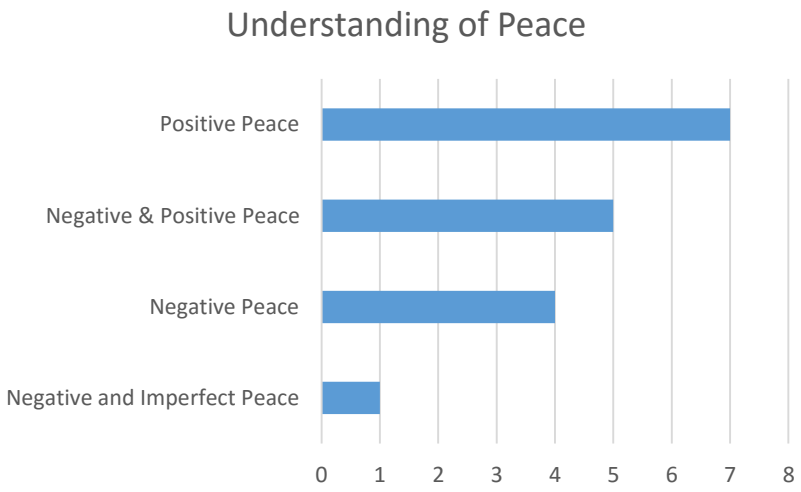
> There is no direct way to peace. We do a little bit here and there, from all sides, maybe this work can help to build peace. And people are tired of the war, they want it to stop, but also not without any change. People suffered too much to go back to how it was before or remain under Daesh. (int. 12, own translation)

This statement describes the vision of *imperfect peace* outlined in sub-section 1.1.3. There is no single and simple way to peace, however, there are many small manifestations of peace, which need to be focused on and cultivated in order to inspire other transformative dynamics.

The most common understanding of peace, in the interviews however, can be attributed to positive peace (Figure 15). Most respondents (70%) understand peace as a situation in which people live together peacefully, enjoy ‘freedom and dignity’ and legal and social justice is applied. Two respondents said that peace is ‘a dream’. Some respondents were particularly

worried about revenge after the war ends and stress the importance, but difficulty, of reconciliation (int. 14). I find it important to highlight a pattern that emerged during the study which indicates that respondents that directly expressed an understanding of positive peace stressed the importance of inclusion and a 'Syria for all Syrians' (int. 2, 4, 11, 18).

Figure 15: Understandings of Peace



Source: own elaboration

The respondents who mentioned ideas close to positive and negative peace often first mentioned that the war has to stop or the regime has to leave, but later on they realized that more is needed to actually build peace in Syria, such as justice, addressing underlying causes and the support of the international community (int.6, 7, 15, 16, 19).

Only one respondent said that there is no peace for Syria anymore. The reason of his pessimistic view might be that he is working as a journalist on the frontlines of the war and witnesses bloodshed and violence on a daily basis. However, many Syrians witness violence daily and still maintain some hope for peace.

3.1.2 Preconditions for Peace

The question "What can be done now for a peaceful future?" sheds some light on the perceived preconditions for peace. The following arguments are ordered according to the frequency the subject came up during the interviews.

A) Addressing the Underlying Causes and Continuing the Revolution

These arguments were expressed together with the vision that the conflict will not just end or disappear after the armed conflict seizes. Transforming the conflict takes time and particularly civil society has to play an important role in building peace, in continuing the revolution or in rebuilding Syria (int. 1, 6, 12, 15, 16, 10, 20). The fact that this precondition has been expressed most frequently during the interviews shows that many CSOs are aware of the practical implications of conflict transformation and the importance of addressing underlying causes and grievances.

B) Need for Agreement and Cooperation

In more than 30% of the interviews, respondents mentioned the need for cooperation amongst Syrians and the need to agree upon ideas of peace in order to build peace. 'Everyone needs to be convinced to rebuild Syria' (int. 9). There will not be peace if one of the parties imposes itself due to its military strength. Leadership and positions of power must be agreed and accepted by everyone to some degree (int. 1, 11, 17).

These arguments raise the question of inclusion. According to the statements of the respondents, inclusive processes are crucial for conflict transformation and peacebuilding. However, in practice, inclusion is often difficult to implement.

C) Role of Outside Actors

There are mainly three roles international actors are perceived to play in Syria: supporting the armed struggle, supporting the humanitarian response, and supporting/hindering a political solution.

Respondents expressed two contradictory opinions towards outside actors: either they wish a more active role of international actors, or they wish no role at all for foreign actors. Some respondents perceive a disappointing dependence on outside actors (int. 5. 12) and hence wish for no more foreign presence in Syria. Thus, re-establishing a Syria that is only for Syrians (int. 11). This opinion stems from disappointment of the international community, which did

not take adequate action despite the immense suffering endured by the civilian population. Others wish for a more active role from the international community in order to stop the violence and help to mediate between the parties (int. 7, 14, 19). This opinion is based on the fact that the international community could change the situation in Syria. Particularly the ceasefire and some aid deliveries to besieged towns has shown that if the international players agreed, they could alleviate the suffering of people more efficiently.

D) Reconciliation or Division

The interviews demonstrated two tendencies among Syrian people: the ones who want to keep Syria together, and the ones who think that a division among ethnic lines could be a solution. The main reason why a division could be a solution is due to the immense difficulties to reconcile between ethnic and religious groups. Respondents mentioned that it is too difficult to forgive (int. 19) and asked the question 'How can you live together with someone who executes women and children?' (field notes, 22.5.2016).

E) Islam

For many Syrians, particularly from rural areas, religion is very important and they are devoted Muslims. Hence, in many occasion the necessity of a *strong and real faith* came up. In this sense, a community according to Islamic values and norms is a precondition for peace. Respondents also stressed that extremist groups do neither represent nor live according to Islam.

3.1.3 What Does Protection Mean in Idlib?

> The presence of international organisations may in itself provide a certain level of protection. However, if – as is the case in Syria – this presence is limited in strength and reach, affected communities turn to their first line of defence: themselves. […] From the beginning of the conflict local groups and individuals started organising their own relief, and in many ways social cohesion provided the protection international organisations could not. Three years into the conflict, however, this first line of defence has been weakened. The social fabric across Syria has been torn apart through displacement, death, continued fighting and the increasing presence of foreign fighters with no ties to the communities they control, and accordingly less sympathy for their plight. (Svoboda, 2014: 3)

A) Meaning and Relevance of Protection

Protection is a term with many meanings and associations, depending on the context. For some interviewees it was very hard to say what protection actually means or countered with a question "What do you mean exactly?". Due to the hardship under which most local CSOs operate, protection is associated with safety and the safeguard of basic needs and human rights. However, the frustration and the feeling of powerlessness is reflected in the answer by some respondents that protection and safety have lost their meaning in Syria.

International organizations that usually assume the role of protection work when the UN, inter-governmental organizations and the state fail to protect civilians, have a difficult stand in Syria as their access is restricted due to the difficult security situation. According to OCHA, 13.5 million people are in need of protection inside Syria. Due to the lack of access only 5.3 million are targeted by the Syrian Response Plan out of which only 1.5 million have been reached (OCHA, 2015: 16). In Idlib governorate alone, 1,224,773 people are in need for protection (Ibid.: 24). After Aleppo and rural Damascus, this is the highest number of people in need.

B) Who Needs Protection?

As described in sub-section 1.4.1, there have always been groups of people that were considered innocent or unable to participate in war, and hence, were either spared or even needed to be protected. Throughout history and cultures, these groups always included women and children. This is also true for Syria. All respondents who were asked the question if there were particular groups that need protection mentioned children in their answer. Women were also mentioned often. However, it is interesting to note that all respondents who mentioned women also mentioned children. None of them mentioned women alone or in other combinations. This reflects the general conception that women are the weaker sex and are in need of protection. However, many men express that this does not mean that women are

inferior, but just that they are physically not as strong as men, or that women as the life-giving sex, are more valuable than men.

On the other hand, there were also CSOs that stressed that everyone needs protection. Everyone is targeted by aerial bombardments in the same way. This answer indirectly implies that aerial bombardments do not differentiate among gender. However, the term "targeted" might actually have a gender bias in terms of who is actually "targeted" by those bombing and this could lean toward men as opposed to women and children. Especially since men typically are recruited as soldiers and portrayed as the "terrorists".

Other categories in need of protection are the poor, weak, displaced and minorities. These are still other categories of vulnerable groups than identified in the Nuba case study in Sudan by Justin Corbett on community resilience and self-protection. Particular vulnerable groups in the case of Nuba are orphans, elderly and single-parent households (Corbett, 2011: 21). Women, on the other hand, are perceived as particularly resilient and playing an important role in protection (Ibid.). The difference between the categorization of vulnerable groups in the case of the Nuba and in Idlib can be explained by cultural differences. However, it may also be possible that INGOs had a certain influence on the understanding of vulnerable groups in the case of Idlib through the vocabulary used in humanitarian assistance that focuses on women and children.

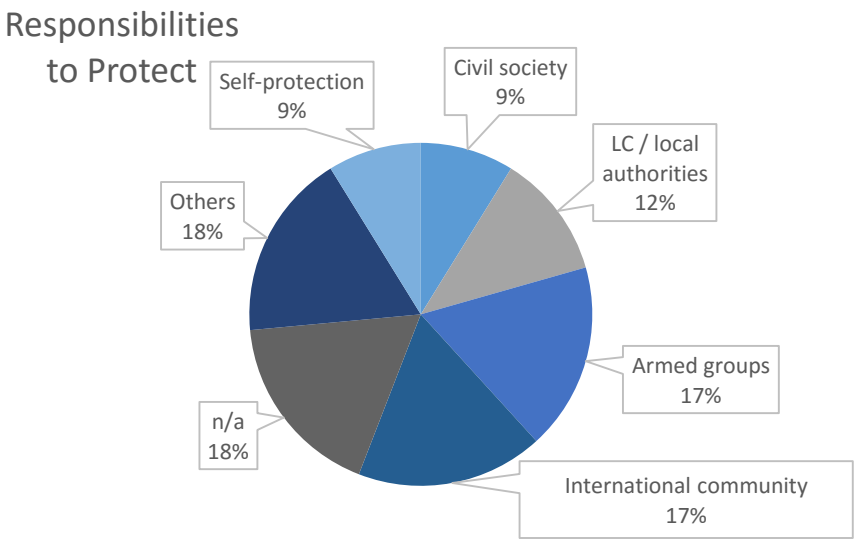
It is important to notice that protection strategies for one group, may increase the risk for another group (Gorur, 2013: 7). For instance, paying taxes to armed groups may increase the security of relatively wealthy families, but armed groups will also go to poorer families and ask for taxes and hence increase the vulnerability of the family, as they either face violence or poverty. Hence, not all protection strategies affect all vulnerable groups in the same way.

C) Who Is/Should be Responsible of Civilian Protection?

With changing power relations and disrupted authorities, responsibilities are newly allocated. Traditionally states are responsible for the protection of their civilian population and

if the state fails to do so, the international community steps in. In Syria's areas out of state control, local authorities and armed groups are the main actors responsible to protect civilians. However, often the will or the capacities to carry out this mandate are missing.

Figure 16: Responsibilities to Protect in Idlib



Source: own elaboration

According to the interviews (Figure 16), people perceive the role of LCs and local authorities only to some extent in protection. However, armed groups play a key role, but they were almost never mentioned alone. Armed groups are part of the problem for protection, but on the other hand, they are also the only ones that can protect civilians from military violence, according to respondents (field notes, 22.5.2016). On the other hand, the international community is often stated as the single responsible for protection by respondents, however, they are not fulfilling their responsibility.

Civil society has also been endowed with a certain role in providing protection. Though respondents mentioned that there is no protection and people have to protect themselves. Other parties responsible in providing protection include: police, the Syria Civil Defense, *mukhtar*[39] and God.

[39] Literarily translated as 'the chosen', *al-mukhtar* is the name of the traditional village leader in many Arab countries, as well as in Turkey and Cyprus.

3.2 Main Threats and Conflicts in Idlib

In this section, the main threats and conflicts in the communities in Idlib are presented. These include direct, structural and cultural manifestations of violence as well as different conflicts such as small crimes, organized crimes, personal conflicts, structural conflicts and ethnic conflicts.

3.2.1 Manifestations of Violence in Idlib

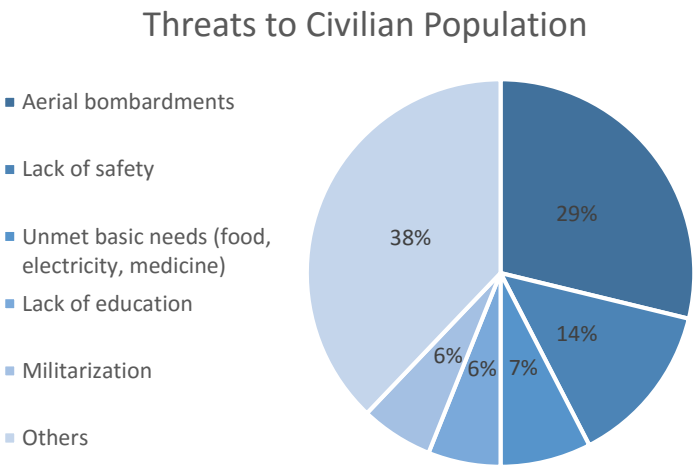
In order to analyze protection strategies and mechanisms, the threats and types of violence need to be assessed because protection depends on the threat. In an ongoing armed conflict, the most visible and immediate threat is direct violence. The less visible types of violence are considered secondary because of the severity direct violence plays in a conflict. In conflict transformation literature, the focus lies more on the indirect types of violence, structural and cultural. In this sub-section, the types of threats to the civilian population in the areas under study are discussed. In a second step, I analyze the types of conflicts occurring within the communities.

Threats are most of the time relative, especially in armed conflicts. Everyone who experienced living in a conflict-ridden country knows that the threat is perceived differently by the people directly concerned by the threats and the people looking from the outside. Many Syrians state that they became accustomed to the violence around them. They got used to the sirens, used to the bombings, used to losing friends and family members (field notes, 6.4.2016). As Justin Corbett mentions in his research on self-protection strategies in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, threats are mostly perceived according to location, livelihood, gender, age and socio-economic status and the perception changes with time during the course of the conflict (Corbett, 2011: 17). Hence, as this research is conducted during a very violent phase of the conflict in the area under study, the perception of the main threat being aerial bombarding seems evident.

There are many different threats that have been mentioned by the respondents (Figure 17). Nonetheless, the aerial bombardments are by far perceived as the biggest threat to civilians with 95% of the respondents explicitly stating that the bombardments are the biggest problem they face. Apart from the bombardments, a general lack of safety and security was mentioned by 45%. A quarter of the respondents stated that unmet basic needs like water, electricity, food and medicine is a major problem for civilian populations. Lack of education and militarism (excluding extremism) is each perceived by 20% of the respondents as a main threat for people.

Other threats and problems for the civilian population include: physical destruction (1) and injuries (1), psychological stress (2), poverty and economic hardship (2), lack of shelters (1), lack of support (3) and access (2), no rule of law (1) that gives rise to kidnappings (2) and arbitrary detention (2), increase of small crimes (3), as well as displacement (2), domestic violence (1) and extremism (2).

Figure 17: Main Threats to Civilian Populations in Idlib



Source: own elaboration

In the words of one respondent: "[All other threats] are consequences of the military violence: extremism, domestic violence, great shifts in traditional norms and behaviors in community" (int. 14). Compared to the problem of the aerial bombardments, many threats are perceived as secondary.

3.2.2 Conflicts within the Communities in Idlib

This sub-section provides an overview of the main conflicts occurring in the communities of the respondents. These conflicts are perceived as less threatening than the

military conflict, however, many important issues came up during the interviews that need to be taken into account in any attempt to transform the conflict. The main conflicts can be divided into the following categories: small crimes, organized crimes, personal conflicts, structural conflicts and ethnic conflicts.

A) Meaning of Conflict

"Conflict is a divergence of interests, views or behavior between persons or groups, and is normal in any society." (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 14). In Peace Studies, conflict does not have an inherently negative meaning, as conflict is part of human relationships. However, in everyday vocabulary the word often has negative connotations. The same is true in Syria. The literal translation of conflict (صراع) and disputes (نزاعات) are often associated with armed conflict and massive violence. The word used in this thesis to describe conflicts within the community was 'problems' (مشاكل).

When the word 'problems' was used in the question, respondents were more likely to answer that there were conflicts in the community. 'Conflicts are always there' (int.16). But most respondents agreed that conflicts have changed since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011.

B) What are the Conflicts in the Community?

The conflicts within the community can be divided into five types summarized in Table 3 below. Forty percent of the respondents mentioned small crimes as common problems within the society apart from the immediate military violence, followed by organized criminality (35%), personal conflicts (35%), structural conflicts (30%) and ethnic conflicts (10%).

Table 3: Five Types of Conflicts in Idlib

Type	Cause	Examples
Small crimes	Economic and social reasons	small problems, theft, burglary, land disputes
Organized crimes	Militarization, armed conflict	sleeping cells, arbitrary detention, conflicts between factions, kidnappings, corruption
Personal conflicts	Psychological stress	divorce, distrust, hate
Structural conflicts	Displacement	Property rights, competition for scarce resources, GBV, early marriage
Ethnic conflicts	Sectarianism	Discrimination, expulsion, propaganda

Source: own elaboration

C) Small Crimes

With the violent military conflict, one would suspect all other conflicts to experience an increased intensity. As there are no official statistics, the crime rate depends on the perception of respondents. Some respondents said that the problems between people are the same as before the armed conflict, others said that small crimes have increased since 2011. Respondents that affirmed that small crimes increased stressed at the same time that Syria did not have a low crime rate because of the regime, but because of the people. Now, the main reason for thefts (the most frequent mentioned small crime) can be found in the economic situation and the sharp rise of extreme poverty.

D) Organized Crimes

With armed conflict, war economy replaces formal economy and criminal networks are taking control over trade, lucrative assets and labor forces. Kidnapping for ransom, arbitrary detention, sleeping cells and conflicts between factions have been mentioned in this type of conflict arising from organized criminal groups. These problems are directly linked to the widespread possession and use of weapons, militarization and the absence of rule of law.

An interesting point stressed by several respondents was that family members adhere to different factions, and often personal problems then become problems between factions and are

handled with violence. In one example the fight between two cousins led to the death of 13 people, among them women and children (int. 13).

D) Personal Conflicts

Respondents also mentioned that due to the stressful and difficult situation people 'cannot stand each other', 'cannot endure each other', 'there is a lot of hatred' within society as a consequence of the bad situation (int. 3, 13). Another consequence mentioned by a respondent is the increasing number of divorces (int.8).

Even though there is evidence that in situations of armed conflict domestic violence usually increases (Usta et al., 2008), not even the women's groups mentioned this problem. The silencing of domestic and gender-based violence (GBV) can be explained by the taboo and stigmatization attached to it.

D) Structural Conflict

Displacement has a very complex and important impact on the society. People lose their livelihood and social safety net. Therefore, many of the conflicts in the society are directly or indirectly caused by displacement, such as property rights, competition for housing, jobs and other scarce resources, but also GBV and early marriage. I am aware of the complexity of GBV and early marriage, nonetheless, I argue that displacement plays an important role in increasing the vulnerability of women and girls because their safety net is disrupted.

Nonetheless, many respondents also stressed the solidarity between host communities and IDPs, mostly because host communities have either been temporarily displaced before or are aware of the possibility of displacement in the future. Hence, through this shared experience as 'Syrians' a new sense of community may arise.

E) Ethnic Conflicts

Even though I avoided the subject of ethnic issues in my questions, they came up on some occasions. One respondent argued that minorities need to be protected because he witnessed the exodus of minorities in Idlib and rural Aleppo. Another important issue concerned

to ethnic conflicts is the political use of sectarianism to fuel the war. For example, most Druze villages in Idlib have stayed out of the war and have remained almost untouched by the war, despite some attempts to fuel hatred against Druze by war propaganda (field notes, 22.5.2016).

The report on internal displacement by the NGO Forum (2015b: 12) illustrated very well how difficult and politicized ethnic questions became. The report mentions about a majority Sunni village in Idlib that is surrounded by villages of ethnic or religious minorities. When the village was raided by the governmental forces, people were scared to flee to the neighboring villages and either hid in the fields or went to majority Sunni villages that were further away.

The more fuel has been poured into ethnic and sectarian tensions, the more important it is to include these issues in conflict transformation, reconciliation and national dialogue.

3.3 Community-Based Strategies to Deal with Violence and Conflicts

This section provides an overview of the community-based strategies in civilian protection and conflict resolution applied in Idlib. The first part presents the mechanisms used by individuals, civil society, armed groups and the international community to protect civilians. The second part outlines the conflict resolution mechanisms used in Idlib to deal with conflicts within the communities. Part three and four discuss in more depth how the different CSOs address the threats and conflicts presented in section 3.2.

3.3.1 Protection Mechanisms: How Civilians Survive Violence

This sub-section analyzes the mechanisms used by individuals, civil society, armed groups and international actors to protect civilians from direct, structural and cultural violence. In the first part, I present several categories to better conceptualize these mechanisms, particularly the inventory of protection mechanisms provided by Casey A. Barrs, and followed by a second categorization inspired by Galtung's typology of violence

A) Categorizations of Protection Mechanisms

Different actors have different tools and mechanisms to provide protection to themselves and others. In sub-section 1.4.3, I distinguished between mechanisms that reduce the threat and others that reduce vulnerability. Depending on the nature of danger and the type of violence, the same strategy can address both threats and vulnerabilities. For instance, displacement can be a reaction to direct violence (bombardments) and hence reduce the vulnerability. But in another situation, the same mechanism, displacement, can be due to the economic situation (unemployment) which is a form of structural violence, and hence, reducing the threat. Moreover, as mentioned before, not all mechanisms that are aimed to protection actually decrease threats and vulnerabilities. Displacement, for instance, often increase other threats and vulnerabilities.

In his preliminary inventory of protection strategies, Casey A. Barrs divides the strategies and tactics into three categories: local safety, local livelihood, and local services (Barrs, 2012: 'Note to the Reader'). His inventory is a listing of possible mechanisms for civilians to survive violence, without claiming some strategies as more efficient or worthier to support than others. Barrs does not intend to urge support for any specific strategy, but to show the different mechanisms used by civilians to protect themselves from violence.

Barrs' categorization is very useful, however, it misses the cultural aspect of violence. Hence, the following discussion of the strategies used by, individuals, CSOs, armed groups and international actors in order to protect civilians is inspired by Galtung's typology of violence and adds cultural considerations to Barrs' inventory.

B) People

In general, people stay as long as possible in their home. They try to deal with the danger as long as possible. If it seems impossible to continue like that, they leave to safer areas. Another strategy is to fight back or to join armed groups. But before they resort to these options, they adapt many other strategies to protect themselves and their family from violence.

One of the first mechanisms is blending in. Armed conflict is characterized by unexpected changes and disruption of the known structures. Hence, changes and developments cannot be anticipated anymore. In order to stay safe, people try not to attract attention and blend in with the new situation. In his inventory, Barrs speaks about 'pragmatic compliance' (Barrs, 2012: 1). Individuals may comply with demands and rules in order to persuade the powers that they are compliant or at least harmless (Ibid.). In Idlib, this is particularly the case where extremist groups are present. The most visible manifestation of this strategy is where there is a common and salient physical appearance within a group of people (int. 19). For example, men let their beards grow and women wear black *abayas hijab* or *niqab*[40]. Especially religious minorities adopt this strategy to reduce exposure and thereby minimize the risk of being identified as *different*.

Apart from soft pressure, some armed groups also use other forms of pressure and ask people to pay taxes for their 'safety' (int. 17) or ask them to provide information. People may choose to provide information of limited use as a pragmatic form of compliance (Barrs, 2012: 1).

In order to protect one's property, people may create the impression that the property is uninhabited or that there is nothing valuable anymore (Barrs, 2012: 17). People in Idlib hide their assets if possible in order to avoid attracting attention and becoming victims of looting and eviction (int. 20). However, contrary to some conflicts, such as what Nuba experienced, in which hiding assets did decrease their vulnerability by allowing people to eventually return to their villages in the end (Corbett, 2011: 25). In Syria, however, as displacement often turns from temporary to permanent, hiding assets does not considerably improve civilians' protection.

[40] Islamic clothing: *Abaya* is a loose over-garment that covers almost all of the body, *hijab* is the traditional headscarf and *niqab* is a cloth that covers the face only leaving the eyes free.

The strategies mentioned above are reducing the threat of structural violence. The main mechanism to direct military violence is hiding and temporary flight. An early warning system manages to warn civilians in some areas of Idlib from certain threats, like aerial bombardments. Depending on the situation, the warning can be too late. People hide in collective shelters or in basements. But many people do not have access to adequate shelters (int. 3, 4, 6, 15, 18). They hide in the safest spot of their apartment, under stairs or in the fields. When their area is under intense bombardment or clashes erupt, people leave temporary to their farms, villages, or to the fields and return after the fighting and bombardment stops (int. 15). However, due to the normalization of frequent clashes and bombardments in some areas, or to the frequent alarms, people become accustomed to the threats of war and no longer seek shelter or hide in the face of danger (int. 18, 20).

If these mechanisms are not enough anymore, people flee their area to find refuge in safer areas. The decision to leave is very difficult and depends on many factors. The decision when and where to leave depends on social, political and economic factors. The findings of this thesis support Barter's PhD research on civilian protection in Aceh (Barter, 2011). Barter identifies as well security, economic incentives and socio-cultural factors as the main explanatory factors for flight (Barter, 2011: 155-164).

In Syria, the decision to leave happens usually with a feeling that it will only be temporary. However, for most Syrians the short term displacement often results in a permanent state involving multiple locations (NGO Forum, 2015b: 3-4). The push and pull factors depend on relative safety, access to employment, family connections, access to humanitarian assistance and education (field notes, 15.5.2016; Reach, 2015: 5). Most people decide to leave, when all other people in their neighborhood are leaving as well (field notes, 15.5.2016). Similar in the case of Aceh, Barter describes that flight often happens in groups, except for young men leaving for economic reasons (Barter, 2011: 161).

Displacement, apart from decreasing a certain risk of direct military violence, increases many forms of threats and vulnerabilities, therefore, the decision to leave is very difficult. Many people lose shelter, social safety nets, livelihood, their property and legal documents and fall into extreme poverty or become exposed to exploitation. This may leave to the reaction of voluntary family separation and to send one of the family to earn money abroad. This mechanism may improve the livelihood of the family, but it puts the person who is sent away at greater risk as he/she is often alone, under severe psychological stress and vulnerable to exploitation (Barrs, 2012: 14-15).

Apart from these nonviolent mechanisms, there are also violent alternatives. Even though armed civil defense groups are protected under the Geneva Conventions, these armed reactions carry deadly risks for civilians (Barrs, 2012: 11). The purpose of this thesis is to find nonviolent alternatives to armed self-protection. Self-protection and joining armed groups are the most common forms of armed protection strategies. Joining armed groups can address two forms of violence: direct military violence (increasing or reducing the threat) and structural violence (increasing safety for the family and providing livelihood). Many young men choose to join armed groups as a reaction to the experienced violence or because of lack of alternatives (int.4).

C) Civil Society Organizations and Local Councils

CSOs and LCs step in where individuals cannot protect themselves. However, many CSOs feel powerless in view of the military violence. Hence, their work focuses on reducing vulnerabilities to direct violence and addressing structural as well as cultural violence to a certain extent.

Three mechanisms to reduce threat of direct violence were mentioned by respondents: private security guards to secure the property of the organization (int. 11), the removal of landmines and UXO (int. 16), and mediation (int. 8, 11, 20). LCs, community leaders and religious leaders have the most promising position to mediate between factions and it is one of

the most direct and formal types of engagement utilized to improve physical safety of civilians according to Barrs' inventory (Barrs, 2012: 1). However, against the threat from aerial bombardments CSOs have only a very limited impact.

Hence, they focus on reducing the vulnerability of people to direct violence. Mechanisms to do this include[41]: enhancing early warning, organizing evacuation, providing first aid, circulating information, building shelters and safe spaces, promoting risk education and offering psycho-social support.

Early warning is one of the main duties of the Syria Civil Defense, the main protection CSO, but also humanitarian CSOs and local councils (LCs) support early warning systems. Due to the breakdown of mobile phone connections, electricity cuts and internet blackouts, the most reliable way of communication is the radio and satellite phones. With the intensification of aerial bombardments and fighting on the ground, civil defense teams, rescue teams and humanitarian organization increasingly take advantage of these devices in order to warn people and mitigate causalities (Rozana, 2015).

At the beginning, these devices were used mostly in rural areas, but now also in cities like Aleppo and Idlib. Information is also shared through social media, mosques and radio stations. Usually, the warning comes in 10 minutes before the plane arrives or later, and often there is not enough time to go to the shelter, or there are simply no shelters. Also there are some planes and missiles that cannot be detect in advance, and hence, no early warning is possible. Another challenge is the frequency of these warnings. In some parts of Aleppo and Idlib, sirens go off up to 10 times a day because planes pass over the city or village. Thus, people stop going down to the shelters and the early warning loses its efficacy and desired purpose (int. 18, 20).

As there is not much civil society can do against direct violence, most CSOs address structural violence. To reduce vulnerability of local populations, to improve local livelihood

[41] For more details, see Barrs C A (2012) "How Civilians Survive Violence: A Preliminary Inventory", The Cuny Center.

and local service provision, CSOs engage predominantly in capacity building. Nine out of twenty CSOs provide capacity building and trainings in areas such as risk education, PSS, first aid, education, media and human rights (see sub-section 2.3.3.). Justin Corbett in his study on community resilience and civilian protection of the Nuba people in Sudan, acknowledges the importance of capacity building, particularly for besieged populations (or where international actors have limited access, like in Syria). He identifies at the same time serious gaps in the international humanitarian system in delivering these needed capacity building and suggests to improve the INGOs capacities to provide capacity building in hard-to-reach or besieged areas (Corbett, 2011: 42).

Another approach to reduce vulnerability of their organization concerning structural and cultural violence is to increase their legitimacy. Particularly women's groups faced problems from their own community and had to prove the importance of their work in order to be accepted by the community and face less resistance (int. 3, 11). Because of the magnitude of the bombing and direct violence, people thought that there is no role for women anymore, but through their work they managed to earn respect and appreciation from their community (int. 3, 11).

Information is very important in armed conflict, highly politicized and biased in conflict situations. Hence, access to correct information about the security situation, where to get help and many other issues is crucial (Barrs, 2012: 3-4, 20-21). Particularly LCs and SCD teams work in dispersing, as well as gathering, information about the security situation, but also humanitarian CSOs and mosques are important actors in dispersing and gathering information.

Humanitarian assistance through relief work and development projects addresses mainly structural violence such as lack of access to education, water and food. Almost all CSOs engage in humanitarian assistance to different degrees, but only one CSO was aware of the protection implication of humanitarian assistance. LCs and community leaders are also important in negotiating access for humanitarian organizations.

Apart from life-saving aid such as food and medicine, it is also important to take into consideration the moral support that 'luxury' items can bring to the population (Corbett, 2011: 46). When a container with a considerable amount of toys for children arrived to one village in Idlib, all children gathered and were waiting impatiently. When the men of the village were unloading the material, a bag full of footballs broke and before the balls could touch the ground, children took them to play. This story has since been told by many people and always draws smiles on people's faces. These moments and their impact on the moral of the people are not to be under-estimated.

CSOs also address renewed oppression and repression by diverse armed groups. In Ma'arat al-Nu'man and Kafranbel CSOs organized renewed demonstrations and protests against extremist groups (Syria Deeply, June 24, 2016; int.11).

Cultural violence is the most difficult to address. To reduce the threat of militarism, there are cases of villages and camps that disarm people before they enter (int. 6). Villages of Druze minorities in Idlib managed to keep a low profile and stay out of the armed conflict for more than five years so far (field notes, 22.5.2016). Other CSOs offer safe spaces for children where they are less affected by the armed conflict. To reduce the threat faced by women, women's groups offer safe spaces for women and children. However, more important is to reduce vulnerability towards cultural violence through awareness campaigns, dialogue, education and providing alternatives. Also youth groups, such as the football club, provide important alternatives for the youth with the aim to prevent young men to join armed groups. These youth groups have been successful to some degree, however, it is very difficult, and out of the scope of this research, to evaluate the impact of youth clubs on the choices and decisions of young men.

Justin Corbett mentions in his study the need for nurturing a sense of belonging that helped people in the Nuba Mountains to survive the protracted conflict (Corbett, 2011: 43). A strong sense of community and unity may be crucial to survive extreme situations such as sieges

and displacement. He goes so far as to mention the dangers that may come from small relief work that might harm the solidarity of the communities (Corbett, 2011: 43). In Idlib, during some interviews the worries of an increased separation between people could be felt, in other interviews respondents stressed the fact that they were all Syrians and that this fact united them. However, suspicion and sectarianism are increasing the longer the conflict continues. Nevertheless, some CSOs are engaging in activities for social cohesion and bringing people together.

D) Armed Groups

Even though armed groups are considered one of the most important actors in protecting civilians, in practice their efforts seem minimal. Armed groups are the ones that can negotiate ceasefires, warn civilians and reduce the threat for civilians by avoiding civilian areas for their operations.

The only area in which armed groups are actually perceived as increasing the safety for civilians is through their role in local courts (int. 8, 9). All in all, it does not seem that armed groups are doing a lot to enhance protection of civilians. On the contrary, all sides to the conflict use civilians as human shields, target civilian infrastructures on purpose and block access of humanitarian assistance (Amnesty International, 2016).

F) International Community

In general, Syrians are disappointed and frustrated by the international response. According to most respondents, the international community has to stand up and start to actually do something. Proposals from CSOs on what the international community could do to enhance civilian protection are: support the local response (4), support peace initiatives and talks (3), provide capacity building (2), negotiate ceasefire (2), enhance coordination (1), create safe zones (1), increase presence (1), and change media coverage (1). However, the hope that the

international community will do something that actually protects civilians on the ground vanished[42].

The same holds true for the Nuba case. During the armed conflict, international assistance was negligible or completely lacking, except for small and inefficient relief efforts and the support of one hospital (Corbett, 2011: 21). Hence, survivors of the armed conflict in the Nuba Mountains perceived international assistance during the conflict as limited to non-existent. In the post-conflict phase, however, international response increased.

3.3.2 Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

When asked about the way society deals with conflicts most respondents mentioned legal and other nonviolent mechanisms. Only three stressed the violent approach to conflict resolution. Firstly, this sub-section mentions violent mechanisms. Due to the focus on nonviolent tools in this thesis, violent approaches are not represented in detail. Nonetheless, violence is a non-negligible aspect of daily life and of dealing with conflicts and therefore needs to be taken into consideration. Secondly, legal mechanisms applied in Idlib are outlined. The last part analyzes other nonviolent conflict resolution mechanisms including negotiations, third party interventions and traditional approaches.

A) Violent Mechanisms

Due to the lack of rule of law and the militarized context, arms rule in Syria (int. 19). Hence, there is violence in dealing with conflicts, however, controlling factions try to limit the use of violence and intervene to negotiate nonviolent solutions. But the problem remains that if the agreement is broken or not accepted by one of the parties, a resort to violence is frequent (int. 7).

[42] For the risks of international action see sub-section 1.4.3 on the military tools for protection of civilians and on the controversy around interventions of the international community.

Research prepared by the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSD) and the Peaceful Change Initiative in 2014, analyzes opportunities for building peace within Syrian communities and stresses the dramatic rise in corollary conflicts and violence in Syria, especially due to the deterioration of law and order (CCSD et al., 2014: 2). The research finds that old disputes, rivalries and revenge action may more often spiral out of control and find violent expression (Ibid.). This thesis supports these findings, however, the extent to which actors resort to violence in conflict resolution varies from one village to another (int. 7, 17, 19).

B) Legal Mechanisms

As mentioned in sub-section 2.4.2, almost every village has a court that deals with conflicts within their community and is based on Sharia law. The problem with these courts is that in some cases they lack legitimacy or are controlled by armed factions. More than a third of the respondents highlighted the presence of courts and judges to deal with conflicts. In some areas, there are also police units. However, their authority, legitimacy and independence is unclear. In some cases, armed groups control the police, others mentioned international donors that fund police (int. 9, 11). A member of a local council said that there are different agencies funding police in different areas, but unfortunately without proper coordination, and the situation is very chaotic (int. 9).

In villages where police are independent from the ruling armed factions, tensions and conflicts over the control of police, courts and judges may appear. In several villages in Idlib, *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) raided police stations and arrested officers and judges (Now Lebanon, July 9, 2015). Three months later, people of the town in Idlib demand the return of the independent police and started negotiations with the armed groups (Syria Direct, October 22, 2015).

In the city of Idlib, JN also created an all-female police unit to enforce strict Islamic rules on women, which are mostly expressed through dress-codes (Syria Direct, April 18, 2016

and October 6, 2015). However, as a woman mentions in an interview provided by Syria Direct it is not about dressing but about control:

> Like many women here, I'm not against Islamic dress. Our clothing is already Islamic and was so before the revolution. The issue is that people need to have a sense of personal freedom. A woman has the right to wear whatever she wants as long as it doesn't violate Islamic law. But when clothing becomes a way for one group to impose their authority on another, I can't support that.
> Also, clothing is not a priority in a time of war. Imposing Islamic dress should not be our priority at this time. We should be focusing on security for women and children, procuring medicine and food and enabling women so that they can support their families at a time when so many men are not around because they have been killed. (Syria Direct, April 18, 2016)

C) Other Nonviolent Mechanisms

Respondents mentioned traditional conflict resolution approaches, negotiations with armed groups and mediation as examples of other conflict resolution mechanisms. This is in line with the research on Syrian perceptions on peace, justice and reconciliation conducted by Craig Charney commissioned by the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) (Charney, 2015). The study mentions *Sulha* (negotiation and compensation) and *Musalaha* (reconciliation) as the traditional methods of conflict resolution in the Levant[43] that is also well-known by most Syrians (Charney, 2015: 51).

Sulha and *Musalaha* depend on local customs and traditions and vary from village to village. However, the common features are that the final decision is binding and public (Charney, 2015: 52). Due to regional differences and the scale of the crimes committed, Syrians do not believe that these traditional mechanisms may be useful for national reconciliation (Charney, 2015: 53). Moreover, compensations might not be covered by local resources and would need government intervention (Ibid.: 54).

Negotiations are often used when armed groups are involved in negotiations in the case of the release of kidnapped civilians and in the case of conflicts between different armed

[43] Levant refers to a historical and geographic area in the eastern Mediterranean including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and Jordan.

factions. Moreover, armed groups play an important part in negotiating access for goods and services, as well as for humanitarian assistance.

The most important mechanism, however, remains the mediation through a third party. Half of the respondents mentioned this type of conflict resolution mechanism. Mediation through third party has a long tradition in many parts of the Arab world, and is often a core element of tribal conflict resolution mechanisms (Safa, 2007: 4). In Idlib, the third party that might be asked to mediate can be divided in three categories: religious leaders, community leaders and civil society organizations.

Civil society is definitely a new actor in conflict resolution, however, religious and community leaders have traditionally played a role in mediating between conflicting parties. As mentioned in sub-section 2.2.1, new leaders are emerging with the conflict. Particularly new religious leaders are often associated with armed groups in areas controlled by Islamic factions. In the words of a Syrian: 'In Syria, everyone with a beard can claim to be a sheikh.' (field notes, 1.4.2016). Also, traditional dynamics in community leadership changed. Nonetheless, still many people stress the importance of the local notables such as *mukhtar* and *wujaha*.

According to the research on local peace resources conducted by CCSD Syria and Peaceful Change Initiative in 2014, community and religious leaders play a more direct role in conflict resolution, whereas other civil society actors play a more indirect role through mobilization, humanitarian aid and awareness raising. This thesis supports most of the claims made by CCSD's research. So, that religious and community leaders are mostly engaging in direct interventions such as mediation, negotiation and arbitration, either by a single leader or in a group of leaders if the conflict is more complex (CCSD, 2014: 6).

In general, these interventions follow seven steps: establishing a first contact, getting the agreement to intervene, finding the facts, identifying guarantors (often armed groups), negotiating the agreement, signing the declaration, implementing and following up the decision (CCSD, 2014: 6).

Reasons to facilitate and enabling these interventions by community leaders are the neutrality and respect the leaders enjoy, the shared understanding of norms and traditions as well as the follow-up and implementation (CCSD, 2014: 6-7).

However, these interventions face six main challenges. The first challenge is the neutrality of the leaders. This is particularly the case for religious leaders, as most of them are affiliated with an armed faction. This overlap of interests impairs the legitimacy of religious leaders in the eyes of civilians (CCSD, 2014: 7).

A second challenge is the lack of professional background of many community leaders in mediation. Particularly for vital and complex conflicts that may occur in the context of an armed conflict such as in Syria, community leaders are often not prepared to intervene (CCSD, 2014: 5).

Thirdly, community leaders and religious leaders engaging in conflict resolution often face restrictions and limited space for action. In the case they transgress their space or mandate, leaders may also face a high personal risk and no protection (CCSD, 2014: 10).

A fourth challenge is the short term thinking and the expectations of fast results by communities and armed factions alike. In order to prove their legitimacy, community leaders are expected to achieve results in short time (CCSD, 2014: 5). This may lead to superficial solutions and hinders sustainable conflict transformation.

A fifth challenge is the lack of authority to execute decisions. Therefore, community leaders need to fall back on armed groups as guarantors to execute the decisions (CCSD, 2014: 9). This however, implies a certain risk of human rights abuses, resort to violence and impedes the distinction between military and civilian structures (CCSD, 2014: 9 and int. 7).

The sixth and most important challenge of community leaders and religious leaders intervening in conflict resolution is that these processes are not inclusive. Particularly women and youth are excluded from these traditional processes (CCSD, 2014: 7). This may lead to more conflicts between traditional leaders and younger generations and women's groups.

Moreover, there is a general lack of a consultative culture of decision-making, which impedes the participation of all segments of society in conflict transformation.

Traditional mechanisms may be a source for future reconciliation, however, the challenges of legitimacy and inclusiveness of the processes, as well as the disbursement of compensation, need to be guaranteed. According to the study conducted by Charney, particularly local committees for fact-finding missions might be well-accepted by both sides and could be a tool to contribute to reconciliation (Charney, 2015: 55-57).

In conclusion, contrary to my expectations, local civil society actors mentioned more nonviolent mechanisms than violent ones. This can be due to the fact that mediation through community leader has a long tradition in Syria and remains important[44], or due to the control of nonviolent mechanisms by armed groups, or the answers can be biased.

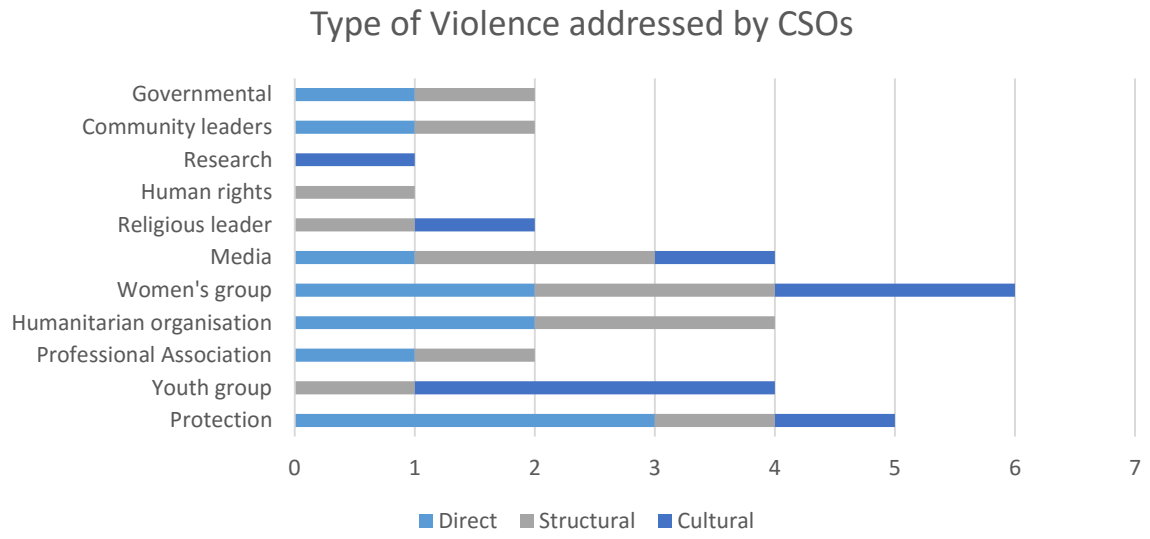
3.3.3 Types of Violence Addressed by CSO

All different manifestations and forms of violence can ultimately be classified into three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural proposed by Galtung (1990). In order to analyze the role of civil society in protection and conflict transformation, the different types of violence addressed by CSOs are discussed.

Sixty-five percent of the CSOs address structural violence, 55% address direct violence and 45% cultural violence. It is also important to analyze which CSOs are addressing which type of violence. Figure 18 illustrates the different CSOs addressing the three types of violence relative to the number of CSOs interviewed.

[44] For details, see Ousama Safa (2007) "Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation in the Arab World: The Work of Civil Society Organisations in Lebanon and Morocco", Berghof Foundation.

Figure 18: Types of Violence Addressed by CSO



Source: own elaboration

Only three types of CSOs address all types of violence: protection CSOs, women's groups and media activists. The CSOs specialized in protection, mainly address direct violence due to their mandate, but also include activities to reduce structural and cultural violence. Media activists also address all types of violence, however, often they lack awareness about the importance of their work or the limitations of how their work can be used to reduce violence (see sub-section 4.1.3). Outstanding, however, are the women's groups. Both of the interviewed groups address all three types of violence.

Professional associations, humanitarian organizations, community leaders and governmental organizations all focus on direct and structural violence. Religious leaders and youth groups address structural and cultural violence, whereas the youth groups predominantly focus on cultural violence, which is very important in conflict transformation.

I discuss now in more details the three types of violence and how they are addressed by civil society.

A) Direct Violence

The most evident manifestation of direct violence in an armed conflict is the military violence. These include violent acts such as bombardments, shelling, suicide attacks, missile

attacks, rockets, violent clashes, as well as domestic violence and GBV. The most common way of addressing direct violence is in the immediate response to it. In other words, by reacting to the violence and by assisting the survivors. Only few CSOs are working to prevent violence on the local level, mostly through negotiating ceasefires, or through advocating on the international level for no-fly zones and peace talks.

In response to acts of direct physical violence, the specialized protection CSO plays a key role by providing first aid, medical assistance, rescue work, transportation, warning people of attacks and of dangerous areas, building shelters and raising awareness about self-protection and safe places (int. 2, 17, 18). Also humanitarian CSOs provide first aid, transportation of the wounded and medical care (int. 6, 10).

In the Nuba case study in Sudan, Justin Corbett ascribes high significance and importance to psychological needs such as belonging, friendship, understanding and respect (Corbett, 2011: 18). Particularly in ongoing violent conflict, it is important not to neglect psychological needs of people. In interviews with Syrian CSOs, psychological needs came up many times by very diverse actors, from religious leaders to media activists. Psychological violence is usually addressed by providing safe spaces, PSS and creating a positive atmosphere (int. 2, 3, 11). Particularly women's groups engage in this field, but also protection and humanitarian CSOs to some extent.

To prevent direct violence is very difficult for civil society actors, unless they have good relations with armed factions. Sometimes armed groups allow journalists to warn civilians before attacks, but often they do not because of secrecy (int. 13). LCs and community leaders, depending on their legitimacy and relations with armed groups, may engage in dialogue and negotiations with armed groups to achieve ceasefires, evacuations or access for humanitarian aid and rescue teams (int. 15, 20).

Landmines and UXO may provoke or maintain direct violence throughout a long period of time. By raising awareness about the issue, risk education and the safe removal of mines and

UXO, the professional association specialized in demining can help prevent direct violence (int. 16).

B) Structural Violence

Common manifestations of structural violence in Idlib and neighboring areas are lack of basic services (health care, electricity, water and sanitation) or the lack of access to them (poverty, criminality, kidnappings, arbitrary detention and oppression). These forms of violence are often complex and interdependent. Poverty often limits people's access to services and increases crimes and kidnappings for ransom. But also oppression increases arbitrary detention and impunity. Moreover, basic services, particularly food, health care and water, have been used as weapons of war in Syria (as widely reported in print and online newspapers). The CSOs studied in this research address structural violence in four ways: increasing access, promoting the rule of law, changing societal structures and reducing poverty.

Depending on the scope of the CSOs' work, they aim to provide access to education by building/rehabilitating schools, training teachers and paying salaries to teachers (int. 3, 10). They also improve access to health care by providing mobile clinics, transportation, medical training and supporting health centers and field hospitals (int. 5, 6, 10). Moreover, media activists provide access to information and community leaders may engage in humanitarian negotiations to gain access to hard-to-reach areas (int. 13, 20).

The CSOs addressing impunity and insecurity due to criminal activities have different approaches and apply different laws. Religious leaders are in favor for the Islamic Sharia, however, based on Islamic Studies and not on its interpretation by untrained judges. Human rights activists wish to improve the respect of HRL and IHL. And the LC use the quasi-governmental structure to improve the rule of law.

Some CSOs directly address societal and political structures to counter oppression and increase participation (int. 1, 11). In many areas, the revolution experienced a 'second spring' in 2015 with people taking to the streets against extremist groups (Al-Monitor, March 24,

2015). Another CSO attempts to increase dialogue and participation in society through workshops and trainings (int. 1), however, the group fails to represent 50% of the community: namely women.

Poverty is increasing rapidly in Syria, especially with high inflation plaguing the country's economy. The most common approach to address poverty is still by distributing food and non-food items. However, the problem goes deeper because almost half of the population in opposition-held areas have lost their livelihood as they were employed by the state. Additionally, unemployment is extremely high. Both humanitarian CSOs are trying to address the problem of livelihood by supporting small income generating projects (int. 6, 10).

C) Cultural Violence

Cultural is the trickiest type of violence to address, because it is in complex manners rooted in society and traditional patterns. CSOs addressing cultural patterns often do so through awareness raising, workshops or throughout their work as a whole. It is difficult to extract only certain activities because when these activities are taken out of context they may no longer adequately address cultural violence.

CSOs address issues such as early marriage, discrimination, militarization, recruitment, extremism, critical thinking and education (int. 3, 4, 8, 11, 19). Often, the transformative effect is not directly intended. For example, the youth groups working in art and sports did not realize the transformative impact of their work until they were directly asked about it in the interview. Their main goal is to share their passion for sports and art. As a side effect, their work addresses cultural violence. The sports club provides an alternative for young boys to spend their time, to cultivate friendships to meet youth from other villages and to find alternatives to joining armed groups. The youth group promoting filmmaking focuses on art and self-expression. Even though most filmmakers work alone, their films are screened all over Syria and often people from different sides of the conflict can identify with each other through these films. Art opens up and becomes a part of the ongoing dialogue.

3.3.4 Levels of Conflict Transformation

This sub-section analyzes the work of local CSOs relative to their transformative potential. To do so, Lederach's approach to conflict transformation with the four levels discussed in Chapter One is applied. The four levels are personal, relational, structural and cultural. The descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of all four levels are summarized in the Table 4 below and illustrated with some examples from this research. On average, almost all CSOs engaged in personal, relational and structural conflict transformation, however, less than half of them are involved on the cultural level.

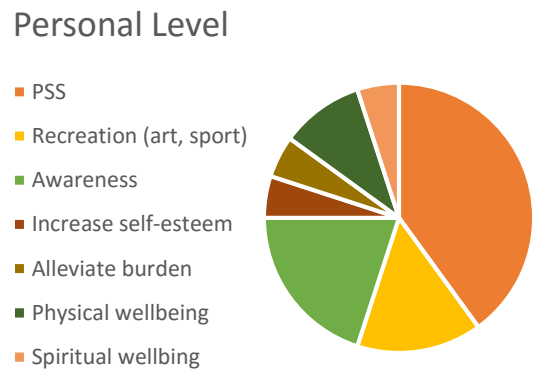
Table 4: Four Levels of Conflict Transformation

Level of conflict transformation	Descriptive	Prescriptive	Examples
Personal	How the conflict affects physical wellbeing, emotional stability and spiritual integrity of persons	Minimize destructive effects and maximize the potential for individual growth	PSS, recreational activities, awareness raising, social services, counselling
Relational	How the conflict changes patterns of communication and the interactions in relationships	Minimize poorly functioning communication and maximize mutual understanding	Dialogue, social cohesion, mutual help, reconciliation, improve communication
Structural	How social conditions affect the dynamics of the conflict and also how social structures are changed by it	Understand and address underlying causes, promote nonviolence, foster structures to meet basic human needs, and maximize participation	Humanitarian assistance, give people a voice, improve access, continue demonstrations
Cultural	How cultural patterns interact with the conflict and how the conflict changes cultural patterns	Identify and support cultural patterns that counter violence and identify cultural resources for constructively handling conflicts	Provide alternatives to violence for youth, nonviolent conflict resolution, promote art and nonviolent self-expression

Source: adapted from Lederach, 2003

The *personal level* of conflict transformation focuses mainly on the impact of the armed conflict on individuals. Time and again respondents stressed the importance of limiting the impact of the conflict on children, because they are innocent and do not deserve to live under these conditions. But also for everyone else, it is important to have spaces or occasions in which the conflict is not permanently on one's mind. Respondents mentioned examples such as football games, film screenings, journeys and games which allow a moment of mental distance and a temporary rest. Apart from these recreational activities, professional psycho-social support is very important and common in Idlib (Figure 19). The women's groups also stressed the importance of raising women's self-esteem and self-worth.

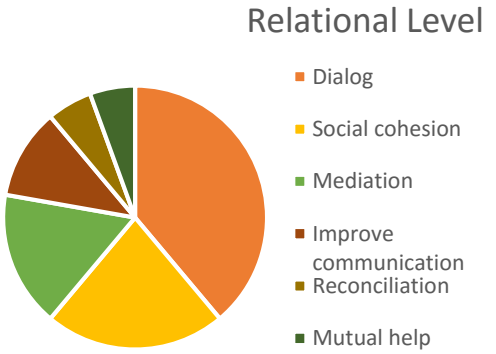
Figure 19: Personal Level of Conflict Transformation



Source: own elaboration

The *relational level* focuses on the relationships between people and how they interact and communicate with each other. Figure 20 shows that most of the CSOs aim to improve the dialogue between different communities through workshops, trainings, recreational and artistic activities. Social cohesion entails community work, working in a diverse group, engaging with different communities. Other CSOs engage in mediation, improving the communication and information exchange and mutual assistance. All CSOs engage somehow on this level of conflict transformation, except the humanitarian organizations. Community leaders play a particularly important role in relational transformation.

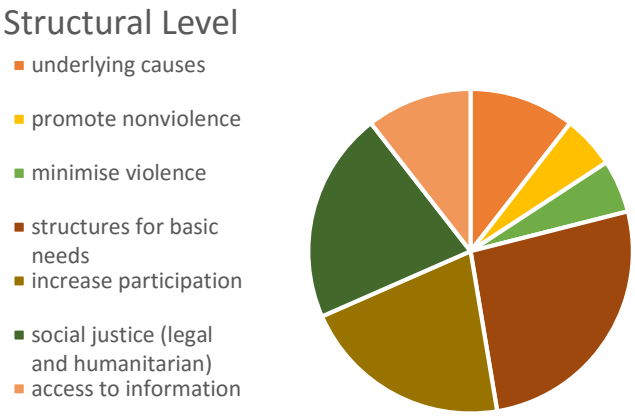
Figure 22: Relational Level of Conflict Transformation



Source: own elaboration

The *structural level* aims to transform the root causes, find alternatives to violent reactions and improve access. Goals mentioned include continuing demonstrations, promote nonviolence, improve legal and humanitarian access, ensure just distribution of aid, monitor ceasefires and report to the international community (Figure 21). The structural level faces many obstacles, disapproval and disagreement by the ones who are benefitting from the structures in place, often armed groups, local war lords, and criminal networks. Hence, CSOs engaging on this level face many obstacles and often fail in their work. For instance, a famous radio station in rural Idlib faced many problems with extremist groups and finally, after the pressure by the extremist group to shut the radio down failed, had been destroyed physically.

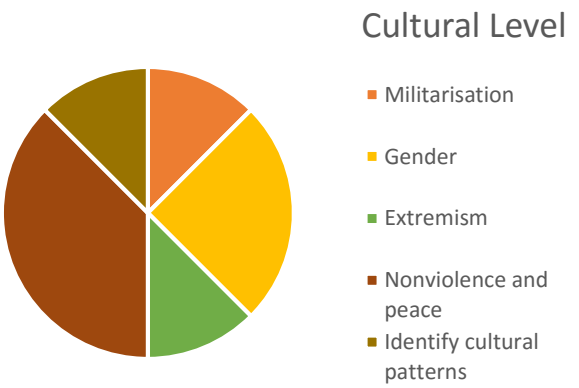
Figure 25: Structural Level of Conflict Transformation



Source: own elaboration

The *cultural level* of conflict transformation is more difficult to capture and to engage with, because often cultural patterns are invisible and normalized. Hence, less than half of the respondents aimed or engage on the cultural level of conflict transformation. Out of the eight CSOs which work in this field, one CSO aims to limit the effects of militarization on the youth, one engages in countering Islamic extremism and one assists communities to identify violent and constructive cultural patterns. Two CSOs, a women's group and the human rights group, engage in gender issues and three

Figure 28: Cultural Level of Conflict Transformation

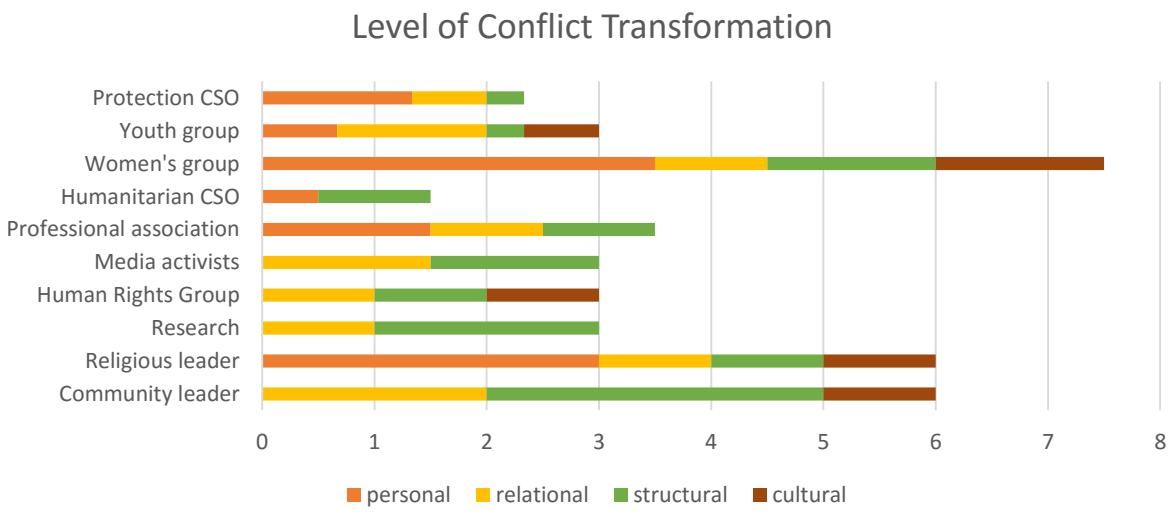


Source: own elaboration

CSOs work on nonviolence and peace (Figure 22). Interestingly, the youth group related to art work was not fully aware of its impact. However, through their art work they are able to make cultural patterns visible. However, they do not aim to directly address violent cultural patterns. Nonetheless, raising awareness about taboo issues is a first step in addressing cultural violence.

Figure 23 below disaggregates the levels of conflict transformation for each type of CSO. Due to the small sample size in each group (between 1 and 3), the results are not representative of the general population. Nevertheless, there are several points worth mentioning. Women's groups, religious leaders and community leaders seem to be a central part of the peace constituency due to their diverse and important contributions in the conflict transformation process. Another interesting point is that humanitarian organizations seem to have little impact and interest in conflict transformation.

Figure 31: Levels of Conflict Transformation by CSO



Source: own elaboration

Figure 30: Levels of Conflict Transformation by CSO Source: own elaboration

Unfortunately, it is out of the scope of this research to assess the impact of CSO in conflict transformation, as it is difficult to measure and needs a long-term approach. However, these findings may serve as a starting point for further research needed in order to assess the impact of civil society on conflict transformation.

3.4 Some Concerns

In this section two important topics are discussed, which did not fit into any specific section above because they are crosscutting (gender) or too important to be discussed as a part of another sub-section (ceasefires).

3.4.1 Local Ceasefires

The time of the data collection for this study coincided with the partial and fragile ceasefire that went into effect on 27 February 2016 (Reuters, April 22, 2016). Despite breaches of the truce from the early hours, the ceasefire reduced the level of violence in the studied areas and helped getting urgently needed humanitarian aid to hard-to-reach areas (Al-Jazeera, February 28, 2016; int. 1, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12). The truce covered all areas in Syria that are not under control of 'terrorist' groups. Mainly Daesh and *Jabhat al-Nusra*[45] are excluded from the truce and civilians living under their control continue to suffer from aerial bombardments. However, in areas covered by the truce, it had a relative impact. Respondents stated that children play in the streets, people are going out, there is a feeling of relief and relaxation, and people try to return to a 'normal' life. This is like a breath of fresh air for many in the midst of protracted violence. In some areas, people take again to the streets and organize new protests to revive the revolution. However, the ceasefire was never stable and changes from day to day. It was from the beginning a false ceasefire, because it excluded two important players: Daesh and *Jabhat al-Nusra.* But, against the odds, the ceasefire was perceived as a positive impact on the people's lives.

When asked about the monitoring of the ceasefire, some respondents said that armed groups are responsible, others mentioned the media, journalists, civil society and the

[45] *Jabhat al-Nusra*, also known as the Al-Qaeda of the Levant, changed its name to *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* on 28 July 2016 and officially cut its ties with Al-Qaeda.

international community to be responsible for monitoring. All of these actors are involved in documenting breaches, however, it is not clear to whom they are supposed to report.

Another big problem is that even though the UN is present in Syria, UN agencies are often far away from the affected regions and frontlines. The weakness in reporting and monitoring the ceasefire and the breaches can be explained by a general perception of or lack of political will to find a political solution in Syria. Even if reports of breaches reach the UN, international media and the international community little has come to action.

For some Syrians, local ceasefires could be part of a solution for Syria. There have been many examples of locally negotiated ceasefires between various armed groups. However, more critical voices fear that ceasefires, particularly if government forces are part of it, intend to empty the areas in order to impose demographic changes (Al-Monitor, January 13, 2016; Middle East Eye, December 31, 2015; int. 20). Displacement and mass migration as a method of warfare has been studied by Kelly Greenhill (2010) in her book *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*. Greenhill shows how states used the tool of migration, often successfully, to change the political game or impose their interests.

In Syria, the government is accused of using displacement as a tool in order to change the realities on the ground by negotiating ceasefires, evacuate civilians and offer armed groups safe passage to leave the area. Many civilians, however, decide to stay in besieged areas, exactly out of fear that they might never be able to return if they would leave.

3.4.2 Gender

Even though it is out of scope of this thesis to analyze in detail the role of gender in conflict transformation and civilian protection, gender needs to be taken into consideration as argued in sub-section 1.4.4. Conflict needs to be seen through a gender lens because of the

enormous significance gender plays in conflicts[46]. Moreover, the previous section showed the exceptionalism of women's groups in conflict transformation and protection, and raises the question of what role of gender in conflict transformation and protection. Hence, this sub-section highlights some concerns related to gender, protection and conflict transformation.

A) Different Roles in Protection?

Even though the question was asked if there was a difference in the roles of men and women in protection, most respondents stressed the different role for women, as if the role of men corresponded to the norm. This highlights a deeply held belief within society as to the normalcy of gender roles and beliefs. More than 60% of respondents said that there are different roles and only 30% said that women and men have the same role in protection.

Respondents who supported the view that men and women had the same role, either stressed that women can do everything men can do (rescue work, going to the frontlines, physically hard work), or that there is a need to include more women in the work that men do, particularly in health care and first aid.

The respondents who affirm that there is a difference in the role of women and men tend towards two understandings of this difference: on the one hand, respondents attribute to men and women different gender roles in protection which attach to women a role in education, and child rearing, and to men physical protection and livelihood. On the other hand, respondents acknowledge a *de facto* difference, but support a change and to give women a more diverse role in protection, particularly in health care.

B) Gendered Conflict Transformation?

Figure 18 and 23 above (see sub-section 3.3.3 and 3.3.4) demonstrate a certain of exceptionalism within the listed women's groups. Women seem to have an exceptional impact

[46] For details see: Cilja Harders (2011) *Gender Relations, Violence and Conflict Transformation*; Joshua S Goldstein (2001) *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Cambridge University Press.

in the areas of conflict transformation and protection. Nonetheless their participation in civil society still remains weak and their voices only rarely attract media attention.

The two other segments of civil society with significant impacts on protection and conflict transformation are both dominated by men: religious leaders and community leaders. Whereas other CSOs are increasingly encouraging female participation, women's groups address more diverse types of violence and engage manifold with conflicts.

One possible explanation why women address more types of violence can be found in the argument made by Cilja Harders, in her article on gender relations, violence and conflict transformation (Harders, 2011). Harders argues that violence should be seen as a continuum and affects individuals, particularly women, on the household level, community level, national and international level (Harders, 2011: 147). Hence, this manifold exposure and experience of violence may lead women to be more aware of the different manifestations of violence. Syrian women activists also express their motivation of joining or founding women's groups due to personal experiences (Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan, 2015: 5). These findings are in line with the findings of this research. As an example representing many experiences, the report of a nursing trainer illustrates very well how experiences of violence may encourage individuals to act: when asked about the motivations to participate in a nursing course in rural Idlib, many female participants recounted their personal experience of air strikes and how they were unable to help their family members and as a result many of them died (int. 5). However, apart from the direct military violence, women often face restrictions and discrimination by extremists and the patriarchal structures. This might lead to the awareness of women about the diverse manifestations of violence and the need to address them.

In order to find answers to the question why women are more active on all four levels of conflict transformation, the study conducted by Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan may give some ideas for possible answers (2015). However, further research needs to be done in order to understand the impact and potential of women's participation in conflict

transformation. In the study, the authors found some interesting points to explain the exceptionalism of women's groups in conflict transformation in Idlib.

Firstly, women seem more aware of the inefficiency of violence. Violence only created an endless cycle of violence is a common perception among women activists according to the study (Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan, 2015: 14). This can be partly explained by the fact that women are less involved in violent struggles and armed groups. It is possible that women find it easier to view violence from the outside because they are not primarily recruited and indoctrinated by the dominant system of conflict resolution. Hence, it might be easier for women to admit that the violent path of the uprising has failed. However, more research needs to be done to reach conclusions.

Secondly, women often include cultural aspects in their peacebuilding activities (Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan, 2015: 14) and therefore address often neglected cultural patterns perpetuating violence. Moreover, many women invoked the rise in ethnic tensions for their activism. Hence, they engaged in peacebuilding because of a general solidarity and feeling of responsibility towards others and future generations (Ibid.: 14).

Thirdly, women's groups link peacebuilding to the initial uprising in 2011. Thanks to this link, women's concerns do not remain simple 'women's issues' but are taken more seriously (Sharoni, 2012: 114). Women's groups also include economic empowerment of women as an essential element to bring about change (Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan, 2015: 15). However, the achieved empowerment during armed conflict might be lost after the conflict. Often, there has been a 'post-war regression' of achieved economic and political empowerment (Harders, 2011: 149). And often, economic and political empowerment is not able to change family structures and family roles (Ibid.).

Conclusion

Chapter Three explored the main threats and conflicts faced by the civilian population in Idlib and how different actors on the ground engage with them. The data collected in this research shows that the underlying causes of the conflict received considerable attention and were stated as preconditions for peace. That supports in general the need for conflict transformation as opposed to conflict resolution. However, protection is more depending on the immediate situation and is perceived more narrowly during a very violent phase of the conflict. The main actors in protecting civilians are the people themselves, as well as civil society and local councils which play an important supporting role for civilians. Despite the high level of violence, conflicts are mostly approached in a nonviolent way through negotiation and mediation. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are well-respected and efficient. Nevertheless, these mechanisms inhibit weaknesses due to their short term approach and their failure of representing women and the youth. The chapter also elicits a certain exceptionalism of women's groups in both addressing violence and conflicts in the communities. The next chapter applies the data presented in this chapter and draws final conclusions to answer the research question.

Chapter Four – No Peace without Protection? No Protection without Peace?

Image: Graffiti at a damaged building in Binnish, Idlib countryside, saying 'We're steadfast'[47]. Source: Shahba Press

[47] My own translation

Chapter Four discusses the key findings and relates them to the academic debates. The first part analyzes the protection efforts of CSOs regarding their potential to transform conflicts and proposes an analytical framework to link protection to conflict transformation. The second part tests the theories of nonviolence and nonviolent resistance in the case of Idlib and how civil society uses nonviolent tools to engage with non-state armed actors. The third part evaluates the impact the concept of *imperfect peace* can have in the context of armed conflict in Syria.

4.1 Linking Protection to Conflict Transformation

In this section, protection is linked to the concept of conflict transformation, in order to analyze the transformative potential of protection initiatives. The analytical framework linking protection to conflict transformation is based on the three core elements of protection as identified by Victoria Metcalfe (2012) and discussed along with data collected for this thesis. The three elements are: changing behaviors, reducing threats and vulnerabilities, and empowering communities.

Subjective Perceptions of Violence

As seen in section 3.1, most of the interviewees responded that stopping the violence and addressing the root causes of the Syrian uprising are clear preconditions for peace. In this sense, peace is only possible if people are protected from any kind of violence - direct, structural or cultural. On the other hand, respondents also seem aware of the fact that peace in the negative sense does not necessarily mean safety and protection. In addition, some people prefer being exposed to violence and lacking protection to living in a *false* or negative peace. Already these few examples show that the relation between protection and peace is far more complicated than expected.

This raises the question of how exactly protection and peace are linked? Where to start in this vicious cycle of ‘no peace’ and ‘no protection’? Can intervening in protection actually help to build peace? The following sub-sections address these questions.

During the research, it has become clear that protection is more subjective and relative than I initially thought. Of course, there are objective and real threats and needs, however, the perception of these threats and needs have an important subjective and relative component. Compared to the aerial bombardments, the lack of water, medicine or employment seemed secondary for many Syrians in Idlib. This relativity in the perception of threats, and hence protection, is important because perception is part of reality and ultimately forms how people relate and act in a given context.

Persons who lived for some time in unstable, post-conflict or violent environment often experienced this relativity in the perception of threats. The car bomb that hit the other side of the city was far away; the clashes in the neighborhood were in the other street; the cousin was only slightly injured. One of the most common words to hear from Syrians is '*alhamdulillah'*, thanks to God, to express that they should be grateful as the situation could be a lot worse. This relativity is one of the strongest protection mechanisms for people living through armed conflict. Even though it is heart-breaking to see children getting used to warplanes, missile attacks and dead bodies, this protective reaction helps people to live through these extreme situations.

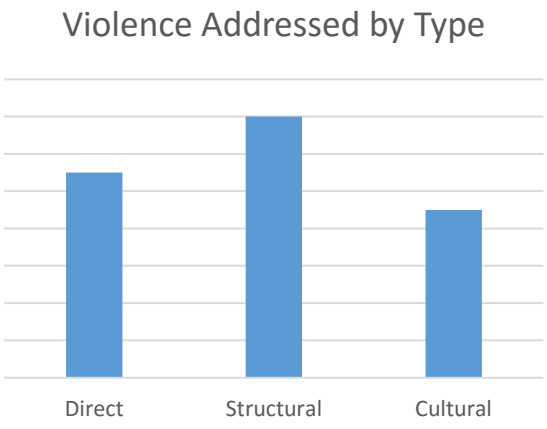
In the previous chapter, the main threats and protection mechanisms were discussed. This research shows that aerial bombardments are the most severe threat and that at the same time civil society cannot do much to protect civilians. The only responses are early warning systems, shelters and rescue teams. But the research shows as well that people are becoming desensitized and systematically accustomed to warning signals and warplanes and do not follow safety instructions anymore.

4.1.1 Types of Violence and Levels of Conflict Transformation Addressed by CSOs

Prevention of the most visible direct violence, the air strikes, is very limited; hence, CSOs focus on the reaction to it, which includes first aid, search and rescue, early warning and evacuation. Protection from maybe less visible impacts of the conflict, such as psychological stress, cultural violence and structural violence, vary greatly. For example, psycho-social support is provided by many different CSOs, poverty is addressed by some, whereas early marriage receives only limited attention.

Figure 24 shows that most attention is paid to structural violence, followed by direct violence and then cultural violence. According to Galtung's theory, the most visible form of violence – direct violence - should receive the most attention. In the case of Idlib, however, the focus on structural rather than direct violence can be explained by the fact that most direct violence is caused by aerial bombardments and that civil society can do little to address this threat on the local level.

Figure 34: Violence Addressed (by type)



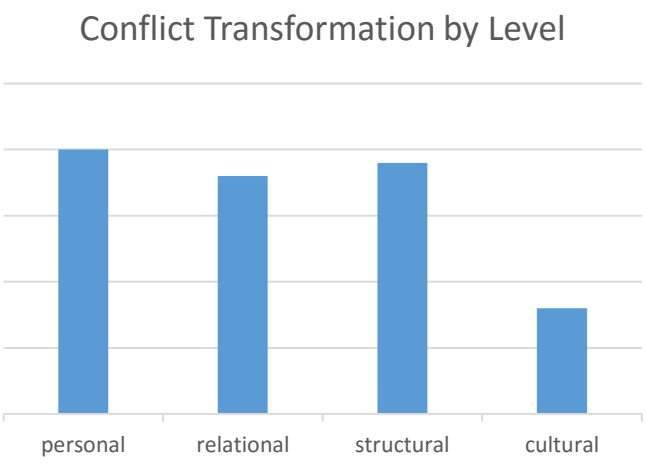
Source: own elaboration

On the international level, Syrian civil society was represented at the Geneva Peace Talks. However, the representatives of Syria's civil society view the Geneva Peace Talks with a skeptic eye and remain frustrated due to the inability to make any significant changes on the ground. According to a young representative of civil society at the Geneva Talks, civil society actors have many ideas and approaches to build peace in Syria, but it is all in vain if no political solution can be found (field notes, 28.4.2016).

On the local level, despite major challenges and destructive dynamics, many transformative efforts can be found. Figure 25 below illustrates the transformative efforts of CSOs sorted by Lederach's levels of conflict transformation (see sub-section 1.2.1). The

personal level is closely followed by structural and relational levels. Noticeable, however, is the lack of effort on the cultural level. On the one hand, it is understandable that in an ongoing armed conflict cultural patterns receive less attention. On the other hand, armed conflicts have a big impact on cultural patterns, in a constructive or destructive way, and may present an opportunity to change destructive cultural traits. However, even though some cultural problems came up in conversations, efforts to address these issues remained limited. When taking into account Figure 24 and 25 above, the gap between cultural violence and the other two types of violence is not as big as it is in conflict transformation. This gap can be explained by the lack of awareness of CSOs on their transformative potential which is discussed later in sub-section 4.1.3.

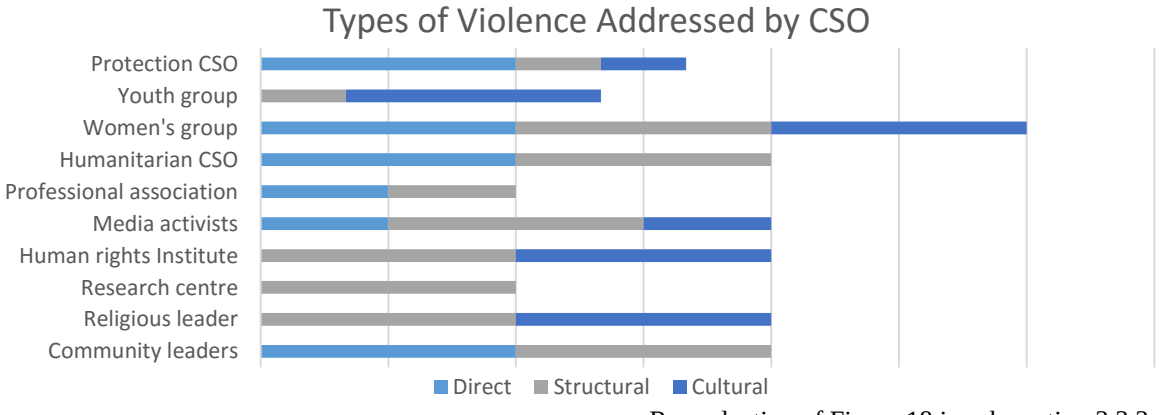
Figure 37: Conflict Transformation in Idlib (by level)



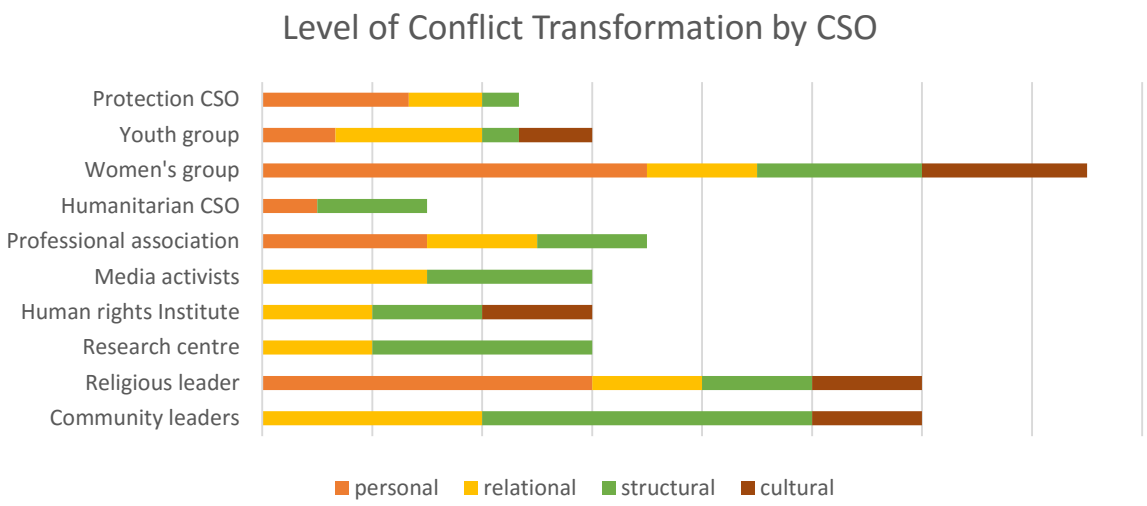
Source: own elaboration

4.1.2 Engagement of CSOs in Protection and Conflict Transformation:

In order to see which actor addresses what type of violence and at the same time undertakes efforts as to which level of conflict transformation, the data needs to be disaggregated. The reproduced graphs below show the type of violence by CSO (Figure 18) and the level of conflict transformation by CSO (Figure 23).



Reproduction of Figure 18 in sub-section 3.3.3.



Reproduction of Figure 23 in sub-section 3.3.4.

The first group of CSOs is composed by actors that seem to be more aware of their potential to transform conflicts and of their constructive impact on the community. Women's groups stand out in both graphs. Both women's groups participating in this study address all three types of violence and, to different extents, undertake efforts on all four levels of conflict transformation. Also, religious leaders and community leaders appear to make important contributions to conflict transformation. Religious leaders play a particularly important role on the personal level, whereas community leaders play a more important role on the relational and structural level. Professional associations, thanks to their expertise, seem to assess their impact on conflict transformation clearer. Even though they have limited impact on protecting civilians from violence; their work focuses more on conflict transformation on the personal, relational and structural level.

The second group of CSOs are the ones that lack awareness about their transformative potential. Protection CSOs play an important role in addressing violence; however, they seem less confident in regards to their transformative impact. Respondents of protection CSOs often stressed that they are service providers only. Yet, their values of humanity and impartiality transcend the conflict lines and ethnic/sectarian divisions. All three youth groups interviewed address cultural violence in different ways. Similar to the protection CSO, youth groups lack

awareness of their transformative potential and seem timid when it comes to conflict transformation. Particularly the group specialized in art work is not aware of the transformative power of art and filmmaking. On the other hand, the youth group working in social organization aims to transform the society; however, lacks a gender approach, and hence, does not fully realize its transformative potential. Humanitarian CSOs seem to have the same issue about confidence and awareness of the importance of their work. Even though they are clearly addressing important direct and structural manifestations of violence, their transformative efforts are very limited. Most of their efforts are in addressing the immediate suffering through relief work and structural problems such as poverty and lack of access. Media activists contribute to protection efforts from all types of violence, however, only to a limited extent, as they often depend on the goodwill of armed actors[48]. In conflict transformation, media plays an important role and is often seen as a tool to break cycles of violence (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000: 15-18). The impact media activists hope to make on the community is to make their voices heard, to convey information and to provide access for international media. However, many media activists are not fully aware of the importance and potential of their work. This is partly due to the fact that most media activists in Syria are not trained journalists and only received very limited capacity building[49]. More formalized media CSOs (unfortunately not part of this study) might be more aware on their transformative potential than independent citizen journalists.

In Chapter Two, roles and functions of civil society in peacebuilding and conflict transformation were described (see section 2.3). Some scholars distinguish the functions according to the phase of conflict. Martina Fischer proposes the following categorization

[48] Media activists have been targeted since the beginning of the conflict by all sides. There have been 101 journalist deaths between 2011 and July 2016 with confirmed motives. For more details, see Committee to Protect Journalists, https://cpj.org/killed/2016/ (Accessed: 9.8.2016); Reporters without Borders, https://rsf.org/en/syria (Accessed: 9.8.2016)

[49] For details about the lacks and needs in capacity building of Syria's CSOs, see Rana Khalaf et al. (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times*, Badael Foundation, p.47.

(Fischer, 2011: 291-292): prior to the violent outbreak of a conflict, civil society plays a role in early warning and preventive diplomacy; during the violent phase, civil society's main role is in maintaining and/or improving relationships across conflict lines and ethnic divides; and in the post-conflict phase, civil society plays an important role in regeneration, reconstruction and reconciliation (Fischer, 2011: 291-2). However, many functions cannot be strictly divided by the phase of conflict. Therefore, I use the analytical framework proposed by Paffenholz and Spurk (2006). They propose seven core functions that civil society may play in conflict transformation. All seven functions can be applied in all stages of the conflict, however, being particularly relevant in specific phases.

The seven functions are: protection, monitoring and accountability, advocacy and public communication, intermediation and facilitation, socialization, conflict sensitive social cohesion and service delivery (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006: 32).

Even though this thesis departed from the idea of looking closer to the protection function, many activities in protection that have a potential impact on the conflict can be categorized in other functions as well. This is due to the broader definition used in this research.

According to Paffenholz and Spurk (2006), direct negotiations of ceasefires, demilitarized zones, release of prisoners and evacuations are categorized in the protection function, whereas early warning, monitoring of ceasefires and documentation of violations of IHL and HRL are part of the monitoring function. Syria's civil society also engages in advocacy and public communication, particularly to stop barrel bombs, to break the sieges and to ask for no-fly zones. Local civil society in Idlib also plays an important role in intermediating and facilitating conflict resolution between civilians and/or armed groups. Also in service delivery, civil society plays a crucial role, however, the role of service delivery in peacebuilding and conflict transformation is contested. Examples for activities attached to the socialization and social cohesion function are the film festival connecting Syrians across conflict lines through art, capacity building activities and dialogue projects between host communities and IDPs.

Interestingly, the main concern for respondents is the protection of civilians even before peace talks can be taken seriously. This supports the statement that a certain level of protection is needed in order to engage in peacebuilding (Barnes, 2006; Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006).

Protection, service delivery and intermediation functions address more the immediate situation, whereas the monitoring, advocacy, socialization and social cohesion function address more the long term impact on protection and conflict. According to Lederach's notion of the three lenses (see sub-section 1.2.2), both lenses, the immediate and the one rendering the underlying patterns visible are relevant. However, a framework is needed that holds them together. In this case the framework used is conflict transformation.

Hence, if and how civil society's actions in protection contribute to conflict transformation or not depends not directly on the type of activities, but more on the approach applied by CSOs in carrying out their work. To do so, however, CSOs need a certain level of self-reflection and self-awareness about their impact and their position in the conflict (Fischer, 2006: 11-12).

4.1.3 Lack of Awareness of the Transformative Potential

The data collected for this thesis brings up certain key issues such as the lack of awareness among civil society organizations of their capacities to influence and transform conflict. Syrians in general, and volunteers in CSOs in particular, often expressed a feeling of powerlessness and inability to change their situation. The rhetorical question 'What can we do?' was asked very often. On the other hand, statements like '*alhamdulillah'* and 'It could have been worse' express a mental strategy and a frame to view tragic events more optimistic when many feel helpless or unable to change the situation.

Interestingly, the actors in civil society that are most aware of their capabilities to impact the situation can be categorized into tree types: 'traditional', 'expert', and 'marginalized'. 'Traditional' actors - CSOs that had similar functions before the Syrian uprising - such as

religious leaders and community leaders may draw confidence and self-awareness from their experience and legitimacy. 'Expert' actors, such as professional associations have specific knowledge and expertise in certain areas. This expert knowledge may be the source of their confidence and the assessment of their impact on society. Surprisingly, the most 'marginalized' part of society, represented by women's groups, are at the same time the most self-confident and self-aware actors in conflict transformation. To put it in the words of one of the women interviewees: "We can bring back peace through women's voices" (int.3).

New actors in Syria's civil society, such as humanitarian organizations, media activists and human rights groups, but also youth groups to a certain extent, seem unaware of their potential. This can partly be explained by the lack of experience, as most of these stakeholders are less than five years old and do not work in the same profession prior to the conflict or were not able to finish their education.

There is a general feeling that experiences of Syrian CSOs are not valued. In the humanitarian response, this problem has been recognized in some studies (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015; Khalaf et al., 2014: 9). However, the interactions between local and international actors are complex and bear historic and political imbalances within[50]. These findings are in line with the findings of Camilla Orjuela, who did significant field work in Sri Lanka and argues that civil society has often been used by the West for moralizing, democratizing and at the same time, depoliticizing civil societies (Orjuela, 2004: 57-58).

In the study on women's participation in peacebuilding, the authors found a certain skepticism and lack of awareness on women's contributions to peacebuilding by women activists themselves (Ghazzawi, Mohammad and Ramadan, 2015: 16). They argue that this lack of awareness is mainly due to the narrow understanding of peacebuilding and hence, is often

[50] Interesting book on this topic: Hamid Dabashi (2012) *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism,* London, Zed. However, the experience of Syria and the data of this study invite to reflect more critically on the responses of the 'West' to the Arab Spring.

perceived as a 'waste of time', not the first priority, not adapted to the Syrian context or even as a betrayal towards the people fighting, dying and suffering (Ibid.). However, this thesis argues that by linking conflict transformation to protection, which is the most immediate need, the benefit of peacebuilding activities becomes more evident (see next sub-section 4.1.4).

4.1.4 Analytical Framework to Link Protection to Conflict Transformation

Victoria Metcalfe, an experienced researcher and practitioner in the humanitarian sector, highlights three main elements of protection, which are changing the behavior of armed groups, decreasing the threat and vulnerability of civilians and building up local capacities to empower local communities (HPG and ICRC, 2011, as cited in Metcalfe, 2012: 1). All these three elements are closely related and interconnected. Moreover, all three elements play a role in conflict transformation. Hence, by engaging in protection, civil society can play a part in conflict transformation. In this sub-section, the link between protection and conflict transformation is explored and an integrated framework is proposed.

Table 5 below illustrates the framework linking protection to conflict transformation through the three main elements by using data gathered in this thesis.

Table 5: Analytical Framework Linking Protection to Conflict Transformation

	Protection	Conflict Transformation
Changing behavior	Demonstrations against oppressive rules Engaging global and local CS in campaigns to pressure compliance with IHL	Initiate dialogue with factions Link the local to global level Nonviolent resistance
Decreasing threat and vulnerability	Flight, hiding, adapting behavior, early warning	Collaboration, transforming relationships, mutual support
Building local capacities	Awareness campaigns, risk education, capacity building (first aid, demining, PSS, peacebuilding, journalism, management)	Share experiences and stories, counter simplistic dualism,

Source: own elaboration after Metcalfe, 2012: 1

A) Changing Behavior

Changing the behavior of armed state and non-state actors includes negotiating ceasefires, promoting the respect of IHL, release of prisoners and negotiating humanitarian access (particularly to besieged areas), but also the respect of basic human rights and civil freedoms, such as the freedom of movement and of expression.

I) Compliance with IHL and Addressing Direct Violence

Community leaders such as *mukhtar*, *wujaha*, tribal leaders and local council members are often directly involved in initiating or negotiating local ceasefires (int.20; CCSD, 2014: 2). As mentioned in sub-section 3.4.1 these local ceasefires are important to protect civilians, to guarantee humanitarian access and can function as local anchors for conflict transformation. Other important efforts in changing the behavior of armed groups in order to protect civilians include the promotion of IHL, negotiating the release of prisoners and ensuring humanitarian access (field notes, 22.5.2016).

As for the promotion of IHL, community leaders also promote 'demilitarized zones' in order to prevent attacks. For instance, one village in rural Idlib forbids to openly bearing arms and military clothing (field notes, 14.5.2016). Also, many IDP camps ask the newly arriving to hand in their arms when entering the camps (int. 6). Openly bearing arms amidst civilians has been used as an excuse by the Syrian government to attack civilian infrastructures and IDP camps, hence, a clearer distinction between combatants and civilians could enhance protection, but also mitigate the culture of militarization to some extent (field notes, 22.5.2016).

Women, in some instances, do also play an important role in the release of prisoners, promoting local ceasefires and improving humanitarian access. Women organize sit-ins to pressure armed groups to release prisoners (Syria Deeply, May 17, 2016), initiate ceasefire negotiations through petitions (CCSD, 2014: 2) and use their relative freedom of movement and perceived innocence to improve humanitarian access - particularly in besieged areas (Williams, 2014). Women are in many ways taking a role in changing behaviors; however,

often it is done indirectly without media coverage, for example through awareness campaigns, as well as in education activities and child rearing. Particularly the often nonviolent approach of women may encourage other nonviolent actions, thus, playing an important role in conflict transformation.

The Syria Civil Defense has earned legitimacy and trust of the local communities through their important work in rescue, risk education, early warning and first aid. Civil defense volunteers are heroes for many Syrians as they risk their lives to help others. Nonetheless, civil defense teams have been targeted and members kidnapped. As a reaction, the civil defense asks protection from kidnapping their volunteers (Syria Direct, October 12, 2015). Thanks to their legitimacy, civil defense teams can change behaviors of armed groups and criminal networks that harm them to some extent.

Syria's civil society is also working on the international level to change the behavior of armed actors and to enhance compliance with IHL. The Syrian Campaign, a global advocacy group launched in 2014, is well connected to global civil society and initiated campaigns to stop barrel bombs, to break the sieges and to protect medical and rescue workers on a global scale (The Syrian Campaign, n.d.).

II) Respect of Freedoms and Addressing Structural Violence

In Idlib, due to the presence of predominantly Islamist groups, women are the first ones to see their freedom restricted. In many areas, Islamist groups impose strict dress-codes or even a female police to enforce the rules (Syria Direct, April 18, 2016). However, women are also the ones who resist these rules. In several towns in Idlib, women demonstrated against the strict codes of extremist groups (Syria Deeply, May 17, 2016). On the other hand, in many areas in Syria, women benefit from relatively more freedom of movement across conflict lines. A group of women, for instance, made use of their previous experiences and were able to negotiate safe passage for students across conflict lines to continue their studies (Williams, 2014: para. 19).

Civil society groups also called for renewed demonstrations during the ceasefire in 2016 to oppose restrictive rules by armed groups (Syria Deeply, June 24, 2016; Syria Untold, March 16, 2016). Apart from locally organized resistance to extremist groups, youth groups are transgressing the physical restrictions on movement in the virtual space. Many youth networks are organized via internet and social media, particularly the ones in territory controlled by Daesh.

B) Decreasing Threat and Vulnerability

The main strategies to reduce threat and vulnerabilities have been discussed in section 3.2. Main protection mechanisms are flight, evacuation and hiding. But also early warning, awareness raising and accepting the situation are mechanisms to survive the violence.

These mechanisms are not automatically protecting from all types of violence, as we have discussed using the example of flight that severely increases the vulnerability when people become IDPs and refugees. In these cases, those who flee as they lose their social safety net. Moreover, these protection mechanisms are not automatically constructively dealing with the conflict. Often in conflict, people reach back to the family/clan identity which can easily be used to construct simplistic dichotomies and lead to exclusive in-group/out-group behavior. So, what type of protection mechanisms can be mobilized for conflict transformation? I argue that it is less the mechanisms themselves, as how the mechanisms are approached and implemented.

For instance, flight increases the vulnerability of most people more than it protects them. However, the way host communities and local authorities deal with displacement differs greatly and influences the transformative potentialities of the protection mechanism itself. When hosted in separate camps far from infrastructure, employment opportunities and without addressing people's grievances, the conflict is exacerbated. The same holds true with evacuations and early warnings, which can be organized transformative and inclusive or exclusive thereby worsening already existing misperceptions and stereotypes.

Psycho-social support activities are also an important part of decreasing vulnerabilities. Even though many CSOs and INGOs provide PSS activities, there is a lack in medically trained staff in psychology and mental health. Many families do not know how to deal with traumatized children and adults in their immediate surroundings which may lead to destructive behavior and deteriorating personal relationships. Hence, quality PSS might assist individuals and families to deal with the traumas of war and contribute to conflict transformation on the very personal level. If addressed wrongly, however, PSS and mental health problems can lead to stigmatization and marginalization of traumatized persons.

Other mechanisms such as awareness raising and risk education are very closely linked to the next element: empowering local communities.

C) Empowering Communities

Empowerment, awareness raising and capacity building positively affects the previous two elements of protection and conflict transformation. By empowering communities, they become more aware of their strengths and capabilities and are able to creatively use their scarce resources. In Syria, innovative ways to address the lack of basic services are booming and reach from underground playgrounds to biogas production (Syria Deeply, May 19, 2016; Enab Baladi, July 11, 2014). But at the same time, knowledge sharing, formal and informal education, and critical thinking has been restricted by some extremist groups (field notes, 29.4.2016).

Capacity building is a term that came up in many conversations, with local as well as, with international actors. The term is as broad as protection or civil society and is interpreted by each actor differently. Some local actors thought capacity building was a synonym for PSS. Justin Corbett stresses the importance of capacity building in protection (Corbett, 2011: 42). The study conducted by Rana Khalaf and her co-researchers on the Syrian civil society acknowledges an important gap in capacity building. On the one hand, Syrian CSOs do not perceive capacity building as a need, but then they are asking for more training in specific fields (Khalaf et al., 2014: 47-48). Their study confirms the impressions left during the present

research, which found that there is a particularly important lack of capacity building in media work and in human rights in Idlib. These are two fields particularly important for conflict transformation as discussed earlier.

After having discussed the framework linking protection to conflict transformation, the next section analyzes nonviolence as both an approach for protection and conflict transformation. In the following section, I explore how nonviolent tools are used by CSOs to challenge non-state armed actors and to negotiate their space.

4.2 Nonviolence in Violent Settings

This section investigates how civil society actors use nonviolent action to deal with non-state armed groups. Despite some major achievements CSOs attained by nonviolent action, the approach has also some serious limitations in the context of a highly militarized and violent setting.

4.2.1 How Nonviolence is Employed by CSOs during Armed Conflict

Gene Sharp is known as one of the main theorists of nonviolent action[51]. In this sub-section, a short overview over his theory is outlined and applied to the particular case of armed conflict context.

The basis of Sharp's theory is that the nature of political power is fragile and depends on the active and passive support of the subjects. This means that the 'rulers' hold no intrinsic power (Sharp, 2013: 4). The core for holding political power is the obedience of the subjects. Once subjects withdraw their support and obedience, every ruler becomes just another normal person (Sharp, 2013: 9, 17). Hence, it is important to analyze why people obey.

[51] Gene Sharp (1973) *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston, Porter Sargent. Other authors elaborating on nonviolence include Erica Chenoweth, Maria Stephan and Peter Ackerman.

Sharp identifies seven main reasons (2013: 10):

- Habit;
- Fear of sanctions;
- Moral obligation;
- Self-interest;
- Psychological identification with the ruler;
- Indifference; and
- Absence of self-confidence among the subjects (Sharp, 2013: 10).

Interestingly, all seven reasons for obedience also apply to situations of armed conflict, in which non-state armed groups take over control and subjects obey the new non-state actors. I develop this aspect further in the next sub-section in which nonviolent actions toward armed non-state groups are examined regarding protection and conflict transformation effects (see sub-section 4.2.2).

Based on his theory, Sharp presents 198 methods of nonviolent action, which he groups in three categories: (1) Protest and Persuasion, (2) Non-cooperation, and (3) Nonviolent Intervention (Sharp, 2013: 23).

Protest and persuasion (1) encompasses mainly symbolic acts of opposition with the intend to show the grievances and the extent of support (Sharp, 2013: 25). Non-cooperation (2) includes methods in social and economic non-cooperation, such as boycotts and strikes, but also political non-cooperation, such as withholding recognition or boycotting elections. Nonviolent intervention (3) are more directly targeting changes in behaviors, relationships, policies and institutions (Sharp, 2013: 43). These interventions, however, can have constructive and destructive effect and are not *per se* contributing to conflict transformation.

Some examples for nonviolent actions in the case of Syria help to make Sharp's theory more concrete. Nonviolent protests with waving flags of the Syrian revolution remain one of the main images of the Syrian uprising and are one of the most widespread methods of

nonviolent action in Syria. But also public declarations and statements of CSOs have become important, particularly in addressing the manifold violations of IHL. Petitions play an important role on the international level in order to raise awareness about the humanitarian situation in Syria. On the local level, petitions have been used as tools to pressure the release of prisoners. Also on the local level, graffiti and street art have become symbols of the uprising and civil disobedience. Mutiny, non-cooperation with conscription, prisoner strikes and embargos are other important methods used in Syria. However, one of the most striking nonviolent interventions since the beginning of the conflict is the latest movement in besieged Aleppo. Residents are burning tires to cover the city in smoke, in order to prevent air strikes, and thus to enforce a no-fly zone which the international community was unable to provide[52].

Many successful nonviolent movements do not just disappear, even if they face violent reactions. According to the theories of conflict transformation, conflicts do not vanish into thin air. Lederach uses the image of waves that symbolize the ups and downs of human relationships (Lederach, 2003). This image and the theories of conflict transformation may explain the re-emergence of nonviolent movements, such as the *Daraya movement* mentioned in section 2.1. In the five years of the Syrian conflict, there are many incidents in which nonviolent movements re-appeared after a period of violence. In Idlib, the renewed protests during the ceasefire and nonviolent action against armed groups are examples that support the idea of conflict transformation and the fact that conflicts do not resolve into nothing, but must be transformed from within as well as from the outside.

4.2.2 Facing Non-State Armed Actors in Idlib

As developed in Chapter One, nonviolence plays an important role in civilian protection and in conflict transformation, as the nonviolent approach challenges mainstream conceptions

[52] Washington Post, 1.8.2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/world/aleppo-residents-burn-tires-to-create-smoke-screen-against-bombings/2016/08/01/3afdf4a6-5805-11e6-8b48-0cb344221131_video.html (accessed on 2.8.2016)

on power, protection and conflict resolution. This chapter uses theories from Gene Sharp, Marie-Joelle Zahar, as well as Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan to shed light on why civilians obey non-state armed groups, how civilians engage with armed actors on a local level, which nonviolent methods civilians apply to challenge armed groups, and finally, why some of these nonviolent actions have been successful and others not.

A) Obedience to Non-State Armed Groups

Gene Sharp identifies seven core reasons[53] to explain why people obey authority. All these reasons also apply to the specific context of armed conflict. This study supports Sharp's argument that civilians may obey authority in three cases: civilians support the armed group exerting authority, civilians are indifferent on who is in power or civilians obey in order to protect themselves and their families.

Civilians supporting the non-state armed groups, which are controlling their territory, obey their rule due to moral obligation or because they identify with the ruler. This is particularly true in struggles for freedom and in conflicts with a religious component. According to this research both of these elements are present in Idlib and many armed factions use this rhetoric in order to gain the support of the local communities. Also self-interest and lack of self-confidence can lead civilians to obey and support the armed groups in their communities.

Civilians who are indifferent on who controls their territory obey the rule because of habit or indifference. Particularly in areas where the armed groups are changing frequently, civilians get used to the different rulings and obey out of habit and indifference. In some parts of Idlib, civilians have seen many different armed factions ruling their villages. Often, civilians in these villages said that they did not care anymore who were in power and that eventually all armed groups were the same.

[53] Reasons for obedience: habit, fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the ruler, indifference and absence of self-confidence among the subjects. (Sharp, 2013: 10)

One of the most important and strongest reasons for civilians to obey the rule of the controlling armed group, however, is for protection, meaning out of fear of sanction. This study found that 'blending in' and 'following the rules' is one of the main strategies for civilians to protect themselves and their families.

This discussion of the reasons for obedience to non-state armed groups shows that there are many arguments that push civilians to follow the rules imposed upon them. Nevertheless, civilians are not only passive recipients of orders and rules. They are engaging with non-state armed groups and sometimes challenge their rule.

B) Civilians Engaging with Non-State Armed Groups: Local vs. Foreign Fighters

Military and civilian actors engage in diverse relationships and often depend on each other. In Idlib, many civilians supported the local fighters at the beginning, as they perceived the armed groups to be protecting the civilians from the violence of the regime. Moreover, the first armed groups were organized locally and often gained the support of the whole village because they were protecting their families, friends and neighbors. However, in the interviews many respondents were reluctant to embrace or support the presence of foreign fighters, which are often accused to have brought about the deteriorating situation in Syria.

These findings are in line with Marie-Joëlle Zahar's argument that civilians have more possibilities to negotiate with armed groups that are locally rooted. For example, in Raqqa, the stronghold of Daesh, a teacher was able to open a dialogue with young fighters which were recruited locally because she used to be their teacher. When the commanders realized the influence the teacher had on the young fighters, they threatened her until she fled to Turkey (Syria Deeply, May 17, 2016). Zahar argues that the relations between civilians and non-state armed groups can be analyzed by identification and by control (Zahar, 2001). If armed groups identify with the local population and *vice versa*, civilians are treated better and have the possibility to engage in negotiations with the armed groups. This argument is based on the fact that armed groups depend on the support from the local communities (Zahar, 2001; Svoboda

and Pantuliano, 2015: 12). At the same time, good relations between armed groups and civilians can be used as arguments to legitimize indiscriminate attacks. If armed groups do not identify with the local population and *vice versa*, armed groups often use strength and violence to control the local population and enforce support. As an example of control through fighters that are foreign to the local population the case of a Syrian town can be illustrative. An armed group that conquered the Syrian town had been blamed for bringing foreign fighters in order to impose strict rules upon the remaining population, knowing that local fighters would not be able to exert control to the same extent as foreign fighters did (field notes, 15.5.2015).

However, armed groups are also dependent on the local communities and apply different strategies to ensure support, which reach from forced recruitment to encouraged marriage between fighters and local women (DCAF, 2015: 12). There are many examples in which civilians and civil society in Idlib engage in dialogue and negotiations with armed groups in order to improve the situation of civilian populations.

C) Methods of Nonviolent Resistance in Armed Conflict

Sharp identifies 198 methods of nonviolent action. (Sharp, 2013) In this part, examples of nonviolent resistance to non-state armed groups are presented and illustrated by data collected for this research. This part covers only nonviolent resistance of civil society towards non-state armed groups and does not include all nonviolent action since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, during the ceasefire people took again to the streets and resumed protests against the regime. However, some protests, particularly in extremist-held areas, turned against the non-state armed groups. There have been incidents of protests against the ruling of extremist groups before, however, most of the time against specific laws and rules, such as against dress-codes for women, and not in general against the presence of the armed group. Other common strategies are sit-ins and petitions organized by civil society, for instance to release prisoners. International petitions and joint declarations of CSOs have been used to

pressure compliance of all armed actors with IHL. Another method that was used to pressure all actors to comply with IHL, particularly to stop the deliberate attacks on health facilities and health workers, was a professional strike of medical staff after a series of deliberate attacks. However, this method was not effective, as civilians suffered disproportionately more from the strike than they were able put pressure on stopping the air strikes.

Following a more distinctive nonviolent methodology, some CSOs adopted an artistic approach to express their opinions. Graffiti, posters and videos are used as nonviolent resistance against non-state armed groups. Particularly short videos making fun of Daesh circulated on social media and aimed to break the predominately fear-based power exercised by the extremist group. Graffiti reflect on the one hand the influence of different groups in a certain area, but they also allow the opposition to the armed groups to express their opinion. Even though in the Syrian conflict as a whole, more diverse and important methods have been applied, the methods mentioned above were used by CSOs to challenge non-state armed groups and bear a higher risk than to challenge democratically elected government in the absence of widespread violence.

Hence, the fact that certain nonviolent methods have been applied successfully in the context of an ongoing armed conflict in order to pressure non-state armed groups and extremist groups, proves that nonviolence can be a viable option, even in armed conflict, and should be analyzed more thoroughly in conflict transformation theory.

D) Success and Limitation of Nonviolence in Violent Settings

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan greatly contributed to the understanding of why civil resistance works (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008). In their work, the authors identified predominantly legitimacy as a factor to explain why nonviolence action against violent movements can be an effective tool against violence. The argument is that violent reaction to nonviolent movements is rarely acceptable by either part, hence, it is more probable that violent repression of nonviolent movements will backfire (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008: 9).

Additionally, people are more probable to withdraw their support from the violent actor if force is being used against nonviolent actions (Ibid.: 11). This argument has been supported by the findings of Masullo's study of the Peace Community of San José in Colombia (Masullo, 2015). He finds that the violent reaction of non-state armed groups and paramilitaries towards the declaration of neutrality of the community, backfired on the armed actors by empowering the nonviolent resistance and decreasing the support for armed groups in the region (Masullo, 2015: 42-43).

Another important finding of Chenoweth and Stephan's study is that nonviolent movements are found to be more open to negotiations and also that power holders are more willing to negotiate with nonviolent movements (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008: 13). According to the scholars, reasons behind the unsuspected success of nonviolent movements compared to violent ones are the domestic support on which nonviolent action is mostly based, whereas violent campaigns depend on foreign support (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008: 24). Foreign support can also backfire on both violent and nonviolent movements when it is affiliated with political power. Moreover, foreign support increases the dependency of the movement on foreign resources which are more likely to be suspended or cut off. Besides, violent actions face well-trained 'experts in violence', namely armies, whereas nonviolent action can confuse traditional armed actors.

A community leader participating in this study mentioned in one conversation that the biggest mistake was to accept weapons (int. 20). The arming of the opposition gave the regime a good argument, together with the well-known rhetoric on terrorism, to legitimize the use of force against its own people. Since the Syrian uprising turned violent, militarization and violence have been normalized and are often used to settle disputes (see sub-section 3.3.2). Respondents told stories in the interviews how disputes between family members turned into violent clashes between different armed factions, because the family members adhere to warring factions. These experiences may lead to two different reactions: either people resort to

violence to protect themselves from more violence, or people chose nonviolent methods to resolve their conflicts. If they resort to violence, however, they may soon realize that they cannot win against armed factions. Hence, the only option that is left for civilians and civil society is to resort to nonviolent means. These examples also support the argument that negotiations and dispute settlements are more probable to happen with nonviolent actors, and that problems between armed actors are more likely to be 'solved' through violence.

An example of how nonviolent action and withdrawal of support of the community can put pressure on an extremist group is illustrated by the case of *Jabhat al-Nusra*. As one of the strongest non-state armed groups in Idlib, they gained a lot of respect and support from the local population. However, as they are on the terrorist list, the areas with *Jabhat al-Nusra* presence are being targeted by the US-led alliance, by regime forces and by Russian jets. As the population started to suffer more and more from the air strikes and the extremists started to impose strict rules, the discontentment of the population rose and protests against the group occurred. In late July 2016, the group officially changed its name and cut its ties with Al-Qaeda, according to the group to enhance the protection of civilians. Certainly, there are also other strategic reasons behind it, but only the fact that the group officially justified its decision by invoking protection of civilians shows the relevance of this argument.

Unlike the example in Idlib, the Peace Community San José in Colombia had a more difficult stand. After declaring neutrality and withdrawing support for any kind of armed groups, armed actors reacted by accusing the community of collaborating with the ‘enemy’ and by selectively and collectively targeting members of the community (Masullo, 2015: 41). For more than 17 years, the community faced assassinations, disappearances, lootings, sexual violence and impunity from armed groups, however, without giving up their nonviolent resistance (Ibid.). The study identifies several reasons for the success of the nonviolent strategy: The indiscriminate violence against civilians by all actors gave rise to a feeling of ‘under-protection’ and that none of the armed groups would be able to effectively protect the

community. This then led to the decision of declaring neutrality in the conflict, and finally, nonviolence as a strategy to protect this neutrality (Masullo, 2015: 50). Moreover, prior experience of collective action and networks with national and international external actors are other factors explaining the success of the nonviolent resistance (Ibid.). These findings indirectly support the role of civil society in protection and conflict transformation, as the main actors involved in the organization of the Peace Community in San José were community leaders, religious leaders, trade unions, farmer associations and other groups from the civil society (Masullo, 2015).

Comparing the case of San José to villages in Idlib is difficult, because of major differences in the context. There are some lessons that can be learnt from the experience of Colombia. Nevertheless, there are some important challenges in Idlib that might limit the success of similar nonviolent resistance campaigns. Firstly, the people of San José chose neutrality to show their commitment to stay out of the war, from all sides. In Idlib, however, neutral communities would have a difficult stance because the governorate of Idlib is the only entire governorate in Syria that is completely out of state-control, and hence, has become a sanctuary for the opposition to Assad's regime in all its diversity. Another difference is that the peasants in Colombia realized, after years of armed conflict, that violence is not an effective means to solve disputes (Masullo, 2015: 33). In Idlib, still many people believe that violence is the only answer to violence. Even though during the interviews, most respondents expressed their support for nonviolent solutions, in everyday conversations nonviolence is seen as inefficient and sometimes even as useless. For villages in Idlib that remained untouched by the armed conflict until now, the most important strategy for protection is to keep a low profile and avoid attracting attention.

4.3 Syrian Conflict: Does *Imperfect Peace* Have a Chance?

Imperfect peace, in the sense of 'not perfect peace', in the Syrian context is often attached to the notion of negative peace, and is hence rejected by some and seen as the lesser evil for others. Peace in this sense is understood as a *false* peace that does not solve or transform the underlying causes of the conflict. However, this is not what Muñoz's notion of *paz imperfecta* (*imperfect peace*) means. As explained in sub-section 1.1.3, *imperfect peace* looks at peace as a never-ending process that takes into account the imperfect nature of human beings and values all different experiences of peace.

There is only limited literature taking *imperfect peace* as an analytical ground for research. A study by Esperanza Hernandez Delgado focuses on the local experiences of *imperfect peace* in popular diplomacy (Hernandez Delgado, 2011). Alfredo Witschi Cestari concentrates on the relation between *imperfect peace* and international cooperation in the case of Afghanistan (Witschi Cestari, 2011). And Mohamed Nouri applies the concept of *imperfect peace* to the case of Morocco (Nouri, 2011). Through my research, I became aware of the opportunities and benefits of the concept of *imperfect peace* in armed conflict, and particularly in the Syrian conflict.

This sub-section uses the data collected for this thesis with the aim to demonstrate practical implications of the concept of *imperfect peace* in armed conflict. The study finds three major applications for the concept of *imperfect peace*: firstly, it allows to value and elicit all experiences of peace of Syrian people, secondly, the concept renders peace more visible, and thirdly, the concept of *imperfect peace* helps to identify entry points for interventions - also in conflicts as complex as the Syrian one. This last point is shown by reference to civilian protection.

4.3.1 Syrian Experiences of 'Peace': A Feeling of Confusion

When talking about peace with Syrians, the conversation often pauses for some time, people lift their shoulders and say "it's difficult". It is difficult to talk about peace in a positive sense when less than 60km away Aleppo is suffering from one of the bloodiest periods since the beginning of the conflict. Some peace activists participating in a workshop on peacebuilding in Gaziantep, Turkey, get to the heart of the confusion when saying "It is very difficult to build peace when the war is still going on" (field notes, 29.4.2016). This statement represents the mainstream understanding of peacebuilding that is based on the concept of positive and negative peace. Once negative peace is reached, meaning the halt of hostilities, positive peace can be built. This interpretation of peace, as Muñoz argues, excludes many experiences of peace and considers them not as valuable (Muñoz, 2006). Here is where *imperfect peace* makes a contribution by admitting that each and every experience and interpretation of peace has its value.

Some experiences of peace inside Syria have been expressed by the respondents:

> "Peace means a lot" (int. 1)
> "Peace is necessary now" (int. 10)
> "Peace needs time!" (int. 16)
> "Islam is peace, but as the real religion, moderate Islam" (int. 17)
> "There is no peace" (int. 13)

According to Muñoz (2006: 12), every experience should be valued as such, and hence, the experience of no peace has the same value as the statement that peace means a lot. Interesting is also the statement about Islam. The Arabic words for 'peace', 'safety' and 'Islam' have the same roots (سلامة - السلام - الإسلام). And for many Syrians Islam is an important part of their life. However, due to the extremist Islamists, Muslims feel often the need to justify their religiousness.

Perceptions and experiences of peace are also changing with the context. For example, the Peace Community of San José in Colombia mentioned earlier experienced a period of perceived peace after their declaration of neutrality, however, this perception of peace was not

based on the absence of violence. The community was threatened and targeted by armed actors because of their neutrality (Masullo, 2015). The perception of peace in San José can be attributed to the self-determination of the community. Due to the normalization of violence, a complete absence of violence did not seem to be a criterion for peace in Colombia.

Also in Syria the context shapes the perception of peace. Before the uprising in 2011, many Syrians did not perceive their living conditions as 'in peace' or peaceful. Since they are experiencing an armed conflict now, however, they perceive the conditions before the uprising in 2011 as 'peaceful'. One woman expresses very well the lack of awareness of what peace is, until there seems to be no peace anymore:

> Peace is the dream of everyone in Syria. Before the war we didn't realize that we had peace in our hands, now we have to try to bring it back. (int. 3)

Another noticeable pattern that shows how not all experiences of peace have the same value are statements that express the perceived lack of agency by local actors.

> We'd love to have peace, but inside Syria there is no decision from either side for peace. It depends on the outside. (int. 5)

Imperfect peace acknowledges all these different experiences of peace, especially those made in the midst of armed conflict. Then, when peace is experienced on a daily basis in abundance, it becomes normalized, but when violence takes over, the rare occasions of peace become more important. When for instance a rescue worker was asked about how he found strength to do his work, he said:

> We work in a very harsh situation. There is a lot of blood and death, it is very hard and difficult for rescue workers. The family then is really important. When we go back home, we feel more empathic and loving. […] If we can rescue a child under the rubble we are very happy, if we find a dead child we cry. It changes from one moment to another. (int. 18)

What is peace in these circumstances? The next part discusses how *imperfect peace* makes peace more visible through the acknowledgement of people's experiences of peace and violence.

4.3.2 Rendering Peace More Visible

If peace is considered as a perfect situation without any conflicts and perfect social justice, of course peace is invisible, because it never exists. Conflicts are part of human nature. But there are different ways of dealing with conflicts: constructively or destructively, violently or nonviolently. Hence, *imperfect peace* renders peace more tangible, more real and closer to experiences of people (Muñoz, 2006: 14).

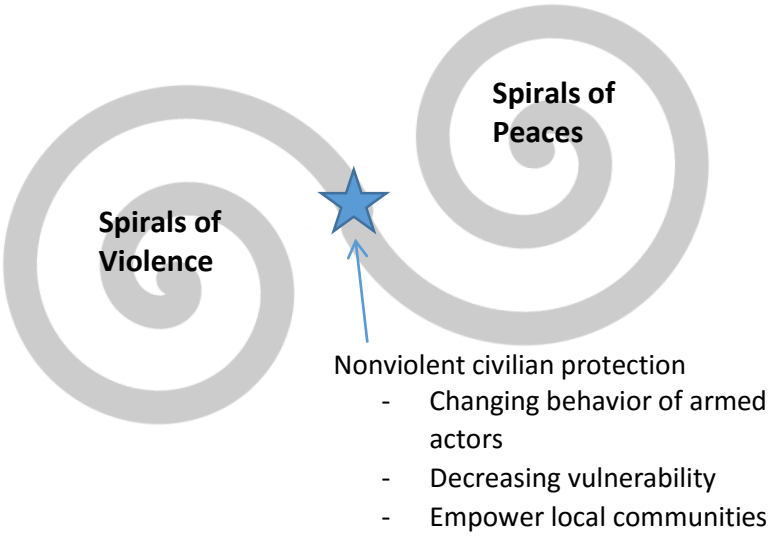
In Syria too, there are local manifestations of this *imperfect peace* amidst the ongoing armed conflict. However, they often remain invisible. Local truces, women's peace initiatives and nonviolent movements do not receive much media attention. If local truces, nonviolent peace movements and demilitarized villages are recognized as manifestations of the peace process and peace, synergies for peace can be created and, contrary to the cycle of violence, cultivate spirals of peace.

In his doctoral thesis in Peace, Conflict and Development Studies, Jose Ignacio Martin Galan, proposes the *chaotic spirals of peace* as an analytical framework for intercultural understanding. His theory is based on the idea that society is built up in the form of a net of relationships. Inspired by Lederach's image of the spider web, Martin Galan acknowledges the interconnectedness of relationships and argues that each action in the web has impacts on other actors to different degrees (Martin Galan, 2013: 376). This interconnectedness leads then to the conclusion that planned and orchestrated spirals of peace can also lead to the creation of unintended and chaotic forms of spirals of peace (Ibid.: 379).

As an example of chaotic and uncontrollable manifestations of cultural violence, Martin Galan mentions the phenomenon of Al-Qaeda (and lately Daesh) which exists as an organized entity in some areas, but also as a loose idea that can fit to many different movements (Ibid., 377). On the nonviolent side, many movements and campaigns work in the same way. An organized group starts a movement and other individuals and groups adopt the idea and contribute to the movement independently.

In Syria, the uprising in 2011 itself worked like this in the beginning and has been partly institutionalized in the Interim Government and Local Councils. But also nonviolent actions and CSOs can benefit from such momentum. This research found CSOs that arose through workshops while the initial intent of the workshop was not explicitly aimed at creating new CSOs. For instance, one women's group was founded by five women who participated in a peacebuilding workshop and at the same time saw their village threatened by Daesh. The workshop in combination with the dangerous situation encouraged these women to continue their nonviolent work for peace after the initial workshop ended. Another example is the youth group working in community organization. This youth group was established after participating in a workshop that dealt with community organization. These are only few examples of the unintended impact structured programs can have and give testament to the idea of spirals of peace.

Figure 40: Framework linking Nonviolent Civilian Protection to Conflict Transformation



Source: own elaboration

Taking into account the theory of s ı be seen as the transformation of destructive spirals of violence into constructive spirals of peace. This transformation, according to my findings above in section 4.1, can happen through nonviolent protection as Figure 26 illustrates. The following sub-section investigates the potential of protection to be an entry point for conflict transformation.

Source: own elaboration

4.3.3 Finding Entry Points for Intervention – Is Protection One of Them?

In complex emergency situations like in Syria, intervention may seem complicated because the impact of such interventions can neither be fully foreseen nor assessed. The complex and changing realities on the ground make it impossible to anticipate the future. Hence, this complexity can be dissuasive for any kind of intervention. *Imperfect peace* helps to break down a conflict in localized elements so they can be viewed within their specific context. In armed conflict, it may help to start on the local level and with small scale peace projects than with big projects that may have adverse effects (Barnes, 2006: 65).

Paffenholz and Spurk (2006) identified service delivery as a potential entry point for conflict transformation. The problem with peace work is that immediate results are limited and people in dire need for protection, food, health care and basic services may prefer more tangible support such as food baskets, mobile clinics and drinking water. Hence, service delivery is an important complementary part of conflict transformation and may open doors for various forms of peace work.

How about protection? Is it another entry point for conflict transformation or is it more?

As seen in sub-section 2.3.4, O'Callaghan and Pantuliano (2007) point out five core problems of protection in humanitarian response:

- Humanitarians are unable to physically protect civilians;
- Concerns that humanitarians 'substitute' local authorities and sustainable solutions to protection;
- Disguise the international failure to protect;
- Confusion about definition and approaches; and
- Protection can be seen as overtly political approach to humanitarian and poses risks for staff and community (2007: 2).

On the one hand, there are fewer obstacles for local actors for engaging in protection work, but on the other hand, local actors may lack resources and knowledge about protection. A good example is the mine actions, which aims to prevent accidents with UXOs and to remove landmines safely. CSOs in Idlib are ready to take a high risk when they work in clearing mine fields and UXOs, however, they could improve their personal safety through capacity building and further training. The problem is that INGOs do not want to be responsible if something happens to a team they have previously trained. An accident risks shining bad light on the INGO, and in the same time, international specialists are not able to access the mined areas in Idlib.

An important argument for protection as an entry point for conflict transformation is precisely the urgent need for protection in armed conflict. All respondents mentioned hostilities and bombardments as the principal threat. And the destructive consequences impede any constructive initiatives as one bombardment has the potential to wipe out any resources invested in a project or initiative. According to respondents, violence needs to stop first and then Syria can proceed with rebuilding its society. Therefore, CSOs working in protection, and particularly the rescue teams of the SCD, earned their legitimacy and trust from the people by providing them with the most urgent services such as early warning, evacuation, search and rescue, psycho-social support and first aid. This trust and legitimacy can be used by these civil society actors to promote nonviolence and dialogue within their communities.

But protection needs to be more than an entry point. It needs to be an integrated part of conflict transformation processes. If protection is only used as entry point, it can easily serve other purposes and escalate or perpetuate violence. For instance, the evacuations of whole villages can be perceived as protection of civilians if the evacuation happens before a major offensive. However, many people perceive these partially forced evacuations as a means to intentionally change the demographics of the region, and thus, as a military tool (Syria Direct, August 10, 2016; int. 20). In this case, evacuations can lead to an escalation of the conflict.

Hence, it is important to assess protection activities in more depth and apply to it a conflict transformation framework. Lederach speaks of the three lenses of conflict transformation: immediate events, underlying patterns and the framework holding the image together (see sub-section 1.2.2). Through the immediate lens, the evacuation may look like the protection of civilians is improved. Taking the underlying patterns into account, the evacuations may appear as a military tool to cut the support of opposition groups in the area. Taking into account a holistic framework, the evacuations increase the people's vulnerability as they may not be allowed to return to their homes and had to leave most of their resources behind.

As shown in section 4.1, protection can be an integrated part of conflict transformation by changing behaviors of armed groups, reducing threats and vulnerabilities and by empowering the local community. If applied in a conflict sensitive way and in a nonviolent transformative approach, protection may be more than an entry point for peacebuilding and in fact, might be conflict transformation itself.

Conclusion

This chapter proposes an analytical framework that links the core elements of protection to conflict transformation. The core elements are: changing the behavior of armed actors, reducing threats and vulnerability of civilians and building the capacities of local communities. An important tool to engage with these elements is nonviolence. This chapter shows that the civil society in Idlib is using different strategies for nonviolent action in order to engage with non-state armed groups and has experienced some success. However, there are important limitations to this approach. This chapter also indicates a general lack of awareness of CSOs regarding their potential impact on the conflict. The last part of this chapter also applied the concept of *imperfect peace* to the Idlib case study and argues that this view of peace has a potential to positively impact the self-confidence and self-awareness of local CSOs in their efforts to protect civilians and transform conflicts.

Conclusion

The goal of the present thesis is to better understand local protection efforts in Idlib, Syria and how this information can contribute to conflict transformation while in the process acknowledging local agency and local contributions to *imperfect peace*.

This thesis aims to bring together theoretical debates around peace and conflict transformation with local, subjective understandings. The three main concepts, civil society, civilian protection and conflict transformation, are very vague and depend on personal and contextual realities which shape their understanding.

As shown, civil society in Syria seems to be a new concept for Syrians even though most CSOs emerged out of structures that reach back to pre-2011 times. Although, these structures underwent drastic changes, the roots of Syria's civil society extend much deeper than is visible at first glance. Hence, Syria's civil society is flexible, diverse and is one of the only representation of the Syrian people apart from the local councils affiliated with the Interim Government.

Similarly, the concept of civilian protection often coincides with civilian peacekeeping, meaning the reduction or halt of immediate direct violence. However, structural violence has the potential to adversely affect civilians even worse than direct violence. Due to the nonviolent methods and tools civil society actors can employ, most of their activities protect civilians from structural violence, even though direct violence does not remain unaddressed. Nevertheless, most CSOs are not aware of the fact that their work can be categorized under the label of protection. The study also concludes that cultural violence, even though more difficult to detect and address, receives considerable attention from CSOs.

Conflict transformation, in the sense of addressing direct, structural and cultural violence in constructive and nonviolent ways, is a new concept for Syrians. Peacebuilding, on the other hand, is well known, but often narrowly defined. The general conception of

peacebuilding usually implies post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. Therefore, working for peace amidst ongoing violence seems a ‘waste of time’ or an extremely difficult task for Syrian activists. At the same time, this research shows that for most respondents a simple cessation of hostilities is not enough to build peace. As preconditions for peace, respondents mentioned the need of addressing the root causes, inclusive democratic institutions, justice and cooperation. This, however, is characteristic of conflict transformation.

These findings show that people have manifold understandings of what peace means and implies. The concepts of *imperfect peace* by Muñoz (2006) and *making peace(s)* by Martínez-Guzmán (2005) help to value these different understandings and to support local actors in their way to find a concept of peace that might fit their worldview and be acceptable in their communities.

Such support could take the form of capacity building in nonviolent tools for conflict transformation and protection. Scholars such as Dr. Mary E. King, Christopher E. Miller, Beatrix Schmelzle and Ruth Mischnick elaborated and reflected on training manuals for nonviolent conflict transformation (King and Miller, 2006; Schmelzle, 2006; Mischnick, 2007). These manual can be tested and further developed by applying them in the context of armed conflict and, at the same time, transfer important knowledge between international and local civil society actors.

Many CSOs engage in local conflict transformation on the personal, relational and structural level, often without being aware of it. However, efforts on the cultural level of conflict transformation remain limited. Despite a general lack of awareness of their transformative potential, CSOs do a lot of work in structural transformation. Once power holders are ready to engage on a nation-wide ceasefire and a political solution for Syria, CSOs can play an important role in structural transformation, connecting their local initiatives and developing national processes linking the grassroots level to the national decision-making level.

This thesis argues that mostly CSOs working in media, protection and humanitarian assistance, as well as youth groups are unaware of their transformative potential on the community level and beyond. More research needs to be done to understand the causes of this lack of awareness and confidence. On the other hand, professional associations, community leaders and religious leaders are more aware of their transformative potential and how they can work on the conflict. This might be explained through their expert knowledge and experience that reaches back to the time prior to the uprising in 2011.

The thesis also acknowledges a certain exceptionalism found with women's groups. Interestingly, women's groups participating in this research address all three types of violence – direct, structural and cultural - and engage on all four levels of conflict transformation – personal, relational, structural and cultural. This is even more surprising as the area under study, Idlib, is a very rural and conservative area, in which women maintain a difficult challenge to participate in public life. Due to my own experiences and friendships with Syrian women and their misrepresentation in the international media as well as within their own communities, I would like to continue on this line of research in order to better understand the role of women and how gender relations play in conflict transformation; with a special interest in the case of Syria.

Moreover, this thesis analyzes how society deals with conflicts within the community in absence of state structures. The main conflicts within communities, apart from the armed conflict, are small crimes, organized criminality, personal conflicts, structural conflicts and ethnic conflicts. Most of these conflicts are directly or indirectly a result of the armed conflict. The armed conflict led to the militarization of society as well as a shift towards war economy, and therefore, to the flourishing of criminal networks engaging in trafficking, smuggling, looting and kidnapping. The economic crisis also leads to an increase in stealing and kidnapping for ransom, disputes over land and scare resources. Moreover, the psychological effects of the armed conflict on people also leads to a tense atmosphere in which conflicts erupt easily,

domestic violence increases and disputes between families may easily erupt into clashes between armed factions. Actors to the armed conflict also made use of ethnic and sectarian diversity to escalate the conflict and deepen divides. Hence, by addressing structural and psychological problems, CSOs contribute to conflict transformation on a local level and are able to prevent violence in some instances.

In Idlib, some areas have been out of state control since 2011 while others only a few months. Two villages under government control are still besieged by non-state armed groups. Each village adopted different ways and has been exposed to different pressure, yet, people did not passively wait until someone rebuilds institutions and structures. Usually community leaders and religious leaders where the firsts to organize services for the community, but also other CSOs took over state functions. Such services include waste management, electricity, drinking water, road maintenance, courts and in some villages police.

Most villages have a court that applies Sharia law, or in one case the Unified Arab law, a middle way between state law and Sharia law. However, due to the presence of many different Islamic factions, many courts are controlled by armed groups and lack legitimacy in the eyes of civilians. In villages where the court lacks legitimacy, civilians use traditional methods of conflict resolution through the mediation or negotiation by community leaders. These methods are also used to negotiate with armed factions or between them. In general, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are well respected and can be very efficient. However, these methods have some important limitations: often armed groups are used as guarantors after a decision has been reached, which increases the risk of a fallback to violent means of conflict resolution. Furthermore, traditional mechanisms often fail to include women and youth and are reproducing societal and patriarchal structures which exclude certain segments of society. A third limitation is the short term approach of these mechanisms because community leaders are in need for quick results in order to earn legitimacy from the population, hence, short term solution are preferred over more difficult but more sustainable long term impacts. This finding

shows the importance of Lederach's *process-structure* to transcend the choice between short term or long term.

This thesis also presents many different nonviolent strategies adopted by civil society to deal with armed groups and reduce threats and vulnerabilities toward civilians. Nonviolence has been a powerful tool to engage with armed actors and negotiate space, ceasefires, release of prisoners and demilitarized zones. However, due to the very difficult and violent environment in Idlib, there have also been many occasion in which civil society was not able to improve the situation and faced pressure and attacks from armed groups. Hence, this research partly supported the writings of Gene Sharp, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan that nonviolent resistance works, but the research also shows major limitations of nonviolent action.

At the same time, armed groups depend on the support of local populations and are more willing to negotiate with nonviolent activists and leaders than with other armed groups. Nonetheless, many Syrians support armed groups because they aim to defend the communities, particularly the groups made up by local fighters. Armed groups with many foreign fighters are seen with more suspicion by local populations. These findings support Zahar's theories on civilian engagement with armed groups.

Adding to the literature in the field of civilian protection and conflict transformation, this thesis proposes an analytical framework in which protection is linked to conflict transformation in order to assess the contribution civilian protection can make in local conflict transformation. The analytical framework links the three core elements of protection to conflict transformation: changing behavior of armed actors, reducing threats and vulnerabilities of civilians, and building capacities of local communities. Due to this close link between protection and conflict transformation, this thesis argues that nonviolent civilian protection applied in a participatory and inclusive framework is part of conflict transformation.

Thanks to this proposed approach to protection and conflict transformation, the core need of populations living in armed conflict, protection, can be addressed and at the same time,

'peacebuilding' receives a new connotation through the concept of conflict transformation that brings peace closer to the lived experience of people and the capacity of civil society actors. The concepts of *imperfect peace* and *making peace(s)* contribute to this shift. In this sense, local communities may become more self-aware and self-confident about their potential to contribute to conflict transformation and protection. Certainly, the research also shows the limitations of a uniquely local approach to protection and conflict transformation. Further research needs to be done in order to analyze the impact of CSOs in conflict transformation and in order to understand how outside actors can support local efforts in protection and conflict transformation, without disempowering local communities.

In conclusion, I argue that protection, applied in a nonviolent, participatory and inclusive framework, is conflict transformation because it aims to transform spirals of violence into spirals of peace through changing behavior of armed actors, decreasing the vulnerability and threats for civilians and building capacities of local communities (Figure 26).

I would like to continue this research on protection and conflict transformation through more comparative studies in other parts of Syria and in other cultures. The framework can also be tested in social conflicts or post-conflict situations, rather than armed conflicts.

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Appendix 1 – List and Codification of Interviews with CSOs

# CSO	Type	Registration	Creation date	Size	Women's participation	Threats	Type of violence addressed	Level of conflict transformation
1	Youth group (social organization)	No	2015	medium	15-20%	direct, structural	Structural, cultural	Relational: dialog, cohesion; Structural: underlying causes
2	Protection CSO	Yes	2013	medium	13%	direct, structural	direct (physical and psychological)	Personal: injuries, physical and psychological; Relational: promote mutual help, cohesion
3	Women's group	No	2011	small	100%	direct, structural	direct (domestic violence) structural (lack of education) cultural (early marriage, discrimination)	Personal: psycho-social, recreation, art, music; Relational: dialogue within community, with IDPs; Structural: promote nonviolence; Cultural: women empowerment, early marriage
4	Youth Group (sport)	No	2012	n/a	No	direct, structural, cultural	cultural (militarization, recruitment)	Personal: recreation, sport, psycho-social; Relational: with other communities, IDPs; Cultural: limit militarization
5	Professional Association (Health)	through HiH	2015	small	n/a	direct, structural	structural (access)	Personal: psychological; Relational: IDPs, different villages

# CSO	Type	Registration	Creation date	Size	Women's participation	Threats	Type of violence addressed	Level of conflict transformation
6	Humanitarian CSO	No	2012	medium	40%	direct, structural	direct (injuries, bombing) structural (poverty, access)	Personal: psychological
7	Media activist	No	2012	-	-	direct, structural	cultural, structural	Relational: dialog, improve communication; Structural: participate in monitoring, increase participation in international dialogue through reports
8	Religious leader	-	-	-	-	direct, structural	cultural (extremism) structural (stealing, abuse)	Personal: awareness, PSS, spiritual; Relational: mediation; Structural: aid distribution; Cultural: Islam and values, real Islam
9	Local Council	Yes	2013	medium	No	direct, structural	structural	x
10	Humanitarian CSO	Yes	2011	big	n/a	direct, structural	structural (income generating) direct (relief)	Structural: basic needs and dignity
11	Women's group	Yes	2013	big	> 90%	direct, structural, cultural	structural, cultural, direct,	Personal: PSS, empowering, self-worth Relational: mediation Structural: relief, participation Cultural: promote peace

# CSO	Type	Registration	Creation date	Size	Women's participation	Threats	Type of violence addressed	Level of conflict transformation
12	Youth group (art)	Yes	2011	small	30%	direct	cultural maybe psychological as well and somehow relational (but not aware of the importance)	Relational: dialogue through films; Cultural: touching important issues of the conflict
13	Media activist	-	2011	-	-	direct, structural	direct (warning) structural (information)	Relational: communication to outside, and within, voice of the people; Structural: just distribution of aid, against corruption
14	Human Rights Institute	n/a	2011	n/a	n/a	direct, structural, cultural	structural (legal)	Relational: reconciliation; Structural: justice, rule of law; Cultural: GBV in prisons
15	Local Council	Yes	2011	medium	No	direct, structural	direct	x
16	Professional Association (protection)	No	2014	small	50%	direct, structural, cultural	direct	Personal: awareness, safety; Structural: risk education, minimize violence
17	Protection CSO	Yes	2013	medium	No	direct	direct	Personal: injuries, physical and psychological;

# CSO	Type	Registration	Creation date	Size	Women's participation	Threats	Type of violence addressed	Level of conflict transformation
18	Protection CSO	Yes	2013	big	0.5%	direct, structural	direct (structural = access)?	Personal: injuries, physical and psychological;
19	Research Center	No	n/a	medium	No	direct, structural, cultural	cultural (misrepresentations)	Relational: improve communication; Structural: access to information, nonviolence
20	Community leaders	-	-	-	-	direct, structural	structural (access) direct (negotiations)	Relational: dialogue with different factions Structural: root causes, basic needs, social justice Cultural: promote nonviolence

Appendix 2 - Interview Guide

Research: Protection without Peace? Local Civil Society Engaging in Civilian Protection and Conflict Transformation: A Case Study of Idlib, Syria

Introduction

Who am I and what have I done, what is the research about.
Ground rules

- Length (+/- 1 hour)
- Confidentiality: assure the safety and respect for the interviewee and the organization, no information is given to third parties without consent
- Anonymity: no names will appear
- Recording if agreed
- Benefit of this study: make visible local response and support local actors

General questions

- Name of the organization
- Where does the organization work?
- Is the organization registered?

Personal questions

- Name of the respondent
- Origin of the respondent
- His/her position in the organization
- Since when is the respondent part of the CSO
- His/her educational or professional background

Questions about the organization

- When was the organization founded?
    - By whom?
    - In what context?
    - With what goal and principles?
    - How did the organization evolve over time?
- What is the organization's role in the community?
- What does your organization do? (activities/programs)
- How many people work with the organization?
    - Volunteers or employees?
    - How many women?
- Who are beneficiaries?
    - Age
    - Gender
    - Region
    - Specificities (handicapped, orphans, students, …)
- Do you work with other groups or organizations?
    - Local and/or international
    - What is the nature of the collaboration?

Questions about civilian protection

General: about protection and threats

- What does protection mean to you?
- What are the threats to safety in your community?
- What are the needs?
- Who is responsible for protection in your community?
- Who needs special protection?

Protection mechanisms

- How do you cope with these threats and needs?
- How do you try to limit impact of war on the community?
    - What are the mechanisms available?
    - What are efficient measures?
- How does it change in the different stages of the conflict?
    - Did you try to prevent attacks on the village? How?
    - What did you do when armed forces where in the village? How if aerial bombardments? When the village was attacked?
    - What did you do after the attack?
- Do you have an early warning system? How does it work?
- Do you work with other villages or areas?
- Are there different roles for women and men in protection?
- Do INGOs help you in protection? Should they play a role? If yes, what kind of role?

Questions concerning conflict transformation

- What are the conflicts/problems in your community?
- What are you doing concerning these problems? How does the community deal with problems/conflicts?
- What are conflict resolution mechanisms in your community?
- How do you envision peace?
- What are the preconditions for peace?
- What can we do now for a peaceful future?

About fun (a positive end to the interview)

- How do you try to keep the spirits up and remain positive? What do you do to have fun and for the people to relax and entertainment? Do you think these activities are important?
- Do you do these events together with different communities? (neighboring villages, IDP camps, …)

Appendix 3 – Humanitarian CSOs Interviewed in 2015 for a Study on International Cooperation

Syrian CSO Table									
Nr.	CSO	Year of Creation	Offices	Regional Scope	Registration	Size	Women's Participa-tion	Sector	Inter-national Links
1	Syrian CSO 1	2013	Antakya (HQ), Istanbul, Gaziantep	Antakya, Reyhanli, inside Syria (80%)	Yes (Turkey)	70 employees, many volunteers	80%	Orphans, Relief, Education, Women, Health, Advocacy	Yes
2	Syrian CSO 2	2015	Antakya (HQ)	Antakya	N/A	5-8 employees, 5 volunteers	Majority	Education, Women, Health, Income generating	No
3	Syrian CSO 3	2013	In Idlib (HQ), Reyhanli	Only inside Syria (rural Aleppo, Idlib and Hama)	Yes (Interim Government)	7 main staff, many volunteers	No	Health, Relief, Education	Yes
4	Syrian CSO 4	2014	Reyhanli (HQ)	Reyhanli and Idlib	Yes (Turkey)	43 employees	Vast majority	Education	No
5	Syrian CSO 5	2013	Reyhanli (HQ), Ghouta, Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Idlib	Turkey, inside Syria (retreat from Eastern areas)	Yes (Turkey)	25 employees, many volunteers	Some	Relief, Health	Yes
6	Syrian CSO 6	2009	Reyhanli (HQ), Damascus Homs, Aleppo, Idlib	Turkey and inside Syria	Yes (Turkey)	30 employees, more than 200 volunteers	20%	Relief, Financial Support, Orphans	Yes
7	Syrian CSO 7	2013	Ghouta (HQ), Reyhanli	Ghouta, rural Damascus,Idlib Lattakia, Homs	Yes (Turkey)	80 employees, many volunteers	2%	Health, Relief, Income generating	Yes
8	Syrian CSO 8	2012	Reyhanli (HQ), Idlib, Aleppo	Especially Homs, but also Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Arsal (Lebanon)	Yes (Turkey)	8 employees, 10 volunteers	N/A	Relief, Education, Orphans	No
9	Syrian CSO 9	2011	Istanbul (HQ), Reyhanli	Istanbul, Reyhanli, Ghouta, Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, Lattakia	Yes (Turkey)	20 employees, many volunteers	20%	Relief, Education, Women, Health, Orphans	N/A

Syrian CSO Table (cont.)									
Nr.	CSO	Year of Creation	Offices	Regional Scope	Registration	Size	Women's Participa-tion	Sector	Inter-national Links
10	Syrian CSO 10	2013	Reyhanli (HQ), Houli, Homs, Ghouta, Aleppo. Lebanon: Arsal, Trablous, Akkar	Homs (especially), Yarmouk, Ghouta, Arsal and Akkar (Lebanon)	Yes (Turkey)	a lot of employees and volunteers	Yes	Relief, Education, Health, Microcredit	No
11	Syrian CSO 11	1983	Kuwait (HQ), in 46 countries	Turkey and Syria	Yes (Turkey)	1 employee	No	Relief	No
12	Syrian CSO 12	2012	Reyhanli (HQ)	Idlib, rural Lattakia	Yes (Turkey)	900 employees, many volunteers	30%	Relief, Education, Income generating	No
13	Syrian CSO 13	2012	Gaziantep (HQ), Reyhanli, Idlib, Trablous (Lebanon)	Turkey and inside Syria	Yes (Turkey)	100 employees, more than 2000 volunteers	50%	Relief, Health, Education, Advocacy, Income generating, Protection	N/A
14	Syrian CSO 14	2013	Istanbul (HQ), Reyhanli, Kilis	Inside Syria and Turkey	Yes (Turkey)	15 employees	50%	Education	N/A
15	Syrian CSO 15	2014	Gaziantep (HQ), Reyhanli, inside Syria	Turkey, Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)	Yes (Turkey)	24 employees, no volunteers	Vast majority	Relief, Health, Education, Orphans, Income generating	No
16	Syrian CSO 16	2013	Antakya (HQ), Aleppo Houli, Reyhanli	Turkey and inside Syria, especially in besieged areas	Yes (Turkey)	63 employees, many volunteers	50%	Health	No
17	Syrian CSO 17	2013	Reyhanli (HQ), Homs, Damascus	Mostly inside Syria, Reyhanli	Yes (Turkey)	5 employees	No	Relief, Income generating	Yes
18	Syrian CSO 18	2014	Reyhanli (HQ), Kuwait, Urfa, Lattaquia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo	Turkey, but mostly inside Syria	Yes (Turkey)	160 employees, volunteers in Syria	12%	Relief, Orphans, Financial Support, Education, Health	No
19	Syrian CSO 19	2015	Reyhanli (HQ)	Reyhanli	(through another organisation)	16 employees	99%	Education, Social cohesion, Orphans	No
20	Syrian CSO 20	2015	Reyhanli (HQ)	Reyhanli	Yes (Turkey)	25 employees, no volunteers	> 50%	Orphans	No