# ANALYSIS
# REPORT

"THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA AND THE POTENTIAL ROLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING AND PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REGION"

# FEBRUARY 2025

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **CSOs** | Civil Society Organizations |
| **EMR** | EuroMed Rights |
| **EPISA** | Empower Peace Initiatives and Strategies of Act Organization |
| **EU** | European Union |
| **EU-MED** | Europe Mediterranean |
| **FGDs** | Focus Group Discussions |
| **FSI** | Fragile States Index |
| **HTS** | Hayat Tahrir al-Sham |
| **IDPs** | Internally Displaced Persons |
| **MSAF** | Morocco-South Alternatives Forum |
| **KIIs** | Key Informant Interviews |
| **LA** | Legal Agenda |
| **PwD** | People with Disabilities |
| **SAR** | Syria Arabic Republic |
| **SDC** | Syrian Dialogue Center |
| **SDF** | Syrian Democratic Forces |
| **TI** | Transparency International |
| **ToR** | Terms of Reference |
| **SDF** | Syrian Democratic Forces |
| **SNA** | Syrian National Army |
| **UNHCR** | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **USD** | United States Dollar |
| **WFP** | World Food Programme |
| **WHO** | World Health Organization |

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# Executive summary

The ongoing conflict in northwest Syria has caused severe destruction, displacement, and human rights violations, creating an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the region's human rights landscape. Widespread violence by various armed groups, including government forces, opposition factions, and extremist organizations, has devastated infrastructure and severely impacted civilians, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children. This volatile environment has led to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation. Despite these challenges, civil society organizations (CSOs) remain critical in providing humanitarian aid, defending human rights, and fostering community resilience in the region. However, they operate under severe constraints, including security risks, limited resources, and operational challenges, which hinder their effectiveness.

Against this background, this report provides a comprehensive analysis of the human rights situation in northwestern Syria, with a focus on the roles that CSOs can play in promoting and protecting human rights. The research will involve a detailed review of existing literature and reports, primary data collection through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), and expert consultations. The cities Ma'arat Misrin and Kafar Takharim were chosen as case studies for conducting this research.

The primary data were collected between the 2nd of December 2024 and the 10th of January 2025, during which the liberation of Syria happened on the 8th of December. This turning point in Syria's history was deeply reflected in the answers of respondents. Mixed emotions of hope for a better Syria, and fear of the future were genuinely expressed.

Specifically, we present three sets of results:

1) **A comprehensive overview of human rights situation, key challenges and trends, and the impact on vulnerable groups; and**
2) **The role of CSOs, current activities and contributions, CSOs' services and community voice, challenges faced by CSOs, and opportunities for strengthening CSOs; and**
3) **Actionable recommendations for CSOs, international and local stakeholders, policy and systemic change**

Overall, the findings suggest five main messages:

1) The human rights violations reported were widespread, affecting residents and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) across different regions, particularly those living close to areas that were under the control of the old regime.

2) The nature of some challenges and needs varies across different groups with women and children being particularly vulnerable.

3) Although these violations have decreased in recent years, their long-term impact continues to affect communities, and there is a strong call for international support to address these ongoing issues.

4) The majority of CSOs offer relief and protection services, and struggle with limited expertise and resources. A unified vision is crucial for rebuilding the country with increasing investments in sustainable development projects.

5) The research should examine heterogeneous differences across geographical locations, population groups, demographic groups, and genders, given the new political situation.

# INTRODUCTION

# 1 Introduction

This report presents and discusses a set of results based on a detailed review of existing literature and primary data through KIIs and FGDs in northern west Syria, which were collected in the context of the research project "The Human Rights Situation in Northwest Syria and the Potential Roles of CSOs in Promoting and Protecting Human Rights in the Region". The primary data is composed of the following

1) Semi-structured interviews conducted with approved questionnaire, to enable unique knowledge and perspectives from 16 informants with a wide range of experiences and backgrounds.

2) FGDs held with community members, victims of human rights violations, and activists to discuss their experiences and perceptions of CSO interventions with a sample size consists of four focus groups, with each group having 8 participants: two groups consisting of male participants only and two groups consisting of female participants only. These focus groups are conducted in the cities of Ma'arat Misrin and Kafar Takharim, with each city having groups with different gender groups.

The overall goal of the research project is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the human rights situation in northwest Syria, focusing on the roles that CSOs can play in promoting and protecting human rights and their effectiveness.

Guided by the Terms of References (ToR) presented in Annex I, the research project ultimately seeks to answer the following questions based on the collected data:

(i) *What is the human rights situation currently occurring in northwest Syria including the most critical human rights violations, and which populations are most affected by these violations?*

(ii) *Who are the multiple armed factions that violate human rights in the region, and how?*

(iii) *What roles do CSOs currently play in promoting and protecting human rights in northwest Syria, and how effective have they been in these efforts?*

(iv) *What are the perceptions of local communities, including vulnerable groups, regarding the human rights situation and the work of CSOs in protecting them?*

(v) *What specific actions or strategies can be recommended to enhance the capacity of CSOs in northwest Syria to better advocate for and protect human rights?*

The KIIs data from the full sample of 16 individuals was collected between the 2nd of December 2024 and the 4th of January 2025. The sample of four FGDs (including 32 individuals) was collected between the 3d of January and the 10th of January 2025.

This research project is implemented by the EPISA organization in the context of the European Union (EU)-funded Majalat[1] II project "Fostering Structured Dialogue between the EU and Civil Society in the Southern Neighbourhood". The overall goal of the Majalat II project is to ensure that policy solutions to key social and political challenges in the Southern Neighbourhood are identified and agreed upon by fostering an inclusive structured dialogue between CSOs and a wide range of national and EU interlocutors. The project has been running for three years and implemented by a consortium led by EuroMed Rights (EMR) including Morocco-South Alternatives Forum (MSAF) and Legal Agenda (LA) (EuroMed Rights, 2024).

This report focuses on the analysis of human rights situation, identifying key challenges and trends, and examining the impact on vulnerable groups. Additionally, it explores the role of CSOs, detailing their current activities, services, contributions, community engagement, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face. Staff from EPISA provided information and advice on the underlying data, which was analyzed by the researcher Siwar Hakim.

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[1] "Majalat" means fields and domains in the Arabic language.

# CONTEXT

# 2 Context

## 2.1 Study area

The Syrian Arabic Republic (SAR) is a fragile country located on the east coast of the Mediterranean in the Middle East with 24,99 million people[2]. According to global fragility index and the corruption perception index, it ranks as the 4th most fragile[3] (FSI, 2024), and the 3d most corrupt state[4] (TI, 2024). The conflict in Syria has resulted in the killing and injuring of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the displacement of millions. An estimated 16,7 million people need assistance and 7,2 million remain internally displaced, including a large proportion of children, with a further 5,5 million Syrians registered as refugees worldwide (UNHCR Syria, 2024). The country has spiraled into a humanitarian catastrophe with violence and displacement causing an increase in trauma and mental health issues (Kakaje et al., 2021).

The plummeting economic situation has put people in Syria in a worse situation with food prices that have increased 236 percent over the last year. This has been further impacted by a fuel crisis and water shortages. The economic sanctions blocked the rehabilitation and development of water distribution networks due to the unavailability of equipment and spare parts and cause serious shortages of medicines and specialized medical equipment (OHCHR, 2022). In October 2022 EuroMed Monitor estimated, that 90% of the population in Syria lives below the poverty line (EuroMed Human Rights Monitor, 2022) and that at least 12,9 million are food insecure (WFP, 2025).

The conflict in Syria claimed the lives of 231,000 individuals since March 2011 (SNHR, 2024). The initial years of the conflict were marked by the highest incidence of violence and triggered one of the largest episodes of displacement witnessed since World War II, conflict was widespread throughout the country's territory, and virtually no region was left unscarred. In more recent years, after 2018, the scale of conflict has significantly decreased, mostly affecting areas in the northern part of the country that remain outside the control of the old regime.

After 13 years of conflict, the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria is at its worst. 3.5 million people are internally displaced. The population counts for 5,1 million of which 4,2 million are people in need. Almost half of them are children, many of whom live in overcrowded camps. 89% of children in north-west Syria require protection assistance. Each month in 2024, the UN and its partners are reaching 1 million people in north-west Syria on average with assistance – but this is a significant drop from the 2.5 million people reached monthly in 2023. The cross-border response is facing the

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[2] As of November 3d, 2024 based on Worldometer's latest United Nations data elaboration.
[3] Of 179 countries.
[4] Of 180 countries.

worst funding crisis in its history. Critical functions of nine hospitals were temporarily suspended last year due to funding shortfalls. As of 18 October, the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria has received only over a quarter of the funding needed. Consequently, humanitarian activities and facilities have continued to be suspended in northwest Syria every week (OCHA Türkiye, 2024).

The Health Cluster reported that 60 health facilities had run out of funds since the end of September. Moreover, the years of conflict have taken a toll on the mental well-being of the people in Syria. In north-west Syria, over 1 million people, or 20 per cent of the population, suffer from mental health conditions, including 230,000 who suffer from severe disorders. This is far higher than the global average (1 out of 8 people) (WHO, 2022). Prolonged exposure to conflict has left individuals facing chronic stress, grief from the loss of loved ones, and the trauma of violence and displacement.

The groups most vulnerable to suicide risks in north-west Syria are unemployed individuals, displaced women, young adults between the ages of 18 to 38 - a significant portion being female, residents of crowded homes, and married women with children (OCHA Türkiye, 2024). Suicidal ideation in northwest Syria is on the increase and reports attribute it to the deteriorating living conditions in the region (Jourdi and Kyrillos, 2022). Social stressors such as poverty, displacement, malnutrition, and the breakdown of social networks are negatively impacting the mental health of individuals (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010). These reports align with some of the earliest writings on suicide and conflict which claim that during civil wars there is an increase in suicides due to social disintegration, feelings of hopelessness, and despair among the population (Durkheim, 2001).

The fall of the Assad regime was brought about by the sudden and unexpected advance by the Syrian Opposition. The study area is the northwestern of Syria, and the sub-districts of Kafr Takharim and Ma'arrat Misrin were chosen as study cases (Figure 1). As of February 20, 2025, the area is under the control of the HTS-led Interim Government, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) as shown in (Figure II.1).

*Figure 1: The Map of Northwestern Syria*

## 2.2 Methodology and tools

The methodology outlines the research approach, data collection techniques, data quality assurance, data translation and analysis strategies, challenges and limitations, and additional considerations.

### 2.2.1 Research design

A qualitative approach will be employed to provide comprehensive analysis which consists of:

#### 2.2.1.1 Desk review

Content analysis of official reports, media coverage on human rights violations, reports and datasets from international organizations, and CSO publications. The context analyses first involved deep research of the historical context and the multiple narratives of events that shape the present human rights situation to understand the political and security situation in northwest Syria and conduct a review of the existing literature and scientific research in the past decade.

#### 2.2.1.2 Key informant interviews (KIIs)

As a product of the desk review, the research team selected a broad spectrum of Key Informants to interview. The sampling method used was "purposive sampling" for interviews and focus groups, that is to select participants who are directly involved in or affected by the human rights situation.

KIIs play an important role in answering the more central and strategic questions and help reveal the narrative and nature of human rights violations through perceptions and interactions. Additionally, it helped in observing the constraints they faced and the ways they sought to overcome the challenges. The aim was to gain insights into on-ground human rights violations, CSO interventions, and obstacles. The interviews were conducted in the field in Syrian Arabic dialect.

The sample comprises 16 participants, ensuring gender balance with an equal distribution of 50% female and 50% male. Table IV.1 provides a summary of key Informants. KIIs scope includes the following actors:

- Decision-makers
- Academics
- Human rights activists
- Community leaders
- Other organizations actors in related fields
- Affected populations and victims of human rights violations

- Lawyers

The EPISA research team set up and conducted these interviews in person. These interviews allowed moderators to gather detailed information from people who have a special understanding of the context and needs of the communities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an approved questionnaire (Annex V), to enable unique knowledge and perspectives from informants with a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. The EPISA team left room open for non-structured questions in each of these interviews. The interview guide focused on perceptions and views of human rights violations, personal experiences, CSOs interventions, challenges, and future opportunities.

### 2.2.1.3 Focus group discussions (FGDs)

The sample size consists of four focus groups, with each group having 8 participants: two groups consisting of male participants only and two groups consisting of female participants only. These focus groups are conducted in the cities of Ma'arat Misrin and Kafar Takharim, with each city having groups with different gender groups. Table IV.2 provides a summary of FGDs.

Focus group discussions were led by a team of two enumerators.  In the case of the female FGDs, the team consisted of two female enumerators.  One team member was assigned the task to lead the semi-structured discussion and to probe additional insight into responses.  The second team member was assigned the task of recording responses.  The data from these FGDs were de-identified (all personally identifiable information are removed), cleaned, translated, and analyzed per location. The data was used to gain information that allows us to address the challenges encountered by affected population, understand the present state of human rights, track its future improvement, and better comprehend the factors that affect it from their perspective in all locations.

The FGDs were held with community members, victims of human rights violations, and activists to discuss their experiences and perceptions of CSO interventions and explore perceptions and challenges. Enumerators identified a homogenous focus group participant body to best yield the views and attitudes of the group in each site. The focus group discussions were conducted in Syrian Arabic Dialect.

A Community member guide was prepared for the focus group discussion which emphases on unmet needs, human rights dimension and suggests improvements for humanitarian programming, with an FGD audience of both women and men (Annex VI). The FGD guides encouraged in-depth dialogue among participants with open-ended questions.

At the beginning of each FGD, the facilitators seek interviewees' permission to record the discussion. Moderators made sure to create a warm and comfortable environment that motivates participants to speak freely and openly. Collected data were uploaded as soon as the data collection was finished. Then data was reviewed, audited, and cleaned daily by the enumerators. Any anomalies in data were immediately discussed between the enumerators and the researcher.

## 2.2.2 Data quality assurance

Rigorous control procedures were developed to ensure high data quality. Key aspects are:

- Feedback from field enumerators on the tools was thoroughly taken into account to ensure they are context sensitive.
- Field enumerators were fully selected and trained in generic and research-specific topics.
- After the provision of the tools, they were piloted in the field.
- Pilot data was reviewed by the researcher in order to identify any gaps or missing information. The feedback was then communicated to all field researchers via the WhatsApp group in a short and concise message to ensure all understand and are aware of any issues.
- Once completed, piloting was followed by actual data collection based on the work plan.
- Data was monitored and checked daily with ongoing feedback to field researchers to build their capacity and ensure issues do not recur during data collection.
- Qualitative data was validated and cleaned by the enumerators' team and the researcher.

## 2.2.3 Data translation and analysis

Data was translated into English, and analysis reflected emerging themes that were incorporated into final reporting. A structured approach is used based on identifying key themes, coding the response. The analysis of the qualitative data yields an in-depth understanding of the situation and provide recommendations and suggestions to improve the effectiveness of CSOs interventions in northwest Syria accordingly.

## 2.2.4 Challenges and limitations

The research team faced a number of challenges during the data collection, as detailed below:

- The political instability and the liberation of Syria on the 8th of December affected the timeframe of the data collection, enumerators had to postpone the interviews for a while because of the uncertainty. For example, some interviewees travelled to Sydnaya prison in Damascus looking for their family members, which was a difficult and a sensitive timing to reach them.
- Due to limited resources, the area covered in this study includes two cities in Idlib District, which was under the control of HTS before the liberation of Syria. Different districts can have different conditions in northwestern Syria depends on the ruling armed group, the international interventions, the ethnic & religious groups, and the climate (Figure III.1).
- Some of the respondents selected for interviews did not respond to the general criteria after agreeing to be interviewed (for example they left the organization they used to work for), forcing the team to select others.
- The lists of respondents had some problems: mobile numbers were not updated; respondents were unreachable or refusing to be part of the valuation.
- There were significant challenges in organizing the FGDs and including diversified criteria (gender, PwD, age range).
- There were few challenges to gather people for the FGDs, and some respondents were uncomfortable gathering in person instead of online.

## 2.2.5 Additional considerations: behavioral responses

During the data collection, one can induce unintended behavioral responses from the population being studied, and this may limit the external validity of the results. In qualitative methodology, the concepts of pre-understanding and openness, as well as closeness and distance, co-construction and situating of knowledge, trustworthiness and integrity, power relations, and ethical dilemmas are given significant importance (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008; Finley, 2002). Expectations, for example, can lead to certain types of unintended behavioral effects. Individuals who didn't receive treatment may expect that they will receive benefits in the future, and based on that, they change their behavior and answers before the program happens (Gertler et al., 2016). In this research, we have reasons to believe that these unintended behavioral responses may be present; however, they will be considered as one of the limitations of this study.

# RESULTS

# 3 Results

## 3.1 Human rights situation in northwestern Syria

### 3.1.1 Overview of human rights violations

The human rights situation in northwestern Syria remains dire, with ongoing conflict, fragile security, and the absence of an effective central authority ([Washington Centre For Human Rights, 2024](#)).

**Arbitrary arrests and torture** were frequently mentioned, particularly against political or media activists. Respondents described how individuals were detained without justification, often based on malicious reports or accusations, and how some still remain missing or unaccounted for. This fear of arbitrary arrest led many to flee their homes in search of safety. In many cases, individuals were arrested without cause, often subjected to severe torture during detention. Families and communities are left in fear and uncertainty about the fate of detainees. Genocidal acts, including the detention and death of approximately 232,000 individuals and arresting 160,000 in Sednaya and other prisons, have left deep scars on Syrian society ([Figure 2](#)). Released detainees have reported shocking conditions, including the presence of children in detention facilities ([Sky News, 2024](#)). In areas like Kafr Takharim, arbitrary arrests have ceased, reflecting a stabilization of local conditions.

*Figure 2: Civilian Death Toll & Record of Arbitrary Arrests in Syria Since 2011*



*Source: [Civilian Death Toll | Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), July 2024 & [Record of Arbitrary Arrests | Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), August 2024.*

Testimonies also emphasized the systematic **bombing of civilian areas and forced displacement** of entire communities which have driven many families from their homes, causing widespread displacement, psychological trauma, and risks of statelessness. The lack or loss of civil documentation, as well as the lack, loss, or destruction of housing, land, and property documents, are significant issues affecting hundreds of thousands of IDPs (UNOCHA, 2024). Many respondents shared personal experiences of being forcibly displaced, often due to military operations or bombings by the old regime. Displacement left individuals without stable homes, leading to extended periods of suffering. Some respondents also mentioned the loss of family members during the conflict, compounding the emotional toll of their experiences.

While some respondents were not personally subjected to arbitrary detention, they witnessed or heard of numerous cases, especially among

*"The old regime used to arrest activists for simply expressing dissenting opinions." — Male respondent, CSO[5]*

political and media activists, and lawyers who faced harassment, censorship, and even murder for documenting violations and **suppress freedom of expression**.

*"There are shocking violations that go unreported... such as early marriages and sexual harassment in camps." — Female respondent, Academic [6].*

**Gender-based violence** remains a major issue in the Syrian society as women and girls are subjected to early marriage, harassment, and denial of education due to cultural norms and lack of legal protection, particularly in camp areas.

**Electronic harassment and blackmail** have led to tragic outcomes, including murder. Notable incidents include murders linked to leaked personal photos and other forms of harassment via social media (Syriadirect, 2024).

*"Human rights in northern Syria often include arbitrary arrests and cases of gender-based violence. Women are subjected to violence, whether physical or psychological, and some of them cannot get their rights or even file a case, and some also have no documents that guarantee their rights." —Female respondent, CSO7*

Additionally, **economic marginalization** exacerbates poverty, inequality, limits opportunities, and contributes to high unemployment. According to the World Bank, the Syrian economy has shrunk by more than 60 percent since 2010, and the Syrian pound has crashed (World Bank, 2022). This was accompanied by the decision to close the humanitarian crossings through which medicines and food supplies were delivered

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[5] Translated originally from Arabic "النظام القديم كان يعتقل الناشطين من أجل أي رأي مخالف"
[6] Translated originally from Arabic "هنالك انتهاكات صادمة لكنها غير معلنة... مثل حالات الزواج المبكر والتحرش الجنسي في المخيمات"
[7] Translated originally from Arabic "حقوق الانسان في الشمال السوري تشمل غالبا بعض الاعتقالات التعسفية وبعض الحالات للعنف القائم القائم على النوع الاجتماعي. النساء يتعرضن للعنف إن كان جسديا أو نفسيا والبعض منهن لا يمكنهن اخذ حقوقهن أو حتى رفع قضية أيضا والبعض أيضا لا تمتلك وثائق تضمن لهن حقوقهن"

to millions of people besieged by the former regime at the time, limiting their access to basic necessities. This was reflected in the answers of participants when they were asked about their needs. There was a common sentiment about how difficult it is to buy food, medicaments, and get essential services such as electricity, education, public transportation, water, and sanitation. Many expressed how crucial it is to help foster the economy, especially to provide opportunities for youth in the job market. Economic instability, coupled with **limited access to resources**, has also forced children to drop out of school and increased the prevalence of Child labor. This was an issue even before the war, but the conflict has worsened it. Over 75% of households have children working, with nearly half being their main or only source of income (Borgen Project, 2019)

## 3.1.2 Key challenges and trends

Human rights violations in northwest Syria stem from a combination of interconnected factors that create an environment of insecurity and systemic exploitation. **The lack of accountability** due to absence of a functioning legal system allows violations to continue unchallenged.

> *"The armed conflict is creating chaos and insecurity... Weak institutions contribute to the lack of accountability and the rule of law, leading to further violations." — Male respondent, CSO[8]*

While overall violations have decreased comparing to the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011, many shocking incidents are not publicly disclosed, highlighting gaps in accountability and justice (SNHR, 2024).

**Economic instability and infrastructure destruction** have had significant negative consequences for society. The bombing of schools, hospitals, and markets, as well as the destruction of essential infrastructure such as roads, airports, water supply, and electrical grids has isolated communities, depriving both women and men of their fundamental rights. A World Bank report released in July 2017 estimated that, as of early 2017, the Syrian civil war had damaged or destroyed approximately one-third of the housing stock and nearly half of the medical and educational facilities, resulting in significant economic loss. However, the destruction of physical infrastructure represents only a fraction of the war's total impact. The World Bank described these visible effects as merely "the tip of the iceberg." (World Bank, 2017)

Displacement and unemployment leave many reliant on insufficient humanitarian aid. **Humanitarian needs continue to grow while funding decreases** (United Nations, 2022). In northeastern Syria, American aid makes up a significant portion of the

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[8] Translated originally from Arabic "الصراع المسلح يخلق الفوضى وانعدام الأمان... المؤسسات الضعيفة تساهم بغياب المحاسبة والقانون فيصير هنالك تمادي في الانتهاكات"

humanitarian response. The announcement on January 20 by newly inaugurated American president Donald Trump of the 90-day suspension of foreign development aid programs has halted programs in critical areas including health and food security (Le Monde, 2025).

Another significant, often overlooked challenge is the growing threat of **climate change**. The geographical location of the country in the eastern Mediterranean basin has exposed it to climate variability and

> *"The old regime militias destroyed forests and demolished homes… Even the trees no longer provide shade." — Male respondent, Lawyer.*[9]

climate change-related impacts in recent decades. In Addition, the former Assad's regime militias have also engaged in deforestation exacerbating the environmental and humanitarian crises. Burning agricultural lands have worsened desertification. The effects of climate change and human actions are making things worse for people already struggling. Syria's environmental issues are significantly affecting the population, causing many communities to lose their livelihoods and become displaced. Climate change-related displacement has been observed throughout the country resulting from extreme weather, loss of agriculture-based livelihoods and the intensifying water crisis. The earthquakes that struck Türkiye and northwest Syria in February 2023 added yet another layer of suffering and rising needs (OCHA, 2023).

> *"The fear of arrest or bombing has left people in a state of constant anxiety… Children are suffering from nightmares. Displacement has torn families apart, and one can no longer trusts even his neighbor." — Female respondent, CSO*[10]

Moreover, Syria's precipitous decline in well-being is unparalleled in the world, even when compared to countries similarly experiencing war, protests, and disasters (Cheung F. et al., 2020). Violations, fear of arrest, and violence have severe **psychological and social impacts**, **and loss of trust in institutions**. Communities experience weakened social ties and reduced collective resilience due to displacement and dispersion. A recent study by the Syrian Dialogue Center (SDC), points to four categories of social trust: trust in people, in groups, in political institutions and in the international community. One of the primary challenges for Syrians will be **reconstructing social trust and heal internal divisions**. This initiative could begin at the community level, incorporating school curricula that emphasize objective approaches to managing differences. Concurrently, leaders from various religious and ethnic groups should engage in balanced discourse aimed at alleviating tensions and promoting civil peace efforts.

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[9] Translated originally from Arabic "مليشيات النظام دمرت الغابات وهدمت البيوت... حتى الأشجار لم يبقى فيها ظل"

[10] Translated originally from Arabic "الخوف من الاعتقال أو القصف جعل الناس في قلق دائم... الأطفال صاروا يعانون من كوابيس. النزوح فرّق العائلات وصار الشخص لا يثق حتى في جاره"

A political solution involving the new Syrian regime and opposition forces requires social trust, according to the SDC study. It highlights that the loss of confidence indicates the lack of an appropriate environment for pursuing this path. The study emphasizes that social trust is fundamental for any feasible solution in Syria as it serves as the "glue of society" (SDC, 2021).

### 3.1.3 Impact on vulnerable groups

The human rights violations in northwest Syria have disproportionately impacted certain vulnerable groups due to their societal roles, limited access to resources, and weak legal protection.

**Women** in conflict-affected areas face significant gender-based violence including domestic abuse, which not only affects them but also harms children psychologically. Some women face restrictions on working due to cultural norms and their husband's control, resulting in limited access to economic opportunities. However, awareness campaigns have gradually improved women's participation in the workforce and educational services. Some participants noted that particularly in CSOs, there is a preference for hiring women over men, although challenges remain, particularly in traditional communities. In addition, women are often forced to assume dual roles, managing households and supporting families due to the loss of male family members in conflict. This exacerbates their burdens, including taking on jobs previously inaccessible due to cultural restrictions. In addition, many women are unaware of their legal rights, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially in displacement camps, where they face additional risks, including exploitation while seeking aid.

> *"For two months now, there have been cases of gender-based violence and arbitrary arrests in northern Syria. This violence causes psychological effects on women, whether physical or verbal, and thus there is no law that protects the weak and vulnerable groups in society from violence."— Female respondent, Human Rights Activist[11]*

**Children** are among the most vulnerable groups, facing numerous challenges such as displacement, where they live in overcrowded, poorly serviced camps. Deprivation from education is widespread, as many children are forced to leave school due to poverty, displacement, or the destruction of schools, often leading to child labor and even forced marriage, poor living conditions in the camps contribute to malnutrition and disease outbreaks, severely affecting their health and well-being.

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[11] Translated originally from Arabic "منذ شهرين حدثت في شمال سوريا حالات عنف مبني على النوع الاجتماعي واعتقالات تعسفية، وهذا العنف يسبب آثار نفسية على المرأة سواء جسدية أو لفظية، وبالتالي لا يوجد قانون يحمي الفئات الضعيفة والمستضعفة في المجتمع من العنف"

> *"Children suffer from displacement and living in poor conditions inside the camps. Recruitment by armed groups threatens their lives and futures. Deprivation of education due to lack of resources and infrastructure."— Female respondent, CSO [12]*

**IDPs** face severe challenges, including overcrowded camps with insufficient infrastructure and weak protection, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to limited access to humanitarian aid and legal support.

**People with Disabilities (PwD)** face severe challenges in accessing essential resources, medical care, and rehabilitation centers due to the widespread destruction of infrastructure caused by years of conflict. The war has devastated hospitals, clinics, and specialized rehabilitation facilities, leaving many PwDs without the support they need for mobility, therapy, or medical treatment. Additionally, damaged roads, lack of accessible transportation, and the destruction of public buildings further restrict their ability to seek care or participate in social and economic activities.

> *"Disabilities, which have increased due to the war, also constitute a large segment of society, and they are deprived of living their lives in a normal way due to the weakness of resources and care and rehabilitation centres." — Female respondent, CSO [13]*

**Men** are impacted by violence and psychological stress, especially those who experience the loss of jobs and displacement, leading to a rise in family tensions. However, societal pressures often restrict men from seeking help and force them to remain silent about their suffering.

> *"Violating men's rights has a very negative impact on men, women and children. Violating women's rights has a negative impact on the family as a whole and then on an entire society that is negative and fragile. Yes, there are cultures that prevent women from working and there are cultures that only accept women in the labor market and men are marginalized without opportunities."— Female respondent, FGD [14]*

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[12] Translated originally from Arabic "يهدد الجماعات المسلحة قبل من التجنيد. المخيمات داخل سيئة ظروف في والعيش النزوح من يعانون الأطفال
التحتية والبنية الموارد نقص بسبب التعليم من الحرمان. ومستقبلهم حياتهم"

[13] Translated originally from Arabic " من محرومين وهم المجتمع من كبيرة فئة تشكل أيضاً الحرب بسبب نسبتها زادت التي الإعاقات
والتأهيل الرعاية ومراكز الموارد الضعف نظر الطبيعي بالشكل حياتهم ممارسة"

[14] Translated originally from Arabic "تعود المرأه حقوق وانتهاكات والاطفال الانثى وعلى الرجل على جدا سلبي بشكل تؤثر الرجل حقوق انتهاك
جانبا مهمش والرجل العمل بسوق فقط المراه تقبل ثقافات وهناك المراه عمل تمنع ثقافات هناك نعم.. وهش سلبي كامل مجتمع على ثم ومن كل الأسرة على سلبا
فرص دون"

## 3.2 Role of CSOs

### 3.2.1 Current activities and contributions

CSOs play a critical role in strengthening communities, promoting human rights, and advocating for positive change. Various organizations and activists in Northwest Syria focus on capacity building, awareness campaigns, advocacy, and social empowerment to achieve a just and inclusive society.

CSOs actively organize **awareness campaigns** on human rights, political participation, and social issues, ensuring that communities understand their rights and responsibilities. Various initiatives, such as "Influential Women - A Better Future - Your Awareness is My Responsibility", have focused on educating communities on property rights, legal documentation, and inheritance rights. These campaigns have empowered women to claim legal ownership of property, thereby protecting them from marginalization.

Organizations such as "Women Now for Development" (WATAN)" have focused on supporting female survivors of sexual violence in displacement camps. Their efforts include **legal aid, psychological and social support**. In one case, legal intervention enabled a survivor to receive medical and psychological care and seek justice through international organizations. Similarly, the "Women's Partnership Center" and "Mary Center for Research and Studies" has implemented legal awareness initiatives, forming committees of female lawyers to support women in navigating legal challenges, and operate a "Hotline Service" to provide urgent legal consultations that help individuals deal with legal problems as quickly as possible.

**Economic empowerment** initiatives have also been implemented to support vulnerable populations. For example, the Zakat Authority worked to help pay fees for many male and female students who find it difficult to secure the installments. Projects such as "Be Helpful to Them" provided widowed women with resources to establish small businesses, improving their financial independence. Similarly, "Madad Organization" has worked on preventing school dropouts by offering remedial courses to students with learning gaps.

**Advocacy campaigns** focus on reducing violence, preventing arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, and enhancing women's roles in decision-making. For example, in response to the closure of humanitarian crossings, the "Tastakil Organization" launched the "Lifeline Campaign", mobilizing women, children, and civil society groups to demand access to essential supplies. This advocacy effort successfully led to a six-month extension for humanitarian aid deliveries.

The majority of organizations provide **relief and protection services**, particularly for displaced populations. They work to secure basic needs and ensure access to education.

Organizations also support **media documentation of human rights violations** to raise awareness at national and international levels.  One significant case involved the arrest of ten individuals in Ma'arat Misrin. In response, activists and CSOs organized protests and advocacy campaigns that resulted in their release. This demonstrates the power of grassroots mobilization in securing justice for detainees. However, in many instances, there have been no direct interventions, highlighting the need for stronger engagement from civil society.

## 3.2.2 CSOs' services and community voice

The experiences of individuals with CSOs in relation to legal aid, humanitarian aid, and community engagement reveal a range of challenges and limitations. While some respondents reported receiving useful services, including legal aid and training, there was a common sentiment that these services were insufficient, poorly coordinated, and did not fully address the diverse needs of the population. Many felt that the services provided were limited in scope, failing to cover all those in need. There was also a recurring concern that the aid offered was often temporary and not sustainable, leading to frustration and a lack of long-term impact.

Regarding the **effectiveness of communication** and whether voices were heard, respondents expressed mixed opinions. Some noted that while their voices were occasionally heard, it was often with difficulty due to inefficient communication channels. Others felt that their voices were completely ignored, as they struggled to reach the relevant organizations or had their requests overlooked.

Access to information regarding available services and assistance has been a significant challenge for many respondents. Several individuals reported that they were often the last to know about assistance programs, primarily because information is first shared with relatives or specific individuals who benefit from these opportunities.

> *"The available assistance is based on poor standards and quality, making it ineffective. To improve access to information, more effective delivery tools, such as digital platforms or field teams, can be supported."— Male respondent, FGD [15]*

A frequent complaint was that despite CSOs conducting needs assessments, the actual response did not match the scale of the community's needs. Specifically, services often focused on a small group of beneficiaries, leaving many others underserved.

The responses also highlight key concerns about inequities in service distribution, including **unfair allocation of opportunities, favoritism and discrimination, corruption**

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[15] Translated originally from Arabic "أن المساعدات المتاحة تعتمد على معايير وجودة غير جيدة، مما يجعلها غير فعالة بالشكل المطلوب"
"لتحسين الوصول إلى المعلومات، يمكن دعم الأدوات الأكثر فعالية في توصيلها، مثل المنصات الرقمية أو الفرق الميدانية"

**and bribery**, and lack of transparency and accountability. Many believe that personal connections, rather than merit, determine access to jobs and aid, fostering resentment within communities.

> *"My husband was unfairly denied his right to employment, despite holding a medical degree, an honorary medal, and a certificate of experience. He even volunteered in field hospitals. However, when public hospitals opened, jobs were allocated to specific individuals, and he was completely sidelined. He has been unemployed since 2011. This situation pains me deeply, especially as I see people with far less experience securing jobs in multiple sectors. This has severely affected his mental well-being—he has lost trust in society. The community has also suffered lost a skilled professional who could have contributed greatly. As a result, many people now view institutions with pessimism."—Female respondent, CSO [16]*

Several respondents also highlighted **the lack of comprehensive legal assistance** in the humanitarian sector, with most CSOs focusing more on relief and camp-building activities than on providing legal protections for affected individuals. This gap in legal support, combined with widespread discrimination in aid distribution, reinforced feelings of exclusion and frustration.

> *"Financial support for human rights protection projects is extremely limited, as most funding is directed toward humanitarian relief. There is a clear lack of donors supporting initiatives that focus on legal protection, making it crucial to advocate for these issues and empower human rights organizations on the ground."— Female respondent, CSO [17]*

**The quality of services provided** by CSOs was another area of concern. There was a significant gap in coverage, especially in the areas of health, education, and legal protection. Many respondents cited the lack of sufficient educational opportunities, particularly for children in displacement camps, and the inadequacy of health services as major challenges. Moreover, the distribution of humanitarian aid was seen as uneven, with some groups reporting that aid was directed disproportionately based on gender, race, or connections, further marginalizing vulnerable populations. In addition,

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[16] Translated originally from Arabic " تعرض زوجي للظلم في حقه بالحصول على فرصة عمل، رغم أنه يحمل شهادة طبية، ووسام شرف، وشهادة خبرة، كما أنه عمل بشكل تطوعي في المشافي الميدانية. لكن عندما فُتحت المشافي العامة، تم تخصيص الوظائف لأشخاص معينين، وتم تهميشه تمامًا. وهو الآن بلا عمل منذ عام 2011. أشعر بالألم حيال هذا الوضع، خاصة أنني أرى أشخاصًا أقل خبرة منه يشغلون وظائف في عدة مجالات وقطاعات. أثر ذلك عليه نفسيًا بشكل كبير، حيث فقد ثقته بالمجتمع، كما أن المجتمع نفسه خسر كفاءة مهنية كان يمكن أن تقدم الكثير. نتيجة لذلك، أصبح البعض ينظرون إلى المؤسسات نظرة تشاؤمية"

[17] Translated originally from Arabic " الدعم المالي المخصص لمشاريع حماية حقوق الإنسان محدود للغاية، حيث يتركز معظم التمويل على المساعدات الإغاثية فقط. هناك نقص واضح في الجهات المانحة التي تدعم مشاريع تعزز الحقوق القانونية والحماية، مما يجعل من الضروري العمل على مناصرة هذه القضايا وضمان تمكين المنظمات الحقوقية على الأرض"

services in northwest Syria vary between the north and the south. Areas that were close to the front line with the Syrian regime before the liberation of Syria suffered from a severe shortage of services compared to the northern areas close to Turkey, which are considered safer.

While CSOs have made valuable contributions to supporting affected communities, there is a clear need for improvement. Respondents suggested that services should be more comprehensive, better organized, and responsive to the actual needs of the community. Additionally, there is a strong call for better communication mechanisms to ensure that voices from all sectors of society are heard and that feedback leads to meaningful action.

## 3.2.3 Challenges faced by CSOs

Operating in conflict zones presents severe **security risks**. In the past, CSOs and human rights defenders faced direct targeting by the old regime, including retaliatory attacks. Organizations have also been affected by airstrikes, bombings, and ongoing military conflicts, which disrupt their work and put staff and beneficiaries at risk. While conditions have improved in some areas, security concerns remain a major challenge.

**Funding** is a major barrier for CSOs, as many organizations struggle to sustain their activities, expand their reach, or hire specialists. Many projects lack continuity because financial support is often directed toward humanitarian aid rather than human rights protection. Many projects are rejected due to the organizations' lack of official licensing in countries like Turkey. Additionally, there is a limited diversity of programs due to financial constraints, which restricts the scope and impact of initiatives.

> *"CSOs suffer from a severe lack of resources, which limits their effectiveness. Financial support is crucial because, without adequate funding, they cannot implement projects or sustain their work. There is also an urgent need for technical skills, such as training in professional documentation of violations and preparing strong human rights reports that can reach international bodies."— Female respondent, CSO* [18]

Additionally, **inherited customs and political restrictions** significantly affect CSOs, particularly in regions controlled by different authorities. Many organizations face challenges in obtaining approval for their projects, and some topics are off-limits due to local political agendas. In some cases, organizations have had to withdraw from certain areas due to difficulties in coordination with the ruling authorities. Additionally,

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[18] Translated originally from Arabic " ،جدًا ضروري المالي فالدعم .الموارد في كبير نقص من تعاني المدني المجتمع منظمات كافٍ، لا تستطيع تنفيذ مشاريعها أو الاستمرار في عملها. هناك أيضًا حاجة ملحّة للمهارات التقنية، مثل التدريب على التوثيق الاحترافي للانتهاكات بدون تمويل لأنّه وإعداد تقارير حقوقية قوية يمكن أن تصل إلى الجهات الدولية."

navigating the complex political landscape delays the implementation of projects and limits the ability of CSOs to expand their activities.

> *"I believe that inherited customs and traditions can pose an obstacle for civil society organizations, as each organization must study the community's nature and context before launching a project. Additionally, political restrictions on certain topics prevent the expansion of some projects by the governing authorities."*— Male respondent, CSO [19]

**The long-term instability** of the region has created additional challenges for CSOs. Many cities have been destroyed, and a significant portion of the population has been displaced, making it difficult to implement sustainable projects and **difficult to reach** affected communities. Moreover, **digital challenges** such as weak internet access, lack of proper equipment, and cybersecurity threats hinder communication and coordination. **Loss of trust and misinformation** led to more struggling as Syrians became familiar with cases of human trafficking and other gangs publishing unreliable sources of information on social media that may lead a person to death. For example, one of the respondents mentioned that she discovered that the people who have published an advertisement for assistance in securing the immigration route are human organ traffickers.

> *"The greatest challenge we face is isolation from the outside world; we are confined to a narrow circle in northwest Syria, which means we have no communication with global defenders. We also lack expertise and logistics, such as laptops, and suffer from weak internet access and inadequate digital protection, affecting our digital autonomy under constant surveillance. Previously, there were direct targeting and retaliatory actions from the regime during the documentation of its violations. Although the situation has improved significantly after Syria's liberation—with more space for free expression—some risks persist from remnants of the regime in Syrian territories."*— Female respondent, CSO [20]

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[19] Translated originally from Arabic " أرى أن العادات والتقاليد الموروثة قد تشكل عائقاً أمام منظمات المجتمع المدني، إذ يتعين على كل منظمة دراسة طبيعة المجتمع والسياق قبل تنفيذ مشروع. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تفرض القيود السياسية على بعض الموضوعات ما يحول دون توسيع نطاق بعض المشاريع من قبل الجهات الحاكمة."

[20] Translated originally from Arabic " أكبر التحديات التي نواجهها هي العزلة عن العالم الخارجي؛ نحن محصورون في دائرة ضيقة في شمال غرب سوريا، مما يعني عدم وجود تواصل مع مدافعين عالميين. كما نفتقر إلى الخبرات واللوجستيات، مثل أجهزة الكمبيوتر المحمولة، ونواجه ضعفاً في الإنترنت والحماية الرقمية، مما يؤثر على استقلاليتنا وسط الرقابة المستمرة. سابقاً، كان هناك استهداف مباشر لمناطق توثيق انتهاكاته، مع انتقام متكرر ضد المدافعين عن حقوق الإنسان. على الرغم من أن الوضع تحسن بعد تحرير سوريا بتوفير مساحة أكبر للتعبير عن الرأي، إلا أن بعض المخاطر لا تزال قائمة من فلول النظام في الأراضي السورية"

# RECOMMENDATIONS

# 4. Recommendations

## 4.1 For CSOs

**1. Rebuilding Trust**

In the aftermath of conflict, trust becomes the central focus and driving force for rebuilding societies, nations, economies, and democracies. Trust is crucial not only on an individual level but also within communities. It is essential for sustaining peace and serves as a catalyst for resolving conflicts.

**2. Enhance Capacity Building**

CSOs should develop specialized training programs focused on human rights advocacy, legal documentation, and project management. Strengthening communication skills and fostering community participation initiatives can empower local populations to engage in decision-making and advocacy. Additionally, establishing dedicated teams for the systematic documentation of human rights violations will ensure credible and internationally recognized reporting.

**3. Strengthen Networking and Collaboration**

Networking and collaboration among organizations must be strengthened by fostering partnerships with international organizations and other CSOs to set priorities, enhance resource-sharing and advocacy efforts. The level of coordination between service-providing organizations and local councils in the region must be raised to facilitate access to services for the most vulnerable people, help address service gaps and avoid redundancies. Establishing a service forum with representatives from various organizations will facilitate identifying issues, sharing resources, and developing joint solutions. Enhanced interaction between leaders, community activists, and CSOs can create a support network for individuals exposed to violations, limiting their spread and improving access to rights.

**4. Expand Awareness Campaigns**

Increasing awareness campaigns on human rights and legal protections through local media, community events, and educational materials is crucial. Engaging human rights defenders in fieldwork and utilizing media platforms to expose violations and promote accountability will also be vital. Promoting community participation and peacebuilding efforts can encourage collective action to resolve conflicts and drive positive change. Raising awareness about mental health, suicide prevention, and substance abuse will help address critical issues within displaced communities.

### 5. Focus on Marginalized Groups

Prioritize the needs of marginalized groups, including orphans, people with disabilities, and the elderly, is essential. Providing psychological support, developing skills, and fostering creativity can assist in their recovery and empowerment.

### 6. Enhance the communication systems

Establishing a community feedback system, such as a complaints hotline, can improve communication between CSOs and local communities. Regular community meetings should also be held to collect input and adjust strategies accordingly. Fighting misinformation is critical and more effective strategies to communicate the projects are needed. The need to work on a verification mechanism before providing the service to ensure that aid reaches the people who need it.

### 7. The Power of Research and Data-Driven Action

A key takeaway from this analysis is the importance of basing interventions on accurate data and thorough research. Strategic planning informed by reliable data ensures that humanitarian projects effectively address community needs and maximize their impact. This approach enhances the sustainability of efforts and leads to more meaningful change. A more comprehensive analysis for the region (for example: a large study using a mixed approach including surveys and qualitative analyses) is needed to examine heterogeneous differences across geographical locations, population groups, demographic groups, and genders, given the new political situation.

## 4.2 For international and local stakeholders

### 1. Increase Funding and Support

International and local stakeholders must increase funding and support for CSOs by providing sustainable financial and logistical assistance to enable them to expand their activities and reach more communities.

### 2. Promote Accountability and Transparency

Promoting accountability and transparency is another key priority, and establishing external councils or committees with independent members will help conduct thorough needs assessments and ensure equitable service delivery without discrimination.

### 3. Support Reconstruction Efforts

Reconstruction efforts should be supported through investments in rebuilding infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and homes, to improve access to basic services and promote long-term stability. Creating economic opportunities, such as

establishing factories, supporting small and medium enterprises, and generating job opportunities for both young men and women, will play a crucial role in economic recovery. Prioritizing rebuilding efforts over short-term relief projects will ensure long-term impact and sustainability, helping communities transition from crisis to stability.

## 4.3 For policy and systemic change

**1. Strengthen Legal Frameworks**

Policy and systemic changes should focus on strengthening legal frameworks by advocating for the establishment of independent legal systems to hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable.

**2. Promote Gender Equality**

Promoting gender equality by implementing policies that protect women's rights and ensure equal access to education and economic opportunities is also essential.

**3. Address Economic Hardship**

Addressing economic hardship requires the development of programs that create job opportunities and support small businesses to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods. Many have emphasized the importance of lifting economic sanctions on Syria to facilitate reconstruction and economic recovery efforts. Raising the minimum wage to a livable amount and improving the general standard of living are necessary steps for societal progress.

**4. Prioritize Education and Social Rehabilitation**

Focusing on education and social rehabilitation is important for rebuilding Syrian society. Ensuring children regain their right to education and preparing society for peaceful coexistence should be a central focus. The long-term effort required for post-conflict recovery will demand just as much commitment as the years of conflict, if not more, to achieve stability and sustainable development. Advocating for greater access for international experts to assist in rebuilding civil society and addressing human rights violations effectively will further support these efforts.

# CONCLUSIONS

# 5. Conclusions

**The human rights situation in northwestern Syria remains critical, with civilians facing severe violations, including arbitrary detention, gender-based violence, and economic hardship.** While CSOs play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges, they continue to encounter significant obstacles such as security risks, funding shortages, and logistical difficulties. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated effort from CSOs, international and local stakeholders, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian and advocacy initiatives.

**Our findings emphasize** the need for continued support in northwestern Syria remains urgent. With high population density and increasing displacement, there is a pressing demand for psychological, economic, and awareness-based interventions. The restoration of dignity, freedom, and stability is a long-term endeavor that requires strategic and sustainable solutions. Throughout the discussions, a deep love for Syria and its diverse society emerged as a recurring theme. Many expressed a strong belief in unity, coexistence, and the importance of building a peaceful and inclusive future.

**This research should also examine heterogeneous impacts across geographical locations and groups after the liberation of Syria.** As the extent and nature of certain challenges and livelihoods vary across districts, we recommend that the research study in detail how the human rights conditions vary across groups and with regard to geographical locations. In other words, this is a great opportunity to understand which districts and groups have the strongest needs for interventions and why.

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# Annex I TOR

Northwest Syria is a focal point of the Syrian conflict, and has witnessed heavy fighting, aerial bombardment, and ground attacks by various armed groups, including government forces, opposition factions, and extremist organizations. This has resulted in widespread destruction of infrastructure, displacement, loss of life, and poor access to basic services such as health care and education. The shifting forces of control during this protracted conflict have led to a severe humanitarian crisis and a shift in the human rights landscape, leading to widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, in northwest Syria. Civilians, including women and children, are particularly vulnerable to violations of their rights, including displacement, exploitation, and lack of access to basic services. Despite the difficult operating environment, civil society organizations play a crucial role in providing humanitarian assistance, defending human rights, and strengthening community resilience in northwest Syria. These organizations often operate in difficult conditions, facing security threats, funding constraints, and logistical challenges. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of the current human rights landscape in northwest Syria and the potential roles that civil society organizations can play in promoting human rights in the region through:

➢ Assessing the current human rights situation in northwest Syria, including challenges, violations, and areas for improvement, and issuing actionable recommendations and visions for civil society organizations to enhance their effectiveness in promoting human rights and advocating for systemic change.
➢ Strengthening the roles of civil society organizations in improving the human rights situation in northwest Syria

This will be done by conducting a research study that analyzes the human rights situation in northwest Syria and issues a set of recommendations for civil society organizations to crystallize their desired roles in promoting human rights. Ma'arat Misrin and Kafr Takharim will be selected as a model for conducting the research through:

1- Conducting a comprehensive review of the existing literature, reports, and data on human rights violations and the activities of civil society organizations in northwest Syria.
2- Collect primary data through 3 focus group discussions

3- Case study of 10 individuals (5 women and 5 men) from activists in the region including representatives of civil society organizations, human rights activists and community members.

4- Analyze the collected data to identify trends, patterns and thematic areas related to human rights challenges and civil society organizations' participation.

5- Prepare a research report summarizing the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

6- Arbitrate the research through 3 interviews with human rights experts in the region

# Annex II Territorial control in Syria

*Figure II.1 Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria*
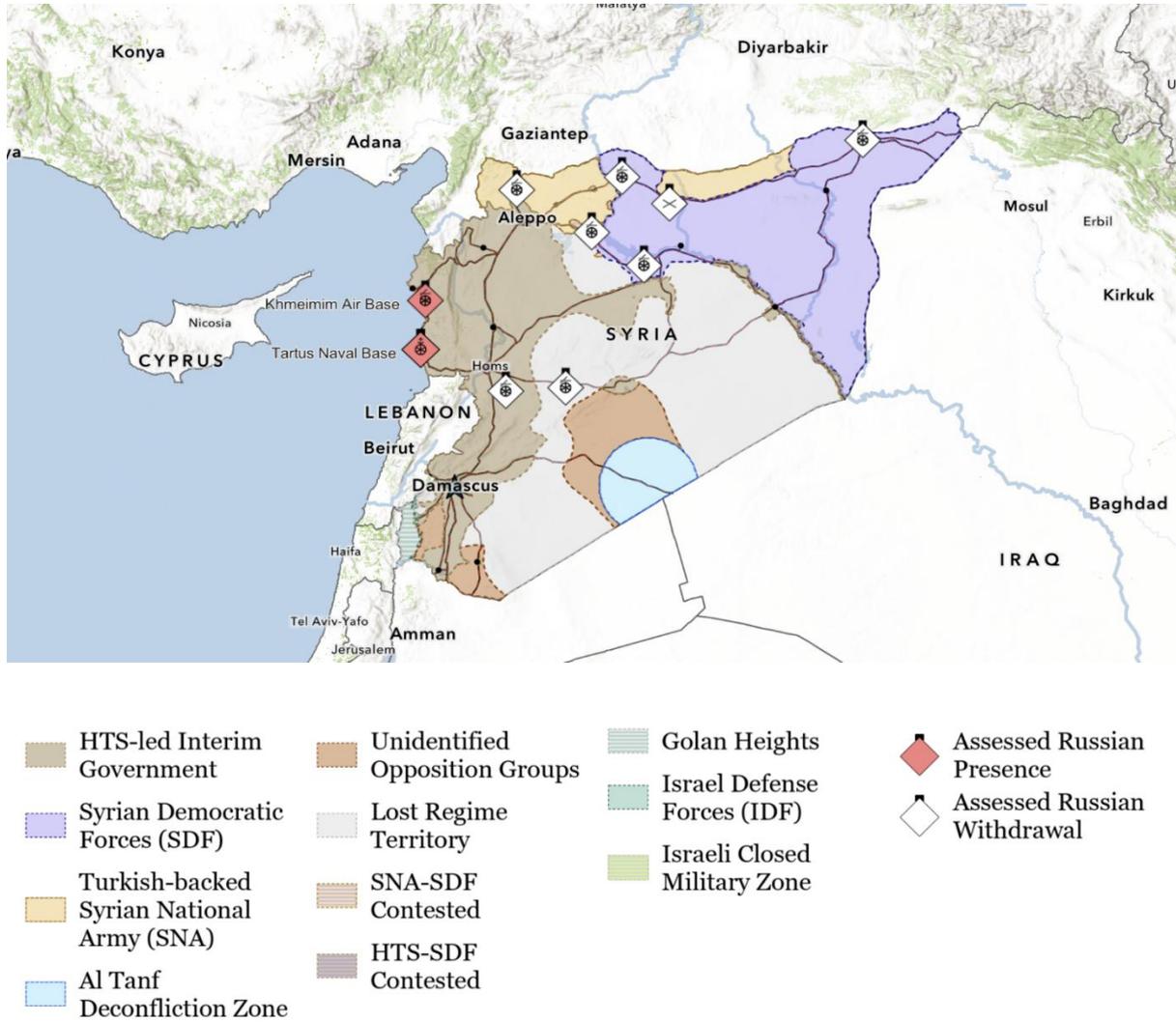


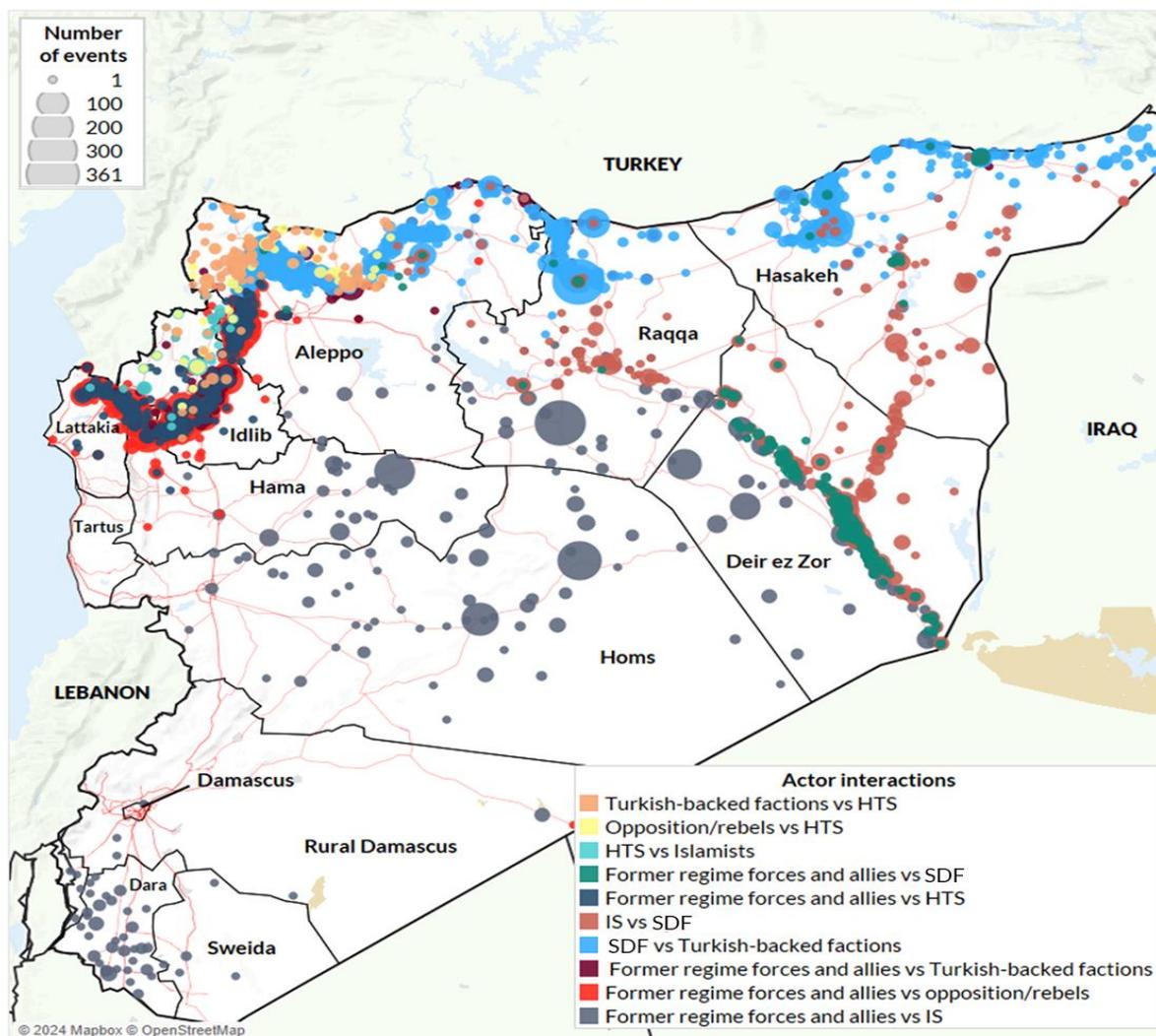*Source: Interactive Map: Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria, February 20, 2025, 2:00 PM EST*

# Annex III Fighting between the main armed groups in Syria prior to Assad's fall

*Figure III.1 Fighting Between the Main Armed Groups in Syria Prior to Assad's Fall*

1 April 2020 - 26 November 2024



*Source: Syria: Which groups have been fighting each other and where?, ACLED data, 12th December 2024*

# Annex IV List of KII and FGD participants

Qualitative data collection includes KIIs with stakeholders and FGDs in targeted communities with men and women separately.

*Table IV.1: Summary of KIIs*

| Place | KIIs | Gender (M/F) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kafr Takharim** | Representative of Women and Child Protection Center | F |
| | Academic | F |
| | Human Rights Activist | F |
| | Representative of Tastakil Center | F |
| | Lawyer at the Syrian Commission for the Release of Prisoners and Detainees | M |
| | Representative of Syrian Spring Development Forum Team | M |
| | Representative of Mary's Organization for Research and Studies | M |
| | Lawyer and Representative of Syria Revolution Gathering | M |
| **Ma'arat Masrin** | Representative of Golden Hands Organization | M |
| | Representative of Sama Organizaion | M |
| | Representative of Youth of Change Organizaion | M |
| | Representative of Dour Organizaion | M |
| | Representative of Toumouh Organizaion | F |
| | Representative of Sikak Organizaion | F |
| | Representative of Watan Organizaion | F |
| | Human Rights Activist | F |

*Table IV.2: Summary of FGDs*

| District | Gender | |
|---|---|---|
| | Female | Male |
| **Ma'arat Masrin** | 1 FGD (8 participants) | 1 FGD (8 participants) |
| **Kafr Takharim** | 1 FGD (8 participants) | 1 FGD (8 participants) |

# Annex V KIIs checklist

## Registration and General Information

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **A1. Monitor Name** | | **A5. Name of interviewee** | |
| **A2. Governorate** | | **A6. Position of interviewee** | |
| **A3. Location** | | **A7. Gender of interviewee** | |
| **A4. Date** | | **A8. Organization** | |

*Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is [facilitator name]. I am doing a survey for EPISA on the human rights situation and the role of CSOs in this area. You have been selected as a key opinion provider considering your experience and knowledge in this specific matter. The interview usually takes 30-45 minutes to complete. We are conducting this survey to collect different opinions and feedback on how to better understand the humanitarian situation.*

*Any information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shown to other people. The results of the survey will not influence the assistance your community is currently receiving or might receive later.*

*This is voluntary and you can choose not to answer any or all of the questions if you want. However, we hope that you will participate since your views are important. Do you have any questions? May we begin now?*

**Interviewee's Consent:**

Yes: _____                              No: _____

| | |
|---|---|
| **Introduction** | *Could you please introduce yourself, position in the organization and how long have you been working in this position/capacity?* |
| **Human Rights Violations** | Can you describe the current human rights situation in northwest Syria? Which specific violations are you most concerned about (e.g., arbitrary detention, gender-based violence, freedom of speech)? why? examples? |
| | Which groups do you think are most affected by these violations (e.g., women, children, minorities)? why? examples? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | In your opinion, what are the key challenges in ensuring accountability for human rights violations (e.g., Poverty, Inequities, Discrimination, Armed conflict and violence, Weak institutions...)? |
| | Have you or anyone you know experienced human rights violations? What kind? How did these violations impact you/his/her life or your community? |
| | Do you see any trends or changes in the frequency or type of violations over the past year? |
| *Role of CSOs* | Can you give examples of successful interventions/initiative by CSOs in the region (e.g., legal aid, advocacy, awareness campaigns) on a specific case of human rights violation (e.g., enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention)? How did the intervention address the violation, and what was the outcome? |
| | What is missing in the Syrian context? |
| | What resources or support do CSOs lack that would help them be more effective in addressing human rights issues (e.g., financial support, technical skills, access to networks)? |
| | What kind of knowledge do Syrian organizations need? |
| | How does your organization work to support the role of civil society? What does it aim to do? |
| | What did you learn working with your organization? |
| | What do you consider a success in your context? |
| | What are the biggest challenges CSOs face in their efforts to protect human rights (e.g., security risks, limited resources, political constraints)? |
| | What role should international organizations play in supporting local CSOs? |
| *Recommendations* | How can CSOs better address the human rights situation in your area? |
| | What policy changes or additional support & services could improve the effectiveness of CSOs? |
| *Closure* | Any final comments / points you want to mention in the end? |
| | Don't forget to end the interview nicely as you started by thanking the interviewees for their time and valuable contribution and answer any questions they have within your capacity and as per the guidelines provided to you! |

# Annex VI FGDs checklist

| | |
|---|---|
| *Name of interviewer:* | |
| *Date of interview:* | |
| *Start time of interview:* | |
| *End time of interview:* | |
| *Governorate:* | |
| *District:* | |
| *Village:* | |

| *Gender of participants:* | *Age of participants:* |
|---|---|
| *1.* | 1. |
| *2.* | 2. |
| *3.* | 3. |
| *4.* | 4. |
| *5.* | 5. |
| *6.* | 6. |
| *7.* | 7. |
| *8.* | 8. |

*Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is [facilitator name]. I am here on behalf of a development organization EPISA. EPISA is conducting this discussion to study the human rights situation in northwest Syria and the role of civil society organizations (CSOs). We would like to take about 1 hour of your time to ask you some questions. Everything you say will be confidential, including all information that identifies you. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may leave at any point. Do you consent to participate in this interview? (Gather consent from all participants before continuing. If an individual does not consent to participate, ask them to leave.)*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Introduction* | **First, I would like everyone to introduce themselves. Can you tell us your name?** |
| *General Needs and Service Provision* | What are the most important services you and your family need right now? Are these needs being met? |
| *Food Security* | How would you rate the quality and quantity of the food provided in the market? What are the key gaps in the service provision when it comes to FS in NW Syria? Are these specific to all geographical locations? Please provide details. |
| *Healthcare* | What has been your experience accessing healthcare services? Are your healthcare needs adequately met? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Have you faced any challenges in accessing medical services, such as medication shortages or lack of medical staff? |
| **Education** | How accessible are education services for children and adults in your community? Are there specific barriers to accessing education? |
| | Do you feel that the education services provided are of good quality and fair to all children? |
| **Employment Opportunities** | What has been your experience in finding employment or earning an income? Are there any programs or initiatives by local organizations that help with employment? |
| | What kind of initiatives Do you think CSOs or local authorities should do more to create job opportunities? |
| **Shelter and Housing** | Are your shelter and housing needs being met? If not, what are the main challenges? |
| **Water and Sanitation** | How would you describe the availability and quality of water and sanitation services in your area? Are they sufficient for your needs? |
| | What could be done to improve these services, and who do you think should be responsible for these improvements? |
| **Gas and Electricity** | How reliable are gas and electricity supplies in your community? Have you faced any difficulties in accessing these utilities? |
| **Political Instability** | how has the political situation affected your daily life and the services you receive? |
| **Fairness of Service Provision/ Corruption & Favoritism** | Do you feel that the services provided by local authorities and CSOs Are distributed fairly? Why or Why not? |
| | Have you ever noticed any favoritism or discrimination in the provision of services? |
| | Have you ever encountered or heard of instances of corruption or bribery in the provision of services? |
| **Access to Information** | How easy is it for you to get information about services or assistance available to you? How could this information be made more accessible? |
| | Have you faced any challenges in getting reliable information about safe areas or migration opportunities? |
| **CSOs** | Can you describe your experience with the services provided by CSOs (e.g., legal aid, humanitarian assistance)? How helpful have they been? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Do you feel that your voice is heard by local authorities or CSOs? Why or why not? |
| **Human Rights Violations** | Have you or anyone in your family, or your community experienced human rights violations (e.g., forced displacement, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence)? Could you share your experience? |
| **Suggestions for Improvement** | What suggestions do you have for how CSOs can improve their services or outreach to build better relationships and trust with community members and better protect your rights? |
| | Are there services that you feel are missing or not adequately provided by CSOs? What would you like to see them do more of, or differently? |
| **Gender-Specific Issues** | How do human rights violations affect men, women, and children differently in your community? |
| | Are there any cultural or gender-related factors that limit access to CSO services? |
| **Closure** | Any final comments / points you want to mention in the end? |
| | Don't forget to end the interview nicely as you started by thanking the interviewees for their time and valuable contribution and answer any questions they have within your capacity and as per the guidelines provided to you! |

# Analysis Report

The Human Rights Situation in Northwest Syria and the Potential Roles of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting and Protecting Human Rights in the Region

February 2025

EPISA