Civilian Protection Needs and Responses **in Syria**

Nonviolent Peaceforce

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Executive Summary

This report explores civilian safety and peacebuilding needs in Syria, drawing on conversations with Syrian communities, officials, and armed actors during an exploratory mission conducted in September 2025 by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP).

These reflections come at a critical time. Many interlocutors described how years of conflict, violence, and discrimination have left deep fear and distrust within and between communities. The legacies of war and widespread destruction are visible not only in homes, buildings, and infrastructure, but also in strained social relations and reduced communal trust.

In addition to fear, community division, displacement, economic hardship, the presence of weapons, and evolving security and governance arrangements continue to contribute to uncertainty. Participants frequently highlighted that grievances are increasingly expressed through social media, where rhetoric, hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation can circulate rapidly. Several interlocutors noted that these dynamics risk contributing to escalation, both online and offline, particularly when not accompanied by opportunities for direct dialogue.

Together, these challenges are contributing to protection risks for civilians across Syria, including:

- The potential for interpersonal tensions to escalate into violence at household, community, or regional levels.
- Risks of identity-based discrimination, harassment, or targeting affecting minorities, people with disabilities, and others who may be vulnerable.
- Social, political, and economic exclusion, including barriers to accessing essential services such as healthcare.

Many community members emphasised that in order to begin processes of repair, people need to regain a sense of safety in one another's presence. Interlocutors frequently highlighted the importance of restoring relationships, trust, and connection within and across communities. While recognising that such repair will take time, they pointed to the value of increasing interaction, understanding, and creating spaces where people can engage safely across geographic, religious, ethnic, and other identity lines.

The assessment identified many civilian-led initiatives across the country attempting to do just this. Examples visited by the team included:

- Youth-led peacebuilding initiatives in Damascus, Latakia, Hama, Homs, Suweyda, and Aleppo supporting dialogue, reconciliation, and social connection.

- Local organisations in Latakia operating community centres and outreach activities aimed at strengthening civilians' sense of safety.
- Community members engaging with security actors to help calm local tensions.
- Volunteer organisations assisting individuals to travel to their workplaces more safely.
- Volunteer groups organising cultural events that bring together participants from different parts of the country to share traditions and experiences.
- Groups addressing immediate risks facing women and creating spaces for nonviolent engagement.
- Local reconciliation committees facilitating mediation between communities in Damascus.
- Youth groups forming voluntary teams that promote coexistence across several provinces.
- Community-based psychosocial support initiatives for former detainees.
- Local committees of clerics from various religions cooperating to reduce sectarian tension.

These initiatives remain largely unsupported and un-networked with others attempting to create similar spaces of safety and change, and as such, scaling out of such initiatives will be very piecemeal as opposed to a concerted investment. This is a critical moment to invest in facilitating connections, something that is not a current focus of international humanitarian or peacebuilding engagements. To prevent escalation, interrupt cycles of violence, and strengthen efforts for sustainable peace, the report recommends prioritising:

- Measures that reduce civilians' exposure to violence, including unarmed protective presence in areas perceived as tense.
- Unarmed accompaniment along routes where civilians report feeling unsafe, enabling access to services, livelihoods, and contact across divides through nonviolent means.
- Support local community initiatives that prioritise long-term trust building.
- Support to community initiatives working to improve inclusive access to services, including logistical support and confidence-building measures.
- Networking, facilitation and support for community representatives to engage constructively with relevant authorities on their safety concerns.
- Connect localised groups working to verify and counter hate speech and rumours for the purposes of out-scaling, achieving economies of scale and strengthening collective verification capacity.

Peacebuilding and social cohesion require sustained engagement. Some interlocutors shared that divisions remain too deep for broader reconciliation discussions at present. In this context, practical steps that increase safety and connection were often described as necessary foundations for longer-term processes.

> *"We have had enough blood!*
> *Ten years of dialogue are better*
> *than one day of blood!"*
>
> - Civil Society Activist



Methodology

The assessment included a month-long visit to locations across Syria, complemented by desk research, between July and September 2025. The findings are informed by more than 60 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of authorities, community members, volunteer groups, activists, tribal representatives, academics, and local, national, and international organisations.

In discussions with civilians, the NP assessment team gathered perspectives on demographics, mobility, perceptions of safety and security, protection risks facing vulnerable groups including children, and access to humanitarian services.

Protection Risks and Needs

As communities across Syria work to rebuild their lives, they continue to do so in an environment that many interlocutors described as uncertain and marked by ongoing safety concerns. Key protection risks and needs raised during the assessment include the following:

Community division and mistrust across social groups: Participants consistently referred to geographic, religious, political, ethnic, tribal, and other forms of division that have shaped experiences during years of conflict. Many people have lived through prolonged periods of separation, while opportunities for interaction with other communities were limited or, at times, absent. Interlocutors noted that these dynamics have contributed to mistrust, misconceptions, and stigma.

In the current period of transition, several participants expressed concern that these divisions may be deepening. With significant attention directed toward national-level political processes, some community-level disputes were described as remaining unresolved, at times reinforcing tension.

Primary sources of stigma highlighted by interviewees included perceived differences between residents of various areas, returnees and host communities, those who left and those who remained, people perceived to be affiliated with different authorities, and language differences, alongside ethnic and religious identities. Grievances related to past suffering were frequently mentioned.

Examples of identity-related protection concerns raised with the assessment team included:

- Reports of children facing barriers to education linked to identity or language, particularly among returnee populations.
- Civilians sharing that they feel unsafe travelling outside of their areas due to past incidents and prevailing security perceptions.
- Cases of families of former soldiers who remain at risk of targeted violence, including kidnapping and retaliatory attacks (many have taken to limiting their movements within their own villages).

> *"Now there are groups. Before, everyone would mix and you wouldn't know who was who. Now, the Christians stick together in one place, the Muslims stay in another – it wasn't like this before"*
>
> - Community member, Latakia

Hate speech and digital violence: Online spaces increasingly mirror and exacerbate offline divisions. Hate speech and inflammatory rumours circulate on social media, often targeting ethnic or political groups. Digital disinformation fuels fear, collective blame, and mobilisation, particularly among youth, and has led to real-world retaliation, increased tensions, and identity-based violence. Even smaller security incidents or claims shared on social media have the potential to escalate rapidly into larger scale violence.

Nearly every interlocutor highlighted hate speech as a risk to safety and stability across Syria, exemplifying impacts at local levels as well as risks to national unity. Social media was described as an enabler and exacerbator of offline divisions, with many noting that people were more willing and likely to be overtly violent and inflammatory in online forums. Many spoke about the increasing communication and management of grievances through social media, and the way that this circumvents and undermines conflict resolution mechanisms such as face-to-face mediation or familial negotiations.

Authorities across all areas were deeply concerned about these trends and reported being overwhelmed or at a loss of how to deal with online misinformation, disinformation and AI interventions in social media. Youth shared feeling peer pressure to match their social media presence to their associated identities (for example, by posting every violent incident related to their own identities but not sharing publicly about anything perpetrated towards other groups). Media literacy was reported to be low or extremely low in all geographical and demographic groupings, with particular concerns raised about how youth are susceptible to violence through online misinformation.

> *"Older generations could be less prone to be impacted by social media rumours and hate speech as having lived together with other communities and have different social understanding, unlike the new generation."*
>
> - Government Official, Damascus

Housing, land and property (HLP) disputes: Destruction of records, secondary occupation, and contested ownership have left countless Syrian families unable to reclaim homes or land. Returnees often find their properties have been seized by others leading to violent confrontations, forced evictions, and growing disputes. The legal landscape is challenging: some properties have two or more different owners because of the confiscation and onward selling during different stages of the conflict. In mixed or formerly contested areas, HLP disputes intersect with other social and sectarian tensions described above, reinforcing community divisions. Delays in access (or exclusion of some identity groups) to fair judicial or restitution mechanisms perpetuate discrimination and economic disadvantages and can exacerbate grievances that can escalate into inter-communal violence.

Child protection risks: Children face specific risks to their safety and protection in the current environment, including reports of ongoing recruitment and use of children by armed actors in some areas of Syria. Many children continue to be excluded from access to education, and fear between identity groups is reportedly leading to increased school dropouts, particularly in high tension areas. This builds on an already challenging baseline, with the Ministry of Education sharing with NP that, at the time they took over governance, over 2.4 million children were not in school and 8500 schools were non-operational due to partial or complete destruction. In addition to lack of access to education, this also increases risks that children are exposed to violence through exploitation, online radicalisation, and vulnerability to recruitment or re-recruitment by armed groups. These risks are particularly high for returnee children due to language barriers.

> *"There are many children in different areas across the country with weapons, ready to be mobilized for someone or other groups and to join any armed group. They are just waiting to be mobilized."*
>
> - INGO staff

Risks to people with disabilities: People with disabilities represent a large population, however, no accurate statistics are available. Many interlocutors stated that people with disabilities remain among the most neglected and excluded groups. Exclusion is fueled by an association of physical disability with former participation in hostilities. Social exclusion, as well as inaccessible physical infrastructure and exclusion from policies themselves, both violates individual rights and increases risks of violence, neglect, exploitation or abuse, particularly in displacement sites.

Retaliation and identity-based violence: Fears of revenge and retribution linked to past events were shared with the assessment team by different interlocutors. In the absence of widely trusted accountability processes, some communities reported that individuals may seek redress outside formal systems.

Risks were described as particularly acute for people perceived to be associated with rival political, ethnic, or religious groups, as well as for relatives of former soldiers. Kidnapping and killing were cited as forms of intimidation or retaliation, and abductions of women and children were also mentioned.

Gender based violence: Risks specific to women and girls have been long documented by protection actors across the country, yet the change in political context was noted during the assessment to have exacerbated rather than improved these, driven by increased uncertainty, insecurity and poverty. Reference was made by several stakeholders to returnee populations, or those attempting to return, facing levels of stress that far outweigh expectations and translating into increased intimate partner or household level violence.

For female headed households seeking to return, there was particular concern due to discrimination in access to services for women not accompanied by a male. Long standing social norms that stigmatise women based on their marital status, such as divorcees and widows, was raised repeatedly to the assessment team. For some in NES, there are concerns that positive gains related to implemented policies aimed at improving gender equality may be lost if institutions are centralised with the rest of the country.

Increased online violence, extortion and blackmail targeting young women was mentioned by communities in various locations, although there was evident shame and embarrassment to talk of such things. Clear links to mental health and suicidal thoughts as a result of such targeting were mentioned by several stakeholders.

> *"The damage and destruction haven't only shattered infrastructure or stones, but also deeply affected humans themselves – the repair and healing of human lives and rebuilding relationships between components are as essential as reconstruction."*
>
> - Government Official in Education Sector, Damascus

The scale of protection risks and needs Syrian communities face requires urgent and comprehensive response. The efforts of Syrian civil society and communities to meet this moment are significant, demonstrating the energy and willingness of many to support safety, repair, and sustainable peace.

Locally-driven efforts explored by the assessment team included protective accompaniment, psychosocial support, and peacebuilding actions such as women-led dialogue initiatives, youth training and coaching programmes, and the establishment of reconciliation committees. At the same time, these efforts are under-funded, disconnected from the broader institutional landscape, and often voluntary and relying on the goodwill of individuals, rather than being resourced, supported, and coordinated in a way that reflects the scale of need. Communities shared interest in peacebuilding and community response efforts, but also raised fears of retaliation and social backlash in some areas.

While many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are trying to scale up social cohesion and peacebuilding programming, they remain limited in terms of scale and resources, incapable of covering the needs across the country especially in existing tension and potential escalations areas. Though this is a critical moment for Syria in terms of civilian safety and establishing strong foundations for repair and sustainable peace, it comes at a moment when humanitarian and peacebuilding (or development) funds are being reduced globally, and this is impacting the capacity of all actors to meet the moment.

Many existing peacebuilding and community protection responses rely almost exclusively on frameworks, mechanisms and community groups that have been driven and put in place by NGOs (national and international), as opposed to linked to, drawn from or enhancing existing community mechanisms. Several key stakeholders, from organisations and communities, raised concerns that this has engendered a lack of buy-in from local communities and saw this as a weakness that could ultimately undermine the impact and sustainability of such efforts.

Many NGOs are working towards social cohesion through existing programming or are now trying to pivot their existing portfolios to do so, particularly utilising livelihoods and infrastructure as incentives. These have a varying impact with several stakeholders citing limited sustainability of such initiatives, especially those resourced through short-term funding cycles. Civilians also noted to the assessment team that in many cases, these incentives are not enough to bridge the deep grievances that exist between groups, and many fear the reaction of friends and neighbours if they participate.

Concerns were also raised about the remedial or post-incident nature of responses, with an emphasis on post-harm case management and services, rather than pro-active and preventive actions that can interrupt violence before it occurs.



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Supporting peace, protection and repair in Syria: Key priorities

Preventing and reducing violence against and between civilians in Syria and using the space this safety creates to foster social repair and sustainable peace, is a critical priority. Given the fragile moment that Syria faces, timely, targeted and effective investments are necessary to secure a safe future for all. To do so requires a clear analysis of the risks that civilians currently face and support for efforts that can respond to these risks in effective, targeted, and adaptive ways. This means that all actors – from communities, to NGOs, to international donor governments – need to act upon and resource the following priorities:

Protect

It is only when people feel safe – to move, to speak and connect with their fellow community members – that real repair, steps toward justice and accountability, and reconstruction of Syria can begin. Localised initiatives for protective presence and accompaniment have already begun, and they need committed investment from national and international partners alike. This will create safe spaces in which brave conversations and actions can flourish and prepare the ground for deeper peacebuilding investments. These initiatives need to encompass safety holistically – both in-person and in online spaces.

Connect

Though initiatives to reduce and respond to violence exist across Syria, they are disconnected across regions and across scales (e.g. local initiatives from international aid architectures). By connecting efforts across these boundaries, we can scale out impact, use training, coaching, and support networks to maximise coverage and effectiveness, and work to build trust across different groups that face common challenges. These connections also provide the basis for repair of Syria's social fabric. Social cohesion and peacebuilding initiatives that help communities to identify common needs and capacities to resolve conflict at the community level are necessary investments.

Engage

For peacebuilding and violence prevention response efforts to be effective, they must be inclusive. Programmes need to ensure the strong engagement of youth, women, people with disabilities and others who are feeling the sharp impact of protection risks and be grounded in community action and leadership. This means careful listening to communities, and co-design of projects and processes with those who are most at risk of violence. Women and youth-led initiatives should be uplifted as key entry points for broader social connection and impact in communities.

Adapt

Syria is a large and diverse country, and responses need to reflect the specific needs and desires of local communities. Blanket programming and standard responses fail to account for these contextual nuances, and as such are likely to fail to meet their objectives. Thus, community, women and youth-led initiatives should be uplifted and of greater focus for support – not only as entry points for social cohesion work but as key actors. They bring the contextual knowledge, relationships, ownership and sustainability that is required for meaningful change within their communities.



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