*a Syrian civil society appraisal of progress and challenges of accountability campaigning and lessons learned*

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**Context**

After seven years of conflict, the world appears to be pushing for a normalisation of the situation in Syria, focusing on time-limited solutions, such as localised ceasefires and the provision of emergency and resilience assistance, or developing long-term plans on constitutional reforms and elections for which the conditions are still lacking, while paying little attention to accountability for the crimes that have been committed throughout the conflict. If in the past the international community wanted to raise its voice against war crimes, crimes against humanity and serious human rights violations in Syria, now its priority seems to be to establish some form of equilibrium and “stability” among the many local, regional and international warring parties in Syria on the basis of a diplomatic agreement based on normalisation, rather than peace in Syria.

There have been some results from voices having been raised in favour of accountability, such as the use of universal jurisdiction by some third countries, mostly EU Member States, to prosecute perpetrators and the United Nations General Assembly’s establishment of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM). Nevertheless, the fight against impunity remains an unfulfilled task and it is now hard to imagine that a proper accountability process will take place in the near future, given the push towards normalisation. Against this backdrop, it is clear that for those who remain committed to the fight against impunity and to the development of genuine Transitional Justice processes, a different track is needed.

**Next challenges for the accountability process in Syria**

There is a need for a renewed long-term strategy for Syria aimed at fostering the pillars of a new Syrian social compact capable of bringing together torn communities, healing the wounds of the past and providing a shared vision for the future of Syria. During the past several years, the technical and financial assistance provided by States, INGOs and international institutions went through several phases. A first phase was characterised by efforts of those actors to build and enhance the capacity of Syrian NGOs, CSOs and activists to document human rights violations and interact with the international mechanisms set up by the UN, such as the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. In a second stage, international actors focused their action on advocacy activities and on interaction with the IIIM, the United Nations and
States willing to exercise universal jurisdiction. In the current phase, the fight against impunity and accountability for crimes of the past no longer appears to be a priority at the international level; while the need for justice remains undiminished, it is likely that the political and financial engagement of the international community will decrease and that donors may not be able or willing to underpin any transitional justice process.

Due to these considerations, the next challenge for Syrian civil society actors is to remain seized of the accountability issue and, building on their previous efforts, to move from a “project based” model of activities to a sustained and long-term political model.

**Conference purpose**

This conference is designed to provide an opportunity for Syrian civil society activists and democracy advocates to reflect on the work done so far on issues related to truth, accountability and transitional justice; develop new policy strategies and a shared approach; and prepare for longer-term work and campaigns with decreasing financial and political support from the international community. From this perspective, the conference aims at encouraging a brainstorming on a new strategy for civil society that includes ways to promote and strengthen their ability to self-organise and maintain their actions in the face of a risk of decreased international support for their justice goals. At the same time, the conference can be a moment that contributes to the development of a renewed civil society coordination based on a shared understanding of the new scenarios and priorities. In both these efforts, the conference will bring voices from other countries with chequered histories in transitional justice, to support Syrian human rights advocates and to learn from their efforts in the pursuit of justice since the start of the conflict in order to discuss new avenues for justice.

**Participants**

Syrian civil society actors working on issues of justice, accountability, transitional justice, victim support, community mobilisation and empowerment, facilitated by regional and international experts who can attest to what can work to keep the issues of truth, justice and accountability alive as a political obstacle to normalisation on an international level.