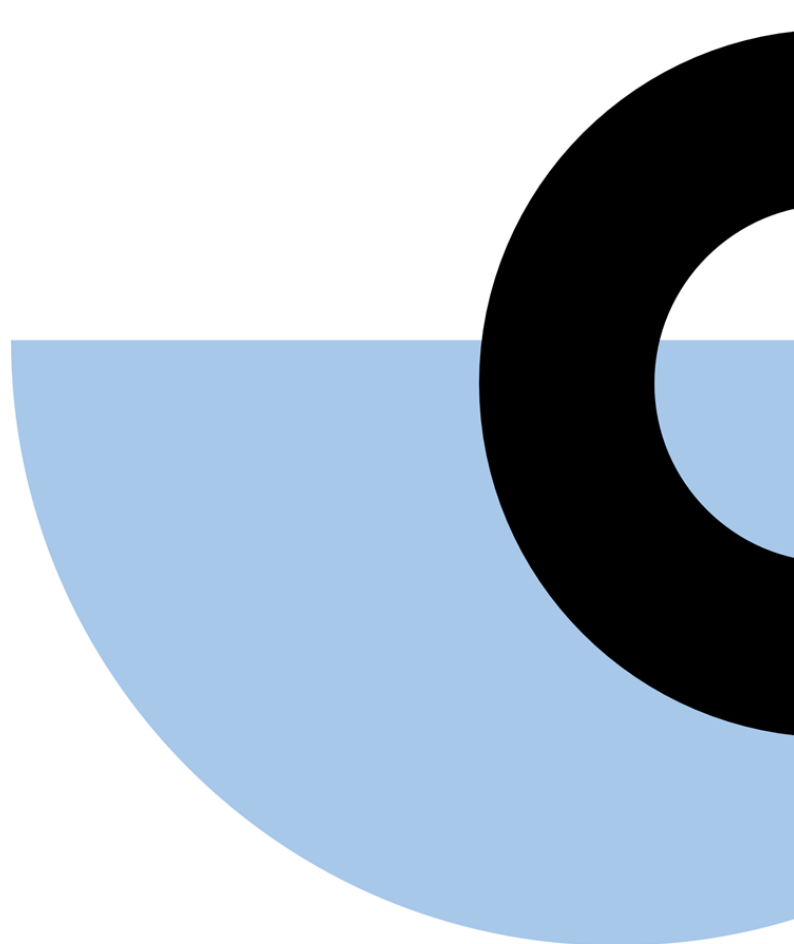




THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT IN SYRIA

PERCEPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY

CSDN Country Briefing Paper

August 2026

European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) is the largest independent civil society platform of European NGOs, NGO networks and think tanks that are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict. EPLO's mission is to influence European policymakers to take a more active role in securing peace and resolving and preventing conflict through nonviolent means in all regions of the world, and to do so more effectively.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policymakers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in cooperation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fifth phase of the CSDN will last from 2023 to 2026. For more information, please visit the EPLO website.



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Introduction

As the EU is considerably stepping up its engagement on peacebuilding and conflict prevention in Syria, with a corresponding shift from emergency response towards a more structured engagement, this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Country Briefing Paper seeks to offer food for thought on the challenges and opportunities that come with such engagement.

This Briefing Paper presents a snapshot of perspectives from international and local NGOs on the EU's role, engagement and potential in the country, resulting from a series of semi-structured interviews held between March and June 2026. It does not attempt to establish consensus among interviewees. It offers a general overview of their contributions, including areas of disagreement. The key points and recommendations should not be attributed to any individual or organisation, and do not necessarily represent the views of all interviewees, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), or its member organisations.

■ Political relations and EU engagement in Syria

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the EU suspended bilateral cooperation with the Assad regime but continued to support the Syrian population through humanitarian assistance, development and conflict prevention programmes. As the largest global donor in response to the Syrian crisis, the EU has mobilised over €41 billion in humanitarian aid, development, economic support and stabilisation since 2011.¹

At the diplomatic level, the EU has been engaged in the Aqaba meetings, with High Representative Kaja Kallas participating in the founding gathering in December 2024 and in the subsequent rounds, helping to shape and coordinate the international position on Syria's transition. The EU Council lifted most of EU sanctions on Syria in May 2025,² and adopted conclusions in June 2025,³ which guide the EU and its Member States' approach to Syria, including the commitment to supporting a peaceful and inclusive transition. In January 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa travelled to Syria for their first official meeting with interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa.⁴ This was followed, in May 2026, by the first EU-Syria High-Level Dialogue, which represents a new milestone in EU-Syria relations and coincided with the symbolically significant restoration of the 1978 EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement, suspended in 2011. Syria is also expected to feature prominently within the Action Plans of the EU's new Pact for the Mediterranean.⁵

¹ https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/syria_en

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/28/syria-eu-adopts-legal-acts-to-lift-economic-sanctions-on-syria-enacting-recent-political-agreement/>

³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10688-2025-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴ <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20260109-presidents-costa-and-von-der-leyen-visit-syria>

⁵ https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/pact-mediterranean-action-plan-spring-2026_en

Between 2017 and 2025, the EU organised annual Brussels Conferences, with the objective to mobilise international support for the Syrian people. In November 2025, the Days of Dialogues, a civil society-focused event traditionally held on the side of the Brussels Conference, were organised for the first time in Damascus.⁶

The EU is currently looking at intensifying engagements in Syria. During their visit, Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa announced a €620 million financial support package for the period 2026-2027.⁷ On stability and peacebuilding specifically, the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) earmarked around €45.5 million in 2025. Efforts have also been stepped up at country level, including on civil society engagement, with the EU Delegation currently finalising a revised Civil Society Roadmap through a process that included extensive civil society consultation.

A difficult context for civil society

The composition of Syrian **civil society** closely mirrors the broader fragmentation of **Syrian society** itself. Many years of conflict have exacerbated ethnic fragmentation and division, and this is reflected in competition for funding and political space among civil society and lobbying groups. Networks of civil society groups are often also organised by ideology, which is extremely detrimental to social cohesion and overall cooperation within the civil society sector, and requires considerable sensitivity in donor engagement. Prior to the fall of the Assad regime, different groups were mostly united around the common goal of liberation; today, **longstanding grievances, mutual suspicion, and geographic, ideological and ethnic rivalries have re-emerged**. Civil society as a whole is not cohesive, and shows substantial divergences, including within homogenous ethnic or ideological groupings, over questions such as allegiance to the new government, the degree of regional autonomy, and the rights of minorities.

Disparities in access to political space and resources is particularly pronounced between organisations based in Damascus and those from other areas. Organisations from Idlib and the North-East tend to have a comparative advantage in accessing and managing funding due to their relatively longer history of engagement with international donors. Additionally, the expansion of certain civil society activities into new regions is creating further tension and competition over resources and political space. **Competition for funding** is particularly acute. Some organisations have aligned themselves with the government considering it as more advantageous from a financial point of view, while more rights-focused organisations continue to face access obstacles due to their political positioning.

Civil society in Syria does not necessarily fit the sectoral categories familiar to the largest ODA donors' frameworks, which complicates both the design of programmes intended to address local needs and the ability of local organisations to engage donors through more "conventional" logics. Given the serious governance issues in the country,

⁶ https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/day-dialogue-damascus-2025-11-15_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_26_68

the work of civil society in Syria tends to focus on service delivery and community support, often assuming multifaceted roles that do not correspond neatly to the conventional humanitarian-development-peacebuilding distinction.

Engagement with local authorities is particularly difficult due to the **complexity of the overlapping layers of power** within Syria. At the local level, security actors and other non-state powerholders (sometimes not necessarily aligned with the government) often exercise more influence than government-appointed authorities, yet they are not subject to formal accountability mechanisms. These groups tend to be overlooked by international donors even though project implementation is in practice often dependent on their permission, which is more likely to be given for service-oriented action rather than rights-based advocacy.

Administrative barriers represent a major problem for project implementation. Most notably, obtaining appropriate formal **registration is a challenge both for international and local NGOs**, although it is not in itself a guarantee of access. In general, every engagement must be negotiated at the local level with local powerholders, even when they might operate outside formal authority structures. This dynamic is a source of considerable tension as it means in practice that access often depends more on personal connections than the ability to deliver a specific service. International donors for the moment have not adopted a common policy regarding the requirement for NGOs to obtain local registration, which further complicates the landscape.

Relations with both formal and informal local authorities are particularly sensitive and vary considerably depending on the location. In general, civil society actors fear repercussions from local powerholders more than from governmental authorities, toward whom they are comparatively more willing to voice criticism. The **absence of accountability mechanisms governing local powerholders entails substantial security risks** for both NGOs and local populations.

Transitional justice and reconciliation are described by interviewees as critical towards reestablishing some minimum levels of trust among the populations, and therefore within civil society and in their relations with authorities. However, interviewees perceived the new authorities as ill-equipped, if not reluctant, to address the needs relating to accountability, memorialisation and reparations. Several interviewees underscored the extreme complexity in advancing transitional justice, including due to the limited willingness of the current authorities to submit to scrutiny over past conduct, thus creating substantial risks of imbalanced and not conflict sensitive approaches.

■ Role and perception of international NGOs

Due to the existing capacity and access difficulties for local civil society, **international NGOs continue to play a key role as intermediaries** between donors and local implementing organisations. This arrangement offers certain advantages, such as facilitating resource mobilisation, and providing support to local organisations in navigating administrative burdens. However, it has also generated some **resentment**

from the **ambiguity and lack of clarity** in specific roles and responsibilities of international NGOs vis-à-vis local partners, perceptions of unwarranted gatekeeping, and the effective subcontracting of implementation-related risks to local organisations. Additionally, the often-limited capacity of local organisations to manage funding in accordance with donor administrative frameworks further reduces donor engagement through direct funding of local civil society, which contributes to widen the gap between established NGOs and grassroots actors.

A degree of resentment also persists among the broader population outside this specific professional sector, as some externally funded NGOs are sometimes perceived as ill-placed to deliver certain activities, thus absorbing funding that might be more effectively directed to community-based actors, such as trade unions or representative bodies. Relatedly, there is also a perception that some INGOs have not always exercised sufficient care in recruitment practices, at times inadvertently favouring one community over another and consequently widening concerns on fairness and transparency.

Role and perception of the EU

Compared to other donors, the EU has been present in Syria over a longer period, which puts it in a comparatively **privileged position for engagement**, firstly through INGOs, but ultimately with local civil society organisations as well. However, familiarity with specific EU programmes and funding streams, as well as knowledge and understanding of the different EU institutions and instruments, remain confined to those individuals who work on EU funded programmes or within sectors that traditionally benefit from development cooperation funding. In this domain, there is a degree of **disconnect between the perceptions of specific EU instruments and the EU's broader political role** as an international diplomatic actor. Among those who are not directly involved in EU-funded work, familiarity about the EU is minimal, generally limited to an awareness that it “represents” Europe in some vague capacity, distinct from individual Member States. Nonetheless, the EU appears to enjoy a comparatively favourable reputation relative to most other international actors, most notably due to its longer-term engagement in the country and a greater degree of transparency.

The organisation of the **Days of Dialogue in Damascus** was seen as a **very important and politically significant initiative**, central in advancing efforts to broaden civil society participation, localisation and inclusion. Some interviewees noted that it was inspiring to see for the first time civil society in genuine discussions with governmental authorities. Others, however, underlined that there is room for improvement, particularly in terms of **ensuring equitable and diverse participation**, and pointed to a substantial gap between the ambitious stated objectives (possibly compounded by high expectations from civil society) and its implementation. Not all groups viewed such close collaboration with the government favourably, especially for the large influence of government authorities in setting the agenda and the choice of participants.

■ The EU as a donor

Among those working closely with EU-funded programmes, the **EU is regarded as a highly valuable donor**, asking pertinent questions and generally seeking to act in the population's interest. The EU's established presence prior to the fall of the Assad regime allowed it to reach a more advanced position than other donors in connecting with local actors, albeit mostly from NGO intermediaries.

The EU is particularly valued for the **diversity of its instruments and its corresponding ability to operate flexibly** across different sectors. The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) in particular were noted as enjoying a strong reputation, with **FPI regarded as a highly flexibly partner**, including in efforts to scale up successful projects in the post-COVID period and in the mine action sector. The EU is overall also regarded as allowing more creativity in project design compared to many state actors, as well as pursuing a more consistent, long-term strategic approach, with priorities that shift less abruptly than other donors. The EU's diversity of instruments, however, while being a clear positive element, makes it more difficult for practitioners to identify the most relevant EU interlocutor for a given need, with only a **limited number of individuals who have a sufficiently granular understanding of the intricacies of EU funding mechanisms**.

Some interviewees raised **concerns regarding funding continuity** beyond the emergency response phase, as well as regarding the transition of programming between different funding instruments (for example, shifting an FPI rapid response initiative towards a DG MENA project). Overall, there is broadly held view that the EU is focused on the right priorities, and that the EU staff at the working level demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of local contexts and needs, but this working-level expertise often needs to be reconciled with clashing intervention logics imposed from higher hierarchical levels.

■ The EU as a political actor

With regards to the EU's political role, there is a **general awareness of the solidarity** extended by the EU over the years to the groups opposed to the Assad regime. In areas formerly under Assad regime control, the **lingering effects of extensive disinformation** continue to affect the EU's reputation. The EU's practice of not labelling some of its initiatives for security concerns naturally limits some of its public visibility and the population's awareness of its role.

The **lifting of sanctions was broadly welcomed** as a development that has eased operations across the board and facilitated an increase in contracts from international donors. **Normalisation of relations at the highest political level was also regarded positively** and as necessary for political, humanitarian, and economic reasons alike. Despite this, some frustration remains regarding the **EU's limited capacity to engage substantively beyond the highest political level**, with some interviewees expressing

disappointment for what is seen as excessive enthusiasm in engaging with the president and the government, and a tendency to accept their positions too readily at face value. While understandable within a broader logic of normalisation, this approach was seen as having a detrimental effect on the perceptions of those who were and are subject to violence and injustice at the hands of groups now in power. Many interviewees expressed a wish to see the EU adopt a firmer posture towards the authorities in Damascus and more pressure to secure reforms.

At a broader level, some interviewees focused on the potential impacts of the EU's strong emphasis on migration and the return of refugees, with the connected **risks of overlooking more immediate and pressing needs for the Syrian populations**. Some frustration also stems from perceived double standards in principled engagement, as an emphasis on human rights and civil liberties is sometimes seen as sitting uneasily alongside an accommodating posture towards the new Syrian government. These two elements risk undermining trust in the broader donor-implementer relationship, which is also affected by the limited presence of the EU outside Damascus and a few other regions.

Interviewees also noted that this frustration stems from a fundamentally constructive impulse, as civil society broadly perceives **the EU as the sole international actor with genuine potential to pursue a rights-based approach on Syria** in international fora. Confidence in the United Nations, the United States, and Gulf states to play a comparable role is essentially absent, leaving the EU widely regarded as the last remaining source of hope in this regard.

Recommendations for EU engagement

1. A stronger Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus

Interviewees highlighted the need for international engagement to go beyond a predominant focus on humanitarian issues and emergency response, advancing development and peacebuilding objectives in parallel. This would require more carefully managed transitions within EU instruments, allowing successful emergency response projects to evolve into sustainable, longer-term initiatives, particularly in education and basic service provision, where continuity is key.

2. Prioritise conflict-sensitive reconstruction centred on human needs

Interviewees stressed the importance of reconstruction, while warning of the risks of overly emphasising physical infrastructure at the expense of social cohesion, mental health and psychosocial support, or efforts to create a shared national identity beyond the current fragmentation. The EU should leverage its experience in holistic, people-centred programming to address these less tangible but equally critical dimensions of reconstruction, where it holds a distinctive added value compared to other international actors.

3. Invest in knowledge production

As Syria is gradually reopening to international presence across previously inaccessible regions, the EU should invest in expanding contextual knowledge of local political dynamics, particularly the multi-layered power structures at local level, which in practice exert greater influence over daily life than formal governmental authority. Strengthened knowledge production would enable more informed resource allocation and better identification of opportunities for engagement.

4. Focus on governance

Weak governance, dysfunctionalities in local administrations and power struggles among influence groups at local level are affecting service delivery and development, perpetuating chronic instability. Interviewees noted that a firmer, less accommodating posture by the EU toward the current leadership on governance issues, using its engagement to strengthen international accountability and create momentum for reforms, would contribute to create more favourable conditions for effective long-term development.

5. More adaptive funding

Interviewees noted that current funding opportunities are mostly structured around rigid sectoral categories and frameworks (e.g., recovery, education, livelihood, etc.) that do not always reflect the cross-sectoral needs in the Syrian contexts. The EU should continue its efforts to adapt its funding architecture to allow greater flexibility across sectors, enabling more effective and higher-impact allocation of resources.

6. Bridge the gap between established civil society and grassroots organisations

The EU is gradually expanding its network of partners in the country, but for the moment it remains mostly concentrated among international NGOs and very established local NGOs, which in many contexts, especially in areas previously controlled by the Assad regime, are not always the best positioned to drive change at the community level. The EU should actively support partnerships between grassroots actors, including those falling outside conventional definitions of civil society, and more established organisations, in order to build the operational and administrative capacity needed for direct engagement, as well as narrowing the gap between formal and grassroots civil society.