

“Maybe We Can Reach a Solution”
Syrian Perspectives on the
Conflict and Local Initiatives for
Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

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Accountability Centre



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Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

a report based on in-depth interviews
— BY —
Craig Charney

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SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTRE
THE HAGUE

THE SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTRE

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ABSTRACT

To better understand opinions and perceptions — and amplify Syrian voices — the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) commissioned Charney Research to conduct in-depth interviews among a diverse group of Syrians, including Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, and Christians; regime supporters and opponents; and internally displaced persons and refugees. Researchers found support among Syrians for a broad-based, internationally-negotiated settlement to the crisis that existed a year ago has diminished significantly. However, interest for inclusive, local-level negotiations designed to de-escalate the conflict and allow for humanitarian intervention is quite strong. Though Syrians are becoming more polarized as the conflict worsens, many still yearn to cease the fighting and live together again in peace as one nation. Charney concluded that efforts to encourage consideration of community-level efforts to advance the causes of peace, justice, and reconciliation may help bridge the enormous divide between government and opposition supporters — and towards resolution of the conflict.

140-CHARACTER SUMMARY

New research from #Syria highlights opinions about local #ceasefires and #reconciliation initiatives. Via @SJAC_info.

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Introduction

When we completed our first study on *Syrian Perspectives on Transitional Justice* in January 2014, the costs of Syria's conflict and the resulting human tragedies were staggering – yet one year later, the situation is even grimmer¹. Since the start of the conflict, an estimated 191,369 have been killed, 7.6 million have been internally displaced, and 3.2 million are refugees in neighboring countries². The conflict itself has become more complex and violent, with the conquest of much of eastern Syria by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the engagement of Kurdish fighters from Iraq and Syria, and the fragmentation of some moderate rebel formations, along with the brutality of the Assad regime. The country's infrastructure and economy have been further battered and neighboring countries put under even more stress. To add to the complexity, the international community is more deeply enmeshed in the conflict, actively engaging militarily in the fight against ISIS, as well as through diplomatic and humanitarian channels.

The worsening conflict makes it difficult to imagine how the hostilities might be wound down, let alone ended with a measure of jus-

1 Our prior study is Charney, C., & Quirk, C. (2014), "He who did wrong should be accountable": *Syrian Perspectives on Transitional Justice*. The Hague: Syria Justice and Accountability Centre.

2 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Syria*, <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

tice and reconciliation – yet the growing humanitarian crisis makes it all the more imperative to seek potential options for doing so. To this end, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) encourages both Syrians and members of the international community to consider how to promote accountability and reconcile communities, with the goals of ending the conflict and creating stable and lasting peace. These types of impacts will require that those concerned with Syria carefully consider the perspectives of Syrians on the ground, who are directly affected by the conflict and will be vital stakeholders in forging a sustainable peace.

SJAC commissioned Charney Research to conduct qualitative research on views of the conflict and local initiatives for peace, accountability, and reconciliation with ordinary Syrians inside and outside the country. From August through October 2014, we conducted 40 in-depth interviews in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hamah, Deir al-Zor, Al-Hasakah, and Raqqah, and among refugees in Jordan and Turkey. To achieve comparable results, the locations we chose are the same as our 2014 study. Our professional Syrian interviewers spoke with both regime supporters and opponents, and members of all major demographic, ethnic, and confessional groups, to explore their perceptions of how local communities in Syria might begin to heal from the wounds inflicted by all parties to the conflict.

Our most striking finding is how much more polarized and fragmented the situation in Syria has become in the past year. The experiences of people on the pro- and anti-regime sides have diverged, with some government supporters reporting improvements in security and services and regime opponents generally saying conditions have deteriorated in their areas. This polarization is also evident in views on national negotiations: on both sides, expectations and demands for total victory have replaced the broad support for a formally negotiated national settlement we found last year. The results indicate that Syrians' hearts have hardened following disappointment in the Geneva talks, unrealized expectations of the inter-

national community, and another year of death, destruction, and confusion.

The news is somewhat more encouraging regarding local initiatives. Many Syrians interviewed were in favor of local-level cease-fires and ending local sieges, and while many others were not, the division was not along pro- and anti-regime lines³. Moreover, almost all respondents we interviewed longed for the greater freedom of movement and normality of life such accords would allow. However, suspicion and mistrust may make such efforts difficult, with particular concern among the opposition that truces have proved to be disguised surrenders to the regime. However, we found an encouraging degree of interest in inclusive, local-level negotiations mediated by local notables, intended to diminish the conflict and lay the groundwork for new local government structures.

Other hopeful signs included the will among many to reconcile after the war and the broad interest in traditional methods of conflict resolution. Many participants voiced the desire to live in peace with those on the opposite side, though fewer than last year. There was also broad acceptance of the traditional processes of reconciliation and compensation (*Sulha* and *Musalaha*), though respondents recognized that these mechanisms are local in scope and that state resources would be needed to help with compensation. Local fact-finding committees to help expose abuses, allocate compensation, make recommendations for prosecutions, and provide a forum for public apologies also appealed to participants, as did post-conflict trust-building activities.

Unfortunately, perceptions of most of the key actors in the conflict are more polarized than they were last year. They also lack much of the nuance or ambivalence we observed then. About major actors,

3 Terms indicating relative support for or opposition to viewpoints, such as “many,” “most,” etc., are defined in the Methodology section on p. XX

the only common ground expressed by regime supporters and opponents concerned ISIS, to which they were uniformly opposed, and other extreme groups such as Jabhat-al-Nusrah, which aroused some hostility among anti-regime participants and was hated by pro-regime respondents.

Our findings indicate that resolving the Syrian conflict has become even more difficult, but the findings are not without hope. They suggest that, currently, the best starting place for a resolution is at the local level. They offer encouragement for initiatives such as the local Aleppo truce efforts of Steffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria. The results strongly indicate, however, that local initiatives which merely transfer control to the regime and generate misinformation about Assad's victories will not be an acceptable or sustainable solution for those in opposition-held areas. Thus, this finding carries a warning against imbuing local ceasefires with a legitimacy they do not merit, or whitewashing "starvation or surrender" tactics as positive solutions. Moreover, such measures cannot replace a national process of negotiations, including transitional justice and reconciliation programs, although they might be a catalyst for and supplement national effects at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, this may be a good time to encourage Syrians to think about what can be done in their own communities to advance the causes of peace, justice, and reconciliation. If reconciliation is to be achieved in Syria, it may need to be built piece by piece.

Craig Charney
Charney Research
January, 2015

Executive Summary

Mood

Syrians remain deeply negative about the situation in the country, but perspectives on the country's direction, current situation, and likely outcomes of the conflict varied according to political views.

- Many, mainly regime opponents, noted worsening conditions in the past year, primarily due to the rise of ISIS as well as regime gains.
- Regime supporters, however, reported improved conditions and increased stability as the army “kills terrorists” and regains control over some areas. Some pointed to the summer's elections and gains made by the army as evidence of Assad's legitimacy as president.
- Many regime opponents look to the armed opposition (principally the Free Syrian Army) to remove Assad and restore peace and order in Syria. Some, however, fear increased fighting among rebel groups.

The local mood varies with the intensity of conflict and extremist forces. Calm Tartous is positive; in Damascus pro-regime residents cited greater stability due to regime gains; Hamah and Homs residents worry about continued fighting; extremist presence and fac-

tional conflict have darkened the mood in Deir al-Zor and Al-Hasakah; and Raqqah residents live in terror under ISIS.

Both regime supporters and opponents were resentful of foreign interference in the conflict, which they perceived as threatening the territorial integrity of the country.

Service provision is largely a function of territorial control.

- Government supporters and some opponents said the state is providing electricity, food, media, and water in their areas.
- Aleppo respondents, though regime opponents, noted less fighting and improved services in areas where the regime has regained control.
- In Raqqah, ISIS has a poor record of providing basic services, arbitrarily cutting electricity and monopolizing food and water supplies.
- Kurds credited Kurdish rebels and parties, including the Kurdish Red Cross, with providing services.

Respondents split on whether they can speak freely with people of different political or religious views about the conflict.

- Regime supporters in particular tended to say they spoke freely; so did respondents living in refugee camps outside the country, who were confident that few regime supporters were nearby.
- Others were unwilling to do so, saying too little trust exists between people and little good would come from debates.
- A few were very afraid to speak their minds, especially Christians and residents of Raqqah, where not one respondent would speak to those of different views.

Potential Outcomes

Positions of most on both pro- and anti- regime sides have hardened against anything other than a fight until a victor emerges, due to the atrocities and suffering they have experienced. Fears that this will lead to deadly vengeance was voiced, primarily by refugees. Most respondents did not favor a negotiated national political settlement and compromises to end the war. This is a dramatic shift in views on such Geneva-type negotiations since our study last year, when regime supporters and opponents alike favored a formal negotiated agreement to end the bloodshed.

Regime opponents reject such a negotiated settlement with a government they hate. Meanwhile, regime supporters reject national negotiations with those they consider terrorist rebels.

Only a few spoke in favor of ending fighting by any means.

Almost all rejected the division of Syria, though some respondents suggested this has already happened.

Reflecting the changed mood, most predicted that in five years' time their side will have won. Many could not envisage a scenario where this is not so, unlike last year, when no end was in sight. Some, particularly refugees, feared continued stalemate and the rise of ISIS.

Halting Hostilities at Local Level

Local initiatives to wind down the conflict received more support than national-level efforts, but they still divided respondents. Despite these divisions, almost all respondents desired the more normal life that local ceasefires and an end to sieges would offer, suggesting ambivalence even among those who did not express support for them.

Respondents were aware of local ceasefires around Aleppo, al-Ghouta (in the eastern suburbs of Damascus), and Homs.

Many favored the idea of local ceasefires, particularly in hard-hit areas, to end the fighting and stop the bloodshed at least in some places. Regime supporters also saw local ceasefires as evidence of the rebels' weakness and as victories for their side.

Many opposed such ceasefires, for several reasons: mistrust of the other side; belief (on both sides) that the truces were victories or footholds for the regime; or outright rejection of any type of negotiations with the opposing side.

When pressed on the issue of local negotiations, many on both sides preferred ending the fighting at the national level rather than just locally, thus bringing peace and security to all Syrians. This was consistent with the preference for outright victory that many expressed, rather than veiled support for national-level political negotiations.

However, participants expressed a strong desire for the freer movement and greater normality that would flow from local ceasefires. Nearly all respondents, pro- and anti-regime alike, wanted the greater mobility local accords would permit, such as permitting students to attend exams, allowing aid deliveries, and allowing free movement of residents.

Views of ending local sieges were mixed as well. Those who favored an end wanted the sieges stopped around the country, not just locally. Regime supporters tended to support ending sieges only after the regime re-establishes control.

Attitudes toward the possible re-establishment of regime control over conflict areas in the wake of local ceasefires break along predictable pro/anti regime lines. Supporters viewed it as the only possible outcome; opponents as the worst possible outcome.

But security coordination between the contending parties goes too far for respondents to accept. Most rejected any proposal that explicitly requires joint regime/rebel cooperation, such as shared checkpoints.

Local Negotiation and Mediation Efforts

Respondents were quite able to envisage how local-level talks might be conducted, despite their differences over whether now is an opportune time for them.

Among anti-regime respondents, the most frequent suggestion was that the rebels in general or FSA should take the lead in local negotiations with the government. Many pro-regime respondents were open to negotiations that include government opponents, as long as they are Syrian and unarmed, and as long as talks are led by President Assad's government.

Concerning the most appropriate potential local mediators, participants suggested a variety of actors, including religious and tribal leaders, families of martyrs, representatives from minority groups, and local council leaders. Participants also mentioned educated people like lawyers, doctors, and teachers as potential mediators. These types of potential mediators were positively viewed and trusted by both sides.

Despite misgivings about local-level negotiations, some respondents – both pro and anti-regime – reacted positively to the idea of talks aimed at starting to rebuild government structures at the local level.

Rebuilding Trust, Post-Conflict

Although division runs very deep among the Syrians we interviewed, we also found a continuing desire for postwar coexistence and reconciliation among supporters of the different parties at the

local level, as well as interest in ways communities might be brought back together. This was, however, colored by doubts about feasibility and potential exclusions.

Many respondents said they still have the capacity to forgive and live in peace with their former neighbors, despite deep mutual distrust and even hatred – under certain conditions.

- Some, particularly in Damascus (pro-regime) and Raqqah (anti-regime), found forgiving those who took up arms against the state, killed on its behalf, or cooperated with foreigners unthinkable.
- Many IDPs and refugees said they would find it hard to forgive and live in peace with neighbors on the other side who forced their departure, although some said they would consider doing so after apologies or trials.

Sulha and *Musalaha*, traditional approaches to reconciliation and compensation, were the preferred methods of local dispute resolution for many respondents. Nearly all respondents were familiar with them.

- Most respondents reacted positively towards the elements of reconciliation, compensation, and prevention of vengeance among people within a local community involved in the processes.
- However, some respondents had doubts that this local, community-based approach could work nationally or resolve Syria's complex national conflict.

Many respondents were skeptical that good faith and repentance by all parties, which this form of local reconciliation would require, is possible or likely.

Most Syrians interviewed said the government must be involved in providing resources for compensation efforts.

The idea of local committees charged with fact-finding and revealing truth was generally well-received because respondents felt a local committee would know best how to resolve local conflicts and provide accountability. Many respondents expressed support for a local committee taking a leading role in the following types of post-conflict activities:

- **Public hearings** — Well-received for providing a mechanism for people to talk about their experiences. Some feared it would open old wounds.
- **Allocating compensation** — Generally supported, though it raised questions about who is going to pay and how, if at all, certain losses can be compensated.
- **Recommendations to prosecutors for war crimes** — Generally supported for providing input into accountability at the local level and a path to trials.
- **Public apologies** — Mixed reviews. Some on both sides were unwilling to consider forgiveness, even after an apology. Others found it appealing.
- **Alternatives to trial** — Many respondents hesitated to support non-trial alternatives for major crimes if it meant that the guilty would escape prosecution, but were prepared to consider them for lesser offenses.

Most respondents embraced post-conflict trust-building activities, such as economic projects that bring people together and projects for youth from different sides of the conflict. Respondents reacted favorably to job creation, educational, and community building activities. Most respondents said that they and their communities would participate if such projects were implemented.

Many supported jobs and education programs to promote the reintegration of former fighters, though some insisted that ISIS or terrorists be excluded. Few respondents rejected the idea outright.

Views of Key Actors

The polarization of attitudes on partisan lines we observed in the first phase of this study last year was even more pronounced in this second round.

- **Bashar al-Assad** — Views were more polarized than last year. Assad is seen as the protector of the Syrian people by his supporters, but as an animal, criminal, or ruthless killer by opponents.
- **Syrian Government Army** — The army is heroic among government supporters and deeply disliked by opponents.
- **The Free Syrian Army** — To regime opponents, the FSA is the vanguard of the revolution. Few doubted that it still exists though they said it may not be everywhere. To government supporters, it is a group of terrorist traitors infiltrated by foreign fighters.
- **Syrian Opposition Coalition** — Views of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces were somewhat more positive than last year. Regime opponents generally saw it as doing something to help and protect Syrians in need and as a legitimating factor for the opposition. However, others derided it as a “*hotel government*” and criticize it for putting interests other than Syrians’ first.
- **Interim Government** — The Syrian Interim Government received generally positive views from many regime opponents who described it as their legitimate representation, though this seems largely symbolic; few said it has presence in their area and it is not clearly distinguished from the Coalition. Regime supporters refused to acknowledge it.
- **ISIS** — ISIS was strongly rejected by regime opponents and supporters alike with very few exceptions. Respondents accused it of brutality and of being made up of foreigners. Some argued it has undermined opposition efforts as well as Islam itself.

- **Jabhat al-Nusra** — Views were mixed. Among those who know Nusrah, some praised it for helping in the effort against the regime, while others accused it of brutality and not representing Islam. A few mentioned its connection to al-Qaeda. Like ISIS, some saw it as under the control of foreigners.
- **Jaish al-Mujahideen** — Many were unaware of the group and others dismissed it as an extremist band that is hurting Islam. Others saw it as helping the rebels.
- **Islamic Front** — Anti-regime respondents were more critical of this group than Nusrah or Jaish al-Mujahideen. They referred to it as “one of several armies” or an “unreal army.”
- **PYD/YPG** — Views of the Kurdish party and fighters are quite mixed and shaped by politics and ethnicity. Some saw them as a tool of the regime, while others viewed them as Syrians whose efforts will result in the division of Syria. Still others saw them as courageous partners against the regime. Some pro-regime respondents viewed them as good partners against the rebels.
- **European Foreign Fighters** — Many regime opponents saw these fighters as providing valuable assistance in the fight against the regime, though some worry they are too extreme or have interests other than Syria. Regime supporters rejected them entirely.
- **Hezbollah/Iranian fighters** — Almost all regime supporters viewed Hezbollah fighters as welcome help against the rebels. Regime opponents saw them as murdering mercenaries.

Information Sources

Television and friends and family continue to be the most relied-upon sources of information, with the addition of WhatsApp. Friends and family are the most trusted sources. TV is less trusted, but is appreciated for its speed and breadth.

Anti-regime respondents watch Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, and sometimes the FSA channel. Regime supporters turn to Al-Dunya, Al-Mayadeen, Alikhbaria and the state channels.

Many respondents on both sides count on Facebook to a greater degree than last year, particularly local pages like Al-Hasakah page, which is quite popular even outside of Al-Hasakah, and Hamah Awal be-Awal.

Mood

Syrians interviewed for this study remain deeply negative about the situation in their country, but differences about the country's direction are evident according to their political views. Regime opponents were despondent about the current situation, expressing little optimism and placing their hope in the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) success. Assad supporters have seen signs of improvement following Syrian army gains. Government services are functioning in regime-held areas and are absent or ad hoc in other areas. Few wanted to discuss the current situation with others of different persuasions, except in regime controlled-areas, where regime supporters feel free to speak out, or in refugee camps, where people feel confident they are among regime opponents.

Regime Opponents Say Situation Ever Worsening

For those against the regime, the situation in Syria has worsened beyond imagination and shows no sign of improvement. Threats appear from every side and trap ordinary people amid death and destruction.

The current situation is extremely bad. I do not think it could become any worse than it already has. I have to feel that way because there is not a single home in Syria that has not lost one, two, or even three individuals. The families in Syria have all been destroyed.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 30, REFUGEE, JORDAN

The situation in Syria is tougher than it is in Africa at its worst. If you die there you know it is because of hunger or poverty. But here in Syria there are many reasons for that: hunger, poverty, murder, rape, arrest, slaughter, and many things. And it hits us from many sides.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

Some blame the deterioration on the emergence of ISIS, whose brutal tactics have split and weakened the rebel cause.

The situation has gotten worse than it was a year ago because, as you can see and hear, ISIS is many different groups. Killing and murders, they even kill their own. Didn't you hear when they slaughtered people from Jabhat Al-Nusrah? I really have no idea who brought these criminals.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 34, DEIR AL-ZOR

What makes the situation even worse is the appearance of Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) terrorists among our decent rebels, a fact that affected the world's view of us negatively. The scenario is gloomy. My heart is broken. Our country was one of the best countries in the world, yet, sadly enough, now we are displaced.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, REFUGEE, TURKEY

Pro-Regime Respondents Credit Army Gains with Improvements

In contrast to opponents, most regime supporters said Syria's situation, while still very bad, has improved. They attributed this to gains made by the army in some areas and its success in "killing terrorists."

The situation a year ago wasn't reassuring or stable at all. We didn't know where we were going or how the future of this country was going to be. The situation now has definitely changed. Everything is ours again because our courageous army is working very hard to defend the citizens.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

The situation became much better after our army, the heroes, is freeing areas in eastern Al-Ghouta like Adra Al-Balad and Adra Omalia. They are besieging terrorists in Duma until they attack them one time and move beyond Al-Ghouta to other areas.

— CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 21, TARTOUS

Some regime supporters said that President Bashar al-Assad's victory in the June 2014 Presidential election was evidence of his legitimacy. This was the first multi-party presidential vote since his Ba'ath party took power in a coup decades ago, but was massively dominated by the incumbent, who won with 88% of the vote. A pro-regime Alawite woman, 55, in Damascus said, "*It is also a great change that our president has won the elections with a very high number of votes.*"

Regime Opponents Continue to Place Hopes in the Rebels

Many regime opponents still hope that the rebels – in particular, the Free Syrian Army – will remove Assad and bring peace and freedom to Syria, despite the armed opposition's limited battlefield success and serious divisions. For them, it is the only way forward: there is no alternative.

I feel bad for every drop of blood from our people, the walls that carry stories of generations before being destroyed, old neighborhoods being wiped away from the map, but there is no third solution now. The Free Army cannot back down from achieving the demands of the people.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

We are being attacked from every side. We do not see anybody standing beside us except the Free Syrian Army.

— SUNNI MAN, (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

Some regime opponents fear that division caused by ISIS and other foreign forces have hindered the revolutionary cause.

I hope that the rebels will have their victory, but with the terrorists like ISIS and the likes of it being in the area, I do not think that the situation will get better. They are putting obstacles in the face of the rebels, and they are distracting them from their true purpose.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, IDP, HOMS

The interventions have made the situation a lot worse. Foreign forces are interfering with the Free Syrian Army. We no longer know who is right and who is wrong.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, REFUGEE, JORDAN

Aleppo Residents Say Life Was Better A Year Ago

Aleppo respondents were extremely negative about the destruction and loss suffered by their city, with some noting worse conditions than last year when rebels were in control of their areas.

The situation is much worse than last year. The regime rules us again, and of course it is a dictatorship; it is taking our youth to prisons.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME) 30, ALEPPO

It's horrible humanity-wise. We just got electricity and water back, which was cut off before. [Compared to last year when] the FSA had control, rebels delivered aid; now the regime took over and made the situation very bad.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

A year ago it was better; we felt freedom we hadn't felt in a long time when rebels were here, but the regime's planes bombarded us without mercy.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 28, ALEPPO

In Tartous, Life is Mostly Normal

For our pro-regime respondents in Tartous, life has a sense of normalcy and security. Even there, however, the presence of the displaced is felt.

The current situation in the area is, thank God, good. We are the farthest from war possible. We are not living the war crisis, thank god. We have an army that protects us, and we have a country that solves our matters and we do not lack anything. Life is more than normal, our shops are open and everything is provided for us, and provided always at any time.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34, TARTOUS

The current situation in Tartous is excellent. Security is stable, because there are army and security checkpoints, but it is more overcrowded than before because of the internal displacement of many families who have come from their cities and villages.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 30, TARTOUS

Damascus Residents Note Some Improvements

In Damascus, pro-regime residents noted improvements in terms of greater normality. They recognized the local situation is still unstable but expressed confidence in government forces.

The situation isn't great but life is getting back to normal like before. Bashar al-Assad is providing the nation with everything it needs. The situation is improving and our army is going to win.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

It's stable and calm, except for some bombs. It's changed a lot (since a year ago), there are almost no terrorists in Damascus and its countryside.

—CHRISTIAN MAN (PRO-REGIME), 28, DAMASCUS

Opposition supporters, however, had not seen improvements where they live. “[*The situation*] is not good, the regime is destroying and killing the people. There are barely any services,” said an anti-regime Sunni woman, aged 33, in Damascus.

Hamah and Homs Respondents Feel Unsafe Amid Fighting

Residents of Hamah and Homs, particularly those with anti-regime views, reported living with the effects of the ongoing conflict in their areas.

Hamah is being bombed on a daily basis with explosive barrels. We won't feel safe until this oppressive regime is finally overthrown.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

There is firing from mortars and missiles. Planes, tanks, and artillery attacks and so on. At first we used to go out; I would leave my wife home, and while I am walking I would not worry about a thing and not think of this whole thing. But now I am afraid; if I go out, how can I leave my wife at home and such. There is no safety like before.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

Pro-regime respondents in both areas said improvements in security have resulted from gains made by the Syrian army. But some of them, too, noted continued conflict.

It's a lot better than a year ago. When the war first started in Hamah, they (rebels) controlled some neighborhoods. But our courageous army immediately eliminated them. And for more than a year, here in the city it is calm, and people are living normally.

—ALAWI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, HAMAH

The situation has gotten better but not that much. Everything is normal, people go to their work, but we do hear every now and then the sounds of some explosions.

—SUNNI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 37, HOMS

Deir al-Zor and Al-Hasakah: Worsening Conditions Due to Extremists, Factionalism

The situation in Deir al-Zor and Al-Hasakah has deteriorated substantially with the arrival of ISIS in the region, bringing with it brutality and division.

In Deir al-Zor (there is) destruction, murder and making people homeless. We got rid of the regime's bombardment, but then ISIS came in and we started fighting each other.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

Nobody expected Deir al-Zor to become like this. ISIS does not offer mercy even if you are old, young, man or woman. Everyday somebody even worse comes along, and we think of before. The situation a year ago was definitely better than it is today. Today we cannot even speak up when there are groups that are far more unjust than Bashar al-Assad and his army.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

It only keeps getting worse, because a year ago, ISIS was weaker and the area they controlled was smaller and less significant. But now they have expanded and reached the Turkish border. They are helping the government kill Al-Nusra, and now the Kurds. We do not know who is against whom.

— KURD WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, AL HASAKAH

Raqqah Residents Fear ISIS Rule

The situation is grimmest in the one provincial capital that ISIS controls. Life in Raqqah under ISIS is violent, frightening, and unpredictable, marked by rebel infighting and ISIS brutality.

We used to live a certain life, and now we are in a totally different one; just like a nightmare. We have a war, we used to watch it on TV; the firing, the slaughter, and the dead. Now we see it for real. You see it on TV and we would get scared. Now we see it in public, the firing, death and slaughter happens in front of us, all in front of us, even in front of the kids.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 39, RAQQAH

[We are in] a really difficult, bad, tragic and scary situation; ISIS on one side, and the regime on the other. Those ISIS, every day they execute someone, or whip someone.]It's] a situation that only needs God's mercy.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQAH

A pro-regime Sunni man in Raqqah, 29, said the situation has worsened in his area because the army is no longer in control. “A year ago, the situation was much better in the area; we were under the rule of the Syrian Army and its protection. But many countries ganged up on it and started sending the terrorist virus that is ISIS until it controlled the area.”

Both Sides Worry About Foreign Influence over the War

Regime supporters and opponents alike complained that foreign fighters are playing too great a role in the war by intervening in the

conflict and struggling for influence over various Syrian factions. Respondents believe foreign fighters are conspiring to dismantle Syria and, on both sides, respondents blame many of the same villains: fighters from abroad, Americans, and Israel. Regime opponents also blame Hezbollah.

Syria, in all of its denominations, is threatened by groups that come to Syria. They came with foreign agendas, and they came to implement them in Syria. They have goals in destroying Syria and erasing it. This is an American, Zionist scheme.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34, TARTOUS

The intervention of forces like Jabhat Al-Nusrah and ISIS have complicated the situation even more, especially the evil doings of the party of the devil, Hezbollah. All of this has made the situation a lot worse.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, REFUGEE, JORDAN

Service Provision is a Function of Territorial Control

Who provides services in a given area – as well as the level of service delivery – is largely determined by which group is in control there. Not surprisingly, government-held areas enjoy the best services, while services are ad hoc in opposition-controlled areas and worst under ISIS in Raqqah.

Pro-regime respondents say the regime is providing essential services like water and electricity in their areas. Even some Aleppo regime opponents credit the Syrian government for service delivery in their city.

[We receive] electricity, medical aid, water and food supplies like rice, sugar, dough, and gasoline. All supported by the government.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 29, HAMAH

We just got electricity and water (following re-establishment of government control of our area). We did not have them before, everything was cut off.

— SUNNI MAN, (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

In Raqqah, ISIS has a poor record of providing basic services. Pro- and anti-regime residents there described electricity and water supplies as uncertain at best.

Today we are ruled by the infidels of ISIS, and they cannot provide all that we need. They cut electricity whenever they want, and they monopolize food and water and leave it to them, and they distribute to us what is left. The situation is really bad with them.

— SUNNI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 29, RAQQAH

There are completely no public services, and people of the neighborhood are the ones who offer electricity after it is cut. And the water, the people of the neighborhood procure it. My husband and son for instance, our neighbor's sons as well as the other neighbor's son climb the pole to make connections to bring us electricity.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 39, RAQQAH

Kurdish respondents in Al-Hasakah reported that Kurdish organizations are providing aid and services, along with some support from the government. “*Right now there are not many services,*” said an anti-regime woman, age 23, from Al-Hasakah. “*For a long time now there has been trouble with them, but the government alongside Kurdish associations help in providing these services when they can.*” The Kurdish Red Cross was cited for its efforts.

Lack of Trust Prevents Dialogue

Polarization was also evident regarding whether Syrians said they felt able to speak freely to those with different political or religious outlooks.

Regime supporters in regime-controlled areas said they freely speak to others about the conflict, much as in our study last year. They feel secure and think events have vindicated their views.

Since I know I am right, I can talk to anyone no matter what their political affiliation or religion is. I would discuss things with them until they know what is right and what is wrong and start thinking about what is best for this country.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Of course [I can speak freely], why wouldn't I? Many of this country's people started to understand what is going on around and they are taking a step back, for we made them understand that those terrorists carry a destructive ideology that would harm the country as well as our religion.

— SUNNI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 37, HOMS

Refugees in Turkey feel free to speak their minds, at least with people who also oppose the regime. They also participate in discussions on Facebook pages.

We have freedom in refugee camps of Intab (Gaziantep Province) to communicate with people back in Syria. We discuss the conflict because most people are against the regime. Some with the regime think the rebels are connected to ISIS. I try to explain that ISIS doesn't represent rebels, but it was created by the Syrian regime. Some listen, others don't. It leads to disagreements.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 38, REFUGEE, TURKEY

Sure. I communicate with different political and religious affiliations daily via Facebook. Facebook pages have lots of different opinions. I have friends who support the regime; sometimes we reach a hopeless point and sometimes we agree.

SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 32, REFUGEE, TURKEY

Among those on both sides who said they do not discuss the conflict, the chief reason was a lack of social trust.

When I am outside I talk to no one. Because one cannot trust anyone; everybody is a traitor.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 30, ALEPPO

No one knows what may happen in the future, so the less you say, the better. I rarely communicate with people from other areas, and you can't really trust anyone these days.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Fear was particularly intense among members of Syria's Christian minority as well as those living under ISIS in Raqqah.

You can't trust anyone anymore; Homs is no longer the Homs we used to know; everyone is afraid of each other.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, HOMS

In Raqqah, people are choking. If you hadn't given me safety, I wouldn't have said all this. Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) is everywhere, and there are barriers. One has to be careful and awake, even if talking politics. We cannot let anyone conflict in opinions or any other way.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, RAQQAH.

Summary of Findings on Mood

Deepening polarization shapes respondents' views of everything happening in Syria. This holds for their views on the country's direction, the services they receive, and their perceived freedom of speech. It can also be seen as a reflection of the very different conditions that exist in areas under control of the government, the mainstream rebels, and ISIS. As we will see in the pages that follow, the polarization extends to the respondents' views on the outcome of the conflict, their hopes for the future, and their thoughts on reconciliation with their neighbors.

Potential Outcomes

Attitudes in Syria towards ending the conflict seem to have changed sharply over the past year: views of both pro- and anti-regime respondents have hardened. A year ago, war-weary regime supporters and opponents alike favored a national-level negotiated political settlement to end the bloodshed, involving compromise by both sides and, in the case of many regime opponents, possible exile for Bashar al-Assad. In this study, most Syrians we interviewed said they opposed anything other than fighting until a victor emerges. This seems to be attributable to brutality and atrocities that have deeply scarred those on each side. Respondents on both sides anticipated their position will prevail, and therefore utterly rejected a partition of Syria. Many could not envision a scenario in which their side does not win.

Fight to the Finish

At this stage, there is little difference between regime supporters and opponents regarding their ideas about ending the war. Many on both sides wanted an end to the conflict, but only on their side's terms.

Opponents of the government seek the defeat and end of the Assad regime.

The conflict must continue because we have reached the point of no return. We cannot tolerate the regime anymore. We must follow through and end the rule of this tyrannical regime.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

I think that this is the best solution, and that is exactly what needs to happen. All the rebels should unite their forces and rid Syria of Bashar [al-Assad] and his criminal gang. They should also go back to continuing their plan of ending the injustices of the regime and its evils.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, IDP, HOMS

Regime supporters wanted only a victory in which the army prevails.

The fighting must continue until the Syrian Army takes its victory. That will happen in each area throughout Syria, as it has happened in Al-Qusayr, Aleppo, and others; victory is near. These criminals are strangers, and they are bound to get out of this country.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Every period that passes, every day that passes, our army is getting back and freeing more areas. They are gaining control over them, and the weakness of Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS), and that these are Takfiri¹ groups, is clear; it is clear and obvious you know. Now, our valiant army will take control over all Syria and bring back security to all of Syria.

— ALAWI MALE (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

Fears were voiced by a few respondents – refugees in Jordan – that victory would mean that the victors take revenge on the vanquished. The principle fear was that ordinary people will be hurt whether the outcome favors a cruel regime or the brutal rebels. *“If the government of Bashar al-Assad wins, there will be ethnic purification. Most of the denominations have lost a lot of relatives, and that is boiling up the tenden-*

1 The Arabic term *Takfiri* refers to those individuals or groups who accuse other Muslims and non-Muslims of apostasy.

cies to get revenge. On the other hand, if the rebels win the fight, they would want to get all of the people who have fought against them out of the country, so it would be the same both ways,” said a Sunni man (anti-regime), 35, who is a refugee in Jordan.

Negotiated Settlement Unacceptable to Either Side

Most on either side of the Syrian divide now reject a negotiated national settlement based on compromise, despite its broad appeal in our prior study. The language used by both pro- and anti-regime respondents is strikingly similar. Profound suffering and the dehumanization of the opponent have left them unwilling to accept talks with the other side at the national level, much less resolve their differences. Murderers, tyrants, terrorists, and foreigners, they said, cannot be negotiated with. To do this would betray those who have sacrificed on their side.

You cannot negotiate with murderers, especially after the arrival of mercenaries and bullies from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon to defend [Assad]. That is why we should band together and be one hand to fight evil.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

I do not think that this (negotiated settlement) would work; the revolution would not have started in the first place if the people would settle for the government of Assad to still be in control.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, REFUGEE, JORDAN

I have never heard of a government elected by the people negotiating with the terrorists, who are not the people of this country.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

This solution is not acceptable in any way because we will never negotiate with the agents of Zionists in the West. If we do accept this, we would be disowning the blood of our martyrs, our children, and our army. We promise that we will keep fighting until we terminate terrorism.

—CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 23, IDP, HOMS

National negotiations and compromise solutions are difficult ideas to suggest to Syrians at present. After four years of conflict, hostility against the leaders and forces of the opposing sides has become intense.

Only a few war-weary respondents considered negotiations to be the best solution. However, anti-regime opponents saw the departure of Assad as an essential condition for a negotiated outcome.

This idea is great because it would spare Syria more struggles, violence, bloodshed, and destruction and unite Syrians as a society and a country.

—CHRISTIAN MAN (PRO-REGIME), 28, DAMASCUS

Such negotiations taking place is much better than destroying the country. Yet, at the same time, these negotiations should not be just for ceasefire, but also for rescuing Syrians from this dictator, so we would be able to live in peace.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

Despite increased divisiveness, however, only a couple of respondents called for Assad and his regime to be “erased,” and there were no outright calls for his execution.

Overall, talks and compromise, at least at the national level, seem to have lost much of the appeal they held for Syrians a year ago, as the conflict has become more brutal and the opposing sides increasingly unwilling to consider each other’s leaders as acceptable interlocutors.

Syria Must Remain Whole

Despite general cooling of support for a negotiated settlement, nearly all respondents, pro- and anti-regime alike, rejected the idea of a divided Syria. Some suggested that Syria's unity and diversity has always been its strength and cannot be sacrificed. Others did not want to go the way of neighboring countries like Lebanon and Palestine, where division has been institutionalized on religious or geographic lines.

Syria has never, and will never be divided. Syria has never discriminated between denominations or religions, and we, Syrians, know how to treat our own wounds and live together as one like we used to.

—ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

[Partition] is the worst outcome I can think of, because Syria and Syrians are known for their resistance against conspiracies and assaults. We embraced nearby countries like Lebanon and Palestine. InshaAllah we get through this, and for Syria to go back to being better than it was.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

Each Side Predicts That They Will Prevail

Both pro-regime and anti-regime respondents expected that in five years they will have won – a sharp contrast to the perceived stalemate most saw a year ago. In line with the deepening polarization and changing military situation on the ground, neither could envisage a situation where their side did not win.

When the Free Syrian Army prevails over the regime, life in Syria will go back to being normal for its people. We will get rid of Bashar al-Assad's unjust regime, and we will get to live in our country the way we want.

—SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 30, ALEPPO

It will be the same as it was five years earlier. All the indications and the developments that are taking place in our country at the moment indicate only one thing; that safety and security will be restored day after day by the help of friendly countries and with the arms of the heroes of the army, the protectors of the country. Kurdish man

— (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL HASAKAH

Significantly, however, the outcomes most respondents considered unlikely in five years' time were ongoing fighting or the possibility of ISIS gaining power. Some respondents, particularly refugees, fear an ongoing stalemate and the increasing power of ISIS. *"I really don't know but I think it will remain the same because ISIS is getting stronger,"* said a Sunni woman, age 20, from eastern Syria, living in Jordan. But, except for this small group, no one envisaged the possibility of an ISIS victory.

Summary of Findings on Potential Outcomes

Rather than moving Syrians closer to ending hostilities by opening them to a negotiated settlement, another year of ever more destructive fighting has pushed pro- and anti-regime parties further apart. The violence and suffering from the conflict have sharply increased hostility towards the opposing side's leaders and forces. Less willing to compromise, those in different camps said they want to continue fighting until their side has the upper hand over all of Syria. Nevertheless, they reject partition, perhaps because they expect outright victory, and tend to dismiss the risks of a potentially inconclusive conflict or ISIS success.

Halting Hostilities at the Local Level

Reactions to proposals for negotiating local ceasefires were different from reactions to calls for a national-level political settlement: many Syrian participants on both sides were open to the idea. Some welcomed them as an incremental step toward peace. However, others preferred to see the fighting stopped nationally rather than piecemeal and locally. Most important, neither side trusts the other's motives or willingness to uphold agreements. Opinion among respondents is also split on ending local sieges.

Yet despite their intransigence and suspicion, those on both sides would welcome the fruits of local ceasefires, particularly greater mobility and normality. Thus, the attitudes of Syrians on the question of local accords are conflicted and ambivalent. However, there are limits to the potential for local-level cooperation: reactions were polarized between the contending sides regarding the restoration of regime control after ceasefires, while security coordination between them was rejected by both.

Many Support Local Ceasefires to Stop the Bloodshed

Respondents were divided on the idea of local ceasefires. They were aware of such initiatives around Al-Hosn Castle (a historic site east

of Tartous), Homs, Al-Ghouta (in the eastern Damascus suburbs), and Aleppo (prior to the high-profile UN effort there by Steffan de Mistura). They split on the desirability of local truces in their own areas, but their views on such efforts were considerably more positive than their reactions to national negotiations.

Many war-weary Syrians on both sides, especially in violence-hit areas, support local ceasefire negotiations to end the fighting. They hope that areas of peace will expand as residents elsewhere follow their example.

I have heard of such negotiations. Insha'Allah that they will continue. Maybe we can reach a solution in this country.

— SUNNI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 30, ALEPPO

We want peace and safety for all Syrians. If security starts to spread throughout our area and other areas, then that is a great thing. It does not matter where it starts, as it is important that it does start.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

Many pro-regime respondents, mostly in Damascus and Tartous, were amenable to the idea of local ceasefires among Syrians because they saw them as means to consolidate government control, eliminate the power of foreign forces, and make Syrians the key actors in their own country.

These negotiations happen in governorates and it is a very excellent idea because it is between Syrians themselves. These negotiations clear out hearts and return those lost into the lap of our home country. After that, everyone can have time to fight strangers and banish them from our country.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 30, TARTOUS

I, as a Syrian citizen who loves the country, want those negotiations to start for this conflict to end. Enough with the destruction that is happening in this great country. The good thing about those negotiations is that they are between the Syrian people.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Thus, pro-regime respondents, for their part, had somewhat different reasons for favoring local truces than did regime opponents, including strengthening their side and expelling foreign fighters. In the anti-regime camp, those favoring such efforts simply wanted a halt to the violence and hoped that calm would spread to the rest of the country.

Mistrust, Fear of Regime Victories, and Hostility to Talks Hamper Local Ceasefire Negotiations

Many respondents who were hostile towards local-level ceasefire negotiations offered a variety of reasons. Some did not trust the other side to uphold agreements and therefore don't support the idea of local talks.

How would you trust someone who destroyed your house just yesterday? How would you trust someone who has killed and robbed and destroyed in the name of religion, when they know nothing about religion?

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

I have friends that I grew up with in the same school, and before school we lived in the same house, between the same walls. We were raised together and lived together. And now they carry a weapon against us. They shoot us and attack us; they became the bullies. Those with whom I was raised did this to me, so how would I trust someone I was not raised with and do not even know?

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

Some anti-regime respondents saw national negotiations as a trap to ensnare the opposition, citing prior examples involving local negotiations and truce efforts around religious holidays.

These are weak and absurd negotiations, because the regime will evade [an agreement]. It happened in Homs and Al-Hosn Castle, and on occasions like Eid Al-Adha, Eid Al-Fitr, and with the end of Ramadan, and in Hamah, but the regime quickly broke it. They want to fulfill certain objectives, make arrests, or clean up a certain area, claiming to clean. Then they break the agreement and continue its goals.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, RAQQAH

The (local) negotiations are fictional with no credibility. They did not even last for a week. The traitor Bashar al-Assad and his followers broke the contract and started the attack again.

— KURDISH WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, AL-HASAKAH

A regime opponent saw such accords as a government ruse to win support abroad. “*These negotiations are just talk. They are only attempts by the supporters of the regime to show the world that there is freedom in Syria,*” said a Sunni man, age 32, from Aleppo.

To some, regime opponents negotiating with representatives of the regime, even locally, would be a sign of weakness; to others, it would be a betrayal of those who have died for the revolution.

As long as we are negotiating with the current regime, [these types of local] negotiations will not be in our favor. The regime must fall first, and after it does, we can begin to state what is it what we, the people, want.

— SUNNI, MAN, (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

We care about nothing except not selling our martyrs' blood and sacrifices.

— KURDISH WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, AL-HASAKAH

Some regime supporters hold similar views of negotiating with the opposition. Seeing themselves as the stronger party, they feel no

need to compromise, particularly with people they regard as terrorists and foreign agents.

There are no negotiations with the terrorists. Why would we negotiate with those people when it is we who rule and have the arms and dominate the area?

— SUNNI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 37, HOMS

[Calls for] negotiations were from the weak side. We offered negotiations before the start of the events, but unfortunately all the countries interfered to get weapons in and start the war. These negotiations now with the terrorists are futile; it has no result. What do these mercenaries want with Syria's interests that they come to negotiate the regime?

Tartous

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34,

Some Want a National Ceasefire

Despite the widespread opposition to formal national-level political negotiations, when the issue of local ceasefire negotiations was raised, many on both sides of the political divide said they would prefer to halt the struggle nationally. While many people wanted the fighting to end nationally with their side winning, as noted above, others wanted the fighting to end but rejected local ceasefires because they feel people in all parts of Syria deserve to live in peace

[A national ceasefire] would be good because in this case, the political answer to the conflict should be chosen over violence since it spares blood and souls. Of course [ceasefires will last] because as Syrians, we don't hate each other and we know that the conflict should be settled like this to save the bloodshed.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (PRO-REGIME), 28, DAMASCUS

If there are agreements that means there must be agreements for all of Syria, not just for a certain area only. Otherwise we will be helping divide Syria.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 28, ALEPPO

Strong Desire for Freer Movement and More Normal Life

Participants expressed a nearly universal wish for the greater freedom of movement and normality that local ceasefires would produce, despite their divisions on the local ceasefires themselves. Almost all respondents, pro- and anti-regime alike, expressed a desire for greater mobility and freedoms such as allowing students to attend exams, facilitating aid deliveries, and allowing free movement across territory held by different groups to get to work, health care, and the like.

We need to work very hard to make this (students' freedom to take exams) come true, because the students have done nothing wrong, and they do not deserve to lose their education.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 38, REFUGEE, TURKEY

We are with all the Syrian people for them to get aid, even the people that are standing against the regime. Humanitarian aid has to be delivered; maybe they will know the value of the regime in the coming time when the regime regains control on all of Syria.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34, TARTOUS

[Free movement] should definitely be accomplished, because people have jobs and benefits to keep that have been halted for years now. They should be able to move freely in order for them to get back to their jobs and in order for life to get back to the way it was.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Moving freely is a very important part of securing all people's needs, especially medication for the sick and treatment for the wounded and others.

—CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, IDP, HOMS

Syrians are thus conflicted about local ceasefire negotiations, wanting the benefits local accords could provide but divided and ambivalent over the means.

Views of Ending Local Sieges Mixed

Just as with local ceasefire negotiations, similar dynamics are at work regarding efforts to end sieges at the local level. Some respondents would welcome the end of local sieges, but again, pro- and anti-regime supporters had somewhat different reasons.

Wherever negotiations happen and sieges end, that is good and a blessing. It will be key to other areas.

—SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQAH

I am with this idea. Maybe in the rest of the areas, the terrorists will turn themselves in, and give freedom to the people to live in safety and peace.

—ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34, TARTOUS

As in the discussion of local ceasefire negotiations, some of those who favored ending local sieges wanted to halt them around the country and not just locally.

[Ending sieges in particular localities] will ease things a little bit from the war's effects and the sufferings of people, but we need a comprehensive solution for all Syria and all Syria regions and all the Syrian people.

—SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, RAQQAH

I support this thing (ending local sieges) but I am not convinced of it. The siege should end in all the areas because I feel the suffering of people and their patience.

— CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 21, TARTOUS

Regime supporters tended to favor ending sieges only after the regime restores control.

Ending the fight or siege in some areas and regaining control over them would be after eliminating all the terrorists within these areas and restoring peace and security by the army into every area they clear.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

Terrorist groups should be uprooted, then there wouldn't be any siege.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Views of Regime Control After Local Ceasefires Polarized

Reactions to the possibility that local ceasefires would restore regime control split respondents by their views of the regime, as might be expected.

Among respondents, regime supporters saw regime control as the only possible outcome of local ceasefires. This includes the power to make arrests, which they saw as the regime's right. Regime opponents saw restoration of regime control as the worst possible outcome.

Surely yes, Assad's government must control all of Syria and all the areas the terrorists go to, and they should be arrested and punished for their actions. This is a lawful right to protect the rest of the people from the brutality and monstrosity of those terrorists.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 34, TARTOUS

We will never accept this (renewed regime control) in any way. The situation will never be fixed if the regime regains control. This tyrant has bombed the city with chemical weapons and has killed thousands of innocent souls, so we will never accept such negotiations or such a government.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

Security Coordination between Sides Rejected

Despite a broadly-shared desire for both sides to work together to ease the burdens of the conflict on Syrians' lives, the idea that the pro and anti-regime forces might work together to promote security in their areas went too far for most participants in the study. Most respondents on both sides rejected any proposal that explicitly requires regime-rebel cooperation for security, such as joint patrols or checkpoints, reflecting the widespread and intense mistrust they feel.

No one would ever settle for something like [security coordination]. Would you accept to share with a thief or an enemy the job of protecting your house? Of course not. No one would ever accept such solution.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, IDP, HOMS

Those are not rebels, they are terrorists and the only ruler is the regime. They shouldn't even be in the country, never mind have joint checkpoints. How would the government come together with those who destroyed the country? We can't feel safe around them. They should leave.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Summary of Findings on Halting Hostilities at the Local Level

Opportunities to wind down the violence in Syria appear more promising at the local level than nationally at the moment, although attitudes on such efforts are conflicted. Many supported local cease-fires and ending local sieges, although many were reluctant to

endorse them, reflecting the high levels of mistrust, anger, and fear prevailing. However, almost all long for the greater freedom of movement and normality that such efforts might produce. The re-establishment of regime control after such initiatives inspired predictably polarized responses, while neither side is willing to accept joint security coordination. Thus, there are some openings to reconciliation, although the paths are narrow and Syrian respondents feel ambivalent about them. Nevertheless, our respondents were willing to discuss how they might proceed as the next section will show.

Local Negotiation and Mediation Process

Syrians were interested in discussing local reconciliation efforts, and they displayed a surprising degree of agreement on the structure of such processes, despite their doubts about whether reconciliation efforts are even possible or acceptable now. Opposition supporters tended to regard the moderate rebels, and specifically the Free Syrian Army (FSA), as the most desirable primary representative in any talks if they were to talk to the government at all. Government supporters were also open to inclusive negotiations, but added provisos: the opposition must be Syrians; only unarmed groups can participate; and President Assad's government must lead the talks. Significantly, both pro and anti-regime participants signaled support for respected community leaders to function as potential mediators in local negotiations. Furthermore, despite the mistrust between the pro- and anti-regime elements, many participants were open to efforts to begin rebuilding local government structures.

Opposition: FSA Should Take the Lead

Many regime opponents felt their natural choice to lead local negotiations should be the rebels in general, and in particular the FSA, as they considered it the leading fighting force against the regime.

If by armed, you mean the rebels and free individuals, then yes they have to participate (in talks). But the rest of the organizations must cease to exist, because the Free Syrian Army is the voice of the Syrian people, but with a gun.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

Until they bring another regime to rule this country, our representative is the Free Syrian Army and we can negotiate with them, but not with this ruling regime.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME) 27, ALEPPO

Regime Supporters Favor Inclusive Talks

Many regime supporters were open to the idea of including opponents in local-level negotiations, on the condition that they are Syrians and unarmed, and that the talks are led by the government.

All (local) negotiations should include people from all Syrian categories, the decision makers, and those who are concerned for the wellbeing of Syria. There is no place for armed groups who have killed Syrian people in these negotiations; they should only be put on trial.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

Reputable people in all areas and neighborhoods should participate, and people who care about safety, stability, and the best interest of the country, not their own best interest. The government should try to understand them but be careful when dealing with them. It is in the opponents' best interest to negotiate with the regime to settle the conflict and stop their violent acts.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (PRO-REGIME), 28, DAMASCUS

The willingness to discuss local negotiations on both sides is encouraging; however, the fact that the opposition sees the FSA as its leading representative while the pro-government side rejects armed opposition groups in the talks could be a stumbling-block unless alternative negotiation channels or proxies can be found.

Local Mediators Respected by Both Sides

We tested reactions to a number of potential local-level mediators and found that quite a few received a generally positive response. Suggestions for possible local mediators included religious and tribal leaders, representatives from minority groups, and local council leaders. Educated elites such as lawyers, engineers, business people, and doctors were also mentioned. These groups were seen by both sides as wise, trustworthy, and able to solve problems.

Men of the cloth who are old and knowledgeable.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

Delegates of the Syrian community and representatives of the Kurds and the minorities, like our Christian brothers, because Syria is distinguished for the religious varieties to build a country of all religious and ethnic orientations.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

Mediators are only religion's top men, the educated, judges, country's leaders like the village's elected, doctors, and teachers.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 29, HAMAH

Surely the educated who have studied, doctors, and engineers. Also, to have businessmen, religious people, you see? The problem will be solved because those are the ones who can solve it.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 39, RAQQAH

Talks for New Local Government Structures Welcomed by Some

Some respondents on both sides of the conflict welcomed the prospect of opening negotiations to build new local government structures for towns, cities, or villages even before the national conflict is resolved.

If [the participants] were from the honorable [people] of this area, and its true rebels, sure, I support such a step.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQA

Such negotiations should include the opposition from inside Syria to involve them in solving the problems of this country. We should respect their opinions.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

However, a few on both sides again refused to even consider local negotiations or their accompanying processes.

As I have told you before, there should be no negotiations with one with thoughts and ideologies like the ones of Assad. The ones who deserve to lead should be the brave rebels who have humanitarian values, courage, strength, and the will (to lead), which is what any leader needs.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, IDP FROM RAQQA

Let them try to establish a new local government as much as they want. Bashar al-Assad has won elections for the last 10 years, and he will still win.

— CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 23, IDP, HOMS

The impasse over national-level negotiations does not preclude efforts to resolve local conflicts and begin to rebuild the country at the local level. Beyond the interest in local talks expressed by some, many Syrian respondents were able to envisage talks in their localities led by respected community leaders, particularly the clergy, the educated, and minority leaders. In addition to seeking to wind down local struggles, there is some support for discussing how to

reconstruct local government structures on more inclusive lines in negotiations, incorporating both regime supporters and opponents.

Rebuilding Trust Post-Conflict

Many respondents said that after the war ends, they feel they will still have the capacity to live in peace with neighbors or former neighbors who supported the opposing side, despite deep mutual distrust and even hatred. However, they expressed certain conditions for such reconciliation to be possible. For them, forgiveness is conceivable after accountability — the definition of which varies among respondents. Forgetting, however, is not an option for them. Others refused to consider forgiveness at all.

Nevertheless, opportunities to heal communities after the conflict seem to exist at the local level. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms appealed to a broad swathe of respondents, at least in theory, as well as local committees for fact finding and revealing truth. Thus, demands for accountability remain strong, as we found last year. Efforts to bridge community divides through educational programs, economic development projects, and efforts to reintegrate former combatants were also supported.

Many Can Still Live With Neighbors

Many respondents on both sides said they could imagine living in peace with their neighbors, even if they had taken up arms for the other side, as long as they are Syrian and have not murdered inno-

cents or committed other abuses. This was true even in Aleppo, where the conflict has been particularly intense and the displacement severe. Some kind of accountability in the form of trials or at least a formal apology is a prerequisite, however.

If they were not murderers, and if their hands were not stained with blood, [forgiveness] is possible. Other than that, definitely not.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

Reconciliation with the people of this country, that would be ok, but not with criminals who have come from other countries; there is no reconciliation with them. This method is very well-known in the Arab world.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

We cannot live with them unless we forgive them. But how can we accept the presence of people who helped kill and destroy our country, and let them live with us without them even asking for forgiveness?

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

If the person who made a mistake confessed it, why would we not live with them as long as they confessed their fault? Because in the end, he is a son of this country even if he is at wrong, and if he realized his mistake and wants to retreat from it, we have no problem in reconciling with him.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

Forgiveness Is Too Much to Ask for Some

Many others, including refugees and regime supporters, took a particularly strong stand against forgiving those who took up arms against them. These respondents saw their opponents' behavior as humiliating, criminal, and traitorous.

Of course not, even if they were my brothers. I would never forgive them because they held these weapons in our faces unjustly.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, REFUGEE, JORDAN

No, I wouldn't forgive them. These people have betrayed us once, so they can possibly betray us a thousand times more. These people should be punished and banished in order for us to live in peace. These people are not to be trusted; we will still be afraid for our lives and for the lives of others. They may betray us again.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Opposition to forgiveness for those who fought the state or killed for it was particularly strong among respondents in Damascus and Raqqah, the capital of the ISIS “caliphate.” For these participants, court trials that result in prison or exile are the only options.

They are villains and traitors who deserve punishment and to be held accountable for what they did. They should leave the country. It's impossible for us to live with them. They should be killed or imprisoned for rest of their lives.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

Forgiving such people would be a crime. Those who killed the innocent and destroyed the country don't deserve to live. Syrians involved could be punished then given a second chance to repent.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms of *Sulha* and *Musalaha* Embraced

Forms of conflict resolution which are traditional to the Levant, *Sulha* (negotiation and compensation) and *Musalaha* (reconciliation), are well-known to respondents and are the preferred methods of dispute resolution for both pro- and anti-regime respondents¹

“[Sulha] claims to restore peace between individuals, families, tribes and villages.” (pg. 263) “[The final ritual of reconciliation (musalaha)] is done openly so that the whole community knows about it...The ritual itself is a complex and symbolic process, and the details differ according to the customs of the region and the community. Nevertheless, the basic principles of the sulha ritual are based on forgiveness (musamaha), shaking hands (musafaha), sharing a meal and bitter coffee (mumalaha) between the opponents. It is also important to note that the reconciliation is declared binding to those who are present and not present at the ritual, including those that are not yet born.” (pg. 265). These processes’ elements – reconciliation, compensation, and avoiding vengeance among conflicting parties in a local community – appealed to respondents on both sides.

There's a big possibility it will have a result here, especially since we have a lot of people that still live like clans. The people have a readiness for such a thing, because the people hated the war, and then they want to get it over with.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQAH

It means to restore the relationship between two conflicting sides as well as a confession of their guilt. These terms belong to us as Arab people, and as Syrians; it is one of our customs. Yes, it will help people restore social relationships.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 28, ALEPPO

Sulha fixes things between two persons in dispute. This thing will certainly keep a lot of troubles away. It is possible here because there are people here who owe each other favors. Sulha will certainly save a lot. It will end a lot of troubles.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

1 Kadayifci, Ayse S., *Standing on an Isthmus: Islamic Narratives on War and Peace in Palestinian Territories*, Chapter 8, offers a fairly comprehensive definition of these processes: “According to Islamic law, ‘the purpose of sulh is to end conflict and hostility among believers so that they may conduct their relationship in peace and amity...In Islamic law, sulh is a form of contract (‘aqd), legally binding on both at individual and community levels: Many verses in the Quran also refer to sulha and the establishment of peace among the members of the community.” (pg. 263)

Reconciliation is a good concept for everyone who loves their country and wants to dismiss the conflicts and reconnect the parties together. I am in favor of the reconciliation. In such cases, usually, the parties lean on the traditional means of settling the conflicts and enforcing the concept of reconciliation.

— SUNNI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 37, HOMS

However, many noted that *Sulha* and *Musalaha* are community-based approaches focused on local-level conflicts. They do not think it could resolve Syria's complex national conflict or permit overall reconciliation given the scale of the crimes committed.

Such terms can work in villages or in the countryside, but I do not believe that it can work when it comes to the country as a whole; it is hard for it to affect the whole country in the same manner it affects villages.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 32, ALEPPO

We all want reconciliation, but we can't reconcile with those people (the opposition) because they destroyed this country. We should not reconcile with people who allowed terrorists to commit crimes against our people.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Moreover, there was concern that this form of reconciliation requires good faith and repentance, something respondents on both sides feared would not be present.

This could be fruitful with good people, but in our case it won't do any good with the terrorists. We all in this country want reconciliation and to go back to the way we were before. But unfortunately, we can't reconcile with those people because they have crossed the lines, destroyed this great country, killed their own people, and on top of that allowed terrorists from foreign countries to come in and destroy the country.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

In order for such things to happen, the people would have to forgive each other. I wish that such reconciliation would happen, but what I will tell you is that I do not think that it will happen between the two parties. No Syrian would believe that the two sides would agree on a mutual settlement or even forgive each other and let go of each other's mistakes. If there was a possibility for such reconciliation, the war would not have lasted this long.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, REFUGEE, JORDAN

Government Must Help With Compensation

In the event that such reconciliation processes are attempted, respondents were clear that local resources alone will not suffice. Whichever side of the current conflict they identify with, respondents felt it will be necessary for the post-war government to provide resources for compensation, a critical component of *Sulha*.

The government should compensate all the damages, and then the people can make the idea of the Sulha between the different categories of the people work.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, DEIR AL-ZOR

The government should be in charge and sponsor conciliation, providing aid and compensation. Compensation is part of the answer to make conciliation work.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Some among the opposition viewed government-funded compensation as punitive, arguing the government should pay compensation because it is responsible for the losses: “Of course the government needs to be involved in compensating people because they were the ones who committed violations against the people,” said a 35-year old Sunni woman in Homs who is anti-regime.

Local Committees for Fact Finding, Truth Revealing Well-Received

After the conflict ends, local committees tasked with finding facts, revealing the truth on what occurred during the war, and recognizing local residents' suffering would potentially have broad credibility and support. Many Syrians on both sides felt that local people would know best how to resolve local disputes and bring about reconciliation. They felt locals best understand the dynamics of the conflict at the local level and are best positioned to resolve them.

The existence of a local committee assigned to find out the truth would increase the credibility and the people's trust in the country. It would facilitate the work, and after the country takes upon itself to provide compensations, that would lessen the gap between the conflicting perspectives, and reconciliation would be achieved.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

If these committees are elected in a democratic manner and are established on bases of integrity, they will help people, recognize their suffering, and reunite the varying perspectives.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 32, ALEPPO

Many respondents favored such local committees taking a leading role in several types of post-conflict transitional justice and reconciliation activities, listed below. Views on these activities lacked the harsh polarization evident on many other topics.

Public hearings — These were well-received by both sides for providing a mechanism for allowing people to talk about their experiences and explain their roles and offering opportunities to make accusations and defenses before the community. “Every person has the right to defend himself, and that can be done through such committees. What is really good about such hearings is that they are public, and therefore, there wouldn't be room for deception or deforming facts,” said a Sunni man (anti-regime), 26, in Hamah. However, some feared they would re-

open old wounds. A pro-regime, Christian IDP woman, 23, in Homs said, *“This would rebuild the feelings of hatred between the people, and may encourage them to enforce their own concepts of justice however they may in order to attain revenge.”*

Allocating compensation — Local committees’ assumption of this role was generally supported. *“I think that there isn’t anyone of this victimized nation who hasn’t been damaged by this war and tyranny. Everyone needs aid especially during this standing siege. As to the type and quantity, there should be a committee that supervise these issues and conduct the suitable statistics,”* said an anti-regime Sunni woman, 33, in Damascus. However, compensation raised questions about who is going to pay and how, if at all, certain losses can be compensated. *“I do not think that those who have lost a loved one care about compensation, because nothing could ever bring back what they have lost,”* said an anti-regime Sunni man, 30, who is a refugee in Jordan.

Recommendations for war crimes trials — The idea that local committees could recommend which persons might face prosecution for war crimes was generally supported as providing a path to trials at the national level and thus a measure of accountability at the local level. *“Certainly, you should investigate in the end, and everyone who did wrong should be punished,”* said an Alawi man who is pro-regime, 24, in Tartous. *“I think that is very reasonable, because it makes sure that whoever steals and robs the country during the conflict meets their punishment, since they have caused lots of destruction to the country,”* agreed an anti-regime Sunni man, 32, in Aleppo.

Public apologies — These received mixed reactions. Some on both sides found them appealing. *“That could also be very good as well because it is like apologizing to the people in front of everyone. This may actually help the efforts of reconciliation,”* said an anti-regime Sunni man, 38, who was a refugee in Turkey. Likewise, a pro-regime Christian woman, 21, in Tartous said, *“Public apology is necessary so the minds of the wronged people can be put at ease. This gives a little comfort to the people.”* These reactions were in line with those of peo-

ple who considered apology as a condition for forgiveness. Others were unwilling to consider forgiveness, even after an apology. *“If I slap you, rob your house, or cut off your arm, and then I came to apologize, what difference would that make? It wouldn’t give you back what you have lost, and therefore, such public apology solutions are a bunch of nonsense,”* said an anti-regime Sunni woman, 35, an IDP in Homs.

Alternatives to trial — Many respondents said it was possible for local committees to prescribe alternatives to trials for those accused of lesser crimes, but they were adamant that those accused of major crimes should not escape prosecution. *“This could be applied to those who committed minor crimes; the ideas of rehabilitation, paying compensations and others instead of going through trials could be applied to them,”* said a Christian man supporting the regime, 28, in Damascus.

Post-Conflict Trust Building Widely Supported

Most respondents favored local community activities that rebuild trust post-conflict between people on different sides in the war. This includes ideas such as economic projects that bring people together and projects for youth from the opposing sides. Specifically, respondents found appeal in projects like the promotion of economic development, education, and community building. Most said they and their communities would participate in activities to build trust between opposing sides.

I would agree to participate in such projects because they are very important for the income of Syrians and their patriotism. It would provide them with an income that should help families to lead good lives. These projects would rebuild the trust between the opposing sides in Syria.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, REFUGEE, TURKEY

A really great idea, but we want it to be implemented here, with no nepotism, and this idea will end unemployment and the problems of the youth. And better for the youth than to remain unemployed, and run towards chaos. They benefit, and benefit the country.

—CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 21, TARTOUS

Some refugees in Jordan, whose suffering has been extreme, rejected the idea, citing the deep divisions in the country. *“No, I do not think that such projects would be a success because we know that the sides of the conflict would never agree. They both want to take vengeance upon each other. As for me, I would not accept to participate in such projects because there is a touch of extremism and racism in the country, and I do not think that such projects would help eliminate any of that,”* said an anti-regime Sunni man, 35, in Jordan. In contrast, refugees in Turkey said they would participate.

Reintegration Programs for Former Fighters Favored

Programs to promote the reintegration of former fighters through the provision of jobs and education were supported by many; few rejected the idea outright. Some wanted repentance or apology as a condition for acceptance.

Yes, I would. That way I'd be helping to keep these former fighters away from war and corruption.

—SUNNI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 27, HAMAH

Yes, after their repentance. We should stand by them so they can participate in good deeds instead of bad ones.

—KURDISH WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 35, AL-HASAKAH

However, some would restrict the offer of such aid to those on their side only, to the exclusion of ISIS fighters or “terrorists.” This may imply some sort of vetting process or criteria for eligibility.

Every honorable person who stood and defended this country deserves to have all his needs met; such as education, working opportunities, and others, and they should be a reward from the regime for their efforts and love to this country. Terrorists, on the other hand, should be held accountable for the destruction they caused to this country; there is no way we consider helping them.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

I support that this would happen; programs that offer job opportunities and education to the rebel fighters. Yes I support them, but for the fighters who were against us, no I do not support them in such a thing.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

Judging by our findings, there may be openings for local-level, post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction efforts in Syria. Many Syrians retain a common sense of community and a desire to rebuild their war-shattered country, despite the harsh rhetoric and deepening polarization that we have noted. They voiced a willingness to forgive those on the other side, after an accountability process or a public apology, though forgiveness will be more difficult for the angriest, including some IDPs and refugees. The traditional processes of *Sulha* and *Musalaha* offer a framework within which the legacies of local-level disputes and struggles can be resolved, although this is not seen as a means or substitute for conflict resolution at the national level. There is also an expectation that state resources will be needed to grease the wheels of compensation, given the scale of the losses.

Summary of Findings on Rebuilding Trust Post-Conflict

Within the local context, Syrians are also supportive of fact-finding committees that work with local residents to initiate reconciliation activities, including conducting public hearings, deciding compensation, making recommendations for war crimes prosecutions, and offering a venue for public apologies. They are divided, however,

over whether such committees should also recommend alternatives to trials, particularly for major offenses. (Similarly, we were told last year that a national truth commission for perpetrators of major offenses would not be accepted as an accountability substitute for criminal prosecutions.) There was also broad support for efforts to re-establish a feeling of community through trust-building activities like economic and youth projects, consistent with our finding last year that Syrians wanted to come together again after the war. The issue of reintegration aid for former fighters was more contentious, however, with some respondents saying it should only go to those from their side. This is a reflection of the very real divide which the issues of the present conflict have generated. The divide is also reflected in public perceptions of the parties, to which we now turn.

Views of Key Actors

The greater polarization of views among those supporting different sides in the conflict which we observed this year was also evident in their attitudes towards the key figures and groups in the Syrian struggle. Views of individuals and organizations we tested divided even more sharply along pro-regime and anti-regime lines than last year. The nuances and qualifications some respondents attached to perceptions of their leaders also have largely vanished. However, there was somewhat more common ground around the rejection of extremists. Pro- and anti-regime respondents tended to share negative views of ISIS, and to a lesser degree, Jabhat al-Nusrah and Jaish al-Mujahideen.

Views of Assad Further Apart than Last Year

Supporters of Bashar al-Assad saw him as the trustworthy protector of the Syrian people. There was no ambivalence or middle ground in views of the President, as there was in our prior research.

Strong, honorable, and honest government with great credibility that is working hard to keep the people pleased. Long live Dr. Bashar and the government.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Bashar al-Assad's government is a government of safety and stability. It is the government of its leading, brave, wise president, who cares about his people and looks out for them. He is the leader.

— KURDISH WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 35, AL HASAKAH

Conversely, all regime opponents we interviewed were extremely negative towards the President, describing him as an animal, criminal, or murderer.

A regime that is unjust, tyrant, murderous, and blood thirsty. There is no possible monstrous description that would be enough to describe it.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

Assad, how can I describe him to you? How can I describe this animal? First thing, I want to describe his name, what his name means: a vicious animal, unjust, carnivore, and in fact he is a carnivore, a thief, a stealer, and seller of lands.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

Similar Polarization of Views on the Army

Nuanced views of the Syrian government army last year have also been replaced by sharp disagreement. Regime supporters viewed the army as the heroic protector of Syria from invading foreign terrorists seeking to divide the country.

The national army, and the only guarantee that this country will remain unified and protected.

— CHRISTIAN MAN (PRO-REGIME), 28, DAMASCUS

May God protect this courageous army. This is our army that is protecting us, protecting Syria, and protecting its people. It would sacrifice its life because of ISIS and its bastards. And also the other bastards.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

Regime opponents, however, viewed the Syrian army as criminal killers of children with chemical weapons and barrel bombs.

The army of Bashar [al-Assad], the criminal, which killed children with chemical weapons and exploding barrel bombs.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL HASAKAH

An army of infidelity and humiliation, may God curse them. How can they stand with a tyrant to kill their brothers in religion and country? The worst of armies it is.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

FSA Held in Higher Esteem by Opposition

Many of the doubts regime opponents held about the Free Syrian Army (FSA) last year have dissipated. Now, views of the rebel army are almost entirely positive, despite the reported setbacks that it has encountered in the field. Respondents described the FSA as the “real army” and the best hope against the regime.

They are our real army which is fighting for the rights of all Syrians. It is the real Syrian Army that is loyal and devoted to Syria and is determined to rid Syria of Assad and his gang of criminals.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

It is our real army, sacrificing for our freedom, refusing to kill their Syrian brothers for Bashar al-Assad.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 32, ALEPPO

Few opposition supporters believed that the FSA might not exist everywhere in the country when asked specifically if it did.

Likewise, only a few recognized that it had been weakened by opposition disunity. An exception was this comment: *“At the beginning, the Free Syrian Army was holding itself together in order to achieve their goal, but now that other groups have entered its forces, they have broken the*

unity of the army. These cells have destroyed the Free Syrian Army,” said a Sunni woman refugee, 25, in Jordan.

Regime supporters were uniformly scornful of the FSA – referring to its members as terrorists, traitors, and foreigners. They perceived it as weakened and tended to conflate it with ISIS and the Nusrah Front.

Traitor terrorists, they are not free, they are agents who destroyed the country in the name of revolution while their only goal is money and support. They are paying for it. I haven't heard about it for a while but I am sure it still is [there]. After being Free Army it became Al-Nusrah Front then Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS); they all are murderers.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

What army? They are animals. There is only the army of President Bashar al-Assad. [They are] people like Daesh who are destroying their people and killing them. They are people who must be executed. There aren't many of them, thank God, because our valiant army destroyed them all, and God willing, there will not be anything left from them.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

Syrian Opposition Coalition Also Has a Boost in Stature among Opposition

Perceptions of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) have improved somewhat since last year, reflecting the more intense polarization of the contending sides. Anti-regime respondents generally praised the SOC for making sacrifices to protect Syria, aiding people in need, and demonstrating the legitimacy of the opposition.

It is offering protection to the people and the country. It is sacrificing its souls for the country. Concerning the area I am in, it is not offering anything because the regime is in control. But the rest of the areas, it is providing a lot of aid and many needs.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, HAMAH

An Arabic and international support to the Syrian opposition. Also they are trying to prove to the world that the government of the opposition is the legitimate government for the Syrian people.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQAH

However, one regime opponent described the SOC as more interested in personal gain than helping Syria. *“The opposition inside Syria is fighting and trying to free our country, while the opposition abroad are only collecting money and putting it in their pockets,”* said a 35 year old man who is a refugee in Jordan.

As expected, regime supporters were uniformly negative towards the SOC. *“Saboteurs, crazy and bastards”* was what a Sunni man, 29, in Raqqah termed them. Another, a Sunni man, 37, in Homs, said, *“This party is going to stay up late in the hotels of Qatar and Kuwait collecting money.”*

Interim Government Enjoys Positive Image but Weak Presence

Comments about the Interim Government from regime opponents were generally positive. They described it as their legitimate representative. However, this seems largely symbolic: few said it is present or active in their area, and they had difficulty distinguishing it from the Syrian Opposition Coalition. However, some refugees in Turkey, where it is based, credited it with providing aid.

This government is the first step in ending Bashar al-Assad's regime. It is working for our benefit and goals. They are working towards ending Bashar al-Assad's regime to take over.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

It's not really [playing a role in Al-Hasakah], but they have a representative who visits our area occasionally to ask about how we are doing and what we need.

— KURDISH WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, AL-HASAKAH

It is providing us with food supplies and medicine. It is also providing our children with school supplies by presenting our tragedy and our suffering to the international committees who didn't hesitate to help us after what they have heard.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 38, REFUGEE, TURKEY

Regime supporters refused to acknowledge the Interim Government. *“A government? This is not a government. This is a game. People who are mentally deranged and are playing games outside Syria and under the patronage and guarding of other countries who seek the destruction of Syria. They do not exist in Syria in the first place,”* commented a pro-regime Alawi man from Tartous, aged 34.

ISIS Rejected by All

Participants expressed opposition to ISIS almost across the board, with negative views shared by both regime opponents and supporters. They regarded ISIS as brutal and foreign-dominated. Some argued it has undermined opposition efforts as well as Islam itself. Hostility was particularly intense among those living under ISIS in Raqqah, whatever their political leanings.

They are terrorists. They are disbelievers. They came to Syria in the name of Islam and Muslims, and as we all know, Islam is the religion of peace and tolerance. They have destroyed the true image of Islam. They are killing our sons and daughters.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, REFUGEE, JORDAN

We have a bitter experience with them. They want to apply Islamic law their way. This law has got nothing to do with Islam. They harmed Islam and the Syrian revolution more than they benefited it. May God get rid of them.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, RAQQAH

Some respondents viewed ISIS as a creation of the US, Israel, or other Western countries. Thus, an Alawi man in Damascus, 44, who supports the regime said, *“Those are infidels made up by the USA, and of Israeli origins. They aim at misrepresenting Islam before the Arab and the West. These people are crazy with murders. They are long beards, empty brains, and hearts of iron to kill unconsciously.”*

Some opposition supporters wonder if ISIS might be working in cooperation with the regime.

They are no different than the oppressive regime. They used to only fight in the liberated areas and they didn't even fight in Aleppo. ISIS and the regime are two sides of one coin. We pray that the regime is crushed along with ISIS as soon as possible.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 38, REFUGEE, TURKEY

They only fight the rebels. They play the biggest role in dividing the country. I think they have connections with the regime or America, and this alliance that was created to fight them is nothing but an obvious ploy.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

Views of Jabhat al-Nusra Mixed But Negative Among Opposition

Jabhat-al-Nusra aroused varying reactions among opponents to the regime, though on-balance these were hostile. It continued to receive praise for its contribution to the fight against the government, as last year.

I pray for them with all my heart; may God bless them and grant them strength to fight the regime. They are Jihadists with every sense of the word who do not accept injustice, and they will be granted victory, God willing.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 35, IDP, HOMS

Jabhat Al-Nusra is comprised of good people who have initiated incredible actions throughout the last year. They shook the bases of the regime when they targeted the headquarters of staff and the crisis cell, in which the criminals met their destiny. They are hardworking fighters who do not know weakness.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, REFUGEE, TURKEY

They were also compared favorably to ISIS by a few. “When ISIS was here, a long time ago, [Jabhat Al-Nusra fighters] were in adjacent areas to Raqqah,” said an anti-regime Sunni man, age 40, in Raqqah. “They treated us in a manner nicer than ISIS and its injustice. They were easier on the people and helped them.”

But others accused Jabhat-al-Nusra of barbarity and not representing Islam, and compared it to ISIS. Like ISIS, some saw it as under the control of foreigners. A few mentioned its connection to al-Qaeda.

All these groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, have nothing to do with Islam or anything else. They have goals from the outside. They are controlled and sent to us to achieve these outsider's projects, nothing more.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, ALEPPO

I can't understand them anymore, they are once with ISIS and another against ISIS; they disfigured the name of Islam with their crimes. They are all related to Al-Qaeda.

—CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, IDP, HOMS

As with ISIS, some wonder if Jabhat-al-Nusrah cooperates with the regime. *“They are no different from the oppressive regime. They are oppressive murderers who do not have a shred of humanity in their bodies. They are doing the exact same thing Bashar al-Assad is doing, and they are following in his footsteps,”* said a Sunni man who is anti-regime, 30, and a refugee in Jordan.

Regime supporters uniformly rejected the group. *“They are truly terrorists who say that they practice Islam,”* said an Alawi woman, 55, in Damascus.

Low Awareness, Conflicting Views on Jaish al-Mujahideen

Jaish-al-Mujahideen, an Islamist group largely drawn from the Aleppo area, was unknown to many of the respondents, even in the opposition. Views were mixed among those who knew it. Some saw it as a violent group using religion as a pretext; others saw it as non-extremist and an asset to the rebel cause.

I know nothing about those people, they are the Mujahideen Army at one point and ISIS at another. These are criminal people who are trying to differentiate between the Syrian people as they spread disorder. These people know nothing about fighting in the name of Islam or anything related to it.

—CHRISTIAN MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 29, IDP, HOMS

Jaish al-Mujahideen is diversified and distributed; it has a part that is Syrian, and a big part of many different nationalities. It is moderate and defends many of our areas.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, RAQQAH

Regime supporters rejected Jaish-al-Mujahideen, as they did other opposition groups. *“Mujahideen means people of Islam. These are crazy infidels, not mujahideen, because they are killing the nation and the Muslims of this nation. Religion doesn’t allow for a Muslim to kill another Muslim,”* said an Alawi man, 44, in Damascus.

Islamic Front Poorly Known and Gets Mixed Reactions

Respondents also had limited knowledge of the Islamic Front. Among those who knew about the group, views were mixed, but more critical than of Jabhat Al-Nusrah or Jaish-al-Mujahideen, even among regime opponents.

Some comments marked confusion and lack of clarity about this group, which was easily mixed up with other Islamist formations. They referred to it as *“one of several armies”* or an *“unreal army.”* *“They are a group of Islamic parties united to fight al-Nusrah Front. Then, they started fighting Da’esh. Like I told you in the beginning, we have thousands of parties that we do not know the names of,”* said a Sunni woman (anti-regime), 34, Deir al-Zor.

Some saw it as a legitimate part of the opposition, comprising Syrian patriots. However, others were wary of it, even as they acknowledged its contribution to the opposition.

The Islamic Front is part of the Syrian revolution and the Syrian opposition. They embrace moderate ideology and we appreciate such type of people and fighters.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, REFUGEE, TURKEY

An army of Mujahideen that was comprised from several fighting fronts. They aim to remove the injustice, attack, and terrorism on Syria. However, it does have some problems; it is a bit radical.

— KURDISH WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, AL-HASAKAH

Regime supporters saw the Islamic Front as an anti-Islamic, foreign army fighting for outsiders' interests, rather than those of Syrians. "Everything that misrepresents Islam is done by traitors and traders of religion. They are agents for the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia, the biggest accomplice in the destruction," said an Alawi man from Damascus.

Views of PYD/YPG Mixed

Views of the Kurdish fighters and their affiliated political party were very mixed and depended primarily on ethnicity and political alignments. Not surprisingly, Kurds viewed them quite favorably.

It is an honest party that wants the Kurds to be independent in this world, and that is what the Turkish government is opposing.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

Kurds are a part of the strong, firm Syrian people that will always defend Kurds and would never sell us to the Turkish government. They even protected us from them.

— KURDISH WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 35, AL-HASAKAH

As with the Kurds themselves, some pro-regime respondents regarded the Kurdish fighters as partners of the government in the fight against the rebels. Some opposition supporters expressed the same view, but with anger.

The Kurds are Syrians anyways. Simple people that live like us, and Syria protected them from the criminal Turks. And the YPG is theirs; they fight ISIS and others because they know the conspiracy is against them as well.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 29, HAMAH

They are traitors who should be punished and tried for supporting the oppressive regime.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

A few on both sides of the conflict also voiced concern about the risk of Kurdish separatism.

We are against the PYD demanding a Kurdish state, and we assure that Syria is for all the Syrians, and cannot be divided into two different parts.

— SUNNI MAN, 32 (ANTI-REGIME), ALEPPO

The Kurds are an integral part of the fighting Syrian people, but they haven't set forward their goals and which side they are supporting yet.

— CHRISTIAN WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 23, IDP, HOMS

European Fighters Get Polarized Reactions

We asked respondents their views on different groups of foreign fighters in Syria. Among those favoring the opposition, many saw foreign fighters from Europe as a part of the fight against the regime. However, some expressed concern over their extremism or fear they serve foreign interests.

Those are mujahideen alongside us. They are doing jihad with us against the regime and against everything that kills Islam.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 39, RAQQAH

They are lost people running after life and desires, fighting Islam and Muslims everywhere. They came to spoil the land and spread corruption.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 27, HAMAH

Not surprisingly, regime supporters interviewed rejected Europeans fighting in Syria.

These are the lords and the core of corruption and destruction whose consciences can be bought with money. They don't want their own countries to be destroyed, so they come here and destroy ours. Christian woman (pro-regime), 23, IDP, Homs

Those people who are coming are terrorists and they come under the name of Islam, but Islam has got nothing to do with them.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 24, TARTOUS

Hezbollah and Iranian Fighters Welcomed by Regime Supporters

Regime supporters in our study unanimously supported the presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria and saw them as welcome help against the rebels. The opposition was equally hostile, seeing them as killers and foreigners.

They are the people who have taken a stand of honor. We are proud of them in front of the whole world because they have proven to us that they are our brothers with all the sense of the word.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

They are more criminal than the regime. They are destroying Syria and killing people. It is neither their country nor their people. Without them, the regime would have ended. They must be killed without trial. They helped the regime with their killings, and with the weapons.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 34, DEIR AL-ZOR

Summary of Findings Regarding Views of Key Actors

Divisions between regime supporters and opponents are even starker in this year's study than last year. Both sides have closed ranks; they are more supportive of the leaders and groups on their side and more hostile to those on the other. However, extremism is a common concern in both camps. While regime opponents and supporters agreed on little when it comes to the other major figures and groups shaping this war, they did agree that ISIS is a negative force whose emergence has worsened the conflict immeasurably. They also share similar concerns to varying degrees about other extremist groups involved in the struggle.

Information Sources

Views among respondents are as sharply split regarding Syria's media landscape as they are on many other issues, with regime supporters preferring pro-government outlets and opposition supporters watching those that are free from regime influence. Neither trusts outlets from the other side, and fewer seem to even follow media from both sides than we had found last year. Fewer also mentioned relying on non-Arab world sources, like BBC-Arabic, France 24, CNN, and SkyNews.

Television Remains Most Important Source of Information

Regime supporters and opponents alike continue to depend on television for most of their news, albeit different channels.

Regime opponents tend to tune into satellite stations based abroad, such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera.

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya mostly. These channels are international and they broadcast the situation in Syria for the entire world, and also because they are sympathetic with the wounded, Syrian people. Not like other channels, which are sell-outs and foreign agents.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 40, DEIR AL-ZOR

Mostly television, and especially the channels of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya; I trust the newscasts they broadcast because we would check with our relatives there, and the news would turn out to be true.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 25, REFUGEE, JORDAN

One anti-regime respondent from Deir el Zor said he watches the Deir-el-Zor TV channel. An anti-regime respondent in Raqqah said he watches Al-Ghad, Shamuna, and the Free Syrian Army channel. Fewer respondents seemed to report watching these channels than last year. Deir-el-Zor, Al Ghad, Shamuna, and FSA TV are pro-revolution satellite stations, also available online.

Regime supporters look to Al-Mayadeen, Al-Dunya, and Al-Ekhabareyya as well as other non-satellite Syrian state channels. Al-Mayadeen is a satellite channel based in Beirut, al-Dunya is a private satellite station in Damascus, and Al-Ekhabareyya is a terrestrial Syrian state broadcaster.

Mostly from television, through news channels and daily newscasts, and from my family and relatives. I usually watch Al-Mayadeen. I sometimes watch the Syrian channel and Al-Ekhabareyya. I can watch the news with video and audio, 24/7.

— ALAWI WOMAN (PRO-REGIME), 55, DAMASCUS

I usually watch Al-Mayadeen channel, sometimes the Syrian channel, Syria News and Dunya channel.

— ALAWI MAN (PRO-REGIME), 44, DAMASCUS

Respondents on both sides tend to avoid sources that promote the other side's point of view, a change from last year where some

respondents listened to both and tried to triangulate something close to the truth. Now, however, with the greater polarization prevailing, respondents seem to view the other side's media as founts of lies.

[The Syrian state channels] are the reliable sources that convey the true reports to us before they have been tampered with by some opposing channels that work against the interests of the country and the well-being of our homeland. Most channels deviate and fabricate the news, and most of the time, they report full, false news that does not even exist in order to sabotage the situation and make it even worse.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

The rest of the channels are either biased in their opinion or with the powerful, dominant side, which is actually the regime. But Al-Jazeera broadcasts the situation of the people and the injustice they suffer. They always stand by the people, the weakest link, so therefore it is the voice of the people.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 28, ALEPPO

People on both sides also rely on word of mouth, especially friends and family networks, trusting the views of people they know on the ground more than media sources. Many said they rely on the mobile application WhatsApp to keep in touch with networks and get information.

I usually get the news in more than one way. Some reaches me through friends on WhatsApp. They convey the true news to me because the events are true and have happened either to them or to their friends. There is also room for discussion between us, and it is the fastest and the easiest way to communicate with each other in different areas.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

Surely they (the trusted sources) are friends and relatives. I check up on them on the telephone and I know the events they have experienced. I do not watch TV because it does not broadcast correct news. But the correct news that I get is from my friends and family.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 39, RAQQA

Facebook, Local Sites are Important Sources

Many respondents, particularly on the anti-regime side, crave non-political information that is free from political interference and surveillance, and seek it on the Internet. Facebook received more mention in this regard than last year. Some opposition respondents said Facebook satisfies this demand. Pro-regime respondents also turn to Facebook, but did not make many mentions of specific pages.

I depend on the sources from the Internet; Facebook and free website pages that are run by normal, non-political individuals, because they are the sources that publish the news without any political surveillance. We all know that these days nobody can publish any piece of news without it being politically reviewed. To make my point clearer, most of the news we watch are just the parts politicians want us to know, not realistic or even really happening.

— KURDISH MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 28, AL-HASAKAH

Facebook is a much vaster source, and is faster in delivering news. Mostly these pages: Ahrar Syria, the supporters of the Syrian revolution, and the Andan Rebel.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 32, ALEPPO

Some refugees mentioned reading Facebook pages specifically hosted and run for them in Turkey.

Some pages fully cover the news in Syria at a very high speed compared to other sources. These pages are also very objective. Mostly these pages: Noqabaq Syria Al-Ahrar – The Turkey branch, which is a page for Syrian refugees in Turkey, and Itihad Al-Talaba Alsoryoon, and the Syrian Free Army page.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 38, REFUGEE, TURKEY

[I rely on] Facebook pages because there are pages that post breaking news about our rebels and the damage caused by the barrel bombs to our civilian Syrian people. Mostly these pages: Syria 24 hours, Al-Ahrar Syrian Students group, Al-Sabeil Neighborhood News page, Masaken (houses) Al-Sabeil, and the Syrian Free Army page.

— SUNNI WOMAN (ANTI-REGIME), 23, REFUGEE, TURKEY

Both sides look at local Facebook pages and websites that provide information about specific areas.

[I trust] Hamah Awal be-Awal because it's highly credible. It also allows people to write their opinion regarding the situation in Hamah and other cities in Syria. This page also publishes news on the coordination happening in Syria.

— SUNNI MAN (ANTI-REGIME), 26, HAMAH

Al-Hasakah, moment by moment because it is the first to report the true news.

— KURDISH MAN (PRO-REGIME), 32, AL-HASAKAH

One pro-regime man, 31, from Homs said he looks at pro-regime channels' and stations' websites for information. *"I find other sites better than Facebook, mostly the General Organization of Radio and Television site which is the official site of Syria channels. There is also the (Iranian) Al-Alam channel website."*

Few read papers or listen to the radio, as we found last year. *"I sometimes flip some pages (of newspapers) but not always because other means have taken over. [As for the] radio, of course not, that was long time ago, now we need it less. The radio's time is up,"* said an anti-regime Sunni woman, 33, from Damascus.

Summary of Findings on Information Sources

The information war in Syria has evolved: those on both sides pay less attention to the other's media, in line with the growing polarization of attitudes and opinions. The media used are the same – television, word of mouth, and Internet. Particularly on the anti-regime side, however, the Internet presence has further developed, with the emergence of specialized pages catering to the needs of refugees in different countries and residents or displaced people from specific areas. As is true with the other aspects of the Syrian conflict, the media scene has become more deeply divided and also more fragmented.

Conclusions and Implications

Greater Polarization and Bitterness Have Undermined Support for National Negotiations

In several respects, the willingness of domestic Syrian public opinion to support a negotiated, national settlement of the country's conflict has diminished compared to a year ago. After another year marked by continued fighting and atrocities, the rise of ISIS, and the failure of international peace efforts, Syrians have become more sharply polarized and have lost their faith in a nationally-brokered compromise. The broad consensus we found last year on the desirability of a negotiated outcome is gone. Syrians want to see their side win and want to believe it will. The negativity that respondents displayed is likely tied to dashed hopes and disappointment with previous negotiations which they view as failures, as well as the suffering from another year of war. It suggests that respondents neither believe such efforts could succeed nor desire further abortive attempts.

Opportunities for Progress Exist at the Local Level, If Locally Led

Despite widespread rejection of any national-level negotiated settlement, respondents were more amenable to the idea of local

ceasefires and reconciliation efforts, indicating that efforts to advance peace and justice in Syria might begin locally. Syrians of every stripe are war-weary and have a tremendous desire for greater freedom, more normality, and less fear in their daily lives. Although they are divided about negotiations to end fighting and sieges in their localities, such efforts receive considerably more support than externally-brokered, top-down national initiatives. Syrians interviewed seem to support very specific, targeted, and local activities more than abstract or notions like “national negotiations.” This indicates that taking concrete steps locally might be a positive approach overall to create buy-in for peace and reconciliation. On both sides, respondents expressed deep mistrust and negativity towards foreign interventions and influences in the conflict, but reacted positively to the idea of local initiatives brokered among and implemented by Syrians themselves. Moreover, respondents easily envisaged how such talks could occur under the mediation of widely trusted local elites.

Mistrust and Doubts as to Follow-Through Make Local Initiatives Tenuous

Although locally-brokered steps towards peace are likely possible, they would also be tenuous and fragile. Many respondents reacted positively to the idea of local ceasefires based on their interests in greater normality and stopping the killing. However, their responses also indicate a doubt that opposing parties would uphold their end of agreements, or that agreements would lead to lasting benefits. Responses indicate that local initiatives could be positive *if* they represent first steps towards meeting local Syrians’ needs and also building blocks for further peace efforts. However, they could also have very negative impacts on the potential for long-term, national peace if they easily fall apart, lead nowhere, or are merely disguises for surrenders to the regime. Syrians and those who seek to help them can examine whether and how islands of peace and freedom might emerge under current circumstances. If

the barriers of mutual mistrust could be reduced, perhaps by one or more conspicuous successes, it is possible others would soon follow. In this situation, initiatives such as the UN proposal for a ceasefire in Aleppo led by Steffan de Mistura are timely and potentially significant, but should include mechanisms that will generate sufficient local buy-in and lead to effective results — not only sustainable results at the local level, but also results that serve as first steps to be followed by other initiatives, rather than ends in themselves.

Local Initiatives May Be Building Blocks for Broader “Bottom-Up” Processes

Syrian responses to this study seem to show a tension: on one hand, rejection of a national negotiated solution; but on the other, when pressed on shows of support for local-level ceasefires, a preference for a national solution rather than islands of indefinite calm while the conflict rages. Respondents seem not to trust a nationally-brokered process given the current situation, and express preference for an outright victory for their side. They also showed mistrust at the local level, but were more positive about the possibility of local progress for certain reasons: such initiatives would be Syrian led, based on interests, and therefore more achievable. Respondents also broadly shared a desire for a more normal life and the reconstruction of their communities. Although study participants may not have expressly voiced it, a possible implication of the apparent contradiction in their responses is that local ceasefires that help to wind down the intensity and virulence of the conflict may be a necessary, “bottom-up” prerequisite for a national process — as opposed to a Geneva-style ‘top-down’ negotiation which focuses first on political issues that are insurmountable in the current climate of intense violence and polarization.

Local Initiatives Should Promote Accountability, Rebuilding, and Democracy to Build Long-Term Peace

If efforts are made to build peace at the local level, they must also strengthen the process of long-term change instead of simply freezing the situation or restoring the pre-conflict status quo. In this study, Syrians expressly communicated that local ceasefires and other initiatives must not be a whitewash for victories by any party that has committed violations – or else any ‘peace’ they achieve will be neither true nor lasting. In fact, this study shows that regime opponents fear local truces are mere camouflage for the restoration of regime control, and experiences to date in certain areas, such as Homs, offer some support for this view. Such efforts are most likely to avoid becoming disguised surrenders in areas where there is a balance of forces or where the opposition controls some territory, giving each side a degree of bargaining power. A flow of resources from sources outside regime control, including international assistance, could offer a basis for providing services and accountability for abuses. This could include humanitarian and subsistence resources as well as technical assistance in governance, services, and justice. Useful contributions could also be made via broad participation in discussions on the establishment of new, democratic local government structures, which experience elsewhere has shown need not wait for the conclusion of the national struggle.

Of course, one major issue with which Syrians will need to grapple in these efforts is what roles can be played by those on both sides who bear varying degrees of responsibility for past or ongoing violence. Responses to this study — as with last year’s — show widespread desire that those who have committed violations be held accountable, especially at high levels. Just as with any national settlement, local peace initiatives could actually promote revenge attempts and renewed conflict if they bandage over grievances or further entrench injustices, highlighting the need for such efforts to include justice and reform alongside reconciliation measures.

Rejection of ISIS Provides Some Common Ground

One striking finding of this research was the near-absence of support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), either in its “capital” of Raqqa or elsewhere in the country. Indeed, among both government supporters and opponents, rejection of extremism was strong and vociferous. Thus far, however, their shared opinion on this issues has not formed the basis for joint cooperation, nor is it likely to as the factions remain more interested in fighting each other than in subduing extremists. In this regard, local conflict resolution processes may provide a key to building local coalitions that can make it more feasible to keep extremists out of given areas or perhaps offer an attractive alternative to extremist ideology that will help to attract the populace currently under their control. At present, ISIS presents itself as the only alternative to the regime; the creation of others would be a step to convincing Syrians that a different outcome is possible.

Syrians Want to Come Together Again After the Conflict, With Conditions

Despite the blood that has been shed, after the war Syrians still want theirs to be one state and one people. But coexistence, many said, requires repentance, accountability, and justice as well as reconciliation. Most Syrians in this study want and expect their side to prevail in the conflict, and are willing to come together, as long as reconciliation is on their terms — often, for example, citing apology or punishment as prerequisites. Many also doubt that reconciliation measures will be possible or effective, but at least express a willingness and openness to considering and attempting such efforts. The mood is particularly harsh among refugees, terrified by the ISIS phenomenon back in the country but also despairing of reconciliation and forgiveness, understandable in light of the particularly painful reality many have lived.

Fortunately there are some resources and ideas for reconciliation measures that could win ready acceptance from the Syrian public. The traditional concepts of *Sulha* and *Musalaha*, which involve the taking of responsibility and compensation, offer a framework for the resolution and conclusion of local-level conflicts and disputes. Even if they are not substitutes for a national accord, they can help to wind down bitterness and conflict before or after such a country-wide settlement. Participants also responded positively to the idea of local committees for fact-finding and revealing truth, as such bodies could potentially conduct public hearings, make recommendations for compensation, and feed into prosecutions in some way. Traditional proceedings and conversations on mechanisms for accountability locally could proceed in parallel with efforts to establish new local government structures now, or could follow a conclusion of hostilities.

Outsiders Can Support Syrians by Promoting Local Discourse and Initiatives

The path to a postwar Syria will be a difficult one, but this is an apt time to encourage efforts to promote peace, accountability, and reconciliation at the local level. Syrians want to see their society and their lives return to normal, even if many cannot yet imagine how this might happen. A task for those outside the country who hope to facilitate such change is to promote discourse around local initiatives that can meet the expectations of those on the ground while also creating the groundwork for a sustainable peace based on justice and dignity. However, the legitimacy of such efforts requires that the task of rebuilding a new country from the grassroots up be undertaken by Syrians themselves.

Appendix: Methodology and Interviewee Details

Charney Research conducted 40 in-depth interviews in August–October 2014 on issues related to the conflict in Syria and local-level initiatives to promote peace, reconciliation, and transitional justice for the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC). This was the second phase of our Syrian qualitative research. (The first phase was conducted a year earlier, in August and September 2013.)

Craig Charney and Christine Quirk conducted field training of the research firm’s field supervisors in August 2014 in Istanbul. During this training we refined the discussion guide, explained strategies for obtaining cooperation, discussed potential obstacles and solutions, and conducted practice interviews to ensure correct administration of the questionnaire. The field supervisors, in turn, trained and briefed local staff for the study. We are impressed by and deeply grateful for their commitment and courage, without which we could not have conducted the research.

The objective of this study was to ensure that all the main demographic and confessional groups, and people in various government- and opposition-held locales, including in the two largest cities, were included in the study. We set quotas for each region and demographic, and used a modified snowball sampling technique to

select respondents. Under this method, which is commonly used when interviewing difficult to access populations, respondents who met the quota criteria were referred by acquaintances of local interviewers and/or selected on the basis of referrals from study participants. (Interviewers could not interview their own acquaintances, however.) Such a sample is not statistically representative of the Syrian population; however, statistical descriptions are not required for qualitative research of this type. We chose this method, rather than a larger-scale quantitative poll — which is not feasible under current Syrian conditions — to enable us to explore similarities and differences in respondents' opinions and probe and contrast their reactions to ideas and possibilities in depth.

A first round of interviews took place between August 21 and September 9, 2014. The interviews were roughly half an hour in length, in Arabic, and were recorded live. They were transcribed in Arabic, then translated into English by the research firm. Interviews were conducted in person by the local research firm's Syria-based interviewers, all of whom were native Arabic-speaking Syrians.

The interviews were conducted in the following areas: four each in Aleppo, Raqqah, Hama, Damascus, Deir al-Zor¹, Hasakah, Tartous, Homs, and two each among refugees in Turkey and Jordan. Six were conducted among internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria. Sixteen interviews were conducted among pro-regime respondents and 24 among opponents. Four respondents were Christian, six were Alawi, four were Kurds and 26 were Sunni Arabs. The interview pool included 20 men and 20 women.

From the initial round of 40 interviews, Charney Research rejected 20 due to quality control issues. They were replaced by the results of a second round of interviews between October 21 and 31, 2014, done by different interviewers. They were conducted in the follow-

1 None of the areas in Deir al-Zor where respondents were located were under ISIS control at the time of the interviews.

ing areas: four each in Deir al-Zor, Hasakah and Raqqah, three each in Aleppo and Tartous, and two in Hama. After a careful quality control evaluation, we concluded these interviews were satisfactory.

Since this is a qualitative research report, it does not use numbers to describe the distribution of opinions. Nor does it speak of “the majority” or “the minority.” Rather, we use qualitative descriptors when referring to proportions within the interview pool that hold a view or express a position. The definitions for these terms are as follows:

“All” — Every respondent in a group

“Almost All” — More than eight-in-ten respondents

“Most” — Between six and eight-in-ten respondents

“Divided” — Between four and six-in-ten respondents

“Many” — Between three and four-in-ten respondents

“Some” — Between two and three-in-ten respondents

“Few” — Less than two-in-ten respondents

“None” — Zero-in-ten respondents

The table below lists the 40 interviews that passed Charney Research’s quality control standards.

NO.	LOCATION	GENDER	REFUGEE OR IDP?	AGE	CONFESSION	EDUCATION COMPLETED	REGIME STANCE
1	Aleppo	Male	-	32	Sunni	Fabric Salesman	Anti
3	Homs	Male	-	37	Sunni	Architect	Pro
5	Hama	Male	-	26	Sunni	Car Mechanic	Anti
8	Damascus	Female	-	55	Alawi	Housewife	Pro
11	Damascus	Female	-	33	Sunni	Teacher	Anti
13	Homs	Female	IDP	35	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
15	Homs	Female	-	23	Christian	University Student	Pro
16	Damascus	Male	-	28	Christian	Accountant	Pro
17	Turkey	Male	Refugee	30	Sunni	Pharmacist	Anti
21	Damascus	Male	-	44	Alawi	Government Employee	Pro
24	Tartous	Female	-	30	Alawi	Government Employee	Pro
28	Jordan	Male	Refugee	30	Sunni	Construction Worker	Anti
29	Homs	Male	IDP	29	Christian	Mobile Phone Maintenance	Anti
30	Jordan	Male	Refugee	35	Sunni	Tailor	Anti
32	Hama	Female	-	27	Sunni	Tailor	Pro
35	Jordan	Female	Refugee	25	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
36	Jordan	Female	Refugee	20	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
37	Turkey	Female	Refugee	23	Sunni	University Student	Anti
38	Turkey	Female	Refugee	29	Sunni	Teacher	Anti
39	Turkey	Male	Refugee	32	Sunni	Business Management	Anti
41	Al-Hasakah	Male	-	32	Kurd	Accountant	Pro
44	Al-Hasakah	Male	-	28	Kurd	Teacher	Anti
43	Al-Hasakah	Female	-	23	Kurd	University Student	Anti

NO.	LOCATION	GENDER	REFUGEE OR IDP?	AGE	CONFESSION	EDUCATION COMPLETED	REGIME STANCE
44	Al-Hasakah	Female	-	35	Kurd	Housewife	Pro
45	Aleppo	Female	-	28	Sunni	Teacher	Anti
46	Deir al-Zor	Female	IDP	34	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
47	Deir al-Zor	Male	-	29	Sunni	Free Trader	Anti
48	Aleppo	Male	-	27	Sunni	Mechanical Engineer	Anti
49	Aleppo	Female	-	30	Sunni	Hairdresser	Anti
50	Raqqah	Female	-	39	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
51	Deir al-Zor	Male	-	40	Sunni	Teacher	Anti
52	Raqqah	Male	-	29	Sunni	Owner of Clothing Store	Pro
53	Raqqah	Male	-	40	Sunni	Owner of Fabric, Clothing Store	Anti
54	Hama	Male	-	25	Sunni	Driver	Anti
55	Tartous	Male	-	24	Alawi	University Student	Pro
56	Hama	Female	-	29	Alawi	Teacher	Pro
57	Tartous	Male	-	34	Alawi	Decoration Engineer	Pro
58	Tartous	Female	IDP	21	Christian	University Student	Pro
59	Tartous	Female	-	37	Sunni	Housewife	Anti
60	Raqqah	Female	-	25	Sunni	Teacher	Anti

Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a Syrian-led, multilaterally supported nonprofit that envisions a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law — where citizens from all components of Syrian society live in peace. SJAC promotes transitional justice and accountability processes in Syria by collecting and preserving documentation, analyzing and cataloging data, and promoting public discourse on transitional justice — within Syria and beyond. Learn more at www.syriaaccountability.org.