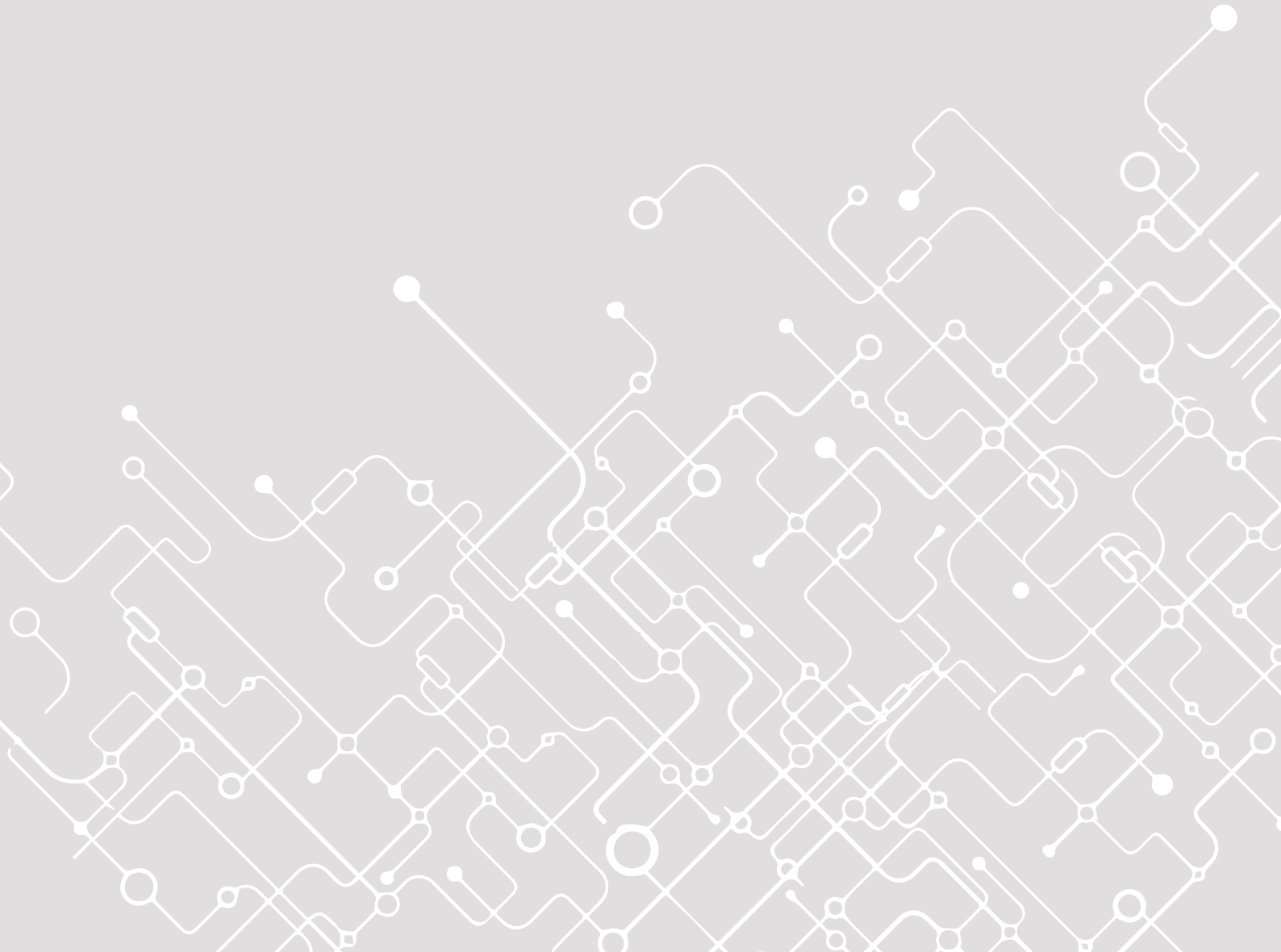


INNOVATIVE PEACEBUILDING IN SYRIA II

AN UPDATE ON THE STRATEGIC
USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD PEACE
IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The research presented in this report identifies changes and continuities in the peacotech landscape in Syria, and presents pressing considerations for innovative peacebuilding there.

In January 2016, the British Council commissioned Build Up to map peacotech initiatives responding to the Syrian crisis and consider options for future work using technology for peacebuilding and development. The resulting report '[Innovative Peacebuilding in Syria](#)' provided an initial exploration of the peacotech landscape in Syria. It also outlined a number of recommendations, some of which led to the design and implementation of the Digital Steps programme. The [Digital Steps](#) programme, run over nine months by Build Up and the British Council, supported eight Syrian innovators to design, test and pilot a technology initiative that contributes to co-existence in Syria.

In June 2018, the British Council asked Build Up to provide an update to the 2016 research, in order to reflect both contextual changes in the Syrian conflict, and lessons learned from the Digital Steps programme. The following report identifies both changes and continuities in the peacotech landscape in Syria, and presents the most pressing considerations for innovative peacebuilding in Syria moving forward.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this report was not to repeat the research conducted in 2016, but rather to narrow the scope of the study in order to provide a relevant update, reflecting on changes and continuities in the peacotech landscape. Specifically, the scope has been reduced to focus only on initiatives working inside Syria, or those targeting audiences inside Syria. As a result, a large number of the initiatives explored in the first report were not relevant to this research.

This report draws on desk research, evaluation materials from the Digital Steps programme and 10 expert interviews carried out remotely and in person from May to June 2018. Interviews were held with participants of the Digital Steps programme, as well as with key stakeholders familiar with the Syrian context, innovation and peacebuilding. Interviews were conducted with individuals inside Syria, in Beirut, and in Turkey.

DEFINING PEACETECH

The term ‘peacotech’ emerged in mid 2015, referring to the convergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and peacebuilding practice.

A full exploration of peacotech in the global context is given in the first report, and will not be re-examined here. In summary, peacotech can be defined as ‘an emerging body of peacebuilding practice which includes a technological component that is of **strategic importance** to its objectives’.¹ We continue to define peacebuilding in the terms of Johan Galtung, as a practice that ‘achieves positive peace by creating structures and institutions of peace based on justice, equity and cooperation, thus addressing the underlying causes of conflict.’ (Galtung in Paffenholz 2010: 45).

Technology continues to serve three key functions when it comes to peacebuilding.² These are:

- **Data management:** gather, analyse and visualise data about peace and conflict
- **Strategic communications:** engage more or different people in conversations and stories about peace
- **Dialogue and mobilization:** create new spaces for more or different peace actions

GLOBAL TRENDS IN PEACETECH

In 2016, we identified three key trends in peacotech: a move from extractive to participatory data collection and analysis; an increase in collective storytelling over individual storytelling; and a shift from structured, small face-to-face contact programmes to collective action through larger, less structured networks. These trends remain relevant in 2018. Since 2016, Build Up has conducted a range of research on peacotech, identifying the following additional trends in the sector globally.

- In general, **peacebuilding continues to lag behind development and humanitarian sectors** when it comes to technology and innovation. This is in part a reflection of the lower operational risks of experimenting with technology for development when compared to conflict contexts, where security considerations often limit the space for innovation. Whilst there has been some increase in the number of high-level actors expressing an interest in peacotech since 2016 (with, for example, the development of numerous ‘tech for peace’ teams within larger organizations), funding for concrete initiatives does not yet match this high-level commitment

¹ Build Up, ‘Innovative Peacebuilding in Syria: A Scoping Study of the Strategic Use of Technology to Build Peace in the Syrian Context’, p6

² Technology can be defined as ‘the different types of hardware, software or systems that enable people to access, generate and share information. This extends traditional definitions to include technologies such as video games that provide new spaces to share information and communicate, or even unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that provide new ways to collect information remotely, moving beyond a focus on equipment to the ways people use technologies’ (Gaskell et al. 2016).

from donors. Indeed, most innovation funds are focused on humanitarian and development challenges, and few define a specific role for peacebuilding. Where calls for proposals are published with a focus on peacebuilding, they tend to emphasise integration of technology within existing programmes, and trend towards early warning, data collection and social media monitoring.

- In the past two years, the peacebuilding sector has seen a **growing interest in misinformation and fake news**, and this has translated into a heightened interest in the strategic communications function of technology for peacebuilding. There is strong interest from donors in this space, which is likely to grow, encouraging experimentation and innovation beyond the traditional social media monitoring field. Linked to this, there is **increasing interest in new partnerships in the peacetech sector** that could involve non-traditional actors in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding actors are increasingly looking into collaboration across sectors, from tech giants to media companies, large multi-nationals and start-ups.
- **Evaluation of peacetech initiatives continues to present a unique challenge** and there have been few major advances in evaluating peacetech in the last two years. There has, however, been an increase in the number of actors integrating technology into their monitoring and

evaluation practices (such as using technology tools to collect data from beneficiaries, or using GIS mapping to identify areas of improved results), but the evidence-base for peacetech initiatives remains slim. Where evidence does exist, it tends to focus on monitoring results, reflecting easier access to quantitative results, such as number of downloads of an app, or reach of a Facebook campaign. Evaluation of the impact of peacetech initiatives, often revolving around behaviour change or altered perceptions, continues to be hard to come by.

PEACEBUILDING IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

PEACEBUILDING CONTEXT

Since 2016, the Syrian conflict has evolved significantly, altering conditions on the ground for large swathes of the population. The humanitarian toll of the last two years is immeasurable, bringing the number of internally displaced to 6.6 million, and the number of those who have fled Syria to over 5.6 million.³ Official numbers of civilian casualties are almost impossible to estimate, with the UN providing the last official estimate in 2016, at 400,000 deaths.⁴ A comprehensive analysis of conflict trends since 2016 is beyond the scope of this report. A brief overview of the evolution of the conflict is important, however, in understanding the updated context for innovative peacebuilding initiatives in Syria.

The last two years of the Syrian conflict can be characterized by an **increase in government control and influence** in the country, as large areas previously under opposition control now find themselves back under government control. This has been achieved through a variety of tactics, and has been accompanied by the signing of a number of so-called 'reconciliation' agreements, viewed by many international observers as 'coercion agreements'.⁵ These agreements were often made following a period of siege or heavy bombardment and are entered into by community representatives and non-state armed

groups who had little choice but to agree with government demands.⁶ Concretely, these agreements often served to lay out conditions for civilian evacuation in exchange for government control over the area. Where military conditions were not used to force an agreement, it has also been reported that 'social coercion' tactics were used to pressure communities into accepting government conditions.⁷

Government advances have impacted the potential for local peacebuilding in Syria, reducing the space for communities in previously opposition-held areas to participate in dialogue and express their grievances, needs and aspirations. The 'long memory of the government of Syria' creates a major barrier for any individuals previously involved in peacebuilding initiatives in opposition controlled areas, making it almost impossible for them to work in such capacity and remain in government – held areas.⁸ Meanwhile, for those continuing to work in government-held areas, there appears to have been some easing of space for civil society and community initiatives. That said, interviewees noted the continued restrictions placed on individuals despite this apparent relaxation.

Government of Syria advances have also resulted in a shifting of parameters for international actors wishing to support

³ UNHCR, April 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> Accessed June 14th, 2018

⁴ Megan Specia, 'How Syria's Death Toll Is Lost in the Fog of War', New York Times, April 13th, 2018

⁵ Interview with humanitarian and conflict analyst, Beirut, 8th June, 2018

⁶ Amnesty International Report – We Leave or We Die, published Nov 2017 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/7309/2017/en/>

⁷ Interview with humanitarian and conflict analyst, Beirut, 8th June, 2018

⁸ Ibid

innovative approaches to peacebuilding. As the space available to the opposition narrows, the majority of the work to support coexistence in Syria moving forward will be done in government-held areas, with implications for major donors whose work has largely supported opposition actors. Perhaps in recognition of this reality, there is some evidence of increasing coordination between actors previously divided by areas of operation (i.e. between those supporting initiatives in government-held areas and those in opposition-held areas). There is also a growing articulation of the need for local peacebuilding inside Syria on behalf of large international donors, arguably in recognition of the failure of international dialogues to achieve meaningful peace.

Closely linked with the government advances in Syria is the **increased internationalisation of the conflict** since 2016, in both government and non-government held areas. Russian intervention in late 2015 in support of the government played a significant role in shifting the balance of power between government and opposition, and was accompanied by a visible presence of Russian actors on the ground in Syria⁹, boosting morale for supporters of the government. The involvement of ISIS also increased the stakes internationally, leading to the the formation of a US-led coalition to combat them and US support for the Kurdish forces in Syria's north. Although this support is increasingly uncertain given conflicting US government statements on their potential withdrawal from the area, it is clear that all sides of the conflict have experienced international involvement.

However, this internationalization of the conflict has contributed to an increased disillusionment among peacebuilding actors and initiatives in Syria. Consecutive rounds of UN-led peace talks in Geneva have produced few results, plagued by a fragmented opposition and a lack of engagement from the government of Syria. Russian-backed peace talks in Astana initially appeared to have some success, leading to the formation of four de-escalation zones. However, the bombardment of Eastern Ghouta, one of those zones, provides further evidence of the failure of international talks to broker meaningful peace. Against this backdrop, there is a sense of disillusionment with international involvement, particularly from those in opposition-held areas. One interviewee stated 'With all the coverage, all the noise [internationally], nothing is changing on the ground. There is a greater sense of being let down by the international community'.¹⁰

As a by-product of the internationalization of the Syrian conflict, some actors have framed the conflict as one of government vs opposition. This interpretation ignores the multi-faceted local drivers of conflict in Syria, which will be crucial elements in the country's reconciliation process. A wide range of local conflict drivers exist and are being addressed by local initiatives - these include IDP-host community relations, sectarian divisions, socio-economic division, unemployment and geographic divides. These drivers are often left out of the international narrative, despite their importance in supporting peace for local communities.

⁹ Interview with humanitarian and conflict analyst

¹⁰ Ibid

Against this backdrop, technology can play an important role in promoting peace in Syria, both at a local level through initiatives that address local drivers of conflict, and at an international level by increasing participation in high level peace talks. Locally, technology can support innovative actors to reach more people more quickly, for example through social media groups and pages or through rapid opinion polls administered through technology. Internationally, technology can provide innovative ways to link local voices to the international peace talks, providing a more direct link to conflict dynamics on the ground, and helping shift the debate away from the government - opposition dichotomy which ignores some of these important local conflict drivers.¹¹

DEFINING PEACEBUILDING IN SYRIA

The sensitivities surrounding the term peacebuilding in Syria were well-documented in the 2016 report. At the time, few actors working in the Syrian context defined themselves as peacebuilders, with many citing the co-opting of the term by the Syrian Ministry of Reconciliation. The term was particularly rejected by artists and by those involved in the 2011 social revolution. In 2016, we identified four types of peacebuilding activities of relevance to Syrian actors: 1) promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric; 2) human rights activism; 3) host-refugee relations and 4) influencing international opinion.

In interviews conducted for this report, some shifts in those sensitivities

emerged, although the four categories of peacebuilding remain relevant in the context. Overall, the term 'peacebuilding' remains contentious, with still few actors working on coexistence inside Syria defining themselves as peacebuilders. Artists remain particularly opposed to the term, which is highly politicized, and it is not considered something of relevance to many local people. As one interviewee noted, 'people don't see how it is related to their own lives', explaining that the term has been interpreted by some as political, as something that happens at a high level but cannot be achieved locally by individuals and artists.¹² As a result of the large influx of NGOs and UN presence since 2016, peacebuilding has also become associated with money and thus with corruption, encouraging local initiatives to shy away from the term to avoid being seen as greedy or opportunistic.

Despite this continued sensitivity, there appears to be a growing awareness of the term among some local actors. One interviewee noted that 'after two more years of capacity building and training, people are coming to accept the idea of peacebuilding, they want to be a part of it. The circle is getting bigger'.¹³ Another interviewee noted that 'people in Syria have understood that this war isn't for them...people have started thinking about what they can do to end the situation'.¹⁴ This growing willingness to engage with peacebuilding appears to be particularly prominent among women, who have found themselves taking on increasingly important roles in their communities as a result of the loss or departure of so many men.

¹¹ Interview with Abdul Hamid Qubbani, founding Director of Jouri Research and Consulting, Skype, 8th June 2018

¹² Ibid

¹³ Interview with representative of Bebesata, social enterprise, Beirut, 23rd May, 2018

¹⁴ Interview with Digital Steps participant, Skype, 22nd May, 2018

However, a greater acceptance of the term peacebuilding does not appear to have been accompanied by a mutual understanding of the term's meaning. Even where people accept the need for peacebuilding in Syria, they don't share a unique definition. 'Some people see peacebuilding as the regime taking back control, others see resilience as going back to the former [pre-conflict] state. There is a realisation that peace is important, but whether we mean stability and normality, or fair and just access to resources - all of that is up for analysis and contextualisation'.¹⁵ 'People accept peace, but they're afraid of justice and of the process to reach peace'.¹⁶ While the increasing desire to be involved in peacebuilding provides an opportunity to shape individuals' roles in the process, this absence of a shared understanding of the term also presents a risk of greater division.

Given these challenges, actors inside Syria have developed alternative terminology to refer to their peacebuilding work, favouring terms such as 'social work', 'community improvement', 'stability' and 'building relationships'.

TECHNOLOGY LANDSCAPE

A detailed outline of the technology landscape was provided in the 2016 report, which noted regular electricity, internet and phone outages across Syria. The report cited a 2015 assessment by REACH, in which internet was reported to be used daily by 52% of respondents.¹⁷ Smartphone usage was considered widespread, with most Syrians using mobile data to access the internet. Social

media, notably Facebook and Whatsapp, was popular, with 90% of Syrians aged 15 - 34 and 71% of Syrians aged over 34 reporting to use social media platforms (with Facebook and Whatsapp leading).¹⁸

Since 2016, there appear to have been relatively few major changes to the situation since then, although localised developments have occurred in terms of infrastructure and accessibility. Across Syria, internet and power coverage continues to be determined by geography, and use of the internet is still accompanied by widespread security concerns.

Interviewees gave conflicting reports of changes in the technology landscape inside Syria, reflecting this geographic disparity. Some reported slower connection resulting from increased demand, while others reported faster internet, albeit expensive. All agreed that Facebook and Whatsapp remained the most common uses of the internet along with Instagram, increasingly popular among young Syrians. One interviewee noted that the continued popularity of established social media tools makes it difficult to establish alternative platforms for Syrians inside Syria, even if those platforms may be technically more secure than Facebook.¹⁹

Interviewees also gave conflicting reports of the security concerns associated with technology, with some noting the increased surveillance capacity of the Syrian government following the involvement of Iran and Russia.²⁰ Others noted the increased willingness to share

¹⁵ Interview with Abdul Hamid Qubbani

¹⁶ Interview with representative of Mobaderoon, Beirut, 12th June, 2018

¹⁷ Available at http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_syr_social_media_thematic_report_september2015_final.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview with Yara El Moussaoui, International Alert, 23rd May, 2018

²⁰ Interview with humanitarian and conflict analyst

coexistence activities openly on social media in regime-held areas on the part of local initiatives.²¹ These two reports may not be contradictory, but may instead highlight a disparity between actual and perceived level of surveillance and risk.

PEACETECH INSIDE SYRIA

For the 2016 report, 55 organisations were reviewed for peacetech initiatives. Of those, 23 organisations were considered to work at least partly inside Syria, targeting Syrians inside the country. Findings from 2016 demonstrated that the majority of those using technology were doing so for strategic communications (27), followed by data management (9) and dialogue and mobilisation (4). 15 organisations were identified as having an online presence which they considered important to their work, without having a peacetech initiative (i.e. one that used technology strategically to achieve peacebuilding impact). Of the 23 organisations working inside Syria, 13 were using technology for strategic communications and three for data management. The remaining seven had an online presence.

In 2018, the picture for those initiatives working inside Syria appears to be similar. Of the 23 initiatives explored in the first report, 20 remain active in June 2018, all of which use technology for strategic communications. Nine of those were considered to use Facebook as central to their work, highlighting the continued predominance of social media as a tool. In addition to these 20, a number of initiatives not reported in the 2016 report were described by interviewees, including the four new initiatives that have emerged

from the Digital Steps programme.

Three main trends emerge from this updated review of peacetech initiatives inside Syria.

First, **strategic communications continue to be the most popular use of technology for Syrian peacebuilding initiatives**, largely in the form of promotion and outreach. By default, initiatives develop a Facebook page, on which they share pictures, updates of activities and explanations of their work. This promotion of peacebuilding activities has increased in the last two years, particularly in government-held areas. It is considered by some to have played a role in the shifting attitudes towards the term peacebuilding outlined above, and in promoting a growing belief in the possibility of meaningful community work inside Syria. As a result of seeing the work of others, some 'people have started thinking about what they can do to end the situation, eg developing strategies'.²²

Some initiatives also use Facebook pages as a vehicle to recruit participants for trainings or workshops. In the last two years, a number of interviewees noted an improvement in the ability of initiatives to generate compelling content. For example, some youth initiatives in Syria are now developing short videos, rather than only posting pictures about their work, while others have begun to develop infographics. Despite these improvements, a widespread lack of understanding of the principles of strategic communications limits the

²¹ Interview with Benoit Martin, PAX, Beirut, 12th June, 2018

²² Interview with Digital Steps participant

capacity of initiatives to more effectively deploy social media to reach more people or a more diverse range of audiences.

A small number of initiatives inside Syria are using innovative outreach strategies to shift narratives among communities. For example, Bebesata is creating an interactive animation series that challenges common perceptions of violence, and using a Facebook chatbot to engage their audience in a debate that provides a unique opportunity to shift perceptions, whilst maintaining audience engagement. PeaceLens are using short TV episodes, shared on Facebook, to challenge the concept of a divided Syria and develop a common identity among young people.

Second, **networking is a common function of technology for Syrians, but it is difficult to understand its impact.** All interviewees cited the importance of technology for networking between Syrians, and noted the relevance of these networks for peacebuilding. They highlighted the crucial connection between Syrians inside Syria and those outside, as well as across the country, in areas increasingly divided by conflict. However, all the networking initiatives that were mentioned were based on social media platforms - mainly Whatsapp and Facebook - and are largely organic, informal groupings.

Even where efforts have been made to develop more formalised networks using custom-built platforms, participants have resorted to social media networks,

reflecting their greater familiarity with and trust in these platforms. For example, the box.com platform developed as part of the Aswat Faeela project created several engagement challenges, as participants preferred to communicate on the familiar Facebook platform.

One Digital Steps team, WoW, conducted research on the role of informal networks in Syria, particularly around economic needs, such as job-searching. They found that although informal networks were the most common method of finding employment or everyday services, multiple networks had been shattered by displacement and conflict, leaving many individuals left out of networks and unable to access opportunities as a result. There was an appetite for a more formalised network that could rebuild these connections, but little interest in a custom-built solution such as a mobile application. As a result, WoW have developed a Facebook chatbot which serves to connect job-seekers with employers in Damascus, enabling individuals to search for relevant jobs and for employers to seek qualified candidates. This network, built on an existing and widely used platform, is an attempt to formalise an informal network, whilst at the same time promoting coexistence through livelihoods. When launched, WoW will run a simultaneous social media campaign promoting the notion of 'working together despite our differences'.

Despite this growth in networking, Syrian initiatives still feel a lack of connection between one-another, and highlighted a continued limited awareness about

innovation happening at the community level.²³ An attempt to map these networking initiatives or to develop connections between them could provide further insight into whether these informal, tech-enabled networks are having an impact on capacities for peace inside Syria.

Third, **data management projects related to peacebuilding remain largely extractive.** Large scale data initiatives, such as mapping of IDP movements, or conflict trends, were not considered to have a large audience inside Syria by interviewees. Many such initiatives target an international audience and their information does not directly support local initiatives. Indeed, one representative noted that ‘people are not really interested in [these kinds of initiatives] because they are focused on their daily lives, and because they don’t believe in it’.²⁴

Furthermore, where data is used on the ground in Syria, it remains largely extractive. According to some people interviewed for this report, individuals on the ground sometimes contribute to data initiatives (often compensated financially), but it is a considerable security risk for them to do so, and they rarely see the results of their data collection presented in a way that is useful for them. This has resulted in growing ‘research fatigue’ among Syrians. There is a need to consider how data initiatives could usefully (and without risk) support Syrian initiatives on the ground.²⁵ For example, Jouri Research and Consulting have recently completed a report on young people’s needs in Syria, and are now

considering innovative ways to present that report back to young people, enabling them to develop ownership over the data and a collective sense of the analysis and its implications. ‘We need to use creative or digital tools...it’s amazingly important for young people to access this data, to be engaged in the analysis of it... if they don’t have a good understanding [of their community’s needs], then how can we implement effective responses?’²⁶

In addition to the peacetechn trends explored above, there are several organisations working to support an entrepreneurship ecosystem inside Syria. These include initiatives such as Jusoor and Afkar+, who provide local entrepreneurs with mentorship, coaching, funding and training. Despite major challenges for entrepreneurs in Syria, including technological, funding and logistical challenges, this **trend towards fostering a stronger cohort of Syrian entrepreneurs** provides potential for further peacetechn developments. Whilst not directly related to peacetechn, a number of initiatives coming out of these programs have a coexistence angle, and further partnerships with these entrepreneurship hubs should be explored. For example, one initiative incubated by Afkar+ supports Syrian women from different communities to design, create and sell handicrafts to international buyers. Whilst not a traditional peacebuilding intervention, this kind of social enterprise provides significant potential for fostering coexistence.²⁷

²³ Interview with Digital Steps participant

²⁴ Interview with representative of Mobaderoon

²⁵ Interview with Abdul Hamid Qubbani

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Samer Alaswad, CEO & Co-Founder, Afkar+

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PEACETECH DESIGN IN SYRIA

Based on the contextual features outlined above, including changes in the conflict landscape and emerging trends in uses of peacotech in Syria, the following emerge as key lessons for peacotech in Syria:

- **Local peace is possible, local initiatives can innovate.** The Digital Steps teams provide a clear example of the potential for work inside Syria to be truly innovative, impactful and broad-reaching. In an incredibly challenging context, this potential is often forgotten, both by the international community and Syrians themselves. For internationals, there is often a ‘gap between perceptions of what’s possible and what’s actually possible’,²⁸ with donors favouring risk-averse strategies that limit innovative potential. For the Digital Steps participants, teams valued the opportunity to renew their belief in the ability to positively impact peace. After the programme, one team explained, ‘we’re showing that it is possible...to be an agent of peace’.²⁹ However, the Digital Steps programme also showed that to support the potential for local, innovative peacebuilding, there is a need to provide sustained, long-term engagement, along with the space for innovation. Beyond the Digital Steps participants, some interviewees noted that there are a number of innovative initiatives in Syria, including youth dialogue and discussion groups, many of whom have received

almost no international exposure or support and are almost unheard of outside of their local communities. Mapping these very small-scale initiatives would be a first step in highlighting the extent of initiatives working on peacebuilding at the local level and identifying opportunities to strengthen their work.

- **It is critically important to build a network between peacebuilding innovators.** Although there have been increased efforts at networking in Syria since 2016, a gap remains, specifically around thematic networking (e.g. between innovators). The networking opportunities, both between teams and with international initiatives through attendance at international conferences, provided a major source of personal transformation for the Digital Steps participants. As one team noted, “when you all go the same way, you all realise you value your life the same way and that no one deserves to die. We are all hiding in the same building and we all share something - we all have a desire to stay alive.”³⁰ This sense of community is crucial in enabling initiatives to be sustainable, providing them with the motivation, connections and self-confidence to continue to innovate despite the challenging context. ‘What we really need for our projects is more knowledge about the world, other projects in the world and how they are working...exposure and connection to others’.³¹ Where networks are supported, generic, large and poorly defined networks should be avoided, and specific networks around common themes

²⁸ Interview with humanitarian and conflict analyst

²⁹ Interview with representative of Bebesata

³⁰ Digital Steps Evaluation, p4

³¹ Interview with Digital Steps participant

should be developed.³² Noting the prevalence of informal networks outlined above, one useful approach would be to map and work to strengthen existing networks, rather than replicating groupings.

- **Monitoring and evaluating local innovation presents a major challenge.** Measuring the success of peacetech initiatives is a global challenge. In Syria, this is exacerbated, among other things, by a constantly changing context, countless logistical challenges, fluid demographics, security concerns around data collection and limited baseline data. Specialist training is required for local initiatives to develop robust monitoring and evaluation plans, including support on how to safely collect relevant data. This would serve to address the above trend for extractive data collection in Syria, providing an opportunity to create locally relevant and locally owned data on conflict. Albeit subject to security considerations and thus important to carefully design, this type of data collection and analysis would be a positive development. At the same time, flexibility should be encouraged among donors, in recognition that local innovation may not be as quantifiable as traditional peacebuilding interventions, and thus may require a more nuanced understanding of impact.
- **Need for long-term, sustained support to local initiatives, beyond short term training.** No successful peacetech initiative can be designed, tested and implemented quickly. The nine-month programme provided an opportunity for Digital Steps teams to

carefully design their initiatives, incorporating feedback from user-testing and ensuring their interventions responded to user needs. A longer, sustained support model is required to accompany initiatives through a robust pilot, redesign and implementation. Support that fosters continued collaboration and provides multiple opportunities for networking, both within and outside of Syria, was also recommended by Digital Steps participants. Indeed, interviewees highlighted the importance of moving beyond simply providing training, towards a coaching model.³³ Some noted an overload of training on the same broad peacebuilding topics, highlighting the limited feedback mechanisms to help improve such trainings. Where training is provided, it should focus on specific technical skills that are identified as a need by local actors. For example, training on innovative uses of digital media could serve to address the limited understanding of strategic communications noted above.

- **Logistical challenges continue to pose a major obstacle to peacetech initiatives.** Specifically, international sanctions preventing online payments and the download of any Google applications inside Syria create a number of logistical challenges for initiatives seeking to use technology for peacebuilding. Numerous interviewees cited this as a challenge, highlighting the inability of Syrians to access online learning, for example, as one outcome of these measures. Restrictions on targeting social media ads inside Syria presents a further challenge for strategic

³² Interview with representative of Mobaderoon

³³ Interview with Benoite Martin

communications strategies. Other logistical challenges are numerous, but expensive and unreliable internet and mobile data connection was cited as a barrier specific to peacetechnology initiatives. Despite these challenges, in some cases technology can provide a method to overcome non-technical barriers. For example for Digital Steps participants - Open Art Space - the development of a website to host educational materials and a game around the theme of art for peace, provides an innovative way to overcome the logistical barrier of bringing children to their studio in Damascus. For children unable to attend regular workshops, the online game provides a valuable sense of continuity and an opportunity to continue to reap the benefits of an art for peace curriculum.

- **Need for increased funding for small scale innovative initiatives.**

Funding for these kinds of projects continues to be very limited in Syria, with many interviewees reporting a struggle to successfully apply for donor funds. This lack of funding for innovative, small scale initiatives can be explained by a variety of factors. In part, it is a result of political considerations, with many Western governments previously concerned about funding organisations in government - controlled areas, where important local innovation is still happening. As the space held by opposition reduces, this limitation will have to change if innovative initiatives are to be supported across the whole country. Logistical challenges are also important factors in preventing donor funds reaching small-scale innovative initiatives. Not least of these is the de-risking trend, whereby

global banks have been tightening operations to respond to increased counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering regulations.³⁴ This has resulted in regular reports of long delays in funds reaching Syrian partners, with money being held between correspondent and recipient banks for up to six months.³⁵ As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for donors to support partners in Syria, making it very difficult to support small-scale initiatives such as those in Digital Steps, who would not have the cash flow to support lengthy delays. Addressing these challenges through new agreements between NGOs and banks and considering creative methods for overcoming these challenges will be an important step in the drive to support more local initiatives.

- **Need for more flexible funding requirements to support innovation.**

Donors are often risk averse when it comes to supporting innovation, requiring initiatives to meet stringent reporting requirements that may not be conducive to the flexible approach needed to support genuine innovation. In the immediate term, more support is required to support local initiatives to develop the capacity to meet donor requirements, while efforts should also be stepped up to support donors to provide more flexible funding for small scale initiatives. This could be done by providing clear Monitoring and Evaluation templates around innovation and peacebuilding that show impact beyond traditional peacebuilding metrics.

³⁴ Stuart Gordon, Alice Robinson, Harry Goulding and Rawaad Mahyub, 'The Impact of bank de-risking on the humanitarian response to the humanitarian crisis', August 2018, available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12376.pdf>

³⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Since 2016, changes in the Syrian conflict context have been significant, resulting in a number of developments in the peacetechnology landscape in Syria. While conditions on the ground pose new challenges for donor engagement at a political level, local actors in Syria continue to innovate and develop creative approaches to peacebuilding. Focused predominantly on technology as a tool for strategic communications, these local initiatives have shown impressive resilience since 2016, with many of those studied then continuing to work today, as well as new actors emerging. However, Syrian innovators face countless challenges, including limited funding, logistical obstacles, limited opportunities for networking, low monitoring and evaluation capacity and a need for long-term continuous support. This research, building on interviews with key stakeholders and lessons learned from the Digital Steps programme, shows that innovative approaches to peacebuilding in Syria are possible, despite these challenges, and that efforts to support these actors through sustained, tailored accompaniment should be stepped up.
