

Press Release

Social Degradation in Syria

The Conflict Impact on Social Capital

1st of June 2017

The Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), an independent not-for-profit research center, launched its report “Social Degradation in Syria” in cooperation with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB). This report explores the impact of the armed conflict in Syria on social relations. It uses the concept of social capital as an approach to analyzing various aspects of social relations, such as trust, cooperation, and shared values. The research develops an index to measure social capital based on a critical discussion of the concept, as well as on a multi-purpose field survey that involves quantitative and qualitative indicators covering all Syria for both the pre- and during-crisis periods.

The research adopts an operational definition of social capital as being mutual values, reciprocal trust, and bonds and networks, which have been accumulated within a society; this accumulation affects and is formed by institutions that govern public life. A social capital index for Syria (henceforth, SCI) consists of three components: the first is social networks and participation, measured by four key indicators: participation in public decision-making, volunteerism, cooperation in overcoming problems, and women’s participation. The second component is social trust, and is measured by two key components: trust between individuals and feeling secured. The third is shared values and attitudes, which is measured by the extent of agreement among community members on a common vision at both regional and national levels, and finally the social status of women.

The research shows that **SCI** in Syria has declined by 30 per cent during the crisis, compared to the pre-crisis period. This degradation is a result of notable declines in the three components of the index, albeit to varying degrees. The decline in the social trust component contributed to the overall decline of SCI by 58 per cent, whereas the contributions of the values component and the networks component were at the rates of 22 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively. The governorates in which SCI has declined the most are those that were most affected by war, hostilities, and polarization. The decline was highest in Raqqa, 80 per cent, followed by Hasakah, 52 per cent, and Idlib, 47 per cent. On the other hand, the decline was the lowest in Tartus, around 5 per cent, and less than 10 per cent in Damascus, since these regions were less exposed to destruction due to the armed conflict.

The findings indicate a decline in the **social networks and participation** component. Raqqa was the most affected governorate, followed by Idlib, Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor, each of which has been subjected to large-scale displacement and military operations, which have negatively affected the social fabric in their regions, causing severe degradation in social relations. In terms

of the component's indicators, political oppression, extremism, widespread violence, and exploitation have contributed to the marginalization of women's social participation, despite their transformed role in bearing the economic burden of families and supporting those affected by the conflict. Moreover, participation in public decision-making was already weak before 2011, but it has further deteriorated during the current crisis, especially in military operations areas, where military and security forces have replaced any remaining possibilities of effective participation with authoritarian governance and increased persecution of citizens.

The crisis led to a severe decline in cooperation between individuals in many studied areas, particularly those where armed forces have spread their control, penetrated local communities, and imposed rules based on fear, subjugation, and hatred of the other. Instead of the formal judicial system, citizens increasingly turn to informal authorities such as local notables, senior security officials, and clerics respectively, as a mechanism of conflict resolution. As for volunteerism, the findings show an increase in the relatively safe areas such as Tartus and Damascus, and an overall deterioration in Raqqa, Daraa and Rural Damascus, where most of their studied areas have been subject to devastation, siege, and hostilities. It is notable, however, that these very areas have also generated some of the most inspiring and humane forms of volunteering, despite the often excessive dangers involved.

The research shows that the **social trust** component in Syria witnessed the most severe decline in comparison to the other components. Compared with pre-crisis conditions, the trust component diminished by 47 per cent. Levels of interpersonal mistrust have been highest in besieged, destroyed, and contested areas, such as Raqqa, followed by Hasakah, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, and Aleppo. This deterioration primarily resulted from the collapse of feeling secured, which declined at the national level by 59 per cent. Frequent manifestations of violence, such as systematic shelling, arbitrary detention, killings, theft, and kidnappings are major factors contributing to a prevalent sense of insecurity, so are widespread poverty, deterioration of living conditions, expand of conflict economy, forced displacement, corruption, and fear culture. The crisis has also had reduced reciprocal trust among individuals by 31 per cent, which can be attributed to lack rule of law, difficult living conditions, and extreme polarization in society.

The **shared values and attitudes** component also declined significantly over the course of the crisis by 20 per cent. The research indicates a significant increase in disparity of shared values and attributes between governorates during the crisis. Raqqa has experienced the highest decline in this component, followed by Hasakah, mainly due to its conflicting visions and to a lesser extent to the status of women. The governorates of Tartus, Sweida, and Lattakia, on the other hand, have witnessed a less severe decline in this component.

As for the component's indicators, the disagreement within local populations about a vision for the future of their area is attributed to a number of factors, including chaos, differences in political opinions, the absence of elected councils to facilitate the expression of opinions, social and identity polarization, and disagreements on the best way to end the crisis. These factors also

largely translate into disagreement on the future of Syria, depicting the degree of social fragmentation on the national level. Disagreements on desired visions for their homeland are confounded by armed forces sabotaging shared values and promoting different forms of repressive governance—from caliphates to autocracies—in the regions they control. In terms of the status of women in society, it has deteriorated during the crisis with consolidating patriarchy. Women have been subject to military attacks, rape, labor in harsh conditions, as well as increased economic responsibility, especially in the case of displaced families and widows. Incidents of underage and customary marriages and trafficking have become more frequent.

The research findings demonstrate the negative effect that direct violence—such as displacement, involvement in violent acts, and discriminatory institutional practices—has on both bridging and linking social capitals. These types of social capital are based on relationships that transcend traditional bonds, and are manifested in the networks component. The findings also show that development indicators such as health, education, and employment are strongly correlated with the shared values and attitudes component, that these indicators are not directly related to violence, affect the cognitive aspect of a shared vision for the community and the country, and are important factors in building the future social contract. Moreover, the research shows that conflict economy and conflict-related deaths are the main determinants of feeling secured, while the trust between individuals is affected by conflict economy, discriminatory institutions, forced displacement, and loss of job opportunities.

The report provides a policy approach based on an analysis of social capital in Syria and the damage it has gone through due to armed conflict. This approach is based on stopping the deterioration of social capital that is caused by violence at the local and national levels, and envisaging steps that can restore social harmony, taking into account Syrian citizens both at home and abroad. This approach is based on the revival of a social policy which relates to the social capital components, aiming to serve a common good and to which various actors can contribute.

A social policy required for developing the social capital and its components should aspire to achieve social justice as its long-term objective by setting sub-goals of ensuring decent and sustainable livelihoods, social integration, and the rights to participation, expression, and public accountability. An alternative social policy for Syria should endeavor to overcome the inequalities and exclusion induced by pre-conflict policies and confront the catastrophic impact of the conflict including destruction, social fragmentation, conflict economy, forced dispersion, and decompose the subjugating institutions to achieve justice for the conflict victims.

End of press release

Syrian Center for Policy Research

Web: www.scpr-syria.org ; email: info@scpr-syria.org

Note: The report can be downloaded in English and Arab from SCPR website.