

SYRIA: Syrian civil society works toward a sustainable peace

By Elisabetta Baldassini

HRWF (20.09.2016) – On Tuesday 13 September 2016, the European Peace Liaison Office (EPL0) organised a lunchtime discussion on the vision of Syria's civil society for the future of their country. The event came in response to the noticeable absence of political progress in Geneva to end the war in Syria, prodding Syrian civil society to step up efforts to ensure equal rights in the post-war period. Two civil society activists, **Assaad Al Achi** and **Mutasem Alsyufi**, shared their vision of the current situation and future prospects for a sustainable peace. They also made recommendations for EU policy makers to help in realizing this vision.

Assaad Al Achi is the Executive Director of a leading grassroots organisation, *Baytna*, and a founding member of the *Syrian Local Coordination Committees* and the *Civil Society Geneva Declaration Initiative*. Mutasem Alsyufi will soon move into the position of Executive Director of *The Day After*, an organisation supporting a democratic transition for Syria.

Before the 2011 Revolution, there was little space for civil society to function and any attempt of protest was banned. The revolution finally broke down these obstacles and Syrian civil society began to come into its own. Beginning in 2014, civil society actors have had a consistent presence at consultations in Geneva to end the war. In 2016, a Civil Society Room was set up to establish a working space for Syrian civil society to contribute meaningfully to the peace process and to represent the voice of civil society within the country during

the official Geneva talks.

At first, the Civil Society Room worked behind the scenes and in a consultative role with the Office of the Special Envoy. It functioned in four different working groups, making it sometimes very difficult to reach consensus on very challenging issues.

Even still, Assaad Al Achi stressed the importance of civil society, as it can transmit the voices from the ground up, something which the big implementers of diplomacy have trouble delivering. The grassroots movement that was raised up at the time of the 2011 revolution needs to be reckoned with. A public statement of nearly 300 organisations and 1033 individuals in support of civil society's commitment to the peace process is testimony to the strength of this movement.

The delegation also made recommendations for reforming the functioning of the Civil Society Room as well as supporting the EU in its role of monitoring and cooperation in implementing UN Security Council Resolutions. Together they hope to forge a more hopeful future for their country.