

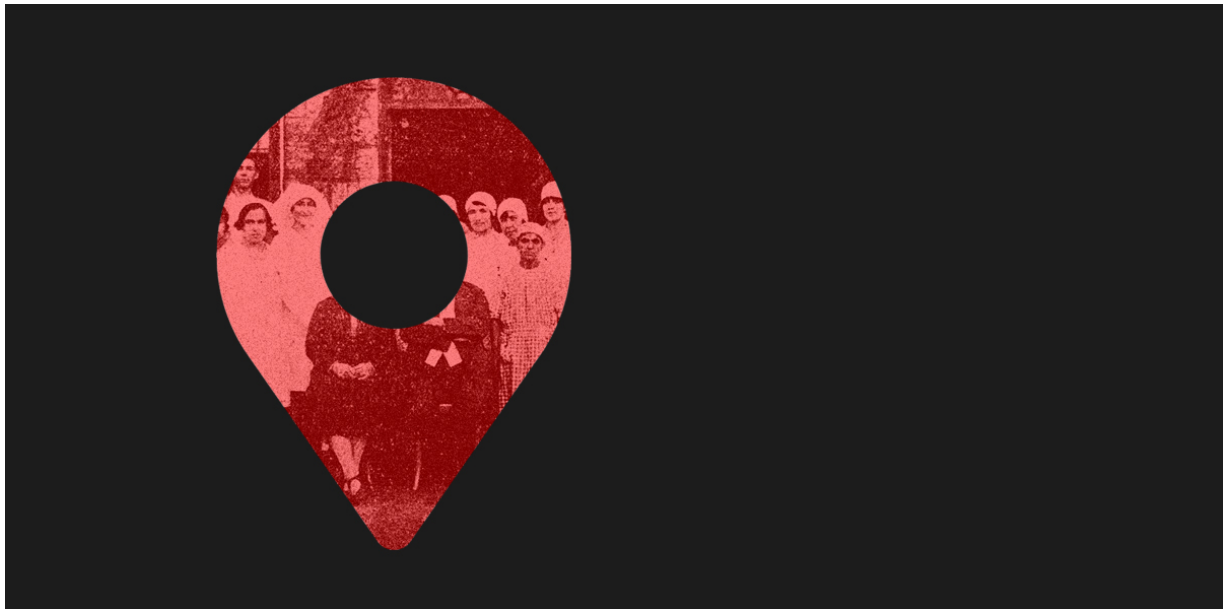


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International and civil society organizations in Homs

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Public work amid the fear of civil activism.

The beginning

When the dark-skinned, twenty-something-year-old man who had just graduated from engineering school was offered a small job at a civil society organization he felt

larger than life. He was doing everything: helping staffers with relief work, assisting the receptionist in the healthcare department, and even working with the photographers in the communications department. He even insisted on helping the cleaners if needed. That was in 2012, when his enthusiasm for the work outweighed everything else, and when civil society organizations were at the peak of their humanitarian and relief efforts. Their presence was more crucial than ever. Many people were both eager for and afraid of the work at the same time, as the job opportunities that were created by the circumstances of the time put young men and women into positions in which they never expected to find themselves.

Non-governmental civil society organizations (CSOs) in Homs date back to the 1920s, beginning with the Islamic Charitable Association, which provides charity services and runs the Islamic Orphanage. In 1924, the Scouts of Syria was officially founded in affiliation with the World Organization of the Scouts Movement (WOSM). This was followed by the establishment of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) in 1942, which is linked to the International Red Cross (IRC). However, the Scouts of Syria and the SARC are not technically “civil society organizations.” This is because they are affiliated with an international system and CSOs, by definition, have to emerge from the local community itself—they are government-licensed bodies operated by local members. Other civil society organizations appeared later, such as the Khaled Ibn El Walid Charitable Association in 1949, which provides charitable services; al-Birr Association and Social Services in 1956, which also provides charitable services; the Child Care Society in 1957 that addresses family affairs; the Orthodox Association for Helping the Poor in 1960; and

the Arab al-Nahda Association in Homs, also in 1960; and finally al-Rahma al-Maronyah (Maronite Mercy Society) in 1962. This coincided with the creation of the first law in Syria to regulate the work of CSOs, passed in 1958 in the wake of the foundation of the United Arab Republic, which encompassed Syria and Egypt. The same law is applied to CSOs to this day. It is also worth mentioning that churches have always carried out social work outside of the realm of organizations, conducting the work themselves.

As for those organizations which operate in Homs and are affiliated with the United Nations, they dealt exclusively with the government before the revolution and were limited to UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). For example, WHO funds the Ministry of Health, while UNICEF funds the ministries of health and education. After the 2011 revolution broke out, however, several international organizations successively started operating in Homs, namely: UNFPA, UNHCR, UNDP, FAW, and OCHA. These organizations do not run their activities directly. Instead they finance government bodies, non-government associations, and even other international organizations. Other international organizations that are not affiliated with the UN have obtained government licenses and security permits in order to operate in Homs either through self-funding or in partnership with other international organizations. These include: DRC, OXFAM, PUI, ADRA and the IRC. These international organizations are not allowed to have any activity in Syria without full coordination with the SARC, which is supervised by the Office of the President's Adviser for Red Crescent Affairs, i.e. "the state," as one employee of these organizations prefers to call it. CSOs differ from the international organizations listed above in that today they are affiliated with the Ministry of

Social Affairs and Labor, and before 1970 they operated under the Ministry of Interior because there was no such thing as the Ministry of Social Affairs. At that time, CSOs were treated like political parties.

It should be noted that this article addresses only organizations and associations that operate in the fields of relief and charity, because the Syrian regime does not allow organizations in its areas of control to work outside of these fields, with the exception of some cultural activities. Human rights-related work and activities aimed at advocacy are totally non-existent in these regions. It is also important to mention that unions are also technically CSOs, but because they are mandated by law and supervised by the Ba'ath Party in one way or another, they can no longer be considered as such.

Licensing temporarily suspended

The twenty-something-year-old remembers what happened to the children of his relatives' neighbors in the 1980s very well. They told him the story time and time again. The neighbors' sons, who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, were murdered and their house was destroyed. The young man and his family had nothing to do with this, but the memory still stuck with him. All he and the other young men who worked in relief had to do was distribute aid to families who had no breadwinners. It was raining mortar shells that day. They all rode together in one car, racing against the shells, their laughter cutting through the darkness. Despite the overwhelming circumstances, the association's work didn't stop. Nor did the work of other organizations and their employees. Nor did people stop showing up at these organizations. Nothing stopped. On the

contrary, most of the workers at civil society organizations considered themselves to be participants in the happenings, each according to his or her specific role. Most neighborhoods were on fire. Fear and anticipation filled people's hearts—after all, it's the year 2013 that we're talking about here.

The licensing of CSOs did not continue uninterrupted over the course of their emergence. It almost completely stopped during the 1980s when the state refrained from granting licenses to organizations for several years. Older ones expanded gradually, growing drastically in many Syrian governorates. Many of these organizations are called public-benefit associations, and some of them have been licensed to operate throughout the northern region of the United Arab Republic. This is because the law which governs them came about during the period of unity, as mentioned above. By way of example, one of these associations has more than 20 branches, which cover all of Syria except for the south. Some of its branches have stopped operating due to the events that followed 2011.

Government licenses did appear again, however, with the licensing of the Blind Care Association and the al-Rajaa Association for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in 1993; the Inshaat Association in 2003, which addresses family affairs; the al-Rabee Association for the Care of Children with Autism in 2005; Sandouk Alafia in 2006 which is dedicated to medical and health relief; and the Shabab El-Kheir Charity in 2009. All of these organizations are still in operation to this day.

Numerous associations were founded after 2011, including the Karem Association for the Restoration of Livelihoods in

2011; the al-Amal Charity Association in 2015; the Mustard Seed Association in 2016; the Caritas Association, an affiliate of Caritas in Lebanon; the Babel Charity, which is concerned with “peacebuilding;” and the Syrian Society for Social Development, among others.

Sectarian distribution

At first the young engineer had no friends other than his coworkers from the association. Sometimes, when they stayed late at work, he would crash at their houses. He trusted them blindly. But those friends soon scattered. Some traveled. Some died. Some started working for other associations. In the years that followed, he saw many new male and female employees get hired by the association. Like that one woman, for instance, who did not wear the veil. One could hear whispers every time she passed; is she Sunni, Alawite, Christian, or what? Then another unveiled woman was hired. In the end the whole thing became somewhat normal, and soon a friendship grew between him and one of them, but there was always a sense of caution in the air.

Although the 1958 “Associations Law” prohibits sectarian labeling of CSOs, it is sometimes possible to figure out an organization’s sectarian affiliation by its name. Take, for example, the Islamic Charitable Society or the Orthodox Association for Helping the Poor. It is not always the name of the organization that indicates its affiliation, however. It can also be inferred by the CSO’s location or by what people say about it. For instance, the management of al-Nahda Association, which was established in 1960, consists entirely of people from the Alawite sect. The fact that the board of directors is from this or that sect, however, does

not in any way mean that beneficiaries from other sects are denied access to their services. Nor are people from other sects denied access to job opportunities. Employees from various sects can be hired regardless of the organization's overall character. Such is the case with Babel Charity, where the board members are all Alawite while the other employees are from different sects. To varying degrees, this same dynamic applies to other CSOs. Recently, the regime has recently emphasized the importance of sectarian diversity among CSO employees. Regarding this subject we must also observe that whether we like it or not there is a division between some of Homs' neighborhoods, and that it has existed since before the revolution and the war. This rift is not deliberate. It is simply the norm among the people. Thus, a manager from one organization would not even consider applying for an administrative position at another organization that has board members from a different sect than their own. This rift is agreed to and understood by all, even if it remains unarticulated and not a matter of any clear or conscious thought process.

Between security forces, the state, and the regime

Before his very eyes, one of the man's young female coworkers was arrested. There was nothing anyone could do, including him. He stood there, watching, listening to the muffled screams of the other women at the association. Then he heard that another young man from the association who he barely knew was also arrested in exactly the same way as the young woman. Only those close to the detainees are privy to the truth of what happened. He listened to people's chatter here and there, but chose to be neutral and avoided asking questions. He thanked god in

secret that he was only slightly acquainted with the detainee. No need to risk everything, he thought. He was doing very well and he wasn't thinking about travelling at the time. Even though confusion reigned in the general atmosphere, it couldn't get in the way of his ambitions, which only grew the more he succeeded at work.

As mentioned above, the 1958 Associations Law is still in effect, and it is the basis on which the work of all associations and organizations and any CSO-related instructions from the Ministry of Social Affairs are monitored. All organizations must attain permission of the ministry before undertaking any activities. There are also security permits, which organizations are often granted according to the experience of their leaders, as they opt for what will definitely be approved, or take risks with what may or may not be. The Ministry of Social Affairs usually sends information to the concerned security departments, but permits are sometimes subject to the whims of officials at the Directorate of Social Affairs.



Naturally, upon applying for a permit for any project or initiative, some people receive immediate approval, while others might be faced with an immediate denial or long delays. This depends on each person's relationship with the government and the ministry. Should someone undertake an activity without a security permit or ministry approval, the activity itself might go off without a hitch, but security and legal measures will follow because the lack of approval violates the law. Thus, the work depends on the people themselves and the extent of their ability to quickly obtain approval for their activities by using their connections.

It is also normal for the organizations' activities to be subject to strict policing by the regime. The Political Security Division has a special branch that dispatches security representatives or "officers" to each association, organization, and union. These officers monitor their work and employees, and each employee is subject to a security check before he or she is hired. For example, international organizations, including those affiliated with the UN, are supervised by a security officer that is delegated by the Political Security Division. This officer oversees their work, the affairs of their personnel, and all of their approvals. Because the Ministry of Social Affairs is in charge of supervising all CSOs, it in turn submits all related information to the Political Security branch. Based on that information, the latter grants or denies permits for projects and activities, etc. In one instance, a worker at an association filed an application to the Social Affairs Directorate, asking for a permit to carry out activities related to child protection that included going out into the street. Along with many others, however, his application was denied. This happens frequently for security reasons that both parties understand. Moreover, and on a slightly different note, there also exists the United Nations Security Office for the Protection of Personnel, which is responsible for protecting employees of international organizations.

The recruitment mechanism

In 2017 the young engineer headed to the local Red Cross center with a hard copy of his resume, of which he was very proud, in hand. He did not know anyone who worked at the organization, but he had something better than an acquaintance—he had a verbal reference from an old manager, now abroad, who told him that he knows a Red

Cross employee for whom he had done favors. The employee was to help him get recruited immediately by the organization. The young man assumed that the previous position of the person who gave him this verbal recommendation meant that he would almost certainly be hired. Though not without hesitation, he seized the opportunity.

Recruitment mechanisms differ between local CSOs and international NGOs, as well as between one organization or association and another. When it comes to associations, for instance, vacancies are posted onto the association's Facebook page. Applicants then send a resume by e-mail, or by filling an online resume form, which is usually posted both on a website and on the association's Facebook page. This has been the process in recent years, but it was different before, and many people were hired with fewer qualifications. Today, mediation, personal relationships and favoritism have greatly influenced the recruitment process. These are not the rule, however, as in many cases employees are admitted to organizations according to their actual competencies. On the other hand, employees in upper administrative positions are often recruited based on their prior acquaintances and other considerations, such as their relationships with various members of the regime.

As for international organizations, the situation is different in many ways. There is a global recruitment system that organizations are supposed to use, but the way this system is actually applied can vary from one organization to another. Their recruitment process can be divided into two phases; the first pertains to the international organizations' entry into Syria between 2011 and 2012. This phase was marked by a "state of emergency" that prompted

organizations to recruit people with varying levels of competence according to favoritism. This was due to the unstable security situation, excessive funding, the unverifiability of any and all information, and finally, the fact that these organizations had never before operated on the ground. They were thus forced to recruit many employees irrespective of their lack of experience and competencies, especially between 2012 and 2014.

In 2016 a second phase began wherein the recruitment process changed completely, becoming more strict and organized. For example, the applicant might undergo a preliminary examination in the English language about the vacancy, and this only after their resume is accepted after being submitted via an electronic form. Then they take an English language assessment test, followed by one or two additional interviews. It should also be noted that the nature of the UN's global recruitment system includes recommendations from the organization's existing employees, and this "recommendation" is basically a lighter form of what in Arabic is called *wasta*, i.e. unfair preferential treatment. These applicants who have a recommendation get additional "points." If, for instance, three people applied for a position and scored close to one another, the recommendation component would intervene to add points for the recommended applicant. They would definitely get hired, the matter having been prearranged based on an agreement with officials at the organization. Furthermore, the interview of the recommended person is different from the interviews of the other applicants, as he or she is treated more leniently. The interviews also differ according to who is conducting them, and whether they are Syrian or foreign. Furthermore, when the recommended applicant reaches the interview stage, they and the person

conducting the interview are both aware that they are about to be offered the job. Sometimes the hiring is left up to chance, as when someone applies for a position and there is no one who has been recommended applying against them. At that point, they can be hired based exclusively on their qualifications, although this is not what usually happens. The process outlined above does not apply to all organizations, as some use different recruitment approaches. UNFPA, for example, opts either for internal advertisements or to hire through nominations. In general, getting a job at a UN organization has become very difficult for several reasons, among them the high standards set up by the organizations, and the recommendation factor, which is essential. If the recommendation plays a role in the hiring of one applicant and not the other, it does not necessarily mean that the person hired does not possess the specified qualifications – they may or may not be the best person for the advertised position – but it does help them to pass the exams and interviews.

In other words, these organizations are trying to implement a global recruitment system in Homs, but it is one that can be easily manipulated. Many of the people who apply for a vacancy at one organization may be eligible but they do not get hired, as the job is usually offered to someone less competent for reasons that are incomprehensible to the other applicants. Moreover, higher and more sensitive positions are almost exclusively offered to a specific group of people, namely the loyal supporters of the regime.

In addition to the above, employees are sometimes recruited through a third party. That is, an organization will sign a contract with an association and asks for an

employee to work with that organization, which also pays their salary. Then, a year or so later, when the same organization has a vacancy, the employee with whom they previously had a contract tends to be prioritized over other applicants, even if the latter are more competent.

It is worth adding here that the majority of CSO employees are highly qualified and knowledgeable. They are also usually very social, as their work demands that they be in communication with many people. This is true even if some of them can be described as patronizing towards coworkers, especially those in administrative positions. It is impossible to make a generalization about this, however. In some cases, it also happens that the managers of a given organization are exclusively members of certain well-known families in Homs. This generally applies to organizations whose directors belong to the Sunni or Alawite sect, but again, we cannot take this as a rule.

The activities of associations and organizations

The very elegant Red Cross employee claimed they didn't know the person the engineer mentioned, and spoke to him as though he were a small child: "And what job can we offer you?" The young engineer was at a loss for words, so he apologized and went on his way. He learned a lesson from this incident, however, and the more he applied for jobs with the Red Cross or other organizations, the more he understood the rationale behind the application process. He also began to figure out what position he could apply for. Like so many others, he was trying to add as many courses with fancy names as possible to the list on his ready-made electronic English resume. Although he had many

connections, they didn't take him anywhere. He was keen to move between the available positions at his association, hoping that he might land in the same positions at another organization, or even in lower ones.

The activities carried out by CSOs are often contingent on the requirements of international donors, in addition to any activities that they began before 2011 and which they continued in the following period. Among key CSO activities are those related to healthcare, helping people with poor health conditions, vocational training, education, and the establishment of care homes, such as nursing homes or homes for persons with disabilities. This last area is the focus of the al-Rajaa Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. Other activities include cultural events, such as those carried out by the al-Asala Association, in addition to those which are community or environment related.

As for international organizations, they mostly fund livelihood activities, which they have been financing for about three years. These activities include vocational training, grants and small projects, and relief and healthcare activities. Another area that organizations have been working in recently is called "community cohesion and peacebuilding." Work in this area is being done with some cunning, in order to avoid causing trouble with either the government or donor agencies. These approaches include launching initiatives and holding activities about such topics as the importance of difference, etc.; projects related to women, including gender-based violence; and activities related to education and child protection.

It is also worth mentioning that foreign trainers often enter

Syria to hold training workshops, especially for employees of international organizations, and even for local associations. They obtain government permits either as employees of or via a UN organization. In this way they are granted a visa to enter Syria and given approval for whatever activities they intend to hold. For example, if a trainer plans to go out on a field visit, they first need a government permit. The same applies to the administration of any Damascus-based organization, in the sense that if they intend to visit Homs to follow up on the situation there, the organization must obtain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is directly in charge of the organization's affairs.

Funding

In 2018, while still an employee at the association, the young engineer got a raise. His colleagues' salaries were also raised by thousands of Syrian pounds. This increase in salary did not seem to change anything at the beginning, but later it inspired jealousy in other employees. Problems, conspiracies, and gossip proliferated, some of which the young engineer participated in and some of which he catalyzed. As the entire city of Homs fell under the regime's control, things changed— salaries were raised, but projects decreased. Homs is now safe, and according to some organizations there are other regions that need more attention. Everything changed. The people themselves changed, and the engineer was no exception. If an opportunity arises it might be the last, and if he doesn't seize it, someone else would. So it better be him.

Some CSOs depend on donations from businessmen for funding. Others rely on their own investment projects, the

revenues of which they use to fund their other services. For example, the al-Birr Association and Social Services owns al-Birr Hospital, which generates annual profit. These profits go towards helping poor families that need medical treatment or other services. The Islamic Charitable Association runs a private school, the revenues of which it uses to pay the employees' salaries, while dedicating the surplus to funding the rest of its services. These associations are primarily non-profit entities, meaning they are not allowed to profit and must spend all their revenue towards their stated goals. Other associations depend on contracts with international organizations for their funding, while others still obtain government donations, but this is quite rare. For example, presumably government grants are offered when customs confiscate large quantities of a given material. After taking its share, the government then distributes these materials to organizations. However, as mentioned, this happens only rarely.

As for UN organizations, they do not have their own independent funding sources but rely on donors. They hold conferences to obtain funding from other bodies such as the European Union (EU), foreign countries, and international companies, etc. One association had a contract with the UNDP, but the actual funding was offered by the EU. Both the association's directors and the regime were aware of this fact. But the regime did not mind because it benefited from the dollars that would be transferred through the Central Bank, and from which it would take its share.

Conflict of principles

The young engineer made great progress in his job over the

years. Even with all his experience, however, there was still no way for him to land a job at an international organization and get the ensuing privileges: connections, a different society, and hundreds of thousands of pounds as opposed to the mere crumbs he is getting now, which do not match his effort or experience. He doesn't care about anyone's opinion anymore. He knows that he has changed a lot in the past years. Only a stupid person wouldn't have changed. He became more violent, opportunistic, and cruel. He builds relationships with anyone and everyone, regardless of their affiliations or nationality. His one condition is that they present him with a better chance to be hired by an international organization. He was never a man of principle or committed to a cause, and there's nothing shameful about the fact that his dedication to work intersects with his personal ambition. He now boasts that he knows this or that person, and about his relationships with security agents that he has been introduced to by work and life circumstances. "After all, they're human beings just like us," he tells himself. We live in the same city, there's no escaping that. For him, this is not an issue of either love and hate or victory and defeat. It is all about personal interest, the need to secure a life and build a future, things that seem to be getting harder and harder to achieve every day.

A number of the foreign parties that fund associations with pro-regime administrations through international organizations are at odds with the regime, such as the EU. This fact does not bother any of these associations, however, because the money will enter the country at any rate, and they believe that they are the most entitled to have it. In general, these associations think about their duties and the services they offer people as being separate

from the political situation. Thus, they set their political stance aside in order to provide services. They also consider that having access to funding helps in providing services to those who are not directly involved or interested in any causes. These associations do not really care about the source of their funding, although some consider UN organizations to be biased and prejudicial, and herein lies the contradiction.

The common language of civil society organizations

Nowadays he helps with changing any problematic words in the slogans of initiatives that are going to be submitted to the Ministry of Social Affairs for approval. He has grown familiar with the ministry's concerns and the secrets of the work. Recently, and of his own accord, he ruled out most of his old friends' proposal ideas before they could even be presented to the ministry. Since his inferiors at work wouldn't understand a lot of the issues, he wasn't going to feel obligated to explain everything to them. He also gets involved in the details of any events that he knows for sure will not be attended only by "beneficiaries" and employees.

The workers at CSOs are careful to use neutral language that does not contain any hidden connotations. Their language is thus clear and direct, and most importantly, it is not open to multiple interpretations. An employee at one organization used the word "change" in the name of a women-related campaign, and the name was immediately rejected by the Directorate of Social Affairs. It was not even presented to the Political Security Division, because the directorate knew in advance that the campaign would not be granted a permit. CSOs also cannot use words that

contain meanings pointing in the other direction — that is, they cannot use a language that directly supports government policies, because this may provoke popular backlash from their supporters both the people and the beneficiaries. Therefore, it is necessary to deploy neutral language that does not provoke or offend the people, international organizations, or government or civil society agencies, nor alienate the CSOs or deprive them of either funding or government permits and favors.

Between the people's love and hatred

Right now, he is violently fending off a woman who is begging him for a basket of what she calls “al-ma’eneh” in her dialect. All her women neighbors received al-Ma’ouneh, i.e. aid packages, she says. He regrets the way he spoke to her, and says, “I’m sorry aunty, but your name is not registered on our lists.” He was looking around for the receptionist, whose job it is to speak to this woman. Then, for just a moment, he remembered when he first started working in this field and didn’t utter a word of reproach to the receptionist when she rushed into his office to continue talking to the woman.

Many people view international and local civil society organizations with suspicion, especially since international organizations entered the country and funds started to flow through them into local associations. This suspicion, however, lies in the conditions that regulate access to the CSO-services. For example, in order for a family to obtain a box of food, it must first meet certain conditions that pertain to income, displacement, and the number of family members. When these conditions are not met, people tend to accuse these organizations of theft, claiming that they

are taking the boxes of food for themselves and their acquaintances. In addition, there is no mechanism to monitor the distribution process in these organizations, and there never has been. Those who are denied access to services always foster these suspicions, but those who benefit from the services, even if only once, change their views and grow to understand that the situation is not all about money and theft. There are also people who do not need these services due to their good financial situations. They view CSOs positively, especially when they observe their positive impact on the lives of people they know. But nevertheless, the hatred and suspicion that some people foster is not wholly unreasonable, as there have been clear indications of corruption at some organizations, where favoritism and partiality are evident.

Finally

Feeling that he would never hold a higher position at his association, the young engineer decided to leave after securing a better job at a different association. He now has an impressive resume and understands that his admission into an international organization depends on two things: his competence and finding someone to recommend him from within the organization to which he is applying. He already has the first, but is still lacking the second. He will not give up, however, and with this being the way things are, he has decided to apply for scholarships abroad. At least he has a recommendation for that if he needs it.

It is undeniable that CSOs have been somewhat helpful in many respects, including providing job opportunities, food aid, educational services and more to thousands of people. Many of the people who receive these services actually

need them. It is also undeniable, however, that the regime benefited from the massive influx of funds to organizations, which means that the funding has turned into a lifeline, and it has been so for many years. This matter should be examined more deeply and from various perspectives in order to more meaningfully assess the effectiveness of these organizations, something that cannot be done in the scope of this article.

As for the employees of these organizations, when a debate arises they experience rare personal or collective moments of reflection. They think about the feasibility and importance of what they are doing, their position vis-a-vis the ongoing catastrophe happening in the country, and the extent of their contribution to ameliorating it, if only slightly. Opinions differ greatly depending on each person's status and position, and no two answers will be the same. In the end, however, the important thing is that these organizations are their chief source of income in a devastated place that is beyond repair, and that the job opportunities they provide are growing more and more scarce every day.