

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1342
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	The New Humanitarian
Titel:	Stop-gap solutions for Syrians without papers
Udgivet:	4. august 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	25. august 2020

Stop-gap solutions for Syrians without papers

Aron Lund - Freelance journalist and analyst specialising in Syria

- **Conflict**
- **Analysis**
- 4 August 2020



A man registers for a new ID card issued by Turkey-backed opposition authorities in al-Bab, northern Syria, 2018. (Khalil Ashawi/REUTERS)
STOCKHOLM

Millions of Syrians have spent years in parts of the country not controlled by President Bashar al-Assad’s government, and as births, deaths, marriages, and property transfers continue, they have had these events recorded by whatever stop-gap bureaucratic solutions local authorities can offer.

Over nine and a half years of war, rebel councils, private lawyers, mayors, religious leaders, insurgent commanders, and a variety of self-declared governments have all tried to issue their own ID cards, birth certificates and other documents, hoping to bring a sense of structure to life in the areas they rule, and help locals access humanitarian aid.

“Let’s say I’m a displaced person in Idlib and I want to have an aid box from an NGO,” explained Mazin al-Balkhi, who, when interviewed by The New Humanitarian in 2018, worked with the [International Legal Assistance Consortium](#) (ILAC), a Stockholm-based NGO that seeks to promote the rule of law in conflict zones.

“I could go to their headquarters and say I have 10 children – but I only have one child. How do they know that? They ask me for [documents],” al-Balkhi told TNH.

Paperwork created in rebel-controlled regions may be able to help in situations like the one al-Balkhi mentioned, but the truth is it has [limited utility](#), and government-issued papers remain the gold standard, accepted all over Syria as well as outside the country.

“Ultimately, people want recognised documentation like you can get from government areas,” said an aid worker in northeastern Syria.

However, many Syrians can’t access the state’s civil registry offices, or even enter areas held by al-Assad without fearing for their lives – and so it has been left to others to help people across Syria get the paperwork they need.

Rebel paperwork, outside funding

In 2014, a group of opposition-aligned Syrian legal professionals launched a project to revive defunct state civil registry centres in rebel-held areas, in the name of the Syrian Interim Government – a Turkish-backed exile government declared by opposition groups the previous year.

The project was overseen and financially supported by ILAC, with funding from the government of Sweden.

A [Swedish government agency database](#) detailing international development projects shows that ILAC's programme to support justice sector actors inside and outside of Syria received 40.7 million Swedish kronor (roughly \$4.5 million) in government funds from 2017 to 2019, when the project ended. According to ILAC, around a quarter of that money went to supporting civil documentation centres.

"We have supported a total of 21 civil documentation centres, including the establishment of some new centres to serve internally displaced persons, which weren't previously a part of the national structure," ILAC Executive Director Agneta Johansson told TNH, noting that civil registration had been "one component of a broader project in which we support Syrian lawyers and judges to set rule of law standards for a future Syria".

At one point, ILAC-supported offices operated in opposition-controlled areas in Deraa, Quneitra, Darayya, Homs, Idlib, and the western Aleppo countryside. However, when some of these areas were re-taken by loyalist forces in 2018 and remaining anti-Assad strongholds in the Idlib-Aleppo region fell under the control of Turkey-backed factions or [terrorist-designated rebel groups](#), ILAC withdrew its assistance.

It is unclear whether any of the civil documentation centres ILAC once supported remain operational, but Johansson said they had produced some 300,000 documents from 2014 to 2019.

She said the centres issued what are called "individual registry statements", which include name, birth date and place, and other family information and are often used as replacements for ID cards. The centres also helped produce birth, death, and marriage certificates, as well as so-called "family booklets", which record the identities of couples and their children, and can serve as the basis for issuing other documents.

"From what we've seen, people mainly came to renew their individual statements, in large part so they could register to receive humanitarian aid," Johansson said.

To a large extent, the documents followed the same templates as official Syrian papers, with one key difference: Stamps and symbols of the Damascus government were replaced with those of the opposition's interim government.

Dangerous documents?

The ILAC project was not without its critics. For some time, UN officials have [warned](#) against providing Syrians with "documents which may put them at risk of harm and be perceived as political".

As al-Assad steadily reclaims much of Syria and refugees are [increasingly pressured to return](#) from abroad – at least before borders were closed due to COVID-19 – carrying an opposition-stamped document could potentially invite persecution by the state security agencies.

"We have not found any other conflict where the risk of retribution linked to an identity document is so pervasive."

"We have not found any other conflict where the risk of retribution linked to an identity document is so pervasive," a humanitarian official, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject, told TNH.

While acknowledging that "the spirit of what they want to do is good", the official voiced strong criticism of ILAC's support for civil documentation centres: "We think what they're doing is problematic, creating parallel systems and setting people up with documents that they can't use in the future... what you have is millions of people who have been issued documents that they have later had to burn or discard, because they know that this is basically a scarlet letter."

The official said they had the same concern about documents issued by armed groups, village leaders, and others; all of which could be seen as forged or illegal by the government in Damascus.

Johansson told TNH that her organisation takes such criticism "very seriously", pointing out that ILAC-supported offices tried to copy the templates of government papers in an attempt to make their documents as compatible as possible with the state's own paperwork. Still, she said, "the documents aren't recognised by Syrian authorities, and that is clearly a problem."

Johansson said she hoped the paperwork could nonetheless serve as a basis for re-registration or new paperwork with the Syrian government, arguing that a "possible reintegration of these documents with the national civil registry" would need to be "managed responsibly" but "is ultimately necessary".

She added that even if the documents are ultimately not recognised by al-Assad's government, they have served a purpose. "By using these documents, people have been able to access humanitarian assistance and education, and it has enabled people to move freely within the opposition-held areas," Johansson said.

“In a conflict when a service isn’t available, people will try to find a solution.”

“In a conflict when a service isn’t available, people will try to find a solution, but then there will be questions that aren’t solved. As long as this has helped people in an interim period, it has at least done that.”

The Swedish Foreign Ministry did not respond to several requests for comment.

Searching for a solution

According to the humanitarian official, who, like Johansson, spoke to TNH in 2019, “the best solution [to the problem of opposition-branded documents being too risky to use] would probably be to set up some form of independent clearing house” to which Syrians could bring irregular paperwork they had collected during the war.

The official envisioned an internationally funded “mechanism that can receive anything – within certain parameters for validity and for having a bare minimum of details authenticated – and then spit out one document for all”, which would not carry politically compromising details such as rebel stamps and logotypes.

This idea has yet to be fleshed out, and it is unclear how it would work or if the Syrian government could be persuaded to accept such documents. But as borders open up again, refugees are likely to once again face [growing pressure to return](#) home. Finding a way to bridge Syria’s documentation gap is a problem that will grow more urgent by the day, not just for Syrians who now carry risky opposition-branded documents or no documents at all, but also for the government, whose bureaucracy has lost track of millions of births, deaths, marriages, court cases, property sales, and other events crucial to the management of any country’s society and economy.

“The question of civil documentation is such an enormous issue in Syria, whether inside Syria or outside Syria or for people who want to go back and re-establish their lives inside the country,” said ILAC’s Johansson.

“It must ultimately be handled on a political level and be given the attention it needs.”

al/as/ag

- Read more about:
- **Syria**

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/08/04/syria-documentation-solutions>