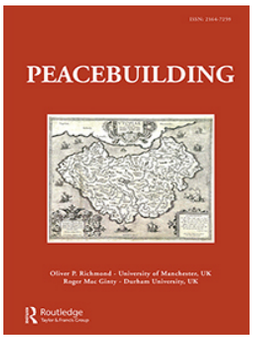

Peacebuilding

ISSN: 2164-7259 (Print) 2164-7267 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpcb20

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To cite this article: Monalisa Adhikari, Jennifer Hodge, Adam Farquhar & Juline Beaujouan-Marliere (25 Dec 2025): Beyond comprehensive peace agreements: the role of civil society in promoting liberal values in local agreements, Peacebuilding, DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2025.2600826

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2025.2600826

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PEACEBUILDING
https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2025.2600826

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Beyond comprehensive peace agreements: the role of civil society in promoting liberal values in local agreements

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ABSTRACT
Comprehensive peace agreements have historically been considered the tool of best practice for settling armed conflicts and, more recently, a conduit for the international community to spread liberal norms. Yet today such settlements are rare whilst local peace agreements are on the rise. Using the PA-X Local database, we evaluate how and in what ways do liberal norms feature in local peace agreements. We argue that the participation of civil society increases the likely presence of liberal norms in agreements, due to their function, their normative orientation, and incentives from international actors. To test the argument the article employs mixed methods to conduct (i) a binary logistic regression of civil society participation and the inclusion of liberal values in local agreements 1990–2024 using the PA-X Local dataset; and (ii) a case study of local peace agreements in northwest Syria. Preliminary results support our theoretical expectations.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 February 2025
Accepted 2 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Peace agreements; civil society; liberal peace; liberal norms; local peace agreements

Introduction

In their much-cited article, *Just How Liberal Is the Liberal Peace?*, Madhav Joshi, Sung Yong Lee and Roger Mac Ginty, analyse features of all comprehensive peace agreements (CPAs) signed since 1989 to assess if they embed liberal normative commitments, including democracy, human rights, and security sector reform.[1] Seeking to examine if liberal norms continue to shape contemporary peace processes, they found that despite variation across different types of liberal norms, 'liberal' modes of peacebuilding remained the most prevalent form of peace-support intervention.[2] A decade since the article, both liberal norms and comprehensive peace agreements share an altered fate of decline and persistent challenges. A rather resounding consensus in International Relations scholarship holds that the hegemony of liberal norms in peace processes has been 'lost' or is in 'retreat'.[3] Similarly, CPAs have been less frequent with time, especially in light of contemporary complex conflicts such as Yemen and Myanmar, among others,[4] and are increasingly being replaced by local peace agreements (LPAs).[5] While focus on LPAs in mainstream IR and peace studies has been limited, with CPAs often instead the point of reference, the scholarship is being outpaced by practice, where in complex conflicts like Syria at least 85 LPAs were signed between 2011–2024 in different geographic areas, alongside two national processes-the Russia-led Astana process and the UN-led Geneva process.[6]

Unlike CPAs, which deal with multiple substantive issues that underpin the grievances of conflict parties, including human rights, rule of law, electoral reforms, and security sector reform,[7] LPAs are narrower in

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[1]Madhav Joshi, Sung Yong Lee, and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Just How Liberal Is the Liberal Peace', *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 3 (2014): 1–26.
[2]Joshi, Lee, and Ginty, 'Just How Liberal Is the Liberal Peace'.
[3]Pol Bargués-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2018); David Chandler, 'Peacebuilding: The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1997–2017', in *Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Jan Pospisil, 'Peace in Political Unsettlement: Beyond Solving Conflict', in *Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
[4]Christine Bell and Sanja Badanjak, 'Introducing PA-X: A New Peace Agreement Database and Dataset', *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 3 (2019): 452–66.
[5]Mary Kaldor et al., 'Local Agreements – An Introduction to the Special Issue', *Peacebuilding (Abingdon)* 10, no. 2 (2022): 107–21.
[6]https://www.peaceagreements.org/lsearch.
[7]Madhav Joshi, Jason Michael Quinn, and Patrick M. Regan, 'Annualized Implementation Data on Comprehensive Intrastate Peace Accords, 1989–2012', *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 4 (2015): 551–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314567486.

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their scope, involving negotiation between local actors to settle local conflict dynamics within a distinct geography of a broader conflict system, often negotiated by local actors rather than national elites, and engaging with local issues rather than broader systemic issues underpinning the conflict.[8] Similarly, CPAs, with their wide-ranging commitments also demonstrated increased 'normativization' of peace agreements with liberal norms such as human rights and inclusion increasingly being incorporated into such agreements.[9] In contrast, given their focus on local, issue-specific agendas, LPAs can exclude liberal normative commitments on gender, human rights, democracy amongst others.[10] Responding to this is a small body of scholarship, largely based on case studies, documenting what LPAs mean for peace outcomes.[11] However, questions remain for what LPAs mean for the liberal norms that CPAs so boldly embodied.[12] This article seeks to fill this gap by examining two inter-related questions: to what extent do LPAs embed liberal norms, and what is the impact of local civil society for the inclusion of liberal norms in LPAs?

We argue that the participation of civil society increases the likely presence of liberal norms in agreements, due to their *function*, their *normative orientation*, and incentives from international actors that *persuade local parties to embed liberal commitments*. By their very nature, the *function* of civil society involves invoking liberal norms and international rights regimes to support their core work. The *normative orientation* of civil society is likewise likely to be aligned with liberal norms, with CSOs typically socialised into the global governance architecture underpinned by liberal values. Finally, the incentive structure for civil society, with funding often at the behest of external states and multinational organisations, is likely to *persuade* civil society into the promotion of liberal norms.

To investigate the argument, methodologically, we combine quantitative data analysis using version 8 of the PAX-Local dataset, the most comprehensive dataset on LPAs, along with insights from fieldwork inside and around Syria – notably Turkey, Jordan and Iraq – between August 2022 and March 2023.[13] The PAX-Local dataset has global coverage and includes all agreements on the main PA-X database[14] that address local issues, involve local actors, and deal with forms of local/communal violent conflict: a total of 349 local agreements across 27 countries.[15] Despite the database only including written agreements that were possible to obtain,[16] with many more likely in existence yet not publicly available, this is the only, and most extensive, dataset of LPAs globally.

For the case study, the fieldwork and engagement led to several hundred interviews (conducted in-person and online), with a number of civil actors, such as members of local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) working inside Syria, and community members involved in peace efforts at several levels, such as social leaders, members of the constitutional committee and individuals who took part in negotiations with armed groups and foreign military personnel operating in Syria. Overall, we find a statistically significant relationship between local civil society presence and signifiers of the liberal peace in LPAs. Furthermore, the empirical evidence in the case study in northwest Syria supports the argument that the

[8]Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros, and Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements – An Introduction to the Special Issue', *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 107–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111.

[9]Christine Bell, 'Peace Settlements and Human Rights: A Post-Cold War Circular History', *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9, no. 3 (2017): 358–78; and Mary Kaldor, 'How Peace Agreements Undermine the Rule of Law in New War Settings', *Global Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 146–55.

[10]Christine Bell et al., 'A Globalised Practice of Local Peace Agreements', in *A Globalised Practice of Local Peace Agreements*, ed. Christine Bell, Jan Pospisil, and Laura Wise (London: The British Academy, 2021), 7–14.

[11]Mary Kaldor, Marika Theros, and Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements – An Introduction to the Special Issue', *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 107–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111; Jan Pospisil et al., *Untangling Conflict: Local Peace Agreements in Contemporary Armed Violence* (Stadtschlaining, Austria: Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2020). https://www.aspr.ac.at/fileadmin/Downloads/Publikationen/Reports/05-2020-Report_ASPR_No_5_EN-kl-2.pdf; Christine Bell and Laura Wise, 'The Spaces of Local Agreements: Towards a New Imaginary of the Peace Process', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 563–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2156111; and Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 156–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2032941.

[12]Juline Beaujouan, 'Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2371713.

[13]This project has received ethics approval from the Law School Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (REIC). This research was approved under two broader projects: 'Interactive Fragmentation: Peace Routes and Roots for Peace in Syria' on the 5th of August 2022 (no approval numbers given by this institution). 'Syrian Peace: Delocalised, Imposed and Illegitimate?' on the 10th of October 2022 (no approval numbers given by this institution).

[14]PA-X is a global database containing 2055 peace agreements, found in more than 150 peace processes between 1990 and 2024. We rely on version 8 of the dataset for the analysis.

[15]https://www.peaceagreements.org/lsearch.

[16]Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', *Peacebuilding (Abingdon)* 10, no. 2 (2022): 156–71.

function and *normative orientation* of civil society, as well as the *persuasion by international actors to embed liberal commitments* helps to explain the overall statistical relationship.

The article contributes to existing scholarship in three different ways. First, we focus on LPAs rather than CPAs and highlight the neglect of LPAs in peace studies and IR scholarship. Despite the increased significance of LPAs in policy and practice, as evident with the UN publishing guidelines for engaging with local mediation in 2020,[17] our analysis sheds light on the extent to which mainstream scholarship in International Relations continues to reference and use CPAs as the benchmark, hence creating a disconnect between scholarship and policy. Second, we highlight how and in what ways liberal norms are accommodated within the framework of LPAs, which has both scholarly and policy relevance, ranging from what it means for minority rights, to international engagement in these processes. In this way, the article outlines opportunities and constraints provided by LPAs as sites for adoption or socialisation of liberal values.[18] Finally, in highlighting the centrality of civil society participation for the inclusion of liberal commitments in LPAs, the article also contributes to growing scholarship on the role of civil society during peace negotiations[19] by examining the impact of their inclusion in an understudied type of peace agreement.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, the article reviews existing literature on LPAs, civil society involvement in peace processes, and the inclusion of liberal norms in peace agreements. Then, the overall research design is outlined. Next, we present more detail on the quantitative design and the results. We then outline the findings of the case study in northwest Syria, before moving to the conclusion.

Local peace agreements, civic society space and inclusion, and liberal commitments

Rise of local peace agreements

Since the 1990s, peace agreements signed as a part of a broader peace process, often supported by the international community, has been a dominant pathway of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Peace agreements committing to build domestic consensus on post conflict reconstruction through inclusive political institutions using mechanisms such as power-sharing; human rights safeguards, and reconciliation became the key approach to getting parties together.[20] Reflecting on the global shifts in the post-Cold War order, and the accompanying rise of liberal internationalism in the 1990s, the 2000s also saw normativization or re-institutionalisation of peace agreements with commitment to liberal norms explicitly cited in peace agreements.[21] This increased reference to liberal norms at least partly is owed to liberal peacebuilding projects, whereby 'liberal' values of human rights, democracy, and rule of law were promoted as central to conflict -affected contexts transitioning to peace.[22]

Yet since the 2000s, comprehensive peace processes, and resulting comprehensive peace agreements have declined.[23] Since 2005, peace processes in only thirteen countries have resulted in CPAs, while over the same period there have been 318 LPAs signed across 20 conflict-affected countries.[24] Increased fragmentation of

[17]United Nations, 'UN Support to Local Mediaion: Challenges and Opportunities', 2020, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/UN%20Support%20to%20Local%20Mediation_Challenges%20and%20Opportunities_1.pdf.

[18]Bargués-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding*; Chandler, *Peacebuilding*; and Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettlement*.

[19]Desirée Nilsson, 'Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace', *International Interactions (Abingdon)* 38, no. 2 (2012): 243–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2012.659139; Celia McKeon, 'Civil Society: Participating in Peace Processes', in *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*, ed. Paul van Tongeren et al. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005); and Emma Elfversson and Desirée Nilsson, 'The Pursuit of Inclusion: Conditions for Civil Society Inclusion in Peace Processes in Communal Conflicts in Kenya', *Cooperation and Conflict* 57, no. 2 (2022): 171–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367211047136.

[20]Lisa Strömbom et al., 'Agonistic Peace Agreements? Analytical Tools and Dilemmas', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 4 (2022): 689–704. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000055.

[21]Christine Bell, 'Peace Settlements and Human Rights: A Post-Cold War Circular History', *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9, no. 3 (2017): 358–78.

[22]David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), https://www.dawsonera.com/guard/protected/dawson.jsp?name=https://idp.ed.ac.uk/shibboleth&dest=http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9781849642873; Beate Jahn, 'The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy: Democratization, Intervention, Statebuilding (Part I)', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2007): 87–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970601075931; Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Statebuilding and Peacebuilding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). http://edinburgh.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748638765.001.0001/upso-9780748638765; and Dominik Zaum, 'The Paradox of Sovereignty: International Involvement in Civil Service Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *International Peacekeeping* 10, no. 3 (2003): 102–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310308559338.

[23]David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, 'Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management', *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, no. 4 (2018): 486–506. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902.

[24]Johannes Karreth et al., 'International Third Parties and the Implementation of Comprehensive Peace Agreements After Civil War', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, nos 2–3 (2023): 494–521; and Bell and Badanjak, 'Introducing PA-X'.

conflicts marked by multiple armed actors rather than a state and a 'single rebel group', have made CPAs difficult to mount.[25] In this context, LPAs have provided an alternative imagination of peacemaking. While difficult to concretely classify, Bell and Wise define LPAs as, '*formal and informal agreements relating to a geographic area smaller than the entire conflict zone, involving at least some local actors (whether in an immediate village, neighbourhood, municipality, city or specified military zone) with the objective of mitigating or ending conflict in that area by addressing local conflict drivers and actors*' (2022, Pg. 565). These agreements, while centred on a specific locality, are often connected to the wider conflict, and are increasingly leveraged to bring peace and stability to localised areas, when national level talks are stalled.[26]

Despite their increased salience in practice, LPAs have yet to be systematically mainstreamed and studied in International Relations scholarship, leading to limited knowledge production on a policy that has deep salience to contemporary peacemaking practices. Indeed, our analysis of scholarly engagement with LPAs and CPAs reveals the relative neglect of LPAs in existing literature.

Following Sara Hellmüller's methodology,[27] we systematically review 27 journals using keyword searches of article titles (Appendix 1), comprising 13 top-ranked International Relations journals identified through Wiegand's[28] cross-ranking comparison methodology, 9 specialist peace and conflict studies publications as defined by Bright and Gledhill,[29] and a further specialist peacebuilidng journals. As shown in Figure 1, the analysis shows that 64.4% of the academic articles identified in the search between 1990 and 2024 used CPAs as a reference point for peace and conflict trajectories, while 20% concentrated on LPAs, and 15.6% referred to both types of agreements, demonstrating the continued dominance of CPAs in the scholarship.

One implication of scholarly marginalisation of LPAs is a lack of thorough understanding of the roles, functions, and types of LPAs and their implications for the liberal peace agenda. LPAs serve different functions, imbibe multiple levels of participation, vary in scope, and affect peace outcomes differently. LPAs may be peace affirming or otherwise serve the logics of war. While some may reinforce ethnic divisions and violence, others form the basis for incremental peacemaking.[30] For

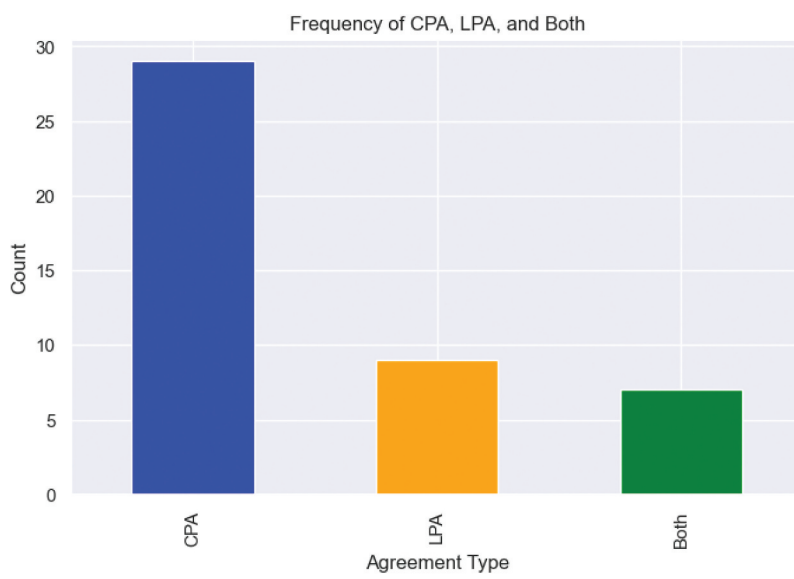

Figure 1. Scholarship on CPAs, LPAs and peace and conflict trajectories.

[25]Bell and Wise, 'The Spaces of Local Agreements'.
[26]Kaldor et al., 'Local Agreements – An Introduction to the Special Issue'.
[27]Sara Hellmüller, 'Knowledge Production on Mediation: Practice-Oriented, But Not Practice-Relevant?' *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023): 1847–66.
[28]Steve Saideman, 'Can IR Have Its Own "Big 3" Journals?' *The Duck of Minerva*, November 30, 2020. https://www.duckofminerva.com/2020/11/can-ir-have-its-own-big-3-journals.html.
[29]John Gledhill and Jonathan Bright, 'Forum on Studying Peace and Studying Conflict: Complementary or Competing Projects? Studying Peace and Studying Conflict: Complementary or Competing Projects?' *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019): 259+, Gale Academic OneFile.
[30]See note 26 above.

example, small islands of peace may emerge that can influence the conflict's territorial dimension and prevent local conflicts from escalating into national-level divisions.[31] Moreover, research in Syria reveals that local talks can in themselves contribute to steep reductions in violence and fatalities and improve standards of living.[32] LPAs may be used as short-term measures to de-escalate and contain conflict in the absence of a national peace process; or as a 'framework' for establishing a new localised peace and political settlement. Different types of 'local' actors are included in the making of LPAs, including, conflict actors, community representatives, villagers, women's groups, business, traditional leaders, and faith-based groups.[33]

Given their contextual peculiarities, varied functions, and construction by different sets of local actors, LPAs also vary in their normative commitments. A simple aggregate data analysis from the PAX-Local database highlights that 77 out of 329 agreements mention at least one provision on human rights and equality, and 79 have specific mentions of women, girls and gender. Besides the content of agreements, how LPAs involve civic and other minority groups also varies. For example, in Galkaio, a Somalian town, civic actors notably women and youth, sustained the momentum of an LPA process.[34] Yet, in Afghanistan, in local peacemaking efforts, women had no obvious role, with local initiatives exclusively male in their membership.[35] Some LPAs embody liberal ideas of gender, rights and justice, whilst others are outright illiberal. Such variation leads to the question of when and under what conditions do LPAs enshrine and commit to liberal norms.

Civil society and liberal commitments in local peace agreements

The inclusion of civil society actors, we argue, is one key source of variation that can lead LPAs to either promote or undermine liberal norms.

Over the years, the norm of civil society inclusion has been well institutionalised in liberal peacebuilding programmes,[36] and the international community has devoted substantial efforts towards building and strengthening its role in peace processes.[37] At a more practical level, civil society actors perform multiple functions in peace processes including as: *facilitators* initiating or mediating dialogue between the warring parties; *direct participants* in negotiating a settlement to the conflict; as *monitors* of implementation; *advocates* calling for dialogue as an alternative to armed violence; and drawing international awareness to the conflict.[38]

Arguments for the inclusion of civil society actors are made both from a rights perspective – actors who are affected should have a say – and from a sustainability perspective – to prevent spoilers from emerging and to help build consensus on the peace agreement.[39] Here, inclusion of civil society is seen to make the process more legitimate, given its functions, including, serving as an intermediary between elite political actors and the broader public, enhancing the public buy-in of the peace agreement, holding parties accountable and refraining them from stalling the process, and as an example of compromise and bridge-building with a wide political spectrum.[40] Indeed, the inclusion of civil society actors in the peace settlement of comprehensive processes has been found to increase the durability of peace.[41] Yet, there have been

[31]Pospisil et al., *Untangling Conflict*.
[32]Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process'.
[33]See note 31 above.
[34]Nisar Majid and Marika Theros, with Khalif Abdirahman, *Finding Peace in Somalia: The Galkaio 'Local' Peace Agreement*, Conflict Research Programme (London: LSE, November 4, 2020), https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107142/1/CRP_finding_peace_in_somalia.pdf.
[35]Michael Semple, *Alternative Paths to Peace: Restoring the Local in Afghan Peace-Making*, working paper (Belfast: Queen's University, 2022), https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/FileStore/Filetoupload,1451669,en.pdf.
[36]Laura J. Shepherd, 'Constructing Civil Society: Gender, Power and Legitimacy in United Nations Peacebuilding Discourse', *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 4 (2015): 887–910; Nilsson, 'Anchoring the Peace'; and Esra Cuhadar and Daniel Druckman, 'Let the People Speak! What Kind of Civil Society Inclusion Leads to Durable Peace?', *International Studies Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (2024): 359–81.
[37]Elfversson and Nilsson, 'The Pursuit of Inclusion'.
[38]McKeon, 'Civil Society: Participating in Peace Processes'; Elfversson and Nilsson, 'The Pursuit of Inclusion'; Nancy Annan et al., 'Civil Society, Peacebuilding from Below and Shrinking Civic Space: The Case of Cameroon's "Anglophone" Conflict', *Conflict, Security & Development* 21, no. 6 (2021): 697–725; and Christine Bell and Catherine O'Rourke, 'The People's Peace? Peace Agreements, Civil Society, and Participatory Democracy', *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 3 (2007): 293–324.
[39]Desirée Nilsson et al., *Civil Society Protests and Inclusive Peace Talks*, Joint Brief Series: Improving Mediation Effectiveness (Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2023); and Annan et al., 'Civil Society, Peacebuilding from Below and Shrinking Civic Space'.
[40]Sara Hellmüller, 'Civil Society Inclusion in Peace Mediation', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Oliver Richmond and Gëzim Visoka (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); and Andreas T. Hirblinger and Dana M. Landau, 'Daring to Differ? Strategies of Inclusion in Peacemaking', *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 4 (2020): 305–22.
[41]Nilsson, 'Anchoring the Peace'; Thania Pfaffenholz, Darren Kew, and Anthony Wanis-St. John, *Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Why, Whether and How They Could Be Involved* (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2016), https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CivilSocietyandPeaceNegotiations-WhyWhetherandhowtheycouldbeinvolved-June-2006.pdf.

critiques on the uncritical embrace of civil society, including, challenging the very conception of civil society in the peacemaking space, and the functions associated with civil society. In policy discourse in the UN and beyond, civil society is largely conceived of as referring to a voluntary collective working for common objectives distinct from the state.[42] Civil society is often represented as a coherent and unitary entity,[43] which obscures the fact that different types of civil society can have varied effects on peace, and not all lead to democracy, inclusion, or human rights.[44]

While rich in ascertaining why and in what ways should civil society organisations should be included in peace processes, and implications for peace outcomes, two critical gaps remain in the scholarship with regards to the context of LPAs. First, much of the scholarship has continued to focus on civil society participation in national or comprehensive processes. Second, how civil society participation impacts the 'liberal' quotient of the LPA is more implicit than explicit.

Building on the abovementioned scholarship on civil society inclusion in peacemaking, as well as three distinct literatures- legal mobilisation, socialisation within transnational advocacy networks, and international support to civil society- we identify three mechanisms through which civil society inclusion may affect liberal commitments in LPAs: their *function, normative orientation*, and *persuasion by external actors* given the funding structure of civil society organisations in conflict-affected states.

First, the very *function* or raison d'être of civil society organisations involves invoking liberal norms and international rights regimes, advocating on issues of wider public interest, and advocating for marginalised groups.[45] For their core work, civil society organisations often incorporate legal strategies and the norms and content of international law and multilateral treaties,[46] which are inherently linked to the liberal peacebuilding agenda. Even in deeply divided societies civic constituencies exist, who recognise the importance of respecting human rights and promoting peace, often providing spaces to articulate citizens' participation in public life.[47] As the very function of civil society organisations is tied to values and norms that underpin the liberal peace, the inclusion of civil society is likely to lead to an uptick in the inclusion of liberal norms in agreements civil society are party to be they comprehensive, local or otherwise.

Some scholars have been critical of the assumption that civil society is inherently peace-promoting and liberal-oriented.[48] Especially in authoritarian contexts with limited civic space, civil society can instead contribute to legitimating an authoritarian state[49] and posit liberal values as 'Western'.[50] Yet, even in such contexts, civic activism can mix both democratic and authoritarian elements.[51] Overall, we thus anticipate that the inclusion of CSOs in local peacemaking, even in authoritarian contexts, is likely to be reflected by provisions compliant with international law, and liberal regimes such as human rights, due to the *function* of CSOs.

Second, CSOs are likely to encourage the inclusion of liberal norms in LPAs as these organisations are socialised to and have internalised such norms. Given their constant interaction and role in the wider transnational advocacy movement, CSOs are socialised into liberal norms that underpin the current global governance architecture, which they diffuse into the context of LPAs. The scholarship on norm adoption and change in International Relations, posits CSOs as key organisational platforms to promote norms and enable their 'cascade' into different countries.[52] CSOs and their associated movements have been key to

[42]Sara Hellmüller, 'The Role of Civil Society Actors in Peacemaking and Peacebuilding', in *Routledge Handbook of Peace, Security and Development*, ed. Fen Osler Hampson et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 407–419.
[43]Shepherd, 'Constructing Civil Society'.
[44]Briony Jones and Dit Fatogoma Adou Djané, 'Reading the "Uncivil" in Civil Society Resistance to Transitional Justice in Côte d'Ivoire', *Political Geography* 67 (2018): 135–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.10.004.
[45]Mariana Olaizola Rosenblat, 'The Role of Transnational Civil Society in Shaping International Values, Policies, and Law', *Chicago Journal of International Law* 23, no. 1 (2022): 144–60.
[46]Emilio Lehoucq and Whitney K. Taylor, 'Conceptualizing Legal Mobilization: How Should We Understand the Deployment of Legal Strategies?' *Law & Social Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2020): 166–93; Nicole De Silva and Misha Ariana Plagis, "NGOs, International Courts, and State Backlash against Human Rights Accountability: Evidence from NGO Mobilisation Against Tanzania at the African Court on Human and Peoples" Rights', *Law & Society Review* 57, no. 1 (2023): 36–60; and Charles Chernor Jalloh, 'The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Advancing International Criminal Justice', *African Journal of International Criminal Justice* 1, no. 1 (2015): 47–76.
[47]Roberto Belloni, 'Civil Society in War-to-Democracy Transitions', in *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding*, ed. Anna K. Jarstad and Timothy Sisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182–210.
[48]David Lewis, 'Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse', *Journal of Civil Society* 9, no. 3 (2013): 325–40.
[49]Jasmin Lorch and Bettina Bunk, 'Using Civil Society as an Authoritarian Legitimation Strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in Comparative Perspective', *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): 987–1005.
[50]Elena Korosteleva, 'Questioning Democracy Promotion: Belarus' Response to the "Colour Revolutions"', *Democratization* 19, no. 1 (2012): 37–59, 4.
[51]Chenxi Zhang, 'Energy Governance in China: A Mixture of Democratic Environmentalism and Authoritarian Environmentalism', *Environmental Policy and Governance* 34, no. 4 (2024): 352–62.
[52]Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917.

diffusing norms such as sustainable development, gender equality, human security, good governance into the policy portfolios in many parts of the world.[53] In their work, CSOs also often tend to collaborate with like-minded NGOs, and other actors within and outside national boundaries, forging robust transnational advocacy networks which create opportunities for learning, emulating and being socialised to different normative regimes.[54] We thus further anticipate that CSOs are likely to propose liberal norms in LPAs due to their *normative orientation.*

Third, CSOs may also promote liberal norms within LPAs given the *persuasion by* external states and multilateral bodies like the UN. Two contextual factors are significant in discussing the incentive structure for civil society groups in terms of promotion of liberal norms. For example, in conflict-affected states, asymmetries of power and funding structures result in domestic CSOs often being funded by international states, and organisations.[55] The funding structure and the accompanying resources and political will by international states and organisations creates opportunities to persuade, incentivise or even coerce CSOs to push through liberal norms as pathways for reform.[56] The ability of civil society 'to network between local political forces and external actors' and offer indirect international legitimacy also ensures that political elites accept liberal norms promoted by civil society actors.[57] We thus anticipate that the inclusion of CSOs is likely to increase the presence of liberal values in LPAs due to the incentives placed on these organisations by external actors. We present the research design to evaluate this theory in the following section.

Based on these three mechanisms discussed in the scholarship, we can draw two key hypotheses about civil society participation and inclusion of liberal norms in local peace agreements:

Hypothesis 1: Local civil society participation increases the likelihood of liberal value inclusion in local peace agreements.

Hypothesis 2: Local civil society participation increases the likelihood of liberal value inclusion across each of the five dimensions of liberal peace (democracy, rule of law, human rights, security sector reform and governance reform) in local peace agreements.

Overall research design

We evaluate our theoretical expectations with a multimethod approach. First, to evaluate the overall argument that the inclusion of civil society increases the likelihood that LPAs include liberal peace norms, we conduct a binary logistic regression using data on LPAs in the PA-X Local dataset, covering all country-years from 2009 to 2019 to analyse 240 LPAs. PA-X Local records 'publicly available written agreements between locally-based and other actors, which address local conflict-generating grievances only within a part of the wider conflict-affected area'.[58] The agreements aim to resolve local issues and address local violent conflicts, involving local actors, that have resulted in at least 25 conflict-related deaths.[59] The unit of analysis was one LPA. The temporal range is based on limitations in available data for variables in the model, rather than theoretical scope conditions, with implications for extrapolating general trends.

There are also further challenges with PA-X Local in that the dataset only includes publicly available written agreements that have been formally agreed, excluding informal local negotiation practices and oral agreements, which are common. However, to our knowledge, PA-X Local is the only database that seeks to

[53]Jonas Tallberg et al., 'Why International Organizations Commit to Liberal Norms', *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2020): 626–40.
[54]Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
[55]Annika Elena Poppe and Jonas Wolff, 'The Contested Spaces of Civil Society in a Plural World: Norm Contestation in the Debate about Restrictions on International Civil Society Support', *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 469–88.
[56]Simone Tholens and Lisa Groß, 'Diffusion, Contestation and Localisation in Post-War States: 20 Years of Western Balkans Reconstruction', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 18, no. 3 (2015): 249–64. https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2015.21; and Sara Hellmueller, 'Meaning-Making in Peace-Making: The Inclusion Norm at the Interplay Between the United Nations and Civil Society in the Syrian Peace Process', *Swiss Political Science Review* 26, no. 4 (2020): 384–405.
[57]Saubhagya Shah, *Civil Society in Uncivil Places: Soft State and Regime Change in Nepal* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2008).
[58]Christine Bell, 'Peace Settlements and Human Rights: A Post-Cold War Circular History', *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9, no. 3 (2017): 358–78.
[59]Pospisil et al., *Untangling Conflict*.

collate LPAs. As a result, we can only confidently claim that the findings apply to the written, formal and publicly available forms of local agreement identified within the PA-X Local dataset. Second, we conduct a case study in northwest Syria to evaluate our expectation that the *function* and *normative orientation* of CSOs, as well as the external *persuasion of civil society by* external states and multilateral bodies like the UN underpin the relationship between civil society inclusion and the presence of liberal peace norms in LPAs. Whilst the quantitative analysis will offer insight into the overall relationship between civil society participation in LPAs and the inclusion of liberal peace values, the qualitative case study is complementary: offering an opportunity to understand how the overall relationship works.

We next turn to further detail of the quantitative research design and its analysis, before returning to analysis of the Syrian case study.

Quantitative research design and analysis

Dependent variable

The main dependent variable is the inclusion of liberal peace values in LPA accords, drawing on the PA-X and PA-X Local datasets. We created the dependent variable by mapping variables from the PA-X and PA-X Local[60] to each of the five core attributes of the liberal peace identified by Joshi, Lee and MacGinty's.[61] (Aappendix 2).

The first hypothesis suggests a positive relationship between the participation of local civil society and the inclusion of liberal values in LPAs. The analysis includes a variable, liberal values, which is coded as a binary variable for inclusion of any dimension of liberal values in LPAs, following Joshi, Lee, and MacGinty (2014). The second hypothesis suggests a positive relationship between the participation of local civil society and each of the five liberal peace dimensions set out in Joshi, Lee and MacGinty (2014), in turn. For the second hypothesis we disaggregate the analysis as follows.

To assess whether LPAs promote democracy we create a binary variable that indicates whether electoral and political reform provisions, as well as references or commitments to democracy or elections, are included in provisions. We assess whether accords invoke rule of law by creating a binary variable that indicates whether provisions relating to judicial reform, corruption, commitments to domestic and international law, truth and reconciliation mechanisms and other transitional justice mechanisms, constitutional change, and protection of civilians, are included in provisions. For human rights, we create a binary variable that indicates whether human rights, pastoralist rights, and cultural protections are included in peace agreements. To assess the inclusion of security sector reform in LPAs, we create a binary variable that indicates whether police reform, military reform, demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants into society (DDR) provisions are included. Finally. governance reform is a binary variable that indicates whether power-sharing, new political institutions, or civil administration reform provisions are included. We detail the exact variables that are mapped from the PA-X and PA-X Local datasets to each of the five clusters of liberal peace values in Appendix 2.

For the analyses, we used binary variables, because we aim to explain the presence of liberal peace values in LPAs rather than the frequency with which such values are mentioned. Among the 240 LPAs under analysis, at least one provision that signified liberal peace values was coded for 186 observations, with 12 observations referencing democracy, 132 observations referencing rule of law, 74 observations referencing human rights, 95 referencing security sector reform, and 88 referencing governance reform.

Independent variable

The main independent variable is the participation of local civil society. It is measured with the binary variable, *LocComSoc*, which records when any participant in an LPA in the PA-X Local dataset represents

[60]Christine Bell et al., *PA-X Codebook, Version 8* (Edinburgh: Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 2024); Christine Bell et al., *PA-X Local Peace Agreements Database and Dataset, Version 5* (2024), www.peaceagreements.org/lsearch.

[61]John Gledhill and Jonathan Bright, 'Studying Peace and Studying Conflict: Complementary or Competing Projects?' *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019): 259. https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz001.

a 'group of civilians (formally or informally organised) that is based in the locale of the agreement'.[62] The definition of civil society is contested, yet is commonly seen to refer to voluntary organisations comprised of groups of civilians that are separate from the state and political parties,[63] such as women's organisations or human rights groups. This variable is thus a good measure of our definition of civil society. In total, such groups were present in 71 LPAs over the period of analysis.

To provide a contextual analysis of civil society's role in peacemaking, this article adopts the definition by Kawakibi and Sawah,[64] which describes Syrian civil society as 'the active and voluntary participation of citizens in organisations (outside their families, friends and workplace) where they support their interests, views and ideologies'. This definition encompasses community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), both locally established and formed by diaspora networks. The article focuses specifically on civil society within Syria, as these actors are more directly and immediately engaged in peacemaking efforts compared to those based abroad. This focus enables a more grounded reflection on the findings derived from the analysis of local peace agreements discussed earlier in the paper, and highlights the critical contributions of those operating within the Syrian context.

Moreover, the definition places emphasis on citizen participation, capturing a broad and diverse array of actors with varying identities, interests, and ideologies. Syrian civil society reflects the country's wider social and political landscape. As such, civic actors include not only CBOs and NGOs, but also 'community figures, religious leaders, professionals (academics, teachers, experts), women and youth groups, as well as activists'.[65]

Confounders

We included several variables that were likely to be confounders. These are: whether the UN is a signatory of the LPA, *ImUN*, whether civil society actors are mediators of the LPA, *MedLocCivSoc* and whether a Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member is a mediator, *MIA_DAC*.

Since liberal peacebuilding is promoted and regulated by UN doctrines it is likely that UN presence will influence both the content of agreements and the participation of civil society in LPAs. We thus include the *ImUN* variable from PA-X Local, which records whether the UN is a signatory to a LPA. From the same resource, we also control for whether civil society actors are mediators of the local peace agreement, *MedLocCivSoc*, and whether a Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member is a mediator, *MIA_DAC*. When civil society actors are mediators, it is reasonable to expect greater inclusion of civil society participants, and that mediators may promote liberal peace values. Similarly, the mandate of the DAC includes liberal peacebuilding values such as human rights and equalities. We hand code the *MIA_DAC* variable from the *MedIntActor* variable on PA-X Local, with reference to the list of 32 DAC members (OECD 2024). Summary statistics for confounders are presented in Appendix 3.

Empirical findings

We tested both hypotheses across 240 LPAs between 2009 and 2019. Observations were nested within countries, with standard errors clustered by country. Model 1 in Table 1 is a bivariate logistic regression, Model 2 adds controls for whether the named mediator of the accords is a DAC member country or a civil society representative, whether the UN was a signatory. The relationship between local civil society presence and signifiers of the liberal peace in the accords is statistically significant and positive in both models, as anticipated. Specifically, model 2 indicates that LPAs are 6.24 times more likely to contain provisions with liberal values when local civil society participate. The Wald Chi-Square

[62]Christine Bell and Sanja Badanjak, 'Introducing PA-X: A New Peace Agreement Database and Dataset', *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 3 (2019): 452–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318819123; Bell et al., *PA-X Local Peace Agreements Database and Dataset*.

[63]Christoph Spurk, 'Understanding Civil Society', in *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Thania Paffenholz (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010); and Roberto Belloni, 'Civil Society in War-to-Democracy Transitions', in *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding*, ed. Anna K. Jarstad and Timothy Sisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[64]Salam Kawakibi and Wael Sawah, 'The Emergence and Evolution of Syria's Civil Society', in *Syrian Voices from Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against All Odds*, Special Bulletin 2, ed. S. Kawakibi (The Hague: Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, 2013).

[65]Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani, 'Engendering Civicness in the Syrian Peacemaking Process', *Journal of Civil Society* 18, no. 2 (2022): 183–200.

Table 1. Empirical results on liberal values in local peace agreements.

	Dependent variable: presence of liberal values in local peace agreements	
	Model 1	Model 2
Local civil society	1.679***	1.830***
	(0.316)	(0.220)
DAC mediator		13.671***
		(1.060)
Local civil society mediator		−0.632
		(0.747)
UN signatory		0.908
		(0.782)
Constant	0.916***	0.895***
	(0.237)	(0.243)
Observations	240	240
Number of countries	16	16
Log Likelihood	−118.668	−117.553
AIC	241.335	245.105
Wald chi square test statistic	11.54***	839.23***

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

test indicates that both models were statistically significant. Overall, the results provided evidence in favour of the hypothesis.

Different specifications of the dependent variable

We next disaggregate the results for each of the five signifiers of the liberal peace. As shown in Table 2, hypothesis 2 holds for rule of law, human rights, security sector reform and governance reforms, though the association is not statistically significant in model 1 for democracy. Democracy typically relates to provisions relating to national-level implementation of elections and associated bodies, and thus is relatively rare with only 12 observations across the sample. It is unsurprising that the relationship does not hold for democracy, given that LPAs are typically concerned with resolving local-level issues.

Robustness tests

We conducted robustness tests to achieve better confidence in the findings. Firstly, we add country-level controls to the models to account for the country-level factors that might explain the presence of provisions that map to the liberal peace in LPAs signed in that country. As LPAs are subnational by their nature, we do not include these controls in the main models. The first country-level control we add for robustness is the level of democracy in the year prior to the agreement being signed, using the lagged *polity2* measure from

Table 2. Empirical results on each signifier of liberal values in local peace agreements.

	Dependent variables: signifiers of liberal values in local peace agreements				
	Model 1 Democracy	Model 2 Rule of Law	Model 3 Human Rights	Model 4 Security Sector Reform	Model 5 Governance Reforms
Local civil society	0.936	1.448***	1.432***	1.353***	0.645**
	(0.998)	(0.240)	(0.351)	(0.318)	(0.326)
DAC mediator	−12.181***	−14.354***	−13.314***	15.336***	−13.436***
	(1.329)	(1.064)	(1.173)	(1.059)	(1.092)
Local civil society mediator	0.296	−0.261	−0.311	−0.699**	−0.214
	(0.673)	(0.317)	(0.503)	(0.345)	(0.524)
UN signatory	1.349**	2.066***	−0.008	−0.390	0.284
	(0.652)	(0.783)	(0.417)	(0.515)	(0.768)
Constant	−3.385***	0.212	−1.252***	−0.770***	−1.130***
	(0.866)	(0.248)	(0.537)	(0.201)	(0.282)
Observations	240	240	240	240	240
Number of countries	16	16	16	16	16
Log Likelihood	−47.772	− 150.348	−137.945	−151.081	−140.538
AIC	105.545	310.695	285.891	312.162	291.075
Wald Chi Squire test statistic	234.31***	226.12***	327.26***	228.38***	389.29***

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

the Polity V project (Marshall and Gurr 2020). The polity2 measure reflects the electoral competitiveness and openness of the country, political participation, and constraints on executive power. Liberal concepts should also be more readily adopted in countries with more advanced development, as proxied by higher GDP per capital (Hegre 2000). To capture this potential effect, we also control for the GDP per capita of a country in the year prior to the signing of the local accords, using a natural log, with data from the World Bank (2024). In countries with greater pre-existing civil society strength, civil society are both more likely to be participants in LPAs and liberal values are more likely to be adopted in the accords. We thus also control for the core civil society index *CCSI*, from the V-Dem data project, which measures civil society autonomy from the state, and whether citizens can freely pursue political and civic goals.[66] The results remain robust to these specifications (Appendix 4.1).

Secondly, it is possible that the case of Syria, with 85 LPAs, skews the data and the results. However, we find that the results are robust to the exclusion of Syrian LPAs (Appendix 4.2).

Thirdly, research by Hauenstein and Joshi[67] on hybrid peace indicates that involving both local and international actors is a particularly effective peacemaking strategy. We therefore propose an interaction between UN signatory and civil society mediators. We find a statistically significant association between the interaction term and the dependent variable. After removing UN signatory and civil society mediators from the main model, the results hold (Appendix 4.3). To assess multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated for all variables in the main model. All VIF values were below 5, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model (Appendix 4.4). Finally, we assess whether the results are driven by specific countries, regions or time periods, and find that the results are robust to country fixed effects and year fixed effects (Appendices 4.5 and 4.6). The results hold in the Middle East and Asia, but not in Africa (Appendix 4.5), indicating a fruitful avenue for future research.

Local peace agreements in Syria: liberal commitments and the role of civil society

Our primary argument on civil society participation and commitment to liberal norms in LPAs finds support in the statistical test results. However, to ascertain the validity of these results, and evaluate the mechanisms underpinning the overall relationship, a case study from northwest Syria is likely to be helpful.

Syria stands out as a unique case for several reasons. Its 13-year conflict has led to the involvement of a wide range of actors and the emergence of two distinct international peace processes: one led by the UN and Western countries like the US and EU member states, and another spearheaded by Russia, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, Iran.[68] Despite these extensive efforts and the resulting congestion of the peace landscape, none of these initiatives successfully convened all warring parties or produced a comprehensive peace agreement. However, the conflict has given birth to a rich collection of local peace practices, including 85 written LPAs recorded in the PA-X peace agreement database since 1990, the largest corpus of LPAs on PA-X Local. Of these, 9 of the 85 Syrian LPAs involved civil society, with 8 LPAs referencing at least one liberal value, and 6 located within northwest Syria (appendix 5). The eruption of the conflict in 2011 enabled the rise of numerous civil society grassroots groups, notably in northwest Syria, performing multiple functions and establishing operational offices in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Over the years, civil society grew increasingly recognised as a significant actor in promoting social cohesion and conflict resolution.[69]

The diverse landscape of Syrian civil society must be understood within the constraints imposed by the country's political context. Under the Assad regimes, civil society was subject to extensive state control. The 1958 Law on Associations and Private Societies – further tightened by amendments in 1969 - permitted only

[66]Michael Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v14* (Varieties of Democracy Project, 2024); Michael Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Methodology v14* (Varieties of Democracy Project, March 7, 2024), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4782726.

[67]Matthew Hauenstein and Madhav Joshi, 'Remaining Seized of the Matter: UN Resolutions and Peace Implementation', *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2020): 834–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa050.

[68]Samer Abboud, 'Making Peace to Sustain War: The Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace', *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2021): 326–43; and Irene Costantini and Ruth Hanau Santini, 'Power Mediators and the "Illiberal Peace" Momentum: Ending Wars in Libya and Syria', *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2022): 131–47.

[69]Juline Beaujouan, *The Covid-19 Pandemic and Alternative Governance Systems in Idlib* (PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 2022); and Swisspeace, *Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace* (Bern: Swisspeace, 2016), https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/160107-insidesyria-en-def_0.pdf#:~:text=This%20study%20seeks%20to%20increase%20the%20understanding%20about,143%20interviews%20conducted%20by%20Syrian%20researchers%20inside%20Syria.

regime-sanctioned NGOs, most of which functioned as state appendages rather than independent actors.[70] Grassroots initiatives were rare and, when they did emerge, were typically informal and vulnerable to repression. In contrast, the 2011 uprising catalysed the proliferation of CSOs across the country, although their capacity to operate varied greatly depending on the controlling authority or armed group.[71] In regime-held areas, independent civil society actors were frequently labelled as terrorists or foreign agents, severely restricting their activities. Even international organisations faced significant operational constraints and were subjected to numerous conditions imposed by the regime. By contrast, civil society operated with relatively greater freedom in opposition-held areas, particularly in the north and northwest following the 2019 national ceasefire. In these regions, civic actors assumed governance and service provision roles, compensating for both the absence of the state and the limited capacity of opposition institutions. However, even in opposition-controlled territories, civil society operated in a fragmented and contested environment, including areas under the control of Islamist-Jihadist armed groups. Although their activities were often constrained by the shifting policies and restrictions imposed by these groups, civic actors consistently made concerted efforts to reach and support civilian populations – often operating discreetly in the most challenging conditions. As a result, civil society engagement in peacemaking has remained largely localised, shaped more by immediate political and territorial realities than by formal negotiations with the central state.

Another important consideration is that, while the 9 selected LPA formally include civil society representatives in the negotiation process and contain provisions that may seem to align with the liberal peace agenda, it is crucial to consider the context in which these agreements are signed. With the exception of one, all of these agreements are primarily tactical tools for conflict management, often described as 'surrender agreements'[72] or 'strangle contracts'.[73] Frequently referred to as 'reconciliation' agreements, they are the result of highly asymmetrical negotiations between a dominant army or armed group and a weaker group or fighters or civilians. In Syria, these types of agreements have regularly been made in neighbourhoods besieged by the Syrian army, with Russian oversight. Rather than fostering truly inclusive negotiations, they have contributed to short-term conflict stabilisation and helped sustain the authoritarian al-Assad regime, displacing the conflict both geographically and temporally (Beaujouan, 2024). One common goal of these agreements was to neutralise less powerful armed groups, which is why they often include provisions for disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. A revealing example from northwestern Syria occurred in January 2019, when a brief agreement[74] called for the dissolution of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, a faction engaged in combat with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the al-Ghab Plain of Hama Governorate. In fact, two separate agreements were signed on the same day: one between the armed factions, and another between HTS and the elders of several local villages. Civil society representatives were involved only in the second stage, following the resolution of hostilities between the armed groups. The agreements stipulated that all villages would be neutralised from ongoing fighting and that Harakat Ahrar al-Sham would surrender its weapons. Subsequently, these villages were placed under the administration of the Salvation Government, an entity informally affiliated with HTS.

The case analysis focuses on the northwest of Syria, which, up until December 2024, was governed by two de facto opposition administrations: the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). This area was not only significant for practical reasons concerning the relative safety of researchers and participants but also because it represented a unique environment within Syria. Amidst the conflict – particularly after 2019, when conflict lines and governance actors began to stabilise – opposition areas fostered certain liberal qualities such as the presence of a strong civil society, which provided a more inclusive platform for informal governance.[75] In the northwest of Syria, it is estimated that

[70]Laura Ruiz de Elvira and Tina Zintl, 'The End of the Baʿthist Social Contract in Bashar Al-Asad's Syria: Reading Sociopolitical Transformations through Charities and Broader Benevolent Activism', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 329–49; and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, 'State and Civil Society in Syria', *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 2 (1993): 243–57.

[71]Rana Khalaf, 'Governance Without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building During Conflict', *Syria Studies* 7, no. 3 (2015): 37–72.

[72]Christine Bell and Laura Wise, 'The Spaces of Local Agreements: Towards a New Imaginary of the Peace Process', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 563–83.

[73]Marika Sosnowski, 'Reconciliation Agreements as Strangle Contracts: Ramifications for Property and Citizenship Rights in the Syrian Civil War', *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2020): 460–75.

[74]*Agreement between Tahrir al-Sham and the Elders of Villages in the al-Ghab Plain*, January 9, 2019, PA-X Peace Agreements Database, https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2343_602a9b67e52ce.pdf.

[75]Juline Beaujouan, 'The Covid-19 Pandemic and Alternative Governance Systems in Idlib', *IDS Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2022): 39–52. https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2022.116; Juline Beaujouan, 'Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2371713.

over 250 organisations operated within at least 12 networks that facilitate collaboration among member groups (ICVA, 2021: 7). However, up to 40% of organisations functioning in the areas controlled by the SIG in Idlib governorate were unregistered,[76] suggesting that the actual number of active organisations may have been even higher.

This analysis recognises the complexity and fluidity of the Syrian context, where the conflict has led to the fragmentation of the country along both territorial and political lines. In December 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist group with Salafi-jihadist roots with unofficial but influential ties with SSG, led to the toppling of the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the end of fifty-four years of Assad rule over Syria. In his first public speech after the demise of al-Assad, al-Ahmed al-Sharaa,[77] the leader of HTS, voiced his commitment to a peaceful, inclusive and democratic Syria. While the future remains highly uncertainty at the time of writing this paper, Syria now faces a new era, with renewed hope for a sustainable resolution of the conflict, increased civic space and the return of peace.

Until the regime change, opposition areas in the northwest of Syria were under the protection of Turkey, a guarantor of the 2019 national ceasefire negotiated with Russia. Even prior to this agreement – and nearly from the outset of the conflict – Gaziantep, located approximately 60 kilometres north of the Syrian border, served as a crucial hub for civil society organisations and humanitarian actors, providing a vital lifeline to communities in northeast Syria. Most of these organisations are relatively small, typically employing up to 30 members, and heavily rely on temporary staff and volunteers.[78] The primary focus of these organisations is providing humanitarian aid and social services, with particular attention given to protection, education, and health initiatives. In what follows, we outline the mechanisms underlying the overall relationship between civil society participation and the presence of liberal norms in LPAs in Syria.

Civil society function

The analysis of PA-X written agreements highlights the active involvement of civil society in northwest Syria as *direct participants* in conflict resolution negotiations, with individuals and organisations frequently appearing as signatories or mediators. A notable example is the agreement reached in February 2018 between the Local and Shura[79] Councils and three armed groups regarding the village of Kfar Darian in Idlib. This agreement included signatures from a civil society representative, a village notable, and the Teachers Syndicate in Idlib.[80]

The prominence of the rule of law in peace-related activities in Syria partly stems from the pressing need for justice, particularly transitional justice, as a means to move beyond conflict. Over years of conflict, numerous 'free bar associations' and 'free lawyers' associations' have developed in northwest Syria and are tirelessly advocating for the adoption of international norms and standards, as well as their integration into local legal practices in Syria. Another contributing factor is the interplay between the legal system, tribal customs, and Islamic teachings.

Civil society actors in northwest Syria are thereby arguably likely to seek inclusion of dispositions related to the rule of law. The PA-X database includes an example[81] of how a local dispute between two armed groups was mediated by local elders and solved through the payment of *diyya*– blood money that brings financially compensation for the loss of a relative – as per Shariah law. Another agreement[82] was initiated by a committee of notables headed by a Saudi preacher. The agreement settles to form an independent Shariah committee to help resolve the conflict in Idlib between several armed groups and factions.

[76]Armenak Tokmajyan, *Hubs and Bubbles: Syrian Civil Society after a Decade of Conflict* (IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development, 2021), IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development.

[77]The leader of HTS abandoned his *nom de guerre*, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, to formally distance himself from his jihadi past and to present himself as a political and civilian figure committed to playing a significant role in shaping the future of Syria.

[78]Tokmajyan, *Hubs and Bubbles*.

[79]Shura councils could be described as consultative councils made of social representatives; some of them operate at the local level, while others are part of the legislative branch of the Syrian political system.

[80]Agreement between the Local and Shura Councils and Jabat Tahrir al-Suriyyah, Tahrir al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham regarding the village of Kfar Darian, Idlib, February 27, 2018, https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2277_5e78dd6b3ec49.pdf.

[81]*Agreement to Form a Sharia Committee to Resolve the Conflict in Idlib between Jabhat al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army Factions*, July 19, 2014, PA-X Peace Agreements Database, https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2167_5ca6193b24761.pdf.

[82]*Untitled Agreement on the Payment of Diya between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Nour al-Din al-Zanki Movement*, February 2, 2018, PA-X Peace Agreements Database, https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2339_602a9cc682865.pdf.

Beyond such associations, a great number of Syrian NGOs and CSOs have been established invoking norms that fit the liberal agenda. For instance, in October 2022, one of the authors met a member of the *Shaml* coalition comprising of seven Syrian CSOs that gathered around several 'leading democratic civic rights values' such as human rights advocacy, political participation through elections, and the rule of law.[83] The *Syrian NGO alliance*, which brings together 25 Syrian NGOs, similarly works 'to meet the humanitarian needs in line with international standards and protocols' and to advance its core values such as participation, equality, and the preservation of human dignity and rights.[84] The insistence of Syrian NGOs and CSOs on these values, particularly in opposition-held areas and abroad must be understood in the light of their raison d'être to stand against the authoritarian Syrian government. In addition to their essential core work in relief, development, and peacebuilding – components of the liberal peace agenda – these organisations actively promote dialogue within communities. They often mediate disputes, particularly those arising between displaced populations and host communities over resources like water and humanitarian aid. Local NGOs, alongside social leaders such as tribal elders and medical professionals, frequently serve as neutral third parties in these discussions. Their involvement is crucial for conflict resolution, social cohesion, and peacemaking. The positive impact of civil society members often stems from their everyday work in providing relief and healthcare, as well as their respected social status. They often mediate disputes, particularly those arising between displaced populations and host communities over resources like water and humanitarian aid. Local NGOs frequently serve as neutral third parties in these discussions. The positive impact of civil society members often stems from their everyday work in providing relief and healthcare, as well as their respected social status.

However, it is important to acknowledge the complex nature of civil society in Syria, particularly during the early years of the conflict. A man who worked closely with both local civil society and the international community in Syria recounted his experiences negotiating humanitarian evacuations from besieged cities. He expressed, 'I started losing trust in Syrian NGOs because they confuse the revolution and the humanitarian field. At that time [when we were negotiating], some of my colleagues were reluctant to negotiate a settlement for the besieged people, they thought we should continue the struggle [of the revolution]'.[85] Additionally, the mediation efforts of community leaders often face limitations in the context of factional fighting and clashes between armed groups. In northwest Syria, such disputes frequently intertwine with family conflicts, complicating the landscape of mediation and resolution.

Civil society normative orientation

In the context of the Syrian conflict, Syrian civil society share a common objective: to support civilians overlooked by the Syrian regime and inaccessible to the international community, as well as those rendered vulnerable by the conflict. This has led scholars like Alhousseiny and Atar (2021) to classify these Syrian networks as examples of liberal humanitarianism. This concept goes beyond merely providing emergency assistance; it seeks to influence behaviours and policies while prioritising the protection of civilians.[86]

Liberal humanitarianism has become a defining characteristic of the liberal order and its values. Therefore, examining this new generation of Syrian civil society offers a compelling case for the central thesis of this paper, as it reflects the dynamics of humanitarian action within a complex and challenging context. By focusing on their initiatives, we can gain insights into how these organisations navigate the interplay between humanitarian assistance and the promotion of liberal values amidst ongoing conflict.

This perception likely contributed to the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) in January 2016, within the framework of the UN-led Syrian peace talks in Geneva. The CSSR was designed to provide Syrian civil society with a platform to make recommendations to the UN Special Envoy on issues directly relevant to the mediation process. Officially, the organisation has consistently advocated for a political solution to the conflict, thereby creating space for the meaningful inclusion of civil society in the Syrian political process (Theros and Turkmani, 2022). This initiative reinforced the connection between civil society and the promotion of liberal peace and values as endorsed by the UN in the Syrian context.

[83]Interview with member of Shaml coalition, in-person interview, Gaziantep, Turkey, October 2022.
[84]Syrian NGO Alliance website, www.syrianna.org.
[85]Interview with former civil society staff, Gaziantep, Turkey, October 2022.
[86]David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji, *Non-Governmental Organizations and Development* (Routledge, London: Routledge, 2009).

However, the CSSR has also encountered significant challenges that have undermined the credibility of its participants.[87]

Moreover, reducing Syrian civil society to the liberal agenda would not do justice to its incredible diversity, nor to the Syrian culture which infused the role and values of civil society. Indeed, there are countless examples of civil society actors appealing to cultural norms such as religious and tribal principles. Thus, Syrian civil society's normative orientation is hybrid, blending liberal values with religious principles, all of which align with universal principles of peace, human rights, and inclusion.

External persuasion of civil society

As identified earlier in this paper, a critical element in understanding the dynamics of Syrian civil society lies in the pivotal role of external actors, particularly in conflict-affected settings where power asymmetries and funding structures significantly shape the actions and incentives of domestic organisations. The Syrian case exemplifies this, with over 700 Syrian NGOs established in Turkey between 2011 and 2021, 20% of which remain active within Syria.[88] These organisations are heavily reliant on international funding. The Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF), established in 2014, is a prime example of a flexible funding mechanism aimed at supporting both national and international NGOs, alongside UN agencies, to address critical emergencies under the framework of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

The SHF has been primarily funded by Western liberal democracies, with key contributors including the United Kingdom, Norway, and the Netherlands, and more recently, the United Arab Emirates, which became the largest donor in 2023.[89] More largely, since the onset of the Syrian conflict, the European Union and its member states have remained the largest contributors to the HRP (OCHA Financial Tracking Service n.d.). However, notable shifts in funding have occurred, such as the decline in US contributions during the Trump administration, which starkly contrasts with support levels under the Obama and Biden administrations.

In 2015, OCHA implemented a 'Whole of Syria' (WoS) approach to unify humanitarian actors in Syria and neighbouring regions. However, the WoS initiative faced significant challenges, with over seventy aid groups, including the Syrian American Medical Society and Syrian Civil Defence, withdrawing from the campaign in September 2016. These groups criticised the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent for allowing the Syrian government to interfere in aid distribution, highlighting the awareness of Syrian CBOs and NGOs regarding the persuasion mechanisms linked to funding.[90]

Moreover, it is important to note that the majority of organisations receiving support from these predominantly Western donors include international NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee and Islamic Relief Worldwide, as well as UN agencies like UNHCR and WFP, and international humanitarian bodies like the ICRC. Hence this funding does not primarily go to Syrian organisations but to larger ones with clear Western values and interests.[91] This, among other factors, contributed to the devolution of risk and responsibility in the response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis, and to a highly hierarchical civil society.

The role of CSOs as intermediaries between local political forces and external actors further underscores the influence of major donors in promoting liberal norms within conflict-affected regions. CSOs not only offer international legitimacy to peace processes but can also act as conduits for the acceptance of liberal norms by local elites. This dynamic has been particularly evident in Syria, where external stakeholders such as the UN, the United States, and European nations have actively encouraged CSO participation in peace processes, as shown by the establishment of the CSSR in 2016. In the northwest, the dependency of HTS and the SSG on external humanitarian aid certainly played a role in HTS' change in values and attitudes from a conservative Salafi towards a more liberal and inclusive stance. In another example, the promotion of

[87]Sara Hellmüller and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *Against the Odds: Civil Society in the Intra-Syrian Talks*, issue brief (March 20, 2018).
[88]International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), *The Evolution of Syrian NGO Networks: Their Role in Humanitarian Response and Long-term Prospects* (Geneva: ICVA, 2021).
[89]OCHA, *Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund Annual Report 2023* (United Nations, 2024), https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cross-border-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2023.
[90]Scott Lucas, 'Syria Letter: 73 Aid Groups Suspend Cooperation with UN Because of Assad "Influence"', *EA WorldView*, September 9, 2016, https://eaworldview.com/2016/09/syria-letter-73-aid-groups-suspend-cooperation-with-un-assad-influence/.
[91]Home | Financial Tracking Service.

liberal values, including human rights and political inclusion, has been a central component of negotiations on post-conflict reconstruction led by the Geneva peace process. The incentives provided to Syrian CSOs, such as funding, capacity-building, and diplomatic support, have played a significant role in further aligning these organisations with international goals, increasing the likelihood of liberal values being integrated into their practices in the ground.

However, the political landscape within Syria and Turkey complicated the role of CSOs in promoting liberal norms. Domestic political changes, such as the tightening of NGO regulations in Turkey before the 2018 general elections, have created significant uncertainty for Syrian NGOs and aid workers operating in the country. Turkish authorities enforced long-ignored regulations, resulting in bureaucratic delays, seized records, and deportations of staff, particularly Syrian employees.[92] Additionally, broader geopolitical tensions, including deteriorating relations between Turkey and the EU, as well as between Russia and the United States, have influenced the funding and legitimacy of humanitarian operations in Syria. These tensions often manifest in reduced financial support for humanitarian programs, as donor countries use financial leverage to exert pressure on Turkey's political stance, further complicating the environment in which Syrian CSOs operate.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on LPAs: a rising form of peace settlement in contemporary conflicts, where CPAs seem increasingly out of reach. In focusing on LPAs, the article has sought to decentre analysis of peace processes from its sole focus on CPAs and bridge the disconnect between practice of peacemaking- increasingly dominated by LPAs- and research on peace agreements that continue to focus on CPAs. Whilst existing research has found that comprehensive peace agreements often act as sites of diffusion for the liberal peace, this paper has sought to investigate whether the same can be said for LPAs, and if so whether the participation of civil society impacts the likelihood of this as an outcome.

Adopting a multimethod research design, the results of the quantitative analysis of 240 LPAs in the PA-X Local dataset between 2009–2019 supports the expectation of a positive relationship between civil society inclusion and provisions relating to liberal peace norms. We validate this overall finding with a case study of northwest Syria, with evidence to support the argument that civil society inclusion in LPAs increases the presence of liberal norms due to their i) function, and ii) normative orientation of civil society organisations, as well as iii) the persuasion of external states and multinational organisations, who often fund such organisations. However, the case study also cautions that civil society inclusion is not a panacea, with many local civil society actors in northwest Syria blending elements of the liberal peace agenda with local customary context.

Beyond the scholarly tropes, this article has salience on three policy debates. First, it recognises a structural shift in peacemaking from CPAs to LPAs and calls for greater scholarly attention and engagement with it. Similarly, while scholarly discussions on contemporary peacemaking profess of a 'crisis'[93] and 'loss of agency'[94] of liberal values and actors, our analysis holds that often overlooked localised spaces of peacemaking can embed and promote liberal values, despite challenges. Our case study also outlines how elements of liberalism are locally derived from extant culture and religion, rather than tricking down from the international community. Finally, our analysis confirms existing discussions on the role and agency of civil society in sustaining liberal norms and practices, often to the benefit of marginalised groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

[92]R. Ellen and C. Lynch, 'Inside Turkey's NGO Purge', *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/inside-turkeys-ngo-purge/.
[93]Chandler, *Peacebuilding The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1997–2017*.
[94]Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettlement Beyond Solving Conflict*.

Funding

This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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