Seeking Inclusion, Breeding Exclusion? The UN’s WPS Agenda and the Syrian Peace Talks

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Women’s Advisory Board (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, a unique mechanism designed to include women in peace processes. Has the WAB fulfilled its objective? Based on ethnographic material, and primary and secondary sources, we argue that the WAB fostered a sentiment of exclusion among some of its members and of the broader spectrum of Syrian women’s organizations. The article further suggests that the WAB failed to meaningfully include women in the Syria peace process. The sources of these failures can be located in the process by which WAB participants were selected and the ‘peacemaker’ identity that they were assigned. The limits associated with the process of selection and the substance of the women’s engagement are inherent to the way the UN frames and justifies women’s inclusion. The WAB, it concludes, should not be hastily replicated as a mechanism of women’s inclusion.

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Keywords


We had not been invited to the talks, we were not official participants. Like nearly all Syrian women, we were just bystanders at an event intended to map out our destiny. Instead of taking our place at the negotiating table, we had to make do with the lobby.

MOUNA GHANEM, The Independent, 22 February 2019

The Syrian Women’s Advisory Board has been a pioneering mechanism for representation of women in the process for peace. It’s not all we want, but it’s a step forward.

RAJAA AL-TALLI, UN Women, 19 February 2019

When, in January 2016, UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced the creation of a Syrian Women’s Advisory Board, hopes were high that this mechanism – the first of its kind – would ensure that “Syrian women do not have just a ‘presence’ in the political process, but that they have impact,” to quote UN Women’s then-Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (UN Women 2016a). The Syrian Women’s Advisory Board (henceforth WAB) was intended to ensure that “diverse women’s perspectives and the gender equality agenda are considered throughout the political process and at key junctures including when peace talks are convened in Geneva” (UN OSE-S 2016).

The WAB has been presented as a mechanism to put Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and other Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions into practice. It has also been described as a way of ensuring “the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria” as per Security Council Resolution 2254 (also known as the Geneva Communiqué). However, this article contends that, while discursively seeking women’s inclusion, the UN’s approach ultimately bred exclusion. Specifically, I argue that two
sets of issues, the *selection criteria* based on which specific women became WAB members, and the *roles* assigned to the women once selected, created potentially unintended, but fully predictable, dynamics that further deepened the exclusion of women from the process.

This study draws upon five years of intermittent participant observation of the UN-led Syrian peace talks. Between 2013 and 2017, I had the opportunity to participate in and reflect upon the efforts of the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) to include Syrian women and civil society groups in the Geneva process. I had the privilege to get to know individual members of the WAB.

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2 In this article, I examine the unforeseen and unintended collective consequences that are the outcomes of purposeful organizational action. I am interested in exploring the tensions and contradictions between purposeful organizational action and both conscious and unconscious individual behavior. I thus distinguish between the intent of the United Nations as an organization and the conduct of individual UN staff members, and interrogate the principal-agent problem that may arise from UN staffers either willfully or unconsciously not abiding with the organization's normative WPS and women's inclusion framework. This echoes research by Lorentzen (2020) on the role of practices in norm refinement and contestation.

3 This study focuses on women's inclusion in the UN-led Geneva peace talks for Syria. UN efforts to resolve the conflict began with Kofi Annan's 2012 six-point plan and the deployment of the brief, and ultimately unsuccessful, UN Supervision Mission in Syria. The failure of attempts to reach a ceasefire led to Annan's resignation and the appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi as a joint UN/Arab League Envoy. Under Brahimi, two rounds of talks were held in Geneva (Geneva I in June 2012 and Geneva II in January 2014). The Geneva I talks yielded the Geneva Communiqué, a transition plan which was the first UN document on the Syrian conflict to include the principle of the full and equitable participation of women. Brahimi resigned in mid-2014. He was replaced by Staffan de Mistura, under whose leadership the WAB was established. De Mistura attempted to negotiate a 'freeze' in the city of Aleppo before launching the Geneva consultations in May 2015. By July 2015, he had created four baskets of thematic issues around which he would engage the parties in later rounds of talks (Geneva III in January 2016 and Geneva IV in February 2017). In the meantime, a US-Russia summit in Vienna (October 2015) paved the way for the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (December 2015) which renewed calls for a ceasefire (achieved for a brief period in February 2016). UN talks on Syria are but one of parallel, sometimes competing, attempts. The most sustained such effort are the Russian-led Astana talks (2017–2018) which resulted in the Sochi Syrian National Dialogue conference of January 2018. Following the conference, a Syrian Constitutional Committee was formed in the framework of the UN-led process to reform the Syrian Constitution.

4 I served as a senior expert on the UN Standby Team of Mediation Experts and, in 2017, as a senior expert in the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria. The UN Standby Team of Mediation Experts (now Advisers) is a mobile unit of experts managed by the Mediation Support Unit within the Policy and Mediation Division of the UN's Department of Political Affairs. While not UN staff members, the experts are deployed in support of various UN mediation efforts. I was first deployed to provide support to the UN efforts on Syria under then Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. I then provided support to various rounds of talks held...
and of the Civil Society Support Room. I also interacted with WAB members in other settings – notably trainings and meetings organized by a number of NGOs, peace institutes, and regional organizations. Because of ethical considerations and out of concern for the well-being of the various WAB members, all the material presented in this article is derived from personal observations rather than from interviews or statements (other than those publicly available and documented).

The article begins with a brief review of UN efforts to include women in peace processes and an overview of academic and policy analyses and assessments of these efforts. I then turn my attention to the WAB and analyze its role as a mechanism for inclusion. I begin with a critical assessment of the selection criteria used to identify potential members. I then turn to the practices of the OSE in dealing with the WAB and link specific sets of practices with exclusionary outcomes. The article draws on several strands of literature – norms and meaning-making, feminist theory, critical peacebuilding research – to analyze the gap between discourse and practice as regards the inclusion of women in negotiations over the future of Syria.

The UN Inclusion Agenda: Norm-making or Symbolic Politics?

In October 2000, observers described the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as “a ground-breaking achievement in putting women’s rights on the peace and security agenda of the UN” (Tryggestad 2009: 539). To increase the representation and active participation of women at all stages of conflict management and resolution, UNSCR 1325 advocated the adoption of a gender perspective in the planning and implementation of peace operations and peace negotiations while underlining the need to pay attention to the protection and respect of women’s rights in armed conflict (Tryggestad 2009: 540–41).

In the 22 years since the passing of this landmark resolution, the Women Peace and Security Agenda has sought “to elevate women’s voices and leadership, increase their participation in peace processes and leadership in security institutions, and bring grassroots strategies for peace building to the under the auspices of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, as well as specific support to the Civil Society Support Room and to the Women’s Advisory Board. My background as a native Lebanese and Arabic speaker, as well as my experience of civil war in my native country, allowed me to build trust with a number of WAB members. All the material presented in this article derives from my personal observations, rather than from confidences, interviews or statements (other than public and documented quotes) made by WAB members.
international level” (Donnelly et al. 2020). During that time, 15 Security Council resolutions have not only reaffirmed the role of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, they have also addressed important issues such as sexual violence in conflict, sexual exploitation and abuse in peace operations, and more recently human trafficking.5

Practitioners and analysts generally agree that Resolution 1325 created a norm. Adopted under the noncoercive Chapter VII, Resolution 1325 is intended to “influence behavior (…) at both the international and national levels” (Trygestad 2009: 544). There is no question that the WPS agenda has deeply transformed our collective awareness of the gendered dimensions of war and peace; nevertheless implementation of UNSCR 1325 has been slow and uneven with efforts to protect women against rape, and sexual and gender-based violence in war proceeding apace, while the gendering of blue helmets and the inclusion of women in peace processes has lagged behind. Indeed, UNSC Resolutions 1820 (19 June 2008), 1888 (30 September 2009), 1960 (16 December 2010), and 2106 (24 June 2013) deepened the international community’s commitment to recognize, monitor and report on sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations as well as to hold perpetrators accountable. UNSCR 2272 of 11 March 2016 further extended these commitments to sexual exploitation and abuse in peace operations. In recent years, middle powers such as Canada, Sweden and Norway have taken the lead in propelling the inclusion of women in peace operations. They have established or supported the establishment of several programs, of which Canada’s Elsie Initiative (Global Affairs Canada 2017) is probably the best known, and, in the process, have contributed to the creation of practices and to the diffusion of the normative regime embodied in Resolution 1325 and subsequent WPS resolutions.

However, when it comes to the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, the record remains paltry. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “between 1992 and 2019, women constituted, on average, 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major peace processes around the world” (CFR 2020) and while there has been some progress, this means that seven out of ten processes still do not include women in leadership roles. Surveying the record of women’s inclusion in peace processes, Corredor (2022) states that “when brought into the fold, women are often involved in Track 1.5 or 2 negotiations or forced to operate from the outside via

5 For the full list of UN Security Council resolutions relating to Women, Peace and Security, and for access to the full text of each resolution, see https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/page/1?ctype=Women%2C+Peace+and+Security&cbtype=women-peace-and-security#038;cbtype=women-peace-and-security.
pressure campaigns.” Where women have been included in Track 1 processes, as in Liberia and in the initial stages of the Arusha process on Burundi, they have been mostly granted observer status constraining their ability to influence the process (Corredor 2022; Anderson 2010). The inclusion of women as full participants remains limited and instances, such as the Philippines’ Bangsamoro process, where women were not only negotiators but also signatories of peace agreements, remain the exception rather than the rule. This is the case, despite a growing body of research that suggests that the participation of civil society groups, including women’s organizations, makes peace agreements more durable (Nilsson 2012; Krause et al. 2018).

In accounting for the slowness, uneven progress, and limited results of the WPS agenda, some policy analysts have invoked a backlash against the agenda by some Security Council members (Salas Sanchez et al. 2020), as well as overt and covert resistance to its implementation in a context of rising authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism (de Jonge Oudraat & Kuehnast 2020). The WPS literature has, for its part, drawn a distinction between policy and implementation, arguing that policies may look good on paper, but implementation often fails (Bell & O’Rourke 2010; Willett 2011). Critical scholars go even further to claim that the agenda’s inclusion policies can be summarized as “adding women and stirring” and that they fail to address the structural roots of women’s exclusion (de Almagro 2018; Gibbings 2011; Puechguirbal 2010).

**The Women’s Advisory Board: Genesis and Function**

Given the contrasting assessments of the UN’s WPS agenda sketched in the preceding section, the announcement in January 2016 that the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-S) would be setting up a Women’s Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy seemed to differ substantially from earlier UN attempts at women’s inclusion in peace negotiations. It thus provides a golden opportunity for researchers to assess what was seen as a unique mechanism for the inclusion of women in peace processes. But how was the WAB born and how was it intended to function? The establishment of the WAB is the conjunction of two parallel sets of efforts: the mobilization of Syrian women’s networks, coalitions, and activists in favor of conflict resolution, and the efforts of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to improve the legitimacy and performance of the UN Geneva track (Hellmüller 2020).

Syrian women began mobilizing at the outset of the crisis. As civil society activists, they participated in peaceful demonstrations. Once the violence began, women mobilized at the community level to address humanitarian
needs and provide relief; they also participated in local councils established in opposition-controlled areas to administer them in the absence of the state.\(^6\) Syrian women also engaged in advocacy in favor of peaceful conflict resolution. However, although they organized in networks to amplify their action and voice, “this early organizing did not translate into a voice at the international level” (Qasas 2016). Rather, the then UN Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, was reported to have ignored women’s pleas for inclusion. According to Liesl Gerntholtz, Acting Executive Deputy Director at Human Rights Watch, Brahimi, who was invited to address a December 2013 meeting on the role of Syrian women in the peace process, “left the room before hearing from any of the women” (Gerntholtz 2013). In January 2014, UN Women and the Government of the Netherlands organized a meeting of Syrian women activists in Geneva on the eve of the resumption of UN talks on Syria (also referred to as Geneva II). The women met with Brahimi. They demanded that women should make up at least 30 percent of negotiating teams in the talks. Their demands also included “ensuring that any eventual constitution should guarantee equal citizenship to the Syrian people ‘in all their diversity and affiliations,’ and guarantee equality of men and women, penalizing all forms of discrimination and violence against women” (Reuters 2014).

This meeting resulted in the establishment of the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD). Speaking about the women’s efforts to secure inclusion in all levels of negotiations at the Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit in London in June 2014, SWIPD member Sabah Hallak told participants “Syrian women of all backgrounds sat and agreed on the need to stop violence and hold all perpetrators accountable, those are the ones who will change the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and should be supported” (WILPF 2014). The SWIPD engaged in sustained advocacy for women’s full and meaningful participation in any national dialogue or negotiation process. A SWIPD delegation even traveled to New York to participate in key events during the opening week of the annual UN General Assembly meeting. But it would still take two more years before the WAB saw the light.

Shortly after the January 2014 round of intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, and in light of their failure to achieve progress, Special Envoy Brahimi handed his resignation to the UN Security Council. His successor, Staffan de Mistura, was appointed in July of the same year. De Mistura attempted a different approach

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\(^6\) In 2019, a study found that the number of women active in local councils had declined as a result of the extreme militarization of the conflict and of the emergence of non-state armed groups whose ideologies were opposed to women’s presence in the public sphere (Hamat 2019).
from that of his predecessor. He embraced three modest priorities: “anything to contribute to reduce the level of violence, anything we can do to increase the access of aid even across the borders and inside Syria, and promote the political process” (Sputnik International cited in Hilal 2014). De Mistura initially floated the idea of a “freeze” of hostilities in Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city and the country’s economic heartland. When this idea met with resistance, he embarked in May 2015 on a wide-ranging round of meetings, the Geneva consultations, including for the first time with civil society and women's organizations. These consultations which lasted from May until August 2015 allowed de Mistura to appreciate the fine-grained knowledge, local networks, and potential gains to be had from drawing upon Syrian civil society, including women’s organizations. It was during these consultations that the idea emerged which, a few months later, resulted in the establishment of both the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room. Zozan Alloush, a SWIPD and WAB board member credits the SWIPD for proposing the creation of such a mechanism.

In early 2016, given the complexity of the political process that was about to be initiated, the Syrian women from SWIPD also suggested the modality of an advisory board as a starting point for women’s inclusion. Together with UN Women, DPPA and the Office of the Special Envoy consulted with the Syrian women from SWIPD for their ideas on what an advisory board would look like, and soon after, the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board was established and began its work at the first round of intra-Syrian talks in February 2016 (DPPA 2020).

According to the website of the OSE-S, the WAB was established, with the support of UN Women and the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA), to give form to the UN's WPS commitments as expressed in various Security Council resolutions, as well as in UNSCR 2254 (2015) on Syria which “encourages the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria” (UN Security Council 2015). The website describes WAB members as 17 women7 hailing from diverse backgrounds and affiliations who:

share a commitment to engage in dialogue with all sides, uphold and champion women’s rights, and support efforts to bring about a fair, just and sustainable political settlement responding to the aspirations of all

7 There are now 17 WAB members, up from 12 at the time of the Board’s inception.
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Syrians, men and women. To this end, they are committed to supporting a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political process facilitated by the UN (OSE-S 2016).

The WAB has convened on the sidelines of meetings organized by the OSE-S with the various Syrian parties, including more recently around meetings of the Constitutional Committee. WAB members consult with the Special Envoy, his team and various stakeholders and are meant to ensure that women's perspectives and the gender equality agenda are given due consideration throughout the process. Advisory Board members have advocated for the release of detained activists and for the sharing of information about the fate of missing persons. They have contributed detailed knowledge of local conditions gained through their networks in country. They have advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and amplified the OSE-S efforts to this end. WAB members have also been tireless in their advocacy in support of women's participation in efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis and effective equality with men, representation, and participation in the political institutions of a future Syria. To this effect, they have contributed to building the capacity of Syrian women as a constituency for peace, and developed and submitted position papers and made recommendations to de Mistura as well as his successor Geir Pedersen. Managed by UN Women, the WAB also receives logistical, financial, and capacity-building support from various governments including the Netherlands, Norway and Finland. It has also been supported by the EU which has ensured the active presence and participation of WAB and Civil Society Support Room members at its annual “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” conferences (also known as Brussels I–VI).

However, assessments of the WAB’s role and usefulness are as sharply divided as opinions concerning the UN’s WPS agenda. On the one hand, there are those who see the Board as a useful mechanism which has allowed women to participate in an otherwise exclusionary process. Indeed, and despite advocacy by Special Envoy de Mistura and his successor, neither the Syrian regime nor the opposition have been open to the idea of guaranteeing 30% representation of women on their delegations. Though not unique to Syria or indeed to the Arab world, several factors can be invoked to explain this resistance including, but not limited to, patriarchal and religious conservative attitudes

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8 The issue of who is included or excluded is particularly thorny in the Syria process. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has labeled armed groups as terrorists and refused to engage directly with them. The Kurdish parties and groups have also been left out of the talks.
that relegate women to the private realm and deny them a role in public, particularly in political life (Aharoni 2020; Corredor 2022). In 2016, the opposition's High Negotiations Committee (HNC) established an all-women advisory committee to offset the “poor representation of Syrian women in the current negotiating process” (Syrian Observer 2016), but the HNC only had 2 female members out of 34 in 2017 (Williams 2016).

Women made up “a mere 15 per cent of the opposition and government delegations at the December 2017 intra-Syrian talks in Geneva” (UN Women 2022). And while the number of Syrian women involved in the latest effort, the Constitutional Committee entrusted with negotiating reforms to the Syrian Constitution, amounts to almost 30% of members,9 women remain a minority in the body's drafting committee. Therefore, in comparison with the record in Syria and elsewhere, the nomination of 12 women to advise the UN Special Envoy does, at least from the outset, seem to reflect the UN’s commitment to overcome obstacles standing in the way of women's meaningful inclusion in UN-steered processes.

Many international observers echo this positive assessment. Speaking after a panel discussion with members of the WAB organized by UN Women in 2016, Ambassador Karel van Oosterom, the Permanent Representative of the Mission of the Netherlands to the United Nations, declared that “The women in the Advisory Board have engaged in constructive dialogue and delivered useful recommendations, providing a glimmer of hope in a situation of atrocity. That alone showcases how crucial participation of women in the peace talks is” (UN Women 2016a). On the positive side of the ledger are also those who underline the board's unity around principles of inclusion, democracy, and equality, in spite of the differences that could separate them. Others see the Board as a mere symbolic and superficial attempt to include women, one that has failed to reverse the patriarchal nature of efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict (O’Keefe 2020). It is telling that these disagreements extend to members of the WAB itself, as illustrated in the two statements highlighted at the beginning of this article. The next section argues that negative assessments of the WAB’s performance reflect a sentiment of exclusion, shared by some Board members and by a number of other Syrian women activists.

9 The Constitutional Committee is composed of three lists of 50 persons each, representing the Syrian regime, the opposition, and civil society. There are 12 women on the Syrian regime's list, 19 on the civil society's, but only six on the opposition's Syrian Negotiations Commission. The proportion of women in the plenary body (also known as large body) charged with adopting reforms is much higher than in the small body charged with drafting.
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Why did a mechanism, lauded as the first of its kind and intended to promote and ensure women's inclusion in the Syrian peace process, seemingly fail to do so, at least according to its critics? The answer lies in problems with both the form and substance of the WAB: on form, the composition and selection of WAB members has been a bone of contention since the inception of the mechanism in 2016; on substance, the board has been described as marginalized, working on the sidelines of the actual process. In what follows, I discuss both issues and link them to a sentiment of exclusion on the part of a sizable number of Syrian women activists and to criticisms of the WAB by policy analysts and academics.

Establishing the WAB: The Difficulties of Selection

I am a Syrian feminist and this advisory board does not represent me in the slightest.

Facebook post by Syrian Women's Rights activist Oula Ramadan (SJAC 2016)

Many Syrian activists have “criticized the board as unrepresentative and a failed attempt at inclusivity” (Syria Justice and Accountability Center 2016). The selection process which yielded the members of the Women’s Advisory Board has been criticized for its lack of transparency and clarity. The selection of individual WAB members has been questioned on multiple grounds – their representativeness, their commitment to feminist ideals, and their integrity and personal credentials.

Selection challenges beset all efforts at including civil society and women's groups in peace processes. Who should select these representatives? Should the process be top-down (selection by the international community or the UN) or bottom-up (election or selection by other civil society actors and/or women's organizations)? What requirements, if any, should these actors meet? How should the selection process ensure representation of the diversity of the (s)electorate? Focusing on women's participation in peace negotiations, Brannon and Best (2022) suggest that the selection of women is based on:

(1) reliability as assessed through either connections to elites or ideological purity; (2) qualifications such as experience in the armed forces, rebel forces, civil society, or academia; (3) personal appeal or ability to elicit
sympathy based on factors such as victimhood, attractiveness, youth, or demographics; and (4) selection by a third party whose strength and size has allowed it to negotiate representation in the process.

Although the OSE-S has never made its selection criteria public, some of Brannon and Best’s criteria seem to apply in this case. Specifically, the women were selected by a third party (criterion 4), although this party did not negotiate their direct representation in the talks. The women’s individual qualifications (criterion 2) seem to have also played a role, with many of them accomplished professionals or seasoned activists, but there is less evidence of the importance of personal appeal given the wide variety of backgrounds of the WAB women in terms of demographics, education, degree of conservatism, and the like. Although the women of the WAB have diverse political sympathies, their direct connections to Syrian political elites on both sides of the divide vary greatly, with some hailing from established political families and others having only “become political” during the mobilizations in 2011. According to Brannon and Best, reliability as assessed through connections to elites or ideological purity is a criterion that negotiating parties use in selecting women, something that the participation of civil society to the Algiers peace talks on Mali illustrates quite well (Lorentzen 2020). It would therefore stand to reason that a third party would privilege a less biased approach.

The challenges of selection have been seized upon by those in the policy world who express skepticism towards efforts at broadening the spectrum of actors involved in peace talks. Indeed, skeptics argue that categories of actors such as civil society or women’s groups are too large and complex to yield legitimate representation (Zanker 2013, 2018). A review of criticism leveled at the WAB finds that such challenges have loomed large in the dissatisfaction and sentiment of exclusion expressed by critics.

Syrian women, including activists, have taken issue with the description of the Board as having been established in response to the demands of Syrian women for inclusion and participation, and as a selection arrived at through consultative processes conducted by women’s organizations (UN Geneva 2016). Instead, they insist that the establishment of the board was not preceded by sufficient consultations or an open call. For instance, interviewed by The New Humanitarian, NGO activist Hanan Halimah described the selection process as “neither clear nor fair to female Syrian activists. There should have been more deliberation among organizations working on the Syrian issue, especially women’s organizations,” she said (Mahmoud 2016).

Another subset of criticisms leveled at the selection process has accused the Special Envoy and his team of not having sufficiently vetted board members.
These criticisms originate primarily with Syrian human rights activists and concern, primarily but not exclusively, women who are associated with the regime. Some of the women on the Board were alleged to belong to “political groups that defended government-sponsored violence, who have links to extremists, who participated in corrupt practices, and who worked for organizations that assisted with government-led human rights violations” (SJAC 2016).

Were the women of the Advisory Board selected in their capacity as women or were they supposed to be feminists? This question, described by Asad as “a wound in the internal Syrian feminist movement” (2020) divided the Syrian women’s movement and contributed to a feeling of exclusion among some Syrian women activists. Mouna Ghanem, a former WAB member, noted in an opinion piece (2019) that, while the Board was intended to provide a gender perspective, “among its membership were those who rejected entirely the principles of universal human rights and international conventions on women’s rights and equality.”

If Board members did not represent Syrian feminists, did they represent Syrian women more generally? The Board’s composition did strive for diversity – regional, confessional, professional, and political. Yet, for many activists, Board members were first and foremost elite women. Echoing this view, Maria al-Abdeh of Women Now For Development considered that the Board promotes an exclusive model of participation and that creates a deep gap between the arguments developed by WAB women and the needs of women on the ground (al-Abdeh 2017). Other critics simply argued that women could simply not represent the diversity of Syrian women, particularly given the difficulties associated with “representation” in a country ruled by an authoritarian regime (Asad 2020). At most, they said, the women “ticked the box of diversity” (Asad 2022).

The controversy over the WAB’s composition led to the organization of campaigns rejecting the Board as a representative of Syrian women. Some organizations, such as the Syrian Women’s Network, suspended their membership in the SWIPD over the latter’s involvement with the establishment of the Board. Others, like the Syrian Feminist Lobby (a network of activists working to promote women’s inclusion in the political process), released statements “rejecting the Advisory Board’s representation of Syrian women, stating that the Board’s

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10 The initial board included several women with political affiliations, including government loyalists “like Ansaf Ahmad, a university professor and member of the Baath party – Syria’s ruling political party – and Diana Jabbour, the director of Syria’s state-run television,” and well-known opposition figures like human rights lawyer Majdoleen Hasan (Zouhour 2016).
views express only the personal opinions of its members” (Mahmoud 2016). On social media, the hashtag #WABdoesNotRepresentMe trended as campaigns were organized to deny the WAB any representative quality. To paraphrase Christina Shaheen, UN Women Gender Adviser to the Board, online comments could be summarized as “Who are you, why you? Why are women here?” Some reflected, in her words, “misogynistic slander that happens to women wherever they dare to engage in public life and especially in this highly polarizing, sensitive issue” (Gambale 2016). The Facebook feeds of several Board members were overrun with misogynist comments. A few campaign organizers even went as far as “defaming the members of the Board,” questioning their seriousness and patriotism even though several of the women were well-established feminist activists, and women’s and human rights defenders (Asad 2020).

WAB members who were feminist activists were said to have fallen “into the trap of representation” (Asad 2020) as they attempted to legitimate the Board by drawing a distinction between themselves and the negotiating parties. One of the most prominent WAB members, Nawal Yazigi, a former president of the Syrian Women’s League – one of the oldest and most established Syrian women’s organizations – explained the difference thus:

“We are not representative,” she said, distinguishing them from the role of the two negotiating teams. “We are representing civil society organizations, women civil society organizations. The members of the Women’s Advisory Board have their own opinions. And they might be in opposition, they might be in regime, but that does not mean they represent the opposition or they would follow any decision that is taken by either of the delegations. Because they’ve come together as an independent group. Regardless of what is their political affiliation or opinions” (Gambale 2016).

These kinds of explanations remained insufficient. And while Syrian women’s and feminist organizations continued to perceive the Board as an exclusive club of women, handpicked by the UN, over time the controversy died down as WAB women began to emphasize that they sat on the Board in their individual capacities and/or as representatives of the specific organizations to which they belonged.

**The WAB: Meaningful Mechanism or Sideshow?**

If the process by which WAB women were selected resulted in a sentiment of exclusion on the part of segments of Syrian women’s and feminist organizations, the function of the WAB has been critiqued as ultimately excluding
women from meaningful participation in the Syria peace process. Critics who have raised questions about this have done so under two headings: the advisory role of the Board and the expectation that Board members be apolitical and able to build consensus. Both criticisms find echoes in the literature on women’s participation in peace processes. Regarding expectations of women’s behavior and focusing on the UN, Andrea Schneiker (2021: 1166) identified “a particular and narrow understanding of what international actors consider to be women’s appropriate and normal behavior when they participate in peace negotiations.” Put briefly, women at the table are expected to care about issues at the heart of durable peace rather than only political and military gains. This is said to derive from their experience of war which is different than men’s. And it is further implied that, in so doing, women are the actors most likely to comply with the UN agenda (Schneiker 2021: 1173–1174). This understanding, Schneiker argues, defines the practices considered acceptable and thus creates a “hegemonic femininity.” This understanding, she adds, could create a double bind for women when the international actors’ perspective clashes, as it does in Syria, with the perspective of (at least some) national actors. For their part, researchers interested in understanding the positions from which women can influence talks have often argued that they could do so whether sitting at the table, or acting as observers within or mobilizing outside the process. In a recent article that brings the various strands of research together to probe women’s ability to impact peace talks regarding gender provisions, Aduda and Liesch (2022: 5–6) identify four factors that provide female delegates with the opportunity to influence what happens at the table: their (inter)national standing, their ability to set the agenda, their ability to form coalitions, and their capacity to act as veto-players. Aside from the table, they identify international pressure, the role played by international and domestic civil society, and the links between women delegates and domestic civil society as factors that could also help increase women’s influence. As will be made obvious below, few of these conditions are relevant when we assess the function of the WAB.

At the Geneva II talks (2014), Mouna Ghanem described women’s participation thus: “Like nearly all Syrian women, we were just bystanders at an event intended to map out our destiny. Instead of taking our place at the negotiating table, we had to make do with the lobby” (Ghanem 2019). According to several observers and analysts, despite the establishment of the WAB, Syrian women’s participation in Track 1 peace negotiations has remained limited, a stark difference with the many roles they have played in negotiations at the local level (Abo Naser et al. 2016; Tabbara & Rubin 2018).

Concerns about the potential marginalization of the WAB were acknowledged from the outset. Speaking to the press upon the announcement of the
Board's creation, Nawal Yazigi described the WAB as only the first step towards the full participation of women to the peace process, saying:

> It's the first time in the history of civil war this [the establishment of such a mechanism] happened. So this is not a small thing. But still it's not what we want. We really want to be at the table, women, third party, independent. At the table. That's our demand (Gambale 2016).

Mouna Ghanem who considered the establishment of the board “... a golden opportunity for Syrian women,” added “Now it's crucial for the Board to be able to influence all parties at the peace talks, and bring the women's agenda to the table ...” (Alfred & Mohamed 2016). In a similar vein, Randa Slim, Director of the Middle East Initiative for Track II Dialogues, said:

> “It is a small step in the right direction,” ... “As long as we keep women in a separate group their impact is limited ... they need to be at the heart of the negotiation.” ... “We don't want this group to be a rubber stamp to what's agreed by a roomful of men” (Alfred & Mohamed 2016).

It is important to acknowledge that the mechanism of the WAB was indeed an innovation and that it sought to include women to a degree unmatched in most UN-led peace processes. It is also true that the women of the WAB have developed and submitted positions papers, consulted with, and made recommendations to the Special Envoy, and met with, briefed, and consulted with a number of international stakeholders. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to estimate the degree of influence that they have had on the peace process. First and foremost, the WAB did not result in women's direct participation in the talks. Since the establishment of the Board, WAB meetings continue to be held on the sidelines of talks with the parties. During these meetings, the relative time spent with the Special Envoy and his senior political advisers is limited, although the senior gender adviser and more junior OSE-S team members are present in the room. When, in 2017, the OSE-S organized thematic groups to which it invited civil society, several women objected to the establishment of an all-male thematic group on constitutional issues composed of Syrian lawyers, judges, and prominent notables. The women have not become a third

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11 The women lawyers of the WAB felt marginalized by an initial decision of the OSE-S team not to allow them to participate in that working group, something they equated with women being tasked to simply look at gender. The decision was ultimately reversed with
delegation, nor have they been able to secure a role for the WAB in Geneva, at the Russian-sponsored Astana talks or in the most recent UN-facilitated Syrian Constitutional Committee (O’Keefe 2020; Joueijati 2017).

In brief, critics both inside and outside the WAB agree that the mechanism has not achieved its full potential. If, at the press conference establishing the WAB, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, underlined that “What is required is not just ‘a presence in the political process, but impact’” (UN Women 2016b), then seven years since its inception, the board remains an advisory body whose participation is mostly “limited to the corridors” (Abo Naser et al. 2016), a superficial effort with no clarity on how its work feeds into OSE-S talks with the parties or with international stakeholders (SJAC 2016), and no guarantee that its recommendations will be implemented (O’Keefe 2020). (Inter)national standing aside, and despite their tight connection to some international civil society actors, women of the WAB have not been able to set the agenda, form coalitions with parties to the talks, or act as veto-players by virtue of the way the mechanism was set up.

Is the WAB a sideshow? To fully answer the question requires us to probe the second major problem that beset the Board from its inception. The Women’s Advisory Board was presented as a mechanism composed of “peace advocates.” From the outset, “UN Women and international supporters insisted that Syrian women put aside their differences, especially the political ones, and come together in seeking to make peace” (Asad 2020). Both the women and their supporters went to lengths to underline that, despite their diversity, the women were able to not only put aside their differences but bracket their political commitments. UN Women expressed similar expectations with regard to the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy. At the end of a SWIPD meeting in May 2016, Hiba Qasas, head of UN Women’s Arab states section declared:

Syrian women showed that they are a strong constituency for peace, rising above their differences and uniting in their common desire to work together for an end to the bloodshed, for a lasting political solution and for forming a strong coalition to this end (UN Women 2016c).

This insistence on the women’s “neutrality” and ability to build consensus raises a thorny question. Why would the women be expected to be “neutral”

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two of the women joining the legal and constitutional thematic working group later during the meeting.
and to “rise above their differences” when others are included in peace processes precisely because of their politics and polarization? This is the corollary of stereotypes that confine women to the role of peacemakers (see Schneiker 2021). It also derives from a wider perception of civil society as positive, a conception that ignores the fact that civil society can be as polarized as the wider society and that it can mobilize in favor of violence as well as peaceful conflict resolution (Belloni 2008; Jamal 2009; Orjuela 2003).

What impact did expectations of neutrality have on the WAB? First and foremost, they contributed to the sentiment of exclusion that drove some women activists to withhold legitimacy from the Board. Asad (2020) rightly notes that the “neutrality” of the Board and its depoliticization cast a shadow on the multiple roles played by local women. It overvalued the contribution of women “peacemakers” and, in the process, marginalized the many women who played diverse and important roles at the local level during the revolution and since the outbreak of violence. Similarly to de Almagro’s analysis (2018) of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, we can argue that the language of neutrality and consensus contributed to “producing WAB participants.” As used by the OSE-S, UN Women, and international (mostly Western) supporters of the WAB, this language determined what women “peacemakers” can and cannot do, what women are qualified to sit on the Board and participate in its activities, which practices are acceptable and natural, and who is responsible for putting them to work. This is illustrated by the fate of Mouna Ghanem; Ghanem was asked to resign from the Board “after meeting with diplomats in my political capacity. For having the temerity to involve myself in the peace process, they expected me to leave the peace process” (Ghanem 2019).

How did all of this affect the WAB’s performance? WAB women were asked to and lauded for rising above differences by not talking about politics. In the early days of the WAB, this led them to focus on issues such as the fate of detainees, confidence-building measures, and humanitarian access. They were also extremely vocal in support of Special Envoy de Mistura’s ceasefire efforts. However, even as they tried to steer away from politics, politics caught up with them. In their first ever briefing, the women called for the lifting of sanctions. Perceived by many of their activist counterparts as a move that would benefit the Syrian regime and that stood in stark contrast to the demands of the opposition, this demand unleashed harsh criticism of the WAB. For Nawal Yazeji, this was simply a misunderstanding.

“In the press statement, we asked [for] the lifting of sanctions that impede the humanitarian aid from reaching the people,” she said. “But
the opposition side ... understood it was about lifting the whole sanctions on Syria, and not just for humanitarian aid" (Gambale 2016).

Yazeji’s assessment notwithstanding, the women’s focus on humanitarian and gender issues would continue to be used by critics to highlight their “depoliticization.” Several activists have concluded that the premium put on consensus has prevented the WAB from speaking to issues such as the Syrian regime’s use of barrel bombs or the thorny problem of transitional justice (Seif in Nobel Women’s Initiative 2016). Others consider that the search for consensus “diverted the focus of WAB away from advising on matters discussed by the negotiating parties and ensuring that gender issues are perceived as priorities” (Haid cited in Kapur 2017: 37).

That constraints around language and requirements to produce consensus directly contributed to lessening the WAB’s relevance and negatively affected the inclusion of Syrian women in the peace process is not something that the available data allows us to confirm. On the one hand, these were the parameters that allowed the Board to come into existence, function as an Advisory Board to the Special Envoy, and build links with various international stakeholders. However, these same parameters contributed to the frustration of the likes of Mouna Ghanem and to deepening the gap between the WAB and significant portions of the Syrian women’s activist constellation.

Conclusion

When the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria established the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board, it sought to create a one-of-its-kind mechanism to include women in the Syrian peace process, as per the requirements of the WPS agenda. The sincerity of the effort is not in question. UN Women and the early supporters of the Board – the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and the Hivos Foundation – are true believers in the agenda of inclusion and equality. As for the Special Envoy and his team, Hellmüller (2020) has convincingly argued that they saw inclusion as a source of legitimacy and performance. However, the analysis of the Board’s creation and functioning suggests that the way the UN has understood the notion of inclusion is problematic. This has resulted in the unintended, but ultimately harmful, double exclusion that I have documented: the exclusion of the broader spectrum of Syrian women from the formal process even as the same women have been politically active on the ground, and the exclusion of the WAB from meaningful engagement with the peace process.
because of the premium put on the women being peacemakers who can reach consensus despite their diversity.

The limited presence of women in Track 1 negotiations has long been explained by the way formal processes define participants. In Syria, as elsewhere, engagement in violence is the premier criterion based on which local actors become parties to peace talks. The patriarchal nature of the Syrian processes (UN and non-UN led) is reflected in the space afforded to discussions of women’s inclusion in official discussions. The Geneva Communiqué’s admonishment that women ought to be fully present in all aspects of the transition does not specifically speak to their participation in the negotiations, although it does speak to their role in implementation. Further, O’Keefe (2020) reported that “despite the UN’s public statements about the importance of women’s inclusion, in 2019 only 1 percent of the Security Council’s discussions on Syria included references to women’s participation.” Last but not least, Olsson and Obermeier (2022) note that, in spite of some progress, the majority of UN Security Council briefers (across all thematic issues) are UN representatives, of which women make up only 22%, a gap that is echoed when looking at non-UN briefers. Mouna Ghanem’s reflections (2021) on this issue are worth quoting in full.

In her book, “The Second Sex,” Simone de Beauvoir argued that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. De Beauvoir emphasized that destiny is not a cosmic force but a human choice, a result of circumstances and culture. It follows that circumstances and social determinants dictate a woman’s role in politics rather than her biology, psychology or even her intellect.

It is this same logic that explains the limited presence of Syrian women politicians in the United Nations-led political process, based on Security Council Resolution 2254. The resolution, adopted in December 2015, created an exclusionary culture not only against most Syrian people but also particularly for women, despite the repeated narrative of Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy at the time, on the importance of women’s roles in the political and peace-building process for Syria. ...

The design of the political process in Syria designates men as the Syrians, hence, women are relegated to the “other” – as de Beauvoir described women’s role in society – and consequently denied full-fledged partnership in the political process. Specifically, Resolution 2254 has half-heartedy encouraged women’s participation without establishing any quota for their presence in the delegations and the political process. Syrian women have been kept to an advisory role as members of the Women’s
Advisory Board; as a result, their political leadership has not been visible to the Syrian public.

While one could take issue with Ghanem’s characterization of women as the “other,” the WPS agenda is premised on characterizing women as “peacemakers” and arguing for their inclusion in peace processes on these grounds. In the case of the WAB, this contributed to a paradoxical situation where the Board’s efforts to build consensus and maintain neutrality vis-à-vis the various sides contributed to its perception as an apolitical entity. To quote Asad (2022), “the representation of women as privileged and central actors of peacemaking in fact depoliticized them as actors in the process.” Taken together with the poor results of UN efforts to improve the representation of Syrian women at various negotiation tables, this contributed to the assessment that this was a peripheral, tokenistic, and ultimately failed attempt at inclusion (Asad 2020; O’Keefe 2022; Ghanem 2022).

The UN’s attempt to include women into the Syrian peace talks was flawed by design. The manner in which the Board was formed, the expectations imposed upon it by the patriarchal nature of Track 1 peace negotiations, and the straitjacket of “women as peacemakers” contributed to the sentiment of exclusion which created tensions with several Syrian women’s networks, limited the Board’s ability to engage in certain issues, and ultimately hampered it from becoming the stepping stone for meaningful inclusion of Syrian women in the peace process. Some of these problems are structural in that they are embedded in the UN’s framing of women’s participation in the WPS agenda (de Almagro 2018; Schneiker 2021). Others are more amenable to improvement and reflect the willingness and ability of individual UN civil servants, including but not limited to the Special Envoy, to implement practices that refine norms and reverse practices that constrain their implementation (Lorentzen 2020). While none of these criticisms are intended to erase or deny the hard work, commitment, and punctual contributions of the WAB, this article ends on a note of caution about the usefulness of the experiment and warns against temptations to replicate the model as an effective way of including women in peace negotiations.

References


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