The Role of NGOs in Resolving the Syrian War: A Case Study of The Carter Center

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Keywords: *Conflict Mapping ; NGO ; Carter Center ; Syrian War* *How to cite:* *Nadiyah, Athilla. (2024). The Role of NGOs in Resolving The Syrian War: A Case Study of The Carter Center. Journal of Peace, Security and Democracy, 1(1), 1-15* Copyright: © 2025 Athilla Nadiyah. This work is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/		This study examines the crucial role carried by the Carter Center in facilitating negotiations and resolving the Syrian war between 2016 and 2019. This time was characterized by severe humanitarian emergencies and intricate geopolitical factors. The Syrian civil war, known for its immense human suffering and widespread international participation, posed significant obstacles to peacebuilding endeavors. In the midst of this upheaval, the Carter Center emerged as a significant participant, utilizing its expertise in resolving conflicts to facilitate discussions and advance the cause of peace. This research utilizes a thorough examination of primary and secondary data, such as government reports, interviews with important individuals, and evaluations conducted in the field, to analyze the effectiveness of the Carter Center's actions. The research emphasizes the Center's comprehensive strategy, encompassing the facilitation of talks, support for ceasefire agreements, and promotion of humanitarian aid. This is done while upholding a position of neutrality and demonstrating a profound understanding of other cultures. The data demonstrate that the Carter Center played a crucial role in establishing avenues for communication and mitigating violence, despite the ongoing and changing obstacles. This thesis enhances our comprehension of the intricacies of international conflict resolution and highlights the crucial role that non-state actors may play in promoting peace by scrutinizing the Center's techniques and outcomes. The research highlights the significance of continuous, compassionate involvement in areas of conflict and provides valuable understanding of the wider consequences for international efforts to promote peace.

Introduction

Human rights have existed for a long time. Concepts of morality, justice, and human dignity have played significant roles in the evolution of human communities throughout history. These concepts date back to the Babylonian, Chinese, and Indian civilizations of antiquity. In addition to being fundamental to Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish beliefs, they contributed to the rules of Greek and Roman civilization. The initial global acknowledgment of human rights occurred with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United Nations General Assembly approved in 1948 (Abakare, 2021).

Human rights had been internationalized, and at least some consideration of them had developed into routine behavior. Aspects of governance in public management of policy issues were included in international relations. Human rights consideration was a component of this global governance. Concerns about people's equal worth, freedom, and welfare have long influenced many national constitutions and significant portions of domestic public policy (Forsythe, 2006).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have recently become new actors in studying international relations (IR), joining the list of state actors that now play a part in the field. NGOs are crucial actors in international relations. An NGO is a group or organization whose members and operations transcend national borders. The global organization aims to link inter-state matters, but its presence is not meant to replace a state's role or authority in its internal or foreign affairs (Bakry, 2017). The creation of NGOs is considered an expression of the civil society's interests. NGOs are components of civil society and play a significant role since they are autonomous social groups that can operate as a bridge between elites who make decisions and the people (Alfadh, 2013).

One NGO with a fundamental commitment to human rights is the Carter Center. The founding ideals of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter serve as the foundation for The Carter Center. The Center was established in collaboration with Emory University with the core goals of preventing and resolving conflicts, advancing freedom and democracy, and enhancing health. When given the proper tools, information, and resources, the Center believes people can better their lives. In the lives of those it wants to assist, the Center strongly emphasizes action and quantifiable outcomes. The Center celebrates the fortitude it takes to forge new paths, fill voids, and tackle challenging issues in the most trying circumstances. The Center is aware that tackling challenging issues necessitates thorough

research, unwavering determination, and an acceptance of the possibility of failure. The Center is nonpartisan and aims to cooperate with other groups at all tiers of government as well as with local communities.

The Carter Center is a prestigious non-profit with its main office in Atlanta, Georgia. It is well-known for its work in global health projects, human rights activism, and international relations. This organization, which was founded in 1982 by the late U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his devoted wife, Rosalynn Carter, is a testament to their unwavering dedication to public service and their steadfast belief in the values of democracy, human rights, and the reduction of suffering on a global scale. The Carter Center receives money from various sources, including grants, individual donations, and collaborations with governments, charities, and other organizations (Carter Center, 2020).

The Carter Center has also made a name for itself as an advocate for defending human rights and empowering underrepresented groups. It opposes human rights violations and works nonstop to establish a society where everyone's rights and dignity are safeguarded. The Carter Center has achieved essential advancements in the area of global health in addition to its work in the areas of democracy and human rights. It participates in several health initiatives to fight deadly conditions, including malaria, river blindness, and Guinea worm disease. The Carter Center's pivotal involvement in practically eliminating Guinea worm sickness, a painful parasitic ailment that previously plagued millions, is one of its greatest accomplishments. To further emphasize its dedication to improving the general well-being of people, communities, and societies, the Carter Center broadens the scope of its mandate to include mental health treatment and health inequities (Congileo, 2004).

The Carter Center also acts as a leader in policy advocacy, conducting studies and providing fact-based answers to urgent global problems. The group works relentlessly to campaign for legislative reforms that have a real and beneficial influence on people's lives worldwide. These problems span various topics, from preventing climate change to guaranteeing clean water and sanitation access. The Carter Center has often proven its mettle in international diplomacy and conflict resolution. It participates in peacekeeping operations and conflict mediation in diverse locations, bringing warring parties together and promoting peaceful dispute settlement. This dedication to diplomacy and peace underlines the group's commitment to fostering harmony and stability in a world frequently scarred by conflict and division (Carter Center, 2020).

The Arab Spring movement started to develop in 2010, and the Syrian crisis are inextricably linked. The Arab Spring, according to Isawati's 2013 book History of the Middle East Volume 2, is a wave of revolutionary movements brought on by the numerous authoritarian governments ruling the Middle East (Rafaldhanis & Syaputra, 2022). President Bashar al-Assad and his backers, the Syrian opposition, and the Jihadist organization are the three primary entities who participate in and are involved in the conflict (Fahham & Kartaatmaja, 2014). A demonstration protesting the detention of many students in the tiny town of Daraa marked the beginning of the Syrian conflict (Starr, 2012).

The Carter Center is exceptionally qualified to foster trust among Syrians and between Syrians and the international world since it has been actively involved in Syria since before 2011. It has long-standing ties with all stakeholders. The Center also tracks, records, and examines the extent of violence nationwide. The Center is particularly well-positioned to satisfy contemporary peacebuilding demands for reforms, the peaceful reunification of the country, economic recovery, rebuilding, and refugee return due to its advantages and long-standing support of realistic policy goals in Syria. The Support for Peace in Syria Initiative continues progressing along two interconnected axes: conflict transformation conversation, research, analysis, and documenting conflicts. To generate visions for a political settlement to the crisis and to direct their ideas to high-level mediation procedures, the Carter Center's work in Syria aims to bring parties together (Carter Center, 2020).

With the Syrian conflict still going on today, the author intends to explore the non-governmental organization the Carter Center has had in resolving the conflict in Syria. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the Carter Center's role in resolving the Syrian War.

Literature Review

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in conflict resolution by facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties, providing humanitarian assistance, and promoting peacebuilding initiatives (Malafa et al., 2024; Ramirez, 2024)) . These organizations often act as mediators, leveraging their local knowledge and networks to foster understanding and cooperation among diverse groups, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace. For example, PeaceNet and Mercy Corps in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, play key roles in conflict transformation by addressing the root causes of conflicts and involving local communities in the peace process (Kiplagat, 2018). NGOs, alongside regional

organizations, promote inclusivity norms in mediation processes. Their insider status and long-standing expertise allow them to align mediation practices with local standards, as seen in peace processes in South Sudan and Myanmar (Pring & Federer, 2020).

In addition to mediation, NGOs also engage in capacity-building activities that empower local communities, enabling them to address the root causes of conflict and develop solutions for lasting peace. NGOs in Tamil Nadu, India, focus on emotional empowerment by providing communities with a sense of care and hopefulness, creating spaces for voicing challenges, and supporting community action. This approach helps overcome affective barriers that prevent disadvantaged communities from taking ownership of their situations (Langmann et al., 2023). Through training programs and workshops, NGOs equip community members with the skills to engage in constructive dialogue, manage disputes peacefully, and advocate for their rights, strengthening social cohesion and resilience against future conflicts (Riak et al., 2022).

While NGOs are often celebrated for their roles in conflict resolution, significant criticisms exist regarding their effectiveness and impact. One major concern is that NGOs may sometimes act as external actors imposing solutions that may not align with the local context or culture (Yeboah, 2021). This can lead to misunderstandings and resistance from the communities they aim to assist, ultimately undermining their peacebuilding efforts (Footit et al., 2020). In some cases, NGOs may prioritize their agendas over genuine community needs, resulting in initiatives that lack local ownership and sustainability (Makwere et al., 2020).

Furthermore, relying on NGOs for conflict resolution can create a dependency that stifles local agencies. Instead of empowering communities to lead their peacebuilding processes, NGOs may inadvertently perpetuate a cycle where locals wait for external assistance rather than taking the initiative themselves (Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018). This can weaken community resilience and inhibit the development of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, which are often more effective and culturally appropriate.

Additionally, the involvement of NGOs in conflict situations can sometimes exacerbate tensions. As the study of Feron & Krause (2022) shows, local actors can resist and reshape peacebuilding practices to serve their interests, indicating that the involvement of external actors can inadvertently undermine local agency and perpetuate dependency rather than foster self-sufficiency. A study by Nishide

(2023) shows that external aid can lead to a dependency cycle, where communities wait for assistance rather than initiate peacebuilding processes.

In some instances, NGOs may inadvertently take sides in a conflict, damaging their credibility and hindering their ability to mediate effectively (Lundgren & Sevensson, 2014). Moreover, many NGOs' funding and operational models can focus on short-term outcomes rather than long-term solutions (Gibb & Adikary, 2000). Many organizations are under pressure to demonstrate immediate results to secure ongoing funding, which can compromise the depth and sustainability of their interventions. This focus on quick fixes can overlook the complex, systemic issues that fuel conflict, making it difficult to achieve lasting peace. Lastly, NGOs often emphasize collaboration with local leaders, which can sometimes marginalize grassroots voices (Footit et al., 2020). Local leaders may not always represent the broader community's interests, and NGOs may inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances by prioritizing these leaders over more marginalized groups (Binder & Baker, 2016). This can result in peacebuilding efforts that are not truly inclusive, thereby limiting the potential for genuine reconciliation and unity within the community.

A more nuanced approach to NGO involvement in conflict resolution is essential to address these challenges, emphasizing collaboration with local communities rather than imposing external solutions (Makwarere et al., 2020). This can involve fostering genuine partnerships where NGOs facilitate dialogue among various stakeholders, including marginalized voices often overlooked by traditional leadership structures. NGOs can enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness by prioritizing inclusivity and engaging grassroots organizations while empowering local populations to take charge of their peacebuilding initiatives (Sacouman, 2011). Such an approach not only mitigates the risk of dependency but also strengthens community resilience by cultivating indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that are culturally relevant and sustainable over time (Vunibola, 2023).

In conclusion, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are pivotal in conflict resolution, serving as dialogue facilitators, humanitarian aid providers, and peacebuilding initiative promoters. Their multifaceted approach addresses immediate crises and seeks to cultivate sustainable peace by empowering local communities through capacity-building efforts and collaborative partnerships. However, the effectiveness of NGOs is often challenged by criticisms regarding their potential imposition of external solutions, the risk of dependency, and the

marginalization of grassroots voices. To enhance their impact, NGOs must adopt a more nuanced and inclusive framework that prioritizes local knowledge, fosters genuine partnerships, and integrates feedback mechanisms to ensure their interventions remain relevant and culturally appropriate. By doing so, they can contribute to developing resilient communities capable of navigating conflicts and fostering a culture of peace, ultimately paving the way for long-term stability and harmony.

Research Method

This study will focus on explaining or describing the specified issue in a qualitative descriptive manner. This research aims to generate descriptive information about the subject under study. This study evaluates the Carter Center's contribution to resolving the Syrian War. The author makes the case that this kind of study will be critical in helping readers understand the subject at hand.

Throughout this study, the author used data from various primary and secondary sources, including interviews, books, scholarly journals, and trustworthy online sites, to further elaborate their thesis. Additionally, the author would draw on official records or internet data that is pertinent to the subject (MoU, speech text, etc.). It is intended that by using these materials, the Carter Center's contribution to ending the Syrian War would be explained in more detail and with greater accuracy.

The literature study approach will be employed to collect the data for this project. Studying the literature helped researchers provide the groundwork for developing a theoretical framework, shifting their perspectives, and presenting plausible conjectures for the investigation. Additionally, it made it easier to classify, distribute, and arrange various literary works according to their subject matter.

Result and Discussion

Conflict Mapping Approach by Paul Wehr

A conflict map is a visual tool representing a dispute, illustrating the people involved and their relationships to the conflict and each other. This tool analyzes micro and macro disputes, encompassing international, national, societal, organizational, and interpersonal disputes. As a visual tool, it may be utilized for both group procedures and with those who lack formal education. The drawing can be made on a piece of paper, a chart paper, a flip chart, or even on the ground.

The concept of conflict mapping was initially established by Paul Wehr in 1979 (IGNOU, 2017).

Conflict maps facilitate the comprehensive examination of a conflict. It provides a clear depiction of the connection between the parties and elucidates the allocation of power among them. It reduces the visual perception of the locations of allies or potential allies. Conflict mapping identifies opportunities for intervention and points of entry for action. Mapping can also facilitate making a well-informed decision on the continuation of the intervention. Additionally, it aids in assessing the progress made in the war thus far. Conflict maps can be utilized at different stages of the process, initially to comprehend and analyze the conflict or subsequently to discover potential intervention opportunities or develop tactics (IGNOU, 2017).

Every map of a dispute is temporary and has to be updated often since it is a social activity that is always evolving (Wehr, 1979). Conflict mapping begins with the parties to a conflict being identified. Primary parties are those directly engaged in the dispute; secondary parties are those indirectly impacted or interested in resolving the conflict; and third parties are mediators, facilitators, or other neutral parties engaged in the conflict resolution process (Anom & Vardiansyah, 2022).

A specific dispute may be managed by starting with mapping as the first stage in intervention. It provides both the intervenor and the conflicting parties with a more comprehensive comprehension of the origins, nature, dynamics, and potential for resolving the dispute. Due to the dynamic nature of conflicts, which are social phenomena, any depiction of them on a map will only be accurate for a limited duration and necessitate regular updates (Wehr, 1979).

Syrian War

Syrians, governed by the Asad family since 1971, started anti-government demonstrations in 2011 (Blanchard, 2023). The civil conflict began on March 15, 2011, spurred by the Arab Spring (Szmagier, 2014). Inspired by these movements, peaceful protests erupted in Syria, calling for democratic reforms, the release of political prisoners, and an end to corruption. Teenagers in southern Daraa, a city in west Syria, scribbled anti-regime graffiti on walls. After they were taken into custody and subjected to days of torture, local protests demanding their release were organized. As attention turned to the government of President Bashar Assad, peaceful demonstrations quickly proliferated across Syria (Yacoubian, 2021).

The early phase of the conflict saw the emergence of various opposition groups, each with different ideologies and goals. The FSA sought to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a democratic government. However, the opposition was fragmented, with Islamist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda affiliate) gaining influence (Keen, 2017). By late 2012, the conflict had evolved into a full-scale civil war, with significant territorial losses for the Assad regime (Mudore & Safitri, 2019).

As the battle advanced, radical factions became more prominent. In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the commander of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), expressed his desire to unify AQI with al-Nusra, renaming the group as the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS or ISIL). The head of Al-Nusra, al-Julani, declined the merger, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the general leader of al-Qaeda, supported this decision, resulting in Al-Nusra remaining as his affiliate in Syria. Subsequently, starting in early 2014, a hostile struggle erupted in Syria between ISIS and al-Nusra, which essentially put Baghdadi against his previous master Zawahiri. While al-Nusra exhibited a strong determination to destroy Assad, ISIS has prioritized the establishment of a caliphate. The group emerged as a formidable and ruthless force, seizing extensive territory in Syria and Iraq. Their presence further complicated the conflict, adding a layer of sectarian violence and drawing in foreign fighters (Keen, 2017).

The rise of ISIS and the ongoing humanitarian crisis prompted international intervention. In 2014, a U.S.-led coalition began airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria (Keen, 2017). Meanwhile, Russia, a longtime ally of the Assad regime, launched its own military intervention in 2015, targeting both ISIS and other opposition groups (Ilnicki, 2015). Iran and Hezbollah also supported the Assad regime, providing crucial military and financial aid (Mamchii, 2023). International involvement further polarized the conflict, with various countries backing different factions. The U.S. and its allies supported some rebel groups, while Russia and Iran bolstered Assad's forces. This proxy war dynamic made it even harder to find a political solution as external actors pursued their strategic interests in the region (Mudore & Safitri, 2019).

Carter Center in Syrian War Resolution

The Conflict Resolution Program at the Carter Center encourages a community-based approach to conflict reduction and resilience-building to both reduce violence and enhance access to regions that are in desperate need of basic health care. By providing the necessary resources and establishing a forum for communication between health professionals and the communities they serve, the

Center intends to provide conditions that will make it possible for individuals to obtain the necessary medical care and services.

Since the outbreak of violence in March 2011, a total of 11.7 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes, either inside Syria or in nearby countries and abroad. Over 500,000 people have lost their lives, almost one-third of the nation's housing has been destroyed, the progress of economic growth has been pushed back by over four decades, and millions of youngsters have been denied access to education. The prevalence of unemployment in Syria is widespread, with around 80% of the population surviving on a daily income of less than US$3.10. This dire economic situation has made millions of young individuals who reached adulthood during the war vulnerable to being recruited by violent extremist groups.

The conflict in Syria has mainly concluded, except for Idlib and other areas that remain beyond the authority of the Syrian government. By employing a series of strategic military advancements and capitulation deals throughout 2018, the Syrian government and its allies have effectively eradicated the possibility of a forcible overthrow of the regime and have successfully reestablished government control over the majority of its land.

The resolution of the war necessitates peacebuilding initiatives that recognize the current status of the Syrian government while utilizing potential gradual modifications and ultimate comprehensive restoration for the entirety of Syria, encompassing all its land and population.

With a history of involvement in Syria predating 2011, The Carter Center has established enduring connections with all parties involved. It possesses an exceptional ability to foster trust among Syrians and between Syrians and the global world. The Carter Center's efforts in Syria aim to facilitate the collaboration of relevant parties to formulate comprehensive strategies for a political settlement to the conflict and effectively convey these proposals to high-level mediation initiatives. The Center further oversees, records, and examines the extent of violence nationwide. The Center's strategic position and consistent advocacy for practical policy objectives in Syria make it highly suitable for addressing the present requirements of peacebuilding, including reforms, the peaceful reunification of the nation, economic recovery, rebuilding, and the return of refugees.

The Support for Peace in Syria Initiative is advancing through two interconnected approaches: conflict transformation discourse and conflict research, analysis, and documentation. The Carter Center has played a significant role in resolving the Syrian conflict through its multifaceted approach, combining conflict analysis, mediation, and peacebuilding initiatives. As an impartial non-governmental organization with longstanding ties to all parties involved, the Center has been uniquely positioned to foster trust and dialogue among Syrians and between Syrians and the international community.

The Center's conflict mapping and analysis work has provided valuable data and insights into the dynamics of the war, helping to inform policy and intervention strategies. Its mediation efforts have brought together diverse stakeholders to develop visions for a political settlement, while its peacebuilding programs have focused on community-based approaches to reduce violence and build resilience.

While the Syrian conflict remains unresolved, the Carter Center's sustained engagement since before 2011 has significantly contributed to peace efforts. Its emphasis on inclusive dialogue, practical policy solutions, and addressing the conflict's root causes aligns with best conflict resolution practices. The Center's work demonstrates the valuable role that NGOs can play in complex, protracted conflicts by complementing official diplomatic channels.

The Carter Center is well-positioned to support post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and governance reform in Syria. Its community-based model and focus on building local capacity can help lay the groundwork for sustainable peace. However, resolving the Syrian war will ultimately require the political will of all parties involved, including external actors. The Carter Center's efforts represent an essential piece of a broader peacebuilding process that must be Syrian-led and internationally supported to achieve lasting stability and prosperity for the Syrian people.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has had devastating humanitarian consequences, displacing millions and causing widespread destruction. The Carter Center's multifaceted approach, combining conflict analysis, mediation, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives, has played a significant role in peace efforts. The Center's conflict mapping and analysis work has provided valuable data and insights to inform policy and intervention strategies. Its mediation efforts have brought together diverse stakeholders to develop visions for a political settlement.

At the same time, its peacebuilding programs have focused on reducing violence and building resilience at the community level.

The Carter Center's sustained engagement since before 2011 has made significant contributions to peace efforts in Syria. Its emphasis on inclusive dialogue, practical policy solutions, and addressing root causes aligns with best practices in conflict resolution. The Center's work demonstrates the valuable complementary role that NGOs can play alongside official diplomatic channels in complex, protracted conflicts.

Theoretical implications of this study include the importance of non-governmental organizations in conflict resolution, the effectiveness of multi-pronged approaches to peacebuilding, and the value of long-term engagement in complex conflicts. Practically, the study highlights the potential for NGOs to contribute to conflict resolution through impartial analysis, inclusive dialogue, and grassroots peacebuilding.

Limitations of this research may include potential bias in data collection and analysis, limited access to certain conflict areas or stakeholders, and the challenge of measuring the direct impact of NGO interventions in a complex, multi-faceted conflict.

Future studies could explore the long-term impact of the Carter Center's interventions in Syria, compare the effectiveness of different NGO approaches to conflict resolution, or examine the role of NGOs in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. Additionally, research could investigate the potential for replicating the Carter Center's approach in other conflict zones.

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