

Art as Peace Building

**Annex 3
Case Studies Syria**

Disclaimer

This report was commissioned by the British Council.

Research company: edgeandstory (in collaboration with Lanka.pro)

Authors: Lina Kirjazovaite, Jordi Baltà, Kateryna Kravchuk, Anna Karnaukh, Kai Brennert

The interpretations offered in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the British Council, its officers, or those individuals who contributed to the research.

Suggested Citation for the Full Report

edgeandstory, & Lanka.pro Collective (2026). *Art as Peace Building: An exploration of practices and impact scenarios of how arts and culture address fragility and conflict*. British Council. <https://doi.org/10.57884/30WN-CQ12>

Copyright

© British Council 2026, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Country Context and Case Studies

Syria

Country Overview

Political and Conflict Context

Syria has endured more than a decade of conflict characterised by shifting frontlines, multi-actor violence, and societal fragmentation. What began as a civic uprising soon escalated into a complex war involving state and non-state actors, extensive foreign intervention, and deepening sectarian and social divisions. Over half the population has been displaced, with millions seeking refuge in neighboring countries or further afield (UNHCR, 2015–2024). The conflict has devastated urban centers such as Aleppo, Homs, and Raqqa, obliterating heritage sites and cultural spaces, and imposing severe constraints on artistic freedom and civil society (Create Syria Report 2022 ICP, 2022).

Beyond the physical and humanitarian toll, the war has inflicted profound wounds on Syria's cultural memory, collective identity, and mechanisms of social cohesion. Artists have faced exile, censorship, and loss, yet creative practices have persisted – often in new forms and spaces – as tools for healing, documentation, and the reimagining of community (Abu Deyya, 2020).

Cultural Ecosystem and Infrastructure

Prior to 2011, Syria boasted a vibrant, albeit state-regulated, arts and culture sector, with deep roots in music, theatre, visual arts, and oral storytelling. The onset of war shattered much of this infrastructure: cultural institutions were destroyed or repurposed, and the movement of artists was severely restricted. Nevertheless, a resilient and adaptive cultural ecosystem has emerged, characterised by:

- Diaspora-led initiatives in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Europe
- Informal networks of artists and cultural practitioners operating within Syria and in exile
- Hybrid project models combining local ownership with international partnerships and funding
- A focus on participatory, community-based, and socially engaged artistic practices

Despite chronic underfunding, security risks, and fluctuating policy environments, these actors have played a crucial role in sustaining cultural life,

preserving heritage, and fostering dialogue and psychosocial support among Syrian communities (دومح، 2021; ةداجش رمس، 2019).

Peacebuilding and Fragility Discourse

Internationally, arts and culture have often been instrumentalised as tools for resilience, soft power, or development. In the Syrian context, however, local practitioners increasingly view creative practice as a lifeline and a right – fundamental to the work of remembering, healing, and rebuilding

social trust (2022; يميمي دللا، 2019). The interplay between arts, identity, and peacebuilding is thus not merely symbolic but structural, shaping how Syrians narrate their experiences, reconnect across divides, and envision alternatives to violence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach to examine the role of arts in peacebuilding and social resilience in Syria. The methodology was designed to capture both documented programmatic outcomes and lived experiences of beneficiaries, providing a comprehensive understanding of cultural interventions in conflict-affected contexts.

3. Damascus Theater Lab – highlights participatory theater and civic storytelling in fragile, conflict-affected urban areas.

These cases were chosen to reflect diverse approaches to cultural practice, different geographic and operational contexts, and demonstrated community impact.

Case Study Selection

Three initiatives were purposively selected as representative and emblematic case studies:

- 1. Action for Hope's Music School** – exemplifies heritage preservation and folk music revitalisation among displaced communities.
- 2. Ettijahat's Create Syria** – represents socially engaged art and community-based creative interventions

Data Collection

Data was collected using three strategies:

- **Document and Project Analysis:** Evaluation reports, project documents, policy briefs, and academic studies provided historical context, program design, outcomes, and challenges.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with beneficiaries, program coordinators, artists, and cultural practitioners, exploring participation, perceived outcomes, and challenges. Participants were selected and ensured representation across gender, age, and location.
- **Comparative and Cross-Case Analysis:** A reporting matrix compared the three cases across context, actors, artistic methods, participation, outcomes, challenges, and theory of change.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data (interview transcripts and documents) were analysed using thematic coding, combining deductive codes from literature on arts and peacebuilding with inductive codes emerging from interviews. Patterns were mapped to identify:

- The role of arts in psychosocial recovery and identity reinforcement
- Mechanisms of community engagement and participatory practice.

- Constraints and enabling factors in conflict-affected contexts

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants
- Interviews were anonymized to protect identities
- Sensitive questions were handled with cultural and contextual awareness

Limitations

- Limited access to participants in some cases
- Potential bias in self-reported outcomes
- Variability in documentation quality

Despite limitations, the methodology provides a triangulated and robust understanding of arts as a tool for resilience, social cohesion, and peacebuilding in Syria.

Mapping Summary

Approaches to Cultural Practice in Conflict

Syrian and Syria-related artistic interventions since 2011 can be broadly mapped into three intersecting approaches:

- a. **Cultural Continuity and Heritage Preservation** – Focused on protecting endangered artistic traditions and cultural memory.
- b. **Art as Healing and Social Transformation** – Centered on psychosocial recovery, dialogue, and trust-building.
- c. **Art as Civic Expression and Critical Discourse** – Engaging arts as platforms for public debate and identity negotiation.

Types of Actors

- Local artists, musicians, theater practitioners, and craftspeople
- Community-based organisations and informal networks
- International NGOs and cultural protection funds
- Academic institutions and research partners
- Diaspora cultural organisations

Timeframe and Reach

- **Action for Hope's Music School** (2015–present): Over 150 participants, thousands of audience members.
- **Create Syria** (2015–2023): Supported 47+ artists and 20+ community projects.
- **Damascus Theater Lab** (2010–present): Long-standing program navigating active conflict. over 25+ theater workshops, 250+ participants, 10+ plays

Case Studies

Action for Hope's Music School and "On the Tracks of Music"

Action for Hope's Music School represents a comprehensive effort to preserve, revitalize, and transmit endangered folk music traditions among displaced and marginalized Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, and Jordanian communities. The initiative integrates music education, research/documentation, instrument-making, self-production training, and public performance/exhibition. One of the activities undertaken in this framework is the "On the Tracks of Music" project, which has focused on documentation and capacity-building of folk music. "On the Tracks of Music" was implemented first in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, involving different minorities and vulnerable groups, including exiled Syrians, and expanded to Syria in summer 2025.

Context and Conflict Phase

Operating against a backdrop of protracted crisis and displacement, the project addresses both the loss of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the psychosocial needs of communities disrupted by war and migration.

Actors Involved

- Action for Hope (lead implementer)
- Local musicians, instrument makers, and community researchers
- International partners, including the British Council through the Culture Protection Fund
- Local partner organisations

Artistic/Cultural Methods

- Participatory research and documentation of folk music and instruments
- Capacity development workshops in music performance and instrument-making
- Training in self-production and digital dissemination
- Public concerts and exhibitions
- Digital archiving and development of an online platform

Participation: Who and How

The project adopted a highly participatory, community-driven methodology. Researchers and trainees were often selected from within the targeted communities, ensuring cultural sensitivity and trust. Over 132 young musicians and instrument makers (84 males, 48 females) were trained, and more than 1,600 people attended exhibitions, with 900,000 online video views (Action for Hope, 2025).

Outcomes (Intended and Unintended)

Intended: Preservation and revitalization of 146 musical pieces and 15 traditional instruments; Empowerment of local musicians and artisans through skills development and new livelihood opportunities; Increased appreciation and visibility of folk music traditions within and beyond the target communities.

Unintended: Expansion of women's participation in instrument-making (breaking traditional barriers); Formation of new bands and small enterprises among alumni.

Challenges and Failures

- Security and political instability, especially in Lebanon, causing delays.
- Cultural barriers to women's participation in some localities.
- Limited formal teaching experience among traditional musicians, necessitating additional support.
- Uneven digital access and risks associated with online dissemination.

“Most Significant Change” Story

A particularly significant change was the increased involvement of women in instrument-making, traditionally a male-dominated field. This not only challenged prevailing gender norms but also expanded the project's economic and cultural impact, as women began to contribute to creative economies and cultural transmission in new ways (Action for Hope, 2025).

Theory of Change

If young people affected by conflict are provided sustained creative education, mentorship, and opportunities to document and perform their cultural heritage, then they can rebuild confidence, acquire livelihoods, and contribute to social cohesion and cultural resilience. The process relies on community-driven research, participatory training, and public engagement to restore the link between heritage and contemporary identity.

Ettijahat's Create Syria

Create Syria is a regional incubator for socially engaged art, designed to increase artists' capacity to design and implement community-based creative interventions in crisis contexts. It combines workshops, mentorship, small grants, residencies, and public forums to support cultural practitioners working with themes of displacement, memory, and community rebuilding (Create Syria Report 2022 ICP).

Context and Conflict Phase

Create Syria emerged in response to the widespread displacement and social fragmentation caused by the Syrian war. It is situated within a context of both active conflict and fragile transition, with activities spanning Syria, Lebanon, and the diaspora.

Actors Involved

- Ettijahat – Independent Culture (lead organizer)
- Counterpoints Arts, Arts University Plymouth, Mozilla Festival (international partners)
- Local communities, artists, and civil society organisations

Artistic/Cultural Methods

- Multiform creative production (theater, film, visual arts, writing, community performance)
- Participatory workshops and digital/hybrid events

- Tailored mentorship and artistic guidance
- Public showcases, festivals, and online dissemination
- Knowledge production (Arts & Uncertainty toolkit)

Participation: Who and How

Participation was highly inclusive and co-created. Artists and communities were engaged through open calls, competitive selection, and iterative workshops. Over 47 artists and practitioners were supported, with more than 20 creative interventions produced, reaching approximately 800 community members and engaging 300+ creative practitioners in forums (Create Syria Report 2022 ICP).

Outcomes (Intended and Unintended)

Intended: Development of higher-quality, community-responsive artistic interventions; Strengthened community ties and identity; Enhanced visibility and career pathways for Syrian artists, including international exposure.

Unintended: Uneven access to residencies and showcases due to mobility and visa restrictions; Some artists lacked financial planning skills, affecting project sustainability

Challenges and Failures

- Visa denials and mobility constraints, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and following the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquake.
- Digital divides and security concerns in online collaboration.
- Structural funding limitations and dependency on donor cycles.

“Most Significant Change” Story

A notable change was the creation and dissemination of the “Arts & Uncertainty” toolkit, which codified participatory methodologies for creative interventions in crisis. This knowledge

product has been widely adopted, enhancing both artists’ capacities and the resilience of the broader cultural ecosystem.

Theory of Change

If artists from crisis-affected communities receive targeted training, mentorship, modest funding, and platforms to prototype and showcase socially engaged projects, then they will develop higher-quality interventions, strengthen community resilience, and contribute to cultural continuity and civic agency. The process emphasizes accompaniment, cohort learning, and documentation to ensure adaptability and long-term impact.

Damascus Theater Lab

The Damascus Theater Lab is a workshop-based program that develops local theater skills, engages communities in storytelling, and fosters civic dialogue through participatory performance. Its focus is on socially engaged arts for youth and marginalized groups within Syria’s active and transitional conflict contexts.

Context and Conflict Phase

Operating since 2010, the Lab has navigated periods of active conflict, censorship, and civic repression, providing a rare space for creative expression and negotiation of collective identity.

Actors Involved

- Local theater practitioners, directors, writers, and youth
- Community partners and urban cultural institutions

Artistic/Cultural Methods

- Participatory theater workshops
- Collaborative development of plays and performances
- Community reflection and dialogue sessions

Participation: Who and How

Workshops were co-created with local participants, with approximately 20–30

individuals per cycle. The approach emphasized inclusivity, storytelling, and the reclamation of civic space through the arts.

Outcomes (Intended and Unintended)

Intended: Strengthened local capacity and technical theater skills; Enhanced storytelling and expression of lived realities; Fostering of empathy and negotiation within fragmented communities.

Unintended: Fragmented reach, primarily limited to urban youth; Informal networks of ongoing arts practice, sustaining activity despite limited formal recognition.

Challenges and Failures

- Political constraints, censorship, and periodic crackdowns on cultural activity.

- Limited funding and infrastructural collapse.
- COVID-19 and mobility restrictions.

“Most Significant Change” Story

The Lab’s most significant change lies in its creation of micro-spaces of freedom and reflection, enabling participants to process trauma, negotiate identity, and envision alternatives to violence in an otherwise repressive environment

Theory of Change

If communities are engaged as co-creators in theater-based storytelling, then they can reclaim agency, foster dialogue, and rebuild trust, contributing to social cohesion and civic resilience amid conflict.

Insights and Recommendations

What Worked and Why

Ecosystem-Building Over Projects: Sustainable impact stemmed not from isolated interventions but from the cultivation of networks, alumni, and knowledge products (e.g., toolkits, digital archives) that outlast individual project cycles.

Artistic Autonomy and Local Agency: Initiatives that prioritized artistic freedom and community ownership were more likely to gain legitimacy, trust, and long-term relevance.

Flexibility and Adaptation: Successful programs adapted to contextual shocks (e.g., earthquake, visa restrictions, pandemic) by modifying timelines, delivery modes, and support frameworks.

Hybrid and Digital Methods: While digital tools expanded reach and enabled international collaboration, they also introduced challenges related to security, access, and inclusion. Hybrid models (combining in-person and online engagement) proved most resilient.

Gender Inclusion: Projects that actively addressed gender barriers (e.g., Action for Hope’s inclusion of women in instrument-making) expanded social norms and multiplied impact.

Enabling / Hindering Factors

Enabling Factors: Strong local partnerships and community-driven methodologies; International funding aligned with cultural protection and social cohesion; Participatory training, mentorship, and documentation.

Hindering Factors: Chronic insecurity, economic collapse, and censorship; Structural funding gaps and dependence on short-term donor cycles; Mobility and visa restrictions, especially for artists in Syria; Cultural and gender norms limiting participation

Policy Entry Points

- **Recognition of Arts as Essential to Peacebuilding:** Policymakers and donors should recognize and support arts and culture as foundational to social repair, not as peripheral or ornamental.
- **Flexible, Long-Term Funding:** Funding mechanisms should accommodate the volatility of conflict contexts, allowing for adaptive timelines and hybrid delivery.

- **Support for Knowledge Sharing:** Investment in toolkits, documentation, and digital archives can multiply impact and enable replication in other contexts.
- **Gender and Inclusion Mainstreaming:** Programs should proactively address barriers to women’s participation and ensure equitable access.

Contribution to Theory of Change

The examined initiatives affirm that art is not merely a tool for peacebuilding but an infrastructure for social resilience, memory, and imagination.

Their cumulative, relational impacts—shifts in perception, trust, and collective capacity—underscore the importance of ecosystemic approaches over project-based or instrumental logic. By centering artistic autonomy, local agency, and participatory practice, these interventions contribute to a qualitative theory of change that values non-linear, adaptive, and context-sensitive processes of social transformation.

Conclusion

The Syrian case demonstrates that in the absence of formal reconciliation mechanisms and amid ongoing fragility, the arts serve as vital civic tools for dialogue, empathy, and coexistence. Initiatives like Action for Hope's Music School, Ettijahat's Create Syria, and the Damascus Theater Lab showcase the diverse ways in which creative practices can process trauma, preserve heritage, and rebuild social fabric under conditions of crisis. Their effectiveness depends less on scale than on the integrity and adaptability of the cultural ecosystem they sustain. As such, peacebuilding frameworks must place arts and culture at the heart of recovery and social repair, recognizing their power not only to remember and heal but to reimagine the moral architecture of peace.

Access the full report here:

<https://doi.org/10.57884/30WN-CQ12>

www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight

 **BRITISH
COUNCIL**