

Building a Shared Vision of Citizenship

Final Project Report with
Recommendations

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents..... 4

Executive Summary 6

Methodology 10

Axis One:Political Participation as an Entry Point to Citizenship..... 17

Axis Two:The Social Contract and Peacebuilding 28

Recommendations 36

Conclusion 43

Executive Summary

This report provides a qualitative policy-oriented analysis of Syrian's (women and men) perceptions of citizenship, and of the prospects for establishing a new social contract and a sustainable peace trajectory within a transitional phase characterized by a high degree of uncertainty.

The paper is grounded in a central premise: that the crisis of citizenship in Syria is not one of definitions or legal texts, but rather a crisis in the relationship between society and the State—one that is currently being shaped under the pressures of security, economic conditions, identity dynamics, and the boundaries of the public sphere. Accordingly, any discussion of a social contract or peacebuilding cannot be separated from people's everyday lived realities, nor from the conditions that shape what forms of political action are possible or required.

The paper draws on a cumulative, multi-level dialogue process consisting of three tiers: local sessions, cross-governorate sessions, and a national convening session. Approximately 120 participants took part, with women comprising around 55 per cent. The sample reflects diversity in terms of identity, social background, geographic origin, and even positions vis-à-vis the authorities of the transitional period.

The findings are interpreted as contextual patterns and indicative trends rather than statistical generalizations, acknowledging the limitations of qualitative research in environments marked by fear, uncertainty, and polarization.

The results show that the context in which the discussions took place—characterized by rapid field developments, fragile security conditions, economic collapse, social tensions, and shrinking political space—constituted the overarching framework shaping participants' understanding of citizenship, participation, and the social contract.

In North and East Syria, shifts linked to changes in territorial control and the renewed presence of central authority have revived debates on decentralization, political guarantees for diverse components, and concerns about a reversion to rigid centralization. In Suwayda, a distinct condition of political estrangement and tension with the center has emerged, accompanied by partial blockade and a sense of isolation. In Homs and Tartous, discussions were dominated by fear associated with violations and the absence of credible accountability pathways. Meanwhile, in Damascus and Aleppo, emphasis was placed on the

severity of the economic crisis and the persistence of narrow decision-making patterns and exclusionary appointments, which deepen disengagement and erode confidence in meaningful participation and influence.

Within the first thematic axis, the paper shows that political participation continues to evolve within an environment marked by political desertification and a long-standing legacy of fear. This renders participation hesitant, oscillating between two trajectories: participation in opposition to authority as a form of pressure to prevent the reconstitution of authoritarianism, and participation aimed at gradual influence through public engagement to improve performance and reform emerging institutions.

However, the absence of enabling frameworks—such as a political parties law, active political parties, channels for societal representation, and clear rules of the game—combined with the persistence of formal and informal oversight, including pressure from “pro-authority public”, leaves political participation vulnerable to becoming symbolic performance rather than effective action. The discussions underscore that rebuilding the political sphere is not merely a matter of legislation; it requires restoring trust in political practice itself and linking participation to minimum guarantees of safety, rights, and transparency.

The paper also demonstrates that identity is not treated as a fixed factor, but rather as a variable that expands or contracts depending on several determinants, most notably power dynamics and proximity to or distance from authority. In moments of fragility, identity becomes an “exclusion field” that determines who is permitted to speak and who is subject to suspicion, while inclusive citizenship recedes in favor of localized, sectarian, or ethnic retrenchments that prioritize protection over politics. This highlights the importance of recognizing pluralism and managing diversity through clear guarantees, as attempts to “transcend identities” without acknowledging them are often perceived as a precursor to renewed exclusion.

The paper further highlights that the space available to women and youth is shaped at the intersection of security, economic conditions, identity, and social oversight. Both groups are often steered toward civil or service-oriented roles, while direct political engagement remains more restricted. The findings point to the issue of symbolic representation of women in contrast to weak substantive empowerment, alongside the absence of structured spaces for youth

engagement. Expanding participation therefore requires redesigning the public sphere and decision-making mechanisms to ensure meaningful authority, roles, and resources—not merely formal quotas.

Within the second thematic axis, it becomes evident that the possibility of formulating an inclusive social contract is not merely a technical or constitutional matter. Rather, it is contingent upon a set of interdependent conditions: a safe and functional political environment that enables the emergence of a social contract that is neither imposed nor exclusionary, and that is owned by all Syrians; a credible transitional justice process (encompassing recognition, truth, accountability, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence); and addressing economic collapse as an integral component of both the substance and meaning of the social contract (including strengthening economic activity, reactivating value and supply chains, supporting social protection systems, and strengthening social responsibility). These elements must be complemented by institutional guarantees capable of relaunching a comprehensive governance process for the State and its institutions—one that prevents the reproduction of marginalization and corruption, and thereby averts the re-emergence of authoritarianism in new forms.

The findings further indicate that the question of “where to begin” is distributed across three main orientations: State- and institution-building, trust-building, and peacebuilding coupled with addressing the legacies of conflict. There is, however, an increasing tendency to view these as interconnected and mutually reinforcing tracks that should proceed in parallel rather than sequentially.

In the area of governance, participants emphasized that redefining the relationship between the center and the peripheries is a key entry point for any viable social contract. Decentralization and local governance are thus framed as critical drivers for building trust, expanding participation, and redistributing power and resources. At the same time, there is a need to strike a balance between the unity of the State and the right of local communities to manage their own affairs, while also drawing on the accumulated local experiences developed over years of conflict rather than disregarding or bypassing them.

On this basis, the paper puts forward a set of recommendations across three levels (national, local, and international), centered on the following priorities: positioning recognition and transitional justice

as a national entry point for citizenship; redefining the role of the State from control to protection, and ending “graded citizenship” and classification systems; managing diversity through guarantees and criminalizing incitement and hate speech with non-selective enforcement; transforming national dialogue into a transparent consultative process with measurable outcomes; expanding channels for participation and strengthening unions and professional associations; ensuring the protection of women as a core condition of citizenship and adopting a national policy to combat gender-based violence; and linking citizenship to transparency, institutional stability, anti-corruption measures, and the provision of basic services as a practical test of the social contract.

At the local level, the paper calls for context-sensitive interventions that avoid imposing uniform priorities over diverse and unevenly affected realities. It emphasizes investing in spaces for dialogue, accountability, and local media, as well as activating local governance and local economies as drivers of social cohesion.

At the international level, the paper underscores the importance of independent support for justice and documentation mechanisms, the protection of witnesses and families of the missing, and the strengthening of local capacities in governance, service delivery, media, and local economies. Such support should be guided by transparent standards and community participation to prevent the politicization of resources or their use as instruments of patronage or punishment.

In conclusion, the paper finds that political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding in Syria are not separate tracks, but rather a single, interconnected process whose success depends on the ability to transform citizenship from a rhetorical concept into tangible guarantees: equal protection, credible justice, transparent institutions, and a management of diversity that does not reproduce new forms of exclusion. In the context of a fragile transitional phase, the findings stress that any process that does not place rights, recognition, and transparency at its core will remain vulnerable to regression and the re-production of exclusion. By contrast, investing in gradual dialogue, local governance, justice, and the expansion of the public sphere represents the most viable pathway toward building a sustainable social contract and lasting peace.

Methodology

I. Adoption of a Qualitative Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology aimed at understanding how Syrians perceive issues of citizenship, identity, political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding within the current context. It further explores how their perceptions of the relationship between society and the State are shaped amid the profound political, security, and social transformations the country has experienced in recent years, particularly following the fall of the regime. The paper does not seek to test pre-existing theoretical hypotheses or to apply ready-made analytical models. Rather, it aims to capture local public sentiment and lived experiences as articulated by participants in the dialogue sessions, while also examining the language and narratives they use to describe their political, social, and economic realities, as well as the possibilities for change within them.

The collective discussions within these sessions enabled the tracing of the meanings participants attribute to concepts such as political participation, identity, citizenship, the social contract, and peacebuilding. They also provided insight into the tensions embedded within these perceptions—for instance, the tension between the desire to participate and the fear of its consequences, or between the need for a strong State and concerns about the return of authoritarian modes of governance.

II. Design of the Dialogue Process

This paper is based on a cumulative dialogue process conducted across three successive levels, designed to enable a gradual progression from local-level discussions to comparative inter-regional dialogue, and ultimately to a national-level exchange.

The process began with the organization of 12 local community dialogue sessions, with an average of two sessions held in each of the following governorates: Aleppo, Al-Hasakah (Qamishli), Tartous, Homs, Damascus, and Suwayda. These governorates were purposively selected to reflect the structural diversity of the Syrian context, whether in terms of social, sectarian, and ethnic composition, or in terms of differing experiences with the State, authority, violence, and local governance throughout the years of conflict.

In the second phase, three cross-governorate dialogue sessions were organized with the aim of broadening the discussion and comparing perspectives across different contexts. These sessions brought together:

- **Homs and Suwayda:** due to the clear convergence in discussions around issues of violence, violations, and memories of abuse. In both contexts, local dynamics are marked by deep societal challenges in relation to the current authorities, as well as sharp polarization either in support of or opposition to them. As a result, questions of justice, accountability, and political legitimacy emerged as central entry points for understanding the relationship with the State.
- **Tartous and Damascus:** these two governorates appear relatively more stable in terms of security, which has generated distinct dynamics in the economic and social spheres, as well as in overall perceptions of key issues. Discussions in these contexts adopted a somewhat different framing, focusing on political uncertainty, the fragility of transitional authorities, and the absence of effective mechanisms for participation. The debate largely revolved around the limits of possible participation in a context where decision-making remains highly centralized.
- **Aleppo and Qamishli:** based on another point of convergence related to experiences of marginalization and imbalanced relations with the State, albeit in different forms across the two contexts. This is coupled with similarities in the scale of transformations these areas have undergone in recent years—particularly following the fall of the regime—and the accompanying shifts in control and influence, which have directly shaped local perceptions of the State, authority, and the future of their relationship.

These sessions enabled a transition from localized discussions to comparative regional dialogue, helping to highlight both convergences and divergences in how different communities understand political, social, and economic issues.

The third phase consisted of a national-level dialogue session bringing together representatives of participants who had taken part in the earlier sessions. This session aimed to elevate the discussion from local and regional levels to a broader national framework, allowing for the issues raised to be debated within an inclusive Syrian context.

III. Participants and Sample

Approximately 120 participants took part in the sessions, with women comprising around 55 per cent of the total. The sample reflected diversity across identity, social background, geographic origin, and even in terms of positions toward the authorities of the transitional period.

- Representation across different age groups (youth, adults, and older persons).
- Inclusion of persons with disabilities.
- Diversity in religious, sectarian, and ethnic backgrounds.
- Variation in professional fields and areas of expertise.
- Differences in both rural and urban settings.
- Differences in educational levels and academic backgrounds.
- Clear variation in experience and engagement in civic work and political activism.

The objective of this composition was not to achieve statistical representativeness of the population, but rather to enable the intersection of diverse experiences and perspectives on issues related to the State, citizenship, political participation, and peacebuilding.

This sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative research, as it allows for the achievement of theoretical saturation while providing rich analytical material without leading to redundancy or fragmentation. It is also consistent with the exploratory, non-generalizable nature of this paper.

IV. Analytical Approach

The analysis in this paper is based on a systematic review of the records of dialogue sessions across their three levels (local, cross-governorate, and national). It focuses on identifying the main patterns emerging from the discussions, with particular attention to the concepts and expressions used by participants themselves to describe their experiences and perceptions. This approach enabled the examination of:

- Points of convergence across governorates in understanding political participation and the social contract.

- Context-specific differences linked to local experiences with authority, violence, and political transformations.
- Challenges and opportunities for political participation.
- The role of local and social identities in shaping these perceptions.

V. Sample Limitations and Biases

This methodology acknowledges clear limitations in the sample. The views presented in this paper do not claim to represent all Syrians; rather, they reflect the perspectives of those who participated in the dialogue sessions.

Certain voices may be underrepresented due to factors such as fear, security sensitivities, social constraints, or pre-existing attitudes toward such dialogue processes, which may result in hesitation to participate. This was reflected in last-minute withdrawals or unexplained absences. Such dynamics should be understood as unintentional biases, commonly associated with qualitative research in conflict and post-conflict settings.

VI. Interpretation of the Findings Without Forcing Generalization

The findings of this paper should be interpreted as analytical patterns and context-specific indicators of how Syrians understand issues of political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding at the present moment, rather than as definitive generalizations or conclusive findings. This approach aims to provide a qualitative understanding of societal perceptions of these issues, contributing to policy and academic discussions on the future of State–society relations in Syria, as well as relations among different components of Syrian society. It also seeks to open space for further research that is broader in scope and more diverse in its tools and approaches, and that can support the development of more inclusive pathways for political participation and peacebuilding.

VII. Context and Security Environment

The community dialogue sessions on which this paper is based were conducted within a highly complex political, security, economic, and social context. In the period preceding and accompanying these sessions, the environment was marked by rapid field and political developments, alongside the continued presence of security, economic, and societal fragility across most Syrian regions. This context was clearly reflected in participants' contributions, as discussions on political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding were consistently framed within these broader pressures, which largely define the limits of possible political and social action.

At the political and security levels, participants pointed to developments in North and East Syria, including the conflict that emerged between the transitional authorities and the Syrian Democratic Forces, followed by the reassertion of control by the transitional authorities over Ar Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates and parts of Al-Hasakah. Subsequent agreements aimed at restructuring the relationship between the center and the Syrian Democratic Forces were also seen as significant turning points in the broader debate on the future shape of the State and the nature of center-periphery relations. These developments raised wide-ranging questions regarding the limits of decentralization, the future of local governance, and political guarantees for diverse societal components. They also reinforced concerns among some participants about a potential return to rigid centralized governance patterns that prevailed prior to 2011.

The impact of these developments extended beyond the directly affected areas, influencing discussions across various governorates. They reintroduced broader questions concerning the trajectory of the transitional phase, the scope of authority held by transitional institutions, and the form and substance of political participation within the constraints of what is both available and feasible.

In parallel, participants highlighted the persistence of both direct and indirect forms of security dominance shaping the public sphere across most Syrian regions. Spaces for expression and political engagement remain subject to varying degrees of oversight and caution. This influence extends beyond formal security institutions to include social and political networks aligned with authority, including what some participants described as the role of a "pro-authority public" in monitoring the public sphere and exerting pressure on critical voices. In some cases, the perceived social or political risks associated with

openly expressing views were described as exceeding those posed by direct State intervention.

Discussions also underscored the specificity of certain local contexts that continue to experience distinct political and security tensions. In Suwayda, participants referred to the ongoing tensions between the transitional authorities and local military, religious, and community actors, as well as what some described as a form of partial economic and administrative blockade affecting daily life. The persistence of this political rupture has contributed to a growing sense of isolation among broad segments of the local population and heightened uncertainty regarding the future relationship between the governorate and central authorities.

In Tartous and Homs, repeated reference was made to the continued climate of fear linked to violations reported in some areas in recent months, alongside the absence of clear pathways for accountability, transparency, or acknowledgment of these violations. Despite the issuance of human rights and UN reports on some of these incidents, participants emphasized that the lack of effective accountability measures or transitional justice mechanisms perpetuates feelings of insecurity and limits individuals' willingness to engage in the public sphere or express political views.

By contrast, participants in Aleppo and Damascus focused more heavily on the profound effects of the ongoing economic crisis. Severe economic deterioration, rising living costs, and declining employment opportunities have contributed to a contraction of spaces for public interaction and participation. Participants also noted that the continuation of government appointments within narrow circles of individuals closely linked to authority reinforces a sense of political exclusion among wide segments of society—particularly among professional and technocratic groups who perceive themselves as marginalized from decision-making processes.

This overall reality has contributed to a broader pattern of political and social withdrawal among large segments of Syrian society. Many individuals feel that their ability to influence public policy is limited or nearly nonexistent, and that the public sphere remains governed by narrow power balances that do not allow for broader participation in decision-making. Within such a context, discussions on political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding become conditioned by structural constraints related to security, economic conditions, and the limits of political openness.

Accordingly, the discussions held during the sessions took place within an environment characterized by a high degree of uncertainty across multiple dimensions, particularly political and security-related. Rapid field developments intersect with economic pressures and shrinking political space, imposing clear constraints on opportunities for public participation. Understanding this context is essential for interpreting the analytical themes addressed in this paper, as participants' perceptions of political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding were largely shaped within this complex environment of pressures and challenges, and were directly reflected in their contributions and perspectives.

Axis One: Political Participation as an Entry Point to Citizenship

I. Foundations and Possibilities of Political Participation in the Transitional Phase

Discussions during the dialogue sessions reveal that political participation in the transitional phase cannot be separated from the complex and ambiguous relationship between Syrian society and the State. After decades of restrictions on the public sphere and the monopolization of political life by the authorities, Syrians enter the transitional period carrying a heavy legacy of apprehension and fear regarding engagement in public affairs. This occurs within an environment largely unaccommodating to meaningful political action, yet simultaneously perceived as offering new opportunities due to the collapse of a repressive security and authoritarian system that had previously curtailed such possibilities. Participants emphasized the need to preserve and build upon these emerging spaces as an inherent right for all Syrians.

Consequently, political participation does not appear as a stable or institutionalized practice but rather as a tentative process, oscillating between the desire to reclaim political space and doubt about the feasibility of doing so under current conditions.

Within this framework, two distinct conceptions of potential political participation emerged in discussions. The first views participation as a critical or oppositional practice aimed at pressuring the authorities and preventing the reproduction of exclusionary governance patterns that have characterized Syria for decades. The second considers participation as a gradual pathway to influence authority and improve institutional performance, through engagement in the public sphere and efforts to enhance existing policies and institutions, even if these institutions are still emerging. This divergence reflects a transitional context in which the rules of the political game and the future State–society relationship remain unclear.

The discussions also highlighted a core challenge at this stage: the absence of organized political structures, particularly political parties and legal frameworks regulating public engagement. In the absence of such structures, political participation tends to take the form of individual initiatives or limited community discussions with minimal im-

pact. A participant in the Aleppo–Qamishli session summarized the situation: *“It is true that there is a total absence of political life in Aleppo, but this does not mean a lack of political competence... We were all optimistic about entering a country allowing political pluralism, but these hopes have begun to fade, and we are losing confidence in the government.”* Similarly, a participant in the Homs–Suwayda session noted: *“There are no parties or party coalitions, and no political parties’ law... so politics is in a suspended State. Given the security situation with thefts and murders affecting all communities, the form of political participation exists only at minimal levels.”*

“It is true that there is a total absence of political life, but this does not mean a lack of political competence.”

Concerns also arose that political participation during the transitional phase might become merely formal or symbolic, without effecting real changes in power dynamics. In the Damascus–Tartous session, one participant noted that some forms of political participation appear more performative than substantive, stating: *“Political participation in Tartous is somewhat of a display... the government recruits certain individuals, but they show up once and then disappear, failing to play the role they are supposed to.”*

“There is a kind of surveillance... even when some youth attempt to initiate political discussions on certain issues, they are stopped or prevented from raising these topics.”

The issue of constrained political space and unclear boundaries for participation also surfaced. Some participants highlighted the presence of implicit monitoring or restrictions on political discussions and community initiatives. A participant in the Damascus–Tartous session noted: *“There is a kind of surveillance... even when some youth attempt to initiate political discussions on certain issues, they are stopped or prevented from raising these topics.”*

Furthermore, discussions revealed that political participation is also tied to a deeper question regarding the reconstruction of the political sphere itself. In the Aleppo–Qamishli session, political participation was framed as essential for addressing accumulated grievances and building a renewed relationship between society and the State. One participant highlighted that political marginalization was a key factor

exacerbating local divisions, saying: *“Today, there are very significant grievances, and local identities are growing because the root of the problem is marginalization and lack of participation... therefore, political participation is the entry point for addressing these issues.”*

Collectively, these discussions indicate that political participation in the transitional phase depends not only on creating a legal framework for political action but also on rebuilding trust in political practice itself. The challenge lies not only in the absence of political institutions and the necessary legal framework but also in the willingness of transitional authorities to accept political participation—a concern central to Syrians’ collective memory, shaped by fear and negative experiences with politics, which continues to influence individuals’ readiness to engage in public life.

Accordingly, political participation in the current Syrian context unfolds along two parallel paths: one seeks to confront and pressure authority to prevent the reproduction of authoritarianism, while the other aims to operate within the emerging public sphere to gradually influence policies and institutions. Between these paths, the contours of a new political space are gradually emerging—still fragile and incomplete, yet reflecting Syrian society’s attempt to reclaim politics as a public domain for discussion and influence after decades of exclusion.

II. Identities and Political Participation – When Citizenship Becomes a “Exclusion Field” Rather Than a Rights Space

The dialogue sessions demonstrate that questions of political participation in the transitional phase cannot be separated from questions of identity. Identity is not understood as a fixed cause or ready-made explanation, but as a variable factor that expands or contracts depending on the nature of authority, the form of control, the intensity of polarization, and the meaning of “political safety” for individuals and groups. In moments of fragility, identity—whether sectarian, ethnic, or regional—becomes part of everyday language used to determine “who has the right to speak,” “who is viewed with suspicion,” and “who is treated as a full citizen.” Conversely, when guarantees are absent and general rules for participation weaken, the notion of inclusive citizenship recedes in favor of identity-based withdrawal, seeking protection before politics.

In the Aleppo–Qamishli session, it became clear how participation is redefined through recognition of societal components. Political participation is understood not only as an individual right but as collective representation and constitutional acknowledgment of identity. One participant sharply expressed this by linking the form of the State written on an identity card to her willingness to engage politically: *“As a Syriac... what binds me to the Syrian Arab Republic? Nothing... my Syriac identity comes first... if I am not recognized as Syriac, I will not recognize the Syrian Arab State... and this applies if I was a Kurdish and I did not receive my rights in the constitution written, not just verbally.”*

Here, participation becomes conditional upon State recognition of the component, rather than merely opening general political “channels.”

In the Damascus–Tartous session, identity took on a more complex form, reflecting not only sectarian affiliation but also regional dimensions (Damascus–Tartous–Deir ez-Zor) and often emerging as a reaction to “collective punishment” or “historical marginalization” and a lack of interregional solidarity. One speaker described this tendency as *“local identity withdrawal... not based on sectarianism... Deir ez-Zor identity goes beyond sectarian identity to become a local identity.”*

“The identity of Deir ez-Zor goes beyond a sectarian identity, to become a local identity.”

This withdrawal directly affects participation: when politics is read as a contest over local grievances, the ability to act collectively at the national level weakens, and public participation is replaced by a logic of “each region defends itself.”

In the Homs–Suwayda session, identity emerged as a key instrument for preventing the slide into new violence, not merely as a lens for explaining the past. Participants explicitly called for transforming the “sectoring excluding” discourse into a political/legal offense, as a condition for safeguarding the public sphere and reopening it to participation that does not produce new victims: *“I believe what can unite us is criminalizing sectarian*

“The sectarian discourse must be a crime so that there are no new victims or new perpetrators.”

discourse; it must be a crime so that there are no new victims or new perpetrators.” This approach views regulating identity discourse as a gateway to controlling the conditions of participation and preventing politics from being reduced to “incitement” or “revenge.”

At the national level, this interplay is magnified: identities do not operate in isolation but interact with the very definition of citizenship (is it a relationship with the State or among citizens?) and with the expansion or contraction of the public sphere. One speaker summarized this clearly, stating that the reality of participation is governed by challenges related to identity and the ambiguous definition of citizenship, within a context of uncertainty and change: *“There are challenges and issues related to identity and our definition of citizenship... both as a relationship between us and the State, and as our relationship with each other as citizens.”*

Importantly, the sessions also reveal that the impact of identity on participation is not uniform; it varies according to proximity to or distance from authority. When individuals or groups are “close” to centers of power or protected within influence networks, the cost of identity in the political sphere may decrease (or be leveraged). Conversely, when they are “distant” or in a marginalized/oppositional position, identity becomes a compounded burden, signaling suspicion, providing a pretext for exclusion, or constituting a perceived security threat. In this sense, identity alone does not determine the scope of participation; rather, it is the relationship between identity and the balance of power that matters: who has protection, who lacks it, who is allowed to represent themselves, and who must first demonstrate “loyalty” or “innocence” before being permitted to participate politically.

III. Spaces for Women and Youth in Political Participation

The dialogue sessions reveal that opportunities for women’s and youth’s political participation in Syria during the transitional phase are shaped at the intersection of several structural factors: security, identity, economy, social surveillance, and the nature of political authority itself. Contrary to common perceptions that reduce the issue to underrepresentation or lack of opportunities, discussions showed that the challenge runs deeper, being linked to the very structure of the public sphere and the boundaries of what is politically and socially permissible. Women and youth face not only barriers to participation but also narrow definitions of what is acceptable politically; they are

often pushed toward civil, social, or humanitarian roles, while direct political engagement remains highly constrained and sensitive.

In the Tartous–Damascus session, this challenge emerged clearly in discussions about youth engagement in the public sphere. One participant noted that the absence of organized and safe spaces for political activity leaves many young people outside public life—not due to lack of interest, but due to the absence of enabling environments. One participant expressed this directly by saying: “Most young people are not participating in public work, unfortunately... there is no space for them.”

In the Homs–Suwayda session, youth participation was discussed in the context of fear over the consequences of political engagement, as political work carries direct risks to personal security and livelihood. One participant described this dilemma: *“How can youth participate in restructuring the State or joining a political party? This exposes them to danger... it makes their life controlled and they cannot secure their basic living.”*

Here, political participation is perceived as both a personal and economic risk, making engagement costly and potentially threatening individual or family stability.

The absence of spaces, intersecting with fear and frustration, does not merely limit participation; it also reproduces generational gaps, giving the impression that political activity is confined to narrow circles or older elites who have previously experienced organized or unorganized political work, as well as State repression and violence, and who have developed more adaptive responses to the frustrating realities and risks. These older participants often assume a supervisory role over political activity, leaving younger generations closer to local initiatives or volunteer work than to organized politics.

For women, discussions indicated that progress in some contexts remains partial or limited. In the Aleppo–Qamishli session, participants noted that women have started to enter some decision-making or public work positions in recent years, yet this presence is often more symbolic than substantive. One participant remarked: *“Regarding women, they have taken roles in decision-making centers, which is new... but it was partly symbolic, not 100%.”* This reflects a broad awareness that women’s presence in certain positions does not

necessarily translate into real influence over policies or decisions; it may simply reshape the overall appearance of participation without fundamentally altering power balances.

These challenges intensify when intersecting with identity and social belonging. Young women, for instance, often face multiple layers of constraints: gender-related, social surveillance, and political/security context. In some local settings, women's political participation is questioned or socially stigmatized, pushing many to limit themselves to less sensitive areas. Conversely, some contexts may offer relatively wider opportunities, particularly in regions that have experienced diverse local organization or self-administration experiments in recent years. However, these opportunities still face challenges related to gaps between decision-making and practice, or between representation and actual empowerment.

These issues were also reflected in the national-level dialogue session, which highlighted the need to rethink the structure of political dialogue itself, so that it is not monopolized by elites or older groups. One participant emphasized expanding dialogue spaces to include women and youth actively, stating: *“Activate the role of additions... so that youth and women are included, and there is no centralization of dialogue limited to older individuals and men, excluding women and girls.”* This underscores a growing awareness that broadening participation requires not only opening the political field but also redesigning dialogue and institutional spaces to allow wider representation for new generations and for women.

Collectively, these discussions indicate that the issue of women's and youth's participation in the transitional phase cannot be understood solely in terms of numerical representation or formal opportunities. The challenge relates to the nature of the political sphere itself: its safety, openness, and the social and cultural limits governing it. In this sense, women's and youth participation becomes a crucial indicator of Syrian society's ability to rebuild a more inclusive political space, where participation is exercised as a genuine right, not granted as a privilege.

IV. Civil Society as an Alternative Space for Political Participation

The dialogue sessions indicate that, in the current Syrian context, civil society is not only perceived as a developmental or social sector but also as one of the few remaining arenas for public engagement

amid the absence of organized party structures and restrictions on direct political activity. With no clear party law, weak representative institutions, and an ambiguous relationship between society and the State during the transitional phase, civil society has become for many Syrians the most realistic space to exercise some form of public action—whether through local initiatives, associations, or community networks.

Can civil society currently serve as a means for political participation under a closed horizon, with no party law and no support for any political movement?

However, discussions also highlighted that this role is not without challenges. Civil society oscillates between serving as an alternative space for political participation and becoming a limited-impact domain, subject to pressures from authorities, funding sources, and social surveillance. In the Tartous–Damascus session, civil society was presented as a potential channel for participation in the context of a closed political horizon and the absence of party frameworks. One participant noted that the lack of a party law makes civic work one of the few spaces available for engaging in public affairs. He posed the question directly: *“Can civil society currently serve as a means for political participation under a closed horizon, with no party law and no support for any political movement?”*

This reflects growing awareness that civil society, by necessity, may function as a temporary substitute for political space, yet it raises the challenge of defining the boundaries between civic and political action, especially in a context where the authorities remain wary of any activity that could be interpreted as political.

Conversely, the Aleppo–Qamishli session showed that, in certain local contexts, civil society has played a significant role in maintaining public action during years of conflict, through community initiatives, humanitarian work, and local initiatives. Yet participants emphasized that this role cannot fully compensate for the absence of organized political life, as civic work tends to respond to immediate social needs rather than influence public policy. One participant remarked: “Syrian society possesses great capacities and skills, but the absence of a suitable political environment often makes these capabilities operate outside the organized political field.”

In the Homs–Suwayda session, civil society was described as relatively active compared to the political sphere. Participants highlighted

multiple community initiatives and rich civic activity in both cities.

However, this vibrancy did not necessarily translate into direct political influence and often remained confined to social or service-oriented domains.

One participant summarized this by stating: “Political participation exists at its minimal level, while there is very rich civil activity in the two cities.”

This contrast between civic vitality and weak political participation largely reflects the transitional phase: civil society operates in a relatively broader space than politics but lacks the tools to convert this activity into institutionalized political influence.

“Against a backdrop of rich civil activity, political participation appears minimal.”

At the national level, civil society is also seen as a potential path for rebuilding the public sphere and reorganizing community interests. Participants noted that professional unions and associations could play an important role in organizing and representing societal demands, especially in light of the political “desertification” affecting Syria’s party environment. A central question arose regarding the potential for civic and union work to serve as an interim channel for aggregating and structuring interests until a more open political environment emerges.

Nevertheless, the discussions showed that civil society itself is not a homogeneous entity; it is influenced by local, identity-based, and funding-related divisions. While funding biases and donor agendas have long been among the greatest challenges to the cohesion of civil society, the new Syrian reality following the fall of the regime introduces even deeper and more serious challenges. Although the newly available spaces for civic action—especially at the local level—are seen as opportunities and achievements after the fall of the Assad regime, the danger lies in these new spaces being reduced to merely immediate responses to local grievances. Such an overextension risks transforming growing local civil society from representing the interests of its communities into representing only their grievances. This, in turn, is likely to push civil society increasingly into narrow geographic, factional, or interest-based confines, rather than fostering openness and convergence around issues of common concern for all Syrians. This dynamic could limit its ability to play a sustained, long-term political role.

In conclusion, the sessions show that civil society in Syria stands at a crossroads: on one hand, it constitutes one of the few available arenas

for public engagement and community initiative; on the other hand, it faces challenges regarding autonomy, influence, and representation. Accordingly, civil society should not be seen as a permanent substitute for political work but as a transitional space that can help rebuild the public sphere and nurture a culture of participation until a more open political environment allows for the return of organized political action.

V. How Do We Reclaim Our Political Space?

Discussions in the cross-regional and national-level dialogue sessions indicate that reclaiming political space is not merely a technical issue related to enacting laws or establishing parties; it is a deeper question about rebuilding the public sphere itself after decades of political desertification and accumulated fear of engaging in public affairs. Participants agreed that the political field in Syria remains fragile and limited, and that its recovery requires multiple, parallel pathways starting from society itself, without necessarily waiting for the authorities to initiate or open political space.

One recurring proposal across sessions was to build community and dialogue spaces capable of gradually revitalizing political discussion, so that local meetings and forums become safe spaces for exchanging ideas and building trust among citizens. In the Tartous–Damascus session, participants noted that some political discussions have already begun to appear as informal “political salons,” yet they remain limited in impact due to surveillance or fear of turning these discussions into organized political action. One participant described this phenomenon by saying that political participation *“sometimes becomes like political salons in cafés... people discuss but remain far from real impact.”* This illustrates that reclaiming political space can start with small, informal initiatives, but these need a safer and more stable environment to transform into meaningful political action.

“Hopes started to fail and we began losing trust.”

In the Aleppo–Qamishli session, the idea emerged that reclaiming political space cannot happen without rebuilding trust between society and the authorities, and among different components within society itself. Participants highlighted that loss of trust in political promises or announced reforms constitutes a major barrier to participation. One participant noted that Syrians had hoped for greater openness in public space following recent transformations, but these expectations

began to fade: *“We were all optimistic that we were moving toward a country that respects citizens and allows political pluralism, but these hopes started to fail and we began losing trust.”* This underscores that reclaiming political space requires first and foremost rebuilding confidence in the very value of political participation, as a lack of trust drives many citizens into withdrawal from public life.

The Homs–Suwayda session showed that reclaiming political space is also linked to addressing rights-related issues and establishing a minimum level of justice and accountability, as well as improving security and economic conditions. Participants noted that the continuation of violations and lack of accountability create an environment where citizens lose faith in organized political work, as politics in this context becomes merely an extension of unresolved conflicts or unacknowledged grievances. In this context, one participant noted that the current security situation involves crimes and violations affecting various communities, some motivated by revenge and others by criminal intent, saying: *“The security situation includes thefts and murders... and it affects all communities regardless of their sectarian affiliation, some motivated by revenge—which is the most prominent currently—and some by theft.”*

This highlights that rebuilding political space cannot occur without addressing such violations within a clear rights-based framework that ensures justice and accountability, because continued violence or impunity deepens insecurity and undermines trust in institutions. Transitional justice and holding violators accountable thus become essential elements of rebuilding the political sphere, as citizens cannot engage in public life with confidence unless they feel the legal system can protect their rights.

At the national dialogue session, discussions focused on the importance of gradually building civil and political networks capable of organizing and representing community interests. Participants emphasized that Syrians need to rebuild political life from the grassroots by forming civil networks and associations that could later evolve into more organized political frameworks. One participant stressed that reclaiming political space cannot be achieved by waiting, but through community initiative and cumulative action: *“Space is taken, not given... if we wait for the authorities to give us space, they won’t.”* This reflects a growing recognition that rebuilding political space requires genuine, effective, and independent community initiatives, with society itself playing an active role in creating these spaces rather than waiting for the authorities.

Taken together, these proposals indicate that reclaiming political space in Syria is neither quick nor straightforward; it is a long-term process requiring interaction across multiple levels: rebuilding trust, expanding dialogue spaces, strengthening civil society and professional unions, providing minimum political and economic security, and achieving justice. In this sense, reclaiming the political sphere does not only mean reopening space for parties or elections, but also rebuilding the political culture itself, making participation in public affairs a natural part of citizens' relationship with the State and with each other.

Axis Two: The Social Contract and Peacebuilding

I. Can a Social Contract Unite Syrians?

Cross-cutting sessions indicate that the question of “building an inclusive social contract” is not raised today as a purely theoretical exercise or a constitutional debate separated from reality. Rather, it is seen as a test of whether minimal trust can be rebuilt: between Syrians themselves on one hand, and between society and the State on the other.

“There is no intention for a social contract. There is currently no opportunity for a social contract.”

In the Damascus–Tartous session, a direct assessment emerged that the primary problem is not the “form of the contract” but the lack of political will and an enabling environment for its creation. One participant stated clearly: *“I don’t think there is any intention from all parties... there is no intention for a social contract... there is currently no opportunity for a social contract... the transitional phase cannot build a social contract.”* This perspective links the feasibility of a social contract to the legitimacy and political behavior of the authorities, not merely to formalized dialogue processes.

By contrast, the Homs–Suwayda session emphasized that any contract “that unites” cannot be built over denial of violations or over a wounded memory that has no path to recognition. The realistic starting point begins with acknowledgment and accountability as

prerequisites for establishing trust. One participant expressed this by directly linking the social contract to a “healthy” environment, beginning with State acknowledgment of its responsibility and continuing with clear accountability saying: *“Building a social contract requires recognition by the authorities of the massacres... and building mutual trust after acknowledgment, accountability, and justice... the contract is not just writings on paper.”* Here, transitional justice emerges not as a separate rights-based issue, but as a foundational condition preventing the contract from becoming a document under which a new cycle of violence and denial occurs.

“We Syrians don’t know each other nor what is happening in each region.”

The Aleppo–Qamishli session highlighted an additional challenge related to the social contract: the multiplicity of political and administrative experiences during the years of conflict and the widening knowledge gap between Syrians about what each region has experienced. In this

context, a highly significant question was raised about the possibility of building on existing local experiences as a form of Syrian expertise that should not be erased, while acknowledging that Syrians have lost much due to disconnection between regions. One participant from Qamishli, referring to the social contract experience in north and east Syria, said: *“Geography changes and forms of control change... where is the social contract, what is its future, and can we build on previous experiences? ... If all components come together and build on an existing Syrian experience... this shows how much we Syrians have lost... we don’t know each other nor what is happening in each region.”*

This indicates that a unified social contract requires a “knowledge bridge” among Syrians, mutual acknowledgment of different experiences, guarantees against marginalization and exclusion, and the formulation of shared rules that recognize ethnic, religious, and regional diversity rather than bypass it.

Despite the grim context—legacy of authoritarianism, economic collapse, fragile institutions, and loss of trust both horizontally vertically—the national-level dialogue session suggested that the window of opportunity is not entirely closed. However, it is conditional on transforming dialogue from mere “meetings” into a cumulative societal process that addresses sensitive issues like transitional justice and makes them part of shared knowledge and organized demands. One participant called for national workshops to structure public

discussion on transitional justice, reparations, and the empowerment of women and youth, emphasizing: *“Syrians from all governorates should come together around transitional justice, its importance for reparations, and building a modern Syria.”*

In this sense, the opportunity rests on two main points: first, the existence of willingness among some participants to reconnect Syrians through frank dialogue on grievances; second, an increasing understanding that the social contract cannot succeed as a superficial text unless it is translated into concrete measures, including: clear governance rules, guarantees of equal rights alongside acknowledgment and accountability, and linkage to a minimum level of economic stability that makes the “contract” viable rather than an empty slogan.

Accordingly, the possibility of formulating a social contract that unites Syrians can only be realized if a set of interrelated conditions is met: A safe and functioning political environment that allows the creation of a social contract not imposed or exclusionary, but owned by all Syrians. A credible transitional justice pathway (recognition, truth, accountability, reparations, guarantees of non-repetition). Addressing economic collapse as part of the contract’s meaning and content (revitalizing economic activity, restoring supply chains, supporting social protection systems, and enhancing social responsibility). Institutional guarantees to relaunch comprehensive governance processes for the State and its institutions, preventing the reproduction of marginalization and corruption, and thereby preventing the return of authoritarianism in new forms.

II. Where Do We Begin—State-Building, Rebuilding Trust, or Peacebuilding?

Discussions in the dialogue sessions revealed that the question of the starting point for reconstructing a social contract in Syria does not have a single agreed-upon answer. Instead, it reflects the diversity of local contexts and communities’ experiences with war, violations, and shifting power dynamics. Three main approaches emerged regarding the starting point: beginning with State and institutional building, beginning with rebuilding trust, or starting with peacebuilding and addressing the consequences of the conflict. These differing approaches reflect not only varying priorities but also the distinct experiences local communities have endured throughout years of conflict.

The first approach emphasized prioritizing State and institutional building as a necessary entry point to reorganize the public sphere and establish clear rules for the relationship between citizens and the authorities. In some discussions, particularly in the Aleppo–Qamishli session, it was noted that the absence or weakness of effective institutions renders discussions about a social contract or sustainable peace largely theoretical and difficult to implement. One participant pointed out that the current reality is characterized by multiple centers of authority and unclear political reference points, making State-building a primary priority before other pathways. In this context, a participant emphasized that Syrians first need a clear political framework that unites the various components and defines the shape of the State before addressing other processes: *“It is necessary that all components come together within a comprehensive political framework that allows building on different local experiences rather than ignoring or erasing them.”*

Conversely, some discussions stressed that State-building cannot precede the rebuilding of trust, as institutions cannot function effectively in a society that has lost internal trust among its members and with the authorities.

In the Tartous–Damascus session, this idea was clearly pointed out by participants who highlighted that any attempt to build institutions or formulate a social contract would remain limited unless the deep trust gap between society and the authorities is addressed.

One participant noted: *“Trust today is almost nonexistent, neither between people and the authorities nor among the components themselves, so discussing a social contract before rebuilding this trust seems premature.”*

This illustrates that rebuilding trust is not merely a subsequent outcome of State-building but a prerequisite for any successful political or institutional process.

The third approach focused on prioritizing peacebuilding and addressing the consequences of the conflict as the realistic entry point for any sustainable political pathway. In the Homs–Suwayda session, participants noted that Syrian society still lives with the effects of violence, violations, and deep divisions, and that any attempt to rebuild the State or formulate a social contract would fail if these wounds are not addressed first. One participant emphasized that peace does not simply mean stopping direct violence; it also requires addressing the grievances and violations accumulated over years of war and its aftermath. In this context, one participant added: *“Acknowledging violations and holding accountable those responsible is the starting*

point for any genuine reconciliation or peacebuilding process, because ignoring these issues will reproduce the root causes of conflict.”

At the national level, the dialogue session highlighted that these three pathways should not be seen as competing alternatives but as interconnected processes that must advance simultaneously. One participant noted that Syrians need a broad national dialogue process that simultaneously addresses transitional justice, trust-building, and the reorganization of political life, emphasizing that these issues cannot be separated. In this context, one participant called for *“launching extensive dialogue workshops on transitional justice, reparations, and State-building”* as a fundamental step toward building a new Syria based on equal citizenship.

These discussions indicate that differences in opinions about the starting point reflect local experiences but also reveal a growing recognition that rebuilding the social contract in Syria cannot be achieved through a single pathway or one step alone. Building the State without rebuilding trust may lead to weak or illegitimate institutions; pursuing peace without institutional reform may remain fragile and prone to collapse; and rebuilding trust without addressing violations may seem unrealistic. Therefore, many participants leaned toward a more practical, composite approach that begins with simultaneous steps in multiple directions: building State institutions, initiating transitional justice processes, and fostering community dialogues that rebuild trust among Syrians themselves.

III. Social Contract and Governance

Discussions in the dialogue sessions highlighted that the issue of governance—particularly the relationship between the central government and local authorities—is a key factor in understanding the possibility of formulating a new social contract in Syria. For many participants, a comprehensive social contract cannot be imagined without redefining the relationship between the State and local communities, especially after years of conflict that produced varied local governance experiences and significant differences in administration and authority across regions. This was reflected in discussions about administrative decentralization, the right of local communities to manage their affairs, and the limits of central authority.

In the Aleppo–Qamishli session, it became clear that governance is closely linked to the experience of northeast Syria, which had developed a distinctive pattern of local administration. Participants

noted that any new social contract should take into account these experiences formed during years of conflict and should not impose a uniform central model that disregards them. One participant explained: *“The geography has changed and the forms of control have changed... so the question today is, where is the social contract and what is its future? And can we build on the mechanisms formed during these years so that all components come together within a single framework?”* This reflects a growing recognition that any new formulation of the State–society relationship must benefit from local experiences developed during the war, rather than attempting to impose an outdated central model whose relevance has been proven weak.

In the Homs–Suwayda session, governance discussions were closely linked to the idea of local communities managing their own affairs, especially in areas where State institutions had weakened or withdrawn over recent years. Participants pointed out that communities had developed various forms of self-organization and local coordination, which often proved effective in responding to local challenges. This strengthened calls for greater local administrative authority in the future.

In this context, one participant stated: *“The local community had to organize itself over the past years because the State was absent... so people today want to have a real role in managing their affairs, not just wait for decisions from the center.”*

This highlights the view that administrative decentralization can bring the State closer to society and reduce the gap that emerged between citizens and central institutions during the conflict.

Conversely, in the Damascus–Tartous session, discussions showed that governance is not only about distributing powers between the center and local authorities, but also about fairness in the allocation of power and resources. Participants noted that feelings of marginalization or exclusion in some regions contributed to deepening local divisions, and any new governance model must address these imbalances. One participant said: *“The problem is not having a center, but how power and resources are distributed... if all decisions remain in the hands of the center, nothing will change in the relationship between the State and society.”* This indicates that for many participants, governance is not just an administrative arrangement but a tool to redistribute power and enhance local political participation.

At the national dialogue level, governance was discussed in a broader context, focusing on balancing State unity with the rights of local communities to manage their affairs. Participants emphasized that

the main challenge is finding equilibrium between maintaining Syria as a unified political framework and recognizing the geographical, social, and political diversity within Syrian society. One participant remarked: *“We need one State, but this State must allow genuine local management... because the center alone cannot handle all the complexities present in Syria.”*

These discussions demonstrate that governance is a crucial element in any effort to draft a new social contract in Syria. After years of conflict and institutional fragmentation, the question is no longer only about the structure of the political system; it also concerns how power is distributed between the center and local communities. In this regard, administrative decentralization is seen by many participants as a means to rebuild trust between the State and society, create a new balance between State unity and local autonomy, reduce tensions between different regions, and enhance political participation at the local level—making it a key pathway for constructing a more inclusive and stable social contract among Syrians.

IV. How Can a Syrian Approach to Peacebuilding Be Developed?

Discussions in the dialogue sessions revealed that peacebuilding in Syria cannot be reduced to political agreements or security arrangements between warring parties; it requires a broader approach rooted in society itself and addressing the underlying causes of the conflict accumulated over years of war and its aftermath. Participants emphasized that peacebuilding is a long-term process directly linked to reconstructing the social contract, as sustainable peace cannot be achieved without redefining relationships among Syrians themselves, as well as between society and the State.

A recurring point in the discussions was that any Syrian approach to peacebuilding must begin by addressing grievances and violations that occurred during the conflict, as ignoring these issues would render any peace process fragile and prone to collapse.

In the Homs–Suwayda session, participants stressed that acknowledging violations and holding perpetrators accountable are essential conditions for rebuilding trust among Syrians. One participant stated: *“We cannot talk about peace if there is no recognition of grievances and violations... true peace starts with justice.”* This underscores that transitional justice is not merely a tool to address the past, but a necessary entry point for building a stable future.

The Aleppo–Qamishli session highlighted that peacebuilding also requires recognition of the social and political diversity that became more pronounced during the conflict. Any attempt to impose a uniform model or ignore these varied experiences risks reproducing the same tensions. In this context, one participant emphasized the need to develop a new coexistence formula based on mutual recognition among different communities: *“Today we need to come together as Syrians with all our components... because the problem is not only political, but also a matter of trust among the people themselves.”* This reflects growing awareness that peacebuilding goes beyond political settlements among elites and requires reconstructing social relationships between local communities.

In the Damascus–Tartous session, the discussion highlighted the pivotal role that civil society and local initiatives can play in peacebuilding, especially given the limited official political spaces. Participants noted that community initiatives and local dialogue can help reduce tensions and build bridges of communication between different groups. One participant remarked: *“Peace does not come only from a political decision... it must come from society itself, from dialogue among people and local initiatives.”* This view frames peacebuilding as a grassroots social process rather than solely a top-down political agreement.

At the national dialogue level, there was consensus on approaching peace as a comprehensive, nationwide process that combines transitional justice, institutional rebuilding, and strengthening societal dialogue. One participant noted that building peace in Syria requires launching wide national dialogues that allow for frank discussion of contentious issues, including justice, reparations, and rebuilding the State. In this context, one participant said: *“We need a broad Syrian dialogue on transitional justice and reparations... because this is the path to building genuine peace.”*

These discussions indicate that developing a Syrian approach to peacebuilding involves several interrelated elements: addressing grievances and violations through transitional justice, fostering dialogue among local communities, recognizing social and political diversity within Syrian society, and balancing grassroots initiatives with formal political processes. In this sense, peacebuilding in Syria cannot be limited to political agreements among factions; it must evolve into a broader societal process that rebuilds trust among Syrians and establishes a new social contract grounded in equal citizenship and justice.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the cumulative discussions and ideas shared by participants across the three dialogue tracks underpinning this paper: local sessions, cross-governorate sessions, and the national-level dialogue. They are drawn from recurring issues and challenges identified during the discussions, as well as practical proposals offered by participants, grounded in their local experiences with citizenship, political participation, the social contract, and peacebuilding. Accordingly, these recommendations are not presented as abstract theoretical proposals but as a composite reflection of participants' views on priorities and actionable steps to enhance citizenship, rebuild trust, and establish meaningful and effective participation, enabling Syrians to reclaim their presence and influence in the public sphere within the current Syrian context.

I. At the National Level

1. Redefining the Role of the State and Its Institutions:

- Position the State as a guarantor of equal protection and participation, not merely as a security or symbolic instrument; embed the protection of citizens as a fundamental contractual obligation, regardless of political, sectarian, ethnic, or regional affiliation.
- Break the monopoly of violence and remove its use from political or ideological purposes, reconfiguring it under accountable institutional frameworks; link any security powers to clear legal standards.
- Establish an independent, safe national complaints mechanism with protection for whistleblowers and witnesses, alongside public accountability for individual and collective violations.
- Ensure institutional stability and transparency through consistent standards for public decision-making, enabling community oversight, reducing ambiguity that undermines trust, and limiting erratic decisions that create uncertainty and suspended allegiance.
- Implement clear measures to combat bureaucratic corruption (bribery/favoritism), as corruption erodes the State's credibility as a just institution.
- Redefine the relationship between central authorities and localities institutionally, socially, politically, and economically, reducing central oversight, preserving local autonomy, and enhancing the effectiveness and agency of both levels.

2. Managing Identity Diversity as Part of Citizenship, Not as a Substitute:

- Recognize pluralism as intrinsic to citizenship; reject approaches that “assimilate” or “bypass” identities without acknowledgment, as these can reproduce exclusion.
- Manage diversity through constitutional or supra-constitutional guarantees protecting the rights of various communities (language, culture, representation), preventing domination by a single group.
- End practices producing “degrees of citizenship” (suspect/acceptable/former regime) through a uniform application of law and standardized procedures preventing categorization and retaliation.
- Criminalize sectarian, racial, or regional incitement, hate speech, and symbolic violence, linking enforcement to non-selective implementation, with clear public and media policies.

3. Recognition and Transitional Justice as a Gateway to Rebuilding Citizenship

- Launch a national approach for truth disclosure and acknowledgment of serious violations as a precondition for any new citizenship framework, embedding recognition as public policy rather than rhetorical stance.
- Balance the legal dimension of justice with the societal dimension, which focuses on restoring trust and repairing social fabric.
- Develop a clear national transitional justice framework encompassing: truth disclosure, documentation of violations, reparations, guarantees of non-repetition, and fair, non-selective accountability for all victims.
- Integrate local councils within this national transitional justice framework as executive and coordinating bodies, strengthening their capacities in documentation, victim support, and reconciliation through training and partnerships.
- Encourage the establishment of joint community committees to oversee the local implementation of transitional justice programs.
- Link any constitutional or political pathway to a credible transitional justice track: avoid recycling perpetrators, acknowledge open wounds, and tie political legitimacy to human rights compliance.
- Prioritize issues of abducted, missing, and forcibly disappeared persons through a transparent and disciplined communication mechanism with families, preventing the mismanagement of trauma through leaks or chaos.

4. Opening the Public Sphere and Organizing Participation: From Display to Influence

- Transform “national dialogue” into a genuine consultative process with clear representation criteria, public records, feedback mechanisms, and measurable, trackable outcomes.
- Expand channels for community participation in public policy (consultative councils, regular local-to-national dialogue platforms, listening mechanisms), considering them essential for rebuilding trust rather than optional.
- Establish transparent rules for political activity and representation, reducing “performative participation” and enabling the formation of political parties that redefine relations with power based on accountability, participation, and prevention of authoritarianism.
 - Strengthen the role of professional unions and federations as channels for organizing interests and representing demands, helping to overcome “political desertification.”

5. Women and Youth: Protection and Empowerment, Not Symbolic Representation

- Ensure the protection of women as a condition of citizenship, embedding safety and protection from stigmatization within the definition of citizenship; avoid limiting women's participation to quotas or symbolic representation.
- Guarantee women and youth participation through substantive mechanisms (authority, roles, resources, access to decision-making), linking participation to real empowerment capable of translating representation into tangible influence and responsibilities.
- Adopt a national policy for protection against gender-based violence: secure reporting centers, legal protection, law enforcement training, psychological and social services, and deterrence measures against stigmatization and social punishment of survivors.

II. At the Local Level

1. General Principle: No Unified Priorities Above Diverse Wounds

- Avoid imposing a single national approach that overlooks local differences in experiences and suffering. Instead, adopt a “basket of local interventions” that acknowledges diverse local contexts, while maintaining unified national standards for rights, inclusivity, and equal opportunities.

2. Daily Rights as a Test of Citizenship in Each Governorate

- Prioritize everyday rights—freedom of movement, protection of roads and institutions, education and recognition of certificates, access to services—as political tests of citizenship, not merely service-related issues.
- Eliminate the logic of service-based, economic, or educational blockades as tools of collective punishment or as mechanisms to control center-periphery relations.

3. Protecting the Local Public Sphere and Breaking the Cycle of Fear

- Enable local communities to participate in protecting their areas and support security/military institutions in preventing violations and enhancing community safety, within regulated frameworks that prevent revenge, stigmatization, and collective punishment, and are linked to fair accountability mechanisms.
- Open safe spaces for expression (civil, media, community, governmental), while stopping platforms of stigmatization and hate speech, and ensuring protection from arbitrary prosecution outside legal frameworks.
- Develop local mechanisms to respond to gender-based violence and kidnapping, criminalize social stigmatization, and establish referral pathways for support services.

4. Civil Society and Local Media: Accountability Partners, Not Fragile Substitutes

- Strengthen the role of civil society as a partner in local policymaking and reduce administrative/security restrictions on its work (funding, activities, mobility), while safeguarding its independence.
- Recognize the temporary role of local civil society in filling citizenship

gaps without burdening it with replacing the State long-term.

- Support balanced local media as a tool for accountability, not polarization, alongside mechanisms to monitor incitement and hate speech.

5. Local Governance and Decentralization as a Contractual Entry Point

- Transform local governance into a foundation for shaping the social contract by recognizing and integrating viable past local governance experiences into an effective decentralized model with unified national standards.
- Strengthen local accountability mechanisms (consultative councils, regular dialogue sessions, complaint platforms) to bring the State closer to citizens and rebuild trust.

6. Revitalizing the Local Economy as a Driver of Social Cohesion

- Restore local economic vitality by establishing clear market and labor rules and reactivating disrupted value and supply chains as a means of strengthening social cohesion.
- Address local dismissal and exclusion policies through transparent standards and clear grievance procedures to enhance fairness and reduce perceptions of collective punishment.

7. Context-Specific Guiding Examples (Non-Exhaustive)

- Tartous: Address stigmatization and collective punishment, create safe spaces for expression, and clarify public service/employment policies.
- Aleppo: Focus on service and economic recovery, stabilize market conditions, and expand local participation.
- Homs: Dismantle classification and revenge dynamics, contain insecurity, and build legally protected community mediation mechanisms.
- Damascus: Enhance transparency in decision-making and appointments, expand civic space, and establish genuine consultation platforms.
- Qamishli: Ensure recognition and guarantees for components, and translate rights into enforceable mechanisms and accountability.

- Suwayda: Prioritize truth, protection, and recognition; lift service/educational restrictions; and protect witnesses and survivors.

III. At the International Level

1. Supporting Transitional Justice and Protection of Witnesses and Families of the Missing and Detained

- Provide independent technical and legal support to establish documentation and accountability mechanisms aligned with human rights standards.
- Fund witness protection programs and structured communication mechanisms with affected families.

2. Supporting Local Capacities, Governance, and Accountability

- Offer administrative and legal training programs and facilitate local funding to strengthen organizations and enable community dialogue and accountability.
- Support monitoring of local dynamics and strengthen local representative institutions, including local authorities and committees/initiatives related to civil peace and social mediation.
- Launch programs supporting local administration reform, combining legal reform with capacity-building to empower local councils as sources of legitimacy.

3. Women and Protection from Gender-Based Violence

- Support safe reporting centers, psychosocial and legal services, and anti-stigma programs, while linking funding to measurable impact on women's participation in decision-making (not symbolic representation).

4. Services and Infrastructure with Transparency and Participation

- Fund infrastructure and essential services projects conditioned on community participation and transparency in distribution, to prevent services from becoming tools of loyalty or punishment.

5. Media and the Public Sphere

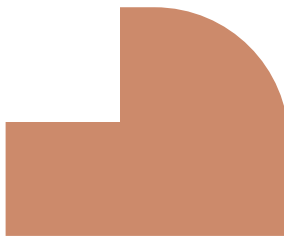
- Support training for local journalists, independent media platforms, and monitoring mechanisms to counter incitement and hate speech, ensuring media serves accountability rather than polarization.

6. Transparency, Data, and Complaint Mechanisms

- Provide technical support to build public databases (decisions, budgets, appointments) and safe complaint platforms to enhance social oversight and reduce ambiguity that undermines trust.

7. Local Economy and Social Cohesion

- Support local economic programs (small employment projects, community investment) that connect rural and urban areas and reduce economic pressures fueling divisions.



Conclusion

This paper, alongside previous papers on citizenship, the social contract, and women's perspectives, affirms that the Syrian crisis is fundamentally a crisis in the relationship between society and the State—one that has eroded due to authoritarianism, violence, and economic collapse. Today, this relationship is being reshaped within a fragile transitional phase, where security dominance intersects with restrictions on the public sphere, growing inequality, and a breakdown of trust both among societal components and between citizens and the State.

Discussions at the local, cross-regional, and national levels show that political participation is not a postponed luxury but a prerequisite for rebuilding citizenship as an equal right rather than a privilege. They also demonstrate that identity becomes a tool of exclusion when guarantees are absent and the rule of law is replaced by proximity to power. Women and youth, more than others, reveal the limits of the public sphere when participation is reduced to symbolic representation or becomes a personal risk. At the same time, the findings indicate that it is still possible to build an inclusive social contract—provided it is not based on overlooking past wounds or bypassing diversity, but rather on a credible process that combines recognition, truth, accountability, and reparations. This must go hand in hand with redefining the role of the State as a guarantor of protection rather than an instrument of control, opening the public sphere through transparent rules, and adopting effective decentralized governance that redistributes power and resources while bringing the State closer to its citizens.

Ultimately, the core conclusion becomes clear: there can be no peace without justice, no social contract without trust, and no trust without equal protection and accountable institutions. These conditions may be difficult to achieve in the current context, but they remain the essential minimum to prevent the transitional phase from becoming merely a recycling of the crisis in new forms.

