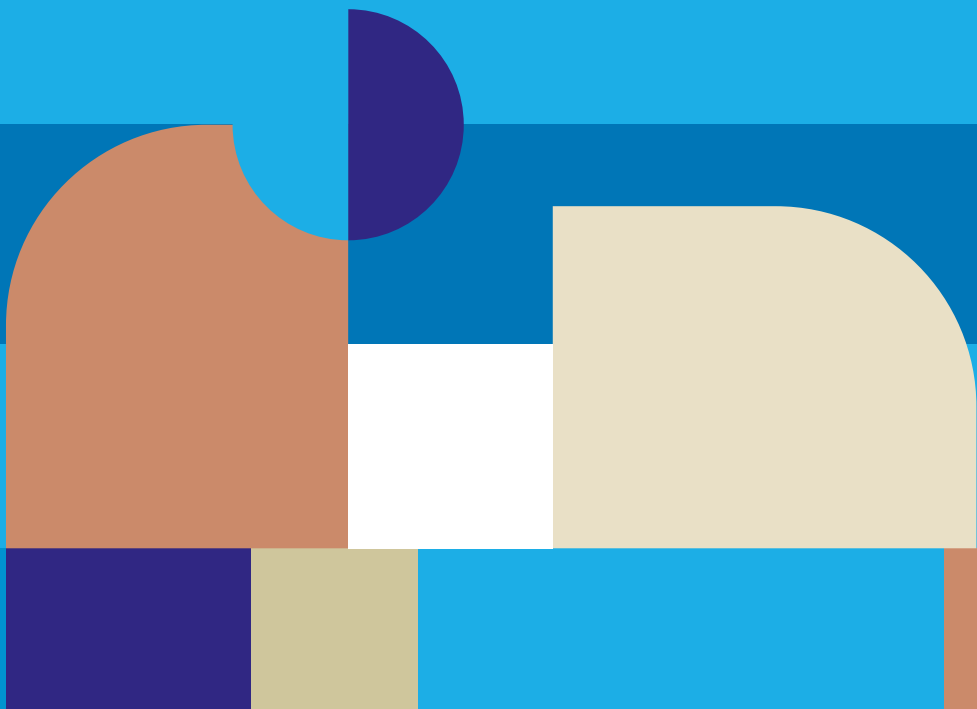


Rethinking the Social Contract in Syria: Local Perceptions in a Transitional Phase



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Transitional Phase

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Executive Summary

This paper is based on a qualitative research methodology and an analysis of 12 community dialogue sessions held between 26 November and 9 December 2025. The findings and analyses presented reflect the context prevailing during this specific period and do not include political, security, or military developments that occurred after that date.

The sessions were conducted at a rate of two sessions in each of the following governorates: Aleppo, Al-Hasakah (Qamishli), Tartous, Homs, Damascus, and Suwayda. These locations were selected as a purposive analytical sample representing structural diversity across Syrian contexts (economic, sectarian, ethnic, security, and political), as well as differing experiences with the State, authority, violence, local governance, and the continuity or disruption of institutions. Each session included approximately 10 participants, bringing the total number to around 120 participants, of whom women constituted approximately 50 per cent. Consideration was given to diversity in age groups and geographic backgrounds (rural/urban), the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and diversity in religious, sectarian, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as variations in educational levels and fields of work.

The paper seeks to understand how Syrians perceive the concept of the “social contract” at the present moment and how their perceptions of the contractual relationship between the State and society are shaped, beyond established philosophical or legal definitions, relying instead on the language and concepts used by the participants themselves. The discussions reveal that the social contract is experienced less as a “document” and more as a lived relationship intersecting with security, justice, identity, the economy, dignity, fear, and recognition.

The findings indicate that the concept of the social contract takes multiple forms depending on the local context. In some governorates, it is perceived as a contract that was never truly established or that remained authoritarian and exclusionary. In other contexts, it appears as an unwritten arrangement based on stability in exchange for silence, as a form of localized contractual experience, or as a defensive or survival contract emerging after the collapse of trust in the State as a partner. Across nearly all contexts, the legitimacy of authority, the protection of social peace, the regulation of violence, transitional justice, truth-seeking, and the balance between rights and responsibilities emerge as key determinants for the possibility of rebuilding the contract.

The sessions also reveal broad national intersections, most notably: shaken trust in institutions, fear as a daily experience affecting participation and belonging, concerns about the reproduction of exclusion in new forms, and a decline in the capacity to feel a sense of belonging when justice and transparency are absent. At the same time, the paper highlights fundamental differences among governorates in terms of starting points and minimum conditions: from contexts where safety constitutes the

primary threshold for any meaningful social contract, to contexts where the contract is primarily linked to recognition of societal components and guarantees for managing diversity, or where non-selective justice is considered a prerequisite for any contractual relationship.

The paper gives particular attention to the position of women as a revealing indicator of the credibility of the social contract. It highlights the gap between legal provisions and lived realities and examines women's participation in light of the need for safe civic space, protection from stigma and violence, justice for women, and the growing daily burdens resulting from weakened services and economic conditions.

In conclusion, the paper provides a qualitative mapping of perceptions of the social contract in Syria during the period covered by the dialogue sessions. It draws from these insights to outline elements of an enabling environment and minimum national and local conditions that could contribute to enriching policy and academic discussions on re-establishing the relationship between the State and society, without claiming statistical generalization or proposing a single model applicable to all contexts.



Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology centered on the analysis of community dialogue sessions. Its purpose is to understand how Syrian citizens define the concept of the social contract in the current context, and how their perceptions of the relationship between society and the State are shaped in light of the profound political, security, and social transformations experienced in the country. Rather than testing pre-existing theoretical hypotheses about citizenship and imposing ready-made philosophical definitions upon it, this study seeks to capture lived experiences as expressed by participants and to explore the meanings and narratives they attribute to the idea of a contractual relationship between the State and society in their daily lives.

I. Rationale for the Selection of Sessions and Sample

The study is based on twelve community dialogue sessions, with two sessions held in each of the following governorates: Aleppo, Al-Hasakah (Qamishli), Tartous, Homs, Damascus, and Suwayda. These governorates were deliberately selected to reflect structural diversity within the Syrian context, including economic, sectarian, national, security, and political dimensions, as well as their differing experiences with the State, authority, violence, local governance and institutional continuity or disruption. This approach enables the examination of the social contract as a dynamic concept shaped by context

Taken together, these governorates constitute an analytical sample reflecting different patterns of relationships with the State: from areas that experienced forms of local governance or alternative administrations, to areas that maintained centralized authority, and to areas that experienced rupture or direct confrontation with the transitional government. This diversity made it possible to understand the social contract not as a single formula but as multiple relationships between society and authority, ranging from protection and regulation to local retrenchment and contractual rupture.

Each session included approximately ten participants, bringing the total sample to around 120 individuals, nearly half of whom were women. The sample was designed to ensure broad diversity, including:

- Different age groups (youth, adults, and the elderly)
- Inclusion of people with disabilities
- Diversity in religious, sectarian, and national backgrounds
- Variation between rural and urban areas
- Differences in educational levels and academic backgrounds
- Diversity in employment sectors and labour market experiences.

This diversity was not intended for statistical representation but rather

to enrich the discussion, allowing multiple experiences and perspectives regarding the meaning of the social contract, its limits, and the possibilities for its reconstruction.

II. Why Using a Qualitative Approach?

A qualitative approach was selected because the question of social contract in the Syrian context cannot be reduced to constitutional texts or abstract legal formulations. As the sessions demonstrated, the social contract is not understood solely as a document or political declaration, but as a lived relationship intersecting with security, justice, identity, the economy, dignity, fear, recognition, and collective memory.

The group discussions made it possible to:

- Trace the language used by participants to describe their relationship with the State.
- Observe how the meaning of the “contract” shifts from one context to another (a protection contract, a contract of silence, a local contract, a legitimacy contract, or a justice contract).
- Analyze tensions within the narratives themselves (between the desire for the State and fear of it, between national belonging and local retrenchment).
- Understand contextual differences among governorates.
- Identify cross-geographical intersections (such as fear, justice, equality, social peace, and the legitimacy of authority).

The analysis focused on the terms and expressions used by participants themselves, even when these did not align with theoretical literature on the social contract. The objective of the paper was not to redefine the concept theoretically or philosophically, but to understand how it is perceived and experienced in practice by Syrian men and women in the present moment.

III. Sample Limitations and Intended and Unintended Biases

This methodology acknowledges the existence of clear limitations in the sample. The views presented in this paper do not claim to represent all Syrians within the governorates included, nor do they necessarily reflect all social or political components within each governorate. Rather, they represent the perceptions of the participants involved in these specific dialogue sessions.

Some sessions also reflected, by virtue of their context and dynamics, a stronger presence of certain perspectives. For example, discussions in Qamishli highlighted issues related to the recognition of societal components; in Suwayda, the question of legitimacy and justice in the

aftermath of violations was particularly prominent; and in Damascus, discussions focused more strongly on the State and a shared national identity. These variations were treated as analytical findings emerging from contextual realities rather than as research imbalances.

At the same time, some voices may have been absent or underrepresented due to fear, security concerns, social constraints, or the lingering effects of violence and trauma. Such factors constitute unintended biases inherent in qualitative research conducted in post-conflict contexts.

IV. Interpretation of the Findings Without Forcing Generalization

The findings of this paper should be interpreted as analytical patterns and contextual indicators of how the social contract is understood in contemporary Syria, rather than as definitive judgments or ready-made generalizations.

The analysis was conducted by:

- Tracing intersections across governorates in understanding the social contract (such as the legitimacy of authority, transitional justice, protection of social peace, the relationship between rights and responsibilities, and the role of women as an indicator of fragility or resilience).
- Highlighting simultaneously contextual differences that render the social contract a multifaceted concept shaped by local experiences with the State, violence, and institutional disruption.

Accordingly, this paper aims to provide a qualitative mapping of perceptions of the social contract in contemporary Syria. It seeks to enrich policy and academic discourse without claiming to close the discussion or offer a single model applicable to all contexts.



Context

This paper is based on community dialogue sessions held between 26 November and 9 December 2025 and therefore reflects the context prevailing during this specific time period. Accordingly, the analysis presented expresses the perceptions of participants as they were formed at that particular moment and does not include political, security, or military developments that occurred after this date. Defining the temporal framework is essential for understanding the nature of the positions and narratives presented, as they constitute direct responses to the realities that existed at that time.

This paper emerges within a Syrian context characterized by a profound fragmentation in the relationship between society and the State. The State is no longer perceived as a stable sovereign framework shared among all citizens, but rather as an entity whose presence and legitimacy vary according to geography and local experience. The community dialogue sessions conducted in Aleppo, Qamishli (Al-Hasakah), Tartous, Homs, Damascus, and Suwayda reflect a country undergoing a fundamental redefinition of the meanings of authority, legitimacy, and belonging, in the context of a heavy legacy of violence and violations, shifting balances of power, and the absence of a clearly defined transitional pathway.

In Aleppo, the context has been shaped by years of multiple authorities and shifting patterns of governance among different actors, accompanied by the emergence of local administrations and alternative governance experiences in certain areas. This trajectory has produced a dual impact: on the one hand, local experiences developed in organizing services and managing public affairs outside central authority; on the other hand, political centralization has reasserted itself without fully incorporating these experiences. Consequently, the context in Aleppo can be understood as a stage of tension between a center seeking to re-establish unified control and a society that has experienced different forms of administration. This tension is reflected in heightened sensitivity regarding issues of governance, uniform standards, and decision-making transparency.

In Qamishli (Al-Hasakah), the context is associated with a relatively unique political experience within the Syrian landscape, where a self-administration emerged that declared its own social contract, recognized ethnic and religious plurality, and established institutions parallel to those of the central State. This experience did not arise in a vacuum but followed a long history of policies of exclusion and discrimination, which made recognition of societal components and their rights an existential issue rather than a symbolic one. Nevertheless, this context remains governed by ongoing tensions with Damascus, as well as by questions regarding procedural legitimacy and the limits of national recognition of this experience. As a result, society in Qamishli exists between a functioning local contractual reality and an unresolved national horizon.

In Tartous, the context is characterized by the particularity of a

governorate that remained relatively outside the theatre of large-scale confrontations during the years of conflict, reinforcing the perception of the area as “safe” or stable. However, this stability was based on an unwritten arrangement grounded in protection in exchange for avoiding political engagement. With recent developments—including violations, dismissals of public sector employees, and shifts in the balance of power within State institutions—this sense of stability has begun to erode. Today, society in Tartous experiences a dual anxiety: fear of losing the security that had been perceived as compensation for the absence of participation, and concern that an unequal relationship may be reproduced in a new form.

In Homs, the context emerges within a city considered among the most socially and geographically complex in Syria. Homs was an early center of the conflict and witnessed intense confrontations, widespread displacement, and demographic transformations. Nevertheless, there has remained an awareness of economic and social linkages between neighborhoods and rural areas that preserved a minimum level of coexistence. Today, the context appears as a fragile balance between the possibility of rebuilding a State governed by the rule of law capable of managing diversity, and the risk of sliding into the reproduction of militia logic or non-institutional forms of authority in a context marked by weak transparency and unclear decision-making processes.

Damascus, by contrast, represents a distinct case as the capital and the center of political and administrative decision-making. It does not represent only its own residents but also reflects the intersection of experiences from various governorates, including areas not directly covered by the dialogue sessions. Consequently, the context in Damascus takes on a broader national character, where the question of defining the State itself becomes prominent: is it a central authority being reproduced, or a new State founded on justice and participation? Within the capital, divergent narratives intersect regarding victimhood and victory, justice and revenge, national identity and sub-identities, making it a symbolic arena for contestation over the meaning of the national contract.

In Suwayda, the context assumes an exceptional character following the incursion and violations experienced by the governorate, and the subsequent deep rupture with the transitional government. During the sessions, Suwayda was described as a region effectively under siege, facing disruptions to daily life and significant difficulties in mobility, education, and employment. Governance is largely carried out by local military, religious, and community actors. In this context, trust in the State as a contractual partner has collapsed, and belonging has contracted from a national framework to a defensive local one. As a result, questions of legitimacy, justice, and recognition of the massacres have become prerequisites for any discussion of a future relationship with the center.

At the broader national level, these diverse contexts reveal several common features shaping the current Syrian moment: the erosion of the legitimacy of authority, the absence of a clear transitional justice process, the entanglement of security with politics and the economy, the rise

of sub-identities as reactions to fear or disappointment, and declining trust in formal institutions. It also becomes evident that the concept of the State itself is no longer self-evident but has become the subject of negotiation and contestation. Likewise, the social contract—if it exists—is no longer understood solely as a constitutional text, but rather as a lived relationship tested through security, justice, recognition, and the possibility of sustaining daily life.

Accordingly, the analysis of the social contract in this paper proceeds from a fragmented and multi-layered national context, in which local experiences differ fundamentally from one governorate to another. At the same time, they share a general perception that the relationship between the State and society is undergoing a process of re-foundation, the contours of which remain unclear and whose political, ethical, and institutional conditions have yet to be determined.

Intersections and Differences among Governorates in Perceptions of the Social Contract

A comparative reading of the analyses across the six governorates reveals that the social contract in contemporary Syria is not understood as a single coherent concept. Rather, it is experienced as a fragmented reality shaped by local contexts, while at the same time reflecting deep intersections that point to a shared national crisis. Although the point of departure differs from one governorate to another, the common thread linking them all is the erosion of trust between society and the State, and the transformation of the social contract from a legal concept into an existential question related to security, justice, and recognition.

I. The Question of Existence – Is There a Social Contract at All?

Initial perceptions regarding the existence of a social contract vary across governorates:

- In Aleppo and Damascus, a prevailing view suggests that a comprehensive social contract never truly emerged in a contractual sense, and that the historical relationship has been one of regulation and administration rather than partnership.
- In Qamishli, a different perception emerges: a local social contract exists and has been tested in practice, yet its procedural legitimacy and its potential to evolve into a national framework remain subjects of debate.
- In Tartous, what might be described as a “contract of stability in exchange for silence” appears—an unwritten arrangement that has begun to erode with the decline of security.
- In Homs, a clear distinction emerges between a local social contract

among residents that preserved a minimum level of coexistence, and a weakened contract between the State and society.

- In Suwayda, the question takes on a more radical dimension: not only has the contract collapsed, but the counterpart in the contractual relationship (the authority) has lost its legitimacy in the public consciousness, leading the contract to contract into a defensive local framework.

This variation indicates that the crisis is not uniform in depth: in some contexts, the question concerns rebuilding a lost contract, while in others it concerns whether a contractual relationship is possible at all.

II. Security as the Primary Contractual Threshold

Despite contextual differences, a clear intersection emerges regarding the centrality of security, though to varying degrees:

- In Tartous and Suwayda, security takes precedence over all other considerations—even before justice and participation—and the social contract is largely reduced to its protective function.
- In Homs, security is directly linked to controlling militias and preventing lawlessness, that is, to the existence of a State governed by the rule of law.
- In Damascus and Aleppo, the social contract is not reduced solely to security but is associated with justice and participation, even if security remains an implicit prerequisite.
- In Qamishli, the concept of institutional protection (such as the judiciary and constitutional mechanisms) is emphasized as a guarantee of rights-based security.

This intersection suggests that the social contract in the Syrian context begins with redefining the role of the State as a guarantor of protection. The difference lies in whether security control alone is sufficient, or whether security must be coupled with justice and accountability.

III. Justice as a Condition for Rebuilding Trust

Transitional justice and accountability emerge as among the strongest intersections across governorates, though with varying degrees of urgency:

- In Suwayda, justice is considered a prerequisite for any social contract; no contract can exist without recognition of the massacres and accountability.
- In Damascus, justice represents a moral foundation for establishing a new relationship, particularly regarding the issue of missing persons.
- In Homs, justice is seen as necessary to prevent revenge and the recurrence of violence.

- In Aleppo, justice is framed within the context of equality and the unification of standards.
- In Qamishli, justice is linked to protecting societal components and preventing domination by a majority.
- In Tartous, the demand for justice appears in the rejection of the continuation of fear without accountability.

Accordingly, justice is not a sectoral demand but a condition for rebuilding trust. Its position varies, however: in Suwayda it represents the starting point; in Damascus a moral foundation; in Homs a mechanism for preventing escalation; and in Qamishli a safeguard against domination.

IV. Diversity Between Recognition and Fear

Managing diversity constitutes a defining axis distinguishing the governorates:

- In Qamishli, the social contract is framed primarily as a contract of recognition of societal components before being a contract of abstract citizenship.
- In Aleppo, theoretical acceptance of pluralism coexists with practical fears among some groups of domination by a majority.
- In Homs, diversity represents a highly sensitive testing ground that could lead to renewed violence if legal regulation fails.
- In Damascus the capital, diversity becomes an arena of competing narratives without a unifying framework.
- In Tartous, coexistence has been sustained through silence, though this arrangement has begun to erode.
- In Suwayda, local identity has become a defensive shield following the collapse of trust in both authority and broader society.

The intersection is clear: no context rejects diversity in principle, yet all express concern about managing it without guarantees. The differences lie in the nature of the fear: fear of domination (Qamishli, Aleppo), fear of violent escalation (Homs), fear of stigmatization (Tartous), and fear of symbolic or physical eradication (Suwayda).

V. The Economy: Between a Driver of Coexistence and a Test of Failure

The role of the economy varies in perceptions of the social contract:

- In Aleppo, the economy and service delivery serve as a practical test of the seriousness of the contract.
- In Homs, economic interdependence acts as a driver of local coexistence.
- In Damascus, economic pressures form a background that deepens frustration and the loss of the capacity for daily continuity.
- In Tartous, economic concerns recede behind the question of

- security but nevertheless reveal the fragility of the contract.
- In Suwayda, economic deterioration is interpreted as evidence of siege conditions and the absence of the State.
- In Qamishli, economic issues are integrated within the broader necessity of a clear system of governance and protection.

The intersection here is that the economy is no longer viewed as a purely technical issue but as a measure of the credibility of the State: is it a partner in sustaining livelihoods, or an additional burden?

VI. Women as an Indicator of Fragility or Credibility

One of the most notable intersections is that women across all governorates constitute a genuine benchmark for assessing the social contract:

- In Suwayda, women's rights are placed at the center of the question of the civil State, accompanied by criticism of social stigmatization directed at survivors.
- In Damascus and Homs, the social contract is linked to the daily safety of women before questions of political representation.
- In Tartous, security is seen as a prerequisite for any meaningful participation of women.
- In Aleppo, women's participation in shaping the social contract is presented as a condition for its credibility.
- In Qamishli, advances in legal provisions regarding women's rights are contrasted with shortcomings in their practical implementation.

The deeper intersection is that a social contract that fails to protect women, or that merely provides formal recognition of their rights, is regarded as a fragile contract. The differences lie in emphasis: in Suwayda, the sources of legislation and social stigmatization; in Damascus, safety and accountability; in Qamishli, the gap between legal texts and implementation; and in Aleppo, genuine representation.

VII. Future Trajectories: Between Local Retrenchment and a Conditional National Horizon

In considering the future prospects of the social contract, three main patterns emerge:

- Defensive local retrenchment (Suwayda, and partially Tartous): a temporary survival contract.
- A conditional national contract (Qamishli, Aleppo, Damascus): no contract without justice, participation, and control over arms.
- Warnings of potential escalation (Homs): the social contract is viewed as an existential necessity rather than a political option.

Accordingly, no governorate advocates for an unconditional national contract. All contexts link any future contractual relationship to clear minimum conditions: an end to violence, non-selective justice, unified standards of governance, protection of diversity, criminalization of hate speech, and the construction of a State of institutions rather than a State dominated by factions or informal power structures.

Policy Recommendations

As articulated by the participants, these recommendations aim to identify the fundamental requirements for creating an enabling environment that would make it possible to begin building a social contract at the national level, while simultaneously responding to and taking into account the specificities of local contexts within an overarching framework.

I. Recommendations at the National Level

1. Launching a Public National Process for Transitional Justice and Truth-Seeking

- Establish a clear national framework for transitional justice that includes truth-seeking, documentation of violations, mechanisms for reparations, and fair and non-selective accountability procedures that provide justice to all victims.
- Give special priority to the files of missing and forcibly disappeared persons through a transparent mechanism for communication with families, preventing the “management of grief” through disorder or unverified leaks.

2. Restoring Procedural Legitimacy through Participation and Transparency

- Transform the “national dialogue” into a genuine consultative process with guarantees, including clear representation criteria, publicly accessible records of proceedings, feedback mechanisms, and measurable outcomes.
- Develop a public information system (data, decisions, budgets, appointments) that enables social oversight and reduces the ambiguity that undermines public trust.

3. Ensuring Uniform Standards in the Application of Law and Ending Dual Practices

- Activate transparent accountability mechanisms for both individual and collective violations, thereby breaking with the logic of impunity.

- Issue a national code of standards governing the implementation of law, service provision, and enforcement, ensuring equal application across governorates and social components.
- Establish an independent and accessible national complaints mechanism, with protection for whistleblowers and witnesses.

4. Managing Diversity through Constitutional or Supra-Constitutional Guarantees and the Criminalization of Hate Speech

- Legally criminalize sectarian, racial, and regional incitement as well as symbolic violence, linking such provisions to effective enforcement mechanisms and clear procedures.
- Incorporate robust guarantees for the rights of societal components (including language, culture, and representation) in order to prevent both “majoritarian domination” and the imposition of a “single identity.”

5. Integrating a Women’s Perspective into the Social Contract as a Condition of Credibility

- Adopt a national policy for protection from gender-based violence that includes safe reporting centers, legal protection mechanisms, training for law enforcement personnel, and service-based and psychosocial support.
- Ensure women’s participation in decision-making through non-symbolic representation mechanisms (authority, roles, and resources).

6. Establishing a National Programme for Minimum Living Standards and Essential Services as Part of the Social Contract

- Introduce an emergency package of services including electricity, water, health care, education, and transportation, with transparency in prioritization and resource allocation.
- Implement clear measures to combat administrative corruption (such as bribery and patronage networks), as such practices undermine the meaning of the State as a fair institution.

II. Recommendations at the Local Level

1. Aleppo

- Transform governance into a contractual entry point by recognizing the experience of previous local administrations and integrating these experiences into an effective decentralized model (services, regulation, municipalities) while maintaining unified national standards.
- Stabilize economic regulations by controlling erratic decision-making, simplifying procedures, and establishing clear and predictable rules for markets and employment.
- Provide guarantees for managing diversity by preventing

majoritarian dominance through local representation and accountability mechanisms that prevent exclusion.

2. Qamishli (Al-Hasakah)

- Consolidate procedural legitimacy by ensuring that any national arrangements pass through a clear consultative process that guarantees societal ownership of the social contract rather than its imposition by the center.
- Protect oversight mechanisms by supporting the independence of the judiciary and monitoring bodies as a prerequisite for sustaining any local or national contract, and by avoiding the dismantling of existing safeguards without viable alternatives.

3. Tartous

- Prioritize security as a prerequisite by developing a clear plan to prevent violations, regulate security and military institutions, and implement measures that prevent targeting, retaliation, and collective stigmatization.
- Break the cycle of fear and silence by opening safe spaces for expression (civil, media, and community-based) with guarantees against persecution.
- Ensure fairness in employment and public service by addressing policies of dismissal or termination through transparent standards and appeal mechanisms, as economic security in this context is closely tied to perceptions of safety and fairness.

4. Homs

- Dismantle the “militia/sheikh model” by unifying security and administrative decision-making, ending informal influence within institutions, and ensuring that any security regulation operates within publicly declared legal mechanisms.
- Establish an emergency program to prevent communal escalation, including the criminalization of incitement, legally supported community mediation mechanisms, and protection for complainants and witnesses.
- Support the local social contract among communities by investing in local economic networks and rural–urban linkages as drivers of coexistence, alongside transparency in services and resource distribution.

5. Damascus

- Develop a new definition of the relationship between the State and society by transforming the capital into a model of transparency and participation (in decision-making, public media, and oversight), given that Damascus functions symbolically as the representation of the State.
- Ensure non-selective justice for missing persons and victims

through a formal and disciplined communication mechanism that prevents manipulation of families' emotions.

- Manage diversity through inclusive official discourse and spaces for dialogue between competing narratives, combined with the criminalization of hate speech and restrictions on disinformation.

6. Suwayda

- Ending violence and rebuilding trust must be a prerequisite for any national process, including security and legal guarantees that prevent the recurrence of violations, alongside a clear and official acknowledgment of what has occurred.
- Implement a strict and non-selective justice process including judicial accountability, reparations, and protection for witnesses, as legitimacy in Suwayda is measured primarily through justice.
- Address hate speech and social stigmatization—particularly against women survivors—through legal protection policies, support services, criminalization of incitement, and community interventions to prevent concealment and so-called “family-based” violence against survivors.
- Break the service and educational blockade through practical solutions related to transportation, education, examinations, and access to universities, as the disruption of daily life is widely interpreted as the complete absence of a social contract.

Analysis of Findings at the Governorate Level

Aleppo Governorate

I. Is There a Social Contract? The prevailing perception: it has not yet been established

The dialogue sessions in Aleppo indicate that the overwhelming majority of participants do not view the social contract as a framework that once existed and then collapsed as a result of the conflict. Rather, they perceive it as a relationship that was never formed in the first place on clear contractual foundations. The historical relationship between the State and society, as described by participants, was not built on mutual obligations or on a social consensus subject to accountability. Instead, it operated through a logic of obedience, control, and top-down management of society. As a result, the discussions did not reveal nostalgia for a “broken contract” or a desire to restore a previous agreement. Instead, there was a widespread perception that the experience of a social contract in its genuine sense had never actually been tested.

Within this context, one participant expressed this idea directly, stating that the State had long treated people as implementers rather than partners, adding that what had existed could not be considered a social contract because it was not based on consent or participation, but rather on the imposition of an accomplished fact. This perspective reflects a widely shared understanding in Aleppo that speaking about the “reconstruction” of a social contract presupposes the existence of a previous foundation—something many participants do not believe existed in the Syrian experience.

Discussions also revealed that recent political developments, including constitutional declarations or official discourse about a new phase, are not automatically perceived as constituting the establishment of a new social contract. Participants approached these steps with clear caution, considering them to remain top-down measures unless they are tested in practice through decision-making processes and the distribution of authority and responsibility. One participant summarized this skepticism by stating, *“A social contract is not a paper or an announcement... the contract is about how decisions are made, who makes them, and whether we are part of it or only hear about it after it happens.”*

This statement illustrates that, in local perceptions, the social contract is not measured by intentions or texts but by the pattern of everyday governance: Are there clear mechanisms of accountability? Are decisions understandable and predictable? Does society play a real role in shaping them? In the absence of clear answers to these questions, any discussion of a new social contract remains, in the view of participants, incomplete.

This perception was reinforced by additional contributions linking the absence of a social contract to the lack of clarity regarding decision-making centers. Participants noted that the problem lies not only in the content of decisions but also in the opacity of the processes through which they are made, leaving citizens unable to identify the authority with whom they can negotiate or hold accountable. In this regard, one participant stated that people today do not know “with whom they are supposed to reach agreements” or “on what basis they are expected to commit,” transforming the relationship with the State into a situational rather than a contractual one.

Accordingly, the Aleppo dialogues show that the question of whether a social contract exists cannot be answered simply with “yes” or “no.” Instead, the conclusion is more complex: the social contract has not yet been built. What is currently presented as the beginning or the contours of a new contract will remain fragile and unconvincing, from the perspective of participants, unless it evolves into a tangible experience that redefines the relationship between the State and society as one of partnership rather than unilateral administration.

II. The Social Contract as Governance Rather Than Text

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Aleppo discussions on the social contract is that participants did not treat it as a constitutional document or a theoretical agreement formulated on paper. Instead, they understood it as a pattern of governance tested daily through the management of public affairs.

The central question guiding the discussion was therefore not: What should the social contract stipulate? but rather: How is the State governed, according to what logic, and in whose interest?

Within this framework, it became clear that participants assess the social contract according to three interconnected criteria:

- First: The existence of a single standard of governance that ensures the absence of double standards or selective application. Participants emphasized the necessity of a unified standard for governance that prevents double standards or selective application of rules. They expressed strong sensitivity to any form of discrimination in the application of laws or decisions, viewing unequal treatment as a direct indicator of the absence of a fair social contract. One participant expressed this clearly: “If there is a law, it has to apply to everyone... the moment people see two standards, they know there is neither a contract nor justice.”
- Second: Participants linked the social contract to the State’s ability to acknowledge and utilize locally accumulated expertise rather than ignoring or excluding it. In the context of Aleppo—where the city and its rural surroundings experienced different forms of governance over many years—local administrative and organizational experience developed in areas such as service provision and everyday governance. However, discussions revealed frustration with the tendency to treat these experiences as if they had “no value” simply because they emerged outside the traditional centralized framework. One participant described this sentiment as follows: *“It feels as if everything that happened before simply did not exist... there were experiences, councils, and local administration, but now we are going back to zero, and that is not what a social contract means.”*
- Third: Participants emphasized that the social contract is measured by the extent to which society participates in decision-making rather than merely being informed after decisions are taken. Participation, as reflected in the discussions, is not a democratic luxury but a fundamental condition for people to feel that they are parties to a reciprocal contract rather than passive recipients of top-down decisions. In the absence of clear mechanisms for consultation or influence, the social contract loses its substance—even if the period is accompanied by reformist or transitional rhetoric.

Based on these criteria, some participants argued that ignoring previous local governance experiences—such as local councils or administrative models that emerged in different parts of rural Aleppo—and reverting to highly centralized decision-making does not represent a path toward building a new social contract. Instead, it risks reproducing an older top-down logic under new appearances. From the local perspective, the social contract is not built by erasing the experiences and organizational capacities accumulated by society, but by integrating them into an inclusive institutional framework that ensures unified standards while allowing multiple levels of participation.

Thus, the Aleppo sessions reveal that the social contract cannot be reduced to texts or slogans; it is tested through fair and consistent governance—governance that recognizes diversity, applies unified standards, and opens space for society to become a genuine partner in managing public affairs rather than merely an object of governance.

III. Imbalance Between Rights and Responsibilities

The Aleppo sessions demonstrate a broad perception that what has historically been referred to as the social contract in Syria—whether before 2011 or in subsequent phases—was essentially an imbalanced contract, in which obligations were imposed on citizens without corresponding rights that were guaranteed or subject to accountability. Participants repeatedly described the relationship between the State and society as one characterized by constant demands for compliance and obedience in exchange for the absence of protection, justice, and meaningful representation.

Notably, this imbalance was not attributed exclusively to the former regime. Instead, it was also presented as a potential risk in the current phase if transparency and participation in decision-making remain absent. Participants expressed concern that the same equation could be reproduced using new language, whereby concepts such as “responsibility,” “patience,” and “the public interest” are invoked without being translated into tangible guarantees or rights that can be claimed through legal means.

One participant explained: “The problem is not with responsibilities themselves. The problem is that there are no rights in return. The State always asks people to endure and comply, but when it comes to rights no one is there... that cannot be called a social contract.”

This statement reflects a widespread understanding within the sessions that the social contract cannot function as a one-directional discourse. Demanding citizens’ commitment loses its legitimacy when it is not accompanied by real guarantees—particularly regarding personal security, justice, and equal opportunities.

Participants also noted that the absence of trust pushes citizens to redefine their obligations toward the State. Instead of engaging in theoretical

discussions about the meaning of the social contract, more practical and direct questions emerged: Why should I commit to a contract that does not protect me? Why should I assume obligations in the absence of justice or representation? One participant summarized this logic: *“If I am not protected, not represented, and there is no justice... on what basis am I supposed to commit?”*

This perspective does not reflect a tendency toward rebellion or rejection of the State. Rather, it indicates a gradual withdrawal from the public sphere as a common response to an unjust contract. In the discussions, abstention from participation, disengagement from public affairs, and reliance on individual survival strategies emerged as silent forms of emptying the social contract of its substance when individuals feel that commitment is no longer reciprocal.

Accordingly, the Aleppo sessions reveal that the imbalance between rights and responsibilities threatens not only the legitimacy of the social contract but also the psychological and ethical foundations of any future contractual relationship. For participants, the social contract cannot be built upon imposed duties; it must be based on a clear and accountable exchange in which commitment arises from trust rather than serving as its substitute.

IV. The Social Contract and Diversity: Theoretical Acceptance Versus Practical Fear

The dialogue sessions in Aleppo indicate that the principle of a comprehensive social contract is not rejected in principle. Rather, it is received with significant conditional caution. In a city with a long history of ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, pluralism is not perceived as an obstacle to building a social contract; instead, it is regarded as a real test of its fairness. However, this theoretical acceptance is accompanied by recurring practical fears that the logic of exclusion may be reproduced under new labels, such as “the will of the majority” or “national unity.”

Participants expressed concern that the discourse of unity might be used to override the cultural or political rights of different communities, or to postpone recognition of these rights under the pretext of national priorities. One participant articulated this concern clearly: “We do not have a problem with a single social contract... the problem is if the contract is built in the name of the majority, because then minorities will pay the price.”

This statement reflects an understanding that the risk does not lie in the idea of the social contract itself, but in how it is defined and who holds the authority to shape it. In the absence of explicit guarantees, the contract could become, in the view of participants, an instrument of forced assimilation rather than a framework for recognizing and managing diversity.

Discussions also revealed concerns that the social contract could become a “soft” formula for reproducing exclusion, whereby the language of equality and unity is used to justify ignoring structural inequalities or the historical particularities of certain communities. One participant summarized this concern as follows: *“The language of unity sounds good, but without guarantees it becomes like before... the same exclusion, only with softer words.”*

In this context, local concerns should not be interpreted as separatist tendencies or rejection of national belonging. Rather, they represent demands for clear and enforceable guarantees within any new social contract. Participants emphasized that diversity does not need to be denied or dissolved; it requires a legal and political framework capable of protecting it from domination by a single discourse or narrative.

Accordingly, acceptance of a social contract in Aleppo appears to be conditional upon the clarity of institutional guarantees, rather than relying solely on goodwill or general rhetoric. The acceptable contract is one that recognizes pluralism as an integral component of the national fabric and establishes clear mechanisms preventing the “majority” from becoming a tool of exclusion—thus reassuring different communities that the social contract will function as a framework of protection rather than a reproduction of past fears in a new language.

V. The Economy and Public Services as a Practical Test of the Possibility of Building a New Social Contract

The Aleppo dialogue sessions clearly demonstrate that, in local perceptions, the social contract is not assessed through political slogans or constitutional texts, but rather through the economy and public services, which constitute the most direct arena for measuring the seriousness of the State and its capacity to uphold its commitments. Unlike some other contexts in which identity or security considerations dominated the discussion, the sessions in Aleppo revealed a broad understanding that the contractual relationship between citizens and the State is built—or collapses—based on access to livelihoods, the stability of economic rules, and the clarity of public policies.

Participants directly linked these elements to people’s willingness to engage in any new social contract. As they expressed it, the contract is not a theoretical promise about the future, but a practical relationship grounded in a simple logic: citizens commit when they see that the State is capable of regulation, applies rules fairly, and behaves in ways that are predictable. One participant summarized this logic by stating: *“People do not want promises... they want to work, to live, and to know what the rules are. Then they will commit.”*

This statement reflects the view that social and political commitment in Aleppo is built from the bottom up through everyday experience rather than through public discourse alone. When economic rules are unstable

or decisions change without explanation or a clear process, the social contract becomes an abstract idea that fails to translate into practice.

Participants also indicated that fluctuations in economic decisions—whether related to taxation, subsidies, or market regulation—are perceived as a major factor undermining trust. They noted that instability affects not only living conditions but also the sense that there is a functioning State with which a contractual relationship can be established. In this context, one participant remarked: *“Today there is one decision, tomorrow the opposite... that is not a contract, that is constant uncertainty.”*

In addition, the protection of vulnerable groups was raised as both an ethical and practical test of the social contract. The absence of social protection mechanisms, or the shifting of the costs of economic policies onto the most vulnerable populations, is interpreted as a fundamental breach of the contractual relationship—even when accompanied by rhetoric about reform or the public interest.

Accordingly, the Aleppo sessions reveal that the economy and public services do not simply constitute one component of the social contract; rather, they represent its practical core. A credible contract is one that provides a minimum level of economic stability, establishes clear and predictable rules, and protects vulnerable groups, thereby enabling people to re-engage in the public sphere and feel that their commitment is met by a genuine commitment from the State. Without these conditions, the social contract in Aleppo remains a postponed idea, unable to evolve into a sustainable relationship of trust.

VI. The Social Contract and Women in Aleppo

The Aleppo dialogue sessions reveal that the position of women within the conceptualization of the social contract is characterized by a clear tension between theoretical recognition of the importance of women's participation and a practical awareness that any new social contract could reproduce exclusion in different forms if existing power and representation imbalances are not addressed from the outset. Women in Aleppo do not discuss the social contract as an abstract legal framework; rather, they approach it as a political process in which the possibility of meaningful participation—rather than symbolic presence—is put to the test.

The discussions highlighted that the social contract, as it is currently debated, is viewed with skepticism by some participants, not because of its declared content but because of who is drafting it and how it is being drafted. One participant articulated this concern clearly by linking the exclusion of women from decision-making positions to the fragility of any social contract that might later emerge: *“If women are not involved in drafting the social contract from the beginning, it will become a patriarchal contract—even if it includes language about equality.”*

This statement reflects an awareness that exclusion does not occur only through written provisions but also through the mechanisms of drafting

and decision-making, making women's participation a fundamental condition—not a secondary detail—in the construction of the contract.

Participants also emphasized that women in Aleppo have historically experienced what might be described as “unwritten social contracts” in which responsibilities were imposed upon them without corresponding guarantees of rights, both under the former regime and during the years of conflict. In this context, one participant linked the concept of the social contract to fairness in the distribution of burdens and rights, stating: *“Women are always expected to endure and make sacrifices, but when we reach the stage of rights or decision-making, they say the time is not yet right.”*

This intervention shows that, from women's perspectives, the social contract cannot be understood separately from lived experiences in which postponement has become a recurring approach to addressing their rights. Such experiences generate skepticism toward future promises that are not accompanied by concrete guarantees.

At another level, participants emphasized that the social contract should not be reduced to formal political representation (such as parliamentary seats or elections). It must also include protection for women in public, economic, and social spaces. Participation in the contract was therefore linked to the ability to enjoy safety, access to employment, freedom of movement, and protection from stigma or targeting. One participant expressed this connection by stating: *“How can I believe in a social contract if, as a woman, I am afraid to participate or speak? The contract must protect me first.”* This link between the social contract and everyday security reflects a practical understanding of the contract as a relationship of mutual protection rather than merely a political agreement among elites.

The discussions also revealed concerns that the social contract could be reproduced through a logic of symbolic representation, where women are included through superficial quotas or media visibility without real changes in the structure of power or political culture. Participants considered this scenario to be an extension of earlier experiences in which women were included as a façade rather than as genuine partners. In this context, one participant emphasized: *“A quota without real authority does not create a social contract... it only creates a good image.”*

Accordingly, the Aleppo sessions demonstrate that women view the social contract primarily as a test of a genuine break with the past rather than as a new rhetorical opportunity. From their perspective, an acceptable contract is one that ensures meaningful participation in its drafting, restores balance between rights and responsibilities, provides protection in the public sphere, and prevents the reproduction of marginalization through new mechanisms. Without these elements, the social contract—even if framed in progressive language—would remain merely a reconfiguration of the unequal relationship between the State and society, with the continued marginalization of women at the core of the political process.

VII. Prospects for a Social Contract in Aleppo

Despite participants' recognition of the depth of the crisis and the complexity of the local context, the discussions did identify clear elements of what could constitute the "minimum conditions" for building a new social contract. The sessions suggest that this minimum threshold is not defined through texts or overarching slogans, but rather through tangible practices that recalibrate the relationship between the State and society on more balanced foundations.

1. **The primary condition lies in ensuring a single standard of governance and ending double standards in the application of laws and decisions.** As participants emphasized, a social contract cannot emerge in a context marked by exceptions and selective implementation that empty the principle of equality of its substance. The existence of a single rule applied to all constitutes an essential entry point for restoring trust in any new contractual framework.
2. **The necessity of involving local communities in decision-making processes rather than merely informing them after decisions have been taken.** This includes recognizing the expertise accumulated within the city and its rural surroundings during the years of conflict and drawing upon previous experiences of local governance within an inclusive institutional framework. Excluding such experiences is widely perceived as a return to a top-down logic that undermines any emerging social contract.
3. **Economic stability and the provision of public services were repeatedly described as decisive tests of the seriousness of any social contract.** Stable economic policies, clear and predictable rules, and the creation of employment opportunities—alongside the provision of a minimum level of essential services—are seen as indispensable conditions for enabling people to re-engage in public life. Without these conditions, the social contract remains a theoretical promise that fails to translate into reciprocal commitment.
4. **Ensuring the fair management of diversity.** Participants emphasized that the social contract must be grounded in the recognition of the country's diverse components and in their protection from domination or majoritarian will. Acceptance of the contract is therefore conditional upon the existence of clear guarantees that prevent the reproduction of exclusion and transform pluralism from a source of concern into a factor of stability.
5. **Restoring balance between rights and responsibilities,** so that obligations are not imposed upon citizens without the provision of legal protection, justice, and credible accountability mechanisms. In this context, citizens' commitment is understood as the outcome of trust built through performance and fairness, rather than an obligation imposed in conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty.

- 6. Integrating women as partners in the formulation of the social contract—and ensuring their protection—constitutes a matter of credibility rather than symbolic representation.** The discussions in Aleppo demonstrate that any new social contract risks losing a substantial portion of its legitimacy if it reproduces gender-based marginalization in more subtle forms. Women's participation should therefore not be understood as a matter of numerical representation or symbolic quotas, but as a foundational condition that shapes both the substance of the contract and the mechanisms for its implementation. This includes ensuring women's participation in drafting processes and decision-making structures, as well as linking the social contract to the State's capacity to guarantee safety in the public sphere, protect women from stigma, exclusion, and violence, and ensure equitable access to employment and political participation.

In this sense, the prospects for a social contract in Aleppo suggest that the minimum viable foundation does not lie in a political declaration or an abstract constitutional formulation. Rather, it lies in a gradual process that redefines governance and demonstrates in practice that the State can function as an accountable partner capable of protecting rights and managing diversity. Such a process would allow for the reconstruction of a social contract grounded in trust rather than coercion. Within this framework, the position of women emerges as a critical test of the fairness and credibility of the social contract. A contract that fails to guarantee women's participation, protection, and the translation of their rights into lived practice ultimately reproduces the very inequalities it claims to overcome.

Al-Hasakah Governorate / Qamishli

I. Is There an Effective Social Contract in Qamishli?

In contrast to the Aleppo context—where the prevailing perception was that a social contract had never been established—the dialogue sessions in Qamishli present a more complex equation. This complexity lies in the existence of an already functioning local social contract experience within areas under self-administration, which, however, is neither universally agreed upon nor treated as a final or complete framework. In this context, the social contract is not discussed as a future theoretical construct but rather as a lived experience, continuously reassessed based on its outcomes, its adoption mechanisms, and its capacity to generate sustainable trust.

Within this framework, a group of participants expressed a relatively positive assessment of the experience. They considered that the social contract in force in north-eastern Syria has, for the first time in the region's history, provided a framework that recognizes ethnic and religious

pluralism, regulates the relationship between authority and society, and places—even if partially—limits on the concentration of power. One participant highlighted this point by stating: *“For the first time, we have a social contract that recognizes our language and the components of the region... there are provisions that protect us, even if implementation is not yet complete.”*

This perspective reflects an understanding among some participants that the value of the social contract lies not only in the level of implementation but also in breaking with a historical pattern of denial and opening a legal space for recognition of communities and their rights. This is perceived as a qualitative shift compared to previous experiences under a centralized State.

At the same time, another, more cautious perspective emerged during the sessions. This group did not reject the existence of a social contract in principle but raised serious questions regarding its procedural legitimacy. Recurrent questions were raised about how the contract was adopted: Was it the result of a broad consultative process? Was it subjected to a public referendum? Or was it imposed as an accomplished fact within a specific balance of power? In this regard, participants linked the level of trust in the contract not only to its textual content but also to the process through which it was drafted and adopted. One participant expressed this concern as follows: *“The problem is not only in the text... the problem is how it was written and how it was imposed. If people did not participate, trust remains incomplete.”*

This intervention demonstrates that the debate in Qamishli is not about whether a social contract is needed, but rather about the conditions of its legitimacy and sustainability. For these participants, the contract does not derive its legitimacy automatically from the recognition of rights; it must emerge from a participatory process that provides society with a sense of ownership and the capacity for amendment and accountability.

This constitutes one of the defining features of Qamishli: the social contract is neither absent nor postponed but rather a subject of active debate regarding its adequacy, its limitations, and its potential for scaling up to the national level. This was reflected in discussions on whether the experience of self-administration could serve as a model for building an inclusive national social contract, or whether it remains a transitional local contract that needs to be integrated into a broader national framework—one that ensures recognition of all societal components and redefines the relationship between the center and the periphery.

Accordingly, the Qamishli sessions show that the question “Is there a social contract?” cannot be answered with a simple affirmation or denial. Instead, the answer is nuanced: yes, there is a tested social contract, but it remains under evaluation and debate, conditional upon revisiting its procedural legitimacy and its capacity to evolve from a local experience into a comprehensive national framework.

II. The Social Contract as “Governance and Protection Mechanisms” Rather Than a Mere Document

The Qamishli sessions demonstrated a relatively advanced and practical understanding of the concept of the social contract, framing it as a system of governance and protection mechanisms rather than merely a political document or definitional text. The discussion quickly moved beyond the question of “What does the contract include?” to a more fundamental question: How is the contract protected, and who ensures that it is not bypassed?

In this context, the judicial mechanism established to protect the social contract emerged as one of the strengths of the local experience, despite acknowledgment that it remains relatively new and has not yet been fully tested. Participants viewed this mechanism as a qualitative step forward compared to previous experiences in Syria, where no independent body existed to monitor the authorities’ compliance with governing frameworks. One participant expressed this point as follows: *“Having a court to protect the social contract is very important... for the first time, there is an entity we can turn to if there is a violation, even if implementation is not yet ideal.”*

This reflects an understanding that the value of the social contract does not derive solely from its text, but from the existence of an authority capable of enforcing it and holding violators accountable—an essential condition for transforming the contract from a declaration of intent into a binding framework.

In addition, participants repeatedly emphasized that the local social contract is amendable, expandable, and even revocable depending on changing circumstances and political phases. This distinguishes it from a permanent constitution, which typically requires complex amendment procedures. This flexibility was presented as a strength rather than a weakness, as it allows the contract to adapt to social and political transformations without being undermined or bypassed. One participant articulated this idea as follows: *“The social contract is not sacred... it must be adaptable to the context, but what matters most is having clear mechanisms to protect fundamental rights.”*

This perspective highlights that flexibility, in the view of participants, does not equate to fragility; rather, it reflects the contract’s capacity to evolve within institutional safeguards, ensuring that amendments are not used as a tool by authorities to undermine rights.

Furthermore, the concept of “supra-constitutional provisions” or entrenched guarantees for the protection of the rights of different societal components emerged strongly, particularly in light of concerns that future majorities might manipulate the constitution or the social contract itself. Participants emphasized that the mere recognition of rights within an amendable text is insufficient unless these rights are safeguarded through mechanisms that prevent their erosion—even in the event of shifting

political power dynamics.

Accordingly, the Qamishli sessions demonstrate that the social contract is understood as an institutional architecture for protection and implementation: an independent judiciary, oversight mechanisms, separation of powers, and robust guarantees of rights. It is not merely a linguistic formulation or a consensual document. Within this understanding, the social contract is not a reflection of a transient political moment but a framework capable of durability and continuity—provided that it is translated into institutions that protect it from the concentration of power and equip society with effective tools for accountability and correction.

III. The “Social Contract” in Qamishli as a Contract of Recognition of Components Before Being One of Abstract Citizenship

The Qamishli dialogue sessions clearly demonstrate that the discourse of “citizenship” as a universal legal framework is not rejected in principle. However, it is considered insufficient unless it is accompanied by explicit and clear recognition of societal components and their ethnic and cultural rights. In this context, citizenship is not understood as an abstract identity or a neutral individual relationship with the State, but rather as a political framework that must address historical imbalances and ensure that exclusion is not reproduced in new forms.

Discussions focused extensively on issues considered fundamental to any acceptable social contract in Qamishli. These issues included recognition of multiple official languages, the right to education in one’s mother tongue, recognition of cultural and religious observances specific to different communities (such as Nowruz and Akitu), and the removal of exclusionary formulations from the definition of the State and its identity. Participants emphasized that these issues are not secondary cultural demands but foundational elements in building trust between the State and society.

In this context, one participant stressed that a notion of citizenship that ignores these rights risks reproducing a logic of denial: *“If they say we are all citizens, but without recognizing our language and culture, that is not recognition... it is a return to the same old problem.”*

This reflects an understanding that formal equality before the law is insufficient to ensure a just social contract if it is used to dissolve specific identities rather than protect them. From this perspective, citizenship should function as a framework of recognition rather than an instrument of assimilation.

The discussions also revealed a direct link between any future national social contract and the need to address historical grievances experienced by Kurdish communities and other groups. These include policies such as the Arabization of names, discrimination in education and employment,

deprivation of nationality, and forms of humiliation tied to identity. These issues were not framed as matters of the past alone but as preconditions for building trust in any inclusive contract. One participant expressed this clearly: *“We are not asking for privileges... we are asking to correct what happened. Without acknowledging injustice, there can be no contract and no trust.”*

This intervention demonstrates that the social contract in Qamishli is not understood merely as a break from the past, but as a process of addressing it—rebuilding the relationship between the State and societal components on the basis of recognition and equity rather than denial or postponement.

This highlights a key distinction of Qamishli compared to other regions: the fundamental test of the social contract lies in whether it recognizes ethnic and religious pluralism as an intrinsic part of the State, or whether it reproduces a unitary State under a new guise.

Accordingly, the Qamishli sessions reveal that an acceptable social contract is not one based on “neutral” citizenship that transcends identities, but rather one that recognizes, protects, and transforms them from sources of fear into foundations of partnership. Without such structural recognition, citizenship remains, in the view of participants, a formal construct lacking the capacity to generate belonging or long-term stability.

IV. The Position of Damascus (Central Authority / Constitutional Declaration) in the Conceptualization of the Social Contract: The “Single-Color” Problem

Within this context, the Qamishli sessions presented a critical assessment of the current central authority in Damascus—not only as a political actor but as an indicator of how the social contract is being conceptualized and constructed. In the discussions, the constitutional declaration was not perceived as an automatic foundational step toward a national social contract. Instead, it was viewed as a document that raised significant doubts regarding the intentions of the authorities, decision-making processes, and the limits of participation.

Participants’ primary concern was not limited to the content of the declaration but extended to the manner in which it was drafted and adopted. The absence of consultation with diverse societal components, and the lack of inclusion of local actors and community stakeholders, were interpreted as evidence of the continuity of a top-down decision-making logic—one that contradicts any contractual model based on partnership. One participant expressed this concern as follows: *“The constitutional declaration came out without anyone asking us... if this is how they intend to draft the social contract, how can we trust them?”*

This reflects a widely shared understanding in Qamishli that procedural legitimacy—how decisions are made—is as important as the content

itself. From this perspective, a social contract cannot be built through documents produced at the center and then imposed on the periphery, particularly in a country characterized by deep diversity.

In addition, the issue of concentration of authority and the dominance of a “single color” in the composition of power emerged as a major obstacle to building an inclusive social contract. Participants linked the monopolization of decision-making by a specific political or ideological group to the reproduction of exclusion, even if the rhetoric has changed. One participant articulated this clearly: *“The problem is not only the previous regime... the problem is if the new authority has the same single color—then what has changed in the contract?”*

This reflects concerns that the issue is not merely the return of past structures but the possibility of reproducing them in new forms, with different actors but similar power dynamics.

Participants also linked hate speech and official identity policies—including language, symbols, and cultural or religious references—to the undermining of any potential for building an inclusive social contract. Ignoring ethnic and religious diversity in official discourse, or treating it as secondary, was seen as reproducing exclusion rather than overcoming it. It renders the social contract, even if formally adopted, a fragile document vulnerable to rejection or to being hollowed out in practice.

In this context, participants emphasized that the issue is not the existence of a central authority per se, but the absence of clear rules for participation and pluralism within that authority. A social contract, as understood in Qamishli, cannot function under the dominance of a single narrative or political identity presented as the “national identity,” as this undermines the very concept of partnership.

Accordingly, the sessions indicate that the position of Damascus in the current conceptualization of the social contract is perceived as ambiguous and a source of concern. Rather than being viewed as a potential guarantor of a national social contract, the central authority—through the constitutional declaration and the management of the transitional phase—is seen as a negative test of the idea itself. Without fundamental changes in decision-making processes, official discourse, and mechanisms for including diverse societal components, any discussion of a national social contract remains subject to skepticism, regardless of the sophistication of its legal formulation.

V. Do We Need a Single National Contract or Regional Arrangements? The Qamishli Question as a Search for “Unity with Guarantees”

The Qamishli sessions demonstrated that the question of the social contract is not approached from a blank starting point, as the region has already experienced a form of local social contract through the self-

administration model. Accordingly, the core question is not whether a contract is needed, but rather how to transition from an existing local contract to a comprehensive national framework without reproducing exclusion or undermining existing guarantees. In this sense, most discussions leaned toward a hybrid approach: a single national contract as a higher-level reference framework, which does not necessarily eliminate regional specificities or arrangements, but rather accommodates or protects them through binding principles.

VI. A Single National Contract—Provided It Establishes Broad Guarantees Rather Than Forced Homogenization

Several participants expressed a preference for a single national social contract at the level of Syria, not as a coercive unifying formula, but as an agreement on broad principles that guarantee the rights of all components and prevent majoritarian domination. One participant offered a particularly compelling rationale, noting that specificities are not unique to north-eastern Syria but are present across all regions of the country in different forms. Accordingly, there is a need for a national social contract that approaches Syria as a diverse mosaic rather than a homogeneous entity: *“There should be a social contract at the level of all Syria... the logic of specificities exists across the entire country... we need to agree on broad principles that guarantee the rights of all components and preserve the particularity of each community.”*

This reflects an understanding that a national contract should not negate diversity, but rather institutionalize it as a national principle—recognizing that each region has its own social composition requiring specific guarantees.

VII. The Local Contract as a Model... Scalable Subject to Adaptation and Inclusion of Other Components

Some participants presented the experience of the social contract under the self-administration as a scaled-down model that could serve as a foundation for broader application. This is not envisioned as a literal replication, but rather as a framework that can be adapted and expanded to include other Syrian components.

This is clearly reflected in an intervention suggesting that the social contract in self-administration areas could function as a national point of departure, provided that it is redrafted, and its provisions revised to reflect Syria's wider diversity. In this context, one participant stated: *“The social contract of the self-administration is a small-scale model for Syria... other components can be incorporated into this contract with amendments to some of its provisions.”*

This approach reflects a desire to preserve the value of the existing local experience, while at the same time avoiding its transformation into a self-contained or exclusive reference. Instead, it is viewed as an evolving framework that can be developed and expanded within an inclusive national social contract.

VIII. Regional Arrangements within a National Framework: Specificity as a Safeguard, Not an Exception

In contrast to the previous perspectives, another view emerged emphasizing that guarantees may be more effectively secured through regional or decentralized arrangements within a broader national framework. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that the Syrian context is deeply pluralistic, and that an overly centralized contract may easily drift toward domination by a majority or a single political orientation.

However, this position does not generally advocate for fully separate regional contracts in a fragmentary sense. Rather, it envisions a dual structure: overarching, binding national principles—potentially supra-constitutional in nature; and corresponding local arrangements that ensure the representation of all components and the protection of their rights within each region or locality.

IX. The Social Contract and Women in Qamishli: Between a Progressive Text and Incomplete Implementation

The Qamishli sessions demonstrate that the position of women within the conceptualization of the social contract is characterized by a dual specificity. On the one hand, the existing social contract in areas under self-administration is regarded as theoretically more advanced with respect to women's rights compared to previous Syrian experiences—whether in terms of the language employed, the inclusion of the principle of gender equality, or the recognition of women's roles in public life. On the other hand, the discussions reveal a clear gap between text and implementation, rendering the contract, for many women participants, a promising but not yet fully effective framework.

The discussions reflected a broad awareness that the inclusion of women's rights in the social contract is not a secondary detail, but a direct indicator of the nature of the contract itself: whether it constitutes a framework for genuine protection and participation, or merely a progressive formulation lacking effective implementation. One participant articulated this contradiction clearly: *"The text of the social contract is good for women, but the problem is always in implementation... on paper there is equality, but in reality, there are still many obstacles."*

This statement reflects a critical awareness among participants that the

social contract is not measured solely by the principles it contains, but by its ability to transform actual power relations—particularly in a society still shaped by entrenched social norms and traditional power structures.

At the same time, other participants emphasized that the very existence of the social contract, with its explicit recognition of women's rights, has created a new reference framework for claims-making and accountability, even if outcomes remain incomplete. In this regard, one participant stated: *"Before there was a social contract, there was nothing to refer to or hold anyone accountable... now at least there is a reference point where we can say: this is our written right."*

This intervention demonstrates that the social contract, even when imperfectly implemented, redefines the relationship between women and authority—from one of subordination or marginalization to one of rights-based claim-making grounded in a binding text. This represents a qualitative shift in how women perceive their role within the contract.

The sessions also raised a fundamental question regarding women's representation in the process of drafting the contract itself, not only in its outcomes. Some participants expressed concern that women's participation, despite being present to some extent, was not always equitable at key decision-making moments. This raises the question of "who writes the contract?" as a fundamentally political and gender-related issue. One participant summarized this concern: "If women are not genuine partners in shaping the contract, there will always be a gap between what is written and what is lived."

Within this framework, the discussion did not focus narrowly on numerical representation or quotas, but rather on a deeper principle: a just social contract for women is one that produces effective mechanisms of protection and implementation—such as an independent judiciary, accountability systems, and public policies—rather than one limited to symbolic recognition. Participants also linked women's rights to the broader nature of the State. A State that is unable to protect women from violence or discrimination, even where progressive legal provisions exist, is seen as a State whose capacity to protect other societal components is likewise questionable.

Accordingly, the Qamishli sessions demonstrate that women are not viewed merely as beneficiaries of the social contract, but as a key benchmark for its evaluation. From the perspective of participants, the success of the contract is measured by its ability to move from formal recognition to practical empowerment, from legal text to policy implementation, and from symbolic inclusion to meaningful participation in decision-making. In this sense, the question of "the social contract and women" is not a sectoral issue, but a central entry point for assessing the overall fairness and credibility of the contract.

I. Prospects for the Social Contract in Qamishli

The Qamishli sessions indicate that the prospects for building an acceptable social contract do not emerge from a vacuum, but from an existing experience and a long history of exclusion. This makes the “minimum threshold” for a social contract in this context more complex and layered. The feasible contract, in the view of participants, is not merely a new legal agreement, but a process that addresses historical imbalances and prevents their reproduction in different forms.

- 1. Explicit recognition of societal components and their ethnic and cultural rights as a foundational element of the contract, not a subsequent outcome.** This includes recognition of linguistic diversity, the right to education in one’s mother tongue, respect for cultural and religious symbols, and the removal of exclusionary formulations from the definition of the State and its identity. Equal citizenship in Qamishli cannot be built on formal neutrality that ignores particularities, but on recognition that transforms them into a source of protection rather than fear.
- 2. The demand for institutional guarantees as a decisive condition for the sustainability of the social contract.** It is not sufficient to include rights in a text that remains subject to amendment; rather, these rights must be safeguarded through independent protection mechanisms, such as an effective judiciary, constitutional or quasi-constitutional courts, and genuine separation of powers. Consideration should also be given to supra-constitutional provisions that prevent future majorities from undermining the fundamental rights of societal components. An acceptable contract is one that protects rights even during shifts in the balance of power.
- 3. The importance of procedural legitimacy and meaningful participation in the drafting of any national social contract.** Trust cannot be built through texts produced at the center and disseminated to the periphery, but through broad consultative processes in which diverse societal components participate as partners rather than passive recipients. The absence of such participation is seen as a direct threat to the viability of any contract, regardless of how advanced its language may be.
- 4. A flexible national social contract** that serves as an overarching framework for rights and sovereignty, without necessarily eliminating local or decentralized arrangements that have demonstrated their capacity to protect specificities. The acceptable minimum does not rest on rigid centralization, but on a balance between the unity of the national framework and the diversity of implementation models, allowing local experiences to function as sources of stability rather than division.
- 5. The position of women constitutes a central test of the seriousness of the social contract.** A just contract is one that translates the

formal recognition of women's rights into concrete policies of protection and empowerment and ensures their participation in decision-making processes rather than limiting them to symbolic representation. The credibility of the contract is measured, in this regard, by its ability to reduce the gap between text and practice—not merely by the progressiveness of its language.

6. **Any serious social contract, whether local or national, cannot succeed without a transformation in the rules of public policy and the official narrative**, including language, symbols, and approaches to managing diversity. In this context, the social contract is understood as a long-term relationship of trust, built through recognition, guarantees, and participation—not through declarations or temporary agreements.

Accordingly, the “minimum threshold” for a social contract in Qamishli is defined as a contract that recognizes diversity as a foundational principle, safeguards rights through independent enforcement mechanisms, produces genuine partnership in decision-making, and balances the national framework with local experiences. Such a contract prevents the recurrence of exclusion and transforms the social contract from a political document into a practical and sustainable framework of protection.

Tartous Governorate

I. Is There a Social Contract in Tartous?

The dialogue sessions in Tartous indicate that participants do not begin from the premise of the “complete absence of a social contract,” as in Aleppo, nor from the premise of the existence of a “tested alternative contract,” as in Qamishli. Rather, they operate from a distinct understanding: that what has historically governed the relationship between society and authority was an unwritten, practical arrangement closer to “coercive coexistence” than to a social contract in the political sense. This arrangement was based on an implicit formula: compliance and silence in exchange for a minimum level of stability. Accordingly, the discussions do not deny the existence of a “previous contract,” but instead describe it as an imbalanced relationship: a State that demands obedience and produces fear as a condition for control, while society lacks mechanisms of accountability or participation comparable to a contractual relationship.

The specificity of Tartous lies in the fact that this arrangement functioned—albeit in a fragile manner—because it offered a degree of predictability: people understood the boundaries of what was permitted and prohibited and adapted their survival strategies accordingly. However, the sessions make clear that the post-December 2024 transition did not produce a new contract, but rather pushed the old one into a phase of erosion. Fear, which had always been part of the equation, did not recede, while the element

of “guarantee/security” that once justified withdrawal has diminished. This explains the shift in discussion from the question “How do we build a social contract?” to a more urgent one: how to contain the expansion of fear and restore a minimum level of security so that contractual discussions can become possible in the first place.

This meaning is explicitly captured in one participant’s description of the persistence and intensification of fear—not as an individual psychological condition, but as a governing structure that reproduces itself: *“Fear lives inside every person in Syria. In the past we lived in fear, and now we are living in even greater fear.”*

This quotation captures the essence of the situation in Tartous: the contract has not evolved into a partnership but has remained a relationship of fear. With political change, this dynamic has not been dismantled but rather redistributed and intensified, leaving people unable to “commit,” as commitment itself is not grounded in trust or reciprocity of rights and duties, but in fear of the unknown.

At the same time, another participant’s testimony illustrates how this contractual void affects the definition of self as a citizen. Instead of describing themselves within a rights-based and equitable framework, they portray a stark duality that reduces the relationship with authority to positions of power and subordination: *“You cannot be just a citizen... you are either a ruler or a subject.”*

This statement reflects not only individual frustration but also the collapse of the “middle space” that any social contract is meant to provide—a safe, ordinary sphere of citizenship in which individuals can anticipate the behavior of authority and rely on general rules. When this space disappears, discussions of a “new social contract” become premature, as people no longer perceive a clear negotiating counterpart or binding rules that give meaning to commitment.

Accordingly, the situation in Tartous can be summarized as follows: there was a “contract” in practice in the sense of a stability arrangement, but it was not a just contract. Today, this arrangement is eroding because fear persists while guarantees decline. The relationship thus enters a contractual vacuum, reinforcing tendencies toward retreat into narrower circles (local environment, village, community, sect) and making the construction of a social contract conditional upon measures that restore security, break the cycle of fear, and create a minimum set of shared rules against which authority can be held accountable.

II. The Social Contract in Tartous as “Security and Control” Rather Than Partnership or Governance

The Tartous sessions show that the concept of the social contract is not initially invoked as a political framework regulating the relationship between State and society, nor as a system of rights and obligations open

to negotiation and accountability. Rather, it is understood primarily as the capacity of authority to ensure a minimum level of security and prevent disorder. Unlike Aleppo, where discussions focused on governance and participation, and Qamishli, where the contract was framed as a system of protection and legal mechanisms, participants in Tartous center their understanding around a single question that almost subsumes all others: Are we safe or not?

In this context, the value of the social contract is not measured by the existence of a constitution, a constitutional declaration, or new political language, but by the authority's ability to contain everyday violence, prevent chaos, and protect individuals from targeting and retaliation. Security clearly takes precedence over all other criteria in participants' perceptions—including political participation, representation, and even broader notions of justice. The social contract here is not an aspirational framework for improving relations with the State, but a last line of defense against total collapse.

This perception is reflected in a participant's description of the current phase as one of containment rather than political transition: *"What people want today is not major projects as much as stopping the bleeding."*

Another participant described the moment as: *"An open transitional phase with all possibilities... extremely difficult due to the complexity of the situation."*

This quotation not only reflects the ambiguity of the current phase, but also explains why the social contract in Tartous is reduced to its security function. In a context perceived as fragile and open to worst-case scenarios, security becomes the primary—if not nearly the sole—criterion for assessing the performance of the authorities.

Within this framework, some participants expressed cautious optimism regarding the performance of the current authorities—not because they believe in a new contractual project, but because they perceive efforts to "contain" or "control the situation." However, this optimism reflects anxious waiting rather than political trust: a hope that authorities will prevent chaos, even if they do not establish a new contract. This reflects a conditional and temporary optimism, driven more by fear of the alternative than by confidence in the current trajectory.

Conversely, other participants voiced concern that "control" could become a substitute for justice, reproducing past mechanisms of domination under new labels. One participant noted that available civic spaces are still governed by a logic of permission and surveillance, with activities pre-evaluated and restricted—indicating a return to security-driven governance despite changes in discourse.

Accordingly, the social contract in Tartous is understood not as a framework for managing disagreement, distributing power, or organizing diversity, but as a mechanism for preventing collapse and managing fear. This understanding imposes structural constraints on efforts to build a contract based on partnership or participation. When the contract is

reduced to “security,” politics becomes a burden, participation a risk, and governance a postponed luxury. A transition to a new social contract is therefore not possible unless security shifts from being a tool of control to an enabling condition that fosters trust, accountability, and a redefinition of the State–society relationship as one of negotiation rather than control.

III. Imbalance Between Rights and Duties

The Tartous sessions reveal a deep awareness of imbalance between rights and duties, though in a different form than in Aleppo. Here, the imbalance is not framed primarily as the absence of legal or institutional rights, but as the imposition of the cost of “stability” on society without corresponding guarantees. Participants describe a long-standing relationship in which people were expected to comply, remain silent, and endure fear based on an implicit promise of protection or avoidance of worse outcomes.

Many participants noted that large segments of society of Tartous paid a high price in the name of “protecting the country” or “avoiding chaos,” without experiencing genuine justice or sustainable security. As the element of protection erodes, commitment is no longer viewed as a moral or national duty, but becomes subject to fundamental questioning: on what basis should people commit if costs persist while security is absent? This question is not articulated in explicit political terms; rather, it permeates the interventions as a general sense that the meaning which once justified silence has collapsed. This is clearly reflected in the testimony of one participant, who conveyed a deeply indicative personal experience, stating: *“My child today is afraid, just as I was in the past... but the difference is that I used to be able to say: this is simply how the country is... today, even that answer is no longer convincing.”*

This quote reflects that the unwritten “contract” which once justified fear as the price of stability is no longer valid, for fear has persisted while stability has disappeared, transforming compliance from a necessary choice into a meaningless burden.

In another intervention, a participant directly expressed this imbalance by linking the absence of protection to the collapse of the very idea of compliance, saying: *“If I am not protected, there is no justice, and I don’t know what might happen tomorrow... why should I comply? Compliance requires something in return.”*

This quote is important because it does not express a call for rebellion or overt refusal, but rather a logic of quiet withdrawal from the contractual relationship: compliance is no longer seen as a duty, but as a losing equation in which the individual has no tools for protection or accountability.

Accordingly, the context in Tartous reveals that the social contract unravels not primarily at the political or institutional level, but at the psychological and moral level. When fear transforms from a tool for enforcing compliance into a permanent factor without compensation, compliance loses its meaning, pushing individuals to retreat into their narrow circles. Within

this silent retreat, the social contract does not collapse all at once; rather, it is gradually emptied of its substance, until the relationship with the State becomes one of avoidance and waiting, rather than a relationship of reciprocal rights and obligations.

IV. The Social Contract and Diversity in Tartous: Silence as a Fragile Coexistence Mechanism

The dialogue sessions show that the management of religious and sectarian diversity in Tartous historically did not rely on a social contract that recognizes diversity as a political or cultural reality requiring protection. Instead, it relied on a silent form of coercive coexistence. Pluralism was neither openly contested nor actively managed as a recognized value or an important issue within the general atmosphere. Rather, a pattern prevailed based on avoidance of discussion and postponement of public debate on identity and belonging, with silence serving as a condition for stability.

This silence, however, was not based on consensus but on mutual fear. While it prevented conflict for a time, it did not generate genuine trust or security. With recent changes, this silent balance has begun to erode, bringing suppressed fears to the surface and turning diversity from a living reality into a latent source of anxiety.

In this context, participants expressed a growing sense that each group interprets the current stage through the lens of its own fears: some speak of present-day grievances and feelings of exclusion or targeting, while others express fear of collective stigmatization, retaliation, or being held responsible for political or historical events in which they do not see themselves as direct parties. One participant summarized this anxious fragmentation, saying: *"People have returned to their local environments before the civic... each group is taking shelter in itself, not because it wants to, but because nothing reassures it anymore."* This quote reflects how, in the absence of an overarching framework, diversity becomes a defensive mechanism rather than a space for partnership.

The sessions also highlighted clear concern that the lack of an official discourse openly acknowledging and addressing mutual fears leaves space for rumors, misinterpretations, and emotional narratives. One participant expressed this fear of silence turning into outright fracture, saying: *"We lived together for years because we were quiet... but today, silence no longer protects us, and people are afraid both to speak and to remain silent at the same time."* This quote illustrates that silence, previously used as a tool of avoidance, has lost its capacity to produce security and has itself become an additional source of anxiety.

Within this context, there is no fundamental rejection in Tartous of the idea of a comprehensive social contract recognizing diversity, but there is a profound fear of a contract drafted on top of this silence without dismantling it. Participants do not demand rigid identity-based formulas or separatist

arrangements; rather, they fear that the same fragile coexistence will be reproduced under a new guise, without addressing accumulated layers of fear, mistrust, and mutual grievance. Accordingly, any social contract that does not recognize these deep layers of lived experience is seen as a contract prone to reproducing division rather than containing it.

Thus, the Tartous sessions reveal that the challenge does not lie in the existence of diversity itself, but in how to transition from a silence that temporarily manages coexistence to an acknowledgment that manages it sustainably. In this context, a viable social contract is not one that bypasses difference or asks people “not to probe it,” but one that creates a safe space to recognize fears and identities, transforming diversity from a silent burden into a gradual source of trust; without this, coexistence remains fragile and liable to collapse at the first disruption.

V. The Economy in Tartous and the Social Contract

The dialogue sessions in Tartous indicate that the economy and public services did not occupy a prominent position in discussions of the social contract, as they did in Aleppo; rather, they initially emerged as a silent backdrop to the crisis—strongly present in daily life but relatively absent from direct political debate. Interventions did not begin with analyses of economic policies or calls for structural reforms; instead, they focused on manifestations of incapacity, lack of opportunities, and erosion of the ability to live with dignity, as if the economy had become a coercive reality to endure, rather than a domain in which negotiation or accountability of the State was possible.

However, this “silent backdrop” is revealed, upon deeper reading of the discussions, as a structural element of the social contract crisis, not merely a side effect. The relative absence of the economy in the social contract discourse does not reflect a lack of importance, but rather highlights that discussions in Tartous are governed by fear and security. In a context where participants feel that stability itself is threatened, improving living conditions is seen as a matter to be deferred until after “securing the situation” or “preventing disorder.” One participant articulated this logic clearly, saying: *“Today your concern is to live and remain quiet... work and the economy have become secondary compared to fear.”* This quote reflects a forced reordering of priorities: the economy is not deferred because it is nonessential, but because people do not see a realistic possibility of holding the State accountable for livelihood obligations in the absence of security and clear rules.

What the Tartous sessions add, as a local particularity, is the direct link between economic fragility and unannounced policies of dismissal and layoffs, especially in the public sector. The issue of arbitrary dismissals, sometimes unannounced officially, was raised as a highly serious economic and social factor—particularly when participants perceive these actions as targeting employees from certain sectarian backgrounds, notably the Alawite community, without clear criteria, announced procedures, or

mechanisms for objection and participation.

As reflected in the interventions, such policies do not only cause income loss but deepen the sense of both economic and existential insecurity simultaneously. Job termination here is not read as an administrative measure, but as a veiled political message, turning public employment from a source of stability into a source of fear. This exacerbates the economic crisis and makes discussion of the social contract more fragile, as the State appears not as a guarantor of livelihood, but as an entity capable of withdrawing the means of subsistence without rules or transparency.

In this context, one participant summarized the relationship between the economy and the social contract directly, saying: *“How can you talk about a social contract when people cannot find a job or make a living? The contract needs people who can endure.”* This statement does not merely link livelihood to commitment; it reveals that the capacity to endure has become a precondition for any contractual relationship, whereas, at a minimum, a social contract is supposed to mitigate the cost of endurance rather than shift it entirely onto individuals.

Accordingly, the economy in Tartous is no longer simply an absent element in discussions of the social contract; it has become one of the most important indicators of its absence. When there are no clear rules for employment and dismissal, and when sources of livelihood are managed according to unannounced security or identity-based logic, the economy becomes an individual burden, and survival strategies become private matters unrelated to the public sphere or citizenship. This, in turn, deepens the sense of lack of prospects and empties any discussion of a new social contract of its practical content, because at a minimum, the contract presupposes a degree of collective economic security, not merely the management of fear or the silent distribution of losses among certain groups.

VI. The Social Contract and Women in Tartous

The dialogue sessions in Tartous show that women perceive the social contract from a different perspective: discussions do not begin with political representation or constitutional texts, but with daily security as a precondition for any conversation about participation or rights. Women, as participants repeatedly emphasized, cannot consider their place within a new social contract while facing ongoing fears for their children, or lacking the ability to move freely and express themselves without repercussions.

Several interventions linked the social contract directly to the State's capacity to protect women and their families from fear, violence, and stigmatization—not as a sectoral women's demand, but as the core of the contractual relationship itself. In women's experience in Tartous, the social contract is measured not by promises of the future, but by the security it provides in the present, enabling a normal life. One participant expressed this clearly: *“As a mother, I cannot think about a social contract*

or participation... my first concern is how to protect my children, and how they can go out and come back safely." This reflects that, in the local women's perspective, the social contract begins not with politics but with the home, the street, and daily life realities.

Another participant connected the social contract to protection from stigmatization and targeting, noting that without such protection, any discussion of rights is emptied of meaning. She stated: *"If a woman is afraid to speak or participate because she might be stigmatized or held accountable, what is the value of any social contract? The contract must protect me before asking me to participate."* This illustrates that fear not only limits participation, but redefines it as a risk rather than a right, making the postponement of participation a defensive choice rather than a political stance.

Other contributions indicated that women do not reject the principle of participation in drafting a social contract, but they question its timing and viability under conditions of insecurity. One participant summarized this tension: *"We are not against participation, but participation needs security... it needs a State that protects us first, then we can think about being partners."* This quote highlights that participation is not an isolated individual decision, but the product of a secure environment that allows its costs to be borne.

Accordingly, women's position within the social contract in Tartous serves as a sensitive indicator of its structural fragility. A contract that cannot provide daily security for women cannot create space for genuine or sustainable participation; instead, it reproduces a relationship based on fear and withdrawal. In this sense, women's prioritization of safety should not be read as a retreat from claiming rights, but as a precise diagnosis of a prerequisite for the very possibility of a social contract: no participation without security, no contract without protection, no partnership under constant fear.

VII. Prospects for the Social Contract in Tartous

The dialogue sessions in Tartous indicate that the future of the social contract is not seen as a clearly defined transitional path or as a foundational opportunity to build a new relationship between the State and society. Rather, it is approached as an open question into the unknown. Discussions do not center on "how to build a better contract," but on how to avoid the worst outcomes, halt deterioration, and prevent deeper violence or division. In this sense, there is no mature vision for a new social contract; rather, participants identify a set of minimum conditions necessary to make any conversation about a contract possible at all.

In Tartous, this "minimum" is not formulated in contractual or constitutional language, but in terms of restoring safety and reducing fear. As participants perceive the transition, it does not start with redefining rights and duties, but with halting violations, alleviating daily anxieties,

and establishing an initial sense that the relationship with the authorities is no longer based solely on fear and silence. This distinguishes Tartous from Qamishli, where the social contract is discussed within a framework of redefinition and guarantees, and from Aleppo, where it is addressed in terms of governance and participation. Tartous remains at the threshold of pre-contractual conditions.

Within this framework, four key points emerge:

1. **There is a need for official discourse and conduct that acknowledges existing fears instead of denying or bypassing them.** Recognition here is not understood as a political concession, but as a first step toward rebuilding trust. Continued neglect or dismissal of societal anxieties deepens a sense of fragility and keeps the relationship with authorities in a State of waiting and suspicion, rather than in a negotiable trajectory.
2. **Moving beyond mere control toward justice is central to any future contractual horizon.** Control, even if temporarily successful in preventing disorder, cannot generate lasting trust or commitment. Without clear accountability mechanisms and publicly known rules governing the exercise of authority, security will remain fragile, dependent on situational balances rather than a stable contractual relationship.
3. **Breaking the cycle of silence and fear is essential for building any new social contract.** Silence, previously a temporary coexistence mechanism, has become an obstacle to redefining the relationship between State and society. Without safe spaces for expression and mutual recognition, fear replaces dialogue and withdrawal replaces participation.
4. **Lastly, sessions in Tartous reflect growing awareness that the old contract—based on silence in exchange for protection—has effectively ended,** and returning to it is no longer possible, even if some actors wish to do so. However, this awareness is not yet accompanied by a clear vision for what could replace it, placing society in a gray zone between a contract that no longer exists and one that has not yet formed.

Thus, Tartous reflects a unique transitional situation: the disintegration of an unjust social contract without a clear alternative emerging. In this context, the relationship between society and the authorities remains one of anxious waiting, rather than a partnership capable of evolving into a new social contract, unless fear is transformed from a tool of control into a subject of conscious political and social intervention that reopens the contractual horizon on different foundations from the past.

Homs Governorate

I. Is There a Social Contract in Homs?

The dialogue sessions in Homs show that the question of whether a social contract exists cannot be answered definitively with a simple yes or no; rather, it is understood through a clear duality in lived experience. Participants explicitly or implicitly distinguish between a local social contract that has emerged among people through coexistence and daily necessity, and the absence or fragility of the social contract that is supposed to link the State with society.

II. An Implicit Local Social Contract Among People

The sessions reflect repeated references to the idea that Homs, by virtue of its history and mixed social composition, has developed a form of practical coexistence resembling an “unwritten social contract” among its inhabitants. This contract is not defined as a political or legal agreement, but as a network of daily relationships shaped by mutual interests and interdependence among neighborhoods, rural areas, and the city. One participant expressed this particularity by noting that Homs is *“a special city because its components are closely interconnected, and because life there necessitates interaction among people regardless of differences.”*

In the same context, a more direct characterization emphasized that coexistence was not merely temporary but constituted the basis of a practical social contract among people, including at the economic level. One participant stated: *“Coexistence existed, and there was a social contract among people—in relationships, in work, and in the economy between the countryside and the city.”*

This perspective reflects that the local community in Homs has developed its own mechanisms for managing differences, and that this “bottom-up” contract remains a resource that can be built upon, despite the fractures it has experienced.

III. Absence/Fragility of the State–Society Contract

In contrast, the sessions present a highly critical assessment of the relationship between the State and society, describing the current phase as one of disorder, confusion, and lack of clear authority. Participants expressed a widespread perception that “the State is not in control,” that its structure is unclear, and that there is a notable absence of regulation and transparency, alongside the spread of revenge and retaliation dynamics in the public sphere without declared accountability or clear legal procedures.

This diagnosis is further deepened by structural criticism of what was described in the sessions as the “authority of sheikhs” within certain institutions, as well as the persistence of militia logic or informal influence as a substitute for the State. According to participants, this reality not only undermines the idea of a social contract, but also prevents the emergence of a clear counterpart with whom society can negotiate or whom it can hold accountable. This issue was framed as a fundamental obstacle to the transition toward a rule-of-law State, with the persistence of militia dynamics and non-institutional forms of legitimacy viewed as incompatible with any viable social contract.

Accordingly, the sessions in Homs reveal a complex situation: on the one hand, there exists a minimum level of a local social contract among people, formed through coexistence and daily interests, which continues to play a role in preventing total breakdown. On the other hand, the State–society contract is eroding due to ambiguity of authority, weak legal regulation, politicization of identity, and the persistence of militia or informal or religious authority at the expense of institutions.

The particularity of Homs lies not only in this contradiction, but in its risks: the erosion of the State-level contract places increasing pressure on the local social contract, burdening it beyond its capacity. Without rebuilding a clear and institutionalized relationship between the State and society, this local contract remains vulnerable—liable to shift from a source of stability into a site of conflict. This makes Homs a critical test case for the possibility of transitioning from “necessary coexistence” to a genuine social contract at the level of the State.

IV. The Social Contract in Homs as a Foundation for a State of Law and Justice, Not Militia or Religious Authority Legitimacy

The dialogue sessions in Homs demonstrate that the concept of the social contract is not invoked as a constitutional text or political declaration, but as a practical question concerning the existence of a State governed by law and clear procedures. Unlike Tartous, where security and the containment of disorder take precedence, discussions in Homs center on the absence of the State as a legal institution, and on the risks posed by the persistence of alternative forms of governance based on revolutionary legitimacy, religious authority, or militia power.

One of the central themes of the discussions was the question of procedural legitimacy: who has the authority to make decisions, and on what legal basis? As understood by participants, the social contract begins when citizens know whom to address, under which law, and within what limits. One participant expressed this concern directly in criticizing non-legal forms of legitimacy: “Who are you to grant me approval? What law authorizes you? Revolutionary legitimacy has been tried before in this region, and it led to a sea of blood.”

This statement does not reject revolution as a historical moment, but rejects its transformation into a permanent source of legitimacy, emphasizing that governance outside the law undermines any possibility of building a stable social contract.

In addition, the sessions revealed a widespread perception of a disconnect between decision-making and society, along with a lack of transparency and public information, leaving citizens unable to understand what is happening or to hold those in authority accountable. Participants noted that they do not know what happens to criminals or perpetrators, and that there are no clear channels indicating whether accountability exists, or impunity prevails. One participant summarized this sentiment by stating: “There is no transparency... we do not know what is happening, who is being held accountable, or how decisions are made.”

This reflects that the absence of information and clarity does not merely produce ignorance, but undermines trust in the possibility of a social contract based on accountability.

This dysfunction is further compounded by what participants described as the “authority of sheikhs within institutions,” where some public positions are managed according to religious or personal logic rather than legal frameworks. This pattern was identified as a structural risk, as it replaces institutional governance with personal authority, transforming the social contract from a relationship between citizen and State into one of dependency on religious or social intermediaries. As participants noted, this raises concerns about the emergence of a State governed by a “system of sheikhs” rather than a system of law.

Accordingly, the social contract in Homs is understood as practical governance: clear laws, transparent procedures, accountability in enforcement, and decision-making subject to oversight. From the participants’ perspective, the issue is not the absence of texts, but the absence of a State capable of implementing them. Without dismantling the logic of militia rule, religious authority, and non-institutional legitimacy, any discussion of a social contract remains merely declaratory, unable to translate into a functional framework that regulates people’s lives and reduces violence and division.

V. Imbalance Between Rights and Duties in Homs

The dialogue sessions in Homs reveal that the concept of rights and duties is invoked in a dual manner that reflects a clear gap between principle and practice. On the one hand, participants demonstrate a relatively advanced theoretical understanding of the social contract as a relationship based on equality among all citizens and components in terms of rights and duties before the law, without discrimination or privilege. This understanding is directly linked to the need for official and media discourse that reflects such equality, as well as to a process of transitional justice that respects lost lives and acknowledges grievances as a prerequisite for rebuilding

trust. One participant expressed this view by stating: *“A social contract cannot exist unless everyone feels they are equal before the law, and that every person’s life has the same value.”*

On the other hand, the discussions reveal a contrasting reality, where duties and restrictions are imposed in practice through power dynamics and social or security influence, rather than through law. Participants indicated that those who hold control determine what is permitted and what is prohibited, while rights—particularly the right to protection or justice—are not equally guaranteed. In this context, one participant noted: *“The problem is not only the absence of rights, but that even filing a complaint has become risky, and may create problems instead of resolving them.”*

This reflects a structural climate of fear, in which the right to object or make claims becomes a risk, thereby stripping the concept of rights of its practical meaning.

As the sessions illustrate, this contradiction between principle and practice produces a distorted social contract: society is expected to comply and conform in the name of stability or civil peace, while the State fails to provide equal legal protection or clear procedures that guarantee rights for all. Under these conditions, compliance does not emerge from voluntary conviction, but from defensive behavior shaped by necessity and fear. Commitment here stems not from trust in the contract, but from the perception that the cost of dissent may exceed the cost of silence.

Accordingly, the case of Homs shows that the challenge lies not in defining rights and duties, but in the absence of equal and accountable mechanisms for their implementation. Without bridging the gap between what is articulated in texts and discourse and what is practiced on the ground, the social contract remains fragile, and citizenship remains a theoretical condition that does not translate into a genuine sense of security and justice.

VI. The Social Contract and Diversity in Homs

The dialogue sessions in Homs show that diversity is not merely a social characteristic of the city; rather, it constitutes the primary arena through which the very meaning of the social contract is tested. Homs, as described by participants, is a highly complex city, such that any imbalance in its governance carries greater risks than elsewhere. Its neighborhoods, districts, rural areas, and crossings are deeply interconnected, while a legacy of violent conflict intersects with a fragile present. Accordingly, diversity is not framed solely as a cultural issue, but as a first-order political and security question: can this plurality be transformed into a form of coexistence protected by the rule of law, or will it be left to the balance of power, incitement, and cycles of retaliation?

In this context, participants demonstrate a heightened awareness that Homs stands at the edge of a decisive test. One participant expressed this

understanding in direct and unequivocal terms: *“If we are not wise, we are heading toward violence more severe than in the past... we have only one option: to succeed.”*

This statement does not reflect exaggeration, but rather a collective recognition that failure to manage diversity in Homs would not result in temporary tensions, but in the risk of large-scale escalation. The social contract, therefore, becomes a matter of survival rather than a theoretical debate about coexistence.

Although diversity in Homs has historically been part of the fabric of everyday life, the sessions reveal that this coexistence was often practical rather than institutionally protected. Today, with the rise of sectarian and inciting rhetoric, it is increasingly evident that the absence of effective legal enforcement renders diversity fragile and prone to ignition. One participant highlighted this gap by referring to the existence of official decisions prohibiting incitement, which nonetheless lack practical effect, stating: *“It is said that there are decisions preventing inciting speech, but in practice there is no real oversight... and we do not see public accountability that would reassure people.”*

This perspective illustrates how weak enforcement undermines trust and reduces the law to an inactive text, leaving diversity exposed to mobilization and escalation.

These concerns are further deepened by the absence of an inclusive national identity capable of accommodating difference. Participants noted that, at the onset of any crisis, society tends to revert rapidly to sectarian, tribal, or regional identities—not as a deliberate choice, but as a defensive mechanism in the absence of a functioning State. One participant summarized this reality by stating: *“We do not have a genuine unifying identity... any problem arises and we immediately return to our narrow identities, even if we try to deny it.”* This observation demonstrates that, without a clear social contract, diversity shifts from being a source of richness to a point of vulnerability, as individuals lack a broader reference framework to rely on in times of crisis.

The sessions also indicate that mutual stigmatization continues to operate as a form of latent violence that can pave the way for physical violence. The persistence of attributing collective characteristics to specific groups, or the neglect of historical grievances, deepens feelings of threat and undermines any willingness to build mutual trust. One participant emphasized that acceptance of diversity cannot be left to ethics or goodwill alone, but requires explicit legal protection, noting that different components continue to be stigmatized and require “a legal framework that prevents violations and protects everyone without exception.”

The fragility of diversity in Homs is further exacerbated by the spread of localized, unregulated forms of violence, such as revenge attacks or assaults that victims may hesitate to report for fear of losing protection or facing further risks. This reality pushes communities toward self-protection and erodes the State’s role as an arbiter, resulting in diversity being managed

through power dynamics rather than legal frameworks.

Accordingly, Homs clearly demonstrates that its diversity cannot be governed through silence or imposed coexistence. For a social contract to be viable in this context, it must evolve into an effective system of protection for diversity: firm legal regulation of incitement and stigmatization, transparent and public accountability mechanisms that restore trust, and an inclusive national discourse that redefines individuals as equal citizens rather than opposing groups. Without these elements, coexistence will remain fragile, and diversity in Homs will continue to represent an open test between the possibility of shared living and the risk of renewed, more severe violence—placing this issue at the core of any serious analysis of the social contract in the governorate.

VII. Economy and Services in Homs: A Driver of Local Coexistence and a Test of Statehood

The dialogue sessions in Homs show that the economy and services are presented as an integral part of the local social contract among people, and as a reflection of how the relationship between society and the State functions. The economy in Homs is not discussed solely in terms of public policies or income levels, but in terms of its role in sustaining or undermining coexistence.

On the one hand, the economy appears as a foundational element of what can be described as a “social contract among people.” Interconnected economic relations between rural areas and the city, as well as among different neighborhoods, have over many years formed a practical fabric of coexistence. Mutual interests and daily exchanges have imposed a degree of stability even during periods of tension. One participant expressed this idea by noting that coexistence in Homs was less political than practical, stating that *“economic relations and joint work between the countryside and the city were part of the social contract that maintained connections among people.”* This perspective shows that the economy is not a secondary detail, but rather a daily mechanism for managing differences and a key driver in preventing rupture and escalation.

At the same time, however, the sessions reveal sharp criticism of the State’s role in the economic sphere. The meaning of the State appears to deteriorate as administrative conditions accumulate, procedures become more complex, corruption spreads, and transparency is lacking. In this context, the State is not seen as an entity that organizes the economy and facilitates life, but rather as a “gatekeeper” that obstructs access and creates a sense of impasse. One participant summarized this dysfunction succinctly: *“We have reached a point where the State cannot benefit from the people, and the people cannot benefit from the State.”*

This statement reflects a breakdown in the economic dimension of the social contract: the State demands but does not deliver, while society needs but cannot access, thereby emptying the idea of mutual obligation

of its substance.

This impasse affects not only living conditions, but also trust in the social contract itself. When services and economic rights become contingent on complex procedures or personal connections, the economy loses its role as a stabilizing factor and instead becomes a source of frustration. It becomes clear that in Homs, the economy is linked to the social contract in two interconnected ways: it is, on the one hand, a driver of local coexistence among people, and on the other, a critical test of the State's ability to function as a fair institution operating under clear and transparent rules, rather than as a mechanism of control or obstruction.

Accordingly, the case of Homs demonstrates that the economy and services cannot be separated from the question of the social contract. The relative success of local networks in maintaining a minimum level of economic stability cannot be sustained if the State remains unable to fulfill its role as a fair and transparent regulator. Without reforming the economic relationship between the State and society, the social contract remains incomplete, relying more on local coexistence networks than on public institutions capable of transforming that coexistence into sustainable stability.

VIII. Women and the Social Contract in Homs

The dialogue sessions in Homs, similar to the experience in Tartous, show that women approach the concept of the social contract from a fundamentally different perspective than legal or textual frameworks. The discussion does not begin with constitutional declarations or theoretical equality, but with a more basic and urgent question: is there a safe space that allows for everyday life? When a direct question was raised about women's safety in the city in light of fears of abduction and the broader security situation, some responses placed responsibility on women to take initiative, while asserting that space "exists" and that equality is guaranteed in theory. This contrast revealed a clear gap between a perspective that emphasizes individual empowerment as a matter of will and initiative, and a reality in which structural safety is seen as the primary condition for any meaningful social contract.

Participants' interventions indicate that this theoretical understanding of equality does not translate into a lived experience of safety. One participant stated, in the context of public participation, that the issue is not the willingness to take initiative, but the cost that women may pay for any visibility or expression, noting: *"How can we participate and take initiative if there is fear to begin with? Safety is not an idea; it is a condition."* This statement demonstrates that, from women's perspective, the social contract is measured not by what is written in texts, but by what reality permits in terms of movement and expression without threat.

This picture becomes clearer through participants' references to increasing social pressures on women in public spaces, such as changing

dress norms, enforced veiling in some contexts, or the existence of unwritten rules governing visits to detainees, mobility, and access to certain places. One participant expressed this by stating that *“today, a woman calculates every step: how she dresses, where she goes, and with whom she speaks, because society has become more watchful and pressuring.”* This reality means that, for women, the social contract is measured by the limits imposed on movement and the potential for harm, rather than by formal recognition of rights.

The discussions also show that women interpret the absence of safe space as a contractual failure of both the State and society. In another intervention, a participant linked daily fear to the meaning of the social contract, stating: *“If the State does not protect me from abduction, stigmatization, or pressure, what is the value of any social contract? The contract must protect me before it asks anything of me.”* This reflects a deep understanding of the social contract as a relationship of protection and mutual partnership, not a one-sided obligation.

Accordingly, the sessions in Homs demonstrate that women do not reject the idea of a social contract or participation in it, but they place safety as a prerequisite to any discussion of empowerment or equality. A contract that does not provide safe spaces for movement and expression, and does not protect women from violence, stigmatization, and social pressure, remains theoretical and disconnected from lived experience. In this sense, the position of women in Homs serves as a revealing indicator of the broader fragility of the social contract: when the State and society fail to guarantee safety for women, any discourse on an inclusive social contract becomes deferred, unable to translate into reality.

IX. Prospects for the Social Contract in Homs

The dialogue sessions in Homs show that discussion of the prospects for a social contract does not stem from an optimistic vision of building a new model, but rather from an urgent need to prevent collapse. Homs, with its complex social fabric and dense legacy of violence, perceives itself as a test case: either it succeeds in transforming its minimum level of coexistence into the foundation of a broader social contract, or that coexistence itself becomes a space for open conflict. Accordingly, prospects are not framed in the language of grand projects, but in terms of the necessary conditions that would make a social contract possible in principle.

1. **The first condition is a decisive shift from the logic of militias and informal authority figures (sheikhs) to the logic of institutions and the rule of law.** Discussions converge on the view that no social contract in Homs can be built amid multiple centers of decision-making, the persistence of non-institutional forms of legitimacy, or ambiguity regarding who holds authority and on what basis. The minimum requirement is not new texts, but clear rules, transparent procedures, and governance subject to accountability, enabling

society to know who governs, on what basis, and who can be held accountable in cases of failure.

2. **The second condition is transitional justice as a foundational entry point rather than a deferred luxury.** While participants recognize the difficulty and complexity of this path, discussions reflect a shared conviction that ignoring grievances and loss of life does not protect stability, but rather postpones potential escalation. Justice here is not understood as comprehensive retribution or an idealized process, but as a realistic approach that acknowledges what has occurred, sets limits on retaliation, and prevents the reproduction of violence under the guise of silence or superficial compromise.
3. **The third condition relates to rebuilding an inclusive national discourse that limits incitement and breaks with sectarian, tribal, and regional classifications.** In Homs, narrow identities tend to re-emerge quickly in times of crisis, rendering any social contract fragile unless accompanied by a discourse that redefines people as equal citizens before the law. This discourse is not seen as a media slogan, but as part of the structure of governance itself, reflected in official language, policies, and approaches to managing differences.
4. **The fourth condition is the conscious utilization of the existing local social contract among people, rather than allowing it to erode.** The practical coexistence that has developed in Homs through daily economic and social interactions constitutes a real asset, but a fragile one if left without protective mechanisms. Transforming this local contract into a driver of stability requires transparency mechanisms, community participation, and communication channels that ensure this coexistence serves social peace rather than being depleted or captured by de facto powers.

Accordingly, the prospects for a social contract in Homs reveal an ongoing tension between two contrasting models: a local coexistence that has, despite everything, managed to preserve a minimum level of shared living, and a model of non-institutional authority that threatens this coexistence and reopens the possibility of more severe violence. The transition to a viable social contract cannot be reduced to a political declaration or a legal formulation; rather, it requires the consolidation of a State based on the rule of law, justice, and accountable governance, alongside the rebuilding of trust and an inclusive national discourse capable of transforming necessary coexistence into a sustainable national partnership.

Damascus Governorate

I. The Question of the Social Contract in Damascus

The dialogue sessions in Damascus show that the question of the social contract is not posed in a conventional way—such as “Was there a social contract?” or “Does it still exist?”—but is instead deconstructed into deeper and more unsettling questions: who are the parties to this contract, and who was actually included within it? Damascus, as the capital and a political and administrative center, is not approached in the discussions as an ordinary city, but as a representation of the State itself, making the relationship to the “social contract” more complex and highly sensitive.

Many participants begin from a clear conviction that what existed prior to 2011 cannot be considered a social contract in the contractual sense, but rather a centralized, authoritarian relationship based on control and exclusion, not on consensus or partnership. One participant expressed this understanding by stating: *“There was no social contract; there was a State that imposed and people who adapted... the contract was with a specific group, not with society as a whole.”*

This view reflects an awareness that the State did not establish an inclusive relationship with society, but instead exercised authority through networks of loyalty and centers of influence, rendering the “contract” selective, non-inclusive, and not subject to accountability.

At the same time, the current phase in Damascus is not understood as a clear transition toward a new social contract, but rather as a period of uncertainty, fragmentation, and lack of vision. Participants do not describe a clash between an old and a new contract, but rather a rupture in the very meaning of the relationship itself: the State remains formally present, yet the contractual relationship that defines what the State owes society and what society owes the State appears absent or undefined. One participant summarized this perception clearly: *“The State exists, but there is no clear relationship with it... we do not know what it wants from us or what it offers in return.”*

This statement reveals that the issue lies not only in the absence of a new contract, but also in the lack of a clear and articulated vision of the future relationship between authority and society.

The particularity of Damascus also emerges as a space that brings together diverse experiences of citizens from different governorates, each carrying varied experiences of exclusion, fear, or marginalization. This diversity does not automatically produce a unifying contract; rather, it exposes the fragility of the existing national framework. Instead of serving as a space for redefining the contractual relationship on inclusive foundations, the capital appears in the discussions as a place where narratives coexist without converging into a shared understanding of the social contract.

Accordingly, Damascus reflects a condition of the absence of an inclusive

social contract in the first place—not merely in the sense that a contract has collapsed, but in the sense that it has not yet been redefined to encompass society in all its diversity. As perceived by participants, the State has not yet transitioned from the position of a commanding center to that of a partner, nor has it articulated a vision capable of addressing the fundamental question: how can a new relationship be built with a diverse society that has lived for many years outside any fair contractual framework? In this context of uncertainty, the social contract in Damascus remains more an open question than an established reality or a clearly defined trajectory.

II. The Social Contract in Damascus as Justice and Participation, Not Merely Security

The dialogue sessions in Damascus show that the meaning of the social contract is not reduced to the question, “Is the situation safe?” Rather, it advances toward questions that define the relationship between society and authority as one of recognition, participation, and justice. Participants approach the social contract as a process whose credibility is established when people feel that their dignity is protected, that their voices have influence, and that the State does not merely control reality but rebuilds trust by revealing the truth, holding violators accountable, and providing transparent rules for public decision-making.

One of the most prominent themes in the discussions is transitional justice as a foundational entry point to the social contract—not only in the sense of trials, but also in terms of truth-seeking, respect for the suffering of families, and rejection of selectivity in recognizing victims. The sessions do not speak of “victims of one side”; rather, they insist on the inclusiveness of truth and the right of families to know the fate of their relatives, while strongly criticizing any superficial, delayed, or disorganized handling of the issue of missing persons. This was reflected in painful descriptions of the impact of chaos and unverified information on mothers, with participants reporting statements such as: *“A mother is shocked when she sees her son’s name... in the tent, we witness terrifying cases of psychological collapse among mothers... the National Commission for Missing Persons did not issue a statement until a month after emotions had been manipulated.”*

Such interventions make justice here a standard for a social contract that “respects the human being,” not merely a separate legal file. If truth is managed in a disorganized manner or treated lightly, the social contract loses its moral foundation before its political one.

At the same time, in Damascus there is a direct linkage between the social contract and political participation, transparency, and decision-making. Participation is not understood as a luxury or a later stage following stability, but as a condition for building trust and preventing the reassertion of authority as an accomplished fact. The discussions reveal a high sensitivity toward “formalism” in dialogue processes or elections if they

are not grounded in clear standards of oversight and accountability. One participant expressed this clearly by linking transparency to the capacity for meaningful participation, stating: *“We have a severe deficiency in transparency... if this principle is realized, I can monitor these institutions... even spaces such as the National Dialogue Conference would not be merely formal or directed by one side... and the same applies to elections.”*

Here, the social contract becomes, in practical terms, the ability to understand, monitor, and hold accountable. Participation is therefore not merely an invitation to attend, but a set of guarantees that prevent dialogue from becoming image management, or elections from reproducing polarization and binary divisions without real impact.

The sessions further reveal that the absence of justice, participation, and transparency does not only have political consequences, but also accumulates a deep internal sense of non-belonging. Instead of being an inclusive space that generates a sense of citizenship, Damascus appears in the discussions as a space where alienation from both the State and society expands when decisions are arbitrary or unclear, and when sensitive issues are handled without transparency or accountability. In this sense, the social contract in Damascus is measured by the State's ability to transform from an authority that manages reality into an institution that recognizes people and enables them to have influence: justice that does not discriminate among victims, participation grounded in transparency and oversight, and dignity that redefines the citizen as a partner rather than a passive recipient.

III. Rights and Duties in Damascus: Inequality and Shifting Patterns of Marginalization

The dialogue sessions in Damascus reveal a clear critical awareness that citizenship, in the Syrian experience, has not been equal in the past, and that this inequality is not being clearly addressed today, but is instead being reproduced in new forms. The discussion does not begin from the illusion of a lost equality alone, but from a deeper concern: that some forms of past discrimination may disappear only to be replaced by new, less explicit and more ambiguous forms that are no less damaging to trust in the social contract.

Participants repeatedly refer to discrimination among victims as one of the most serious manifestations of imbalance between rights and duties. Not all victims, in their view, are treated equally in terms of recognition, justice, or even public discourse. One participant expressed this clearly: *“Today there are recognized victims and others who are as if they are invisible... this in itself is a new injustice, and it makes us feel that justice is selective.”*

This perspective extends beyond the past, indicating that selective justice in the present reproduces exclusion and prevents the formation of a shared sense of equal citizenship.

In addition, there is a clear disparity in access to justice and to spaces of expression and participation. Participants speak of a real inequality in who is able to speak, who can make demands, and who may face consequences for expressing their views. One participant summarized this reality by stating: *“Some people can speak and demand, while others pay the price if they do... this means there are no equal rights, even if laws speak of equality.”*

This reflects that rights, in lived experience, are not merely legal provisions but the actual ability to exercise them without fear or unequal consequences.

In this context, the social contract in Damascus is viewed as structurally imbalanced: society is expected to fulfill clear, though unwritten, obligations—such as silence, adaptation, acceptance of the status quo, and bearing costs—while these obligations are not matched by equal, enforceable rights guarantees. Duties appear general and universal, while rights are selective, conditional, or unevenly applied.

Accordingly, the sessions in Damascus demonstrate that the crisis of the social contract lies not only in the absence of a clear definition of rights and duties, but in the imbalance of power in their implementation. When individuals feel that their obligations are always required, while their rights can be deferred, restricted, or denied, the social contract shifts from a framework of partnership to a coercive relationship that generates a persistent sense of inequality and undermines any willingness to belong or to engage voluntarily in public life.

IV. Diversity and Identities in Damascus: The Capital as a Site of Clashing Narratives Rather Than a Unifying Framework

The dialogue sessions in Damascus reveal that diversity is not managed as a social reality requiring a social contract to protect and regulate it. Instead, it has become an open arena of confrontation between competing narratives that coexist in the same space without a unifying framework. As the political and administrative center, and a space hosting people from various governorates and backgrounds, the capital does not automatically generate a sense of unity; rather, it intensifies differences and places them in direct confrontation.

The discussions clearly reflect multiple narratives that intersect and diverge simultaneously: a narrative of dominance or control that perceives itself as possessing legitimacy and the authority to define the current phase; narratives of victims demanding recognition and justice; narratives of fear of exclusion among groups that perceive any change as a potential threat to their existence or status; and narratives of mutual denial that seek to negate or diminish the suffering of others. This plurality is not perceived as a source of richness in itself, but as evidence of the absence of a contractual framework capable of accommodating it. One participant

expressed this reality by stating: *“We live in the same city, but each of us carries a completely different narrative of what happened... and there is no real space that brings these narratives together.”*

This reflects a perception that Damascus has not become a space for dialogue among narratives, but rather a place where they coexist without convergence, increasing the fragility of the social fabric.

In this vacuum, diversity is not managed through institutions, public policies, or an inclusive national discourse. Instead, it is left to social media, biased media narratives, and mechanisms of sectarian and regional mobilization. One participant highlighted this impact clearly, stating: *“Social media has become what defines people to one another... and every discourse on it increases fear and division.”* This illustrates how unregulated spaces become substitutes for a social contract, yet they are substitutes that produce polarization rather than understanding.

In this context, sub-identities—whether sectarian, regional, or political—are not always chosen out of conscious ideological conviction, but rather become psychological refuges in the absence of an inclusive national identity that individuals feel protects or recognizes them. When a social contract guaranteeing equality and recognition is absent, narrower forms of belonging become mechanisms of self-defense rather than political projects in their own right.

Accordingly, Damascus reveals a profound dilemma in managing diversity: a capital that is expected to serve as a unifying space instead becomes, in the absence of a clear social contract, a mirror of national fragmentation. Without an inclusive national discourse and contractual policies that regulate and protect difference, diversity in Damascus remains a source of tension and confrontation rather than a foundation for building a new social partnership.

V. Economy and Services in Damascus: A Pressing Background Rather Than a Contractual Entry Point

The dialogue sessions in Damascus show that the economy and services are not perceived as an entry point for building a new social contract, but rather as a pressing background that burdens daily life and deepens the sense of exclusion and loss of dignity. Discussions do not treat the economy as a field of negotiation between the State and society, but as a crisis reality managed through minimal adaptation, without a clear horizon or mutual commitments upon which to build.

In this context, the living situation is repeatedly described as one of continuous exhaustion, where rising costs of living, weak services, and job insecurity intersect with a general sense that individual effort no longer leads to tangible improvements in living conditions. One participant expressed this sentiment by stating: *“We are working just to keep going... not to live with dignity, nor to feel that there is a State trying to ease our*

burden.” This reflects how the economy is reduced to a logic of survival rather than one of rights or contractual relations, making the relationship with the State one of endurance rather than partnership.

This economic pressure is linked, in participants’ perceptions, to a broader set of structural issues, most notably the absence of justice, the prevalence of corruption, and the weakness of basic services. The economy is not seen merely as a financial crisis, but as a manifestation of dysfunction in the governance of the State and its relationship with society. One participant summarized this linkage clearly: *“The problem is not only high prices... the problem is that everything feels based on favoritism and corruption, services are poor, and there is no future.”* This illustrates that the economic crisis is understood as a crisis of trust, where people feel that the distribution of burdens is unjust and that access to services and opportunities is not governed by clear or equal rules.

Under these conditions, the State in Damascus is not perceived as a guarantor of a dignified life or as an actor capable of managing an economic social contract, but rather as an entity that is either incapable or, at times, obstructive—imposing burdens without providing corresponding protection or stability. Economic policies, as discussed in the sessions, appear disconnected from social realities and unable to generate a sense of fairness or predictability.

Accordingly, the Damascus context shows that the economy and services do not constitute a contractual foundation from which a new social contract can emerge; rather, they represent one of the sources of its fragility. When livelihood itself becomes a daily struggle without guarantees, combined with a widespread perception of corruption and lack of prospects, the social contract loses one of its core conditions: the sense that the State is a partner in securing life, not an additional burden.

VI. Women and the Social Contract in Damascus

The dialogue sessions in Damascus, similar to other governorates, indicate that women’s position in discussions about the social contract is not treated as a “sectoral issue” or a separate equality matter, but as a key indicator of the fundamental relationship between the State and society. The gap between constitutional rhetoric affirming equality and the security and social realities restricting women’s lives is condensed into a daily experience that redefines the meaning of the social contract at its core: Does it protect? Does it recognize? Does it provide the conditions for actual participation?

In the discussions, women do not reject political or public participation, but they set a clear and preconditioned requirement: a safe space. Participation, as expressed by participants, cannot be separated from physical, psychological, and social safety, nor from protection against stigmatization, violence, or exclusionary discourse. One participant clearly summarized this equation: *“Written equality does not protect me if I am*

afraid to go out or speak... for me, the social contract is safety before anything else." This illustrates that legal texts, no matter how progressive, lose their meaning when they do not translate into actual protection in daily life.

This concern intersects with women's access to justice, particularly regarding violations, gender-based violence, and the absence of clear complaint and accountability mechanisms. Women in Damascus do not see justice merely as a legal process but as a practical question: Can I claim my rights without fear? Are my complaints taken seriously? One participant noted: *"There are many cases of violence or injustice, women remain silent because filing a complaint is itself a risk... if justice does not protect us, what is the value of the social contract?"* Here, the absence of justice becomes not only a violation of individual rights but a direct undermining of the contractual relationship between the State and its citizens.

Furthermore, daily economic burdens borne by women intersect with the fragility of the social contract. Weak services, high cost of living, and the absence of support networks place women in a double bind: family and economic responsibilities under a State that provides insufficient protection. One participant explained: *"We bear everything at home and at work, yet there is no safety or services... the State asks us to endure but gives nothing in return."* This demonstrates a fundamental imbalance in the rights–duties relationship, where women bear the cost of social continuity without a clear contractual obligation from the State in return.

Women's position is also shaped by exclusionary discourse and social stigmatization. Participants indicated that women are often the first to pay the price of political or social polarization, whether through questioning their motives, holding them responsible for "trespassing/violations," or restricting their presence in public spaces. This reality makes participation itself risky rather than a guaranteed right, transforming the social contract into a conditional relationship dependent on silence and withdrawal.

Thus, Damascus clearly shows that women are not demanding a "separate" social contract, but a social contract that works in practice. When the State fails to provide safety, justice, services, and protection from stigmatization, women are the first to experience the breakdown of the contract and the gap between text and reality. In this sense, women's position is not a matter of representation or quotas but a central test of the credibility of the social contract as a whole: a contract that does not protect women, reduce their burdens, or guarantee their safe participation is inherently fragile, no matter how advanced its constitutional language.

VII. Prospects for the Social Contract in Damascus

The dialogue sessions in Damascus reveal that discussions about the social contract's prospects do not start from a smooth transitional vision or a clear roadmap, but from a deep awareness that the capital is at the heart of a struggle over defining the State itself: Should it be reshaped as a central authority managing society without a clear contract, or as a new contractual framework that reorganizes the relationship with society based on justice, participation, and controlled use of force?

No ready or complete vision of the social contract emerges from the discussions, but it is clear that the current phase is perceived as suspended: the old contract cannot be reinstated, and the new contract has not yet taken shape. Within this vacuum, the horizon is defined through two parallel and competing paths rather than a single agreed course:

- First path: reproducing the central State without a social contract. The State continues as an administrative and security structure exercising authority but without redefining its relationship with society or providing clear answers regarding rights and duties. This path, as participants understand it, does not necessarily involve direct violence but relies on managing reality, postponing fundamental questions, and maintaining control rather than engagement, leaving the State–society relationship ambiguous and based on adaptation rather than partnership.
- Second path: building a new national contract, not as a declaration or document but as a process contingent on practical solutions that have yet to be implemented. Participants recognize that this path is neither easy nor immediate, but a complex project requiring deep political and institutional decisions.

From the Damascus sessions, a set of minimum conditions for any viable social contract can be identified:

1. **Justice as the foundation of the new relationship, not as a deferred or selective issue.** A social contract loses its meaning if issues of victims, the missing, and violations are not addressed in a clear approach that reassures society that the law applies to all and that suffering is recognized without discrimination.
2. **Control of violence and clear legal frameworks for the use of force.** The absence of clarity regarding who possesses weapons and who decides their use is seen as one of the greatest obstacles to building any contractual relationship. A social contract presumes a State capable of protecting people through declared rules, not through fear management or leaving insecurity unchecked.
3. **Actual participation in decision-making, not just rhetoric of inclusivity or formal invitations.** This includes elections, national

- dialogue, and consultation mechanisms so that people feel they have a role in shaping the course rather than being passive recipients of predetermined decisions.
4. **Redefining national identity as a unifying framework capable of accommodating diversity without denial or exclusion.** Given Damascus's diversity of backgrounds and affiliations, a national discourse is needed to address fear, memory, and division rather than leaving these issues to incitement or mutual denial.
 5. **Transparency and accountability,** so that the State is understandable and answerable: who decides, on what basis, and how can they be held accountable? Ambiguity in decision-making, as the sessions show, undermines any sense of building a stable social contract.

Accordingly, Damascus does not present a clear or agreed-upon horizon for the social contract. It reveals an open struggle between the logic of managing the State without a contract and the logic of rebuilding the relationship on a new contractual basis. Without decisive answers on justice, security, participation, and identity, the prospects for the social contract in Damascus remain unformed.

Suwayda Governorate

I. Is There a Social Contract in Suwayda?

The dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that the question of the social contract is not posed in the classical form of "Was there a social contract or not?" Instead, it begins with a more fundamental and harsh question: Is there a State or partner to contract with at all? After the severe violations and assaults the governorate experienced, the social contract is no longer discussed as a national political framework that can be reformed, but as a relationship that has lost one of its essential parties in the public consciousness—the State as a protector and guarantor.

There is a recurring explicit denial or suspension of the idea of the State as a contracting partner. This denial is not expressed ideologically but through direct experience and profound loss of trust. One participant clearly stated: *"I don't consider that there is a State today... how can I talk about a social contract when I see no other party but us?"* This reflects the awareness that the relationship is no longer one of contractual imbalance, but one of absence, where rights and duties cannot be discussed under the perception that the other party is nonexistent or morally and politically unrecognized.

In this context, the concept of the social contract does not disappear but contracts from a national, inclusive level to a narrow, local level, which can be described as a "survival contract." The contract, as discussed, no

longer signifies belonging to a State or national project but the protection of the local community from collapse, ensuring a minimum of safety and survival. One participant expressed this shift clearly: *“Today I no longer feel protected as a Syrian... I feel my belonging is only to Suwayda, because in times of hardship no one stood with us.”* This quote illustrates how national belonging has shifted to a local framework as a response to abandonment and violence, not as a conscious separatist choice but as a psychological and social defense mechanism.

This contraction is further reinforced by the exceptional circumstances experienced in Suwayda, which were repeatedly described in the sessions as a form of actual siege—not only in the military sense but in terms of disrupted daily life, restricted mobility, and severed connections with other areas. This reality renders discussions about a national social contract disconnected from lived experience, as the priority becomes survival and securing the minimum necessities of life. One participant summarized this feeling: *“We are living in a besieged area, everything is difficult: roads, work, education... in such a situation, the social contract becomes a theoretical concept far from reality.”*

Accordingly, the sessions in Suwayda reveal that while the social contract has not disappeared as an idea, it has lost its national meaning and transformed into a temporary, local form built around self-protection and community solidarity rather than the State and its institutions. This transformation is not presented as a permanent solution or an alternative project, but as a direct outcome of trust collapse and the absence of a partner, making the social contract in Suwayda today more a contract of survival than a contract of citizenship—a survival contract rather than a State contract.

II. The Social Contract in Suwayda as Legitimacy, Justice, and Protection from Violence, Not as a Text or Declaration

Dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that the social contract is not understood as a document or political declaration that can be theoretically agreed upon, but as a practical framework of legitimacy and protection, tested by the ability to stop violence, prevent violations, and ensure civil peace. The central question recurring in discussions is not “What should the contract stipulate?” but rather: Who holds legitimacy today? Who can protect the villages and their people? Who sets limits on hate speech and incitement? Given the harsh experiences of the governorate, the social contract is measured by its ability to prevent repeated violence, not by its linguistic or constitutional progress.

In this context, the legitimacy of authority emerges as a prerequisite for any discussion of a social contract. Participants repeatedly expressed the conviction that a contract built under the current authority is impossible—not merely because of political disagreement, but because this authority is perceived locally to have lost moral legitimacy due to past violations. One

participant stated clearly: *“How can we talk about a social contract with an authority that participated in killing or covered it up? A contract requires a legitimate partner, not a party under suspicion.”* This underscores that the issue is not the form of the contract, but the identity of the party expected to guarantee it.

This perspective aligns with a strong emphasis on transitional justice and truth-telling as the only viable path to rebuilding trust. Participants did not discuss quick reconciliation or “turning the page” on the past but stressed the need to acknowledge massacres and violations and hold responsible parties accountable before any new social contract could be considered. One participant remarked: *“We don’t want slogans about civil peace... we want acknowledgment of what happened and accountability. Without that, any contract is a lie to the people.”* This highlights that justice is not a clause in the contract but a prerequisite for its very existence, and ignoring it renders any agreement imposed and lacking credibility.

The discussions also repeatedly emphasized that civil peace is a State function, not a political slogan. In the participants’ view, a State’s legitimacy is measured by its ability to prevent external aggression and internal conflict alike. Failure to fulfill this role is seen as a direct cause of social contract collapse, since the community cannot commit to an agreement with an authority that cannot protect it or is complicit in harm.

At the same time, there is a clear fear of reproducing a coercive contract based on the formula “authority in exchange for safety,” in which society is asked to accept the status quo and forgo demands for justice in exchange for a temporary cessation of violence. Participants warned that exhausting the community could lead it to accept such a formula, which does not build a social contract but postpones the explosion and reproduces the causes of conflict.

Accordingly, the dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that the social contract, in people’s perception, cannot be built as a text or a top-down political procedure, but as a framework of legitimacy, protection, and justice. Without a legitimate authority free of suspicion, justice that acknowledges and holds perpetrators accountable, and a State performing its fundamental role in protecting civil peace, any discussion of a social contract remains at risk of becoming an imposed form rather than a voluntary, sustainable agreement.

III. Rights and Duties in Suwayda — Between Equal Citizenship and the Question: With Whom Do We Contract?

Dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that participants begin, on a normative level, from a clear definition of the social contract as equal citizenship: mutual rights and duties, preserved human dignity, the rule of law, and fair management of diversity so that no one is excluded based on religion, sect, or region. This definition is presented in discussions as

the “correct formula” for any contract, meaning the problem is not the absence of a theoretical conception, but the collapse of its applicability in the current reality.

Here, the discussion quickly shifts from the question “What are the rights and duties?” to a more fundamental one: Who is the second party to the contract? Can people be asked to fulfill duties such as obedience, discipline, and public loyalty when there is no protection, no path to justice, and no recognition of massacres? One participant sharply described this rupture, linking the idea of “contracting” to the absence of recognition and accountability, stating directly that she was not prepared to talk about a social contract without a process that restores trust: *“If there is no process, no recognition of the massacres, no accountability, no State that acknowledges your existence... with whom are they going to contract a social contract?”*

This Statement captures the core of the crisis: the social contract presupposes a State that recognizes, protects, and is accountable to its citizens. When the State is seen as incapable, complicit, or unrecognizing, the contract becomes inconceivable—not because people reject it, but because the basis of exchange itself collapses.

Alongside the suspension of rights, the meaning of duties also shifts. Duties in Suwayda today are not voluntary obligations arising from trust in the State, but forced adaptations to siege conditions, disrupted life, fear of chaos, and silence to avoid harm—measures of survival rather than civic participation, and reliance on self-protection rather than capable institutions. In this context, one participant highlighted a striking paradox, describing “citizenship” as achievable only outside the current authority: *“Outside this authority, I feel like a real citizen—I have rights and duties, freedom of expression... freedom of movement... a real judiciary that protects my rights.”*

This is not merely a political stance, but a description of a contractual failure: rights-based citizenship cannot be realized within the State as it should function, and thus the social contract, in its rights dimension, becomes detached from the framework meant to uphold it.

Accordingly, dialogue sessions in Suwayda reveal that the relationship between rights and duties is no longer just disrupted—it is effectively inoperative without prior conditions: recognition of massacres, a path to justice and accountability, and protection guarantees that redefine the State as a legitimate party capable of being held accountable. Until these foundations are in place, rights remain practically postponed, and duties are governed by survival and adaptation, not by principles of mutual contractual obligation.

IV. Diversity and Identities — Suwayda at the Heart of the Minority Question

Dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that diversity is not discussed as a cultural or administrative reality that can be managed through public policies, but as an open identity wound worsened by invasion and massacres. In this context, discussions of diversity are no longer only about daily coexistence, but about fear, betrayal, and broken trust among community components, pushing local or sectarian identities to become psychological shields against a deep sense of threat.

A clear shift appears in self-identification and belonging. Participants described a harsh transformation from a broad national identity to a local/sectarian identity imposed by violence. One participant summarized this shift concisely: *“I used to call myself a person from this country; today I say I am a child who belongs to the mountain... not because I want to, but because no one besides the people of the mountain felt us.”* This does not reflect separatist tendencies, but a defensive mechanism that emerges under threat, where narrow identity becomes a temporary refuge when the protective national framework is absent.

This shift is further deepened by the rupture with society, not only the authority. Participants distinguished clearly between their anger at the State and their pain over societal silence, complicity, or denial of what happened in Suwayda. One participant noted that social betrayal was more severe than repression itself: *“The biggest wound is not from the authority... the wound is from the society that remained silent, justified, or blamed the victim.”* This framing places diversity at the heart of the social contract, because the contract collapses not only due to State violence, but also due to broken solidarity among community components.

In this climate, there is a strong, firm rejection of sectarian mobilization as a direct tool for destroying any possibility of building a social contract. Participants do not merely condemn the discourse; they explicitly link the absence of accountability to the impossibility of contracting. One stated: *“As long as sectarian discourse goes unpunished; any social contract is an illusion... How can you build trust when people are incited against one another?”* This connection shows that diversity in Suwayda requires not only theoretical recognition, but also strict legal protection to prevent identity from becoming a tool of incitement or threat.

Thus, dialogue sessions in Suwayda reveal that diversity is no longer merely a “social mosaic,” but a critical test for the social contract. When wounds go unrecognized and sectarian discourse goes unpunished, diversity turns from a source of richness into a source of fear and division. In this context, no social contract can exist without deeply addressing this identity wound through recognition, criminalization of incitement, and rebuilding trust among components as a foundational requirement rather than a deferred result.

V. Economy and Services in Suwayda — “Siege” as a De Facto Policy

Dialogue sessions in Suwayda indicate that the economy and public services are not discussed as technical issues that can be gradually repaired through policy, but as daily manifestations of the absence of a social contract. Participants do not describe a “traditional economic decline,” but rather a reality of siege affecting every aspect of life: mobility, education, employment, and access to the most basic means of survival.

Suwayda is repeatedly described in discussions as a “besieged area,” not only due to road closures or difficulties in movement, but because of its effective disconnect from the State as a provider of services and guarantees. One participant described daily life: *“We are effectively living under siege... the roads are difficult, work is nearly stopped, and everything requires taking risks.”* This sense of siege is presented not as a temporary circumstance, but as a structural backdrop reshaping people’s relationship to the State, which is seen not as alleviating burdens, but as exacerbating them.

Education emerges as one of the most sensitive indicators of the collapse of the contractual meaning. Sessions repeatedly addressed students’ inability to access universities, submit coursework, school closures, and suspension of entire educational tracks, leaving the future itself in question. One participant expressed concern: *“Our students are losing their future... no guaranteed university, no safe routes, not even clarity if the school year will continue.”* This connects education directly to the social contract: when the State fails to protect the right to education or ensure its continuity, it fails in one of its most basic contractual obligations toward society.

Within this reality, the economy is not seen as a “driver” for a new social contract, but as a direct outcome of State absence and lack of trust. As participants express, priorities are no longer income improvement or service development, but survival and protection. One participant summarized: *“We no longer think about economy or development... our concern is just to stay alive and protect our children.”* This reflects how public policy is reduced to constant emergency management, with living conditions becoming an individual or narrow community responsibility, rather than a State duty.

Thus, dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that the economy and services are a clear mirror of the absence of a social contract. When an entire region is left under siege and dysfunction, and education and work become hazardous endeavors, the contract loses its practical meaning before its political meaning. In this context, a viable social contract cannot be discussed without redefining the State’s role as guarantor of daily life, not as a passive or absent entity.

VI. Women and the Social Contract in Suwayda

Dialogue sessions reveal that women's approach to the social contract does not start from representation or quotas, but from foundational questions concerning the State itself: Can women's rights be protected without a clear separation between religion and sources of legislation? How can one speak of equal citizenship amid ongoing violence, abduction, stigmatization, and violations? In this context, the position of women serves as a precise measure of the seriousness of any proposed social contract, not as an addendum to it.

A clear feminist-rights perspective emerged, highlighting that including religion as a source of legislation opens the door to interpretation and selectivity, restricting women's rights under the guise of "customs" or "traditions." Participants stressed that the only framework capable of ensuring equality is civil law and international human rights law. One participant stated: *"If religion remains a source of legislation, women's rights will always be open to interpretation... we need a clear civil law that protects everyone without exception."* This directly links the nature of the State (civil/laicism) to the possibility of a just social contract for women, making the separation of religion from the State a foundational condition, not a secondary demand.

Women's concerns are closely connected to transitional justice. Participants spoke not only about general justice, but about pathways that directly affect their bodies and experiences: abduction, enforced disappearance, and sexual violence. One participant said: *"How can we talk about a social contract if there is no recognition of what women endured? Justice for women is not a separate issue, it is the foundation of any contract."* This positions women's rights at the core of contracting, not at its margins, emphasizing that ignoring these violations undermines any claim to building a trust-based relationship.

Sessions also highlighted ongoing abuses against women who survived abduction, rape, or sexual violence, not only by perpetrators, but by society itself. Survivors often faced severe social stigma, sometimes leading to forced hiding within the family, divorce, or even honor-based killings. This shows that violence did not stop with the initial crime, but continued socially.

This issue was raised as a double violation: the first violation that women suffered during the massacres, and a second violation inflicted by society after their survival, through holding them responsible for the crime or treating them as "shame" that must be hidden. This reality was presented as one of the most serious challenges to any discussion of justice or a social contract, because society itself becomes a partner in reproducing the violence. One participant expressed this reality clearly: *"Two women were killed, one divorced, and we all remained men of dignity at the expense of the women who had been captives. Unfortunately, this is social stigma... when a woman returns as a captive, the man must be a man enough,*

embrace her, and support her, not for you and time to be against her. There's a saying: they killed honor so that shame could live."

In addition, the sessions revealed the daily burdens that women bear under siege and disrupted life, highlighting their role in community response through shelters, hosting, and volunteering, at a time when the State fails to perform its basic functions. One participant working in this field said: *"We are playing the role of the State: providing shelter, support, and protection... the social contract is tested here, not in texts."* This statement summarizes a practical feminist experience that sees the social contract measured not by what is written, but by the protection, services, and dignity provided in moments of danger.

Accordingly, the dialogue sessions in Suwayda reveal that women are not demanding a "social contract for themselves," but a contract that works for everyone: a civil State that protects rights without interpretation, transitional justice that recognizes and remedies violations against women, and real security that allows them to move, work, and participate without fear or stigma. In this sense, women's rights become the clearest test of State effectiveness and the rule of law, and dignity and safety are prerequisite conditions for any viable social contract in Suwayda.

VII. Prospects for the Social Contract in Suwayda

The dialogue sessions in Suwayda show that the prospects for a social contract are not heading toward a direct or smooth national transition, but rather are forming within a fragmented path shaped by trauma and the collapse of trust. Discussions do not start from a ready-made vision of a comprehensive contract, but from a reality in which the contractual relationship with the State has broken down—not only due to its weakness or incapacity, but because it is perceived locally as a party accused of violence or complicity in it. In this context, the social contract is not presented as a politically attainable project, but as a deferred question governed by strict conditions.

The first clear path is local contraction. In the absence of trust in any national framework, a large portion of participants lean toward thinking of a limited social contract within Suwayda itself, or even within the local community or sect, as a temporary survival contract aimed at protecting people and preventing internal collapse. This path is not offered as a national alternative or a preferred choice, but as an emergency response to the realities of siege, absence of the State, and ongoing threats. The contract here is not based on political rights or participation, but on internal solidarity, controlling violence, and maintaining a minimal level of civil peace.

In contrast, the national path does not disappear from the discussion but appears as a postponed and conditional possibility, one that cannot be reached without fulfilling a clear and strict minimum. Participants emphasize that any new national contract cannot be built on the ruins of

violations or by ignoring them, nor can it rely on formalistic compromises or forced reconciliation. Therefore, the basic conditions for creating an environment capable of beginning discussions on the social contract can be summarized as follows:

1. **Cessation of crimes, violations, and ongoing violence as a prerequisite for any talk of transition or contracting.** Violence, in participants' view, destroys not only security but the possibility of trust itself.
2. **Transitional justice and non-selective accountability.** Restoring trust is not understood as a rhetorical or symbolic matter, but as a practical path that recognizes massacres and violations and holds those responsible accountable without discrimination or impunity.
3. **Criminalizing sectarian and hate speech as necessary to protect diversity and prevent it from becoming fuel for permanent conflict.** Participants see leaving such discourse unaccountable as undermining any potential contract, as the social contract presupposes a minimum of symbolic and moral safety, not just physical security.
4. **Ending the logic of militias and armed legitimacy and transitioning to an institutional State with clear rule of law as a central requirement.** The social contract, as imagined in Suwayda, cannot be built under multiple competing authorities, armed dominance, or the replacement of law by informal powers. The desired State is not one of slogans, but a "strong" State with clear rules, institutions, and a judiciary capable of protecting all.
5. **Rebuilding social trust.** Discussions emphasize that the wound in Suwayda is not only with the authorities but also with society, due to silence, justification, or stigmatization. Therefore, any prospect of a national social contract requires mutual recognition of pain and a genuine solidarity discourse that restores relationships among communities, not just formal political change.

Accordingly, the prospects for a social contract in Suwayda reveal a highly complex reality: a national contract in its previous form is no longer possible, a temporary local contract emerges out of survival instincts, and a postponed national possibility can only be reached through a long path of ending violence, implementing justice, criminalizing hate, building institutional State structures, and restoring social trust.

Conclusion

Analyses across the six governorates reveal that the social contract in contemporary Syria is no longer understood as a constitutional formula or political declaration, but as a daily lived relationship tested through security, justice, recognition, and the ability to sustain life. Participants across contexts converge on the view that the fundamental crisis lies in the erosion of State legitimacy, weakened trust in institutions, and the absence of a clear path for accountability and truth-telling. This makes any discussion of a new social contract conditional on ending violence, unifying legal standards, and ensuring non-selective justice. Effective management of diversity requires practical guarantees rather than general rhetoric, and the balance between rights and duties has been lost amid widespread feelings of insecurity. Women's status emerges as a critical indicator of the credibility of any contract, with the contract measured by its capacity to provide safety, protection, and meaningful participation. Thus, rebuilding the social contract in the Syrian context requires restoring the meaning of the State as a fair and accountable institution, not merely a controlling authority.





