

From Rights to Lived Experience: Citizenship in Six Syrian Governorates

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

Methodology 6

Intersections and Differences Between Governorates: Citizenship as a Multifaceted Structural Issue..... 9

Policy Recommendations..... 14

Results Analysis at Governorate Level 17

Aleppo Governorate 17

Al-Hasakah Governorate / Qamishli City..... 29

Homs Governorate37

Tartous Governorate.....44

Damascus Governorate57

Suwayda Governorate..... 66

Conclusion75

Executive Summary

This paper is based on a qualitative research methodology and the analysis of twelve community dialogue sessions held between November 26 and December 9, 2025. The findings and analyses reflect the context of this specific period and do not account for political, security, or military developments occurring afterward. Approximately 120 participants, nearly half of whom were women, took part in the sessions. They represented diverse age groups, regions, religions, and professions. The dialogues aimed to understand how Syrians perceive the concept of citizenship today and how their perceptions are shaped by the profound political, security, and social transformations unfolding in the country.

The findings indicate that the challenge with citizenship in Syria is not a lack of legal definition, but a structural erosion of its meaning and practice. Across all governorates, participants initially articulated a normative definition of citizenship, describing it in terms of rights, duties, and equality before the law. Yet this definition frequently conflicted with lived experiences, where citizenship is perceived as fragile and conditional—granted or withdrawn depending on context and the balance of power. Participants repeatedly expressed that citizenship was never fully realized, either before or after the conflict; the forms of exclusion may have changed, but the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

Despite marked differences across local contexts—sectarianism in Tartous, economic crisis in Aleppo, memories of violence in Homs, institutional ambiguity in Damascus, ethnic exclusion in Qamishli, and blatant violations in Suwayda—these experiences converge on similar outcomes: weakened trust in the State, skepticism about the impartiality of the law, and a shrinking sense of national identity, replaced by local or defensive loyalties. Fear, in its various forms, emerges as a common structural feature in Syrians' experience of citizenship, whether it is fear of stigma, generalization, lack of protection, or uncertainty.

These governorates differ, however, in their definitions of the “minimum” necessary to rebuild citizenship, reflecting the unique wounds in each context. In Tartous, the minimum involves ending stigmatization, collective punishment, and ensuring separation between State and sects; in Aleppo, it centers on restoring public services and the economy and regulating the public sphere; in Homs, it entails ending discrimination and reprisals and restoring institutional neutrality; in Damascus, it focuses on transparency, stability, and community participation in decision-making; in Qamishli, it

emphasizes acknowledging grievances, upholding national rights, and preventing the return of exclusion; and in Suwayda, it requires truth-seeking, accountability, and restoring the State's protective role. This diversity does not indicate a contradiction in vision but underscores that citizenship in Syria is multifaceted and cannot be built according to a single model.

The paper concludes that restoring citizenship in Syria will not be achieved through general national discourse or abstract constitutional texts alone. Rather, it requires parallel, context-specific pathways that address fear, rebuild trust, and demonstrate the State's capacity as a framework for protection, justice, and dignity. Ignoring the contextual differences between governorates—or imposing a single priority for defining citizenship—risks repeating the very failures that led to its erosion.

Accordingly, the paper recommends a policy approach to citizenship that recognizes the diverse experiences of Syrian men and women, linking citizenship to concrete, measurable, and accountable practices. This approach redefines the State as a partner that guarantees rights, rather than a source of fear or exclusion.

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 citizenship in the current context and how their perceptions are shaped by the profound political, security, and social transformations the country has undergone. Rather than testing pre-existing theoretical hypotheses about citizenship, this study seeks to capture lived experiences as expressed by participants and to explore the meanings and narratives they attribute to citizenship in their daily lives.

I. Rationale for the Selection of Session 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, and local governance. This approach enables the examination of citizenship as a dynamic concept shaped by context.

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 discussions, allowing multiple experiences and perspectives on citizenship to converge and inform the analysis.

II. Why Using a Qualitative Approach?

A qualitative approach was selected because the question of citizenship in the Syrian context cannot be reduced to quantitative indicators or abstract legal definitions. As the sessions demonstrated, citizenship is experienced as an emotional, political, and lived relationship that intersects with fear, memory, violence, access to services, belonging, recognition, and dignity. Group discussions made it possible to:

- Trace the language used by participants to describe themselves and their relationship with the State
- Identify tensions and contradictions within participants' narratives
- Understand contextual differences among governorates
- Identify patterns and intersections across governorates

The analysis focused on the terms and expressions used by participants themselves, even when these did not align with academic or legal definitions of citizenship. The objective of this paper was not to redefine citizenship theoretically, but to understand how it is perceived and experienced 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 groups or perspectives. For example, the Kurdish perspective in Qamishli or a broader national perspective in Damascus. This constitutes an intentional methodological bias, treated as an analytical tool rather than a research flaw. At the same time, some voices may have been absent or underrepresented due to fear, security concerns, or social constraints. Such factors constitute unintended biases inherent in qualitative research conducted in post-conflict contexts.

IV. Interpretation of the Findings Without Forcing Generalizations

The findings of this paper should be understood as analytical patterns and contextual indicators, rather than sweeping generalizations or definitive judgments. The analysis was conducted by:

- Tracing intersections across governorates in how citizenship is experienced, including themes such as fear, lack of justice, a fragile sense of belonging, and the centralization of security and services
- Highlighting simultaneously contextual differences that render citizenship a multifaceted concept shaped by local experience

Accordingly, this paper aims to provide a qualitative mapping of perceptions of citizenship 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.



Intersections and Differences Between Governorates: Citizenship as a Multifaceted Structural Issue

A comparison of dialogue sessions across the six governorates reveals that citizenship in Syria is not merely a local or sectarian crisis, but a structural national issue that takes different forms depending on the political, social, and security context of each governorate. Despite sharp differences in lived experience, participants' perceptions of the essence and limits of citizenship show notable convergence. While the questions raised are similar across contexts, the implementation priorities for what is considered the “minimum” level of citizenship vary.

I. Structural Intersections in Understanding Citizenship

Across all governorates, there is an unspoken consensus that citizenship has never been experienced as a stable and neutral relationship between the individual and the State. In all contexts—whether previously seen as “pro-government” (Tartous), “opposition” (parts of Aleppo and Homs), “historically marginalized” (Qamishli, Suwayda), or “centralized” (Damascus)—participants conveyed that citizenship has always been conditional: dependent on loyalty, silence, identity, or the ability to navigate existing power structures.

This fundamental intersection renders citizenship a fluid concept, derived not from law but from the balance of power. Metaphors such as “degrees of citizenship,” “suspect,” and “privilege” were frequently used in all sessions, reflecting a widespread perception that citizenship is granted and withdrawn rather than being an inherent right.

Fear emerged as a central, structural element of citizenship, not a temporary phenomenon. Its manifestations differ by governorate: in Tartous, fear of stigma; in Aleppo, fear of chaos and economic decline; in Homs, fear of labelling; in Damascus, fear of ambiguity; in Qamishli, fear of returning exclusion; and in Suwayda, fear of impunity. Despite these varying sources, the effect is consistent: a shrinking public sphere and a declining sense of belonging.

II. Different Contexts, Similar Outcomes

Although each governorate approached the discussion from a different perspective, participants' conclusions were remarkably similar. In Tartous, the erosion of citizenship is interpreted through the lens of sectarianism and collective stigmatization, whereas in Qamishli, it reflects a long-standing national memory of exclusion. In both cases, the outcome is the same: deep-seated doubt in the State's neutrality and a fear of discrimination reemerging in a new form.

In Aleppo, where economic instability and multiple defacto authorities shaped the discussion, citizenship was understood as a contract for services and stability. In Damascus, the focus was on uncertainty and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. Despite these different emphases—economic in Aleppo, administrative-political in Damascus—both contexts point to the same conclusion: the absence of stable rules undermines citizenship, turning citizens into anxious recipients rather than active participants.

In Homs and Suwayda, where direct violence and vivid memories of violations persist, citizenship appears even more fragile. In Homs, stigma and categorization (e.g., remnants/revolutionaries) continue to shape interactions, while in Suwayda, local isolation reflects a reaction to perceived national abandonment. Both contexts demonstrate a collapse of trust in the State as a unifying framework, even though the forms of this collapse differ.

III. Similar Questions Despite Differences in Their Order

Across all governorates, the questions raised by participants were remarkably consistent, even if their order or intensity varied:

- Does the State exist to protect citizens or to control them?
- Is the law a universal standard or a selective tool?
- Can belonging be built without acknowledging past harm and collective memory?
- Is participation possible in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty?

These questions emerged repeatedly in Tartous, Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, Qamishli, and Suwayda, indicating that the crisis is not a regional one, but rather a national crisis rooted in a dysfunctional relationship between the State and its citizens.

IV. Differences in The Definitions of the “Minimum Standard” of Citizenship: Contextual Priorities for a Unified National Path

Although participants across governorates broadly agreed on the fragility and erosion of citizenship, their definitions of the “minimum standard” required to reconstruct it were not uniform. Instead, the minimum standard reflected contextual realities, shaped by lived experiences, the nature of past violations, and the participants’ relationships with the State and authority. These differences do not indicate divergent values or a lack of desire for belonging, but rather highlight the essential starting points for any viable national approach.

Tartous: The Minimum Standard as Ending Collective Punishment and Restoring Neutrality

In Tartous, where participants emphasized collective stigma and politicized sectarian affiliation, the minimum standard of citizenship was defined not in terms of services or political participation, but as protection from generalization and collective punishment. Citizenship, in this context, begins when individuals feel they will not be held accountable for their identity or for narratives imposed upon them.

Accordingly, participants emphasized the necessity of a clear separation between the State and sect, as well as ensuring institutional neutrality, as prerequisites for any discussion of empowerment or participation. Without these conditions, citizenship is perceived as a threat rather than a form of protection.

Aleppo: The Minimum Standard as Service and Economic Stability to Restore Trust

In Aleppo, a governorate that has experienced multiple forms of control and governance, the minimum requirement for citizenship is defined by the ability to live a stable daily life. Here, citizenship is measured not by political rhetoric but by the restoration of essential services—electricity, water, sanitation, security, and order in the public sphere.

This focus does not reflect superficial pragmatism; rather, it stems from the understanding that the absence of services and stability drives people toward parallel economies, sub-national identities, and informal protection networks, effectively emptying citizenship of its practical meaning. Consequently, the minimum standard in Aleppo

is grounded in service provision and economic stability before being identity-based or political.

Homs: The Minimum Standard as Ending Classification and Revenge

In Homs, a city marked by the memory of violence and forced segregation, the minimum standard for citizenship is tied to ending the logic of classification and stigmatization—whether framed as remnants versus revolutionaries or first-class versus tenth-class citizens. Citizenship cannot be rebuilt as long as political or regional identities are used to deny rights.

Participants emphasized that depoliticizing institutions, preventing religious or militia-based influence, and establishing credible justice were essential prerequisites before discussions of participation or representation could take place. In other words, in Homs, the minimum standard involves halting symbolic and political harm before any reconstruction of citizenship can occur.

Damascus: The Minimum Standard as Institutional Clarity and a Single Standard of Governance

In Damascus, where direct violence was not the primary focus of discussion, the minimum standard of citizenship emerged as predictability and institutional clarity. Citizenship collapses when decisions are inconsistent, decision-makers act unilaterally, and transparency is absent.

Accordingly, the minimum standard here was not defined by services or recognition, but by the existence of a single standard of governance, policy stability, and genuine participation in public decision-making. Without these, citizenship becomes a State of constant anxiety and a lack of belonging.

Qamishli: The Minimum Standard as Acknowledgment of Oppression and National Rights

In Qamishli, where collective memory of national oppression remains central, the minimum standard of citizenship was identified as the explicit acknowledgment of historical injustices and a rejection of the logic of denial or assimilation. Participants emphasized that equal citizenship cannot be built on superficial equality that ignores past injustices.

Thus, the minimum standard in Qamishli is explicitly political and legal: guaranteeing cultural and political rights, recognizing national diversity, and assuring the Kurdish community that citizenship will not become a new tool for exclusion.

Suwayda: The Minimum Standard of Truth, Accountability, and Protection

In Suwayda, where massacres and violations remain a profound wound, the minimum standard of citizenship revolves around truth-seeking, accountability, and restoring the State's protective function. Citizenship cannot serve as a unifying framework without recognition of victims and an end to impunity.

Protecting women from abduction and stigma was highlighted as an essential element of this minimum standard ,rendering citizenship existential before it can be political.

The intersections and differences across governorates reveal that the challenge with citizenship in Syria is not a lack of definition ,but the absence of the material ,political ,and moral conditions necessary to give that definition meaning .Despite geographical and experiential differences ,Syrians share a common understanding :citizenship will not be restored through general national discourse or abstract constitutional texts alone .Rather ,it requires multiple ,context-specific paths that address fear ,rebuild trust ,and demonstrate that the State can be a framework for protection rather than exclusion.



Policy Recommendations

I. Recommendations at the National Level

These recommendations address the structural crisis of citizenship in Syria as a dysfunctional relationship between the citizen and the State. They call for interventions that go beyond sectoral or symbolic measures.

1. Recognition and Justice as a National Approach to Citizenship

- Adopt a clear national framework for uncovering the truth and acknowledging gross violations, as a prerequisite for building a new social contract.
- Link any constitutional or political processes to credible transitional justice mechanisms that ensure accountability and prevent the rehabilitation of perpetrators, rather than glossing over open wounds.
- Emphasize that justice is not a call for revenge, but a tool for restoring trust and ensuring equality before the law.

2. Redefining the Role of the State as a Guarantor of Protection, Not an Instrument of Control

- Transform the State's role from one of security or symbolic control to one that guarantees equal protection for all citizens, regardless of political, sectarian, ethnic, or regional affiliation.
- End practices that produce "degrees of citizenship" (or implicit classifications) e.g. „suspect ,acceptable ,remnants of the old regime ,(and adopt a single standard in the application of the law.

3. Recognizing Pluralism as an Integral Part of Citizenship, not its Antithesis

- Integrate recognition of national and cultural grievances (e.g., the Kurdish community) into a comprehensive national vision of citizenship, rather than relying on "neutral" formulations that ignore historical injustices.
- Reject approaches that seek to "assimilate" or "transcend" identities without acknowledging them, as this risks reproducing exclusion.

4. Regulating the public sphere and Combating Hate Speech at the National Level

- Implement clear policies to prevent incitement and hate speech in public forums and the media, ensuring laws are applied impartially and consistently.
- Treat the protection of the public sphere as an essential component of safeguarding citizenship, not merely a secondary ethical or media concern.

5. Linking citizenship to Institutional Stability and Transparency

- Establish clear and stable standards in public decision-making, reducing arbitrary or volatile decisions that generate uncertainty and undermine a sense of belonging.
- Expand channels for community participation in public policies as a fundamental condition for rebuilding trust between citizens and the State.

II. Local-Level Recommendations

These recommendations focus on the contextual “minimum standard” of citizenship as expressed by participants in each governorate and on the role of local actors in repairing the relationship between citizens and the State.

1. Contextual Approaches Instead of a Single Model of Citizenship Design local interventions that reflect the specific needs of each governorate:

- Address stigma and collective punishment in Tartous.
- Prioritize service restoration and economic recovery in Aleppo.
- Dismantle classification and reprisals in Homs.
- Ensure transparency and participation in Damascus.
- Guarantee recognition and rights in Qamishli.
- Promote truth, accountability, and protection in Suwayda.
- Avoid imposing unified national priorities that disregard local grievances and specific experiences.

2. Restoring the State's Protective Function Locally

- Prioritize the guarantee of daily rights, including freedom of movement, access to education, recognition of qualifications, access to services, and protection of roads and public institutions.
- Treat these basic functions as practical expressions of citizenship, not as service delivery separate from political or social rights.

3. Protecting Women as a Condition of Citizenship, not as a Symbolic Empowerment Tool

- Develop local mechanisms to respond to kidnapping and gender-based violence, while criminalizing stigma and social punishment.
- Integrate issues of safety, reputation, and protection into the definition of citizenship, rather than limiting women's participation to quotas or symbolic representation.

4. Supporting Local Spaces for Dialogue and Accountability

- Invest in community dialogue sessions as tools to rebuild trust and dismantle generalized prejudices and opposing identities.
- Support balanced local media to serve as instruments of accountability rather than platforms for polarization.

5. Strengthening the Role of Civil Society as a Partner, Not a Fragile Alternative

- Ease administrative and security restrictions on civil society work, particularly regarding funding and activities.
- Recognize civil society's role in temporarily bridging gaps in citizenship, without burdening it with the long-term responsibility of replacing the State.

These recommendations underscore that citizenship in Syria cannot be restored through a single path or level alone. Effective restoration requires a national framework that addresses the structural roots of exclusion and fear, alongside flexible local approaches that respond to citizens' lived priorities. Ignoring the interplay between national and local action risks producing a superficial form of citizenship, incapable of rebuilding trust or preventing a recurrence of collapse.

Results Analysis at Governorate Level

Aleppo Governorate

I. Context

Aleppo Governorate represents one of the most complex Syrian contexts in which to examine the concept of citizenship. This complexity stems not only from its demographic and social diversity, but also from the exceptional experience it underwent during the years of conflict. The governorate was characterized by the coexistence of multiple systems of control and governance within a single geographical area, resulting in profound divergences in how residents related to the concepts of the State, authority, and law.

The city of Aleppo and parts of its countryside remained under the control of the former regime for varying periods, while other areas—particularly in the northern, eastern, and western countryside—were subject to different forms of governance. These included shifting control among armed factions, the presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah in certain areas, territories administered under the Turkish-backed National Army, and, at earlier stages, areas controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). This multiplicity did not simply produce fragmented maps of territorial control; it also generated distinct “citizenship experiences” within the same governorate. As a result, perceptions of rights, duties, representation, and protection were shaped by the authority in control on the ground, rather than by a unified national framework.

In this context, the notion of the “State” did not remain fixed in the consciousness of Aleppo's residents during the conflict. Instead, it became a fluid and contested entity, evaluated through the daily performance of various governing authorities—particularly their ability to provide security, regulate economic life, deliver services, and manage the public sphere. This fragmentation of reference points was reflected in local understandings of citizenship, which came to be seen not merely as a legal status or national identity, but as a pragmatic and functional relationship with whichever authority could effectively manage daily life. Citizenship in Aleppo thus emerged primarily as a lived experience rather than an abstract or normative concept.

At the same time, any analysis of citizenship in Aleppo must take into account its historical role as Syria's economic capital. This status

is associated with extensive networks of commercial interests, economic classes, local and regional markets, and cross-border relationships that often transcend political authorities. The dialogue sessions revealed that economic considerations constitute a central entry point for understanding how residents relate to the State. The State's legitimacy and presence are measured largely by its capacity to restore a minimum level of economic and service stability. Participants consistently emphasized that the restoration of basic services—such as electricity, water, sanitation, and security—is a prerequisite for people's re-engagement in the public sphere. Moreover, discussions highlighted that political discourse on citizenship and rights cannot be separated from the State's ability to finance, implement, and manage resources effectively. In this sense, citizenship in Aleppo appears as a practical social contract, grounded not only in rights and values, but also in performance and service delivery.

This economic dimension intersects with a highly diverse social fabric. Aleppo is home to a large Sunni majority, alongside longstanding and active communities of various Christian denominations, as well as Kurdish, Arab, Circassian, Turkmen, Armenian, and other groups. The sessions indicated that this diversity is not inherently perceived as a source of conflict, but rather as a natural component of the city's identity. The primary challenge lies in managing this diversity in the absence of a unifying State capable of regulating the public sphere, controlling hate speech, and preventing the instrumentalization of identity in political or economic competition.

The analysis of the Aleppo sessions therefore begins by deconstructing participants' conceptions of citizenship and examining how these interact with a range of structural factors specific to the Aleppo context. These include the multiplicity of authorities and governance experiences, the central role of the economy and service provision, the regulation of the public sphere and hate speech, intergroup relations, and the constraints on political and civic participation—particularly for women. Through this lens, the paper seeks to understand how citizenship in Aleppo is being redefined as the product of a complex interplay between history, economics, power, and social diversity, within a transitional phase whose contours remain unstable.

II. Perceptions of Citizenship: An “Ideal” Legal Definition vs. the Reality of Fragmented Governance

Discussions in the Aleppo sessions revealed a clear tendency among many participants to define citizenship in a standardized, legal sense—primarily grounded in the principle of equality before the law

as its core and unifying foundation. This definition was presented as self-evident, requiring no cultural, religious, or political interpretation. Participants emphasized that the problem in the Syrian context lies not in ambiguity surrounding the concept of citizenship, but in the failure of the State and successive authorities to implement it fairly. As one participant expressed: *“Citizenship, simply put, means that everyone is equal before the law... When everyone is equal before the law, citizens feel that they are valued just like anyone else.”*

This Statement reflects a strong normative orientation among participants who view the law as the primary reference point capable of producing belonging and equality, reducing citizenship to its legal and institutional dimensions. However, this “ideal” understanding quickly collided with the complex lived reality of Aleppo, shaped over years by multiple and overlapping systems of control and governance.

During the conflict, residents of Aleppo did not experience a unified legal system or a single authority. Instead, they navigated diverse and often contradictory forms of “law”: the central State’s legal framework in regime-controlled areas, the rules and directives imposed by de facto authorities elsewhere, and unstable transitional arrangements whose structures remained incomplete. This constant shifting of authority rendered the concept of “law” itself fluid and relative, tied more to territorial control than to a coherent notion of the State or a shared social contract.

Within this context, citizenship was experienced less as a legal status and more as a daily, practical reality—measured not by constitutional provisions, but by the extent to which governing authorities could provide security, regulate the public sphere, and ensure a minimum level of fair treatment. One participant captured this dynamic by noting: *“In Aleppo, we’ve become accustomed to changing our behaviour depending on who is in power... There isn’t a single law, and each phase has its own rules—so how can you talk about a fixed citizenship?”*

This perspective highlights how citizenship in Aleppo was not experienced as a stable relationship with a sovereign State, but rather as a conditional and fluid relationship with multiple authorities, each operating according to its own logic and mechanisms. In such a fragmented environment, citizenship shifted from a comprehensive, rights-based concept to an adaptive strategy—primarily oriented toward minimizing risk and ensuring survival, rather than claiming rights or engaging in political participation.

The discussions further revealed that this fragmentation significantly undermined confidence in the idea of legal neutrality. Participants

observed that the law, even where it existed, was often applied selectively or used as a tool of control rather than as a mechanism for justice. As a result, the legal definition of citizenship was no longer sufficient to generate a meaningful sense of belonging. Instead, it was seen as an aspirational goal—one dependent on the reunification of authority and the establishment of institutions capable of applying the law consistently and fairly.

Ultimately, the Aleppo sessions expose a pronounced gap between the normative conception of citizenship—rooted in equality before the law—and the lived experiences of individuals within a fragmented, multi-authority governance landscape. This gap does not signal a rejection of citizenship as a concept; rather, it reflects a profound crisis of confidence in the State's current ability to translate this concept from a legal principle into a tangible, everyday reality.

III. Citizenship, Identity, and Belonging: Diversity Is Not the Problem—Its Management Is

Participants' contributions in the Aleppo sessions indicate that the governorate's social diversity is not perceived as an inherent threat to citizenship, but rather as an integral part of the city's historical and cultural fabric. The presence of Christians, Armenians, Circassians, Muslims, and other communities was consistently described as a natural feature that has shaped Aleppo's identity for decades and contributed to its economic and social vitality. Within this perspective, participants emphasized that the issue lies not in diversity itself, but in how it is politically and socially managed—particularly at a time when identity risks shifting from a framework for coexistence into a tool for mobilization and polarization. One participant captured this dual sense of reassurance and concern: *"We have always lived in Syria as Christians, Armenians, and Circassians... we don't need these issues... if we focus on trivial matters and neglect priorities, the country will be divided."*

This Statement reflects a clear awareness that invoking religious or ethnic identities in times of crisis does not resolve underlying problems, but instead diverts attention from structural issues related to citizenship—such as justice, service provision, and governance. It also risks fragmenting the public sphere by transforming belonging into a source of conflict rather than cohesion.

At the same time, discussions in Aleppo revealed that tensions around belonging are not confined to relations between different

religious or ethnic groups. They also exist within groups themselves, particularly within the Sunni majority. Terms such as “East Aleppo” and “West Aleppo” were used during the dialogue to describe divisions rooted in wartime geography—areas that fell outside the control of the former regime before being retaken in 2016. These areas had already experienced socioeconomic marginalization prior to 2011, and the conflict further deepened these divides. Such labels remain in use today, reflecting ongoing forms of categorization and social differentiation.

Forms of “internal belonging tension” also emerged along lines of geographical origin, power relations, and social background, as well as through mutual stigma between urban residents and those from surrounding rural areas. In particular, participants highlighted sensitivities between long-standing city residents and individuals who migrated from the countryside. One participant articulated this dynamic clearly: *“As someone from Aleppo whose roots are in the Idlib countryside... there is a certain sensitivity toward my background... even though we are all Sunnis... the issue is not religion; it is how we perceive one another—and that is what creates conflict.”*

This observation suggests that divisions in Aleppo cannot be reduced to simple sectarian binaries. Rather, they intersect with regional, class, and cultural dynamics that produce subtle yet persistent forms of exclusion. In this context, identity shifts from a means of self-definition to a mechanism of social evaluation—determining who is perceived as a “legitimate” member of the community and who is viewed as an outsider or of questionable belonging.

Politically, these dynamics highlight that challenges to citizenship in Aleppo arise not only from overt sectarian divisions, but also from internal systems of stigmatization embedded within the social fabric. These systems operate quietly yet powerfully, reproducing fragmentation even within a single community. When social relations are shaped by categorization and suspicion, the notion of citizenship as a unifying framework weakens, replaced by narrower forms of affiliation that serve as mechanisms of protection or differentiation.

The case of Aleppo therefore underscores that managing diversity is a central political and social challenge in rebuilding citizenship. Diversity, in itself, is not an obstacle; it can be a source of strength and resilience if supported by appropriate legal and institutional frameworks. Such frameworks must be capable of regulating hate speech, preventing the instrumentalization of identity in conflict, and fostering a unifying narrative grounded in individual equality rather than collective categorization. In their absence, the risk of fragmentation persists—

not necessarily through overt sectarian divisions, but through the gradual breakdown of the public sphere into competing circles of stigma and isolation.

IV. The State and Hate Speech: Citizenship Is Threatened When Authorities Remain Silent

The relationship between the State and hate speech emerged as one of the most sensitive issues in the Syrian context. In Aleppo, discussions extended beyond condemning hate speech itself to directly examining the role of authorities in either enabling or containing it. Many participants expressed the view that hate speech becomes a structural threat to citizenship when it is left unchecked or addressed selectively, creating the perception that certain forms of discourse are tolerated while others are penalized based on political or sectarian considerations.

Within this context, an incident in Saadallah al-Jabiri Square was cited as a symbolic example of the overlap between religious discourse and the use of insults and derogatory language in the public sphere. Participants viewed this not as an isolated event, but as an indication of the absence of clear standards governing public space and the limited intervention of authorities to curb hate speech. Such dynamics undermine the State's role as a neutral guarantor and a protector of pluralism.

One participant framed the issue in terms of trust in the State, arguing that official silence or ambiguity directly shapes individuals' sense of citizenship: *"The concept of citizenship becomes threatened by the government when hate speech is made public and not stopped... As long as the government remains opaque... the gap between it and the people will widen."*

This perspective reflects a broader sentiment expressed throughout the sessions: the State is judged not only by its formal positions, but also by what it permits in practice. The absence of intervention is not interpreted as neutrality, but rather as inaction—or even implicit complicity—both of which erode trust in institutions and weaken the foundations of equal citizenship.

Participants also highlighted that the problem extends beyond the mere existence of hate speech to the inconsistent ways in which it is addressed. Similar incidents may provoke different official responses, reinforcing perceptions of double standards and deepening societal polarization. This perceived selectivity undermines confidence in the equal application of the law and reinforces the logic of "protection

through affiliation,” whereby individuals seek security through sub-identities rather than through the State.

A distinctive feature of the Aleppo discussions is the shift from viewing hate speech as a moral issue to treating it as a practical measure of State performance. For participants, citizenship is not evaluated through legal texts or political rhetoric, but through the State’s everyday conduct in the public sphere: Does it protect all citizens equally? Does it safeguard freedom of expression without allowing incitement? Does it intervene when discourse threatens social cohesion?

In this sense, the regulation of the public sphere becomes an integral component of citizenship itself. A State that remains silent in the face of hate speech—or responds selectively—undermines not only social cohesion but also the foundational principle of citizenship as a relationship built on mutual trust. Conversely, consistent, transparent, and impartial intervention is seen as a critical step toward rebuilding trust and redefining the public sphere as a shared space rather than a site of identity-based conflict.

The case of Aleppo thus illustrates that protecting citizenship is inseparable from the State’s role in regulating public discourse. Official silence in moments of incitement cannot be considered neutral; rather, it constitutes a political stance with direct implications for social unity and the prospects for building inclusive and comprehensive citizenship.

V. The Economy as a “Condition for Citizenship”: Services as a Foundation for Trust and Integration

Unlike in other governorates, where sectarian and security concerns tend to dominate perceptions of citizenship, discussions in Aleppo highlighted the central role of the economy and public services in shaping how citizenship is understood and experienced. Participants consistently emphasized that the credibility of the State, the meaning of political transition, and the prospects for rebuilding citizenship are all measured through economic performance and service provision. Citizenship, in this view, cannot be grounded in constitutional texts or political rhetoric alone; it requires resources, institutional capacity, and a visible State presence in everyday life.

Within this framework, the economy emerged as a practical and realistic entry point to citizenship. Participants argued that even the most well-designed constitution cannot produce meaningful

citizenship if the State is unable to provide basic services—most notably electricity, water, sanitation, and security. The restoration of these services was described as a turning point for the city, capable of reshaping the relationship between individuals and the public sphere, and of reopening space for trust and participation. As one participant stated: *“The State can write the best constitution in the world, but if there is no electricity, water, cleanliness, and security, people will not feel like citizens... Citizenship begins with services.”*

This perspective reflects a deeply pragmatic understanding of citizenship, one that does not separate political rights from economic rights but instead treats the latter as a prerequisite for the former. In the Aleppo context, citizenship is not an abstract concept or symbolic identity; it is a daily relationship, continuously tested by the State's ability to manage public affairs and ensure a basic level of dignity.

Participants further linked the deterioration of services to the expansion of the parallel economy and informal protection networks. They noted that when the State fails to provide essential services, individuals and communities increasingly rely on alternative structures—such as local associations, informal networks, merchants, or armed groups—to meet their needs. One participant described this dynamic clearly: *“When the State is absent in providing services, people automatically turn to alternatives... a merchant, an association, a faction, or a network of relationships... and this is where citizenship weakens, because you no longer depend on the State.”*

This observation underscores that service provision is not merely a technical or administrative issue, but a core mechanism of political and social integration. As the State's capacity to deliver services declines, its role as a unifying framework weakens, while society becomes increasingly fragmented and dependent on narrower forms of affiliation.

The Aleppo discussions therefore point to a practical political understanding of citizenship, which can be summarized along two complementary dimensions:

- **Citizenship as a service-based social contract:** Citizenship is understood not only as a shared national identity, but as a relationship grounded in the provision of fair and equitable services. Participants emphasized that symbolic recognition alone is insufficient; citizens must experience the State as present, effective, and impartial in their daily lives.
- **Public services as a tool of integration:** Improving access to electricity, water, sanitation, and security is not only a matter of raising living standards, but also of strengthening social

cohesion. Effective service delivery reduces reliance on informal economies and protection networks, and diminishes the appeal of sub-identities as substitutes for citizenship.

In this sense, the Aleppo case demonstrates that rebuilding citizenship must pass through the gateway of economic recovery and service provision. A State capable of restoring its economic and service functions does more than rebuild institutional credibility—it creates the structural conditions necessary for broader social integration. This, in turn, enables individuals to move beyond survival strategies and adaptive behaviours toward active citizenship and meaningful participation in public life.

VI. Women and Citizenship: Restrictions Do Not Eliminate Their Role—They Confine It to “Safe Spaces”

The dialogue sessions in Aleppo Governorate revealed that women’s relationship with citizenship is complex, oscillating between active social participation and structural exclusion from political and institutional spheres. Women were not absent from the public sphere; rather, they played a visible and meaningful role in rebuilding social relations. However, their participation remained largely confined to what can be described as “safe spaces,” particularly within civil society, while their access to formal decision-making and official political channels remained limited.

At the social level, women emerged as key actors in fostering communication and challenging stereotypes within Aleppo society, especially amid tensions between residents returning from areas such as the Idlib countryside, the northern Aleppo countryside, and other regions, and long-standing city residents. Participants noted that community dialogues—including these sessions—contributed to dismantling pre-existing classifications and exclusionary labels, such as “a flip-flopper,” and similar stigmatizing categories. This process helped restore a focus on individuals and their lived experiences rather than reducing people to collective identities. As one participant expressed, dialogue enables individuals to be seen as human beings rather than as categories, thereby reducing generalizations that fuel division.

This mediating role highlights women’s ability to navigate ambiguous spaces, ease social tensions, and construct alternative, less polarizing narratives. However, this social effectiveness has not translated into a corresponding political presence, due to a range of structural, political, and social constraints that continue to limit women’s participation in formal processes.

One participant described a noticeable decline in her involvement after “liberation,” compared to the period before it, arguing that the new phase did not expand opportunities for women as expected. Instead, it produced new forms of marginalization and exclusion. She emphasized that her active participation is now largely confined to civil society, stating: *“After liberation, my participation has decreased... The only space I can operate in is civil society; formal politics is practically closed to me.”*

This Statement reflects a clear paradox: while political transitions are often expected to expand opportunities for participation, the actual transformations in Aleppo appear to have reshaped the public sphere in ways that restrict women’s engagement. These limitations stem from a combination of unclear legal frameworks, entrenched social norms, and a broader environment of polarization and mistrust.

Additional discussions revealed that women face what can be described as a form of “political and social pressure,” extending beyond formal exclusion from office to include challenges in the digital sphere and on social media. Participants pointed to smear campaigns, harassment, and personal attacks that make public engagement costly for women. More importantly, such targeting undermines women’s visibility and representation, often replacing them with male figures, and thereby deepening the fragility of women’s political participation rather than strengthening it.

The issue of representation was also raised in relation to women’s quotas in parliamentary and electoral contexts. Opinions differed regarding the effectiveness of such measures within political systems characterized by alliances and patronage networks. Participants noted that weak public political awareness, combined with the absence of supportive institutional and social environments, often renders quotas symbolic rather than substantive. As a result, they do not necessarily ensure the emergence of effective female representatives or individuals capable of genuinely reflecting their communities’ interests. The limited representation of women from certain regions was also highlighted, pointing to the intersection between gender-based exclusion and broader patterns of regional marginalization.

In conclusion, the Aleppo experience demonstrates that women remain active contributors to rebuilding the social fabric, yet their role is largely confined to “safe spaces” that do not challenge existing political balances. For women, citizenship is not only a matter of legal rights, but also a question of visibility, participation, and the ability to influence without being marginalized or targeted. Without addressing the structural constraints that limit women to non-politicized social

roles, their participation will remain largely confined to civil society, rather than forming an integral part of a broader and more inclusive vision of citizenship.

VII. Prospects for Citizenship in Aleppo: Minimum Requirements

The dialogue sessions in Aleppo Governorate indicate that discussions about citizenship extend beyond abstract slogans or long-term visions. Instead, they are grounded in what can be described as “minimum requirements”—practical and achievable conditions that respond directly to lived realities shaped by multiple authorities, weakened trust, and the absence of a unifying State. Within this context, citizenship is not framed as a theoretical objective, but as the outcome of interconnected practical pathways, whose success is measured by their ability to restore trust, regulate the public sphere, and foster a sense of integration and belonging. These pathways can be summarized as follows:

1. Regulating the Public Sphere and Hate Speech

Participants emphasized the need for clear, public, and non-selective intervention by the authorities in regulating discourse. State silence or inconsistent responses to similar incidents are not perceived as neutrality, but rather as a failure to fulfil the State’s role as a guarantor of civil peace. Systematic and fair intervention to curb inflammatory rhetoric—whether in public spaces or through media channels—is seen as a prerequisite for rebuilding trust and preventing the instrumentalization of religious or regional identities as tools of political conflict.

2. Rapid Service and Economic Recovery

Economic recovery and the restoration of basic services were identified as the cornerstone of any serious effort to rebuild citizenship in Aleppo. The provision of electricity, water, sanitation, and improved security is not viewed as merely technical or administrative, but as a foundational element of social integration. Such improvements reduce social tensions and limit dependence on the parallel economy and informal networks. In this sense, the seriousness of the State is measured by its ability to move individuals from the margins of survival and adaptation back into a structured relationship with State institutions.

3. Leveraging Local Governance Experiences in Aleppo and Its Countryside During the Conflict

Participants stressed the importance of recognizing and building upon the diverse governance experiences that emerged during the years of conflict—rather than disregarding them entirely. Whether through local councils or civil administrations, these experiences represent accumulated social and administrative capital. Ignoring them risks deepening distrust and reproducing administrative fragmentation. Instead, they should be integrated into a unified legal framework that builds on existing expertise rather than attempting to rebuild institutions from scratch.

4. Strengthening the Role of Local Media and Ensuring Balanced Coverage of Aleppo

Participants highlighted the importance of professional and responsible media in reshaping perceptions of Aleppo as a diverse and inclusive space, rather than a site of conflict and polarization. The absence of credible media—or its transformation into a vehicle for propaganda and incitement—was seen as a factor that exacerbates divisions. By contrast, independent media can serve as a tool for accountability, monitoring public institutions, fostering informed debate on shared issues, and limiting the spread of hate speech rather than amplifying it.

5. Empowering Women and Youth Politically and Intellectually

Empowering women and youth was identified as a key prerequisite for moving beyond symbolic or patronage-based forms of representation. Discussions revealed that limited understanding of legislative and executive functions, electoral processes, and advocacy mechanisms restricts the ability of these groups to exercise real influence, even when formal participation is available. Accordingly, empowerment must go beyond technical training; it should be understood as a broader political and educational process that redefines citizenship as informed, active, and responsible participation.

In conclusion, the Aleppo case demonstrates that the prospects for citizenship cannot be built through a single pathway in isolation. Rather, they require a comprehensive and interconnected set of measures that simultaneously address discourse regulation, service provision, utilization of local expertise, media development, and the empowerment of marginalized groups. In the absence of these minimum conditions, citizenship remains fragile—vulnerable to erosion under the pressures of economic hardship, identity-based polarization, and declining trust in institutions.

Al-Hasakah Governorate / Qamishli City

I. Context

The city of Qamishli and its surrounding socio-geographical context represent one of the most sensitive and complex environments in Syria for examining the concept of citizenship. This complexity stems not only from its rich ethnic and religious diversity, but also from the fact that the Kurdish question constitutes a structural axis in redefining the relationship between the individual and the State. Qamishli is therefore not merely a city of diverse communities, but a historical space in which policies of ethnic exclusion, collective memories of marginalization, and an alternative political and administrative experience have intersected. As a result, citizenship here emerges as a deeply contested political concept, shaped by ongoing questions and uncertainties rather than functioning as a neutral legal framework or an uncontested social consensus.

For decades, the Kurdish population in Qamishli and other predominantly Kurdish areas has experienced systematic forms of discrimination and exclusion. These were reflected in State policies that sought to undermine the legal and cultural presence of Kurds, including the exceptional 1962 census, the Arab Belt project, the renaming of villages, restrictions on the Kurdish language in public life, and the denial of citizenship. These measures resulted in widespread limitations on civil and economic rights. Beyond their legal consequences, these policies fostered a deep sense of alienation between the State and society, whereby the State was perceived not as a guarantor of equality and protection, but rather as an authority associated with exclusion and control.

The discussions revealed that this historical memory has not been erased by recent political developments or by the fall of the previous regime. On the contrary, it remains strongly embedded in participants' perceptions and serves as a central reference point when evaluating discussions about a new constitution, equal citizenship, or a national social contract. For many participants, these concepts cannot be considered in isolation from past experiences; instead, they are assessed based on their ability to address historical injustices and prevent their recurrence. Accordingly, skepticism toward inclusive national narratives does not arise from a rejection of the concept itself, but from a concern that similar patterns of exclusion may re-emerge under the language of unity or formal equality.

In contrast to this historical context, Qamishli has, since 2014,

witnessed a distinct political and administrative experiment within the broader Syrian landscape. This has been embodied in the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, alongside the development of local institutions and the formulation of a region-specific social contract. Although participants differed in their evaluations of this experience, it has become a central point of reference in discussions on citizenship. In this context, citizenship is not approached as an abstract theoretical concept, but rather as an existing and evolving practice—tested daily through mechanisms of cultural and linguistic recognition, and forms of local participation, while also confronting challenges related to political pluralism, the scope of participation, and accountability.

The Qamishli sessions coincided with a highly sensitive national moment, marked by a provisional constitutional declaration issued by the transitional authority in Damascus, as well as renewed discussions about drafting a new constitution and forming a legislative body. This context was clearly reflected in the discussions, where the central question was not simply “What is citizenship?”, but rather: Can citizenship be genuinely equitable without explicit recognition of Kurdish grievances and national particularities? And can a comprehensive national project provide reassurance to the Kurdish community in the face of renewed fears of exclusion, whether under the banner of “majority rule” or an overarching national identity?

Despite the diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds among participants, the discussions primarily reflected the Kurdish perspective and its particular historical relationship with the State and the concept of citizenship. This analytical approach is adopted deliberately here as a framework for understanding citizenship in Syria from the standpoint of groups that have experienced historical exclusion, without claiming to represent all components of Al-Hasakah Governorate.

II. Perceptions of Citizenship in Qamishli: A Non-Neutral Citizenship and a Persistent Memory of Exclusion

The dialogue sessions in Qamishli revealed that citizenship is not perceived as a neutral or inherently inclusive concept, but rather as one shaped by a long history of exclusion and marginalization. Unlike contexts where citizenship is primarily discussed through legal or constitutional frameworks, participants approached it through the lived experience of the Kurdish community and its historical relationship with the Syrian State, rather than through abstract theoretical definitions.

Citizenship was not viewed as an individual right grounded in formal equality before the law. Instead, it was seen by many participants as a framework whose credibility has been deeply eroded by a history in which the law itself was used as a tool of exclusion. Within collective memory, citizenship became associated with the denial of nationality to large segments of the population, restrictions on the Kurdish language, the erasure of cultural symbols, and the exclusion of Kurds from political and administrative life. As a result, citizenship was not experienced as a relationship of protection or belonging, but rather as a fragile legal status—subject to restriction or revocation through administrative or security measures. One participant expressed this clearly: *“We Kurds were citizens only on paper... At any moment, your rights could be withdrawn or your identity revoked. So how can we trust the same concept today without guarantees?”*

Within this context, participants emphasized that citizenship, as it was historically practiced, functioned less as a mechanism for social integration or political equality, and more as an instrument of control and domination. Rather than serving as a framework for ensuring justice, the law was perceived as having reinforced discrimination, thereby undermining trust in any subsequent discourse on the “State of law” or “equal citizenship.” This legacy has led many participants to approach the concept of citizenship with significant caution, viewing it as a potential vehicle for reproducing exclusion rather than overcoming it.

However, the discussions did not reflect a rejection of the principle of equal citizenship itself. Rather, they highlighted a rejection of any formulation of citizenship that is detached from historical context. Participants expressed deep skepticism toward the sufficiency of a purely legal definition of citizenship if it is not accompanied by explicit recognition of past injustices and meaningful engagement with their structural consequences. From this perspective, formal equality before the law is not sufficient to guarantee justice, particularly when the law itself has historically functioned as an instrument of discrimination, and when its application has not been critically re-evaluated. One participant noted: *“We hear about equal citizenship every time, but without acknowledging what happened to us... this discourse does not protect us, because we have already experienced it.”*

In this sense, citizenship in Qamishli emerges as a conditional and experiential concept, evaluated through lived reality rather than legal texts or political promises. A recurring theme in the discussions was that citizenship is not measured by what is written in constitutions or official documents, but by the degree to which individuals feel protected from the recurrence of past forms of discrimination, and by

their ability to exercise their rights without fear of regression.

This enduring sense of vulnerability has led many participants to approach national discourses on citizenship with caution and skepticism, fearing that they may reproduce familiar formulas under new terminology—formulas that invoke equality while overlooking historical grievances and underlying power imbalances. Consequently, citizenship in Qamishli is not perceived as a neutral starting point, but rather as a deferred objective—one that can only be achieved through a process that confronts the past as much as it seeks to shape the future.

III. Citizenship and Kurdish Identity: Recognition as a Condition for Belonging, Not Its Opposite

The Qamishli sessions clearly demonstrate that citizenship and Kurdish identity are not understood as opposing paths, but rather as structurally intertwined dimensions that cannot be separated in the collective consciousness of the participants. In this context, Kurdish national identity is not presented as an alternative to Syrian citizenship, nor as a separatist or isolationist project, but rather as a fundamental condition for achieving genuine and meaningful citizenship. Participants emphasized that any approach to citizenship that ignores this national dimension is perceived as an extension of the logic of denial that has characterized the Syrian State's relationship with the Kurds for decades.

From this perspective, approaches that frame citizenship as a “transcendence of identities” or as their “neutralization” without acknowledging them were clearly rejected. Participants viewed such approaches—despite their seemingly inclusive rhetoric—as a continuation of forced assimilation, in which historically marginalized groups are expected to relinquish their distinctiveness in exchange for promises of equality. In this context, one participant stated, “Every time we are told that citizenship means forgetting our identity... we have experienced this before, and the result was our denial, not our protection.”

This Statement reflects a deeply rooted understanding that citizenship cannot be inclusive if it is built on the erasure of national and cultural specificities. Such an approach produces only a superficial form of citizenship based on conformity and forced integration, rather than on voluntary belonging and equal partnership.

In the current context, the discussions revealed a clear sensitivity

regarding the relationship between the current Damascus government and the Kurdish component. Participants expressed strong skepticism toward the discourse coming from the transitional authority, particularly with respect to the definition of national identity and the limits of recognizing diversity. Some noted that the language used in political discourse emanating from Damascus—even when it refers to “national unity” or “equal citizenship”—lacks clear acknowledgment of Kurdish grievances or national rights. This has revived memories of past marginalization under broad nationalist frameworks. In this regard, one participant said, *“We still don’t know how the Damascus government views the Kurds... The discourse is general about unity and citizenship, but without any guarantees or recognition, and this creates real fear.”*

This apprehension was not expressed as hostility toward the State, but rather as a logical outcome of a historical experience that has turned national identity into a source of anxiety rather than security. Participants expressed concern that citizenship in the coming phase may be redefined based on the “will of the majority” or a “single national identity,” potentially leading to renewed marginalization of the Kurdish component, even if framed under the banners of equality and national unity.

Conversely, the discussions revealed a clear and explicit desire to belong to a unified Syrian State, provided that this State is grounded in recognition, equality, and clear guarantees, rather than assimilation or denial. From the participants’ perspective, citizenship is not merely a legal relationship between the individual and the State, but a relationship built on mutual trust. This requires, on the one hand, the State’s recognition of the Kurdish component and its cultural and political rights, and, on the other, the component’s recognition of the State as a shared framework that encompasses all Syrians.

The discussions also reflected an awareness that building comprehensive citizenship in Syria requires a sensitive, multi-layered approach to the experiences of different communities. Imposing a single model of citizenship without accounting for these experiences could be counterproductive—not only for the relationship between Kurds and the State, but for the Syrian social fabric as a whole. In Qamishli, ignoring the Kurdish dimension in any discussion of citizenship risks reproducing a logic of fear and suspicion, thereby undermining the possibility of building mutual trust between communities and weakening any inclusive national project at its earliest stages.

Therefore, the Qamishli sessions reveal that citizenship, from the

Kurdish perspective, cannot be built on formal neutrality or rhetorical discourse alone. Rather, it must be grounded in explicit acknowledgment of the past, guarantees for the future, and genuine partnership in shaping the State and its identity. Without these elements, citizenship remains a fragile construct—open to interpretation and reversal—rather than a stable foundation for belonging and coexistence.

IV. Women and Citizenship in Qamishli: Between Formal Recognition and the Limits of Real Empowerment

The Qamishli sessions revealed that women's relationship to citizenship is shaped by a complex intersection of national identity, gender, and the experience of historical exclusion. The participating women did not view citizenship as an abstract legal framework, but rather as a lived experience shaped by the extent to which they are recognized both as women and as Kurds. In this sense, citizenship appeared as an incomplete concept, tested through the limits of actual participation rather than through the declared discourse of equality.

On the one hand, some participants noted that women in Qamishli enjoy a visible and symbolic presence in the public sphere compared to other Syrian regions, whether through participation in community activities or through public discussions about women's roles. However, this visibility has not necessarily translated into real empowerment as citizens. Interventions pointed to a clear gap between the rhetorical acknowledgment of women's role and their actual ability to influence decision-making or shape policy.

The discussion emphasized that women's citizenship is not measured solely by formal rights, but also by their ability to exercise those rights without guardianship or token representation. Participants noted that women are sometimes used as "facades" or "symbols of progress," while decision-making processes remain confined to narrow circles, leaving women marginalized despite their formal presence.

The sessions also revealed that women face a dual set of constraints: those arising from traditional social structures, and those linked to the broader political context, which limits opportunities for criticism and accountability. The dynamic between socially permissible and politically possible creates a continuous negotiation for women's citizenship. Participants observed that engaging in public affairs can expose women to suspicion or targeting—whether on the basis of gender or political affiliation—thus making their participation more costly compared to men.

At the same time, the sessions highlighted that women play a pivotal role in redefining citizenship as a lived, everyday practice, rather than merely a legal relationship with the State. Women's contributions emphasized values such as coexistence, mutual recognition, and inter-community dialogue, which they see as essential to citizenship in a diverse and sensitive context like Qamishli.

Notably, some participants linked the historical fragility of Kurdish citizenship to the precariousness experienced by women as citizens, arguing that the absence of clear guarantees—whether at the national or gender level—renders any gains reversible. From their perspective, promises of equality or recognition are not sufficient; citizenship must be translated into clear and enforceable rules that protect women's participation from marginalization and ensure its continuity regardless of political change.

Ultimately, the Qamishli sessions show that, for women, citizenship is not merely a matter of written rights, but rather one of security, continuity, and the ability to exert real influence. Women are present in discourse and active in the social sphere, yet their citizenship remains incomplete unless spaces for genuine and unconditional participation are created, and unless the structural constraints that confine their role to symbolic representation or depoliticized action are addressed. Without this, women's citizenship in Qamishli remains a fragile experience, vulnerable to erosion with every political or social transformation.

V. Prospects for Citizenship in Qamishli: Minimum Requirements

Despite the deep skepticism expressed by participants in the Qamishli sessions regarding the traditional concept of citizenship, the discussion nevertheless identified clear conditions for what could be considered the “minimum requirements” for rebuilding an equitable relationship between the citizen and the State. Notably, these conditions were not presented as maximalist demands or comprehensive political programs, but rather as essential guarantees—without which citizenship remains a fragile and unsustainable concept, particularly in a context marked by a long legacy of national exclusion.

1. Explicit Recognition of the Historical Oppression of the Kurdish Component

This is considered an indispensable starting point for restoring confidence in the concept of citizenship. Participants emphasized

that any discourse on equal citizenship that ignores this oppression, or treats it as a closed historical issue requiring no political or legal resolution, will be perceived as a continuation of the logic of denial. In this context, recognition is not understood as a privilege or an exception, but rather as a foundational step that places all citizens on equal footing by addressing the consequences of discrimination instead of overlooking them.

2. Ensuring Non-Recurrence of Exclusion

This entails building genuine trust that citizenship is not a status that can be revoked or restricted by political decree. Participants expressed deep concern that citizenship might be redefined in a future phase in a way that appears inclusive on the surface while concealing the possibility of a return to policies of forced assimilation or the dominance of the “will of the majority” over the rights of minority groups. From their perspective, citizenship cannot be based on promises alone; it requires clear and enforceable guarantees that protect both individual and collective rights.

3. Separating Citizenship from Political or National Loyalty

The discussions revealed a strong rejection of any approach that ties citizenship to adherence to a single official identity or a specific political discourse. Participants argued that transforming citizenship into a tool for enforcing loyalty empties it of its meaning and replaces a relationship of belonging with one of fear. In Qamishli, citizenship is understood as a framework that guarantees the right to be different, not a mechanism to suppress that difference.

4. Creating Genuine and Safe Spaces for Participation

This requires enabling citizens—especially women and youth—to express their views and engage in public affairs without fear of stigmatization or targeting. Participants stressed that formal or symbolic participation is insufficient for building real citizenship, and that restricting the public sphere—even implicitly—undermines the sense of belonging and reinforces a retreat into sub-national identities. Citizenship, as discussed, is constructed through daily practice and active participation, not merely through rhetoric.

5. Redefining Citizenship as a Relationship of Protection, Not Control

Participants expressed a clear desire for citizenship to function as a framework that provides legal and political security, rather than one that generates anxiety or suspicion. In this sense, citizenship in Qamishli is not measured through compliance, but through the extent to which the State—regardless of its form—is perceived as a non-threatening entity that protects identity and existence, while fairly managing diversity.

In conclusion, the Qamishli sessions demonstrate that the prospects for citizenship are not simply a matter of formal integration into a centralized State, but rather a process of building trust grounded in recognition, guarantees, and meaningful participation. From the participants' perspective, citizenship cannot be achieved through abstract generalizations or the dismissal of particular experiences, but only through concrete practices that acknowledge the past, protect the present, and enable a participatory future. Without meeting these minimum conditions, citizenship in Qamishli remains a deferred concept—vulnerable to erosion at the first political or security challenge.

Homs Governorate

I. Context

Homs Governorate emerges as one of the most significant Syrian contexts for understanding citizenship in the post-conflict era, not only because of its sectarian and religious diversity (Sunni, Alawite, Christian, alongside a complex Turkmen, Kurdish, and regional presence), but also because the city, during the years of conflict, became a central arena for the accumulation of violence, forced displacement, and the reshaping of social geography along lines of affiliation. This recent history has left Homs burdened with a wounded collective memory, where the boundaries between what is “over” in the conflict and what continues in other forms remain blurred.

In the discussions, Homs was not described as a city that is “inherently divided,” but rather as a city forced into coexistence under conditions of polarization, where social relations were reproduced within a broader context of inflammatory rhetoric and implicit practices of segregation. Participants described the current phase using terms such as chaos, absence of the State, confusion, and a militia-like reality, reflecting

a widespread perception that the transition has not resulted in the reestablishment of the State as a unifying authority. Instead, it has produced an institutional vacuum filled by unregulated local actors or *de facto* authorities of a social or religious nature.

This institutional vacuum is clearly reflected in perceptions of citizenship. Participants noted that institutions do not operate according to a stable institutional logic, but rather in accordance with shifting balances of power. The law is not consistently applied as a universal standard; in some cases, it is replaced by the logic of “street justice” or “social control,” including stigmatization, intimidation, or informal exclusion. In this context, individuals do not feel that their rights are protected as citizens; instead, their status appears to depend on fluctuating social and political classifications.

From a political perspective, the discussions in Homs reveal that citizenship is not framed here as a purely theoretical or constitutional issue, but rather as a fragile, lived experience closely tied to questions of personal security, justice, the role of religious discourse within institutions, and prevailing patterns of categorization—such as “remnants of the old regime” versus “revolutionaries,” or “first-class” versus “tenth-class” citizens. As participants expressed, these classifications not only generate social discrimination, but also transform citizenship itself into a fluid status, granted or withdrawn according to shifting power dynamics and political alignment, rather than a fixed principle of equality before the law.

Most importantly, Homs, by virtue of its location and historical experience, emerges in the discussions as a living laboratory for examining citizenship after violence. Can an equal relationship between the State and the citizen be rebuilt in a city where questions of justice remain unresolved, and where the State has yet to be restored as a neutral authority? And can citizenship take root while religious or social discourse continues to determine access to rights, rather than the rule of law?

In this context, citizenship in Homs is not evaluated as a unifying national identity, but rather as a condition of security and as the possibility of living without fear of stigma, retaliation, or categorization. Homs thus acquires particular analytical significance, as it reveals that citizenship in post-conflict Syria is eroded not only by sectarian divisions, but also by the absence of a functioning State, the persistence of force-based dynamics, and the transformation of the public sphere into an arena of social control rather than a shared space governed and protected by law.

II. Perceptions of Citizenship in Homs: From Rights and Duties to Degrees

As in Aleppo, the Homs sessions initially presented a normative definition of citizenship as a set of rights and duties grounded in equality before the law. However, this definition did not withstand the weight of participants' lived experiences of Syria. The discussion quickly shifted from a conceptual level to a practical one, where citizenship was described as a process of social, political, regional, and sectarian categorization rather than an inclusive framework.

One participant captured this shift by introducing the concept of "degrees of citizenship," arguing that citizenship was never a reality even before 2011, but rather a system based on privilege and loyalty that became even harsher after the outbreak of the conflict. She stated in this context: *"During the Assad era, there was no citizenship at all... there were first-class citizens, second-class citizens, and tenth-class citizens. After 2011, we became terrorists, refugees, and displaced persons without any rights."*

This statement reflects a deeply rooted understanding among participants that citizenship has never been experienced as an equal legal relationship, but rather as a fluid classification determined by proximity to or distance from power, and later by political or geographical alignment during the conflict. In Homs in particular, this categorization does not remain confined to the past; it continues and evolves in the present into new forms of de facto denationalization through social and political stigmatization.

A clear example of this emerged in the sessions: the labelling of some individuals who remained in the city during the years of conflict as "remnants." This designation carries not only political connotations but is also used in practice to diminish rights or justify suspicion and exclusion. One participant expressed this reality by saying, "Those who stayed in Homs are now called remnants... as if simply staying has become a crime, and this in itself is a stripping of citizenship."

In this context, the discussions reveal that citizenship in Homs is no longer approached as a theoretical question—"How do we define citizenship?"—but rather as a more immediate and practical one: Who is granted full citizenship, and from whom is it withdrawn or diminished? In other words, citizenship has become a tool for distributing legitimacy and rights, rather than a stable legal framework.

Some participants expressed this reality through striking metaphors, such as the distinction between "honeyed" citizenship and "ordinary"

citizenship, referring to the implicit privileges enjoyed by certain individuals or groups, while others remain marginalized even in their most basic rights. This perception reflects an awareness that the problem lies not only in the absence of legal texts, but also in their selective application and the persistence of a logic of entitlement based on identity, position, or political narrative.

Therefore, the Homs sessions reveal that citizenship is currently experienced as a fragile and volatile relationship, shaped more by stigma and categorization than by the principle of equality. This renders any discourse on universal citizenship or the rule of law lacking in credibility unless it is accompanied by dismantling this implicit system of “degrees of citizenship” and redefining the citizen as someone whose rights are not conditioned by loyalty, position, or a predetermined past.

III. The State/Authority and Hate Speech

Compared to other governorates—where discussions primarily focused on the State’s responsibility to regulate hate speech and protect the public sphere—the contributions of participants in Homs were marked by a more direct and critical tone. They emphasized the erosion of institutional neutrality and the transformation of public institutions, in their view, into spaces subject to informal religious or social influence. This transformation is not seen merely as an administrative or cultural issue, but as a direct threat to the concept of citizenship, since State neutrality is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring equality and safeguarding pluralism.

One participant described this reality clearly, arguing that the problem lies not only in the weakness of the State, but also in the absence of political will to build inclusive institutions. She said, *“In the absence of the authority’s will to establish a unified State... institutions today are dominated by a religious character, and every institution has a sheikh who runs it.”*

This description reflects an understanding that the institutional sphere in Homs no longer operates according to the logic of law and administration, but rather in accordance with social and religious power dynamics that produce unequal access to rights and services. In this context, “religiosity” is not understood as an expression of social religiosity, but rather as a mechanism of control and exclusion that undermines State neutrality and makes citizenship contingent upon adherence to a specific discourse or authority.

Participants frequently noted that the problem is not limited to the

absence or weakness of laws, but is fundamentally rooted in the lack of implementation and oversight. They pointed to the issuance of official decrees or circulars intended to curb incitement or regulate public discourse; however, these measures remain, in their view, largely symbolic and are not translated into real enforcement on the ground. One participant illustrated this contradiction by saying, *“A decree is issued to stop incitement, and two days later we hear harsher speeches and calls to arm ourselves, as if there is no State to monitor or hold anyone accountable.”*

This gap between official rhetoric and actual practice has contributed to a widespread perception that the authorities are either unable or unwilling to protect the public sphere as a shared space for all citizens. As a result, many participants expressed a sense that their presence in the public sphere has become conditional or precarious, and that they are treated as “guests” rather than rights holders, particularly in light of the rise of unchecked incitement and accusations of treason.

In this context, citizenship in Homs is threatened not only by hate speech, but also by the transformation of the public sphere from a legally protected space into an arena of competition between religious and social actors and informal forms of influence. This transformation generates a persistent sense of insecurity and undermines trust in the State as a neutral authority, thereby turning citizenship from a stable legal status into a fragile experience that fluctuates between temporary acceptance and potential exclusion.

Accordingly, the Homs sessions reveal that the protection of citizenship is inseparable from restoring institutional neutrality and regulating the public sphere. Any failure to address the growing influence of the “religionization” of institutions or the encroachment of informal power structures will leave citizenship vulnerable to erosion, regardless of how many speeches are made about unity or civil peace.

IV. Women and Citizenship in Homs: Fear and Stigma Push Women Out of the Public Sphere

The women’s axis in the Homs sessions takes on a character deeply intertwined with security concerns and social and sectarian stigma. Citizenship is discussed not only from the perspective of participation or representation, but also from the fundamental standpoint of the ability to exist safely in the public sphere. Participants linked the structural fragility of women’s citizenship—under discriminatory personal status laws—to the instrumental use of women in political and social conflict through stigma and defamation, transforming the

female body and reputation into arenas of collective punishment.

In this context, one participant pointed to the shifting discourse of stigma targeting women, arguing that the targeting has not ceased, but rather that its language and tools have evolved. She said, *“Women are always targeted... Before, they used to call them ‘jihadist brides,’ and today they’re ‘loose women’ or ‘look who they’re with’... The accusation is always ready, and sect or region only amplifies the fear.”*

This Statement reflects how gender intersects with sectarian and regional affiliations, producing a compounded sense of insecurity in which women are targeted not only as individuals, but also as symbols through which conflict and symbolic retaliation are reproduced. This reality not only undermines women’s dignity, but effectively deprives them of the ability to exercise citizenship as a lived form of presence and participation.

Other participants emphasized that the practical consequence of this climate is a forced withdrawal from the public sphere, whether driven by direct fear or by pressure from social control. One participant Stated this clearly: *“After a certain hour, you’re not allowed to go out... Some women have resigned because the situation is no longer safe, and fear has become the norm.”*

Additional participants linked incidents of kidnapping—or threats thereof—to the reduced ability of women to move freely and participate, not only in political life but in any public activity. One participant summarized this reality with a rhetorical question that reflects the depth of the dilemma: *“The security situation has a very significant impact on women’s movement... Some women came to the city and were kidnapped... How can I ask them to participate in any political activity?”*

In this context, citizenship for women in Homs is not understood as a matter of formal representation or quotas, but rather as a right to safety, freedom of movement, and a reputation that is not subject to blackmail or defamation. Ongoing violations—particularly those with sectarian or moral dimensions—reinforce a pervasive sense of insecurity and transform women’s participation into a high-risk personal and social endeavour.

Therefore, the Homs sessions reveal that any discussion of women’s role in building citizenship remains superficial unless the root causes are addressed: the lack of protection, the prevalence of stigma, and the instrumentalization of women within broader conflicts. Without genuine guarantees of safety and dignity, women’s citizenship is reduced to a theoretical construct, far removed from the everyday realities experienced by women in the city.

V. Prospects for Citizenship in Homs: Minimum Requirements

Despite the bleak picture that emerged from the discussions in Homs, the debate nonetheless identified a clear set of conditions that participants considered the minimum necessary for rebuilding citizenship in the governorate. Notably, these conditions were not presented as maximalist demands or comprehensive political programs, but rather as fundamental pillars—without which citizenship remains fragile and vulnerable to collapse with any shift in the balance of power. Using the same methodology applied in other governorates, these conditions can be summarized as follows:

1. Ending the Logic of Classification and Revenge and Redefining “The State for All”

Participants expressed an explicit rejection of transferring the logic of exclusion from one side to another, or replacing a form of citizenship based on loyalty with one based on suspicion. The central concern lies in the reproduction of a “victor/suspect citizenship” model, in which individuals are reclassified along political or sectarian lines rather than being treated equally before the law. From this perspective, a comprehensive national discourse—one that is neither vengeful nor exclusionary—is seen as a foundational condition for rebuilding trust between citizens and the State.

2. Regulating the Public Sphere and Preventing Incitement Through Concrete Implementation, Not Just Formal Decisions

Participants emphasized that restoring citizenship in Homs depends on re-establishing the public sphere as a shared space protected by law. What is required is not merely the issuance of decrees or circulars on paper, but the activation of effective oversight and enforcement mechanisms capable of preventing incitement and calls to violence, and of restoring the rule of law as the sole authority governing disputes and safeguarding rights.

3. Rebuilding Trust Through Credible and Non-Selective Justice

Justice—particularly transitional justice—emerged as a central entry point for rebuilding citizenship, not as a call for revenge or retribution, but because the absence of accountability, or its selective application, undermines the sense of equality and perpetuates feelings of injustice

and marginalization. Citizenship, as reflected in the discussions, cannot be established through symbolic gestures or the neglect of violations, as this empties the concept of justice of its substance and weakens confidence in any political transition.

4. Eliminating the Religious Characterization of State Functions in Favor of Clear Institutional Neutrality

Participants viewed the religious characterization of public institutions as a factor that undermines State neutrality and transforms citizenship into a privilege granted only to those who conform to a specific religious or social discourse. In contrast, a civil and institutional State is seen as the only framework capable of preserving Homs's existing diversity and ensuring equal access to rights and services regardless of affiliation or background.

5. Empowering Women by Ensuring Security and Protection from Stigma Before Any Formal Representation

In Homs, women's empowerment is not understood as a matter of symbolic representation or political quotas, but as a fundamental issue of citizenship tied to security and dignity. Without tangible guarantees that protect women from fear, threats, defamation, and sectarian or moral targeting, discussions of women's participation remain purely formal and disconnected from reality. Accordingly, mechanisms to prevent and respond to violations—such as kidnapping and defamation—are seen as foundational requirements for women's citizenship, not secondary concerns.

Tartous Governorate

I. Context

Tartous Governorate presents a complex case in understanding citizenship in post-conflict Syria. This complexity stems not only from its intricate social fabric, but also from accumulated political and symbolic factors that have made it a significant arena in the Syrian collective imagination.

During the years of conflict, the governorate was often reduced to the label of a “bastion of the former regime.” This characterization served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it deepened the divide between Tartous and the rest of the country through a logic of collective suspicion; on

the other, it pushed large segments of the population to retreat into narrower sub-identities in search of safety and protection.

The discussions reveal that this stigma is not only reflected in how Tartous is perceived by others, but also in how its residents perceive themselves. The question “Who are we?” is frequently raised in a way that is tied more to accusation and justification than to rights and responsibilities.

Within this context, citizenship is not experienced as a legal relationship between the individual and the State, but rather as a fragile emotional and political condition shaped by power dynamics and a legacy of fear. Participants emphasized that Syria has never truly embodied equality before the law; instead, standards have shifted according to loyalty, affiliation, or geography. This has made the emergence of a unified national identity difficult and unstable.

This tension is also reflected in political symbolism, such as the national flag. One participant noted that the red flag had come to represent repression and the security apparatus in their perception, while the green flag—after a brief period of hope—was again associated with violence, violations, and sectarianism. This led them to describe their relationship with the homeland as a “toxic relationship,” one that does not allow for a stable sense of national belonging.

From a structural perspective, the Tartous discussions show that the fragmentation of national identity after December 2024 was accompanied by a clear return to “pre-national identities” as mechanisms of social protection. Participants explicitly noted the absence of a shared civic identity within the governorate. Tartous itself consists of multiple local communities (Sunni, Alawite, Ismaili, Christian), and each group’s relationship with authority is shaped by its collective sense of threat or privilege, rather than by a shared social contract.

A further critical observation was the underrepresentation of certain groups in the sessions. This was seen as evidence of the difficulty of establishing a neutral public sphere in an environment marked by rising sectarian sensitivities.

Most notably in the Tartous context, sectarian affiliation—particularly among the Alawite majority in the governorate—can no longer be understood as a purely cultural identity. It has increasingly become a domain shaped by political pressures and security risks. Throughout the sessions, recurring themes such as fear, victimhood, the search for security, and withdrawal were frequently voiced. A significant segment of participants expressed the sense that they are no longer in positions of power, and that even speaking out has become costly,

particularly in rural areas.

At the same time, some participants warned that the persistence of a sense of injustice—without corresponding channels for recognition, accountability, and transparency—could create a vacuum. This vacuum, they argued, may be filled by emerging local or religious authorities, thereby reproducing sectarianism as a framework for political and social representation.

These sensitivities intersect with a broader perception that violence has not come to an end. Developments in the coastal region and their aftermath, along with events in Suwayda and other areas, have reshaped priorities: citizenship is no longer viewed as an abstract political concept open to theoretical discussion, but rather as something tied to its most fundamental condition—the right to life. Some participants even suggested that discussing citizenship and democracy feels like a luxury in the face of daily fear, ongoing violence, declining trust in transparency, and competing narratives about the nature and rhetoric of the new authority.

The discussions further reveal that large segments of the population are experiencing severe economic and social pressures, driven by policies of dismissal and layoffs, as well as a decline in job opportunities along the coast. As a result, citizenship is increasingly framed not only as a matter of rights, but also as a question of livelihood and economic security.

Accordingly, the qualitative analysis of the two Tartous sessions focuses on deconstructing participants' understandings of citizenship and examining how these perceptions intersect with fear and stigma, the repositioning of sectarian identities as strategies for survival, overlapping and sometimes conflicting narratives of victimhood, and the pursuit of security as a foundational prerequisite for any meaningful discussion of equal and effective citizenship.

II. Perceptions of Citizenship: A Turbulent Concept and an Eroded Identity

The dialogue sessions in Tartous Governorate revealed that, for most participants, citizenship is not understood as a legal framework or a comprehensive social contract regulating the relationship between the individual and the State. Rather, it is experienced as a fluid, fragile, and often contradictory emotional State. Citizenship, as described by participants, is not a stable condition to rely on, but a temporary experience that shifts according to changing power dynamics,

dominant narratives, and the prevailing balance between fear and security.

A striking feature of the discussions was the perceived loss of the ability to define oneself as an “ordinary” citizen—someone who is not required to prove loyalty, justify identity, or defend affiliation. Instead, the discourse was shaped by sharp dichotomies that structure relationships between individuals, the State, and society, such as: ruler/ruled, secure/threatened, and victorious/suspected. These divisions were not merely rhetorical; they reflected lived realities that rendered citizenship conditional and suspended, rather than an inherent right.

One young participant captured this unease by linking it to national symbols themselves, arguing that their failure to convey a unifying meaning has contributed to the erosion of citizenship. He said, *“Between the two flags, I couldn’t form a national identity, nor could I develop a genuine sense of belonging to this land... My sense of citizenship was limited to the small communities I created, not to the nation as a unifying concept.”*

This Statement illustrates how belonging has shifted away from the public sphere toward narrower circles—such as family, friends, and local communities—in the absence of a national framework capable of accommodating and protecting differences. In this context, citizenship is no longer tied to the State or the law, but rather to close, trusted, and secure relationships.

One of the most recurring themes in the sessions was the belief that citizenship had never truly been realized in any previous phase. Participants suggested that what occurred after December 2024 was not a transition toward a more inclusive form of citizenship, but rather a transformation in the form of discrimination, not its essence. This shift can be summarized as follows:

- **Before 2024:** Discrimination based on political stance, loyalty, and proximity to or distance from the previous regime.
- **After 2024:** Discrimination based on—or perceived as based on—regional or sectarian affiliation, accompanied by collective suspicion and enforced silence.

Rather than producing a sense of liberation or a fresh beginning, this shift reinforced the perception that fear had not been eliminated, but merely redistributed. One participant expressed this clearly: *“Before the fall of the regime, I was a second-class citizen because my father’s family was from Idlib. After the fall, I suddenly found myself in a better position... The problem is that there is no middle ground—you are either better than everyone or worse than everyone. You cannot*

simply be a citizen.”

This Statement highlights the absence of a space for “civic neutrality,” where individuals are not judged by their affiliation or position within shifting power dynamics. Instead, citizenship becomes an experience of constant uncertainty rather than a framework that provides stability and protection.

Other contributions, particularly from older participants with prior political experience, further demonstrated that citizenship in Tartous has historically been associated with a logic of loyalty versus opposition, rather than one of rights and duties. One participant, a former political prisoner, noted that dissidents were treated as second-class citizens, and that this logic has not been replaced by a neutral State framework. Instead, it has been reproduced through new tools and narratives.

Ultimately, the Tartous sessions reveal that the crisis of citizenship is not primarily a crisis of definition, but a crisis of lived experience. Citizenship, as experienced by participants, has never been granted as an inherent right, but rather as a temporary and revocable privilege. This has contributed to the erosion of a shared national identity and the rise of temporary, defensive identities adopted as survival mechanisms rather than as expressions of genuine belonging.

As a result, any effort to rebuild citizenship faces a structural challenge that goes beyond legal frameworks, extending instead to the rebuilding of trust, security, and a shared sense of meaning.

III. Citizenship and Sectarian Affiliation: Between Stigma and Victimhood

The interventions of participants in the Tartous sessions clearly demonstrate that sectarian affiliation—particularly affiliation with the Alawite sect, which constitutes the majority of the population in the governorate—is no longer perceived as a neutral cultural or social identity. Rather, it has transformed into a political and moral burden, laden with implications of accusation and self-defence. In the post-conflict context, sectarian affiliation has become a framework that is forcibly invoked in the public sphere, whether individuals accept it or not, shaping their position within a broader dynamic of suspicion and perceived security.

Several participants expressed a sense of being treated as a homogeneous group rather than as individuals, facing a form of collective suspicion tied to Tartous’s image as “loyal” to the former regime. This perception manifested in three recurring patterns throughout the discussions:

- A feeling of being collectively blamed for the actions and practices of the former regime, regardless of individual positions or personal histories.
- A sense of being compelled to remain silent or to justify positions in which they had no involvement.
- A reluctance to engage in public political expression due to fear of retaliation, stigmatization, or forced reclassification.

One participant captured this reality through a striking psychopolitical observation: *“The Alawite today doesn’t feel like a citizen; he feels accused... as if he has to prove every time that he wasn’t part of the regime, and that his silence is sometimes his only means of protection.”*

This statement reflects how, within the collective consciousness of some participants, sectarian affiliation has shifted from a perceived position of symbolic privilege to one of defence and denial—without the availability of clear legal or political mechanisms capable of addressing individual responsibility independently of collective identity.

However, this sense of victimhood is neither uniform nor homogeneous within the sect itself. The sessions revealed important variations in how sectarian affiliation is experienced and interpreted, which can be observed along several internal dimensions:

- **Urban vs. Rural:** Participants from rural areas expressed a deeper sense of vulnerability, fear, and limited ability to speak or dissent, compared to urban residents who appeared to have relatively broader—though still constrained—spaces for expression and mobility.
- **Older vs. Younger Generations:** Older participants, particularly those with political experience or histories of detention, demonstrated a stronger capacity to deconstruct sectarianism as a tool of power. In contrast, some younger participants expressed a marked ambivalence, oscillating between rejecting sectarian identity and relying on it as a mechanism of protection.
- **Former Opposition Members vs. the Politically Disengaged:** Former opposition members expressed a compounded sense of marginalization: their histories of political struggle were not acknowledged, while they were simultaneously subsumed under the same sectarian category associated with the former regime, effectively erasing their political individuality.

In this context, one participant noted that sectarian affiliation no longer functions as a source of protection, as it may once have been

perceived, but has instead become a psychological and social burden: *“Today, we are not judged as individuals, but as a sect... This in itself negates the idea of citizenship, because citizenship means being seen as a human being, not as a classification.”*

This observation highlights how sectarianism, particularly in moments of acute polarization, fails even to fulfil its traditional function as a safety net. Instead, it becomes a factor contributing to political and social erosion. This internal fragmentation reflects a deeper structural crisis: the inability of sectarian affiliation to provide a unifying identity or sustainable protection in the absence of a neutral state and effective mechanisms for transitional justice.

While sectarian affiliation may still be invoked as a reference point in times of fear, it does not offer meaningful answers to questions of rights, accountability, or political participation. On the contrary, it further weakens the relationship between the individual and the state, reinforcing uncertainty and conditional belonging.

Accordingly, the situation in Tartous underscores the urgent need for an alternative civic framework capable of dismantling the dichotomy of stigma and victimhood. Such a framework would require a fundamental shift—from collective affiliations toward individual responsibility and equal rights. However, this framework has yet to materialize, given the ongoing political ambiguity and the absence of concrete steps toward recognition, accountability, and trust-building. As a result, citizenship in Tartous remains a deferred concept rather than a lived and realized reality.

IV. Fear as a Structural Component of Citizenship

Fear stands out as one of the most pervasive and influential components in discussions with participants in Tartous governorate. It is not experienced merely as an individual emotion tied to personal experience, but rather as a deeply embedded collective condition that has reshaped both the meaning of citizenship and the limits of how it can be exercised. Participants described multiple, overlapping forms of fear, expressed both directly and indirectly, most notably:

- Fear of speaking openly about political views
- Fear of collective blame or punishment on the basis of sectarian or regional identity
- Fear of a relapse into violence and renewed large-scale conflict
- Fear for one’s children and for the future—widely seen as the most immediate and consequential form of fear

Importantly, fear is not directed solely at State authorities or apparatus; it also extends inward, toward society itself. Several participants expressed their feeling of unease in the public sphere, fear of their neighbors' reactions, and of social exposure within small, tightly knit communities—where even ordinary speech can be risky. As one participant put it: *“The problem today is not only fearing the authorities, but fearing people... any word you say can be misinterpreted, or a small incident could be used against you.”*

This reflects a shift from a vertical dynamic of fear (between citizen and the State) towards a horizontal one operating within society. In this environment, social oversight functions alongside—and at times in place of—formal State control. Citizenship, as a result, becomes a precarious and risk-laden practice rather than a secure right, while the notion of the “good citizen” is recast as someone who remains silent or avoids visibility.

Concerns about collective blame and punishment emerged as particularly widespread, especially among participants from the Alawite community or from areas that were politically stigmatized during the conflict. Many expressed apprehension that identity itself could become grounds for accountability in the absence of credible systems for individual justice. One participant captured this dynamic succinctly: *“We are not afraid because we did something wrong, but because we might be held accountable for things we did not do... this fear paralyzes you and keeps you away from any public discussion.”*

This highlights that fear is driven not only by actual violence, but also by the absence of safeguards: unclear legal frameworks, weak guarantees of individual accountability, and a lack of official discourse that reassures citizens that identity alone will not be treated as evidence of guilt.

At the same time, fear for children and the future emerged as the most intense and defining form of concern, particularly in women's contributions. Discussions of citizenship were often framed less around rights and entitlements, and more around protection and survival. The central question was not “What are my rights?” but rather “How can I protect my children?” In this framing, citizenship shifts from a political concept to a matter of personal security, where survival, avoiding harm and maintaining a basic level of stability take precedence over civic or political engagement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that fear in Tartous is not simply an obstacle to citizenship, but a structural force that reshapes it at its core. Rather than being grounded in trust, participation, and pluralism, citizenship is instead defined by caution, self-restraint, and

risk management on a daily basis. Under such conditions, meaningful citizenship cannot be restored without directly addressing the sources of fear, whether rooted in State practices, social dynamics, or the collective memory of violence. Rebuilding citizenship in Tartous therefore depends on reestablishing security as a universal right rather than a fragile privilege, and on enabling a transition from a society of “survivors” to one of active “citizens”—a transition for which the necessary structural conditions have yet to fully emerge.

Discussions with women in Tartous suggest that citizenship, when filtered through gender, is not experienced as an equal entitlement but as a compounded form of marginalization. Legal discrimination, social constraints, and a pervasive sense of insecurity converge to shape women’s everyday realities. Beyond the shared challenges of citizenship, women face additional scrutiny and control tied to their bodies, appearance, and socially prescribed roles.

Female participants consistently noted that the legal framework—past and present—has failed to provide equal protection for women. Instead, it has reinforced entrenched inequalities, particularly in areas such as personal status, nationality, guardianship, and labor. Some linked this directly to the nature of the governing system, arguing that without genuine political commitment to equality, women’s citizenship remains structurally incomplete rather than a temporary state that is easily reformable.

Equally significant is the role of social surveillance in sustaining women’s marginalization, especially in public life. Women described constant monitoring of their appearance and conduct by both local communities and de facto authorities. As one participant put it: *“Today, I can no longer enter a police station or visit a detained woman unless I wear a headscarf... Why should my appearance determine whether I’m treated as a citizen?”*

Such accounts underscore how women’s bodies become sites of moral and political regulation, where access to basic rights is informally conditioned by their compliance with unwritten ethical and religious norms. Thus, the principle of equality is undermined before the law.

Female participants have also noted in the intervention that reports of abductions targeting Alawite women—whether verified or circulating as widely believed accounts—have heightened fear on a local scale, particularly in rural areas. These incidents are widely perceived as signals of sectarian and gender-based targeting, increasing feelings of weakness among women. They were not perceived as individual crimes, but rather as ones with an impact which extends well beyond the individuals involved, reinforcing a broader environment of

collective fear that has led many women to withdraw from public life, limit their mobility, and disengage from community participation. The lack of official transparency and accountability around such cases has fueled rumors and sectarian narratives, further eroding trust in the State's ability to provide equal protection.

In this environment, physical safety has become the baseline against which citizenship is measured. For many women, fear of abduction now overshadows discussions of rights or participation, effectively reducing citizenship to the question of whether basic personal safety can be guaranteed, instead of whether it can contribute to the empowerment and legal protection of women.

Women in Tartous also described the strain of navigating constantly shifting political powers without any clear guarantee. As authority structures and public discourse change, women find themselves obliged to adjust to the changing rules governing acceptable behavior. What was permissible one day may be unacceptable the next and the other way round, leaving women in a constant state of insecurity and limiting their capacity to engage in public or political life.

The psychological and social toll of this environment is significant according to the discussions. Many women, particularly mothers, framed citizenship less in terms of rights and more in terms of their ability to safeguard their families. One participant captured this painful shift in a moving statement: *"I've moved past thinking about my own citizenship... What matters to me now is protecting my children and ensuring they can live with dignity and safety."*

This statement indicates that citizenship is no longer understood as a political relationship with the State, but as a coping strategy in an unstable context—one that pushes women toward protective, rather than participatory and right-claiming, roles.

Despite this marginalization, the discussions revealed a strong critical awareness among women of sectarian divisions and exclusionary identity politics. Many female participants rejected such categorizations outright, seeing them as an additional burden that is often used to control behavior and restrict movement. While this awareness has yet to translate into organized collective or political action, it underlines the potential for a more inclusive and equitable approach to citizenship, should enabling conditions emerge.

Overall, the case of Tartous illustrates that, for women, citizenship has not been a vehicle for empowerment but an ongoing negotiation with fear—legal, social, and political. Rather than being supported as active participants in reconstructing public life, women are often expected to adapt, remain silent, and shoulder additional burdens

in the name of stability or cultural norms. Any meaningful effort to rethink citizenship in Tartous remains insufficient unless it places women's lived experiences at its core and addresses discrimination as a structural, rather than incidental, issue.

V. Prospects for Citizenship in Tartous: Minimum Requirements

Although discussions in Tartous painted a grim picture of the situation, they went beyond diagnosis and expressions of fear. Participants also outlined what could be seen as the “minimum requirements” for rebuilding a fair relationship between citizens and the State. Importantly, these were not framed as abstract ideals or rhetorical demands, but rather as grounded responses to lived realities: fear of collective blame, deepening mistrust, lack of accountability, and the contraction of public space. In this sense, the future of citizenship in Tartous is conceived as a coherent set of practical steps, without which the shift from “citizenship” to “seeking protection through group belonging” is likely to persist.

1. Ending Collective Punishment: From Individual Accountability to Impartial Justice

A consistent demand across discussions was the need to move away from collective punishment—particularly in relation to arbitrary dismissals, forced retirements, and the treatment of entire categories of employees or military personnel as inherently suspect. Participants stressed that a post-2024 State cannot be built on practices resembling “purges” or “guilt by association”. Instead, accountability should be individualized: responsibility must rest with those who made decisions or committed violations, not with those who complied under pressure or necessity. Examples such as arbitrary transfers and dismissals of employees were cited as evidence that punitive approaches still outweigh genuine institutional reform.

In this context, one clear demand emerged: A call for substantive, non-symbolic trials—shifting from “politically driven accusations” to legal proceedings that differentiate between individuals. Referral to the judiciary, as participants argued, must not serve as a procedural façade, but as a meaningful process with safeguards capable of restoring trust in judicial decisions.

2. Transparency in Accountability and Transitional Justice: Acknowledgment, Openness, and Community Engagement

In these discussions, “transitional justice” was treated less as a theoretical framework and more as a practical necessity. Participants viewed it as a main condition rather than second option to preventing a slide into “retaliatory” forms of justice that risk perpetuating new cycles of violence. Some voiced doubts about the seriousness of current accountability efforts, pointing in particular to what they perceived as a lack of acknowledgment—or even denial—following events on the coast. This, they argued, undermines trust and creates space for rumor and polarization. As a result, transparency was articulated in concrete terms as follows:

- Clear and public communication of responsibilities, charges, and procedures (rather than ambiguity).
- Open trials conducted in line with due process, including proper jurisdiction with relevance to the crime location, and avoiding exceptional or military courts that erode trust.
- The involvement of civil society, political parties, and human rights or international bodies to help ensure procedural integrity—since exclusion tends to deepen suspicion and turn accountability into a tool of control.

Within this framework, transitional justice is not seen as a “moral compromise”, but as a political and legal mechanism for redefining the State as a guarantor of rights rather than an actor in identity-based conflict.

3. 3. Recognizing Grievance without Turning It into Entitlement: Moving Beyond the “Stigma vs. Entitlement” Divide

In Tartous, grievance emerged not only as a defensive rhetoric but as a growing social reality, particularly among groups who feel they have shifted abruptly from perceived proximity to power (symbolically) to a position of suspicion. Participants argued that the State (or the transitional authority) must take these grievances seriously, especially in rural areas, without allowing recognition to translate into renewed privilege or collective immunity. This reflects a careful balancing act: acknowledging grievance is necessary to rebuild trust, but turning it into entitlement risks reinforcing divisions.

4. Creating Meaningful Spaces for Participation

Participation was widely seen as central and a pressing demand to any notion of citizenship, yet discussions were marked by skepticism about current spaces requiring permission for access rather than being a normal right. Many participants observed that meetings and activities are tightly regulated, require prior approval, and remain subject to arbitrary decisions. This, they argued, recreates familiar patterns of control and reduces participation to a largely symbolic exercise.

To address this, two parallel pathways were proposed by the participants:

- Community dialogue aimed at fostering a shared civic language and reducing sectarian and symbolic violence.
- Structured participatory dialogue with the government that goes beyond token consultation, establishing regular channels that can influence decision-making.

Participation was also linked to a clear legal-political condition: The need for a clear legal framework governing public space, rather than leaving it subject to discretionary control by authorities or local powers.

5. Building a Rule-of-Law State: Party and Media Laws, and Non-Selective Criminalization of Hate Speech

Discussions of citizenship in Tartous leaned strongly toward institutional and legal requirements. Many participants emphasized that overcoming fear cannot be achieved through promises alone, but through a legal framework that enables political and media activity. In particular, calls for laws governing political parties and the press/media were seen as essential for fostering genuine political pluralism, enabling peaceful competition, and breaking monopolies over representation.

One participant also suggested establishing a legislation to criminalize sectarian hate speech, coupled with fair and consistent enforcement mechanisms (so that it does not become a tool for targeting opponents). Alongside this, participants proposed the development of a professional code of conduct for media practitioners to curb incitement and unprofessional practices that fuel division.

Taken together, these conditions reflect an understanding of citizenship as an institutional outcome, rather than a merely articulated in discourse, secured through enforceable rules rather than unifying rhetoric alone.

6. Decentralization and Local Governance as Channels for Trust and Participation: Opportunities and Risks

Administrative decentralization was discussed as a practical pathway for restoring trust and enhancing participation, reducing the sense of “remote governance,” and addressing concerns about unequal appointments. Some participants argued that expanding decentralization could ease tensions and redefine the relationship between citizens and public institutions, through local elections and more responsive governance.

At the same time, participants were careful not to present decentralization as a cure-all. They highlighted the risks of implementing it in the absence of strong legal and institutional safeguards, warning that it could be captured by local power networks. As such, decentralization was framed as a conditional solution: it has the potential to ease tensions and strengthen participation, but only if embedded within a functioning State governed by the rule of law. Otherwise, it risks creating fragmented or exclusionary local power structures.

Damascus Governorate

I. Context

The dialogue sessions in Damascus presented a distinct context compared with other governorates. Beyond being the political and administrative capital, Damascus has, through years of conflict and its aftermath, become a crossroads where many Syrian experiences meet. Participants weren't only Damascene; they included people from Rural Damascus, Deir ez-Zor, Suwayda, Hama and northwest Syria, bringing varied memories and conflict experiences. That mix pushed the conversation about citizenship beyond local concerns to a genuinely national level.

In these discussions, citizenship wasn't treated solely as an issue of services or security for the capital, it was used to gauge the state of the Syrian State itself. Participants described Damascus as both a place where social rifts are most visible and a test of whether any inclusive national narrative will fail or succeed. The city, which should embody State neutrality, was portrayed as revealing the authorities' confusion, the fog around any transition, and the gap between official rhetoric and everyday reality.

Sessions repeatedly characterized the current period (from

December 2024 to the present) as one of no clear vision, misdirection and institutional chaos, with phrases like “loss of belonging,” “chaos,” “misdirection,” and “a distressing transitional labor whose outcome is unknown.” Participants did not see this merely as a temporary problem but as a structural factor reshaping people’s relationship with the State and eroding their sense of citizenship and belonging.

Because Damascus remains the center of power and national symbolism, participants were especially sensitive to how transitional authorities act and speak, on managing diversity, transitional justice, hate speech, and political engagement. Citizenship in Damascus, they argued, is tested not only through laws and services but through political signals: how dissent is handled, the tone of official media, and how sensitive national issues are addressed (the coast, Suwayda, northeast Syria, and areas formerly outside regime control). Despite different personal experiences, the discussions shared a central worry: citizenship feels unresolved. Can an inclusive citizenship be built amid deep social fractures, a hesitant transitional authority, and unprocessed conflict memories?

The sessions focused on unpacking how participants view citizenship in Damascus and how those views interact with cross-cutting national issues, mainly: the lack of political vision, the crisis of belonging, the reemergence of subidentities, hate speech, the relationship with transitional authorities, and limits on political and civic participation.

I. Perceptions of Citizenship in Damascus: a Standardized Definition that Clashes with the Concept of “Nonbelonging” and Uncertainty

As in other contexts addressed during the sessions, some participants began from a conventional definition of citizenship, a bundle of rights and duties grounded in equality before the law. Yet, despite its importance, this definition was not a central point in the discussion. It quickly collided with a differing everyday experience that participants described as a deeper crisis than a mere legal or constitutional flaw. In Damascus, citizenship wasn’t primarily about legal texts or frameworks; it was about an emotional and political relationship with the State that is being worn away by uncertainty and instability.

What stood out in Damascus, based on the discussion, was that the central problem was not the lack of laws or definitions, but a crisis of belonging and trust. One female participant summed this shift from legal form to lived feeling bluntly: What we’re seeing in this phase is *“nonbelonging... caused by deadly arbitrariness.”*

This sense of “*non-belonging*” was not framed as an ideological rejection of the idea of the State, but as the lived result of rapid changes in political and administrative references and major decisions made without clear rules or direction. Therefore, the debate moved away from “*what is citizenship?*” to a more urgent, practical question: How can someone feel like a citizen when there are no clear rules to depend on?

In this context, citizenship in Damascus was tied as much to predictability and consistency in governance as to written rights. Participants demanded not just equality before the law, but clarity in policy, stability in decisions, and a single standard that could be applied. They asked: Is there an overall direction for the State? Is the country run by institutions or by reactive impulses? Do people feel part of the public sphere, or simply recipients of unaccountable decisions?

Terms like “misdirection,” “lack of clarity,” and “isolated decision making” recurred, not as narrow administrative complaints but as structural factors that empty citizenship of its practical meaning. When transparency and participation are absent, citizens find themselves outside the circle of influence and unable to make sense of the rules shaping their lives and guiding them. One participant summarized it by linking citizenship directly to the authority’s behavior in decision-making: “*Decisions are made in isolation... people don’t feel their views count in major decisions.*”

This shows that in Damascus citizenship is experienced not as a fixed legal status but as a fragile sense of belonging and agency. When people feel excluded from decision making and see rules change without explanation, a standard definition of citizenship cannot by itself create belonging, however advanced it may appear on paper.

Overall, discussion held in Damascus painted citizenship as a conditional bond of trust that requires institutional clarity, a single standard of governance, and stable rules and procedures. Without those elements, citizenship shifts from an acquired right to a suspended state in which people feel their relationship with the State depends on the “mood of decision makers” rather than on law, deepening uncertainty and undermining the prospects for stable national belonging.

II. Citizenship, Identity and Belonging: Citizenship is Built on Recognition, Not Denial

As participants in Damascus came from diverse geographic and social backgrounds, a distinctly national view of identity emerged. It

tied citizenship directly to mutual recognition of narratives and harms as a foundational condition for any inclusive belonging. Identity was not presented as a fixed given or a readymade common denominator, but as a reconstruction that depends on acknowledging what different groups and regions endured during the years of conflict, without denial or flattening.

Contributors stressed that the Syrian divide is no longer only a political or sectarian dispute but a split in narratives and memory that cannot be healed by generic national rhetoric that ignores painful realities. One participant put it plainly: the division is built on “nonrecognition.” He argued that a person from Suwayda cannot meaningfully take part in national debate if the suffering there is not acknowledged, and someone who has faced detention or torture will not accept rhetoric that denies or undermines the gravity of Saydnaya prison. Another participant captured this view succinctly: *“We can’t talk about a united homeland if each of us asks the other to forget their pain... recognition is the starting point, not the outcome.”*

Based on the discussions held in Damascus, this framing implies that citizenship in Damascus is not founded on erasing memory or forcibly moving past it, but on reciprocal recognition as an ethical and political basis for rebuilding trust and belonging.

At the same time, many participants described a deep erosion of their sense of belonging: they can no longer pin down their relation to geography, sect, or even national identity in stable terms. One participant stated, *“I don’t belong a geographical location... nor a sect... it’s all coincidence,”* reflecting a loss of confidence in collective identities that, for some, have become instruments of conflict rather than sources of security. This erosion shows that citizenship in Damascus is experienced not merely as a legal relationship with the State but as a difficult mission to rebuild the meaning of national belonging after years of fragmentation and polarization.

The discussions also highlighted the “inclusive vantage point” of the discussions held in Damascus by naming areas less covered elsewhere, such as Deir ezZor and the wider eastern region, as ongoing examples of marginalization, which stands in opposition to inclusive citizenship. Participants pointed to Deir ezZor as historically marginalized despite its demographic and economic importance, signaling a conception of citizenship that goes beyond symbolic belonging to demand fair distribution of attention, resources, and representation at the national level. As one asked: “If whole areas like Deir ezZor are always left out of the picture, how can we speak of inclusive citizenship?”

Thus, discussions held in Damascus show that citizenship, identity,

and belonging are intertwined and inseparable from the question of recognition. From participants' perspective, citizenship cannot be built by denying pain or skipping over memory; it must begin with recognition that turns into the foundation for a plural national belonging that can encompass Syrians' varied experiences rather than exclude them.

III. The State/Authority and the Public Sphere: Citizenship Undermined in the Absence of Transparency, Narratives Defined by Social Media

Participants in Damascus intensely criticized the authority, seeing its behavior as a direct factor in eroding citizenship — not only through poor performance or limited achievements but fundamentally through a lack of transparency and participatory decisionmaking. Repeated references to “isolated decisionmaking” and the “absence of a clear roadmap” left many feeling lost and unable to grasp the country's direction economically, socially, or politically.

Citizenship here is understood not merely as a legal bond with the State, but as a sense of engagement in the public sphere and a feeling that one is at least a symbolic partner in collective decisionmaking. In the absence of that feeling, citizenship becomes passive reception. One participant linked citizenship directly to how decisions are made: *“The problem isn't that there are no laws... the problem is that decisions are taken suddenly, without debate, and without us understanding why or why now.”*

Another distinct and particularly acute issue in Damascus is the outsized role of social media as the primary producer of public narratives in the absence of a clear official discourse and reliable information. In an informational vacuum, digital platforms become the main source of public opinion, amplifying fears, sensationalism, and rumors, which produces a steady state of anxiety and volatility. One female participant summed it up as follows: *“Social media is making us live in permanent chaos... every day you have news, every you face a new shock — eventually you don't want to build anything anymore, you just want to leave the country.”*

That comment illustrates how citizenship can shift from a project of participation and construction toward withdrawal and exit. When public narratives go unchecked institutionally and national issues are managed through a torrent of unverified news and collective emotional reactions, the public sphere erodes as a shared space for reasoned debate and is replaced by an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and mistrust.

In this context, citizenship is threatened, as the public sphere is no longer governed by orderly informative and institutional logic but by instantaneous interactions and reflexive responses. This weakens trust between citizens and the State, making citizens feel that the State is absent from the public narrative or unfit to act as a trusted reference. Discussion sessions in Damascus therefore underscored that protecting citizenship requires restoring transparency, reestablishing informational governance of the public sphere, and producing a coherent official discourse that curbs informational chaos and makes citizens feel that they are part of a meaningful public conversation rather than passive recipients of unexplained decisions and headlines.

IV. Economy and Services as A Key to Citizens' Trust: Volatile Decisions Lead to Anxious Citizenship

Unlike Aleppo — where the economy was framed as a direct “requirement for citizenship” tied to restoring basic services — participants in Damascus treated the economy as a political indicator of the authorities’ capacity for good governance and achieving institutional stability. The concern was not only income levels or service availability but how economic policy is managed, especially the instability and reversals in decisions.

Several participants noted that issuing economic or administrative decisions and then retracting them shortly after creates a general sense that the State is “uncontrolled” and that the rules regulating daily life are neither stable nor predictable. One participant clearly expressed this view: *“Today a decision is issued, tomorrow it is canceled... as a citizen you don’t know how to plan your future.”*

In this context, the economy is not understood as a technical file separate from citizenship, but a daily test of the State’s seriousness and ability to manage public affairs. Policy instability not only affects markets and businesses, but also it undermines people’s economic security and their ability to make longterm choices about work, housing, and education. A female participant tied economic confusion directly to trust: *“The problem isn’t just rising prices... it’s that you don’t know what awaits you tomorrow, and anything can change suddenly.”*

This points to an implicit redefinition of citizenship in Damascus: it is experienced not only through declared legal rights but through the capacity for predictability and stability. Citizenship assumes the existence of reasonably clear rules on which people can base their choices; volatile decisions produce constant anxiety and push individuals to withdraw from the public sphere and focus on private survival strategies.

Therefore, the sessions reveal that economic dimensions of citizenship are undermined not merely by scarcity but by the lack of policy coherence. Citizenship practiced under unstable decisionmaking is anxious, fragile, and prone to withdrawal, weakening trust in the State as a reliable organizing framework.

V. Women and Citizenship: Absence of Inclusive Citizenship and Marginalization of Women's Role

The issue of women arose in Damascus within the framework of “inclusive citizenship”: one that is not limited to a specific category of people, but that involves women as full participants alongside men, youth, and people with disabilities, as fundamental parties in the public sphere. Discussions reflected a broad awareness of significant female, civil, and youth energies ready to engage, but these energies confront legal and procedural barriers that hollow out participation, even within spaces that are supposed to be the safest, such as civil society.

Female participants indicated that restrictions imposed on NGOs and initiatives — pressure around funding, grant monitoring, and interference in programming — not only weaken civil work but also prevent it from serving as a real avenue for practicing citizenship. One participant summed up this problem: *“There’s enormous potential — women and youth want to work — but every time we take a step forward, we face new restrictions; participation is allowed only within narrow limits.”*

Thus, women’s marginalization is not only a matter of direct social rejection, it stems from a regulatory and political environment that makes participation risky and complicated, pushing many women to withdraw or to take invisible roles. In that sense, women’s citizenship in Damascus is “incomplete” — not from lack of willingness or competence, but because the means to act publicly are deliberately constrained.

Discussion also reflected a clear fear of reproducing a new authoritarian pattern with different faces, a concern tied to women’s empowerment and civil society. One female participant warned that preaching about change without allowing real space for participation could simply replace one elite with another rather than eradicate the concept of exclusion: *“We don’t want to repeat the past in a new form... we don’t want to move from the Assad family to the family of Al Sharaa while we remain spectators.”*

This reflects an awareness that women's empowerment cannot be separated from the nature of the emerging political order, and that female participation becomes symbolic when used as a façade without substantive changes in the rules of public life. The question of citizenship here is therefore about the possibility of genuine participation, not just symbolically: Will spaces be opened for women and civil society to have real influence, or will the same exclusion be reproduced under new guises?

Discussions held in Damascus reveal that building inclusive citizenship goes beyond rhetorical recognition of women's roles; it requires dismantling the constraints that tether civil society and ensuring legal and regulatory conditions that allow women to act as full citizens, not as conditional or symbolic participants in a closed public sphere.

I. Prospects for Citizenship in Damascus: Minimum Requirements

Despite the stark tone expressed during the sessions held in Damascus, participants attempted to identify a set of baseline conditions they see as the minimum requirements for rebuilding citizenship in the capital—not merely as a city, but as a mirror of the broader Syrian national condition. As in other governorates, these conditions were not framed as comprehensive reform programs or maximalist demands, but rather as foundational pillars. Without them, citizenship remains fragile, contingent on circumstance and decision-making, and vulnerable to erosion with any political or security shift.

1. Building a National Narrative Grounded in Truth-telling and Acknowledgment

Participants emphasized that any path toward inclusive citizenship in Damascus—and, by extension, at the national level—cannot succeed without a frank engagement with questions of truth and memory. Denial, or the overlooking of accumulated violations and suffering across different regions, does not lead to national unity; Instead, it deepens fractures and reproduces them in new forms. Citizenship here is thus framed as an ethical and political relationship that requires mutual recognition of diverse narratives, and the transformation of such recognition into a foundation for rebuilding trust and belonging.

2. Engaging Society in Decision-making Instead of Unilateralism and Opacity

Participation emerged as a central condition for citizenship—not as a formal procedure, but as a mechanism that restores individuals' sense of being active agents in public life. The absence of participation, unilateralism, and opaque processes strip citizenship of its substance and reduce individuals to passive recipients. Accordingly, participants stressed that rebuilding citizenship requires opening genuine channels for consultation and clarifying the rationale and direction of decisions, thereby restoring the principle of partnership between State and society.

3. Controlling the Public Press and Media through Institutional Transparency

Participants identified informational and media chaos as one of the greatest challenges to citizenship today, with rumors and exaggeration shaping public opinion in the absence of clear and credible official communication. In this context, regulating the public sphere should not be understood as restricting expression, but as an institutional responsibility to provide accurate information, limit emotional manipulation and fear, and prevent social media from replacing the State in shaping the public narrative.

4. Restoring Consistency in Governance and Stability in Policymaking

Participants affirmed that citizenship cannot stabilize amid constant fluctuation in decisions and policies. The absence of a unified standard of governance and the instability of the rules governing public life generate widespread anxiety and uncertainty, undermining trust in the State as a reliable framework. Restoring coherence and stability in policies is therefore essential for a form of citizenship grounded in predictability and clarity, rather than reactive governance.

5. Promoting Inclusive Citizenship by Involving Civil Society, Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities

Finally, the sessions stressed that citizenship cannot be inclusive if participation remains confined to limited elites or merely symbolic frameworks. Expanding space for civil society, and enabling women, youth, and persons with disabilities to participate meaningfully, is essential for transforming citizenship from rhetoric into practice.

This requires a legal and regulatory environment that allows for independent public engagement and moves beyond tokenistic representation toward genuine and impactful participation.

Suwayda Governorate

I. Context

Dialogue sessions in Suwayda reflected a distinctly different context for approaching citizenship. This is not only due to the governorate's demographic composition—a Druze majority alongside local Christian and Sunni communities—but, more importantly, to the enduring impact of recent, unresolved violence that continues to shape both collective consciousness and everyday life. Participants spoke in the immediate shadow of massacres and large-scale violations that have not been processed or relegated to the past. Instead, they remain part of the present, reappearing in daily realities, in language, and in how people interpret their situation.

As a result, Suwayda does not appear as a governorate undergoing a stable or easily normalized transition. Rather, it appears as a space marked by enforced inwardness, shaped by self-protection, collective trauma, and deep uncertainty. Participants pointed to concrete realities that make discussions of inclusive citizenship deeply fraught: inaccessible villages, unresolved displacement, destroyed or looted property, and profound human and moral losses that have not been met with accountability or acknowledgment. These were not background conditions—they defined the discussion itself. Any attempt to talk about citizenship was immediately faced with questions of safety and justice.

In this context, citizenship in Suwayda is not approached as a legal status or abstract national discourse, but as a matter of trust, recognition, and protection. One female participant described the situation as “massacres upon massacres” without accountability, noting that 38 villages remain inaccessible due to burning, looting, destruction, and ongoing displacement. She stressed that rebuilding the relationship between citizens and the State is not realistically possible without establishing the truth and restoring at least a minimal sense of safety. This reflects less a political position than a practical threshold for what citizenship can mean in the absence of protection and accountability.

The discussions also made clear that the impact of these events extends beyond Suwayda itself, reshaping how people relate to

the broader national context. Feelings of abandonment and lack of solidarity—whether from the central government or from other Syrians—were widespread, contributing to a noticeable erosion of national belonging. For some participants, “belonging to Syria” no longer functions as a meaningful framework of protection, and is instead replaced by a more immediate, localized sense of belonging to Suwayda as the last viable space of safety and protection.

This shift should not be read as separatism or ideological rejection of national identity. Rather, it reflects a defensive response to the gap in protection and the collapse of what might be called the implicit citizenship contract. When the State fails to provide security, and when massacres go unacknowledged and unaddressed, national citizenship loses its coherence as a unifying framework, giving way to more localized forms of belonging grounded in proximity and safety rather than equal rights.

In this sense, citizenship in Suwayda is not primarily a constitutional or institutional question. It is a fractured lived experience shaped by unresolved violence, lack of recognition, and a deep breakdown of trust in the citizenship contract. Without addressing these conditions as a starting point, any discussion of inclusive citizenship in Suwayda remains abstract and disconnected from a reality that is still very much defined by trauma.

II. Perceptions of Citizenship in Suwayda: From Shared Framework to “Conditional Entitlement” Eroded by Violence and Abandonment

Similar to other governorates, discussions in Suwayda suggest that citizenship is no longer experienced as a stable legal status or a guaranteed set of rights. Instead, it is understood as a fragile, contingent experience shaped directly by violence, recognition, and protection. Rather than asking “what is citizenship?”, participants were grappling with a more immediate and existential question: is it still possible to see oneself as part of a shared national community after everything that has happened?

This shift is evident in how participants link citizenship to three core elements: recognition, justice, and security. Citizenship is no longer defined by formal affiliation with the State, but by the extent to which it ensures dignity and protection. As one participant put it plainly: *“Right now, I belong to Suwayda only.”*

This statement does not signal a political break with national identity, but rather it reflects the erosion of citizenship as a meaningful

framework capable of ensuring security. Belonging here is not being redefined ideologically, but out of necessity—driven by the absence of protection and the failure of national structures to respond to violence faced by the people.

Another participant linked citizenship explicitly with acknowledgement, emphasizing that the problem is not with the idea of Syria or citizenship itself, but with the lack of acknowledgment of what has taken place. Talks about citizenship, they argued, become useless when people are asked to “move on” without truth or accountability. In this sense, citizenship in Suwayda becomes a conditional claim—dependent on recognition, an end to violations, and guarantees that they will not recur. As one female participant put it: *“I don’t have a problem with Syria or with citizenship—but how can you talk about citizenship when no one has acknowledged what happened? Are we just supposed to forget and move on?”*

At the same time, participants showed awareness of the risks of emotionally charged, collective language. There were explicit critiques of “us versus them” framing, seen as reproducing the same exclusionary dynamics that contributed to collapse. Participants also pointed to internal diversity within Suwayda itself, including differing views on religious authority, local leadership, and governance. In this context, some stressed that legitimacy should not be assumed or symbolically assigned, but must be grounded in free expression and the will of the people.

What emerges is a tension: between the pull toward local protection and the desire to recover a broader, shared sense of national belonging. Yet participants were clear that any such recovery depends on confronting the underlying trauma—not bypassing it rhetorically.

Citizenship, in this context, has shifted from an assumed shared framework to a fragile and contested concept—one that is continually renegotiated under the pressures of violence and perceived abandonment. It is no longer an acknowledged right, but acquired through free expression and people’s will.

III. Citizenship and Belonging: From “Syria” as an Inclusive Identity to Survival Geography and Unsettled Boundaries of Belonging

A central theme in the Suwayda discussions is that national belonging can no longer be taken for granted. It has become an open, unsettled question—shrinking under the pressures of insecurity, violence, and the absence of a functioning national framework of protection.

Belonging is no longer just symbolic or emotional; it is increasingly tied to geography—to the places that can actually provide safety and the conditions for daily life.

One participant framed this in stark, practical terms, questioning the logic of belonging to a political center that offers neither protection nor justice. They asked why should belonging to Damascus be taken as self-evident if closer social or economic alternatives (such as Amman) are better able to secure the conditions of life? Another participant noted that building a shared national framework becomes extremely difficult when communities are operating in reactive mode rather than guided by a common vision. As one participant put it: *“We no longer know what our belonging is based on—everything has become a reaction, not a national choice.”*

This reflects a shift from chosen national belonging to a form of imposed belonging shaped by geography and security realities, rather than by the idea of a collective State or identity. Syria, in this sense, is not rejected as an idea—but its current ability to function as a meaningful space of belonging is deeply in question.

At the same time, participants described how different identities are increasingly mobilized along religious, sectarian, and regional lines in the Syrian society. Symbols and slogans are no longer neutral nor cultural; they have become markers of alignment that provoke counter-reactions, deepening divisions and eroding any common ground for citizenship. Examples of slogans and symbols reflecting this dynamic were addressed by participants, as one of them stated: *“When they say ‘Banu Umayya,’ we respond ‘Banu Maaruf’... Identity has become reaction against reaction.”*

This illustrates how identity shifts from a basis for belonging into a tool of symbolic confrontation, navigated by reaction and counter-reaction rather than coexistence or equal rights. As a result, citizenship becomes tied to cycles of polarization rather than serving as a stable baseline that governs relationships among people and groups within the State.

Overall, the discussions in Suwayda point to a forced redefinition of belonging, in which “Syria” is no longer a collective identity, but rather home to geographical or localized sense of belonging that could provide temporal protection. This shift does not necessarily reflect a desire to disengage from the national level, but rather a vacuum of protection and meaning—leaving citizenship suspended, contingent, and lacking a stable foundation.

IV. The State/Authority: Citizenship Collapses in the Absence of Accountability

This was one of the most contentious themes in the Suwayda sessions. The discussion didn't stop at criticizing the State's performance or bias—it went further, questioning whether the State exists at all as a credible partner in building citizenship. Participants were not describing a State that had temporarily failed, but one that is either absent or has abdicated its most basic responsibilities. In that context, the idea of a “partnership” between citizens and the State is almost meaningless.

A consistent thread ran through the discussions: it is impossible to talk about a national framework or inclusive citizenship while crimes go unacknowledged and unpunished, and in the absence of a political actor that is seen as responsible and could be held accountable. As one participant put it plainly: *“How can we see the State as a partner when it hasn't acknowledged anything, held anyone accountable, or even tried to stop what's happening?”*

What emerges here is no longer a problem of individual misconduct or temporary failure, but a deeper collapse of the State as a moral and legal reference point. When accountability is absent and silence or inaction becomes the norm, the State loses its credibility as a framework that can hold citizens together.

In this light, institutions are not abstract ideals but a practical test of citizenship. Participants linked citizenship to the State's ability to perform basic functions: securing the Damascus–Suwayda road, guaranteeing access to education without discrimination, recognizing degrees, protecting universities, and ensuring that public platforms are not turned into spaces for incitement or mobilization. They cited concrete examples, such as blocking road, forcing Suwayda students out of universities, unrecognizing students' degrees, turning schools into shelters, as evidence that the State is not protecting rights but compounding people's vulnerability. One participant summed it up: *“The State is supposed to protect me on the road, at university, in my degree. When all of that falls apart, what does citizenship even mean?”*

Another concern that surfaced was the fear that reconstruction could become a substitute for truth and accountability. Participants worried that rebuilding homes or offering partial compensation might be used to close the file without establishing facts about what happened or who was responsible, leaving victims without recognition or justice. In this sense, reconstruction is not automatically seen as a positive step;

it can just as easily become a form of quiet denial if it is not paired with legal and moral accountability.

Taken together, the Suwayda sessions show that citizenship collapses when the State is replaced by a logic of “no partner”: a State that neither acknowledges nor holds accountable, and fails to meet its most basic obligations. Under these conditions, citizenship is no longer a lived relationship of rights and duties, but a deferred aspiration—one that depends on the re-emergence of a State that can actually be held to account instead of acting as merely a de facto authority.

V. Women and Citizenship: Protection and Reputation as Main Conditions

In the Suwayda sessions, citizenship is also examined through one of its most painful dimensions: women’s experiences of abduction, abuse, and social stigma. Here, citizenship is not about political participation or symbolic inclusion, but about something far more basic—the right to survive without that survival turning into a punishment. The discussions made clear that the threat faced by women is not limited to the act of violence itself, whether kidnapping or sexual assault, but extends to the harsh social consequences that female survivors endure.

Participants repeatedly described a double burden faced by women who were subject to abduction or assault: the violence stemming from the violation itself, followed by the violence caused by a society that holds female victims accountable rather than the perpetrator. In a stark example, one participant noted that a number of women who were released after being abducted faced direct social violence: *“Two were killed, and one was divorced.”*

This is not treated as an isolated case, but as part of a broader pattern in which a woman’s “reputation” is valued more than her life, and where ideas of “honor” become tools of exclusion and punishment. One female participant linked this directly to a social culture that justifies violence against women in the name of honor, pointing out that women are judged for what they faced—not for what was imposed on them—and that society often finds it easier to silence the victim than confront the crime.

The fear of stigma, participants noted, can be just as powerful as the fear of abduction itself. It pushes many families into silence—discouraging reporting and turning violations into “secrets” that must be buried. Some interventions highlighted that cases of sexual violence are often never discussed publicly at all, out of fear of scandal

or backlash. As a result, a large share of gender-based violence remains invisible, unaddressed, and unacknowledged.

The discussions also offered a sharp moral critique of a society that publicly invokes “dignity” and “protection,” while in practice abandoning women who have been victimized. One participant captured this contradiction bluntly: society “*defends dignity in words, but leaves women alone when they actually need protection.*” In this context, citizenship becomes inseparable from basic, non-negotiable rights: physical safety, protection from coercion, and the right not to be punished socially for violence endured.

From this perspective, the status of “women’s citizenship” in Suwayda becomes a litmus test for the health of the public sphere as a whole. The key question is no longer whether women are engaged in politics, but whether real systems of protection exist: Is stigma condemned rather than justified? Are issues like abduction, sexual violence, and social stigma recognized as basic rights in citizenship, rather than sidelined as “sensitive” topics that are better left ignored?

What the discussions held in Suwayda sessions make clear is that any account of inclusive citizenship is incomplete without addressing this core dimension. When reputation becomes a weapon and women are left without protection—legally or socially—citizenship itself becomes conditional rather than a universal right. Rebuilding citizenship in Suwayda, therefore, cannot be separated from dismantling the structures of violence and stigma that target women. Protecting women is not a marginal issue—it is foundational to any viable citizenship contract.

VI. Prospects for Citizenship in Suwayda: Minimum Requirements

Despite the sharp narratives that emerged, participants did outline a set of minimum requirements for restoring any meaningful sense of citizenship in Suwayda. As in other governorates, these were not presented as comprehensive solutions or fully formed political programs, but as basic prerequisites, without which citizenship remains suspended and unreachable.

1. Truth-telling, Recognition of Massacres, and Naming Things as they Are

According to participants, any serious discussion of inclusive

citizenship in Suwayda must begin with openly acknowledging the massacres and violations that have taken place, and naming things as they are. Treating them as vague “events” open to interpretation is seen as a continuation of denial, one that marginalizes victims and erases any sense of belonging. Accordingly, truth and recognition are foundational to rebuilding trust, rather than being a symbolic or moral demand.

2. Credible Accountability and a Meaningful Transitional Justice that Does Not Overlook Pain

Participants stressed that justice is not about revenge, but a necessary condition for rebuilding any relationship between citizens and the State. Absence of accountability, taking superficial measures or recycling the same actors only deepen grievances and blocks the way for a fresh start. Transitional justice, in this sense, must start by putting an end to crimes and clearly assigning responsibility, not bypassing or postponing them.

3. Restoring the State’s Protective Role as a Practical Test of Citizenship

Citizenship was consistently tied to the State’s ability to deliver on basic functions: securing roads, ensuring access to education, recognizing degrees, enabling safe movement, and providing essential services. When the State fails to provide these basic daily rights, citizenship loses its practical meaning and becomes detached from everyday life and people’s needs.

4. Protecting Women from Abduction and Stigma as Part of the Citizenship Contract

In Suwayda, women’s issues are not treated as a sideline cases or symbolic “empowerment” cases, but as a core test of citizenship itself. Preventing abduction, responding effectively to violence, and criminalizing stigma and social punishment are all essential for a viable citizenship contract. Without ensuring women’s safety and dignity after trauma, citizenship remains selective and conditional.

5. Rebuilding National Belonging through Mutual Solidarity and Non-exclusionary Discourse

Finally, participants emphasized the need to rebuild national belonging in Suwayda on new terms. Feelings of abandonment and mutual generalizations have deepened isolation. What is needed is a national discourse that avoids collective blame and sectarian framing of massacres, acknowledges harm across communities, and shifts the focus toward shared, indivisible rights.



Conclusion

Based on a qualitative analysis of community dialogue sessions across six Syrian governorates, this paper finds that the crisis of citizenship in Syria is not primarily about legal definitions or formal frameworks, but about a deeply fractured relationship between citizens and the State—one that has developed over decades and intensified through conflict. Despite major differences between local contexts with regard to economy, sects, security and nationalism, Syrians share a common experience: citizenship that feels fragile, conditional, and uneven—marked by a lack of protection, justice, and recognition.

Comparative analysis across governorates reveals that citizenship is experienced as conditional and uneven, expanding or contracting depending on State behavior, institutional stability, and the ability to safeguard everyday rights. At the same time, national belonging—once assumed—has become uncertain, shaped by fear, stigma, denial, and the absence of accountability. The use of violence by authorities as a tool of control further erodes public trust, turning the relationship with the State from one grounded in rights and duties into one defined by fear and compliance. Meanwhile, what counts as the “minimum requirements” for citizenship varies from one place to another, depending on local experiences of harm—highlighting the limits of one-size-fits-all solutions for restoring citizenship.

Rebuilding citizenship in Syria therefore requires a dual approach: a national framework that addresses the structural roots of exclusion and fear, and redefines the State as a guarantor of protection, justice, and dignity; alongside flexible, locally grounded approaches that reflect people’s lived realities. Without this balance, and without translating inclusive rhetoric into real practice, there is a real risk of reproducing a hollow form of citizenship that cannot rebuild trust or prevent future breakdown.

