

Effective participation and inclusion in the Syrian peace process

RESEARCH PAPER



About the Building and Bonding initiative

The Building and Bonding project is an initiative that works on developing key ideas, aspirations, and messages to support the peacebuilding processes for Syria. The initiative supports the integration of concepts of peace, justice, and the role of civil society in these processes.

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Introduction



Within the framework of the Building and Bonding project,¹ International Alert, the British Council, Globally Connected, Mobaderoon and Darb undertook a research study aimed at exploring ways to improve effective participation and inclusion in the Syrian peace process.

Methodology

First, a literature review was conducted on inclusion in peace processes and multitrack diplomacy to situate this research in the wider context. The literature review formed the basis of exploring the issue within the Syria context. The team of five researchers then contextualised the literature review in the Syria context and developed a qualitative research methodology based on semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs). The methodology was chosen because of its suitability to the main research question and the opportunities for interactive dialogue with the participants.

During preparation for implementation, a list of key people to interview was developed and discussed in a participatory manner, and a sample of participants was selected based on the following criteria:

- having direct and in-depth knowledge of Syrian society;
- possessing practical or theoretical knowledge of the issues that the research is investigating;
- showing capability to develop forward-looking visions of the future based on a deep understanding of reality; and
- displaying objectivity: objective experts were chosen who had no prior and definitive excluding biases.

The nominated list of participants included 33 candidates. The experts on the list were contacted successively, within the timeframe available for implementation, and positive responses were received from 12 experts. The research sample included a variety of experts including journalists, academic researchers, specialists in administration and civil interventions related to peacebuilding, and civil society activists.

The main research question required delving into a set of sub-questions, which form the sections of this paper:

1. the current political process;
2. the different perceptions of an inclusive peace process in the Syrian context;
3. actual participation and inclusion;
4. motives for confidence in the peace process;
5. the role of civil society; and
6. the role of Syrians at home and in the diaspora.

Limitations of the research

Several factors limited the scope of the research, resulting in the following key limitations:

- The results of the research do not constitute a representative opinion that can be generalised; rather, they are the opinions and perceptions of the specific sample of participants, as described above.
- Among all the challenges the research process faced, the limited timeline of the project represented the biggest challenge and hindered the possibility of expanding the sample of participants. The results of the 12 interviews did, however, cover an acceptable diversity of opinions that could be considered to reflect the range of possible views on the topic in question.

The current political process

Researching opportunities to improve effective participation and inclusion in the peace process in Syria necessitated addressing the current political process and the previous attempts to find a solution to the Syrian crisis within the international community. The main focus was on evaluating the work of the Constitutional Committee from the research participants' point of view, considering the Committee's work to be the most evident manifestation of the current political process, in addition to the outcomes of the Astana meetings, the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the activity of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), and the last Doha Forum in February 2022.

The participants evaluated the political process, with a broad consensus on the flaws and shortcomings, which make it a "waste of time and a hindrance for progress". The existence of the political process, in its various forms and its ineffectiveness, has a negative impact on the aspirations of Syrians because it gives them the impression that there is a possible solution soon, while this is not the case.

The meetings of the Committee cannot be considered a political process in the actual sense; the meetings are at a stalemate and their outcomes are unpredictable. At the same time, however, for the participants, the political process retains some leverage points and advantages. Most agreed that it is a necessity that should not be compromised, hinting at what the current political process needs to be more reliable and effective.

"From my point of view, the main disadvantage in the political process is that Syrians, with all their political affiliations, partisanships and even personal interests, are expressly outside the framework of the political process."²

The participants attributed the prevailing stalemate and futility to a variety of reasons, some of which are structural and relate to the establishment of the Constitutional Committee and the way in which it was formed. The establishment of the Committee took place within the framework of the implementation of International Resolution 2254 on Syria in December 2015, a decision that each of the conflicting parties interpreted in a different way. Moreover, the Committee was formed of those who represent the dominant forces in Syrian society, not the ordinary Syrian citizens, because the latter do not have the freedom of choice and action. This perception is supported by the obvious reticence of the Committee members to express their agreement with the other parties on certain points despite consensus, for fear of accountability and shaming. This results in the suspension of the Committee's work and its limitation to rhetoric discourse, amidst the absence of those looking for a shared consociational space that does not seem close at hand. As a result, the parties are unable to negotiate, leaving all Syrians outside the framework of the political process, while the parties representing them are subject to many disparate agendas, particularly on the opposition side.

According to the results of the research, the failure of the political process was also related to the performance of the conflicting parties and the tools they use to manage and invest in the conflict. The participants confirmed that the political opposition and the regime resemble one another, in that they both belong to the "pre-2011 ideology".³ This ideology is based on proposing zero-sum victory solutions, in which the other party does not have a foothold or interest; we can observe such solutions unfolding in the narrative of the regime-backed delegation stating that "the government is waging a war against terrorism

and trying to protect citizens, and nothing is happening in Syria but that". With this rhetoric, the regime can stall indefinitely while militarily gaining more ground and power. On the other hand, the opposition is proposing major unrealistic solutions such as 'the departure of regime' and the facilitation of talks about achieving a political transition, once the constitution is written and subsequent presidential elections are held a few months later. This exclusionary ideology also manifests in the opposition parties' adoption of preconceptions of the solution in Syria, based on examples of the experiences of other countries. This performance and these tools push the Syrians interested in public affairs to alienate all parties and lose confidence in them and their capacity.⁴

In addition to the above, there are other obstacles to engaging in an actual dialogue – for example, the differing orientations of the opposition representatives, which cover a large spectrum from the far right to the far left and which limit their ability to meet around specific goals and agree on priorities. While the representatives of the regime form one cohesive unit, the representatives of the civil society are divided without the desire and/or ability to search for common ground and bridge the gaps. Furthermore, some of the participants considered the basis for the failure of the political process as the lack of international resolve to find a political solution in Syria. They reflected that the solution is not in Syrian hands because it does not depend on the nature of the Committee and the performance of the parties in it, but rather the whole issue has become more complex as it has turned into an international and regional geo-political affair. The solution is subject to the course of pending issues among the major powers, namely Russia and the US, and other matters that concern the interests of the regional powers, headed primarily by Turkey, Iran and, previously, some of the Gulf countries.

Despite the consensus on the above-mentioned, the participants did not consider the meetings of the Constitutional Committee to be completely inadequate. On the contrary, they stressed the necessity of the Committee's existence and continuance, even though it had contributed to Syrians' lack of awareness of the reality of the balance of power; their loss of confidence in the possibility of finding solutions; and their reluctance to track the meetings' developments. These meetings remain to this day a "bad recipe with no viable alternatives"⁵ – a tool that exists but is not used 'correctly'. In fact, any change in Syria will inevitably have to go through the constitution, and the establishment of any political system will have to incorporate the social contract, which cannot be overlooked.⁶ In that case, the Committee itself might turn into a 'transitional governing body', possessing as it does 'genuine legitimacy' because it has not gained its legitimacy from a mandate by a decree or law issued by any one authority.⁷

One of the most prominent positive features of the current political process mentioned was that it represents an opportunity to ruffle the water of "the political quagmire",⁸ so as not to leave it stagnant and allow the 'mould' to increase. On the other hand, the meetings of the Constitutional Committee might allow – in better conditions – for the intensity of polarisation to reduce between members from all sides who are accepting the principle of serious negotiation between the regime and the opposition. Consequently, these meetings could constitute the nucleus of a common space, in which problematic issues could be seriously addressed and a common ground be found, based on the desire to end the suffering of Syrians and an agreement to reject division and embrace the need to allow all segments of the Syrian society to become part of the solution. Such a space could establish an alternative culture to that of hatred, fear and exclusion.⁹ Also, if this dialogue were to be activated, it would be the framework for testing erroneous ideas and theories until they are trivialised and rejected (such as zero-sum victory propositions of one party, or raising perceptions of unrealistic or non-inclusive solutions of major issues like the nature of the state and the economy, institutional reform, and Syria's foreign affairs and investments).¹⁰

The participants believed that several indicators can support the possibility of activating the political process, the first of which is the “state of attrition”¹¹ that the de facto forces have reached, and in which everyone is now trapped. The regime cannot enter Idlib or the northeastern regions, and it cannot put an end to the security concerns in the southern region. In return, the dominant forces in the north cannot change the balance of power. On the other hand, the participants agreed that the forces controlling Syria are not independent forces, but rather, forces supported by allies. Consequently, every change in the agreements among the supporting parties is reflected on the parties to the conflict and their representatives in the Constitutional Committee. This will not, however, be enough to trigger the process; it will also require public acceptance of both the opposition and the regime negotiating, and a rationalisation of the discourse, such as the opposition parties abandoning major solutions and placing their emphasis on specific issues that can be used as instruments of pressure at the negotiating table – for example, the previously misused case of detainees. It is also important for the regime to rethink the frameworks that allow citizens to communicate.

The propositions in this section represent the participants’ opinions about the current political process and ways to activate it, but the issue of an inclusive peace process goes beyond discussing the political process and the local, regional and international circumstances and dynamics it revolves around. The following section presents participants’ perceptions of an inclusive and meaningful peace process, which are not necessarily related to the course of work of the Constitutional Committee or other parties involved.

Perceptions of an inclusive peace process in Syria

There are different and overlapping connotations of the term ‘inclusive peace process’, which is the main topic of this paper. The participants considered what an inclusive peace process means in the Syrian context; they deconstructed the abstract phrase into realistic manifestations describing actual peace at both political and social levels. Opinions varied depending on the interpretation of the two key words – peace and inclusion. Each of the participants dealt with an aspect of our main question, which in turn was divided into several sub-questions:

- Does Syria have political and societal forces qualified to represent the general Syrian population?
- How can Syrians produce elites that represent them?
- On what grounds do Syrians meet, and what are the commonalities that can bring them together today?
- Who should be included in the dialogue? (This question is expanded further in the third part of this paper.)
- What are the topics of the Syrian dialogue that would achieve real and inclusive peace?

First, participants tackled the question of who has the capacity to represent the Syrian population by delving into the mechanisms of how ‘societal political forces’ have emerged in recent decades in Syria. Some participants believed that the mechanisms for forming elites in Syria did not follow their natural course and create the space that allows citizens to invest their skills, experiences and talents in order to occupy a high position in society. Indeed, authoritarian intervention in the mechanisms of elite formation adopted ideological and security criteria that boil down to the degree of citizen loyalty to authority, which deprived Syrians of true political and societal power. Instead, the regime created links with society that act as a liaison with categorised classes or groups, and these liaisons are reduced to specific individuals who can be controlled through power and gains (for example, Ratib al-Shallah was the system’s liaison with the merchant class, and Najah al-Attar is the liaison with the intellectuals, and Ahmed Amin Kaftaro is the liaison with the religious segment, succeeded by Mohammed Saeed Ramadan al-Bouti). The regime gave those individuals influence to ensure their social status, and in turn they protected and defended the interests of the regime, meaning that their legitimacy came from the regime and not from society, and their role was reversed; they represented the authority before society, and not the other way around. Despite the decline in their role since the year 2000, the alternatives to these mechanisms did not differ because they were also projected on Syrians from a place of power. For this reason, today Syria lacks real forces that society trusts.¹² Participants also expressed that there are no ‘real intellectuals’ and Syria does not have the ability to produce them. This has resulted in a loss of confidence in the political elite on both sides, and here lies the need to build a new political society that links ‘the general population’ with ‘the generality of Syrian politics’, and that will remobilise Syrians and restore their relationship with politics and public affairs.¹³

When asked about an inclusive peace process, other participants referred to an alternative mechanism for producing elites that could represent Syrians. The discussion centered on the individuality and spontaneity of this act, with the aim of forming representative community-based networks. According to the participants, whatever the desired change is, and in order to adopt the change, society will

need the maturation of a set of circumstances that will enable it to propose change and chart its path. The best way to secure these conditions is the individual action from the outset, “that is, for each individual to drive their stake in their social environment, field, community, or profession” and to allow these stakes to connect with each other later on to form a network that allows people to cling to it. This network will provide tangible community services and cater to specific needs, motivating citizens to adhere to it and protect its interests. This maturity requires time, but in every scenario, it must be spontaneous, especially since Syrians have been dispersed in societies inside and outside Syria, and there are entities, organisations and associations now with which they can network through cross-border activities. The required inclusive peace must be led by ordinary Syrian individuals through the generation of capable representatives. This is how we can achieve a societal change: by changing the methodology and ideology to one that focuses on bridging differences, enabling Syrians to connect with each other. A good example is the idea of local coordination committees at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, which represents the “post-2011 ideology”.¹⁴

On the other hand, some participants believed that these elites actually exist and can be used as levers in an inclusive peace process, since they enjoy genuine social standing. These are the non-polarised individuals who have a pluralistic viewpoint and believe in diversity and the right to belief regardless of the subject’s identity, opinion or religion.¹⁵ Those holding this view, however, also agreed that the interconnection of these forces and their formation of networks must be spontaneous and/or voluntary. Civil society organisations have tried incessantly to create such links, and United Nations institutions have made a number of attempts to network, most of which were fabricated and unrealistic attempts because they “did not originate from the bottom, and they did not mature instinctively”.¹⁶ It became natural to reach the following conclusion: Syrians were not able to form a civil society in the form of a pressure bloc. This does not deny the existence of a few successful experiences that were framed by the initiatives of individuals at times and those of civil society organisations at other times.

Some participants questioned the inclusion, because in their opinion, the process could not be inclusive if Syrians did not first seek to include themselves; thus, the challenge here is “that we create the space, that is, we should not wait for the international frameworks to include us”.¹⁷ If the international framework were established, we have to look for those who were not involved in order to involve them. Inclusion, in this case, comprises drawing a map of society and thinking about everyone that should be involved. The reference here is to the full spectrum of Syrians regardless of their background, with a greater focus on including all sectarian and ethnic components, as well as groups of special importance such as youth and women, which are (non-homogenous) groups that are usually excluded from political processes.¹⁸

Following the creation of a meeting space, according to the interviewees, Syrians will face another challenge, which is to accept others ‘genuinely’ – that is, at the level of content and ideas. For this purpose, at this stage, it is not possible to imagine Syrians agreeing on controversial and theoretical issues such as ‘equal citizenship’ or ‘the secularisation of the state’. Rather, in a complex reality, simpler and clearer headlines can build acceptance of the ‘other’, such as “rejection of division and determination to end the suffering of Syrians”.¹⁹ According to the participants, Syrians today agree on their hatred of partition and their deep desire to end the state of humiliation in any manner possible in order to live in a safe and peaceful Syria. These basic concerns, on which all Syrians agree, can be used as the first building block in developing the national identity. “If the idea of patriotism is not based on philosophy and ideology, it can be invented and built on pain and the determination to end this pain.”²⁰ Basic human needs and the aversion to the idea of partition constitute a broad headline that unites Syrians. Behind it lies a wide range of intersections and human commonalities, some of which are material, others are emotional and intellectual.

Simple headlines like these help to “awaken the consciences of the Syrians and make them think”.²¹ Therefore, acceptance of the ‘other’ will also require “a moral and political discourse of the first degree, because politics cannot be separated from morals in times of crises and disasters”.²² Here lies the need for a “suitable discourse” from a “suitable platform”,²³ but it is not necessary to ensure complete consensus because there is no society that is entirely homogeneous in its political culture, especially one that is exhausted, disintegrated and saturated with sectarian toxins. The need here is for a comprehensible and simplified common ground that enables Syrians to engage in dialogue and come to know each other, as a step on the path to forming an inclusive identity. This would pave the way for building dialogue using different and innovative approaches (for example, between the regime’s regions and the northeastern and northwestern regions, between the southern governorates of As-Suwayda and Daraa, between the opposition and the Kurds, between Syrians at home and those abroad)²⁴ and attracting young Syrian political activists who have been in the diaspora for more than 10 years and who have the aptitude, capability and potential to communicate with political figures inside Syria and within the Syrian regime, to create an alternative that can save what remains of Syria.²⁵

The participants also dismantled the implications and parameters of the hoped-for ‘peace’. From this angle, the question of identity and social contract garners the greatest interest among the issues that require agreement to determine the nature, depth and sustainability of this peace. The participants emphasised the importance of having peace that prevents the recurrence of what has happened, and for this purpose all factional identities that deny the existence of difference and do not recognise national and ethnic diversity in Syria are rejected because such perceptions are based on discrimination.

“The Syrian government today is unyielding regarding the issue of the Arabism of Syria, while denying the remaining components – and unfortunately, this stance had not been contested by some opponents for several reasons, such as the claim that it is not the priority battle – and this will lead, sooner or later, to a catastrophically bloody consequence, inevitably due to the perpetuation of hatred and fear.”²⁶

Therefore, Syrians need to employ this diversity – without the falsity of empty slogans – in order to stop the ongoing state of conflict and agree on a comprehensive Syrian identity that values humanity, respects human rights, and considers the ‘other’ to be human beings, not opponents. This is followed by the legitimisation of this proposition with a new constitution that recognises cultural identities and ensures that the laws of the state do not conflict with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provided that the state stands at the same distance from all religions, beliefs and nationalities, which helps to end the state’s guardianship of religions, and prevents the politicisation of religion or the religiosity of politics.²⁷

The previous perspectives constitute a complex set of conditions required to reach an appropriate environment that fosters a meaningful and inclusive peace process. Some of them contribute to the reformation of real societal powers, some of them seek to create a space of convergence, and some of them strive to draw the map of society and include all its spectrums, to prepare the ground for recognition and acceptance of the other, and to delve into the remaining fragile commonalities among Syrians. This is what the participants viewed as a meaningful and inclusive peace process, because it acquires a radical dimension as a real long-term recovery process. This requires persistent effort and learning from past mistakes for many years, and includes, for example, examining educational programmes and consolidating the values of peace through school curricula.

On the other hand, realistically and practically, some participants believed that this long and arduous path could not be embarked upon without stripping the influential forces of their continued influence by stopping all hostilities and halting media mobilisation and hate speech by all parties. If not, the external sponsors of the conflicting parties will have the upper hand in any potential change, and Syrians will remain outside the peace process, in which they will not have an actual role. This explains why some continue to rely on international accords that can accelerate the process and pave the way for the required Syrian-Syrian effort – for instance, if “the Astana trio (Russia, Iran and Turkey) were to find common ground with the US, noting that such international deals should not obviate the necessity of Syrian-Syrian dialogue within the appropriate environment”.²⁸

This section reviewed features and visions of an inclusive peace process in the Syrian context. The next section presents the participants’ perceptions of effective participation and inclusion.

Effective participation and inclusion in an inclusive peace process

Most of the participants related the question of effective participation and inclusion to three axes that are not completely dissimilar, but that combine to reflect the different aspects of the topic at hand. The first axis addresses the opportunities to bridge the gap between the Syrians involved in the political conflict and those who form part of the geographical diaspora; the second axis deals with some indicators or technical conditions from which we can infer the possibility of achieving effective participation and inclusion; and the third axis relates to the description of the mechanism through which this can be achieved.

First, with regard to the rifts that established and fueled the conflict, deepening it and triggering division and fragmentation, according to the participants' knowledge of the Syrian reality, the possibility of integrating all Syrians into an inclusive peace process is theoretically conceivable, as "there is no one in Syria who is not willing to be integrated into an inclusive peace process".²⁹ The participants inferred this possibility by noting that the severity of the division is declining, the harsh living conditions have been similar for everyone to some extent, and manifestations of retaliation and emotional estrangement have no longer been recurring in recent times. Rather, there are simple commonalities such as facing a harsh winter or any factors of exhaustion or weakness that are now bringing people closer to each other. These "real and simple"³⁰ commonalities have a great impact on the hearts of Syrians. The accumulation of these commonalities among all Syrians becomes a factor that reduces the division between them, even if Syrians from across the Syrian geography only agree on an "anthropological article on the Makdous".³¹

The participants presented a set of technical and cognitive conditions as indispensable pillars or tools to achieve effective participation and inclusion, most notably:

- Equal opportunities: Real participation cannot be a feeling, but rather standards that must be observed and met, so that all persons have an equal opportunity to participate despite their various political, demographic, sexual, economic, or physical differences.³²
- Suitable circumstances and discourse: For a certain idea or a value to emanate from the correct platform and with the correct form of speech, it is accessible, informative and can achieve communication, because "Syrians are not only ready for change, but are looking forward to it".³³
- Sharing information: Even with the presence of channels, platforms and workspaces, activating participation requires access to information, and for Syrians to have the information that enables them to engage and contribute to decision-making in an effective manner is the "keystone for participation".³⁴
- Message bearers: These are individuals with a pluralistic and non-polarised philosophy and approach, who believe in the right of all citizens to participate equally, in order to help make the peace process more inclusive. Such people are needed to communicate these ideas to different segments. The elite that Syrians need today is a group of "translators" who can translate the political discourse into a dialogue easily comprehensible by the ordinary Syrian (the non-ideologised citizen) and translate the needs of the ordinary Syrian into a political discourse.³⁵
- Legitimacy of representation: Syrians should be represented at the grassroots level, so that society is represented and not the forces dominating it. The only legitimacy that Syrians can use and apply pressure with is the legitimacy of their voices on the ground, and this requires a moral initiative

that restores politics to Syrians, strengthens them, rebuilds trust among them and relaunches the political debate. Following this, legitimacy will be based on Syrians taking to the streets to support the initiative. This path will then restore individuals' sense of independence and worth, and their ability to think and to resolve their own issues without tutelage. It should be noted that this proposed legitimacy does not aim at sharing power as much as it is aimed at reconciling with the concept of power itself.³⁶

- The representation of some groups should not simply be figurative: In particular, this refers to the representation of women and youth groups on the ethnic and religious diversity spectrum. Benefitting from the capabilities of young people and involving them in many aspects, such as the presence of young representatives who are able to act as substitutes for conducting internal and external dialogues at the military, political and administrative levels, will prepare them for an active role in the future of Syria.³⁷

As for the mechanism for achieving actual participation, some of the participants believe that effective participation can be achieved through four pillars (supported by the civil society as they nurture the process):

1. representation: that is, that the representative is granted the authority and capacity to carry out several actions based on an agreement with the voter;
2. the ability to create spaces for dialogue: meaning that civil society activists and institutions do not simply appear on the scene, they instigate and lead the dialogue within the scene;
3. service that can be provided to the community: the extent to which the community benefits from civic efficacy and associates with it, and what service it actually expects from the civic society; and
4. the outcome of the first three pillars: the formation of a collective consciousness that can protect individuals from the state and at the same time build bridges between the people and the state, "the space that Gramsci discussed".³⁸

This part of the research presented the participants' perceptions regarding the opportunities to bridge the gap between the Syrians involved in the political conflict and those who form part of the geographical diaspora, and the indicators or technical conditions that denote the possibility of achieving effective participation and inclusion, as well as the mechanism through which this can be achieved. The fourth part of this paper will deal with the indicators that increase the participants' confidence in any peace process within the Syrian context.

Motives for confidence in the peace process



The participants would be more confident in any peace process within the Syrian context if specific indicators were available, constituting a wide range of factors and features. Some of these would be related to the availability of certain conditions for a political solution, its mechanisms, and the roles assigned to the conflicting parties; others would assume specific implications for the peace process, its focus areas and outcomes.

Among the most prominent factors related to the roles of the conflicting parties, international sponsors, and peacebuilding mechanisms, five main factors stand out:

- The first step must be taken by the stronger party: the participants believed that there are many steps or factors that would build confidence in the peace process, but the first step is supposed to be initiated by the stronger party, i.e. the Syrian government, which has regained control over most of the Syrian territory. There are many possible examples to include under these steps such as the issue of public and private freedoms, protection of the civil society space and civil and private institutions, holding off military operations, discontinuing media incitement against the 'other' and adopting a rational discourse, and other issues that touch upon society's need for recovery. These are all plausible steps because they are not linked to a regional or international context; they only require a Syrian-Syrian effort. Such steps could establish an enduring level of understanding and sympathy that would bring down the wall between Syrians.³⁹
- The second step requires the agreement of all opposition parties on a set of realistic demands, with clear priorities made public, and the adoption of a step-by-step mechanism, because the participants saw a real need to rationalise the opposition's discourse. They believed that the opposition parties must mobilise the strengths that could constitute effective pressure on the negotiation table (such as the detainees' file, eradicating torture in prisons, putting forward the reform of the security sector in stages instead of demanding a complete restructuring of the sector, including holding the heads of security branches accountable etc.). As a result of these meetings, the opposition parties would agree on a set of possible demands in the short term, and the likelihood of offering in exchange a concession on one of the conditions they had adhered to over the past decade. According to the participants, the opposition parties are still adopting the bidding discourse, in which all demands are a priority and all must be achieved straightaway. The participants considered this functioning as an approach followed by the opposition, this approach clarifies the gap in the political perception of the solution, and this was echoed by the Doha statement,⁴⁰ which included "visions without a project, the same old discourse, and previously made recommendations, continuing to search for problems instead of common visions and reconciliation, and instead of developing a plan to find alternatives".⁴¹
- The next step is to allow the opposition parties to communicate with Syrians through public and open channels of communication, and create links with them, in the interior, to enhance legitimacy and break up the regime's monopoly over the Syrian general population. This would allow for the restoration of the balance of power, politically, in terms of legitimacy and also, in terms of re-establishing the social influence of the opposition parties and their visions on the Syrian public. It is certain – according to the participants – that the regime alone does not have the ability to build a peace process, even if it retains control over all of the Syrian territories.

- The process should be sponsored by guarantor parties such as Russia and the US, as an expression of the seriousness of the international community to push for a political solution and not to impose their own agendas, especially since these international parties today consider their own interests in Syria first, while capitalising at the same time on their ability to influence negotiations and pressure the parties to abide by agreements.⁴²
- Confidence in the peace process may increase if the Syrians are able to form a substantial fraction of citizens who reject all parties involved in the process, in favour of upholding the idea of patriotism and demanding an end to Syrians' suffering.⁴³

On the other hand, participants linked some trust factors to certain implications, focus areas and outcomes of the peace process, most notably:

- Raising the question of identity and acknowledgment of diversity: It is no longer acceptable, according to some participants, to deny cultural diversity and continue the false state that Syrians have been living in, just as it is no longer acceptable to reduce ethnic and religious diversity to a forcibly homogenate, dominant identity. Rather, the Syrian identity must be invested in to create a social state of interdependence, in order to build trust and peaceful coexistence. This diversity can be expressed naturally, and in the same manner it occurs in democratic countries, at the civil level, but not at the political level, because "there is no room for fragmentation on the political front, at this level consensus and a rallying around the building of the state are generated".⁴⁴
- Making the voices that call for peace public: Some participants believed that the feeling of real inclusion in any peace process will come when we can talk about peace openly and without fear, meaning that the voices of those calling for peace should be loud and public, so that we can accumulate networking and coordination and carry out systematic and strategic work to advance the peace process.⁴⁵
- The participants emphasised the importance of civil society having a legal role and a space for action, through which it can reorganise itself and work to create balance within society by removing obstacles, initiating political dialogues, and advancing the culture of human rights as a concept stemming from the accumulation of human civilisations (and not as a Western concept projected onto society). One of the most important factors that enhance confidence in the peace process is participation and interaction in open pathways and discussions that are available on platforms, within clear criteria; this also builds trust among those working in the field. This reinforces the legitimacy of the political course derived from citizens' voices on the ground; such dialogues take citizens out of the cycle of daily concerns and bring them back towards thinking about their issues, motivating them to participate and get to know the 'other', which helps to eliminate preconceived ideas, and remind them of their worth, the importance of their public voices and their impact on this process. This legitimacy also helps to reconcile with the concept of power and distinguish it from authoritarianism, which enhances social capital and accelerates the wheel of democracy by bridging relations among all segments of society and pushing the individual to think about the interests of the 'other'.⁴⁶
- What would increase confidence in the peace process would be to see a break in the intensity of the alignments between the parties and a recirculation of ideas. The participants agreed on the importance of dismantling the blocs participating in the political process, and moving from polarised and antagonistic blocs to those aligned around certain topics, so that the focus is around the idea and not around people – for example, secularists from every party assembling their voices around an idea.⁴⁷

- A comprehensive, ethical, pluralistic and non-uniform political discourse: The majority of participants emphasised the importance and quality of the discourse in creating a political space that can contain bold propositions that are different from the preconceived discourses of the parties. Proposing alternatives restores hope for Syrians, whether in the camps, detention centers, diaspora, or within Syrian homes.⁴⁸

This section presented a wide range of indicators and factors that would help increase confidence in the peace process. The next part will discuss the roles of civil society in detail, some of which have been touched on briefly in previous sections.

Roles of the civil society

Syrian civil society today and the political process

The interviewees all expressed the idea that at this time there is effectively no civil society in Syria in the broad sense. There are, however, some successful initiatives that have generated currents of opinion and debate, have empowered women and youth groups, have come up with ideas and perceptions, have empowered their capacities on their internal level, and developed a public space in which young people would engage in discussions.⁴⁹ Syrian civil society is young, inexperienced and subject to its funding authority and pressure from the countries in which it operates. In addition, it does not have a popular base because it is formed mostly of institutions that have arisen due to circumstances and rely mainly on external funding. Syrian civil society is thus unable to create alliances that bear fruit because it is in the early stage of learning in a complex and constantly changing milieu.⁵⁰

The chances of this society developing as a civil movement are very small because no civil movement can develop inside Syria, not only because of the extremism of the authority and counter-violence in the north and the south of the country, but also because of the moral and humanitarian differences between civil society currently and the other conflicting parties engaged in the political process. This is where the Syrian civil society is criticised. According to some participants, the civil society tried to push the culture of human rights away from personal interests like other parties participating in the political process, thus it was viewed as rejecting the latter and hardening its stance, and eventually did not integrate into the political process. Instead, it remained an idealistic, utopian voice that believes in peace and justice, without offering tangible solutions.⁵¹

“We do not know how to talk to society, but use elitist and condescending discourses, and that is why we have no social power.”⁵²

According to the research, Syrian civil society lacks elites capable of forming an undivided political society. This makes it difficult to establish a collective bloc that represents civil society with a louder voice and greater influence, and that can create pressure to transform the course of the political process. With the obstacles it faces in Syria, civil society has turned into a vocal phenomenon that has neither a presence on the ground nor a productive economic impact on the local product, and of course it has no organisational authority in the regime’s regions or other regions. Thus, Syrians are not able to form a civil society in the sense of a pressure bloc. Rather, “civil society organisations do not provide any added value to donor funds, nor political weight at the negotiation table, and are unable to create internal social forces due to the employment of empty and elitist discourses”.⁵³

Perceptions of the roles of civil society

Regarding the participants’ perception of the role of civil society in the political process, civil society is the only entity capable in the medium and long term of contributing to strengthening the social fabric in Syria.⁵⁴ As such, the importance of this space is not only related to the quality and content of these discussions, but rather to the idea of discussion itself between individuals, and the process of creating

bridging links that steer clear of fanaticism. What Syria needs are relationships that pave the way for the creation of a homeland and a national identity “in the modern sense”.⁵⁵ This effort also supports the idea of stakes that are individually set on the ground, and that connect spontaneously to form a community protection network to which people can cling (as an idea, not as an affiliation or organisation).⁵⁶

Therefore, participants today rely on civil society organisations to reduce tension and turmoil between Syrians at home and abroad; help eliminate the rhetoric of infidelity and build a public space for the dissemination of ideas that rebuild trust among Syrians, and between Syrians and politics in general; defuse the conflict that leads to ongoing tensions; involve individuals in social responsibility; and reorganise society. Civil society must be given a legal role in terms of creating balance within society and working to create, empower and link possible youth representatives who are able to become substitutes at the military, political, and administrative levels, so that the process would be beneficial and useful through internal and external dialogues. In the event that civil society desires to contribute to a political role, it will be counted on to produce an elite group of ‘translators’ to translate ordinary Syrian discourse into a political one and vice versa, contribute to building, activating and organising the public space, and come up with a societal capital capable of moving the wheel of democracy.⁵⁷

The sixth section presents the opinion of a sample of participants on the role of Syrians abroad in the inclusive peace process.

The role of Syrians at home and abroad

The participants stressed the need to open a dialogue between Syrians in Syria and in the diaspora, and between Syrians and the representatives of the warring parties in order to reduce polarisation, put pressure on those parties to agree to serve the interests of Syrians, and stop the media from inciting conflict between Syrians. The participants also noted that the differences between Syrians inside and outside the country had begun to diminish, and today, “we are witnessing a language of understanding and sympathy, while the language of retaliation and schadenfreude among Syrians has become less common than it was in years past”.⁵⁸

“The healing process must take place at home without excluding those outside.”⁵⁹ Some participants believed that, at the level of political discourse, it is not possible to formulate a discourse for Syrians at home and another for Syrians abroad. Rather, there are roles for each individual in their place, so everyone can work according to their ability, without it turning into a discourse and a rift.

“Syrians in Europe and America bear a greater responsibility in building peace, because they are the carriers of change. As for the Syrians at home, they are the main factor for change. Therefore, the Syrians in the diaspora should be more aware that they are no longer the main factor in change, but rather its bearers, and they should appreciate the steadfastness of their people and support them.”⁶⁰

As for the possible role of Syrians outside Syria, the majority of participants expressed their belief that these people have an important role to play, especially as they enjoy a wider space for movement and easier access to resources. They are also “those who have lost the country and their dreams that would have flourished in that country, and are still searching for a homeland, identity and life, especially since most of these are young people at the peak of their capacity and contribution”.⁶¹ Two participants elaborated:

“Dozens of Syrians abroad have become academic cadres in European universities and have the ability and the skills required to help intervene in negotiations and come up with innovative solutions, but they do not have the opportunity to present these ideas or access appropriate platforms. They have the capacity to replace the faces of the opposition and create young political cadres.”⁶²

“Syrians abroad can create a nucleus or a group of forces in the countries they live in to provide something for Syria at the right moment. This should occur without the help of an organisation because the most dangerous thing that can happen is to organise into institutions or entities; the only required organisation is to agree on the idea.”⁶³

On the other hand, some participants looked at the issue with a different lens, believing that it is very difficult to rely on the Syrians in the diaspora, and if they have a role, it is not essential in the overall landscape. A set of obstacles will prevent this:

“The first of which [obstacles] is a natural phenomenon that everyone who travels faces when they keep an image of the country and the reality they left behind in their mind, without recognising that the reality is changing. Second, the different experiences of Syrians abroad will have a major impact.”

Those who settled in Sweden have a different experience than those who settled in the Netherlands or Germany. So, they also changed according to their experiences. Ultimately, the gap is bigger now between the outside and the inside. Also, the generational rift needs to be taken into consideration, as the proportion of young people who left Syria is greater than that of older adults, and this in itself causes a generational, civilisational and cultural rift between the outside and the inside. This gap may make Syrians abroad the most extremist and least willing to compromise for peace, especially since no one is pressuring them, not even their daily circumstances.”⁶⁴

This section reviewed the roles of Syrians inside and outside Syria; the final part of the paper will present a summary of the key findings of the research.

Summary of research findings

The following points summarise the most prominent results of the research:

- The political process is “a bad recipe with no viable alternatives”: The participants evaluated the political process, with a broad consensus on its flaws and shortcomings, which make it – according to the participants – a “waste of time and a hindrance for progress”. The meetings of the Constitutional Committee cannot be considered a political process in the actual sense, but at the same time, for the participants, the process retains some leverage points and advantages. Most agreed that it is a necessity that cannot be compromised, noting what the current political process needs to be more reliable and effective.
- Syrians do not have actual political and societal powers: When discussing an inclusive peace process, the participants tackled the question of who has the capacity to represent Syrians because some participants believed that the mechanisms for forming elites in Syria have not taken their course. Indeed, the authoritarian intervention in the mechanisms of elite formation adopts ideological and security criteria that boil down to the degree of citizen loyalty to authority, which has deprived Syrians of possessing real political and societal powers.
- The importance of individual action and its spontaneity: Whatever the desired change is, and in order to adopt the change, society will need the maturation of a set of circumstances that will enable it to propose change and chart its path. The best way to secure these conditions is the individual action from the outset, “that is, for each individual to drive their stake in their social environment, field, community, or profession” and to allow these stakes to connect with each other later on to form a network that allows people to cling to it. This network will provide tangible community services and cater to specific needs, motivating citizens to adhere to it and protect its interests.
- Among the challenges facing an inclusive peace process: Creating a space and accepting the ‘other’. The process cannot be inclusive if Syrians do not first seek to include themselves. In addition, the challenge here is for Syrians to create a meeting space. Following the creation of a meeting space, according to the participants, Syrians will face another challenge, which is to fully accept the ‘other’ – that is, to accept the ‘other’ at the level of content and ideas.
- Syrians share the common ground of rejecting division and wanting to end pain: It is not possible to imagine Syrians agreeing on controversial and theoretical issues such as “equal citizenship” or “the secularisation of the state”. Rather, in a complex reality, simpler and clearer headlines can build acceptance of the ‘other’, such as “rejection of division and determination to end the suffering of Syrians”.
- The question of identity and social contract garnered the greatest interest when discussing the nature, depth and sustainability of peace. The participants emphasised the importance of having peace that prevents the recurrence of what has happened, and for this purpose all factional identities that deny the existence of difference and do not recognise national and ethnic diversity in Syria should be rejected. This is followed by the legitimisation of this proposition with a new constitution that recognises cultural identities and ensures that the laws of the state do not conflict with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provided that the state stands at the same distance from all religions, beliefs and nationalities, which helps to stop the state’s guardianship of religions, and prevents the politicisation of religion or the religiosity of politics.

- The path of inclusive peace is long and arduous and could not be embarked upon without stripping the influential forces of their continued influence by stopping all hostilities and halting media mobilisation and hate speech. If not, the external sponsors of the conflicting parties will have the upper hand in any possible change, and the Syrians will remain outside the peace process. This explains why some continue to rely on international accords that can accelerate the process and pave the way for the required Syrian-Syrian effort.
- According to the participants' knowledge of the Syrian reality, the possibility of integrating all Syrians into an inclusive peace process is theoretically conceivable because "there is no one in Syria who is not willing to be integrated into an inclusive peace process". The participants inferred this possibility by noting that the severity of the division is declining, the harsh living conditions have been similar to some extent, and manifestations of retaliation and emotional estrangement have no longer been recurring in recent times. Rather, there are simple commonalities such as facing a harsh winter or any factors of exhaustion or weakness that are now bringing people closer to each other.
- Among the technical and cognitive conditions that the participants considered indispensable factors to achieving effective participation and inclusion were equal opportunities, sharing the necessary information to activate participation, and relying on individuals who possess a pluralistic and non-polarising culture. Moreover, the representation of Syrians should be at the grassroots level, so that society is represented and not the forces dominating it, and that the representation of some groups is not simply figurative, in particular that of women and the youth.
- The participants would have more confidence in any peace process in the Syrian context if it has specific indicators, the most prominent of which are that the initial steps need to be taken by the stronger party, i.e. the Syrian government and that the opposition parties need to agree on a set of realistic demands, with clear priorities made public, and adopt a step-by-step mechanism. Also, opposition parties must be allowed to communicate with Syrians through public and open channels of communication. The process should be sponsored by guarantor parties such as Russia and the US, as an expression of the international community's seriousness to push for a political solution and not to impose any agendas. It would also be very beneficial if Syrians were able to form a significant fraction of citizens rejecting all parties involved in the process, in favour of upholding the idea of patriotism and demanding an end to the suffering of the Syrians.
- Syrian civil society, according to the results of the research, lacks elites capable of forming an undivided political society. This makes it difficult to form a collective bloc that represents civil society with a louder voice and greater influence, and that can create pressure to transform the course of the political process.
- Participants today rely on civil society organisations to reduce tension and turmoil between Syrians at home and abroad, contribute to eliminate the rhetoric of infidelity and build a public space to disseminate ideas that re-establish confidence among Syrians, defuse the conflict that leads to continuing tensions, involve individuals in social responsibility and reorganise society.
- The majority of participants expressed their belief that the main role lies with Syrians abroad. Dozens of them have become academic cadres in European universities and have the ability and skills required to help intervene in negotiations and present innovative solutions, but they do not have the opportunity or the appropriate platforms to present these ideas. They can replace the faces of the opposition and create young political cadres.

Endnotes

- 1 The Building and Bonding project is an initiative that works on developing key ideas, aspirations, and messages to support the peacebuilding processes for Syria. The initiative supports the integration of concepts of peace, justice, and the role of civil society in these processes.
- 2 K. Al-Nabwani, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 18 Feb 2022
- 3 The term is used by Mudar Al-Debs in reference to an ideology that does not produce pluralism and is not based on social capital, but rather on organic/sectarian foundations in relationships, and adopts violent, aggressive and exclusionary behaviours towards the other. M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 4 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)
- 5 Z. Al-Zoubi, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 14 Feb 2022
- 6 S. Mobaied, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 11 Feb 2022
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 9 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)
- 10 Y. Aleesa, interview H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 11 M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 12 'Real forces' refer to forces that belong to the society, that did not produce and/or are not sustained by the regime.
- 13 Y. Aleesa, interview H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022; M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 06 Feb 2022
- 14 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 15 S. Mobaied, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 11 Feb 2022
- 16 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 17 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)
- 18 See the section on effective participation and inclusion on page 12 for more on inclusion.
- 19 Z. Al-Zoubi, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 14 Feb 2022
- 20 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 21 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022, in reference to the saying of Hannah Arendt: "the unscrupulous are those who do not think"
- 22 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 23 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022.
- 24 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)
- 25 J. Bakr, interview by A. Totonji, personal interview, 26 Jan 2022
- 26 M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 27 S. Mobaied, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 11 Feb 2022; M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 28 Z. Al-Zoubi, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 14 Feb 2022
- 29 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 30 Ibid
- 31 Makdous is a dish of oil-cured aubergines. Part of Levantine cuisine, they are tiny, tangy eggplants stuffed with walnuts, red pepper, garlic, olive oil and salt; sometimes chilli powder is added.
- 32 M. Hassouna, interviewed online via Zoom, 27 Jan 2022
- 33 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 34 M. Hassouna, interviewed online via Zoom, 27 Jan 2022
- 35 S. Mobaied, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 11 Feb 2022; M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 36 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 37 M. Hassouna, interviewed online via Zoom, 27 Jan 2022
- 38 Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891–1937) was an Italian Marxist philosopher, journalist, linguist, writer, and politician. He wrote on philosophy, political theory, sociology, history, and linguistics. He established the concept of civil society. M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 07 Feb 2022.(name encoded at the participant's request)
- 39 M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 40 The Doha statement is a 17-point statement issued by the Syrian opposition calling for reforms and issuing recommendations on the Syrian file
- 41 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request); S. Zakzak, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 13 Feb 2022
- 42 A. Jbawi, interview by A. Totonji, online via Zoom, 29 Jan 2022; J. Bakr, interview by A. Totonji, personal interview, 26 Jan 2022
- 43 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022
- 44 Ibid
- 45 S. Anjrini, interviewed online via Google Meet, 8 Feb 2022
- 46 M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 47 S. Zakzak, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 13 Feb 2022
- 48 M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022.; S. Anjrini, interviewed online via Google Meet, 08 Feb 2022
- 49 M. al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 6 Feb 2022; M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022; Z Al-Zoubi, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 14 Feb 2022
- 50 M Hassouna, interviewed online via Zoom, 27 Jan 2022
- 51 Z. Al-Zoubi, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 14 Feb 2022
- 52 Ibid
- 53 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)

- 54 M. Hassouna, interviewed online via Zoom, 27 Jan 2022
- 55 This means consensus on a national identity without fanaticism.
- 56 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022; M. Al-Debs, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Zoom, 06 Feb 2022
- 57 Ibid; S. Anjrini, interviewed online via Google Meet, 8 Feb 2022
- 58 S. Anjrini, interviewed online via Google Meet, 8 Feb 2022
- 59 Ibid
- 60 M. Nseir, interview by H. Shuhuf, personal interview, 10 Feb 2022
- 61 S. Zakzak, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 13 Feb 2022
- 62 J. Bakr, interview by A. Totonji, personal interview, 26 Jan 2022
- 63 Y. Aleesa, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 20 Jan 2022
- 64 M.A, interview by H. Shuhuf, online via Google Meet, 7 Feb 2022 (name encoded at the participant's request)



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