



# Community Perception of Decentralization:

New foundations to rebuild the Syrian state



IFES Decentralization Report  
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اليوم التالي  
لدعم الانتقال الديمقراطي في سوريا



THE DAY AFTER  
Supporting Democratic Transition In Syria

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# Introduction

The transformations that Syria has witnessed after the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 poses some crucial questions related to the nature of the new Syrian state, center-periphery relations and mechanisms to rebuild public authority after decades of authoritarian centralization which governed the political, administrative, security and economic sphere in the country. Syrian debates no longer revolve around the type of political system or transitional period arrangements, the local security developments which have taken place highlighting the question of sub-identity vs. national identity and their interrelation in addition to the best mode of governance to manage diversity.

Rather, debate extends to the more profound structural questions related to state administration, redistribution of powers and roles between the capital and other governorates and central institutions and local communities within a framework that preserves the state itself and its sovereignty while at the same time preventing the reproduction of the centralized model which contributed to accumulating crises of trust and marginalization and undermined participation over the past decades.

## Significance

The Syrian experience, before and during the revolution, has shown that decentralization in Syria has not been a merely administrative model to regulate the relation between the center and the provinces. Rather, it has become an integral part of the very structure of political and security authority as decision-making powers, resources, authorization were concentrated for decades in the capital. Local administrations, on the other hand, were rendered into executive units with limited powers unable to manage their own development and service needs independently and effectively. With time, this model has deepened the development gap between different areas and undermined local communities' ability to take part in decision making leading to decline of trust in public institutions and absence of a balanced sense of national partnership.

With the eruption of the Syrian revolution and the ensuing collapse of vast parts of the structure of the central state, various forms of local administration and decentralized governance that varied in form, legitimacy and efficiency. During the revolution years, Syria witnessed various experiences of local councils, autonomous administrations, semi-autonomous local governments in addition to hybrid forms of governance involving civil and military actors on the one hand and local and international organizations on the other. Despite the problems and imbalances inherent in these experiences associated with militarization, weak institutions and corruption and multiplicity of actors, they have contributed to reshaping Syrian perception of the idea of local administration as they have shown that local communities are capable -to various degrees- of playing a bigger role in the management of services and development and organizing daily life when they are offered the appropriate space, powers and resources.

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As Syria transitioned to a new stage after the fall of the regime and with the advent of a transitional government that seeks to rebuild state institutions, the question of local administration and decentralization has come to the forefront as one of the most critical and most influential issues in the future of the country. The first year after the formation of the new government has revealed some complex challenges associated with rebuilding state institutions, diversity management, stabilization, regulating the relation between the center and the provinces and accommodating the various local experiences that have evolved during the revolution. This stage has also shown that reproducing traditional centralization was no longer practically possible nor is it socially acceptable. At the same time, unregulated decentralization or that which is not linked with an overarching national frame carries risks of disintegration, multiplicity of authorities and reproducing local power networks.

**The significance of this study emanates** from the 'local community perspective' from which it approaches decentralization; i.e. how Syrian communities themselves view the idea of redistributing powers and roles between the center and localities and what are their demands, concerns or expectations from any future decentralized model. For decentralization in the Syrian context is no longer merely associated with upgrading services or reducing bureaucracy. It is rather associated with issues of fair resource distribution, management of social diversity and rebuilding trust let alone all the potential causes of reproducing tyranny including political participation, good governance, balanced development, transitional justice and civil peace.

## The Problem, Hypothesis, Methodology and Tools

This study addresses a basic problem, namely that Syria after the fall of the former regime faces a dual and complex dilemma. On the one hand, the traditional centralized proved incapable of managing diversity, achieving balanced development and building a healthy relation between the state and society. On the other hand, experiences during the revolution have revealed the risks of unregulated or militarized decentralization and multiplicity of authorities and weakness of institutions. In this light, the basic question of this study is as follows:

**How do local Syrian communities view decentralization after the fall of the regime? What are the social, political, security and development parameters that govern their perceptions of redistributing powers and roles between the center and localities?**

*A set of sub-questions emanate from this fundamental question:*



- How does perception of decentralization vary between various Syrian areas?
- What kind of relation do local communities want between the center and localities?
- What are the main concerns associated with decentralization?
- What are the powers which local communities believe must be maintained by the central state? What powers do they demand for local administrations?
- How do local governance experiences during the revolution affect the present perceptions of decentralization?
- What is the nature of the relation between decentralization, transitional justice, civil peace, and rebuilding trust in the state?

## TDA

The study hypothesizes that Syrian communities do not favor separatist or disintegrating decentralized models. Rather, they prefer a 'balanced decentralized' model based on redistributing powers and roles within the framework of a unitary state provided that this model secures local participation, fair resource distribution, administrative efficiency and local representation without infringing national sovereignty and the unity of the state.

The study further assumes that perceptions of decentralization vary depending on the local governance experiences of the various Syrian areas during the revolution and that concerns of local corruption, division and undermining the state constitute some of the most important parameters of the community perception of decentralization.

The study uses the descriptive analytical approach for being most capable of capturing community perceptions and complex local contexts related to decentralization in Syria. The study has further made use of the comparative approach by comparing between the different areas in order to analyze similarities and differences in local perceptions of the center-locality relation. The **study mainly utilized the following tools:**

### 01

Analysis of focus group discussions in several areas that represent a broad Syrian diversity in terms of governance experiences during the revolution, social and cultural structure, historical relation with the center, forms of local administration, economic and security situation, level of exposure to the war and political shifts.<sup>1</sup>

### 02

In addition to analyzing the survey of scenarios related to decentralization and analyzing commonalities and convergences between different Syrian areas in order to test participants' attitudes toward practical issues related to the judiciary, security, services, education, resources, local mediation, emergencies and local-center relation.

1- The focus group discussions were held in seven different Syrian areas (Damascus, Jaraman, Hama, Tartous, Hasakeh/Qamishli, Aleppo and Idleb).

# Existing Literature

The issue of decentralization in Syria has increasingly attracted interest in Syrian and international research literature especially as the theoretical discussions related to political solution and constitution shifted into a level more closely associated with rebuilding the state and managing the transitional period. Most recent studies have focused on shifts of local governance, the locality-center relation, diversity management, rebuilding the social contract and the future of local administration after the revolution.

A study by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on local governance in post-Assad Syria focused on the notion of 'hybrid state' proposing that the post-2024 reality in Syria has given rise to a model based on interaction between nascent central institutions and informal local and community structures. The study proposes that Syria's future lies in a multi-level model that combines strong central institutions and effective local networks. The study specifically focused on sectors of administration, security, and justice as well as the role of local councils and civil society in filling the void left behind with the collapse of the central state in some areas.

## TDA

On the other hand, some studies have approached decentralization from a broader philosophical-political angle. The article 'Decentralized Nationalism in Syria', for example, considered decentralization a requirement for building a new Syrian nationalism in the aftermath of the fall of the centralized authoritarian model. The article links decentralization with rebuilding the social contract and citizenship. It states that traditional centralization was one of the instruments used to produce division and sectarianism while democratic decentralization may become a framework for diversity management and promotion of political participation. The article cautions, at the same time, that decentralization could turn into sectarian quota system unless it is associated with a democratic system based on citizenship and rule of law.

Political monitoring and analysis reports issued by some Syrian and international centers also tackled shifts of governance and administration after the fall of the regime including the monthly reports on governance and administrative shifts in Syrian governorates which focused on the growing role of local actors and civil councils and the challenges associated with rebuilding state institutions and their relation with the local community (Arab Center for Contemporary Syrian Studies and Omran Center for Strategic Studies). At medial and analysis levels, several international reports have tackled the issue of locality-center relations in the new Syria especially in relation to the demands of Kurdish actors and the challenges of integrating north eastern Syria, concerns of Syrian components, problems of political representation and the growing concerns of disintegration or reproducing centralized authoritarianism in new forms.

These studies, however, concentrated on: political and constitutional approaches, administrative and institutional models, relations between political and military actors and the international and regional dimensions of decentralization. The 'local community perspective', on the other hand, remained relatively limited especially in terms of understanding perceptions of local communities themselves of decentralization and how these perceptions vary between various Syrian areas. Hence the significance of this study as an attempt to provide an in-depth local-community understanding of decentralization in Syria based on voices and experiences of local communities themselves rather than merely the perceptions of political or legal elites. The success of any decentralized model in Syria would be directly linked to community acceptability and its ability to respond to the various concerns, needs and perceptions within the diverse Syrian communities.

# Community Perception of the Centralization-Decentralization Dichotomy After the Fall of the Regime

Below is a model analysis of a set of Syrian areas targeted by the research through focus groups and an in-depth questionnaire, representing wide Syrian diversity in terms of governance experiences during the revolution, social and cultural composition, historical relationship with the center, local administration models, security and economic reality, and the level of exposure to war and political transformations.



## Damascus and Its Countryside: Decentralization That Undermines Security Overreach

No discussion of decentralization in Syria can be conducted in isolation from Damascus and its countryside, as the space most closely associated with the centralized model around which the Syrian state was formed. The capital and its countryside experienced enormous pressures resulting from internal displacement, economic collapse, deterioration of services, expansion of the informal economy, erosion of the middle class, and rising poverty rates. The area also witnessed major demographic and social transformations as a result of hundreds of thousands of Syrians moving to it or its suburbs, which put additional strain on infrastructure and public services.

Focus group sessions dedicated to Damascus and its countryside showed that participants view the governance crisis in Syria as a structural crisis linked to the nature of the centralized state itself, and not merely as an administrative dysfunction or technical weakness. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the accumulation of powers within the center led to the disruption of local administration, slow response to needs, inflated bureaucratic procedures, weak accountability, and lack of efficiency. Participants also pointed out that local institutions within Damascus itself had limited powers, as fundamental decisions remained tied to ministries and central bodies, which restricted local administrations' ability to plan or make quick and effective decisions.

## TDA

In this context, decentralization, for participants, emerged as an entry point for reforming public administration, through redistributing powers, enhancing the autonomy of local administration, improving services, reducing bureaucratic complexities, and building more effective accountability systems.

However, participants emphasized at the same time that the success of any decentralized model requires a broader reform of the state's structure and institutions, and not merely a nominal transfer of some powers. The discussions also revealed clear awareness among participants that the traditional relationship between the center and localities in Syria was built on dependency more than partnership. The center was accustomed to monopolizing decisions and resources, while local administrations remained limited in their ability to influence public policies or determine their own priorities. For this reason, participants proposed reorganizing the relationship between the center and localities in a more balanced manner, whereby the center retains sovereign and strategic files, in exchange for granting localities broader powers in services, local planning, development, local budgets, and project management. However, they also stressed the importance of a clear national framework that ensures the unity of public policies and prevents conflict of authority or multiple frames of reference.

The security dimension cannot be separated from decentralization. Centralization was closely associated in Damascene collective consciousness with the security structure that governed the country for decades, where public administration and local authorities were linked to a broad central security apparatus with extensive influence. This led to the erosion of institutional independence, the weakening of local administration, a decline in citizens' trust in institutions, and the dominance of the security approach over administration and services. Hence, participants believed that any genuine decentralization process must be linked to redefining the relationship between administration and security, so that local institutions become more independent and capable of functioning within a clear legal and administrative framework, away from traditional security dominance. At the same time, participants showed heightened sensitivity toward issues of stability and state unity, especially in light of the Syrian experience during the revolution. Therefore, there was no support for the idea of security decentralization or multiple armed structures. Rather, there was a clear emphasis on the necessity that security and military institutions remain within the framework of the central state. Participants called for developing a new security model based on the rule of law, protection of citizens, enhancement of judicial and civil oversight, improvement of the relationship between society and security institutions, and strengthening local police within the state's framework.

## TDA

These proposals reflected a clear desire to separate the idea of a unitary state from the tight security centralization that prevailed over the past decades. From an economic perspective, Damascus and its countryside experienced deep economic transformations that directly affected the city's structure and its economic and social role. The economic crisis led to a decline in production, a collapse of purchasing power, an expansion of informal economy, rising unemployment rates, deterioration of public services, and widening social gaps. The concentration of economic decision-making within the center was also reflected in the weak capacity of local administrations to address economic problems or launch independent development initiatives. For this reason, participants directly linked decentralization to the issue of economic development and local resource management, as they believed that expanding localities' powers could contribute to improving services, accelerating project implementation, enhancing local investment, improving resource management, and supporting the local economy.

The issue of developmental justice also emerged clearly in the discussions, as participants noted that prolonged centralization contributed to producing large disparities between regions, even within Damascus and its suburbs themselves. Hence, participants believed that decentralization must be linked to a more equitable redistribution of resources, along with the development of transparent systems for local budgets and public spending. However, they also stressed the necessity of national policies that prevent decentralization from becoming a tool for deepening economic disparities or entrenching local privileges.

The focus group session showed that participants do not view decentralization as a separatist political project or a threat to national unity, but as part of a broader reform process for the structure of the Syrian state. For them, decentralization was associated with issues of administrative efficiency, improvement of services, community participation, strengthening local administration, combating corruption, and building more transparent institutions. In this context, the idea of "centralization of sovereign policies and decentralization of administration and services" emerged as the most acceptable formula among participants.

Despite the relative acceptance of the idea of decentralization, the session revealed a set of concerns, the most prominent being the fear of fragmentation or multiplicity of authorities, the reproduction of corruption locally, the weakness of local administrative competencies, the absence of oversight and accountability, and the use of decentralization in a political or sectarian manner.

For this reason, participants emphasized that the success of any decentralized model requires a set of fundamental parameters that form the local community's vision of decentralization, the most prominent of which are:

01

**Priority of state unity:** Despite the widespread criticisms of traditional centralization, preserving the unity of the Syrian state remained a clear priority for participants, with repeated emphasis on the necessity of maintaining defense, foreign policy, sovereign institutions, national security, and strategic resources.

02

**Governance reform:** In the Damascene consciousness, decentralization was associated with governance reform more than with identity or regional demands. Participants focused on the necessity of reducing bureaucracy, enhancing efficiency, developing local administration, building accountability systems, and combating corruption.

03

**The relationship between administration and security:** The need to redefine the relationship between administration and security emerged as one of the key determinants for the success of decentralization, especially in light of the long security legacy of the Syrian state under the former regime.

04

**Community participation:** Local participation, engagement of civil society, enhancement of the role of youth and women, and building channels of communication between the state and society are essential conditions for rebuilding trust in institutions.



## Aleppo and Its Countryside: Decentralization as a Driver of Stability

Aleppo governorate represents one of the most complex Syrian cities in terms of its economic, social, and political structure, and it is also considered one of the most important environments that allows for understanding the transformations witnessed by the Syrian state during the years of the revolution and beyond. As a large governorate and a historical economic center, Aleppo formed a model of the complex relationship between the center and localities, between the local economy and the central state, and between civil society and political authority. Aleppo gained exceptional importance during the revolution as a result of the military, political, and administrative transformations it witnessed, as the city was subjected to multiple divisions, and various patterns of governance, administration, and control.

The transformations witnessed in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 reopened the discussion within Aleppo about the future of the Syrian state, the limits of centralization, and the nature of the relationship between the capital and the governorates, especially as the city directly experienced the consequences of economic collapse and multiple administrative and security frames of reference over the past years. In this context, the focus group session conducted in Aleppo reveals that decentralization for the local community is a matter directly related to administrative efficiency, reconstruction, economic development, service management, the flexibility of local administration, the reduction of bureaucracy, the relationship between the center and the local economy, and the restoration of stability.

## TDA

Participants in the Aleppo governorate session emphasized that they view the governance crisis as a crisis linked to the accumulations of the revolution and centralization together. They also pointed out that the past decade revealed the importance of having local administrations more capable of dealing with crises, services, and infrastructure, especially in large and complex cities like Aleppo. However, they also stressed that any expansion of localities' powers must be linked to the existence of clear legal and oversight institutions that prevent corruption or multiple frames of reference.

The issue of reconstruction was central to the discussions, as participants believed that excessive centralization impedes the ability of large cities like Aleppo to manage their development priorities effectively. Participants pointed out that Aleppo needed greater flexibility in local planning, broader powers in project management, facilitation of local investment, and a greater capacity to manage infrastructure and services. They also linked decentralization to the city's ability to restore its economic role, especially given the need to revitalize industry, trade, and productive infrastructure. At the same time, participants stressed that the success of local development requires general national coordination that prevents sharp disparities between governorates and preserves the unity of the national economy.

The security dimension was strongly present within Aleppo's sessions as a result of the complex experience the city lived during the revolution. The multiplicity of authorities and military and administrative control led to the formation of a broad social experience with the risks of chaos, division, and multiple frames of reference. For this reason, participants showed heightened sensitivity toward any model that could lead to multiple security authorities, a weak state, the militarization of local administration, and the absence of a unified legal frame of reference.

At the same time, participants expressed a clear rejection of a return to the traditional centralized security model that was associated with dominance, control, and the weakening of civilian administration. Hence, a perception emerged within the discussions calling for building a security model based on the rule of law, enhancement of civilian administration, strengthening of local police within the state's framework, improvement of the relationship between society and security institutions, and the separation between administration and direct security subordination.

The session gave a general impression that Aleppo's residents view stability as a fundamental condition for any successful decentralization process. The long revolution left deep marks on the city's social and economic fabric, and created persistent fears of a return to chaos or local conflicts.

## TDA

For this reason, participants stressed the importance of a unified state, stable legal institutions, an effective judiciary, and oversight and accountability systems as necessary conditions to ensure the success of any decentralized model.

Aleppo is considered one of the Syrian cities most connected to the national economy, and therefore it was deeply affected by the economic crisis and the revolution. The industrial, commercial, infrastructure, services, and transport sectors suffered extensive damage, and the city's ability to perform its traditional economic role declined. This was reflected in the discussions within the group, as participants directly linked decentralization to the city's ability to restore its economic role. Many of them believed that local administration needs broader powers in economic planning, attracting investments, supporting local industry, managing infrastructure, and facilitating services. They also pointed out that prolonged centralization contributed to disrupting local economic initiatives and linking most economic decisions to the center.

Participants also believed that rebuilding Syria after the revolution requires a more balanced model for the distribution of resources and investments, and they believed that decentralization could contribute to improving the distribution of resources, strengthening local development, enhancing cities' ability to determine their priorities, and reducing developmental disparities. However, they also emphasized the importance of keeping major economic policies within a unified national framework.

Despite the relative positive inclination toward decentralization, a set of concerns emerged in the discussions, the most prominent being the fear of multiple authorities and the possibility of a return to chaos or the militarization of administration, weak oversight, the reproduction of corruption locally, and economic disparities between governorates. For this reason, participants stressed the necessity of a clear legal framework, oversight institutions, an independent judiciary, general national coordination, and unified security institutions.

The session reflected a clear awareness of the risks of both excessive centralization and unregulated decentralization, alongside a growing inclination toward a hybrid model based on a center that retains sovereign files and localities that possess broader powers in services and development, effective legal and oversight institutions, and a broader partnership between the state and society. This is what makes the discussion about decentralization in Aleppo part of a broader process of rebuilding the Syrian state, the local economy, and the relationship between the center and localities after the revolution.



## The Central Region: Effective Decentralization That Preserves Sovereignty

In addition to the geographical space and administrative cost, the central region carries a heavy political and cultural legacy tied to a long history of tensions with the central authority. It also witnessed, during the past decades, deep transformations that directly affected its relationship with the state and its institutions. The transformations witnessed in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 reopened the discussion within this region about the future of the Syrian state, the nature of central authority, the limits of local participation, and the mechanisms for redistributing powers and roles between the center and localities. In this context, the discussion about decentralization had a special character, because it was not linked only to issues of administration and services, but also to issues of trust in the state, justice, political representation, development, collective memory, civil peace, and the relationship between security and society.

The focus group session conducted in Hama governorate revealed that the local community holds a complex position toward decentralization, based on rejecting a return to traditional authoritarian centralization, fearing chaos or multiple authorities, and a desire to build a more effective and representative local administration, while preserving state unity and stability.

## TDA

Beyond the visible levels of destruction, the region was also deeply affected by the transformations of the general landscape in Syria after the revolution, whether at the social, economic, or security level. The region witnessed a wide economic decline, internal displacement, pressures on services, a decline in agricultural and productive sectors, and an escalation of security and social concerns. The social fabric was also affected, and feelings of distrust and fear of a return to traditional security approaches intensified.

The session indicated that local administration within the governorate remained limited in its powers, while most administrative and development decisions were linked to the center, which led to weak response to local needs, slow project implementation, bureaucratic inflation, weak accountability, and a decline in the effectiveness of local institutions. Participants also believed that centralization contributed to disrupting local initiatives and reducing the role of local communities in planning and decision-making. Hence, decentralization for them was linked to the idea of redistributing powers, strengthening local administration, improving services, building more representative institutions, and enhancing transparency and accountability. However, participants also stressed that the success of any decentralized model requires a comprehensive reform of the state's structure and institutions, and not merely a limited administrative transfer of powers.

The issue of local representation emerged clearly in the discussions, as participants believed that prolonged centralization contributed to weakening political and community participation within the governorate. Participants called for expanding the role of local councils, strengthening local elections, including civil society, empowering youth and women, and building community participation channels. They also believed that decentralization could constitute an opportunity to rebuild the relationship between society and the state on a more participatory and just basis.

The security dimension was among the most prevalent issues in Hama's sessions, as local memory was deeply linked to the security approach that governed the relationship between the state and society for decades. Hence, participants believed that any genuine decentralization process must be linked to rebuilding trust between society and the state, and to separating local administration from traditional security dominance. At the same time, the discussions showed heightened sensitivity toward issues of stability and civil peace, especially in light of concerns related to the possibility of a return to tensions, chaos, or multiplicity of authorities.

## TDA

Therefore, there was no support in the sessions for models that would lead to the fragmentation of the state or multiplicity of security frames of reference, and a clear emphasis emerged on the importance of keeping sovereign institutions within the state's framework, the state's monopoly on weapons, the rule of law, and the building of more professional security institutions, but with the development of a new model for the relationship between security and society based on protecting citizens, judicial oversight, enhancing civilian administration, and building community trust. Hama governorate was significantly affected by the Syrian economic crisis, especially in the agricultural and productive sectors that form a fundamental part of the governorate's economy. Participants pointed to problems of unemployment, declining investment, weak services, deteriorating infrastructure, internal and external migration, and rising living costs. They also believed that prolonged centralization contributed to weak local development and linked most economic decisions to the center.

Participants directly linked decentralization to the issue of local development, as they considered that expanding localities' powers could contribute to improving services, developing infrastructure, supporting the local economy, improving resource management, and enhancing local investments. However, they also emphasized the importance of national policies that ensure justice among governorates and prevent sharp developmental disparities.

Participants also believed that decentralization could contribute to strengthening the sense of citizenship if linked to transparency, justice, and participation. At the same time, the sessions showed the existence of a set of concerns, the most prominent being the fear of chaos or multiplicity of authorities, the local reproduction of corruption, the weakness of administrative competencies, the exploitation of decentralization in a sectarian or political manner, and the absence of oversight and accountability.

The Hama session reveals a set of fundamental parameters that form the local community's vision of decentralization, the most prominent of which are the priority of rebuilding trust, the linkage of decentralization to issues of developmental justice, political participation, local representation, and the improvement of the relationship between society and institutions, not to mention the rejection of traditional security centralization. Hence, it seems that the most prevalent vision in Hama's sessions is building a model based on a center that retains sovereign files and localities that are more capable of managing their own affairs, more effective legal and oversight institutions, and a new relationship between the state and society based on participation, trust, and rule of law.



## Hasaka Governorate: Decentralization as a Framework for Eliminating Marginalization

Hasaka governorate, and more broadly the Jazira region and northeastern Syria, has exceptional specificity in the Syrian discussion about decentralization, because it combines several elements that make it one of the most complex Syrian environments in approaching the relationship between the center and localities. It is a region with clear national, religious, and cultural diversity, and with strategic economic resources, especially oil, gas, wheat, and water. It also went through a relatively different governance experience from the rest of the Syrian regions during the years of the revolution, through the model of self-administration, and the local, administrative, security, and educational institutions associated with it, which put forward a political discourse based on recognizing pluralism and local participation.

Therefore, the decentralization discussion in Hasaka starts from a deep political, administrative, and social experience with a partially existing local governance model, and with a long memory of feelings of marginalization under the centralized Syrian state. Hence, decentralization in the perspective of the local community in Hasaka appears linked to issues that go beyond administration and services to include: constitutional recognition of diversity, justice in resource distribution, political representation, identity management, the relationship between the center and the peripheries, and the future of Syrian state unity on more just contractual bases.

## TDA

Syrian centralization over the past decades led to management of strategic resources almost completely by the center, while local communities continued to feel that their wealth was being extracted and managed away from them, without sufficient dividend in development, services, and employment opportunities. This generated a deep sense of economic and developmental grievance, which made the question of decentralization in Hasaka directly linked to the question of justice in resource distribution, and not merely to expanding municipal powers or improving local administration.

Hasaka stands out for its wide social, national, religious, and cultural diversity, encompassing Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, and multiple religious and cultural components. This diversity made the region a sensitive space in the Syrian discussion about national identity and the management of difference. The problem, in the participants' perspective, lies in the way diversity was managed by the central state, which was historically characterized by cultural stereotyping, political marginalization, and weak recognition of linguistic and cultural rights. The Hasaka session showed that decentralization is understood locally as an opportunity to manage this diversity in a more just and flexible manner, through recognizing local languages, enhancing balanced representation, preventing national or religious exclusion, and expanding participation in decision-making. However, this vision is not without concerns, as participants fear that national or cultural specificity could become a tool for domination, sectarian allocation, or exclusion if citizenship and constitutional guarantees are absent.

The experience of self-administration is considered one of the most important factors that shaped Hasaka's local community's perception of decentralization. The region lived through a relatively different governance model during the years of the revolution, which relied on building local, administrative, security, and educational institutions, and introduced a political discourse based on recognizing national and linguistic plurality, expanding women's participation, and representing local components. Participants in the focus group's assessment of this experience was somewhat complex. On one hand, they acknowledged some of its advantages, especially regarding the introduction of education in Kurdish and Syriac, opening the field for the representation of some components, expanding women's participation in the public sphere, and enhancing the local sense of representation compared to the traditional centralized model.

## TDA

On the other hand, clear criticisms appeared regarding the weakness of services, poor resource management, rampant corruption, absence of transparency, weak administrative expertise, the centralization of decision-making within some institutions, in addition to issues of mandatory conscription and its social repercussions. This complex assessment reveals that participants distinguish between "the idea of decentralization" as a principle for redistributing power and recognizing diversity, and "the reality of the existing experience" as a practical experience that may be criticized and reviewed.

This distinction is important because it prevents the discussion from being reduced to a binary position for or against self-administration. The local community, as reflected in the session, does not reject the idea of local administration or decentralization, but demands that it be more transparent, representative, efficient, and accountable.

Participants focused clearly on governance problems. There were recurrent references to the absence of accountability, weak oversight, inadequate budget disclosures, weak transparency in resource management, and the spread of an administrative culture in which patterns of corruption and nepotism accumulated. This means that decentralization in Hasaka is measured by the ability of local institutions to be subject to accountability and capable of managing resources with justice and efficiency. Decentralization that is not subject to oversight could become, in the participants' view, a transfer of corruption from the center to the localities, or a reproduction of new domination in the name of local specificity.

For this reason, participants focused on the importance of establishing independent oversight mechanisms, civil society's participation in oversight, declaring budgets, enhancing financial transparency, and building effective accountability systems. These demands reveal that the local community in Hasaka requires institutional guarantees that prevent the misuse of decentralization.

It can be said that the question of resources was at the heart of the decentralization discussion in Hasaka. Participants focused on oil, gas, agriculture, wheat, and water as strategic resources that cannot be separated from the future of the relationship between the center and the region. Through the discussions, it became clear that the crisis lies in the way resources are managed and their revenues distributed.

## TDA

Participants expressed a widespread feeling that the region contributed greatly to the national economy, but did not receive what corresponds to its productive role in terms of services, development, and infrastructure. Therefore, demands emerged for reformulating the economic relationship between the center and localities through allocating a share of resource revenues to regions of production, establishing more independent local budgets, adopting fair distribution criteria, and enhancing community oversight over spending.

However, these demands did not take on a separatist character or a call for local monopoly of resources. The discussion revealed awareness that strategic resources must remain part of national wealth, but while achieving greater justice in the distribution of revenues, in a way that prevents the continuation of local communities' feelings of marginalization.

Despite the region's wealth in resources, participants focused on the deterioration of services and infrastructure, including electricity, roads, health, education, and employment opportunities. This contradiction between the abundance of resources and the weakness of services forms one of the most important determinants of Hasaka's perception of decentralization. Decentralization here is understood as a tool for converting resources into tangible local development, by enabling localities to plan their development and manage their economic and social priorities within a just national framework. Hence, local development in Hasaka is linked to three main conditions: a fair share of resource revenues, transparent management of local spending, and community and institutional oversight that prevents corruption and waste.

Hasaka lives within an extremely complex security context, as a result of multiple military and political forces, local security arrangements linked to self-administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces, in addition to the region's sensitive relationship with Türkiye, Iraq, and the rest of the Syrian geography. This reality made the question of decentralization closely linked to the future of security and state unity. Participants showed concern about the possibilities of fragmentation, sectarian allocation, formal decentralization, and the domination of new local forces, and the local reproduction of authoritarianism.

## TDA

Alongside the criticism of centralization, concerns emerged about the domination of new local forces in the name of decentralization. This reflects an advanced awareness that the danger does not come only from the center, but may also come from unaccountable localities. Therefore, participants linked the success of decentralization to the existence of oversight, accountability, and genuine representation of diversity, and to preventing the monopolization of decision-making by a single party, force, or component. Hence, acceptable decentralization in Hasaka is pluralistic and participatory decentralization, not closed, partisan, or factional decentralization.

The subject of national, religious, and cultural diversity formed one of the most prominent themes in the Hasaka session. Calls recurred for constitutional recognition of pluralism, respect for local languages, guaranteeing balanced representation, preventing national or religious exclusion, and promoting mutual participation. Participants believed that traditional Syrian centralization failed to manage diversity because it dealt with national identity from a monodimensional angle, and did not provide a just framework for recognizing cultural and linguistic specificities. In contrast, decentralization can provide a more flexible model if coupled with equal citizenship and legal guarantees.

Despite the demand for recognizing diversity, no inclination toward dismantling national identity or replacing it with closed local identities appeared in the session. The idea of a "comprehensive social contract" that guarantees the rights of all components within a unified national framework emerged. This means that the local community in Hasaka does not see an essential contradiction between recognizing specificity and belonging to a unified Syria, and believes that genuine unity cannot continue without recognition, justice, and representation.

Hence, decentralization in Hasaka is an entry point for redefining Syrian citizenship on more pluralistic and equitable bases.

One of the most distinctive features of the Hasaka session was the clear presence of the women's dimension, where issues of women's participation, representation, justice, and rejection of symbolic representation were discussed. Women's contributions included criticism of some experiences that presented women's presence in a symbolic manner without granting them genuine influence in decision-making. This raises an important question in any future decentralized model: does participation mean merely a formal presence of different groups in institutions, or does it mean an actual capacity to influence decisions? For the participants, it seems that the required decentralization must ensure genuine participation for women, not limited to seats or slogans.

Youth participants focused more on migration, the absence of opportunities, weak development, the importance of competence, and the need to renew local elites. This reflects that decentralization in Hasaka is also linked to the future of youth and their ability to survive, participate, and work within their communities. If decentralization does not become a tool for improving development, creating employment opportunities, and empowering youth, it may remain merely an administrative arrangement incapable of addressing the deep causes of migration, frustration, and weak trust in institutions.

The Hasaka/Qamishli session reveals that the local community views decentralization as a necessity for reformulating the relationship between the center and the region, but one conditioned by a set of guarantees. It must address historical marginalization and link stability to justice in resource distribution. Recognition of diversity must be constitutional and institutional. State unity must be based on a just contract, not coercive centralization. Through this perspective, Hasaka appears as one of the Syrian environments that most links decentralization to the question of the new social contract, more than linking it only to improving services. Participants also believed that decentralization in the new Syria will not succeed if it does not address three fundamental questions: the question of identity and recognition, the question of resources and justice, and the question of governance and accountability. Without addressing these questions, decentralization will remain either an unfeasible slogan, or a fragile arrangement that reproduces the same crises of centralization in new local forms.



## Idleb Governorate: A Cautious Attitude to Decentralization

Idleb occupies a special position in the Syrian decentralization debate, not only because it is a governorate that has experienced one of the most peculiar patterns of local governance during the years of revolution, but also because it represents a condensed case for understanding the relationship between the collapse of traditional centralization, the rise of ad hoc local administration, the overlap of civilian and military, and the expanding roles of organizations and community initiatives in managing daily life. From this perspective, Idleb can be seen as a social and administrative space that has experienced a practical and direct test of the idea of local governance under exceptional circumstances.

During the years of the revolution, Idleb experienced a state of "forced decentralization," which led to the formation of the Salvation Government, networks of local and international organizations, military actors, and community initiatives. Although this experience has given residents practical experience in managing local affairs, it has also exposed the fragility of governance when there is no overarching legal reference and clear institutional oversight.

## TDA

This reality has provided the local community with hands-on experience in dealing with close-range management, and has opened the door to community and professional initiatives in sectors such as health, education, relief and basic services. At some stages, residents felt that the administration's proximity to the community allowed for greater responsiveness and flexibility, especially when local action was linked to organizations, training and volunteering. However, this relatively positive experience did not eliminate the underlying structural problems, especially the weakness of the legal terms of reference, overlap of the civilian and the military, and absence of stable oversight systems.

With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the general political framework that governed the debate over Idleb and decentralization changed. The question has become how to integrate the accumulated local experience into a new national project to rebuild the Syrian state. The Idleb session shows that the participants are clearly aware of this problem. They pointed out that the Idleb experience does not represent full decentralization, but a hybrid model dictated by the conditions of the revolution. They also stressed that the implementation of decentralization in Syria cannot be done by transferring the experience of one region to another, and that it needs to be implemented through a gradual national plan that takes into account the differences in administrative, social and economic structures between governorates. The Idleb debate did not reject the role of the center and demanded having a center capable of setting public policies and ensuring the unity of the state and localities that have broader executive, service, and development powers.

Participants expressed this reality by criticizing what they described as the militarized mentality in the management of civilian institutions, which implies poor consultation, lack of accountability, limited transparency, and the prioritization of security at the expense of development and services. Some participants believed this pattern reproduced authoritarian features similar to traditional centralism, albeit with a different context and actors.

Therefore, participants' perspective on decentralization in Idleb is based on an important distinction between "the existence of a local administration" and "effective decentralization". The mere existence of local institutions, councils, or administrative structures does not necessarily mean decentralization, unless these institutions are elected, accountable, or able to make their decisions within a clear legal framework.

## TDA

Despite criticism, the session showed that the Idleb experience created a societal awareness of the importance of local participation and civil action, especially in the health, education, and relief sectors. Openness to organizations, trainings and volunteering has contributed to expanding the local community's awareness of the role of civic initiatives in managing public affairs. But this experience, according to the discussions, remained governed by a fragile political, security, and institutional framework, making it insufficient to establish a stable decentralized model.

Hence, participants seemed more inclined to view decentralization as a gradual path rather than an immediate decision. The problem is building the environment that makes these powers usable. This, according to the opinions put forward, requires community awareness, qualified cadres, effective oversight, clear laws, and institutions capable of regulating the relationship between the center and localities.

The issue of public services occupied a central position in the Idleb session. Participants directly linked decentralization to the ability to improve basic sectors. Participants' interventions reflected a high level of frustration towards the reality of services. Education sector was described to be in a state of severe deterioration, pointing to the existence of administrative confusion, weakness in planning, and the absence of a clear vision for the management of educational and service institutions. This focus reveals that decentralization in local consciousness is linked to the everyday question of citizens: Who runs schools? Who plans for hospitals? Who decides the priorities of roads, water and electricity? Who has the authority to respond quickly to a local problem? Therefore, some participants were of the view that the management that is closer to the people might be better able to understand needs and set priorities, because each region is better aware of its social and service conditions.

But this inclination towards local administration was not absolute. Other participants expressed that the deterioration of services was not only due to the form of the administrative system, but also to a lack of financial and human resources and general political and economic conditions. This distinction is important because it prevents decentralization from becoming a simplified technical prescription for all crises, and emphasizes that improving services also requires resources, competencies, stability, and a supportive institutional environment.

The session showed a clear awareness of the significant disparity in the level of services between cities, rural areas and camps. Idleb is not a homogeneous social or service unit; it includes urban centers, rural areas, vast camps for displaced people, and environments with different needs. Hence, the idea that close-range local administration might be better able to understand these disparities and prioritize each region according to its own needs.

Economically, Idleb suffers from deep fragility caused by developments in the overall landscape, population pressure, weak productive infrastructure, and the dependence of many sectors on aid or informal economy. Weak financial and human resources were shown at the session to be one of the main obstacles to an effective local model. Without real resources, decentralization can turn into a transfer of responsibilities rather than an actual empowerment of local communities. Participants therefore emphasized the need to couple decentralization with building a financial and administrative system that allows municipalities to manage part of their resources, prioritize spending, and provide centralized support to the most vulnerable areas. Fairness in the distribution of resources is as important as the distribution of powers, because local administration will not be able to improve services or development unless it has the minimum financial and human tools.

In Idleb, the decentralization debate cannot be separated from the security context. The governorate has lived for many years under the shadow of the multiplicity of authorities and military forces and security pressures, which made participants more sensitive to any model that might lead to chaos, multiplicity of references, or militarization of civilian institutions.

## TDA

Hence, many participants stressed the need for a strong center that handles sovereignty and security issues and acts as a guarantor of the unity of the state and the prevention of disintegration. On the other hand, this does not mean accepting the reproduction of the traditional security approach. Participants demonstrated a clear rejection of the militarized mentality in the management of civilian institutions, and expressed that the success of decentralization required the presence of civil administration, the separation of services and development from the logic of security control, and building institutions subject to law and control.

The session showed that the fear of disintegration, consolidation of sub-identities and external interventions was strongly present in the discussion. Participants seemed to distinguish between decentralization as an orderly delegation of powers within the state and chaotic or uncontrolled models that could deepen division or weaken the state. Therefore, the most accepted model in Idleb is one based on a strong center that sets public policies and localities with broad executive powers, as well as oversight and accountability, and this is done with the philosophy of "gradual implementation" and "protection of the state".

Although Idleb is not usually presented in the Syrian debate as a pluralistic environment in the broad national or religious sense as in north and east Syria, the Idleb session showed that management of diversity was present in the discussion from another angle, related to the unity of the state, local identities, fear of division, and the relationship between citizenship and local authority. Participants saw that misapplication of decentralization could lead to strengthening sub-identities or weakening the state, but could turn into a gateway to building a more stable and just state if associated with citizenship, participation, and justice in the distribution of resources. Here, citizenship has taken a central position as the umbrella framework that allows for the management of diversity without disintegration.

Participants stressed the importance of a clear constitution, an independent constitutional court, rights guaranteed by law, and an inclusive national dialogue. This reflects a realization that decentralization must be part of the re-establishment of the Syrian state itself. The absence of legal safeguards can make decentralization vulnerable to political, factional, or local utilization, while a clear constitutional framework can transform it into a tool to promote unity and participation.

## TDA

The issue of corruption was one of the most prominent issues in the debate. Participants thought that decentralization could become a means of reproducing networks of corruption and nepotism at local level if oversight and accountability were absent. There have been demands to end intransparent appointments, involve the community in the selection of officials, develop periodic and public reports, and establish clear budgets for administrative units.

A relatively structural understanding of the problem of corruption also emerged, with some participants linking corruption to poor salaries and economic conditions, which means that in addition to laws and penalties, the fight against corruption requires administrative and economic reform that promotes efficiency, independence, and transparency.

The Idleb session reveals that the local community tends to support decentralization in theory, and treats it with apparent caution, aware of the complexities of its application in a post-conflict environment, which suffers from poor resources, instability, lack of institutional awareness, and the accumulation of conflicting experiences with local governance. Idleb therefore presents a conditional and pragmatic vision based on drawing on the expertise of the local administration while overcoming the elements of fragility that accompanied the experience during the revolution.

The session showed that Idleb favored more a realistic and cautious conception of decentralization, based on an initial acceptance of the redistribution of powers and roles, but under clear conditions related to stability, oversight, resources, efficiency, incrementalism, and state unity. Participants do not call for a return to traditional centralization, nor do they accept chaotic or unbridled decentralization, and they are looking for a formula for a balance between a strong center that guarantees public policies and state unity, and localities capable of managing services and development and responding to the actual needs of the population.

Hence, Idleb can be considered an important indicator that the Syrian decentralization debate is moving towards a pragmatic approach that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between centralization and decentralization, and seeks a special Syrian model that benefits from the experiences of the revolution and local administration, without reproducing its fragility, the militarization of its institutions, or its absence of legal reference.



## Syrian Coast: A Decentralization that Reduces Corruption and Ensures Civil Peace

The Syrian coastal area is one of the environments that has remained relatively far from extensive military destruction compared to other Syrian cities and governorates, but at the same time, the effects of war have been felt profoundly at the levels of governance, services, trust in the state, local economy, and the relationship between society and institutions. From this angle, the Syrian Coast reveals an important dimension in the Syrian decentralization debate: the need to redistribute powers and roles also stems from environments that have ostensibly remained more stable, but have suffered from prolonged erosion of services, weak local administration, the accumulation of corruption, and the decline in the center's ability to respond to the daily needs of communities.

The coast focus group session showed that decentralization from a community perspective is being presented as a practical tool for improving services, reducing bureaucracy, strengthening oversight, and gradually building trust between citizens and public institutions. Therefore, the discussions came closer to a functional, service, and development approach to decentralization, with a clear presence of concerns about stability, state unity, and fear of chaos or poor implementation.

## TDA

After December 2024, the coastal area has become all the more critical in the Syrian context, as it has become one of the regions that needs careful policies to rebuild trust and civil peace and redefine the relationship between the local community and the new state. Fears of chaos, division and weak institutions emerged in the discussions, as opposed to a clear desire to improve management and services and hold institutions accountable. In this context, the coast's perspective on decentralization emerges as a cautious and pragmatic one, and it seeks a formula that allows the governorate to manage its service and development needs more efficiently, while the center remains a guarantor of unity, sovereignty, and national balance.

One of the highlights of the Coastal area session was that the decentralization debate started from everyday experience with public services. There have been repeated references to declining water services, deteriorating roads, poor infrastructure, uneven levels of services between regions, and high costs versus declining quality. These issues were presented as isolated technical problems and as an indication of a deeper crisis in the way local affairs were managed. Participants saw that remote central administration could not accurately understand the priorities of villages, cities, and towns, and that linking service decisions to lengthy centralized processes made the response slow, costly, and ineffective. Hence, the idea of a "close-range decision" emerged as one of the most important ideas in the Tartous session. When the authority is close to citizens, they can diagnose the problem more quickly, prioritize more accurately, and be accountable to the community.

The session showed a clear rejection of absolute models, whether rigid centralization or unbridled decentralization. That is why the idea of a hybrid system based on the centrality of sovereign and strategic issues, the decentralization of services, local administration and development emerged strongly. Participants expressed this in various ways ultimately suggesting that the state must maintain sovereignty, while service and development details should be left to the localities. In doing so, the coastal area presents a clear vision of functional decentralization: a strong center in sovereign issues, and strong localities in service and development issues, with a clear distribution of powers and oversight and accountability mechanisms that prevent corruption and mismanagement.

The Syrian coast is a space that carries security and social sensitivity, especially after the fall of the regime. Although the session did not address decentralization as a direct security issue, stability concerns were clearly present. Participants seemed careful not to turn decentralization into a gateway to chaos, division, or multiplicity of authorities. This caution is understandable in an environment that has undergone profound political and social transformations after 2024, and in a region that needs to rebuild trust between society and the new state, and between different social components. Therefore, decentralization should not be presented in isolation from stability and civil peace, and it should be considered as a path that should promote, rather than undermine, trust.

The crisis of confidence was central to the session. Participants linked centralization to bureaucracy, slowness, poor responsiveness, lack of accountability, and lack of transparency. Hence, decentralization has emerged as a tool for rebuilding trust through tangible achievement. The idea that trust is built on implementation was recurrent in the debate. In other words, citizens need to see firsthand the results in improving water, roads, cleanliness, services, and combating corruption.

## TDA

Therefore, decentralization in Tartous was linked to the idea of a state that approaches citizens through service and accountability, rather than through control or centralized discourse. There was also awareness that trust also required an active community that participated in oversight, maintained public utilities, collaborated with local institutions, and exercised its role in accountability.

The Coastal area has been deeply affected by Syria's economic crisis, although it has not experienced extensive military destruction. The crisis has affected the standard of living, employment and services, the cost of living has risen and the ability of the population to meet their basic needs has declined. This has made the economic dimension strongly present in the decentralization debate. Participants saw excessive centralization as an impediment to development, as it slows down actions, limits the ability of municipalities to attract investment, and hinders local economic initiatives. In turn, expanding the powers of local administrations can help stimulate the local economy, by facilitating procedures, encouraging investment, and linking development to the needs of each region.

Participants clearly linked decentralization to local development. They believed that granting municipalities broader powers could help attract investments, attract expatriates, stimulate the local economy, improve job opportunities, develop infrastructure, and support local initiatives. An important idea was also raised on the Syrian diaspora; some participants considered that expanding local powers and creating a more flexible and transparent administrative environment may encourage Syrians abroad to invest in their home areas. This proposal reflects an awareness that development requires partnership between the center, municipalities, the private sector, expatriates and civil society. But at the same time, participants stressed that local development should remain part of an overarching national vision, so that decentralization does not turn into a greater disparity between rich and poor regions. The center should retain a role in redistributing resources and supporting less able areas, while municipalities manage their priorities and implement their projects more efficiently.

Corruption was one of the most prominent concerns at the session. Participants expressed a clear fear that decentralization could become a tool for redistributing corruption rather than addressing it, as the problem lies in a decades-long administrative culture based on nepotism, weak oversight, lack of competencies, and non-transparent appointments. Such awareness is important, because it prevents dealing with decentralization as an automatic solution.

## TDA

If powers are transferred to municipalities without transparency, accountability, and oversight, local administrations may become narrow centers of influence, and may become closer to local interest networks than being representative and service institutions. Therefore, Participants focused on the importance of good governance, including community oversight, digital transparency, authentic local elections, deterrent penalties, judicial independence, publication of budgets and plans, and clarity of recruitment standards.

The session showed clear sensitivity towards the question of diversity and sectarian fissure, especially in the context of the coastal area and the tensions seen after the fall of the regime. Participants stressed that diversity in Syria has become a problem due to political exclusion, poor justice, the erosion of inclusive national identity, and seeking refuge in sub-identities. In this context, decentralization is presented as part of a broader track that needs democracy and an inclusive constitution, party law, genuine elections and comprehensive national justice. Participants clearly expressed fear from the misuse of decentralization to increase local or sectarian divisions if the inclusive national terms of reference are absent. Therefore, they linked the success of decentralization to the presence of a national framework that protects citizenship and prevents the transformation of local administration into a tool for closed identities. Hence, the perspective of the coastal area to decentralization is based on a careful formula: recognition of local needs and expanding service and development powers, but all within a unified state, inclusive national identity and clear rule of law.

One of the highlights of the Coastal area session is its focus on the role of citizens themselves in the success of any decentralized model. Participants stressed that the protection of public facilities, the payment of fees, local monitoring, participation in elections and cooperation with municipalities are all essential elements for the success of local administration. This proposition reflects a relatively advanced understanding of decentralization as a two-way relationship: the state grants powers, resources and a legal framework, and society exercises control, participation, and responsibility. Decentralization means that municipalities also have the responsibility to manage and monitor these powers.

However, participants were realistic in their understanding of the limits of participation, noting that poverty, unemployment, people's preoccupation with securing their basic needs, and lack of trust in institutions are all factors that limit the ability of citizens to engage effectively in local affairs. This means that community participation cannot succeed in isolation from the improvement of economic and service conditions and gradual trust-building.



## Jaramana as a Condensed Diversity Model: Decentralization as Guarantor of National Frameworks

The position of the community in Jaramana on decentralization cannot be understood in isolation from this complex context. The city is located at Damascus outskirts, that is, within the administrative and political sphere closest to the center of the state, but it is culturally and doctrinally linked to Suweida. At the same time it experiences obvious local problems related to services, urban expansion, population pressure, local representation, and the need to have management that is closer to population. Therefore, the debate on decentralization there does not take a separatist or regional tone, but rather a framework for reorganizing the relationship between the state and the community.

Jaramana is one of the Syrian environments where social, religious and regional diversity is clearly visible. Historically, it was a space of social specificity, and this specificity was further complicated by the waves of displacement that it witnessed during the revolution. This has led to the formation of a community that is diverse in terms of social, regional, and economic backgrounds, making issues of representation, participation, and diversity management firmly present in the debate on decentralization.

## TDA

Jaramana's session showed that the most prominent entry point for the discussion on decentralization was the service and administrative reality. Participants focused on accumulated daily problems related to cleanliness, traffic, sanitation, urbanization, pollution, and poor infrastructure. Although these issues appear to be straightforward service issues, they reveal a deep crisis in local governance linked to weak powers, resources, and coordination between different levels of administration. Participants linked the deterioration of services to the lack of decision-making administration and to the lack of clarity of responsibilities between the municipality, the governorate, ministries and central institutions. In such a situation, citizens are unable to identify who is responsible for the default eroding trust in public administration and reinforcing the sense that the problem is the governance structure that manages it. Therefore, decentralization has emerged in the debate as a means of clarifying responsibilities and holding local administration accountable for its performance. When a local entity has effective powers, it can be held accountable directly, while the current overlap of powers leads to blaming different institutions.

The discussions showed a clear legal and administrative awareness among participants, especially with regard to the gap between legal texts and actual implementation. Some participants pointed out that some laws give local councils considerable powers in theory, but these powers are devoid of substance due to the intervention of the center, poor resources, administrative whimsical fluctuation or lack of political will. This means that the problem lies in the absence of an environment that allows for the implementation of decentralization. Decentralization needs capable institutions, financial resources, transparency, oversight, and an administrative culture that respects the boundaries of jurisdictions.

The issue of local security was one of the most distinctive themes of the Jaramana session. Participants discussed the experience of involving the people of the area in security activities within an official framework affiliated with the state. Some considered that this experience contributed to achieving a degree of stability because it relied on the knowledge of the people of the area about the peculiarities of the local community and their ability to communicate with residents. The idea that local security enhances the effectiveness of the security establishment if it remains regulated by law and subject to official and judicial oversight has emerged in the discussion. The presence of security or police officers from the area may contribute to reducing the gap between society and the security establishment, and increase the ability of agencies to understand local problems, such as drugs, violations, and social tensions. But participants did not deal with this idea without reservations. They pointed to the dangers of nepotism, conflicts of interest, and weak impartiality, especially when social and family relationships interfere with security work. Therefore, the locally accepted model is based on organized local security within the state, rather than on independent local formations or parallel security authorities.

Jaramana's perspective on local security is linked to a broader question of trust between society and the state. The session showed that residents want a security institution that is close to the community, but at the same time subject to law and not based on local or personal loyalties. This means that, to be acceptable, local security must combine the three pillars of proximity to society: regulation within the state institution, oversight and the rule of law.

## TDA

Jaramana lives a complex economic reality. It has a relatively extensive commercial and service activity, but at the same time it suffers from high population pressure and clear social and economic inequalities. Population growth, displacement and pressure on services have increased the burden on local administration, at a time when these transformations have not been accompanied by a similar expansion of powers or resources. Participants focused on an important question related to the fate of local resources and revenues: What is left for the city? What is transferred to the center? How can the fee collection be linked to services? These questions reveal that decentralization in Jaramana is also understood from a financial and administrative perspectives, not just from a political perspective. A city with large economic activities needs a clearer financial system that allows it to manage part of its resources, that can be reflected in improved services and infrastructure. Participants called for a transparent system that determines what remains locally and what goes to the center, while ensuring fair distribution between the richest and less capable regions.

The session showed a clear inclination towards what can be called "structured financial decentralization." The goal is to create a more transparent financial relationship between the center and municipalities. This requires defining domestic revenue, collection mechanisms, domestic spending ratios, and central transfers within clear and accountable rules.

Jaramana's session showed a clear rejection of the automatic link between decentralization and fragmentation. Participants believed that decentralization could be a tool to strengthen the unity of the state if applied within a clear national framework, as it allowed local communities to feel represented and involved in the management of their affairs.

## TDA

But this acceptance is conditional on not turning decentralization into a tool for closed identities, quota system, or division. By virtue of its diversity, Jaramana recognizes that mismanagement of diversity can lead to serious tensions, and therefore there was emphasis on citizenship and inclusive national identity as the governing framework of any decentralized model.

One of the central ideas that emerged in the discussion was that what is required was not to abolish the role of the center, but to redefine it. The center must be a guarantor of balance, rights and the law, not a hegemonic authority that overruns localities. This perception reflects significant maturity in the understanding of decentralization, distinguishing between the state as a crucial national framework and authoritarian centralization as an administrative and political pattern that can be criticized and overcome.

Accordingly, Jaramana's preferred model is based on a center that protects the unity of the state and rights, localities that manage services and development, clear monitoring, community participation, and inclusive citizenship that transcends identity introversion.

A clear preference for election over appointment, and for accountability by the people over the top-down management, emerged at the session. Participants believed that elected local administration was more representative of the needs of the people and more accountable in case of default. But participants did not lose sight of the challenges of local elections, especially in an environment that may be affected by personal relationships, fanaticism, sub-identities, and a weak programmatic culture. Therefore, ideas have been put forward regarding raising the criteria for candidacy, enhancing program-based competition, developing new electoral laws, and obliging local councils to announce plans that can be evaluated periodically.

The session reveals that participants understand that local democracy is a process that needs to accumulate experience, culture and institutions. Elections alone are not enough if they are not accompanied by financial transparency, community oversight, local media, and a civil society capable of follow-up. Therefore, decentralization in Jaramana is understood as a process of cultural, administrative, and political transformation, so Jaramana can be seen as an important indicator that decentralization in Syria's diverse environments needs delicate consideration; building a system of trust, accountability, and representation capable of managing diversity, improving services, and promoting national belonging at the same time.

## Reading the General Attitude Toward Imagined Scenarios on Decentralization Themes

The focus group survey results reveal the features of a Syrian social perception that clearly tends toward adopting a "balanced decentralized" model based on redistributing powers and roles between the center and localities within the framework of a unified state, without slipping into disintegrating or separatist models.

**In the scenario related to the judiciary and the local-center relationship**, which addressed the idea of appointing a public attorney and judges from the people of the region while leaving the final appointment to the Judicial Council.

The results showed a clear inclination toward a hybrid formula combining the local and the central, where 45.83% preferred that the Judicial Council make appointments after nomination by the Provincial Council, while 34.72% supported the option of "full local selection with formal approval from the Ministry", whereas only 13.89% preferred fully centralized appointment, and 1.39% considered that "there is no significant difference between the options".

The responses related to the general principle also showed that 30.56% "agree" that the presence of judges from the locality increases justice and trust, 30.56% answered "maybe", compared to 19.44% who "disagree", 8.33% who "strongly disagree", and 8.33% who expressed "strong agreement". These results reflect a general conviction about the importance of the local dimension in building trust in the judicial institution, alongside a continuing need for a central national reference that prevents the judiciary from becoming a closed local structure or one subject to narrow social relations.

TDA

A public attorney and judges must be appointed by the people of the region, with the final appointment remaining with the Judicial Council. Which option is closest to your view?	Percentage
The Judicial Council appoints based on nomination by the Provincial Council.	45.83
Fully local selection with nominal approval from the Judicial Council	34.72
It is best for the appointment to be entirely by the Judicial Council (fully centralized)	13.89
There is no significant difference between the options	1.39

As a general principle, the presence of judges from the region increases justice and trust	Percentage
Agree	30.56
Maybe	30.56
Disagree	19.44
Strongly disagree	8.33
Strongly agree	8.33

In the scenario related to local regulations, which addressed the possibility of local councils issuing special regulations concerning markets, construction, the environment, and accommodation of the cultural specificity of localities, 54.17% preferred granting councils "extensive freedom within the constitution", while 43.06% supported "limited differences within a unified national framework".

Additionally, 50% of participants believed that differences in regulations between governorates could improve services, 23.61% expressed a hesitant position through the "maybe" option, 15.28% "strongly agreed", compared to 6.94% who "disagree" and 1.39% who "strongly disagree". These results reveal that the social attitude tends toward recognizing the peculiarities of localities and their need for regulatory flexibility, but within the limits of a shared national reference that prevents sharp contradictions between regions.

TDA

The local council wants to issue special regulations (such as regulating markets, construction, the environment, taking into account the cultural context of localities) that differ partially from the capital's regulations. What is the appropriate limit?	Percentage
The council has extensive freedom within the constitution	54.17
Limited differences are permitted within a unified national framework	43.06

As a general principle, differences in regulations between governorates may improve services	Percentage
Agree	50
Maybe	23.61
Strongly agree	15.28
Disagree	6.94
Strongly disagree	1.39

In the security domain, the results of the scenario related to appointing a police chief from the people of the region who reports to the Ministry of Interior showed that 50% of participants prefer "local selection with approval from the Ministry", while 29.17% supported "centralized appointment after consulting the governor or local council", whereas 9.72% chose "fully centralized appointment", and 8.33% chose "fully local selection". Additionally, 45.83% expressed "agreement" that the police chief's knowledge of the region's specifics improves security, and 38.89% "strongly agreed", while 11.11% answered "maybe", and only 1.39% rejected the idea completely. These results reveal that Syrian society has come to lean toward a security model that is closer to the local community and more understanding of its specificities, without relinquishing the central national reference of the security institution.

TDA

The provincial police chief is appointed from the people of the region, and reports to the Ministry of Interior. What is the most appropriate option?	Percentage
Local selection with approval by the Ministry	50
Centralized appointment after consulting the governor/local council	29.17
Fully centralized appointment	9.72
Fully local selection	8.33

As a general principle, the police chief's knowledge of the region's specifics improves security	Percentage
Agree	45.83
Strongly agree	38.89
Maybe	11.11
Strongly disagree	1.39

In the scenario related to community participation in the security domain, which addressed forming committees comprising notables, women, youth, and activists to cooperate with the police in resolving disputes and preventing crime, 41.67% considered this model "appropriate as organized partnership with the police", and 34.72% considered it "appropriate in a limited and advisory capacity", while 18.06% preferred that these committees have "a broad role in managing local security", whereas only 2.78% considered it "inappropriate and weakening to state authority". Additionally, 45.83% agreed that community participation reduces crime and increases trust, and 41.67% strongly agreed, while 6.94% answered "maybe", and only 2.78% rejected the idea. These results reflect a growing awareness among participants that security also requires local community partnership that enhances trust and social prevention of violence and disputes.

Community committees (notables/activists/women/youth) are established to cooperate with the police to resolve minor disputes and prevent crime. What is your opinion?	Percentage
Appropriate as an organized partnership with the police	41.67
Appropriate in a limited and advisory capacity	34.72
Should have a broad role in managing local security	18.06
Inappropriate and weakens state authority	2.78

As a general principle, community participation reduces crime and increases trust	Percentage
Agree	45.83
Strongly agree	1.67
Maybe	6.94
Disagree	2.78

In the financial and service domain, the scenario related to collecting local fees and retaining a portion for spending within the region showed that 51.39% prefer keeping "most revenues locally," while 41.67% supported "a balanced ratio (sharing)" between the center and localities, whereas 2.78% believed that "only a small percentage remains locally," and 1.39% supported all revenues going to the center. Additionally, 47.22% agreed that retaining a portion of revenues locally improves services, and 44.44% strongly agreed, while 2.78% answered "maybe," and 1.39% rejected the idea, and 1.39% rejected it completely. These results indicate that the financial and developmental dimension constitutes one of the most important motivators for accepting decentralization, as participants believe that improving services requires empowering localities to manage a portion of their resources directly.

TDA

The local council collects local fees (sanitation, services) and retains a portion of them for spending within the region. What is the most appropriate distribution?	Percentage
Most revenues are retained locally	51.39
A balanced ratio (sharing)	41.67
A small percentage retained locally	2.78
All revenues go to the center	1.39

As a general principle, retaining a portion of revenues locally improves services	Percentage
Agree	47.22
Strongly agree	44.44
Maybe	2.78
Strongly disagree	1.39
Disagree	1.39

In the scenario related to launching industrial zones according to the needs of the provinces, 65.28% preferred that the decision be "local within a national framework," while 26.39% supported the Ministry making the decision "with local participation," and 4.17% chose "a fully local decision," whereas only 1.39% supported the decision being in the hands of the Ministry alone. Additionally, 55.56% agreed that regions know their economic needs better than the center, and 29.17% strongly agreed, while 9.72% answered "maybe," and 1.39% rejected the idea, and 1.39% rejected it completely. These results reflect widespread awareness of the importance of empowering localities to play a greater role in developmental and investment planning, while keeping this role within a unified national framework.

## TDA

The governorate wants to launch an industrial zone according to its own needs. Who decides?	Percentage
Local decision within a national framework	65.28
The Ministry with local participation	26.39
Fully local decision	4.17
The Ministry only	1.39

As a general principle, regions know their economic needs better than the center	Percentage
Agree	55.56
Strongly agree	29.17
Maybe	9.72
Strongly disagree	1.39
Disagree	1.39

Regarding local employment, the results showed that 56.94% consider giving priority to people from the region in some service jobs "acceptable with some controls," while 30.56% considered it "necessary to enhance stability," and 6.94% considered it "partially acceptable," compared to 2.78% who rejected it as "discrimination." Additionally, 47.22% agreed that employing people from the region improved public service, and 22.22% expressed "strong agreement," while 23.61% answered "maybe," and 2.78% rejected the idea. These results reveal an attempt to reconcile professional competence on one hand, and the need to enhance local attachment and community trust on the other.

## TDA

Priority is given in some service jobs (education, health) to people from the region. What is your opinion?	Percentage
Acceptable with some controls	56.94
Necessary to enhance stability	30.56
Partially acceptable	6.94
Rejected (discrimination)	2.78

Employing people from the region improves public service	Percentage
Agree	47.22
Maybe	23.61
Strongly agree	22.22
Disagree	2.78

In the educational domain, the scenario related to granting governorates flexibility in directing their schools in a way that takes into account the local environment showed that 51.39% prefer "extensive flexibility for regions," and 34.72% prefer "limited local additions upon ministry's approval," while 5.56% supported schools being fully subject to the governorate, and only 4.17% preferred absolute compliance with Ministry instructions. Additionally, 52.78% agreed that provincial oversight of the educational process helps take into account local specificity, while 16.67% answered "maybe," and 16.67% "disagree," and 5.56% "strongly disagree," while 5.56% expressed "strong agreement." These results reflect a tendency toward recognizing local specificity in the educational domain, but without breaking with the general national framework of education.

TDA

The governorate wants to direct the province's schools with behavioral instructions compatible with its environment. What is the appropriate limit?	Percentage
Extensive flexibility for regions	51.39
Limited local additions upon ministry's approval	34.72
Schools should be fully subject to the governorate	5.56
Absolute compliance with Ministry instructions	4.17

Provincial oversight of the educational process and control over education policies achieves education that takes into account local specificity	Percentage
Agree	52.78
Disagree	16.67
Maybe	16.67
Strongly disagree	5.56
Strongly agree	5.56

In the local mediation scenario, 40.28% believed that resolving minor disputes through reconciliation committees is "acceptable in limited cases," while 36.11% considered it "acceptable and organized," and 9.72% saw it as "fundamental and preferable to the judiciary in some cases," compared to 11.11% who rejected the idea in favor of the judiciary only. Additionally, 51.39% agreed that local mediation is faster and more effective, and 23.61% answered "maybe," and 8.33% strongly agreed, while 11.11% rejected the idea, and 2.78% rejected it completely. These results indicate a relative acceptance of the idea of local community mediation, but within limits that prevent it from becoming a complete substitute for the formal judiciary.

TDA

Minor disputes are resolved through local mediation (reconciliation committees) before resorting to courts. What is your opinion?	Percentage
Acceptable in limited cases	40.28
Acceptable and organized	36.11
Rejected, judiciary only	11.11
Fundamental and preferable to the judiciary in some cases	9.72

As a general principle, local mediation is faster and more effective	Percentage
Agree	51.39
Maybe	23.61
Disagree	11.11
Strongly agree	8.33
Strongly disagree	2.78

In the emergency management file, 40.28% supported "near-complete local management of emergencies," and 36.11% preferred "temporary broad powers," while 18.06% saw the need for "limited expansion of powers," and only 1.39% supported keeping powers fully centralized. Additionally, 62.5% agreed that decentralization in emergencies increases response speed, and 25% strongly agreed, while 6.94% answered "maybe," and 2.78% rejected the idea. These results reflect a clear conviction that

In emergency situations, the governorate is granted expanded powers to manage resources and make quick decisions. What is your opinion?	Percentage
Near-complete local management of emergencies	40.28
Broad temporary powers	36.11
Limited expansion of powers	18.06
Powers should remain centralized	1.39

As a general principle, decentralization in emergencies increases response speed	Percentage
Agree	62.5
Strongly agree	25
Maybe	6.94
Disagree	2.78

## TDA

The survey results reveal a clear Syrian social inclination toward adopting a "balanced decentralized" model based on redistributing powers and roles between the center and localities within the framework of a unified state, with relative rejection of both rigid centralization and unbridled decentralization.

The majority of participants showed a tendency to strengthen the role of local administrations in the areas of services, development, local planning, resource management, and emergencies, while keeping sovereign matters, such as defense, foreign policy, the general judiciary, and monetary policies, within the competencies of the central state.

The results also showed widespread acceptance of the idea of involving local communities in managing some security, social, and service matters, and of enhancing the role of community mediation, local police, and administration that is closer to residents, stemming from a growing conviction that localities are more capable of understanding their needs and their economic, social, and cultural specificities. In contrast, the results showed clear persisting concerns related to the possibility of decentralization turning into a source of local corruption, disparity between regions, or weakening of the state and division, which reflects a general tendency toward a decentralized model regulated by national oversight and clear constitutional rules.

Taken together, these positions reveal that decentralization in Syrian social consciousness is part of a broader process of rebuilding the state and the relationship between society and institutions on the foundations of participation, justice, efficiency, and balance between state unity and the effectiveness of localities.

## General Approach to Social Perception: Balanced Decentralization

From the social perspective, the need emerges to build a multi-level decentralized model that is not limited to the administrative dimension but also encompasses the financial and developmental dimensions as interconnected levels that together aim to enhance administrative effectiveness, achieve more balanced development, bring decision-making closer to citizens, and rebuild trust between society and the state. A model characterized by good management of diversity, committed to implementing transitional justice, and achieving the equation most needed for Syrian reality, for decentralization is a political, institutional, and social project that aims to reorganize the relationship between the state and society on new foundations based on: participation, justice, efficiency, transparency, and the rule of law, which makes the success of decentralization linked to the ability of Syrians to build a balanced governance model based on: a strong but non-dominant center + effective but non-separate localities + a genuine partnership between the state and society + justice in the distribution of resources and powers, in a way that allows for rebuilding trust, stability, justice, managing diversity, and the state together. Below is the set of social determinants:

## 1 **First: From Dependent Administration to Proactive Administration**

Local administrations in Syria suffered over the past decades from severe weakness in powers, resources, and autonomy, such that they were often reduced to mere executive links tied to the center, incapable of making effective decisions even in simple service matters. This model led to bureaucratic bloat and procedural complexity, where decisions related to services, infrastructure, or local projects often required multiple central approvals, leading to slow implementation, declining efficiency, and erosion of citizens' trust in public administration.

This also contributed to weakening the ability of local communities to participate in determining their developmental and service priorities, because decision-making remained distant from the communities that these policies were supposed to serve, and this situation is still in effect even under the new government.

Hence, the essence of administrative decentralization in Syria lies in granting local units actual and broad executive powers in managing sectors directly linked to the daily lives of residents, including: management of public services, local education, health, infrastructure, local transport, urban planning, and the environment. However, this transfer must be coupled with a genuine decision-making powers within the limits of local jurisdictions, away from excessive bureaucratic obstruction or central interventions that reproduce centralization in new forms. Administrative decentralization does not only mean establishing local institutions, but also empowering these institutions to operate flexibly and effectively, with clear mechanisms for coordination with the center.

At the same time, the success of administrative decentralization is linked to building genuine local capacities, because granting powers without developing cadres, systems, and institutions may lead to weak performance, conflicting decisions, or mismanagement. For this reason, Syria needs extensive programs to build the administrative and technical capacities of local councils, municipalities, and executive administrations, allowing them to transform from marginal and weak institutions into a key actor in managing local public affairs. Administrative decentralization should also be based on a precise equation that combines a center that sets national policies and general standards, and localities that possess flexibility in implementation and adaptation to their local specificities.

Therefore, the problem in the previous or current Syrian model lies in the absence of balance between central planning and local implementation.

# 2

## **Second: From Financial Dependence to Relative Independence**

Financial decentralization is one of the most sensitive and complex levels in any decentralized model, especially in states emerging from conflicts such as Syria. Syrian local administrations suffered for decades from near-complete financial dependence on the center, where most resources and revenues were collected centrally, while localities relied on central transfers that were often subject to political and bureaucratic considerations more than they were linked to the actual needs of the regions. This led to weakened capacity of local administrations for long-term planning or implementing independent development projects, and also deepened the feeling of marginalization in many regions that saw their resources being drained without this being reflected in the level of development and services in them.

Therefore, building a decentralized financial system in Syria is considered a fundamental condition for the success of any decentralization process. This requires granting local administrations broader powers in preparing their budgets, managing a share of their revenues, collecting some local fees and taxes, and setting local spending priorities. However, on the other hand, general financial policies must remain within the competency of the central state, ensuring the unity of the state's financial and monetary system and preventing sharp disparities or financial imbalances between regions.

Financial decentralization should also not become a tool for deepening economic disparities or entrenching the monopoly of some regions over resources and wealth. The existence of natural or economic resources in a particular governorate must remain part of the national wealth while ensuring that local communities receive a fair share of their returns.

For this reason, building a decentralized financial system in Syria requires a clear determination of local and central revenues, transparent mechanisms for financial transfers, a fair system for redistributing resources, and clear standards for spending and development.

At the same time, granting localities broader financial powers must be coupled with strict and transparent oversight systems that prevent corruption or mismanagement. Financial decentralization, in the absence of oversight, may lead to the emergence of local corruption networks or misuse of public resources. For this reason, local spending must be subject to judicial, financial, legislative, and community oversight, ensuring good management of public funds and achieving justice and efficiency.

# 3

## Third: Toward Local-Specific Development

The Syrian experience in all its stages has shown that development managed exclusively from the center often fails to understand the real needs of local communities or interact with the economic, social, and cultural specificity of each region. Furthermore, centralized development policies often led to concentrating investments and services in specific areas, while other regions suffered from marginalization, weak infrastructure, and lack of employment opportunities. Hence, local development should be an essential part of any decentralized model in Syria, such that governorates and local councils possess actual powers in developmental planning, managing local projects, attracting investments, developing the local economic structure, and supporting small and medium enterprises.

Developmental decentralization means granting local communities the ability to determine their economic and social priorities according to their needs, resources, and particular circumstances, instead of imposing unified development models from the center. Developmental decentralization also allows for the development of more flexible and diverse policies, so that each region can benefit from its comparative advantages and local potentials, whether in agriculture, industry, tourism, trade, or the local economy.

However, local development must not become isolated or competitive in a way that harms the unity of the national economy. For this reason, local development plans should be coordinated within a comprehensive national vision that ensures integration between regions, prevents sharp disparities, achieves developmental justice, and links local development to general national interests. Developmental decentralization also requires a stable legal and investment environment, institutions capable of planning, management, and monitoring, and a genuine partnership between the state, local administrations, the private sector, and civil society.

Decentralization is a necessity associated with rebuilding the state after the revolution. However, its success remains linked to the ability of Syrians to build a balanced model that combines state unity, the effectiveness of local administration, justice in resource distribution, balanced development, and community participation. Therefore, the real challenge facing the new Syria lies in building a multi-level governance model, based on a strong non-dominant center, effective non-separate localities, genuine partnership between the state and society, and a balance between national unity and local specificity. This is what ultimately makes decentralization part of a broader project to rebuild the Syrian state on foundations that are more just, flexible, and participatory after decades of centralization, war, and institutional collapse.

# 4

## **Fourth: The Decentralized Framework as a Structure to Manages Diversity and Build an Inclusive National Identity**

Cultural, national, religious, and sectarian plurality has contributed to making the issue of managing diversity one of the most complex and sensitive matters in post-revolution Syria, not to mention the repercussions of the way this diversity was managed over the past decades.

The revolution did not only lead to extensive destruction of infrastructure and institutions, but also reshaped the social, psychological, and political map of Syrian society, and pushed many local groups to seek refuge in their sub-identities in the face of violence, collapse, and loss of trust in the state.

The problem was not in the existence of diversity itself, for Syrian society was historically a diverse society in terms of nationalities, religions, sects, cultures, dialects, and regional specificity. Rather, it lay in the absence of a political and administrative model capable of managing this diversity in a just and balanced manner. The authoritarian centralization that ruled Syria for long decades dealt with diversity as a threat to be controlled or contained, more than a natural part of the Syrian national fabric. For this reason, local specificities were often marginalized, local administration was weakened, national identity was linked to political loyalty to the authority, the public space was subjected to intense central hegemony, trust between some local communities and the state eroded, and feelings of marginalization or exclusion festered among different segments of Syrians.

Decentralization emerges as one of the fundamental tools that can contribute to achieving this balance if applied wisely and in an organized manner. For this reason, decentralization in Syria should be based on respect for local specificity, and the protection of cultural and linguistic rights should become an important part of any future decentralized model. Equal citizenship means recognizing diversity within a unifying national framework that guarantees equal rights for all citizens. Therefore, recognizing cultural and linguistic plurality can be a factor for promoting stability and national belonging if organized within a clear constitutional and legal framework.

Managing diversity also relates to ensuring balanced representation within local and national institutions. The political exclusion or marginalization of any social component often leads to erosion of trust in the state, and reinforces isolationist or identity-based tendencies. Hence, decentralization should contribute to creating broader spaces for political and administrative participation, so that different components feel represented and capable of influencing decisions related to their lives and interests.

## TDA

The danger increases when the "diversity file" is politicized and turned into a tool for conflict, exclusion, or control. For this reason, decentralization should be based on the principle of equal citizenship, the rule of law, and the strengthening of national identity through consolidating the concept of citizenship, reinforcing national bonds, building inclusive institutions, and preventing the use of local administration for sectarian or separatist purposes. Accordingly, decentralization will appear as part of a broader national structure based on integration and cooperation between different regions.

This also requires developing educational, cultural, and media policies that enhance shared national belonging, and rebuild trust among Syrian components after years of revolution and division. Managing diversity is a long-term project related to rebuilding the Syrian national space itself. Recent local Syrian discussions have shown that the majority of Syrians accept diversity and fear its mismanagement. The main concern about decentralization is that this administration may turn into an entry point for division, sectarian allocation, or the reproduction of closed local authorities.

## 5

## **Fifth: Decentralization and Local Security in Syria: Between Rebuilding the State and Preventing the Fragmentation of Power**

For decades, the Syrian security establishment was associated with a security doctrine focused on protecting the political regime rather than safeguarding society. Security agencies were constructed as closed, centralized entities relying on a total monopoly of force, deep security infiltration into society, political surveillance, weak accountability, and direct links to the centers of power. This model eroded trust between citizens and security institutions; the security apparatus was no longer linked to its original purpose as an institution meant to uphold the law and protect society, becoming instead a tool for political control and dominance. With the outbreak of the revolution, large parts of this system fractured, giving rise to multiple local security and military authorities. Some of these became affiliated with armed factions, while others formed along regional, tribal, or ideological lines. Concurrently, different models "local security" affiliated with the community local administration emerged in certain areas.

## TDA

However, these experiences, despite their differences, revealed a fundamental truth: security cannot be managed solely through a closed center insulated from local communities, nor can it be left for unchecked local authorities or armed forces that are not subject to the state. Hence, the real challenge in the new Syria lies in building a security model that strikes a balance between the unity of the security establishment and the need of local communities for safety, participation, and trust. Consequently, there is an urgent need to develop frameworks for local security management within the state structure. This ensures the security establishment does not remain detached from or hostile to local communities, but becomes closer to citizens and more capable of understanding and engaging with social and regional specificities within the framework of law and institutions. Enhancing the role of local police stands at the forefront of these frameworks, given that the police represent the closest link between the state and society. While local security is linked to combating crime or maintaining order, it is also fundamentally connected to building daily trust between citizens and public institutions. Comparative experiences in post-conflict countries have shown that the presence of professional, trained, and community-linked local police contributes significantly to mitigating tensions, enhancing stability, preventing the recurrence of violence, and improving the relationship between the state and its citizens.

This issue gains particular importance due to the scale of the rift that emerged during the revolution between society and the security apparatus, as well as the harsh developments that followed in the first year of the transitional period. Therefore, building a professional local police force is one of the most critical tools for rebuilding trust. Furthermore, involving local residents in security institutions represents an important step toward establishing a more stable and legitimate security. Security personnel drawn from the local environment are often better equipped to understand the local community, communicate with residents, appreciate social and cultural specificities, and handle local disputes with greater sensitivity.

At the same time, this formula carries real risks if it is not meticulously regulated. Local security can easily become a tool for tribalism, nepotism, or regional hegemony in the absence of professional standards and institutional oversight. Consequently, the inclusion of local residents in security institutions must take place within a unified national framework, ensuring that affiliation with the security establishment is based on professionalism, the rule of law, and an inclusive national doctrine, rather than on regional, sectarian, or political allegiances

## TDA

The development of community security mechanisms is vital, given their link to the new security model in Syria. Security does not operate in isolation from society; rather, it functions through a methodology and a participatory process rooted in cooperation among formal institutions, local communities, municipalities, civil society, and local actors. Community security encompasses crime prevention, local dispute resolution, addressing social problems, combating narcotics, preventing violence, and promoting civil peace. It also enables the creation of more effective communication channels between citizens and security institutions, which is a matter of utmost importance in the Syrian context, that witnessed a profound erosion of trust between both sides during the revolution.

Yet, all of these frameworks remain conditional upon security institutions being subject to law, judicial oversight, civilian control, and institutional accountability. One of the most dangerous scenarios facing post-revolution Syria is the transformation of local security into a cover for the emergence of regional armed factions or de facto authorities autonomous from the state. Therefore, the monopoly over armed force must remain within the purview of the central state, and all local security institutions must be subject to the constitution, national laws, judicial oversight, and legitimate civilian authorities. Local administrations or social forces must also be prevented from becoming substitutes for the state in the security realm, as this could lead in the long run to the fragmentation of authority, conflicting jurisdictions, the resurgence of local conflicts, and the weakening of national stability. Hence, the real challenge in Syria lies in building a balanced security model that addresses the aforementioned concerns. Security sector reform (SSR) is a fundamental pillar of the project to rebuild the Syrian state, rather than merely an isolated technical file. Post-conflict states do not regain sustainable stability except by redefining the relationship between power and society, between security and citizenship, and between the state and local communities.

# 6

## **Sixth: Transitional Justice and Decentralization in Syria: Toward Rebuilding Trust and Peace**

The relationship between transitional justice and decentralization is of particular importance, as it serves as a test and a measure for the redistribution of trust, responsibility, and participation within the state. Syrian local communities view the state not only through legal texts or centralized institutions, but also through their daily lived experiences with oppression, marginalization, the absence of justice, poor services, violence, and violations.

Therefore, the success of any decentralized model in Syria remains contingent upon its ability to help address these historical and social accumulations, rather than merely reorganizing the state's administrative structure.

The Syrian experience during the revolution and the developments of the first year of the transitional period have shown that the conflict was not the same across all areas; it took on various forms depending on the local specificities and the social, political, and security contexts of each area. Consequently, the decentralization process must be linked to the path of transitional justice and the rebuilding of trust between the state and society, transforming local administrations and local communities into actual partners in the processes of recovery, reconciliation, and the reconstruction of civil peace. Justice requires the involvement of the local communities themselves in addressing the impact of conflict and repairing social relations. Thus, ensuring local participation in reconciliation efforts is one of the prerequisites for the success of any transitional process in Syria. Genuine reconciliation is not achieved solely through political agreements or security settlements, but by creating societal spaces that allow residents to express their fears, needs, and visions for the future of their areas, as well as their relationship with the state and other communities.

Decentralization can contribute to rebuilding trust by creating closer, more direct channels between the state and local communities. This allows these communities to participate in identifying priorities for recovery and reconstruction, addressing the impacts of the conflict, and formulating local policies related to services, security, and development. In the same vein, involving victims and local communities in recovery processes is considered one of the most important elements of sustainable transitional justice. Victims need to feel that they are part of the process of rebuilding the state and society, and that their suffering and experiences are taken into account when shaping the country's future. From this standpoint, the role that local communities can play in building civil peace must be recognized; and transitional justice must not be reduced solely to centralized or judicial institutions. Sustainable peace is not built through courts and political decrees alone, but also through mending social bonds within local communities themselves.

## TDA

Furthermore, managing local disputes represents an essential part of any successful transitional process in Syria. Many of the tensions left behind by the revolution are linked to local disputes, property disputes, social divisions, or the consequences of violence and displacement. Therefore, local administrations and community actors can play a pivotal role in facilitating local dialogues, supporting dispute resolution mechanisms, promoting community reconciliations, and preventing the resurgence of tensions and violence.

Restoring trust in institutions is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the new Syria. War, violations, and violence have led to a deep erosion of citizens' trust in the state, security apparatuses, the judiciary, and public administration. This trust cannot be rebuilt through rhetoric or political settlements alone; it requires building institutions that are more just, transparent, closer to citizens, and more respectful of the law and human rights.

Accordingly, decentralization and transitional justice converge on a fundamental point: rebuilding the relationship between the state and society on new foundations. Decentralization grants local communities greater room for participation and influence, while transitional justice seeks to address the legacy of violence and violations, build trust, and prevent recurrence.

This makes transitional justice and decentralization interconnected parts of a broader project to rebuild the post-revolution Syrian state, rather than just two parallel tracks. Post-conflict countries regain their stability by rebuilding trust, social relations, and a shared sense of citizenship and belonging.

## Final Conclusions

This study reveals that the Syrian decentralization debate following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 is a complex one. It combines theoretical frameworks, constitutional underpinnings, and all questions regarding how to rebuild the Syrian state itself, the future relationship between the center and localities, between authority and society, and between national identity and local diversity. The transformations witnessed in Syria during the revolution years, and subsequently during the early transitional phase, have demonstrated that the authoritarian, centralized model that ruled the country for decades can no longer produce stability, efficiency, or trust. Simultaneously, these developments have revealed that unregulated decentralization, or that which is associated with militarization and a multiplicity of competing authorities, can itself turn into a new source of fragility, division, and state weakness.

The study demonstrates that Syrians, despite their diverse environments and experiences, do not generally lean toward adopting fragmenting or secessionist models; rather, they tend to envision a "balanced decentralization" based on the redistribution of powers and roles within the framework of a unified state with inclusive national institutions. Furthermore, the study highlights clear commonalities across various Syrian areas regarding their critique of traditional authoritarian centralization, their desire to build a local administration that is more effective and closer to the community, and their demand for greater equity in the distribution of resources, development, and services. Conversely, divergences have also emerged, linked to the distinct local experiences during the revolution. Areas that engaged in broader experiences with local governance appeared more inclined to demand wider powers, yet they were also more conscious of the risks posed by the absence of oversight, institutional structure, and a national reference point.

The study shows that the issue of decentralization in Syria is intertwined with a broad spectrum of interconnected files, such as governance, transitional justice, diversity management, balanced development, civil peace, trust in institutions, and the reconstruction of the social contract.

Consequently, the success of any future decentralized model in Syria will remain contingent upon its capacity to strike a delicate balance: between state unity and local empowerment; between a strong center and a non-hegemonic center; between local specificities and an inclusive national identity; between local administration and national oversight; and between community participation and preventing the formation of closed centers of influence or parallel authorities.

Moreover, the study reveals that societal concerns surrounding decentralization are no less significant than the aspirations attached to it. Participants expressed distinct concerns regarding the potential for local corruption, inter-regional disparity, state weakness, fragmentation, and a multiplicity of authorities.

This implies that any process to redistribute powers in Syria cannot succeed unless it is coupled with the construction of effective oversight institutions, transparent accountability systems, clear mechanisms for resource redistribution, and constitutional and legal guarantees that preserve state unity and rule of law.

In light of this, decentralization within the Syrian context appears closer to a project of rebuilding the state on new foundations, rather than merely a technical, administrative reform. It represents an opportunity to restructure the relationship between the citizen and public institutions, and to rebuild the trust eroded by long decades of security and political centralization. It also signifies an attempt to transition from a state built upon the monopoly of decision-making and resources to a state that is more balanced, participatory, resilient, and capable of responding to diversity and local needs.

Finally, one of the most critical parameters for the future of decentralization in Syria is linked to the capacity of Syrians to forge a new social contract that recognizes diversity, achieves justice, and prevents the reproduction of authoritarianism, while simultaneously preserving the state as an overarching, inclusive national framework. The decentralization for which Syrian communities have shown relative acceptance is not a decentralization of fragmentation, factional quotas, or conflicting authorities; rather, it is the decentralization of a single state capable of combining unity and diversity, sovereignty and participation, stability and justice, alongside an effective center and capable localities, within a new model for governing post-revolution Syria.





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