

Final Statement

Conference on Participatory Research and Emancipatory Political Participation in Syria University of Vienna, 18–19 June 2026

On 18–19 June 2026, the University of Vienna and the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) convened the *Participatory Research Conference on Syria in the Contexts of the Middle East and North Africa*. The conference brought together researchers, representatives of civil society organizations, and experts and practitioners working in the fields of participatory political participation, citizenship, governance, justice, development, and conflict.

The conference marked the concluding milestone of a participatory research project on political participation and citizenship in Syria, implemented between 2024 and 2026 through a collaboration between the Syrian Center for Policy Research and the University of Vienna, with support from the Carnegie Foundation. The discussions were grounded in a broad body of qualitative evidence generated through field research that included 110 in-depth interviews with active participants and community participants, ten dialogue workshops to discuss and validate the findings, and two scenario-building workshops exploring possible future trajectories. These research activities were conducted across eleven Syrian governorates: Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, As-Suwayda, and Daraa.

Together, these research tools enabled political participation to be examined from multiple perspectives: through the political and institutional structures as understood by active participants; through the everyday possibilities for participation as experienced by community participants; through the collective meanings and shared priorities that emerged from the dialogue workshops; and through the visions of possible futures articulated during the scenario-building exercises. At the same time, the conference marked the beginning of a broader process aimed at transforming co-produced knowledge into public dialogue, policy alternatives, and democratic practices capable of further development.

The conference was grounded in the fundamental premise that conflict-affected communities are not merely objects of research but essential partners in the production of knowledge, the analysis of reality, and the formulation of alternatives. From this perspective, participatory research was approached not simply as a method of data collection, but as an epistemic and political practice that redistributes the authority to ask questions, interpret evidence, and generate conclusions. It also examined the capacity of research itself to function as a democratic practice based on listening, dialogue, accountability, and community capacity-building.

The public forum held alongside the conference raised a broader question concerning the meaning of political participation in a conflict-affected society undergoing political transition. The discussions emphasized that participation is not a narrowly institutional process, nor is it limited to elections, political representation, or public consultations. Rather, it constitutes an arena of contestation over power, the state, knowledge, historical memory,

citizenship, social justice, and the material conditions that enable—or prevent—individuals and communities from shaping their collective future.

The conference reaffirmed the essential role of civil society, civic action, professional associations and trade unions, youth and women's platforms, independent media, and local committees as key intermediary spaces that connect citizens with governing institutions, facilitate meaningful public participation, and advance the representation and protection of societal interests. It further emphasized the need to establish an enabling legal environment that guarantees the resources, independence, and institutional space necessary for these actors to operate effectively, while strengthening their capacity to influence public policy and institutional decision-making.

The discussions also underscored that human dignity is not merely an outcome of democratic transformation but one of its fundamental preconditions. Fear, distrust, and exclusion were identified as structural barriers that undermine the prospects for participatory politics and civic engagement. In this context, the conference affirmed that epistemic justice constitutes an integral dimension of participatory political participation. Knowledge generated by citizens, women, youth, survivors, and marginalized groups should be recognized as a legitimate source for understanding reality and shaping public policy, rather than being treated as raw data extracted, interpreted, and analyzed outside the communities that produced it. The conference further stressed the importance of safeguarding the oversight, policy, and knowledge-production functions of civil society, and of resisting its reduction to the implementation of projects or the delivery of services alone.

I. Key Conclusions

1. Participatory Research as Epistemic Justice and Democratic Practice

The conference concluded that, in the Syrian context, participatory research constitutes a means of redistributing epistemic power rather than merely a technique for data collection. The research experience demonstrated that participants contribute not only individual testimonies or opinions but also critical analyses of power relations within society, the state, and systems of governance. They distinguish between formal authority and actual power, identify the actors capable of enabling or obstructing change, and articulate alternative pathways that connect security, justice, livelihoods, representation, and accountability.

The conference further found that the added value of participatory methodology lies not simply in expanding the range of research tools, but in diversifying the sources of knowledge. Interviews with active participants revealed institutional structures, public policies, and key actors; community interviews illuminated how political participation is experienced in everyday life through the realities of fear, mobility, access to resources, social norms, and the presence of armed actors; dialogue workshops transformed individual experiences into collectively negotiated understandings; while scenario-building exercises translated diagnosis into political imagination and strategic pathways for the future.

The conference also emphasized that adopting the term "active participant" rather than "key informant" is not a matter of terminology alone, but reflects an ethical and political shift in the relationship between research and

society. In a Syrian context marked by a long history of surveillance and fear, building trust and fostering relationships of equality become integral components of the research methodology. Likewise, safeguarding participants and respecting their right both to speak and to remain silent are essential conditions for producing responsible knowledge that does not reproduce existing relations of domination.

At the same time, the conference acknowledged that participatory research in conflict settings faces significant challenges, including fear, self-censorship, constraints on access, unequal power relations within communities themselves, the dominance of certain voices, limited time, and persistent questions of representation. However, recognizing these limitations does not diminish the value of participatory research; rather, it strengthens its credibility. Knowledge produced in contexts of conflict cannot be assumed to be neutral or complete. Instead, it is inherently shaped by conditions of safety, trust, context, and the positionality of both researchers and participants.

2. Political Participation: From Presence to Influence

Drawing on both the research findings and the conference deliberations, the conference concluded that political participation, as understood by participants, extends far beyond voting, attending meetings or workshops, or engaging in symbolic consultation. Rather, it entails the existence of safe, material, institutional, and epistemic capacities that enable individuals and communities to shape priorities, formulate public policies, influence the allocation of resources, monitor implementation, and hold both formal and informal actors accountable.

Accordingly, the success of participatory politics cannot be measured by the number of people invited to consultations or the number of dialogue sessions convened. It should instead be assessed by whether citizens' voices are translated into action, influence public policy, initiate processes of accountability, or contribute to the redistribution of resources, power, and knowledge. Participants drew a clear distinction between procedural participation, which records opinions without affecting decision-making, and transformative participation, through which communities define problems, co-produce knowledge, influence decisions, monitor implementation, and demand accountability.

The conference therefore emphasized that institutions do not become participatory merely by virtue of their existence. Elections may take place without meaningful representation; national dialogues may proceed without binding outcomes; local councils may exist without effective powers; civil society organizations may operate without genuine independence; and public consultations may be conducted without any follow-up. The essence of participatory politics thus lies not in institutional form but in the quality of the relationship between society and public institutions: whether citizens have access to information, are able to influence public agendas, monitor the use of public resources, and exercise meaningful accountability over decision-making.

3. Structural Barriers to Political Participation

The conference concluded that the obstacles to participatory politics are not merely legal or procedural. Rather, they constitute an interconnected system of fear, poverty, declining trust, centralization, fragmented decision-making, unclear lines of responsibility, informal governance arrangements, patronage networks, and the enduring

legacies of conflict and authoritarianism. Expanding civic space therefore requires more than isolated institutional reforms; it requires transforming the structural conditions that make participation possible, safe, and consequential.

Fear emerged as one of the most pervasive constraints. In many contexts, it has evolved from fear associated with the former centralized security apparatus into a localized and multi-layered phenomenon, encompassing fear of de facto authorities, armed actors, social stigmatization, the securitization of civic activities, self-censorship, and uncertainty regarding who exercises authority. These conditions encourage individuals to engage primarily in lower-risk forms of participation—such as service initiatives and local solidarity activities—while avoiding direct political engagement.

The conference further emphasized that poverty and the deterioration of livelihoods are not merely social conditions surrounding participation but direct mechanisms of political exclusion. When people are preoccupied with securing bread, transportation, employment, electricity, and healthcare, participation in public life becomes prohibitively costly in terms of time, financial resources, and emotional capacity. From this political economy perspective, those with access to income, time, protection, mobility, connectivity, and knowledge enjoy significantly greater opportunities for participation, whereas people living in poverty, internally displaced persons, women bearing disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, and residents of marginalized areas are systematically pushed to the margins of public life.

The discussions also identified the crisis of trust as a structural obstacle no less significant than fear or poverty. Participants expressed deep skepticism regarding the effectiveness of previous consultation processes, the responsiveness of public institutions, the transparency of selecting representatives, and the likelihood that consultation outcomes would translate into public policy. Rebuilding trust, therefore, requires more than launching new dialogue initiatives; it demands effective follow-up mechanisms, public access to information, meaningful accountability, and demonstrable policy outcomes.

4. Actors and Their Roles: Between Formal Authority and Actual Power

The conference findings demonstrated that the actors shaping political participation extend well beyond central and local state institutions. Security agencies, armed actors, tribal leaders, religious authorities, economic elites, patronage networks, donors, and external actors all exercise varying degrees of influence over the boundaries of civic expression, collective organization, access to resources, and exposure to risk.

One of the conference's principal conclusions was that legal reform alone cannot transform participatory governance if informal systems of influence continue to outweigh formal institutions. The research demonstrated that informal practices and parallel governance arrangements—including proximity to political authority, factional endorsement, tribal influence, networks of wealth and armed power, and external funding—frequently determine who is able to participate, who is excluded, and who gains access to public resources.

The performance of formal institutions revealed a persistent paradox. Public authorities may create space for service delivery, local initiatives, and limited dialogue, while political participation and representative processes remain constrained by selective authorization, discretionary licensing, appointment mechanisms, and the absence

of binding institutional outcomes. Likewise, although armed and security actors may in some contexts provide temporary protection, they weaken civilian politics when they operate outside systems of accountability or substitute for political parties, representative councils, and an independent judiciary.

Conversely, social movements, civil society organizations, professional associations and trade unions, independent media, youth and women's platforms, and local committees continue to represent promising intermediary spaces capable of connecting citizens with decision-making processes. Yet these actors cannot fulfil their emancipatory role if they remain subject to surveillance, confined to service delivery, dependent upon external funding or administrative approvals, or deprived of legal independence, financial sustainability, representative legitimacy, and clearly defined oversight functions.

5. Societal Agency and Emancipatory Citizenship

The conference session on citizenship and societal agency demonstrated that Syrian society continues to possess considerable civic vitality, reflected in local initiatives, solidarity networks, community mediation mechanisms, volunteer action, service campaigns, professional organizations, youth and women's initiatives, and everyday practices of resilience and cooperation. However, this vitality has largely remained confined to narrow social and humanitarian spheres, without evolving into organized institutional and political capacity capable of shaping public policy and decision-making.

The challenge, therefore, is not to create civic agency anew but to activate, protect, and institutionalize existing social and political capacities by linking them to formal mechanisms of participation, accountability, and influence. Initiatives that repair infrastructure, restore public services, organize local solidarity, or facilitate community dialogue already embody the foundations of active citizenship. Yet they require an enabling legal and institutional environment capable of transforming survival strategies into sustained capacities for participation, oversight, and democratic negotiation.

Within this framework, the conference advanced the concept of emancipatory citizenship as the capacity of individuals and communities to act collectively, co-produce knowledge, claim rights, hold public authorities accountable, and shape the future. Citizenship is therefore understood not merely as a legal status or symbolic affiliation with the state, but as the effective ability to influence public affairs, particularly for those historically deprived of opportunities to organize, express themselves, or access public resources.

The conference further emphasized that women, youth, internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees, persons with disabilities, people living in poverty, residents of rural and marginalized areas, and the families of victims, detainees, and the forcibly disappeared remain among the groups most affected by limited opportunities for participation. Their inclusion cannot be achieved through symbolic representation alone. Rather, it requires guaranteeing their effective access to information, strengthening their capacity for collective mobilization and agenda-setting, ensuring their representation within councils, committees, political parties, and professional associations, and enabling their meaningful participation in monitoring public resources and public policies.

6. Strategic Opportunities and Policy Alternatives

Despite the breadth of existing structural constraints, the research identified significant opportunities for expanding participatory politics, provided that participation is approached as an integrated system rather than through isolated institutional reforms. Key opportunities include transforming local initiatives into permanent participatory institutions; strengthening municipalities, local councils, and neighborhood committees; revitalizing trade unions, professional associations, and political parties on democratic and independent foundations; safeguarding social movements, civil society organizations, and independent media; linking national dialogue processes with locally grounded and binding implementation pathways; and developing transparent public information platforms.

The sixth conference session stressed that these alternatives should not be understood as aspirational recommendations but as an integrated package of institutional reforms capable of being translated into constitutional provisions, legislation, representative institutions, accountability mechanisms, and effective protection of civic space. This package encompasses constitutional and legal reforms safeguarding civic, political, and social organization; democratic local governance supported by transparent budgets and adequate fiscal resources; independent civil society organizations, professional associations, political parties, and media institutions; security institutions grounded in the protection of rights rather than the control of society; comprehensive transitional justice; economic recovery that expands citizens' material capacity to participate; intersectional inclusion of women, youth, displaced populations, and persons with disabilities; and transparency in public information, decision-making processes, and public budgets.

Finally, the scenario-building exercises for 2029 demonstrated that the future of participatory politics in Syria will depend on the interaction of two fundamental dimensions: the nature of governance, ranging from exclusionary to inclusive, and the level of societal agency, ranging from disengagement to effective collective action. The transformative scenario requires the simultaneous emergence of inclusive governance and an empowered society. By contrast, an active society operating under exclusionary institutions is likely to produce a trajectory of high-cost constrained mobilization; formally open institutions without sufficient societal capacity are likely to result in administrative participation without meaningful influence; while the convergence of exclusionary governance and a weakened society risks reproducing cycles of fear, silence, and political disengagement.

II. Conference Recommendations

Building on the research findings and the deliberations of the conference, participants call for concrete measures to ensure that participatory politics evolves from a process of expression and consultation into one of meaningful influence and accountability.

1. Political and Constitutional Framework

The conference calls for the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, equal citizenship, political pluralism, and cultural diversity. It further calls for the launch of an inclusive and transparent process to develop a permanent constitution that guarantees the rule of law, the separation of powers, and judicial independence. In addition, the conference urges the adoption of democratic legislation governing political parties, civil society associations, independent media, trade unions, and the right to peaceful assembly, thereby transforming social, political, and

civic organization from a privilege subject to official authorization into a protected public right enforceable through legal accountability.

2. National Dialogue and Representation

The conference calls for rebuilding national dialogue as an ongoing, multi-level process rather than a one-off conference. This process should be rooted in governorates, local communities, and subnational contexts; be guided by transparent criteria for representation; ensure the meaningful inclusion of women, youth, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, and marginalized regions; and be linked to binding outcomes, accompanied by independent and publicly accessible monitoring and follow-up mechanisms.

3. Security and the Rule of Law

Recognizing that social security emerged as the foremost priority identified by participants, the conference emphasizes that security must function as a framework for protecting rights and freedoms rather than restricting them. This requires placing all weapons under the authority of inclusive national institutions founded upon equal citizenship and the rule of law, committed to equality and non-discrimination, and subject to legal accountability, civilian oversight, and democratic scrutiny. It also requires clarifying the mandates of security and judicial institutions; protecting individuals engaged in public affairs from threats, reprisals, and stigmatization; criminalizing hate speech and incitement; and guaranteeing the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of association without fear.

4. Local Governance and Bottom-Up Democracy

The conference recommends strengthening local councils, municipalities, neighborhood committees, trade unions, and professional associations as primary arenas for democratic practice. This requires credible local and professional elections, meaningful institutional mandates, adequate and transparent financial resources, publicly available budgets, participatory consultation prior to local decision-making, and monitoring indicators for public services and recovery efforts, thereby transforming fragmented local initiatives into an institutionalized system of participatory governance.

5. Social Movements, Civil Society, Independent Media, and Knowledge

The conference calls for safeguarding the independence of social movements, civil society organizations, youth and women's platforms, and independent media, while providing the legal and financial conditions necessary for them to perform their functions in community organization, advocacy, oversight, and knowledge production. It further recommends establishing publicly accessible information platforms, civil society mapping initiatives, safe channels for receiving complaints and public proposals, and digital participation platforms linked to official responses, implementation timelines, and measurable monitoring indicators.

6. Transitional Justice and Trust-Building

The conference calls for launching a comprehensive transitional justice process that does not selectively recognize victims or perpetrators and that ensures the meaningful participation of victims, survivors, and the families of missing persons and detainees in defining priorities and monitoring implementation. It emphasizes that transitional justice is not an isolated human rights agenda but a fundamental condition for rebuilding public trust, restoring civic space, and preventing collective memory from becoming a source of fear, exclusion, or revenge.

7. Economic Recovery and Livelihoods

The conference emphasizes that expanding participatory politics requires addressing its underlying material conditions. It therefore calls for linking participation initiatives to local economic recovery, employment opportunities, vocational training, small grants, support for the solidarity economy, and the economic empowerment of women and youth. It further calls for ensuring transparency in investment, reconstruction, and public procurement in order to prevent the reproduction of crony capitalism and wartime political economy.

8. Intersectional Inclusion and Emancipatory Citizenship

The conference recommends adopting institutional mechanisms that ensure the meaningful, rather than merely symbolic, participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees, and economically and socially marginalized groups. These measures should include representation quotas or minimum thresholds within councils, committees, and professional associations; accessibility arrangements for persons with disabilities; measures that enable the safe participation of women; and guarantees relating to civil documentation, safe return, and meaningful local representation for displaced persons and returnees.

9. Follow-up and Transforming Knowledge into Action

The conference recommends establishing a structured follow-up mechanism to advance the outcomes of both the research project and the conference. This mechanism should include the publication of a comprehensive analytical report, targeted policy briefs, subsequent local and national dialogue processes, public discussion platforms, and monitoring tools to assess progress on participation, representation, and accountability. The conference further calls for sustaining the participatory partnership among researchers, communities, civil society organizations, and policy actors so that the process does not conclude with the conference itself, but instead evolves into a continuing process of co-produced knowledge and collective action.

III. From Research Findings to a Pathway for Action

The conference calls for the publication of a comprehensive analytical report synthesizing the findings of the participatory research project and situating them within a broader framework of participatory knowledge production, particularly at the intersection of social and economic knowledge and political economy, in order to identify and advance pathways for transformative action.

The conference further emphasizes that the outcomes of participatory research should be understood not as the conclusion of a project but as the beginning of a continuous process. These findings should therefore be translated into sustained local and national dialogues, policy briefs, monitoring and accountability tools, public deliberation platforms, and enduring partnerships among researchers, communities, civil society organizations, and policy actors.

The conference affirms that the vision of emancipatory participatory politics advanced throughout its deliberations does not seek merely to incorporate people into existing institutions as they currently operate. Rather, it calls for transforming the very foundations of the relationship between society, the state as an institution, and governing authority: moving from exclusion to partnership, from consultation to influence, from voice to accountability, from extractive knowledge to co-produced knowledge, and from formal legal citizenship to citizenship grounded in agency and the capacity for collective action.

In its concluding statement, the conference underscores the importance of integrating participatory knowledge with community organizing and institutional transformation. Such an approach is essential to protecting freedoms from fear, linking justice to livelihoods, grounding citizenship in equality, ensuring that dialogue leads to binding outcomes, and enabling society itself to shape and participate in the making of its own future.

The participants in the Conference on Participatory Research and Emancipatory Political Participation in Syria adopted this document at the conclusion of the conference held at the University of Vienna on 18–19 June 2026.