

Manoeuvring Blue Buildings for a Youth-Led Syria

Citizenship and Political Participation



Editor: Ola Saleh

Reviewer: Oula Ramadan

Think Space Facilitators: Badael Team

Think Space documentation: Badael Team

Graphic Design: Ali Mustafa

© Badael e.V. 2023 Berlin, Germany. All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be printed, reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means without prior written permission from Badael.

Badael is a rights-based organisation founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the basis of a genuine and sustainable peace in Syria. Championing locally-owned alternatives, we endeavour to buttress the scope and impact of inclusive grassroots civic action and foment the development of holistic truth and understanding within and around the Syrian context.



Table of Contents

Background.....	4
Conceptual Unpacking	6
10 Factors Eroding Youth’s Sense of Citizenship	6
Factors that specifically affect women and girls	7
The Exclusion of Youth	8
Damned if they do and damned if they don’t.....	9
Civil society – The main Ally of Youth	10
Youth Ruling Syria 2040	13
The president	13
Minister of Education:.....	14
Minister of Justice:.....	14
Minister of Defence:	15
Minister of Economic Affairs:	15
Conclusion	17



Background

Creating spaces that foster learning, activism, co-thinking, and civic engagement among young people is a top priority for Badael. Such spaces are crucial for the development of societies. This emphasis arises from the need to protect and empower the excluded majority in Syria, especially youth, enabling them to lead grassroots citizen movements and initiatives within their communities. It is under this strategic priority that Badael initiated a youth platform to empower and mobilize young Syrians as pivotal change agents, whose perspectives are integral to the growth of a robust grassroots civil society.

The youth platform also aims to enable Syrian youth in cultivating greater social resilience and enhancing their ability to shape discourse and thinking on topics and priorities key to young people within the Syrian civil society. During the platform's establishment meeting, five topics, "Safe Spaces", "Social Cohesion and Inclusion", "Militarism and Destructive Spaces", "Formal and Informal Education" and "Political Participation and Civic Engagement", were identified by participants as urgent issues for Northern Syria's youth. These issues were addressed through think spaces, and the outcomes have contributed to the development of 5 knowledge papers.

The think spaces served as non-prescriptive, deductive environments where 16-20 youth from Al-Atareb, Darat Azza, and Killi, aged 18 to 30, unpacked the conceptual and practical aspects of each issue. They built on their lived experiences, creativity, and peer exchange in a space facilitated by Badael. This paper reflects youth's contemporary experiences of exclusion in Northern Syria which should be situated in the historic range of society-wide political exclusion under the Assads' rule for the past five decades or so, and their exclusion regionally and internationally. Young Syrian women in particular, witnessed aggravated exclusion after marginal improvement in local governance. The most prominent example of this

is the closure of women's offices in local councils with the change of de facto authorities.

Symbolically, blue buildings grew to signify exclusion for Syrian youth in the North. From the blue building which is responsible for administering civil society work under the Salvation government in Idlib and the blue buildings of some multilateral actors¹.

The general dissatisfaction of youth with the gap between international policy frameworks on youth, such as the Youth Peace and Security Agenda, and its implementation, or lack of it, in Northern Syria in a way that can equip youth to become politically engaged citizens is loud and clear in this paper.



1 Namely the United Nations

Conceptual Unpacking

Citizenship is understood by youth in Northern Syria as the relationship between the individual and their country whereby a (democratically elected) government performs its duties of ensuring citizens' rights and citizens feel secure to voice concerns and are engaged in preserving the public good. It encompasses the ability of citizens to perform their political, social, and economic rights and obligations. Citizenship is a right described by one participant as: "the eye and the arm to me" to demonstrate the intrinsic relationship between the individual and their citizenship rights.

There is a partial or restricted sense of citizenship among youth in Northern Syria, where political rights featured as nearly absent, and civic rights are limited. For example, participants expressed a general lack of trust in authorities in light of the absence of civil governance. Some argued that even speaking of a sense of citizenship vis a vis illegitimate authorities may legitimise their rule. They articulated their dissatisfaction with appointed legislative bodies used as a representation façade to silence critical opinions. Furthermore, civic registration documents such as identity cards issued in the North are not recognised outside this area nationally, regionally or internationally.

10 Factors Eroding Youth's Sense of Citizenship

1. War.
2. Recurrent displacement and instability.
3. Absence of the rule of law.
4. Military rule.
5. The heterogeneity of de facto authorities and inter-group conflicts.
6. Status Quo politics.
7. Fear.

8. Discrimination between residents and IDPs.
9. Intolerance and marginalisation.
10. Competing survival priorities.

Factors that specifically affect women and girls

1. The civic rights of women who got married to foreigners and do not have their marriage registered are not protected.
2. Social norms inhibiting and prohibiting women from exercising their full citizenship
3. Pay discrimination against women.
4. Educational discrimination is based on reserving certain specialisations for men, such as law and engineering.
5. Policing women's and girls' attire² can exclude them from accessing public buildings or engaging in the labour market (for women) or the public sphere.
6. Legal discrimination against women³.
7. Gender segregation further limits women's and girls' opportunities including in civil society.

² This is not about whether or not women are covered by mostly how they are covered.

³ To date, Syrian women who are married to foreign men cannot pass on their nationality to their children

The Exclusion of Youth

Youth from and in Northern Syria are unmistakably absent from politics, negotiations, decision-making, and policy spaces.

Youth recognise that due to fear, dogmatic and restricted political sphere, repeated experiences of being unheard, and a limiting societal mindset, they are hesitant to form a political bloc or committee that can represent them and their revolutionary views for a free and democratic Syria.

The intertwined nature of the political and the military in many contexts in Syria dilutes and muddies civic rights. This is added to affinity bias in seemingly democratic processes. For instance, people would vote for those with whom they have familial or tribal ties over those who bring a solid political vision and expertise due to decades of repressive rule under the two Assads which led to regression towards the safety net of the family or the tribe over political programmes.

Youth also feel they lack the mandate to engage politically due to restrictive and reprehensive attitudes towards the capacity of youth to develop political visions, and the absence of platforms that represent youth. They have also expressed fear of individual actions and a wish to have spaces for collective action.

This is twofold for women who are systematically excluded, blocked, and rejected from political spaces, despite their creative input and will to participate. Women lack the support or buy-in for their participation from de facto authorities and there are prevalent societal beliefs belittling women's participation and leadership potential. Furthermore, there are no dedicated seats for women in official structures in Northern Syria to break those stereotypes by exposure.

Women are particularly excluded from leadership and political positions. Women and girls are further excluded from the public space by being deprived of their right to protest. Unfortunately, women's position in

society is experienced to have retreated to the background over the past decade or so. A challenge further exacerbated by the internal migration of women's rights organisations from Idlib to Northern Aleppo.

Undoubtedly, care burden inhibits women's and girls' capacity to participate considering the lack of gender-responsive measures. For example, a participant lost an opportunity to take up leadership training because she could not leave her three overnight during the training. The organisers did not give her the flexibility to commute in order not to miss this opportunity despite her willingness to temporarily move her kids to a commutable distance from the training.

Women, indeed, have the capabilities, but they lack opportunities to occupy decision-making positions.

Damned if they do and damned if they don't

The symbolism of blue buildings came to signify exclusion. In UN buildings⁴, youth feel their views and aspirations are absent, they wonder about the Youth Peace and Security agenda and how the UN sees its applicability to youth in the North beyond countering violent extremism. A focus which increasingly makes youth feel stigmatised as potential terrorists.

Other blue buildings denote censorship and potential security repercussions from de facto authorities. Youth in Northern Syria walk on eggshells when they plan activities that aim at political awareness and women's empowerment, they need to adapt the language to bypass censorship and ensure their safety. Between international marginalisation and stigmatisation⁵ and the closing civic space locally, their sense of exclusion and isolation is heightened.

"We feel as if we are in exile inside our country, no one cares about our existence, everything is prohibited for us by internal and external forces"

4 Participants particularly referred to the security council.

5 The general perception is that minority world and donor countries view youth (and their families) in Northern Syria as "terrorists".

Civil society – The main Ally of Youth

Participants believe what creates the little space that offers them a sense of citizenship is a mix of their self-motivation and the safe civic spaces created by civil society actors and to a lesser extent students' unions.

For example, 'No to Marginalising Atareb' was noted as a good example of how youth found their revolutionary drive to act collectively with other members of the community to demand dignified conditions in Atareb after service provision centres were moved to rural Idlib in what locals perceived is systemic marginalisation of their town.

Civil society actors were, indeed, appreciated for facilitating knowledge sharing, skills development, and safe spaces for youth to express themselves and develop their civic engagement and commitments. Affirmative action through Badael's youth platform was also celebrated for responding to gender-specific barriers women face in various platforms' leadership and for enabling youth to overcome affinity bias when electing the board of the platform. This was the case because the majority of participants did not know each other beforehand.

While civil society actors were celebrated as enablers of civic engagement, participants underscored the absence of influential civil society networks that can lead change and represent a transformative power. Civil society work is perceived to be limited by donors' agendas and priorities which often are not aligned with the aspirations of youth in Northern Syria.

Finally, there was a recent example of a democratic process to elect a youth parliament facilitated by governance structures as exceptions to the rule:

The Youth Parliament

Under the interim government in northern Aleppo, the stability support unit launched a youth parliament. With the participation of 1200 young men and women, the parliament was elected through an observed election process by other organisations to give youth a full electoral experience. The parliament was comprised of 80 volunteer groups and had a representation function to speak on behalf of youth in meetings and conferences in Turkey.

While women participated in the process, they have mainly won committees traditionally associated with care such as Health and Education.

The parliament was deprioritised due to the impact of the earthquake and the diversion of priorities for earthquake response. However, efforts are underway to reactivate it, according to the stability support unit.

Participants appreciated the experience of the youth parliament to exercise democracy. They also recognised that without youth from other parts of Syria, there is a risk of reflecting the status quo of a deeply divided political landscape. Therefore, they came up with 8 recommendations:

1. Establishing safe virtual dialogue space between different localities
2. Producing digital content about youth concerns and priorities in Northern Syria
3. Initiating dialogue between civil society and local authorities
4. Supporting youth organising efforts in syndicates
5. Aid actors in all its forms nationally and internationally must understand the nexus between economic power/autonomy and civic engagement.
6. Investing more in safe spaces for youth to develop independent thoughts

7. Targeting the whole society with awareness about the importance of women's political participation
8. Investing Syrian diaspora in knowledge and skills transfer



Youth Ruling Syria 2040

The think space was concluded with an imagining exercise to offer them and us a portal to a Syria that resembles its youth and to continue building on their agency and creativity. Participants travelled in time to a Youth led Syria in 20240. They worked in groups taking up different roles in cabinet with the following governmental functions and they were tasked with ensuring equitable citizenship for all Syrians.

The cabinet adopted the following principles:

- Rule of law
- equity
- freedom
- decentralisation
- separation of powers
- gender equality

The president

An executive order stipulating no more than 2 terms for the president

The presidential agenda focuses on:

- Accountability
- Prioritising the ministry of education
- Enhancing democracy and creating societal buy-in for democratic values
- Adopting nonviolence policies and improving diplomatic relationships
- The president does not interfere with and ensure the independence of the judiciary
- Ensuring equitable distribution of wealth

Minister of Education:

Education is compulsory and free. The ministry offers quality education with cutting-edge technologies and teaching methodologies with regular monitoring and evaluation of the educational cadre and educational capabilities.

The ministry will take the following immediate steps:

- Introduce a talents scouting committee
- Introduce higher education scholarships
- Introduce positions for mental health professionals across levels of education
- Improve teachers' salaries
- Ensure equity in education and allocating seats for women in engineering and political science to bridge the historical gap
- Ensure non-discrimination based on gender or religion in educational institutions
- Introduce a quota of women in leadership positions across educational institutions

Minister of Justice:

The ministry will set up a special tribunal for war crimes and conflict-related accountability, and a special judicial committee to oversee transitional justice. The ministry will immediately release all detainees and ensure transparency.

The ministry will take the following immediate steps:

- Assess and modernise the justice system and national laws
- Introduce strict measures to counter corruption
- Set up an oversight mechanism for the judiciary

Minister of Defence:

The ministry will focus on preventing foreign intervention, protecting the borders, and building mutual defence agreements in line with the cabinet's principles

The ministry will take the following immediate steps:

- leniency in deferring compulsory service for youth
- Improve the educational side of defence institutions
- Ensure non-discrimination in defence institutions
- Ensure equitable access to leadership positions for all citizens

Minister of Economic Affairs:

The ministry will take the following immediate steps:

- Commission a national, regional and international political economy analysis to inform development priorities and methodologies
- Protect property rights
- Support small and entrepreneurial projects
- Support the establishment of national factories
- Fight unemployment
- Allocate a percentage of the national revenue to support the ministries of education, justice and defence
- Invest the state's resources in improving infrastructure
- Introducing affirmative action for marginalised groups, especially people with disability
- Encourage investments and ensuring a safe investment environment

- Ensure civil servants have dignified salaries
- Improve the national gold reserve and ensuring the recovery of the national currency value



Conclusion

To be defined by an outside 'other' as a resident of a so-called "extremism-incubating" society and to be viewed as a potential risk for radicalisation but have no chance to influence that definition is a severe breach of youth's autonomy over their identity and their agency writ large.

Sometimes, donor agendas (inadvertently or not) can solidify the stigma of a certain community. This is the case for preventing violent extremism programming in Northern Syria which is done as a risk reduction or management exercise in a vacuum of civic rights and civic engagement support.

The message youth are exposed to nationally and internationally is that they have to choose between an extreme version of their religion to appease de facto authorities or completely denounce faith to appease the international anxiety of constructed causality between religion and radicalisation. Religious values for many communities in Syria (be it Islamic, Christian or otherwise) are communal values, very much like some values in say British or Swedish societies are inspired by the Church of England or the Church of Sweden, even when those societies are not necessarily religious. It seems the right of Syrian youth to their heritage, to their civic identity and duties is constantly politicised by de facto authorities and by aid politics while simultaneously their political participation is muffled or at best diluted.



Badael
بدائل

