

## Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Northern Syria:

## From Marginalization to Empowerment



This report summarizes the key discussions and recommendations of the first annual forum on the issues of minorities and indigenous peoples in Northern Syria from a human rights and gender perspective



November 2024



## Introduction:

On November 22, 2024, the city of Qamishli hosted [“The First Annual Forum on the Issues of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Northern Syria”](#), under the slogan “A Future Built by Diversity”. The Forum served as a platform to discuss the issues of the region’s peoples from human rights and gender-based perspective.

The Forum was organized in-person and virtually, by [Synergy](#) Association for Victims, [Syrians for Truth and Justice \(STJ\)](#) Organization, [Tadmrt](#) Organization for Development and Social Cohesion, [Arta](#) Foundation for Media and Development, and Bridge Organization, aimed at highlighting the challenges faced by the minorities and indigenous peoples in Northern Syria, from a gender-related perspective, and identifying their needs and priorities to build consensus about shared future visions that strengthen the minority participation in the civil society, peace-building efforts, and achieving justice.

The Forum hosted 11 panelists and over 90 participants (physically and virtually), including public affairs activists, human rights defenders, civil society and media representatives, as well as actors and members of minorities and indigenous peoples, such as the Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, and Yezidis.

The Forum addressed three main themes, during which the participants discussed: 1. The rights of the indigenous peoples and religious communities in Northern Syria (Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, Yezidis and others) to language, religion, belief, culture and art, and fundamental human rights, like “health and education among others”. 2. The issues of minorities and indigenous peoples in media and social media platforms. 3. Political empowerment and representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in Northern Syria, including their participation in decision making, and the country’s constitution and future.

All discussions emphasized the importance of empowering women and their leading role in dialogue and peace building processes.

The Forum in Northern Syria was organized in parallel with the UN [Seventeenth Session of the Forum on Minorities Issues](#), scheduled to be held on 28 and 29 November of 2024 in Geneva. The recommendations from the Northern Syria Forum will be submitted to the United Nations, as well as local and international actors to amplify the voices and aspirations of minorities and Indigenous peoples in Northern Syria.

## Indigenous Peoples or Minorities? The Legal Framework in the Context of Northern Syria:

During the First Annual Forum on the Issues of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Northern Syria, the participants—including Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, and Yezidis—unanimously affirmed their status as indigenous peoples, with deep historical and geographical roots in the region. This distinction is more than a mere terminological debate;

it holds significant legal implications for the rights and protections afforded under international law.

According to the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities](#) of 1992, **Minorities** are human groups characterized by their own national, religious, or linguistic identity, which differs from that of the majority of the population of a state. This UN Declaration grants minorities fundamental rights, among them:

- **Protection against discrimination and marginalization**, and ensuring their full participation in the public and political life.
- **Maintaining their cultural and linguistic identity**, and religious practices without interference.

Regarding **Indigenous Peoples**, the UN has designated a separate declaration for them in 2007, known as [the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). This Declaration is characterized by providing wider protections to include:

- **The right to internal self-determination**, and the governance of their cultural, linguistic, and religious affairs.
- **Recognition of their right to the lands and resources** they have historically inhabited, with a guarantee that these are not seized without their free, prior, and informed consent.
- **Political and administrative empowerment** to ensure their effective participation in making the decisions related to their own destiny.

In the context of northeast Syria, the Kurds (including the Yazidis), Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians, are considered indigenous peoples due to their long-standing presence and deep historical bond to the region, as well as their significant role and contributions. However, they may also be classified as “minorities” at the national level, given their smaller population size compared to the Arab majority..

This overlap between the two definitions [minorities and indigenous peoples] underscores political and legal challenges, especially in light of the transformations the region has undergone. While the international law guarantees fundamental rights for minorities, it implies deeper obligations on the states towards the indigenous peoples, including the constitutional recognition of their identity and collective rights, as well as empowering them to participate in self-governing of their historical territories.

As for Northeast Syria, recognizing these communities as indigenous peoples is essential for achieving justice and equity, ensuring cultural pluralism, and enhancing societal cohesion. Additionally, combining the protection afforded to minorities with the recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights can provide a comprehensive framework that addresses the legitimate needs and prospects for these people.

## The First Session: Rights of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Northern Syria:

During the First Session of the Forum, participants and panelists discussed the violations experienced by the indigenous peoples in Northern Syria, both prior and during the conflict, while highlighting the current challenges these communities face and the available opportunities to strengthen their rights. The discussions addressed key topics related to language, religion, belief, culture and art, in addition to fundamental rights, such as health and education among others.

Indigenous peoples and religious communities in Northeast Syria, like Kurds, Yezidis, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, and others, constitute essential components of the region's social and historical fabric. Yet, these communities have endured, for decades- even prior to the conflict in Syria- to varying degrees, from systematic exclusion and discrimination policies at the hands of the Syrian authorities. These policies followed by the Syrian government targeted their cultural, linguistic and religious identity, enforcing Arabization and prohibiting the use of their languages in public and educational institutions. Consequently, their ability to preserve their cultures and identities was significantly impacted.

As the Syrian conflict intensified, these communities faced severe violations from multiple parties. They endured brutal attacks by the Islamic State (ISIS), which specifically targeted Christian and Yazidi religious communities in Northern Syria, where civilians were abducted, properties were looted, and infrastructure were destroyed. Furthermore, factions affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA) of the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government/National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces have committed widespread violations, such as murder, arbitrary detention, and torture against the Kurds in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

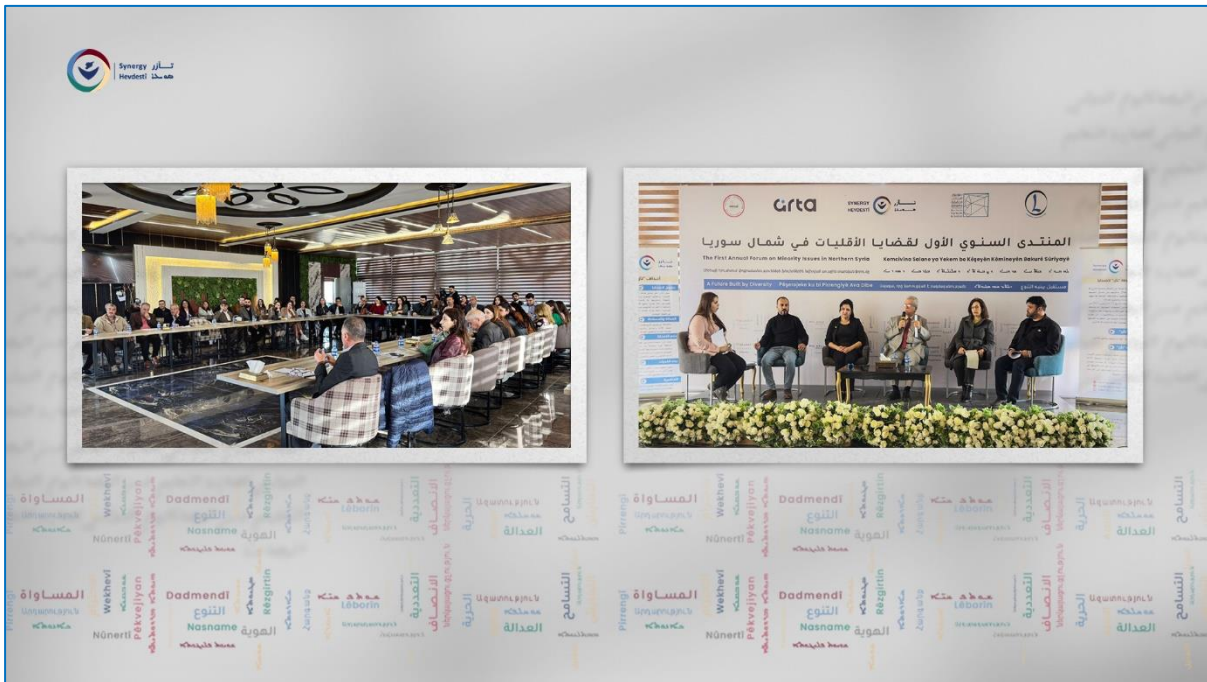
The Kurdish Yazidis have faced compounded and multiple violations at the hands of various parties, including ISIS and the Syrian National Army (SNA). These violations were driven by both ethnic and religious motives, as they were targeted both for their Kurdish identity and for being Yazidis. This dual targeting subjected the Yazidi community to systematic attacks, including killings, arbitrary detention, torture, forced displacement, abductions, and violence, aimed at erasing both their ethnic and religious identity.

This double targeting reflects the deep-rooted discrimination that Yazidis have historically faced due to their unique ethnic and religious identity. The severity of these violations is evident in the destruction and desecration of their religious sites, as well as attempts to force them to abandon their faith, highlighting efforts aimed at their ethnic and cultural cleansing.

The discussions also emphasized the need to address ongoing challenges, including institutional discrimination and the lack of constitutional recognition of these peoples'



rights, with recommendations put forward for recognizing and cementing these rights, ensuring equality in access to basic services, such as healthcare and education, within a fair legal and constitutional framework.



- **Cultural and Linguistic Rights: Identity Erasure Policies**

The Kurdish community in Syria has suffered from systematic policies, aimed at erasing their cultural identity. For instance, the Syrian government imposed Arabic as the official language in all aspects of public life, including educational curricula, while banning the use of Kurdish in schools and government institutions. Arabization efforts also involved renaming Kurdish cities and villages with Arabic names, leaving a lasting impact on the collective cultural memory of the Kurdish people.

On the other hand, Syrians, Assyrians and Armenians, endured strict restrictions on practicing their religious beliefs in their native languages, as they were limited only on church rituals and ceremonies. This limitation contributed to a decline in the use of their languages in education and public life. Their linguistic and cultural rights were largely symbolic, with no governmental support to sustain their cultural and religious identity.

Arabization policies in Syria extended beyond language and culture to include the very name of the state, which was changed to the “Syrian Arab Republic” in 1961. This shift reinforced feelings of exclusion and discrimination among religious and cultural minorities in the country<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The country’s name was changed to “the Syrian Arab Republic” in 1961, after Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic (the union between Egypt and Syria), which lasted from 1958 to 1961. After withdrawal, the Syrian government decided to change the name of the state to reflect the Arabic identity in a context to consolidate the Arabic nationalism. The new name was a part of political orientations aiming at strengthening

Today, violations against the Kurds (including the Yezidis), Assyrians, and Armenians persist in Northern Syria, where areas are controlled by the Syrian Interim Government and the Turkish-backed SNA factions. These violations include arbitrary policies targeting the identities of these communities, erasing their cultures and indigenous beliefs, and restricting their linguistic and religious rights.

▪ **Religious Rights and Beliefs:**

Before the conflict, religious minorities in Syria faced nationwide marginalization, particularly the Kurdish Yezidis, who remain among the most marginalized religious communities in Syria. They were not recognized as an independent religion in the Syrian constitution and lacked a personal status law—unlike other religions. Additionally, they were subjected to Islamic curricula that disregarded their beliefs, contributing to the erasure of their cultural and religious identity. These policies made it difficult for new generations of Yazidis to preserve their religious and cultural heritage.

Following the conflict, the suffering of Yezidis worsened, beginning with the genocide they were subjected to in Sinjar/Şingal Region in Iraq in 2014 at the hands of ISIS, when they were exposed to kidnapping, murder, sexual slavery, and the detention and transfer of thousands of Yezidi females and children to Syria, where they were subjected to “almost unimaginable horrors”, as described by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>2</sup>

The suffering of the Yezidis persisted, this time at the hands of the SNA’s factions, who committed numerous violations in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, during and after the two Turkish Operations- Olive Branch in 2018 and Peace Spring in 2019. Documented violations included murder and arbitrary detention, religious restrictions through prohibiting them from practicing their rituals and ceremonies or celebrating their religious festivals, in addition to the deliberate exhumation and destruction of Yazidi shrines and religious sites.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the Assyrians in villages located in the Khabur Basin, and Tall Tamer, experienced grave violations at the hands of al-Nusra Front and ISIS during the Syrian conflict. In February 2015, ISIS launched widespread attacks on the Assyrian villages, during which they kidnapped more than 200 persons, including children and women, and detained them as hostages to demand huge amounts of money as ransoms. Several ancient churches were destroyed, and their properties were looted in an attempt to obliterate the cultural and religious identity of the Assyrians in the region. These violations depopulated the region

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the Arabic identity at the expense of non-Arab communities in Syria, such as Kurds, Assyrians, and Syrians, contributing to enhancing Arabization trends in terms of culture, language, and politics.

<sup>2</sup> “They came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against Yezidis”, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, June 15, 2016, document No: A/HRC/32/CRP.2

<sup>3</sup> For more, you can read [“Yazidis in Syria: Decades of Denial of Existence and Discrimination”](#), Synergy Association for Victims and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) Organization, September 4, 2022.

from its native peoples who have already suffered from forced displacement and the loss of their properties and historical memories. Today, similar violations target Armenians, Syriacs and Assyrians in Syrian opposition-held areas, where Turkish-backed armed factions impose repressive policies, exacerbating their suffering and endangering their cultural and religious identity.

- **Health and Education; Basic Rights Missing:**

The discussions during the session agreed on the absence of comprehensive national policies ensuring that indigenous peoples in Northeastern Syria, such as Kurds, Yezidis, Armenians, Assyrians, Syriacs and others, have access to adequate healthcare and educational services. These communities face significant challenges to obtain essential services due to the ongoing conflict, and suffer from the absence of educational curricula that acknowledge their culture, linguistic and religious rights. This as a result hinders the ability of the future generations to preserve their cultural identity. As a result, these communities continue to endure the impacts of the discrimination and marginalization they have long faced.

- **Challenges and Opportunities:**

The participants stressed that the main challenges lie in the absence of legal and constitutional recognition of the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples in Northern Syria. Despite the ongoing challenges, the experience of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) represents the best example in terms of the rights of the indigenous peoples. The AANES has managed to establish legal framework that recognizes the Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian languages, promotes education in these languages, and provides greater space for the cultural and religious rights of minorities. However, this legal framework remains incomplete due to the ongoing conflict and economic blockade.

It is therefore necessary to create a new Syrian constitution that acknowledges the identity and rights of these peoples, ensuring cultural and religious pluralism as a foundation for sustainable peace and transitional justice in the country.

## The Second Sessions: Role of Media and Social Media Platforms:

The Second Session focused on the role of media and social media platforms in representing the minorities' cultural and religious issues, highlighting the importance of linguistic and cultural elements in promoting the collective identity and the cultural pluralism in Syrian society.

The participants discussed the challenges faced by minorities in the media, most notably the negative stereotyping/misrepresentations and hate speech. They also proposed solutions to strengthen a media discourse that fairly reflect the cultural and religious diversity. Successful models of multilingual media were highlighted, such as [Arta FM](#), which broadcasts its radio programs in four languages: Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian,

providing a framework that reflects the region’s richness and diversity. Another successful model presented was [Suroyo FM](#), which broadcasts programs in minority languages. Furthermore, the discussions covered other experiences of channels and radios in Northeast Syria, which have dedicated linguistic and cultural content to the region's peoples, including programs specifically for religious communities, like the Yezidis, contributing to preserving their heritage and promote their identity.

The session emphasized the importance of these experiences in addressing cultural exclusion policies, and their role in fostering an inclusive media discourse that empowers minorities to express their issues. Participants also explored effective tools for monitoring media content to ensure it respects diversity and cultural justice.



### The Third Session: Political Empowerment and Representation, and Participation in Decision Making:

The Third Session focused on the political empowerment and representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in Northern Syria, highlighting the need to strengthen their participation in political decision-making and the drafting of a constitution reflecting Syria’s cultural and religious diversity.

The discussion tackled the historical challenges these peoples faced, particularly the Kurds, who endured systematic marginalization at the national and political levels under the Ba’ath Party government. The panelists emphasized the importance of overcoming these exclusionary policies to create a more just and balanced future. Additionally, the crucial role of civil society was highlighted, as an incubator for promoting the participation of minorities

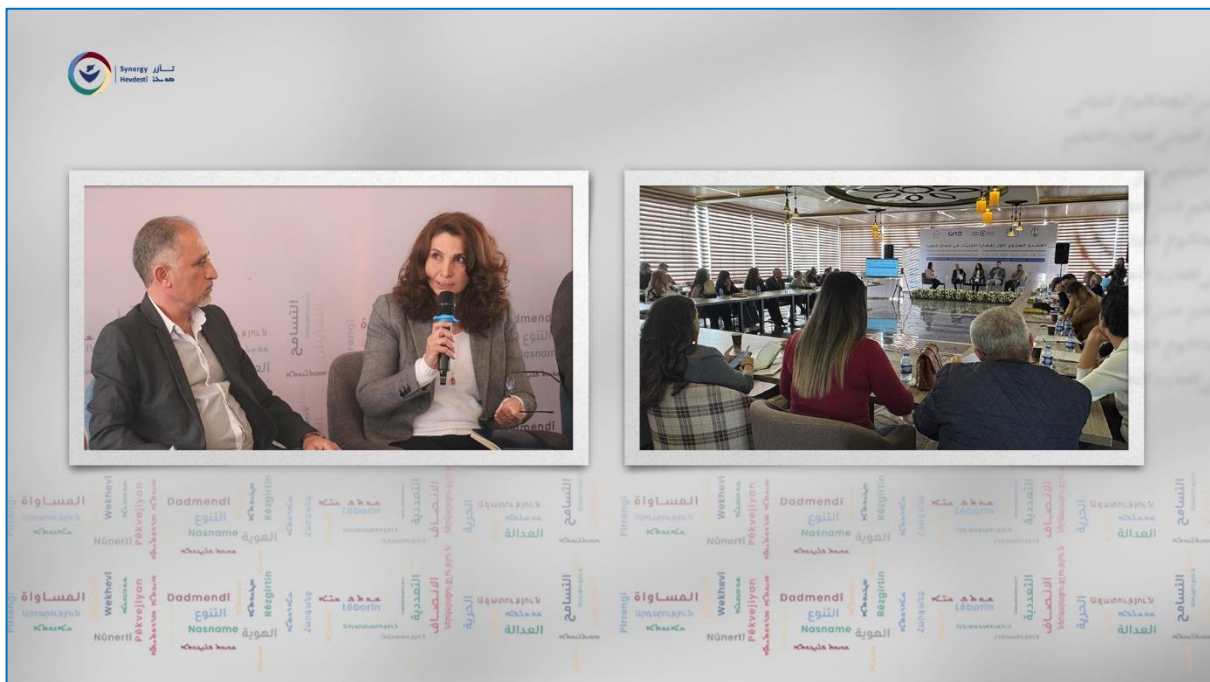


and indigenous peoples, empowering activists to play an active role in political processes and decision-making.

The role of women as a crucial element in dialogue and peace-building processes was underscored, stressing the need to empower women from minorities and broaden their participation in the political arena. Women representation in the political processes not only promotes gender equality issues, but also grants more inclusive and effective dimension on the decisions related to the future of minorities and Syria as a whole. The participants stressed that women from minorities, with their unique experiences and suffering, possess the ability to offer innovative visions that contribute to achieving sustainable peace and strengthening social cohesion.

Regarding future solutions, the panelists emphasized the need to establish governance systems that are inclusive of all the components, with federalism being proposed as a potential model to promote the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples. This would ensure that the different communities can self-manage their affairs in a way that reflects their unique needs and characteristics. The session also presented examples from other contexts, such as the federal model in Iraq, as a potentially beneficial approach to ensure justice and diversity in Syria.

The session concluded that achieving fair and sustainable representation for minorities and indigenous peoples requires not only political and constitutional reforms, but also societal transformations that support social justice and equality. It is also essential to empower the most marginalized individuals, particularly women, to play a leading role in shaping the future of the country.



## Recommendations:

The discussions during the Forum yielded a set of recommendations aimed at ensuring the rights of all components of the Syrian people, especially minorities and indigenous peoples, within a comprehensive process of rebuilding the Syrian state on the foundations of equality, justice, and diversity. To achieve this, the recommendations call for clear and integrated implementation mechanisms, including legislative reform to ensure that national laws align with international standards, institutional reform to ensure transparency and accountability, and strengthening the role of civil society as a key partner in supporting national efforts and monitoring the implementation of policies. The recommendations also emphasize the importance of international cooperation to provide technical and financial support and ensure transitional justice and reparation. In other words, the success of these recommendations requires the integration of efforts from national and international actors, along with civil society, to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable process.

### **Constitutional Recognition of the Rights of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples:**

- Amending the Syrian constitution to clearly stipulate the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, such as the Kurds, Yazidis, Armenians, Syriacs, Assyrians and others, including their national, cultural, linguistic, and religious rights.
- Including constitutional provisions that strengthen the legal protection of the identity of indigenous peoples and minorities, as well as enable them to manage their local affairs in accordance with the principles of equality and diversity.
- Ensuring that international agreements and treaties ratified by Syria take precedence over national legislation, to guarantee the rights of minorities indigenous peoples based on international standards.

### **Guaranteeing Fair Political Representation:**

- Reviewing the structure of the current Constitutional Committee to ensure genuine and fair representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in Northeastern Syria within it, and in all political negotiation roles concerning Syria.
- Enacting laws that guarantee fair representation for all components, including minorities and indigenous peoples, in legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, as well as decision-making positions at both national and local levels.
- Adopting electoral mechanisms that take into account ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, ensuring effective participation of minorities in political processes.

### **Protecting and Developing the Cultural and Linguistic Identity:**

- Including Kurdish, Syriac, and Armenian as constitutionally recognized official languages in Syria, and establishing a legal framework to regulate the creation of educational institutions and schools that teach in the languages of the region's

peoples, to ensure the protection of cultural and linguistic diversity and promote their rights to freely and dignifiedly practice their linguistic and educational identity.

- Allocating a government funding to support cultural activities that aim at protecting the cultural and historical heritage of minorities and indigenous peoples.
- Issuing legislations banning any attempts to obliterate or marginalize the cultural or linguistic identity of minorities and the peoples in the region.

#### **Empowering Women and Ensuring Gender Equality:**

- Including binding legal provisions that guarantee the participation of women, particularly women from minorities, in all political and constitutional institutions, with a minimum representation of 30%.
- Enacting laws that oblige government entities and local organizations to develop and implement multi-level empowerment programs for women on the economic and social fields.

#### **Legal Recognition of Local Religions and Religious Sects' Rights:**

- Including in the Syrian Constitution the recognition of local religions, such as Yezidism, Christianity, and others, and ensuring the right of their members to freely practice their religious rituals.
- Enacting a specific personal status law for religious communities that takes into consideration their cultural and religious privacy.
- Taking measures to protect religious sites against demolition or exploitation, and ensuring government funding for the restoration and rehabilitation of these sites.

#### **Criminalizing Discrimination and Prohibiting Racism:**

- Enacting a comprehensive law that criminalizes discrimination based on race, religion, language, or origin, with severe penalties for acts aimed at inciting or spreading hatred against minorities.
- Establishing a legal mechanism for receiving discrimination complaints against minorities and ensuring their fair and transparent follow-up.

#### **Enhancing Power Balance through a Decentralized Governance System:**

- Including the principle of administrative and political decentralization in the constitution, ensuring that minorities and indigenous peoples have the right to govern their affairs independently.
- Establishing a legal framework that defines the powers of local authorities and ensures a just distribution of resources among different regions.

#### **Role of Media and Social Media Platforms:**

- Enhancing comprehensive media coverage: through supporting local media outlets in highlighting the issues of minorities and indigenous peoples in Syria, and providing

content that reflects cultural and religious diversity in the region, free from stereotypes.

- Encouraging community journalism: supporting the establishment of media outlets and independent press institutions run by individuals from minorities, contributing to amplifying their voices and empowering them to express their issues and concerns.
- Combating hatred speech: enacting laws and legislations banning the dissemination of hate speech and incitement against minorities through the media and social media platforms, with penalties for violators.
- Promoting media literacy: offering training programs and workshops for local communities on the use of media and social media platforms to enhance their political and social participation, and represent their issues professionally.

#### **Achieving Transitional Justice and Ensuring Equity for Victims:**

- Establishing specialized courts focused on transitional justice, prioritizing violations that targeted minorities and indigenous peoples.
- Developing a national plan to document the crimes and violations suffered by minorities during the Syrian conflict, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable.
- Designing programs for the rehabilitation of victims, both psychologically and socially, and providing them with financial and moral compensation.

#### **Redress and Restoring Seized Rights:**

- Establishing an independent body to take inventory of confiscated or destroyed properties that belong to minorities, ensuring the restoration of their rights through fair compensation and property restitution.
- Developing a legal mechanism that enables the victims to file complaints for the violations committed against them and restore their rights transparently.

#### **Monitoring Violations and Guaranteeing Future Protection:**

- Establishing a national independent committee responsible for monitoring and documenting violations committed against minorities and indigenous peoples, and submitting binding recommendations to the government to prevent recurrence.
- Collaborating with local and international organizations to provide technical and material support in the monitoring and documentation process.

#### **Promoting Understanding and Coexistence Among Communities:**

- Including the history and cultures of minorities in school curricula to foster greater understanding among Syria's diverse communities.
- Launching national awareness campaigns to highlight the suffering of minorities and the peoples in the region, such as the Yezidi genocide, Armenian genocide, the Seyfo/the Assyrian genocide, and the forced displacement of the Christians.



### **Ending the Turkish Occupation and the Ensuing Violations:**

- Issuing national decisions condemning the violations committed in the Turkish-occupied areas in Northern Syria, such as Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad.
- Cooperating with international organizations to ensure the safe return for the displaced to their regions, protect the cultural identity and residential structure of these areas, and hold perpetrators of violations, whether individuals or groups, accountable.