



## Research: To Strengthen the Culture of Knowledge

10<sup>th</sup> Edition in 2026 – 2027

**Cultural Policies in Syria: Unpacking the Legacy of the Past, Building New Possibilities**

### Research Framework

In the wake of the transformations that began in December 2024, Syria has experienced a foundational moment that reopens essential questions about the role of arts and culture, its public functions, its relationship to society and the state, and the ways in which it is produced. This follows decades of a centralised model that dominated the production, organisation, and distribution of culture, in which official institutions played a leading role and sought to instrumentalise cultural and artistic expression within specific frameworks of understanding and engagement. Over the

subsequent fourteen years since 2011, the boundaries of cultural and artistic production expanded both inside and beyond national borders. This period witnessed a broadening of roles and opportunities within cultural and artistic work, shifts in modes of cultural production, changes in distribution channels, the fragmentation of production centres, and the emergence of multiple divisions and polarities. Questions of centre and periphery were reconfigured in ways that challenged Syrian geography itself, while Syrian cultural production in the diaspora emerged as a major voice shaping cultural practice.

Since 8 December 2024, the Syrian cultural landscape has entered a phase of profound fluidity. Traditional roles long held by official institutions have started to recede, while new, yet still unformed, spaces are emerging. These developments raise pressing questions about the future of arts and culture – just as they do about the future of Syria – and about the trajectory of transition towards a new model for the reproduction of cultural work. In this evolving landscape, cultural institutions, entities, and collectives inside and outside Syria are playing an increasingly visible role, alongside the role that official institutions may seek to propose and perhaps to lead. Between these two dynamics lies a vibrant field of independent practitioners, as well as a clear need to think through a proposed framework that situates the local within its regional context amid complex and uncertain conditions. Here, urgent questions arise around citizenship and transitional justice, the protection of civil peace and cultural diversity, and the understanding of culture as a safeguarded right for all Syrians, particularly in the aftermath of a year marked by violations against several Syrian communities.

Against this backdrop, cultural policy cannot be conceived merely as a regulatory framework, nor deferred as a task until conditions “stabilise.” On the contrary, there is today an urgent need to pursue inclusive processes that foster the production of critical knowledge – knowledge capable of making sense of more than seven decades of history, while resisting the impulse towards premature conclusions. This requires approaches that respect the complexity of what has been achieved and accumulated in Syrian cultural and artistic production, beyond simplistic judgments, and that reflect carefully on what is both possible and necessary in a transitional phase. The absence of a clear vision and coherent policies does not mean the absence of power; rather, it creates space for unseen forms of exclusion, the reproduction of inequality, and the monopolisation of resources.

The central question guiding this edition of the Research programme is: How can Syria develop "transitional" cultural policies – bottom-up and participatory in nature – that begin by unpacking the legacy of past decades and dismantling its institutional structures, while drawing on the accumulated cultural experiences inside and outside Syria, without reproducing the very forms of exclusion they seek to overcome? What conditions and mechanisms are required to generate policies that emerge from within the cultural sector itself, that acknowledge and balance the key binaries shaped over past decades (domestic and diaspora, centre and periphery, official and independent) while remaining resilient amid the fragility of the current formal context, the absence of a stable institutional framework, and the presence of multiple official and independent cultural actors?

This research framework adopts a narrative-analytical approach that understands cultural policy as the outcome of a long history of power relations, governance patterns, and modes of professional organisation, rather than as a set of technical responses to sectoral needs. From this perspective, cultural policy is approached as a public arena of contestation and negotiation, where interests, visions, and understandings of the meaning of arts and culture intersect, alongside questions of who has the right to produce, organise, and access them.

This framework calls for an examination of the centralised model that governed cultural policies in Syria for decades. During this period, official institutions – often and to varying degrees – sought to align cultural production with a mobilising official discourse and to closely tie it to the state's ideological apparatus. This approach led to the marginalisation of independent initiatives, restrictions on freedom of expression, and a widening gap between cultural production and local communities. Such an examination does not aim to revisit the past as a closed chapter, but rather to deconstruct its underlying mechanisms and understand their continuing impact on institutional structures, professional relations, and the prevailing cultural imagination to this day. At the same time, this analysis does not assume that official institutions were the sole producers of cultural work. Hundreds of practitioners in the arts and culture sector, including those who worked within Ministries of Culture and their affiliated bodies, have over many years sought to cultivate diverse and "independent" spaces that nurtured pioneering cultural environments across the Arab Region, operating within national frameworks that recognised the value of culture, the arts, and the right to access them.

The research framework also calls for reflection on the features and characteristics of cultural work over the past fourteen years, which represent a unique experience of operating within cultural policy environments beyond national borders and within frameworks and traditions different from those that prevailed in Syria, particularly in terms of censorship, production, reception, and even the very concept of the state and its role in the production and distribution of culture.

In addition, the framework approaches the current moment as an incomplete transitional phase, marked by institutional fragility, overlapping roles among actors, and the absence of clear regulatory frameworks. In such contexts, cultural policies inevitably take on an experimental and incremental character. The objective is not to produce an ideal model, but to develop flexible guiding principles capable of adapting to political and social change, and of responding to the concrete needs of the cultural sector across its various fields. This approach takes into account the trajectory of transition in Syria and the pressing questions it raises around safeguarding cultural diversity, ensuring spaces of equitable citizenship, guaranteeing the right of all cultural communities to express themselves safely, and securing the right to public spaces in which artistic and creative practices can thrive.

In designing this framework, we are mindful of several key challenges that accompany any attempt to rethink cultural policies, most notably:

- The absence of infrastructure as a major challenge: reflected in the shortage of spaces and facilities dedicated to artistic production and performance across Syrian cities, and the need to consider this issue as an integral part of reconstruction – understood as ensuring inclusive spaces for the diverse segments of Syrian society.
- The direct impact of compounding economic crises over the years: and their repercussions on declining purchasing power, the difficulty of covering production costs, and limited audience access. This everyday economic reality – intersecting with the fact that most culture and arts practitioners operate within the “informal” sector – constitutes a material condition for any cultural policy that seeks to be viable in the current context, particularly amid ongoing economic fragility.
- The geographical disparities that have shaped cultural policy realities: Syria has long suffered from entrenched centralisation, producing the dominance of “Damascus as centre” over peripheral regions encompassing most governorates. Since 2011, this has been

followed by a fragmentation of the cultural field between an interior marked by authoritarian constraints and a dispersed diaspora.

- The politicisation of cultural discourse: In recent years, many discussions around cultural policy have devolved into ideological confrontations that have hindered the building of broader agreement. Today, this risk looms even larger within Syria's highly sensitive context.

This theoretical framework is grounded in an understanding of cultural policy as a participatory practice – one that is not formulated from the top down, but shaped through ongoing interaction between civil society, cultural actors, audiences, and the state. This perspective underscores the importance of decentralisation, not merely as an administrative choice, but as a principle that recognises the plurality of cultural contexts in Syria and affirms the right of local communities to define their own cultural priorities and modes of expression. There is also much to learn from the “innovative strategies” developed by culture and arts practitioners, both individuals and institutions, over the past fourteen years in order to continue working despite constraints. These include, for example, co-production models, volunteer-based initiatives, and the creative maximisation of limited resources. This living, adaptive legacy, both inside and outside Syria, represents a valuable research and policy asset that can inform thinking around cultural policy frameworks in transitional and fragile contexts.

This research framework further views culture as a key actor in addressing the effects of violence and division, not necessarily through direct reconciliatory discourse, but by creating spaces for expression, storytelling, difference, and the rebuilding of trust. Accordingly, the desired cultural policies are those capable of supporting culture's role in sustaining civil peace, without imposing on culture any symbolic or moral burdens that exceed its capacity.

Finally, the framework adopts an intersectional approach, recognising that cultural policies cannot be separated from economic, social, educational, and environmental policies, nor from questions of social, transitional, spatial, and gender justice. Within this understanding, culture is not an isolated discipline, but a field deeply intertwined with the structure of society as a whole, requiring policy thinking that extends beyond its conventional boundaries.

Within this context, we believe that the themes to be addressed by the research papers fall under the following central theoretical axes. Researchers are invited to work within these themes or at their intersections, with an emphasis on flexible and cross-cutting approaches:

1. Contemporary Cultural Policies in Syria – Transformations and Challenges:

An examination of the current centralized model and a deconstruction of its mechanisms, alongside an analysis of the ongoing transformations in the Syrian cultural landscape since December 2024. This includes assessing the role of formal institutions in the current transitional phase and exploring the future of cultural production and organization amid the present fluid context.

2. Cultural policies in transitional and fragile contexts: Examining the role of cultural policies during periods of political transition, drawing on comparative experiences and exploring what elements may be adapted to the Syrian case.

3. Cultural governance and decentralisation: Investigating models of self-organisation developed by the cultural sector in recent years, as well as alternative models for managing cultural affairs. This includes examining the roles of official institutions, local authorities, and the independent sector; analysing mechanisms of partnership; and proposing concrete pathways for implementing meaningful decentralisation.

4. Culture, justice, and civil peace: Exploring the relationship between cultural policies and issues of social coexistence, memory, and transitional justice, as well as the role of culture in building shared spaces. This also includes the rights-based and professional dimensions of protecting cultural practitioners.

5. Economy, funding, and cultural sustainability: Addressing the financial and everyday challenges faced by cultural practitioners, approaches to funding, the creative economy, and the conditions for sustainability in environments affected by structural economic crises.

For more information about the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the research programme visit Ettijahat's website [by clicking here](#).

To review the Frequently Asked Questions and complete the application form, please visit the Ettijahat E-Applications platform [by clicking here](#).

\*\*\*\*\*