



ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER

# FROM IDLIB TO DAMASCUS: HTS' EVOLUTION INTO THE SYRIAN CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

On November 27th, 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led the Military Operations Department's launch of a military offensive codenamed "Deterrence of Aggression" against president Bashar al-Assad's Government of Syria (GoS) and Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Across the country, SAA defensive positions and GoS security institutions rapidly melted. The HTS-led coalition of forces stormed out of their Idlib enclave and found themselves nearing the Syrian capital with astonishing little bloodshed. On Dec 8th, after only 11 days, Assad left the country, marking the end of 61 years of Baath party authoritarian rule in Syria. With the fall of Assad, a new phase began: that of the HTS-led institutional transition. The leader of HTS, known until then by his nom-de-guerre, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, adopted his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and de facto took the lead of not only the military but also the political side of the transition. (For the purpose of this report, RIC will hereafter refer to him as 'Ahmed al-Sharaa', even when talking about his time prior to becoming Syrian president when he was still commonly known as al-Jawlani). HTS announced the establishment of an interim authority in Damascus – the Syrian Caretaker Government (SCG) – and members of the HTS-affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) of Idlib were appointed to the majority of posts. A slew of official statements referencing an inclusive future for Syria were broadcasted and a fresh era of diplomatic relations was initiated.

Many Syrians saw prospects for peace and a better future in a post-Assad Syria. Yet the serious concerns regarding the role that former HTS and SNA leaders and fighters will play in the 'new Syria', raised since the beginning of December, have only amplified in recent days and weeks. These concerns are for two main reasons. First, the so-called transition period up to now has been defined by HTS concentrating power and control in its hands while employing the rhetoric of democracy and popular participation. This signals a continuation of HTS' authoritarian record in Idlib, where HTS dominated both the military and civilian aspects. This enabled HTS to perpetrate repressive practices. UN commissions and local sources recorded arbitrary detention, torture, and summary executions in secret prisons, suppression of dissent, religious discrimination, crimes against children and gender based violence as defining characteristics of HTS' rule in Idlib since 2017. So far, the HTS-dominated SCG's approach shows an unwillingness to embrace Syria's diverse civil society, even as language to the contrary is employed. Second, HTS and its Idlib allies have been implicated in crimes of a jihadist Islamist character. This has occurred since its origins as an al-Qaeda offshoot in 2012 up to today. These concerns surpass HTS alone: in their 2024 report

on Syria, Human Rights Watch noted that other factions that participated in the November 27th offensive, such as the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) also had a history of being “responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the HTS-led offensive headed to Damascus, a separate SNA and Turkish offensive attacked SDF-held areas, expelling an estimated 100,000 people from Shehba. Related to this, one further concern this report will outline concerns the role of Turkey in Syria going forward, in light of the Turkish occupation in northern Syria after Assad’s fall.

## 1.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on North and East Syria, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers, and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

## 2. THE SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT

### 2.1 HTS BACKGROUND

While HTS officially no longer exists, understanding the group’s history and experiences in Idlib can aid in comprehending the current political landscape in Syria and potential future scenarios. A critical examination of HTS's rebranding as a democratic entity is also crucial, particularly in light of instances of repressive practices recorded in Idlib being repeated in other parts of the country since the 8th of December, and the Alawite massacre that took place in early March at the hands of SCG forces.

1 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/syria>

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a military and political organization belonging to the Sunni Salafi movement. It is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the UN Security Council, the US, Russia, and Turkey, and displayed many characteristics of authoritarian and violent ideology. According to experts in the field, it is a jihadist organization. Importantly, it is considered to belong to a novel form of jihadism referred to as "political jihadism".<sup>2</sup> In following political jihadism, HTS diplomatically rejected the most extreme aspects of the Salafi-jihadist ideology, rebranding itself at the very least as not posing a threat to the West, and at most as a reliable international partner. This marked it as distinct from al-Qaeda and ISIS: HTS purported to have abandoned global jihad and was willing to interact with Western states and economies while pursuing a national agenda. Internally, the HTS de facto governance of the Idlib region, northwestern Syria, saw a population of 4.5 million administered by the so-called Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) from 2017 up to the initiation of 'Deterrence of Aggression' on November 27th, 2024.

This section briefly summarizes the history of HTS and its leadership, Idlib's former governance system, and the state of relations between Idlib's rulers and civil society. RIC's previous report on HTS, published in June 2023, discussed HTS' background and its relations with the Turkish-backed SNA in northern Syria in light of HTS' incursion into the SNA-controlled regions in October 2022. The latter topic is not covered in this report, hence readers seeking such information can read the old report [here](#).

HTS declared its founding in January 2017, yet its roots go back further. HTS' leader, now the self-appointed Syrian interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has a long-standing history inside the global jihadist movement.<sup>3</sup> In this time, he made numerous evolutions in terms of his approach and strategy. He travelled to Iraq to join al-Qaeda in 2003 and fought there for two years before being captured and imprisoned by the US. After his time in prison, he served as an ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) commander before eventually being dispatched to Syria personally by ISI's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to organize a Syrian ISI offshoot.

In Syria, al-Sharaa founded Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadist militia which went on to participate in the Syrian Civil War.<sup>4</sup> When ISI evolved into ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), al-Baghdadi expected al-Nusra to be incorporated within it. Al-Sharaa instead chose to announce allegiance to ISIS' jihadist rival al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The U.S. Department of the Treasury added him to its Specially Designated Nationals list in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

2 <https://rb.gy/txjx9z> (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>)

3 <https://rb.gy/ul9zrv> (<https://www.mei.edu>)

4 <https://rb.gy/k17thd> (<https://www.amnesty.org>)

5 <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20130516>



In July 2016, al-Sharaa rebranded al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, departing from al-Qaeda, and began formally eschewing objectives such as attacking American targets. Despite this apparent cut, he remained on the UN, EU and US lists of globally designated terrorists. Indeed, al-Sharaa's motivations for splitting from al-Qaeda were largely related to gaining more acceptance from the Free Syrian Army factions rather than any deeper change in the group's Salafi-jihadi ideology and aim of establishing an Islamic state in Syria.<sup>6</sup> U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper suggested that by splitting from al-Qaeda, al-Nusra aimed to "create the image of being more moderate in an attempt to unify and galvanize and appeal to other oppositionist [sic] groups in Syria"<sup>7</sup> who would fear becoming targets of US airstrikes should they cooperate with an al-Qaeda branch. The benefits of such cooperation had already been seen in March 2015, when al-Nusra teamed up with Syrian Salafi-jihadi group Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya to seize Idlib from SAA forces through the establishment of a joint coordinating body with some Free Syrian Army factions.

In January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with a few smaller Islamist factions to form HTS. Idlib, in the northwest of Syria, ended up as HTS' stronghold while Assad's Russia-backed SAA was re-taking most of the regions it had lost to Free Syrian Army factions and ISIS in the years prior. In Idlib, al-Sharaa took another pragmatic step. HTS began introducing civil services for the 4.5 million people living there, building state-like institutions and prioritizing local objectives. Indeed, al-Sharaa's willingness and effort to engage in politics marked a leadership style that clearly departed from that of other jihadists such as al-Baghdadi.<sup>8</sup>

The shift from a Salafi-jihadist militia to a political-jihadist military and civil organization had a profound effect on the composition of HTS leadership. The first component of this transformation consisted of the removal of the overtly Salafi-jihadist members from HTS leadership. In 2013, ISI cells were expelled when al-Nusra split from ISI. Then, as al-Nusra officially split from al-Qaeda and rebranded itself twice, the majority of al-Qaeda members, including senior leaders who had relocated to Syria,<sup>9</sup> were removed from the group. It was at this time that a new official al-Qaeda offshoot in Syria, Hurras al-Din, was created.<sup>10</sup> While HTS and Hurras al-Din did have several points of friction

6 <https://www.aei.org/articles/avoiding-al-qaedas-syria-trap-jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding/>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=36m40s&v=XpG9MXVoeQA>

8 <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/al-qaedas-generational-change/>

9 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/al-qaeda-leader-targeted-in-u-s-airstrike-in-syria-1475557030>

10 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6141>

between them (for example concerning the breaking of allegiance to al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri or ownership of weapons) the latter's willingness to accept HTS rule in northwest Syria meant its presence there was tolerated by HTS for some time. In 2020, Hurras al-Din set up its own operations room, sparking an HTS-crackdown on several key leaders. However, Hurras al-Din largely fell into irrelevance in the proceeding years - until officially announcing its dissolution in January 2025, in a statement that urged Syria's new leadership to implement the rule of Islamic law.<sup>11</sup>

Despite HTS' split, some al-Qaeda loyalists remained within the group. In 2018, the UN Security Council reported that the leaderships of both groups maintained contact.<sup>12</sup> Another wave of expulsions was that of the so-called 'Egyptian Current', which took place between 2019 and 2022. A slew of defections by al-Qaeda loyalists occurred, particularly motivated by a wish to reject alliances with non-Salafi-jihadist Islamic rebel groups, disdain towards the pursuit of a national strategy in lieu of global jihad, and opposition to the new emphasis on local Syrian politics. Egyptian Salafi-jihadists also defected because they opposed HTS collaboration with Turkey, considering the latter a secular, and therefore "infidel", state.<sup>13</sup>

The various motivations for these splits stem from reactions against HTS' increasing adherence to political jihadism which was not an outright rejection of jihadism. Throughout these transformations, some al-Qaeda loyalists remained within HTS leadership, and some analysts suggest that the split from al-Qaeda was proposed to al-Qaeda itself in advance and included a commitment to maintain some kind of connection.<sup>14</sup> The fact that a range of ISIS fighters defected to HTS, as recorded by the UN Security Council, also indicates that HTS did not radically depart from a jihadist ideology.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, HTS actively cooperated with Salafi-jihadist militias and militiamen, both Syrian and foreign, in the ranks of the Military Operations Department that ousted Assad.

A further component of the transformation of HTS relates to the internal dynamics of the remainder of the leadership. Prior to the transformation, internal hierarchies and strategy were drawn largely along religious lines. With the increasing adherence to political jihadism and the practical issues emerging from having to administer Idlib territory, decisions about leadership and strategy began to factor in access to economic resources, ability to garner the support of the tribes of the region, and closeness to al-Sharaa.

Between the summers of 2023 and 2024, HTS' leadership went through a delicate

11 <https://x.com/azelin/status/1884323940950282632>

12 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/201/01/pdf/n1820101.pdf>

13 <https://rb.gy/e0m3j8> (<https://www.akhbaralaan.net>)

14 <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/fierce-dispute-headquarters-liberation-al-sham-al-qaeda/>

15 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/201/01/pdf/n1820101.pdf>

process of reshaping its internal balance of power. From the outside, it appeared as a challenging moment for the organization, with a major leader arrested, another defecting, and a six-month campaign of arrests of HTS members and officials. This was paired with strong popular unrest and voices calling for the dismissal of al-Sharaa.<sup>16</sup> However, thanks to an authoritarian crackdown, HTS weathered this period and emerged with a functioning leadership that in the second half of 2024 finished planning, and eventually executed, the takeover of the Syrian state.

## 2.2 HTS CENTRALIZATION OF POWER

In the post-Assad period, HTS has centralized control over the Syrian state in its hands, while employing a discourse of democracy in an attempt to cover this. This resembles its actions in Idlib too.

At the time of the formation of HTS in 2017, it was the strongest, but by no means the only, faction in Idlib. However, HTS swiftly ensured that no other group would be able to rival it, using both violence and coercion.<sup>17</sup> Idlib had previously been governed by a patchwork of Free Syrian Army factions and jihadist militias including al-Nusra, plus local councils affiliated to the Syrian Interim Government (the civilian authority that was the formal representation of the Opposition). With the formation of the Syrian Salvation Government on 2 November 2017, less than a year after the formation of HTS, the latter evolved from a purely military organisation, to one that began to wield politics as a tool.<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup> All SIG entities were forcibly evacuated from Idlib.<sup>20</sup><sup>21</sup> HTS, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the General Shura Council, and the General Security Service became the four key political and military institutions in control of the region.

In September 2017, a conference was held in Idlib to lay the groundwork for the formation of a new authority in Idlib, exiting from the SIG framework. At that time, the topic of the dissolution of HTS was brought up. Riyadh al-Assad, a former SAA officer who was one of the founders of the Free Syrian

16 <https://npasyria.com/181853/>

17 <https://stj-sy.org/en/between-reformist-discourse-and-actual-repression-how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-handled-idlib-protests/>

18 <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/the-shifting-red-sands-of-idlib-12370>

19 <https://pomeps.org/the-consolidation-of-a-post-jihadi-technocratic-state-let-in-idlib>

20 <https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/a-tale-of-two-muharrars>

21 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/>



Army, who was present at the conference, stated: “Tahrir al-Sham has already declared that it will dissolve itself, which is an external and internal demand”.<sup>22</sup> In August 2017, HTS Commander-in-Chief, Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber), said that the organization was ready to dissolve itself, as long as all factions operating in the north do the same, to be reunited under a single command. Such dissolution never occurred. Come November 2017, when the SSG officially declared itself, Riyad al-Assad became the Deputy Prime Minister for Military Affairs, and kept that position until the HTS-led offensive of November 2024.

When the SSG was founded, Mohammed al-Sheikh, who was appointed as the first prime minister, pledged: "we will remain independent, meaning we won't tolerate pressure from any side". The aforementioned al-Assad also insisted that the SSG would be independent.<sup>23</sup> Yet HTS' control over the SSG was the subject of much scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> A 2021 report of the Middle East Institute assessed the economic and financial activities of the SSG, concluding that the SSG is "no more than a tool to provide the 'legal' and administrative framework for the HTS's takeover of the region's economy and resources" which also “provides a scapegoat for the group’s [HTS’] transgressions and greed”.<sup>25,26</sup> While SSG governance saw a rise in civilian services and technocratic institutions, these have been “mainly focused on ensuring the control and monopoly of HTS and its associates over every aspect of life and the economy”, rather than genuinely responding to the needs of the local population. In one example, noted by the UN,<sup>27</sup> through a new company – Watad Petroleum – HTS was raking in \$1 million per month, having monopolized fuel import and distribution.

Whilst the SSG included individuals who were not members of HTS, HTS members occupied numerous, if not the majority, of the SSG's key security and religious positions, including within the SSG's internal police force. Some SSG bodies did seek to disassociate themselves from HTS – but this was largely in order to receive direct international aid. For instance, the Ministry of Education permitted international partners, such as UNICEF and humanitarian NGOs to assist in the development of educational materials and the design of curricula in Idlib.<sup>28,29</sup> This reflected the reliance of the SSG on aid in provision of services to the local population. 75 percent of Idlib’s residents received aid from humanitarian

22 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/09/syrian-general-conference-faces-interim-government-idlib/>

23 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/11/power-race-salvation-interim-governments/>

24 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/>

25 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/economics-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

26 <https://opc.center/the-economics-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

27 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3899838>

28 <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/JB-The-Rise-of-Private-Education-in-NW-Syria.pdf>

29 <https://timep.org/2023/06/09/education-system-in-northwestern-syria-a-long-road-ahead/>

organisations.<sup>30</sup> However, an illustration of the significant degree of overlap and control exerted by HTS over the SSG was evident in the SSG's religious council (Majlis al-Ifta), which comprised of individuals who were also members of the HTS religious council (Majlis Shari), which was the group's highest religious authority.<sup>31</sup>

From its inception, the government was a technocratic theocracy in which key decisions such as the selection of the prime minister and cabinet were in the hands of the General Shura Council. At the September conference "Islamic law as the only source of legislation" was stipulated, as well as "the need to preserve the identity of the Syrian Muslim people," with no reference to Syria's other faiths.<sup>32</sup> The SSG did hold elections for its various technocratic ministries plus the Shura Council (which was commonly likened to a parliament), however this was a very limited democratic exercise. "The list of eligible candidates is pre-selected, and only certain people are allowed to vote. No women are allowed to vote or hold any senior-level positions in the SSG. Consequently, the process is elite and male-driven, and most residents in HTS territory have no role in it or in who decides on the rules of society," assessed researcher Aaron Zelin.<sup>33</sup> Common citizens had no formal means to issue a mandate via elections or to exercise accountability. Bassam Sahyouni was appointed as the first president of the Shura Council upon its establishment in February 2019. Just over one year later he resigned, reportedly due to frustration over HTS dictating policies and direction.<sup>34,35</sup> The most recent person to serve as SSG Prime Minister was Mohammed al-Bashir, who was "granted confidence" by the Shura Council on January 13th, 2024. Al-Bashir is now the official prime minister of Syria.<sup>36</sup> The SSG originally consisted of 10 ministries: Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Awqaf, Dawah and Guidance, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Agriculture and Aggregation, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Local Administration and Services, Ministry of Economy and Resources, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs and the Ministry of Education.<sup>37</sup> A 11th, the Ministry of Information, was formed in 2023.<sup>38</sup>

30 <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>

31 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hts-evolution-jihadist-group>

32 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/09/syrian-general-conference-faces-interim-government-idlib/>

33 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

34 <https://jusoor.co/public/tr/details/searching-for-spaces-for-effectiveness..-what-is-behind-the-recent-resignations-in-idlib>

35 <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/salvation-government-elects-new-shura-council-president.html>

36 <https://rb.gy/nfyalc> (<https://www.independentarabia.com>)

37 <https://levant24.com/infographics/2023/07/structure-of-the-syrian-salvation-government/>

38 <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/idlebs-ministry-of-information-has-all-the-powers-of-a-security-branch.html>



## SYRIAN SALVATION GOVERNMENT (JANUARY-DECEMBER 2024)



**ANAS KHATTAB**  
*HTS Intelligence  
Director*



**AHMED HUSSEIN AL-SHARAA**  
*Emir of HTS*



**MUHAMMAD ABD AL-RAHMAN**  
*Minister of Interior*



**MUHAMMAD AL-BASHIR**  
*Prime Minister*



**MAZEN DUKHAN**  
*Minister of Health*



**BASEL ABDUL AZIZ**  
*Minister of Economy  
and Resources*



**MUHAMMAD TAHA AL-AHMAD**  
*Minister of Agriculture  
and Irrigation*



**FADI AL-QASSEM**  
*Minister of Development  
and Humanitarian Affairs*



**NAZIR AL-QADRI**  
*Minister of Education*



**ABD AL-MUNIM ABD AL-HAFIZ**  
*Minister of Higher Education  
and Scientific Research*



**MUHAMMAD YAQOUB AL-OMAR**  
*Minister of Information*



**SHADI MUHAMMAD AL-WAISI**  
*Minister of Justice*



**HUSSAM HAJJ HUSSEIN**  
*Ministry of Awqaf,  
Dawah and Guidance*



**MUHAMMAD MUSLIM**  
*Minister of Local Administration  
and Services*

The Shura Council was the SSG's legislative body and pseudo parliament.<sup>39</sup> An SSG-organized conference in February 2019 purportedly sought to encourage public participation in the creation of the Council.<sup>40</sup> While dozens of civilians and fighters attended the conference, many civil actors declined to come, citing the process as HTS-managed.<sup>41</sup> Ten conference attendees were selected to oversee the Shura Council's formation, but direct elections were never conducted. Instead, its members were elected via an HTS-organized poll that was organized with just a fraction of local community representatives. In this way, HTS managed both the process and results of the selection of candidates. 107 council members were initially 'elected' in this way. The Shura Council's duties included legislation drafting, confidence granting or withdrawal for the SSG members, and ratification of SSG general plans. The Council was also meant

39 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hts-evolution-jihadist-group>

40 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1487521>

41 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/>

to monitor and supervise the activities of SSG ministries, and respond to civilian complaints.<sup>42</sup> Dr. Bassem Sahyouni was one of the council's founders and its first president. One year into his term, he announced his resignation without officially giving a reason, although it is reported he was frustrated with HTS interference in and control over the work of the council.<sup>434445</sup>

In April 2024, the Council announced the selection of an eight-member Higher Electoral Committee to determine a new electoral process that promised representation of women, local councils, minorities and the military.<sup>4647</sup> Elections with a new such format never materialized.

The General Security Service was officially established in 2020, for the purpose of internal security such as pursuit of "regime agents" or "sleeper cells" affiliated to factions considered hostile to HTS or SSG interests. Officially it was not linked to HTS. Indeed, in terms of manpower it was distinct. However, it was "associated and heavily – albeit covertly – influenced by HTS"<sup>48</sup> and widely described as the HTS security arm, targeting critics of HTS on charges of "collaboration with the enemy".<sup>49</sup>

## 2.3 HTS TAKES DAMASCUS

In Idlib, HTS centralized power and effectively managed all security, administrative and military matters, with control over supposedly independent bodies such as the SSG. The same phenomenon can be identified currently with HTS positioning itself at the center of the newly-formed Syrian Caretaker Government and concentrating authority in the hands of Ahmed al-Sharaa and a close inner circle of long-time HTS members or affiliates. It is difficult to identify a genuine 'transitional period' occurring, in which the state structures and systems of the Assad period are gradually replaced by functioning democratic institutions in a process with pluralistic participation. Instead, four steps – the establishment of an interim government loaded with HTS figures, the 'Victory Conference', the National Dialogue Conference, and the transitional constitution – have laid the practical groundwork for power and decision-making mechanisms to be formalized in the hands of HTS' leadership.

42 <https://tinyurl.com/4nn5hmdf> (<https://www.aljazeera.net>)

43 <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/idleb-president-of-general-shura-council-resigns.html>

44 <https://jusoor.co/public/tr/details/searching-for-spaces-for-effectiveness..-what-is-behind-the-recent-resignations-in-idlib>

45 <https://timep.org/2023/02/20/so-close-yet-so-far-the-political-and-economic-isolation-of-north-west-syria/>

46 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/>

47 <https://tinyurl.com/58hpp2r5> (<https://www.syria.tv>)

48 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>

49 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/04/al-jolani-the-one-man-rule/>

On December 6th, 2024, in the middle of a blisteringly successful offensive, with the fall of Damascus and Assad's government almost guaranteed. Ahmed al-Sharaa reintroduced himself to the world. Interviewed by CNN's Jomana Karadsheh, he called for a future of stability and peace in Syria. Islamism will be the foundation to build "a legal framework that protects and ensures the rights of all", he said. Institutions will be set up and with the rehabilitation of the "liberated areas," people will return to their homes. Many refugees from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, "and even refugees in Europe may return to rebuild their country".<sup>50</sup> Two days after this interview, the departure of Assad was confirmed.<sup>51</sup>



The nom de guerre, 'Mohammed al-Jawlani' was dropped, and in its place 'Ahmed al-Sharaa' entered the limelight. Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali, the outgoing prime minister and the last head of the GoS, agreed to remain in his position to take care of the transition. One day later however, on December 9th, HTS transferred this leadership role to Mohammed al-Bashir, a technocrat and at that time Idlib's SSG Prime Minister.<sup>52</sup> On December 10th, al-Bashir announced he would head a transitional government for a three month period lasting until March 1st, 2025.<sup>53</sup> Other SSG ministers would take on the national ministerial portfolios, hence retaining their positions but within the new interim authority.<sup>54</sup> This set a tone that has largely defined the transition period so far: decision-making power and key responsibilities have been kept in the hands of those close to HTS, previously affiliated with the SSG administration.

From the beginning of the transition process, some Syrian activists expressed concerns about the lack of information regarding who will actually participate in the government, and who will be holding power after the interim authority's deadline

50 <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/06/middleeast/syria-rebel-forces-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-jolani-intl-latam/index.html>

51 <https://en.majalla.com/node/323549/politics/revealed-insider-story-assad%E2%80%99s-flight-and-sharaa%E2%80%99s-arrival>

52 <https://en.ammonnews.net/article/76979>

53 <https://tinyurl.com/5aaz9uz3> (<https://www.independentarabia.com>)

54 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/15/what-to-know-about-syrias-new-caretaker-government>



of March 1st.<sup>55</sup> Others questioned whether al-Sharaa and, by extension, HTS, would use the transition period to consolidate their control over the country.<sup>56,57</sup> Such concerns were not unfounded. Of the 36 people currently appointed to key positions within the SCG and associated security and governance institutions, 30 of them were affiliated to HTS/SSG in Idlib. Four of them have long histories in the global jihadist movement.

The current SCG prime minister is Idlib-born Muhammad al-Bashir. As already noted, he was the SSG prime minister, having been chosen by the Shura Council in early 2024. Before this, he was the SSG Minister of Development and Humanitarian Affairs under prime minister Ali Keda.<sup>58</sup> Having studied engineering, he had worked at a Syrian Gas Company gas plant prior to his political career.<sup>59</sup> In Idlib, he also graduated from the University of Idlib in 2021, studying Sharia law.<sup>60</sup>

The current SCG foreign minister is Asad al-Shaibani (Zaid al-Attar). He is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>61</sup> When al-Nusra became Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, he acted as the group's official spokesperson. After Jabhat Fatah al-Sham became HTS, he worked in its Political Affairs Department. He then held the same position within the SSG upon its formation.<sup>62</sup>

The current Director of General Intelligence Services is Anas Khattab (Abu Ahmed Hudud). He has a long history inside the global jihad movement and has been very close to al-Sharaa since they founded Jabhat al-Nusra together.<sup>63</sup> Originally from Syria, he left for Iraq to wage "jihad against the American occupation"<sup>64</sup> and subsequently ISI. During his time as an ISI fighter, he managed the Syrian-Iraqi border region. With the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra, he became the group's General Administrator. In 2012 and 2014, the US and UN respectively listed him as an international terrorist.<sup>65</sup> He became the deputy commander of HTS and the head of the organization's General Security Apparatus. Throughout these years he had links with various national intelligence services, including that of the GoS

55 <https://tinyurl.com/6xetu9es> (<https://www.alarabiya.net>)

56 <https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-election-timetable-sparks-debate/7918897.html>

57 <https://tinyurl.com/6xetu9es> (<https://www.alarabiya.net>)

58 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/world/middleeast/syria-bashir-prime-minister.html>

59 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/12/09/who-is-mohammed-al-bashir-the-man-who-will-oversee-syrias-government-transition/>

60 <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-mohammed-al-bashir-syrias-new-prime-minister>

61 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/639650917cf149000147075d>

62 <https://tinyurl.com/3e9f5fsm> (<https://www.aljazeera.net>)

63 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>

64 <https://tinyurl.com/4amv75pm> (<https://www.syria.tv>)

65 <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-syrias-new-intelligence-chief-anas-khattab>

while he was an ISI member, and that of several Gulf states after. Reportedly, Khattab also maintained a close relationship with Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), dating back to his time overseeing al-Qaeda operations in Syria, even as the Turkish Interior Ministry designated him as ISIS-affiliated in 2021 (a time in which the Turkish government was under pressure to reassure critics that Turkey was actually committed combating ISIS).<sup>66</sup>

The position of Defense Minister is currently held by Murhaf Abu Qasrah (Abu Hassan al-Hamawi).<sup>67</sup> He joined al-Nusra, and remained in the group as it became Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in 2016, and HTS in 2017.<sup>68,69</sup> Within HTS, Abu Qasra became military wing leader and was responsible for the creation of HTS' armed drone unit, the Shaheen Brigades.<sup>70</sup> He was one of the key commanders during the HTS-led 'Deterrence of Aggression' operation. Serving under him as Army Chief of Staff is currently Ali Nour al-Din al-Naasan. A former SAA officer, he defected when the Syrian Civil War began, and was also an HTS fighter.<sup>71,72</sup>

All but one minister from the SSG kept a position in the new government. The key exception is the Health Minister, Mazen Dukhan, who has lost his seat. Mahir al-Sharaa (Maher al-Hussein), the brother of Ahmed al-Sharaa, has replaced Mazen Dukhan in the SCG. He had previously served as the advisor to Dukhan in the SSG.<sup>73</sup> His appointment was met with accusations of nepotism, with some viewing it as a continuation of the favouritism, corruption and family leadership that marked Assad's rule.<sup>74</sup>

Of those who kept a position, all but one kept exactly the same position. The exception is SSG interior minister Muhammad Abd al-Rahman, who was initially appointed to the same post within the SCG, but was then moved to the position of Idlib Governor, and Ali Abd al-Rahman Keda was moved to SCG Minister of Interior. Keda had worked within the SSG since 2019, serving as the president for four years before Muhammad al-Bashir. His repeatedly being elected for presidency

66 <https://nordicmonitor.com/2025/01/syrias-new-intelligence-chief-khattab-serves-as-liaison-to-turkeys-spy-agency-mit/>

67 <https://tinyurl.com/3462dtbv> (<https://7al.net>)

68 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murhaf\\_Abu\\_Qasra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murhaf_Abu_Qasra)

69 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/6586e48b6f0f2d0001c47c96>

70 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/13/syrian-rebels-reveal-year-long-plot-that-brought-down-assad-regime>

71 <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-interim-government-appoints-new-army-chief>

72 [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op\\_ed/2025/02/19/profiles-of-foreign-commanders-in-the-new-syrian-army/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2025/02/19/profiles-of-foreign-commanders-in-the-new-syrian-army/)

73 <https://tinyurl.com/4fyeseue> (<https://syrianobserver.com>)

74 <https://arabic.euronews.com/2024/12/18/jolani-appoints-brother-maher-health-minister-syria-sparks-criticism>

by the Shura Council had also sparked criticism in Idlib.<sup>7576</sup> After al-Bashir became president, Keda was appointed as head of the SSG Board of Grievances upon its formation in June 2024.<sup>77</sup>

The current Minister of Justice is Shadi al-Wais. After studying for a degree in Islamic Sharia, he became an Islamic education teacher, imam and preacher. When the Syrian Civil War began, he participated in the setting up of various Sharia authorities and served as a judge and later public prosecutor. He then joined Jabhat al-Nusra, working as a judge.<sup>78</sup> Upon his appointment in the SCG, he was identified in a video from 2015 where he is ordering the execution of women accused of prostitution in Idlib, sparking widespread outrage.<sup>7980</sup> At the time of its original publishing the video was shocking enough to spark a wave of international media attention.<sup>81</sup> Within the SSG, he was variously a member of the Civil Criminal Court, president of the Criminal Appeal Authority, president of the Court of Appeals and a member of the Supreme Judicial Council. In 2019 he was appointed SSG justice minister. Upon being announced for the same post in the SCG he stated in an interview that since “Muslims make up about 90% of the Syrian people [...] implementing the Sharia will play a major role”.<sup>82</sup>

The other SCG ministers who keep their roles from the SSG in Idlib are:

- Minister of Economy and Resources, Basel Abdul Aziz
- Minister of Agriculture and Aggregation, Muhammad Taha al-Ahmad
- Minister of Education, Nazir al-Qadri
- Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Abd al-Munim Abd al-Hafiz
- Minister of Information, Muhammad Yaqoub al-Omar
- Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, Fadi al-Qasim
- Minister of Local Administration and Services, Muhammad Muslim
- Minister of Awqaf, Dawah and Guidance, Hussam Hajj Hussein

75 <https://tinyurl.com/bdeur5kz> (<https://stepagency-sy.net>)

76 <https://timep.org/2023/02/20/so-close-yet-so-far-the-political-and-economic-isolation-of-north-west-syria/>

77 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/07/idlibs-grievance-board-al-jolanis-tool-to-consolidate-his-power/>

78 <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/01/syrias-new-minister-of-justice-a-profile-of-shadi-mohammed-al-waisi.php>

79 <https://verify-sy.com/en/details/10597/Did-the-current-Minister-of-Justice-appear-in-a-video-documenting-the-execution-of-a-woman-in-the-Idlib-countryside->

80 <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-minister-oversaw-execution-women-prostitution>

81 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/alqaeda-video-shows-public-execution-of-woman-accused-of-adultery-and-has-disgusted-even-isis-supporters-9980813.html>

82 <https://www.memri.org/tv/syria-new-minister-justice-shadi-waisi-sharia-law>

- Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, Muhammad Taha al-Ahmad

Figures who worked within the SSG in its directorates and now have ministerial positions in the SCG are:

- Minister of Electricity, Omar Shaqrouq (he also worked in the SSG electricity and energy sectors)<sup>83</sup><sup>84</sup>
- Minister of Water Resources: Osama Abu Zaid (he previously worked in Jabhat al-Nusra's General Directorate of Services, and later the SSG's water directorate)<sup>85</sup>

Newly appointed ministers who did not hold SSG positions before are:

- Minister of Finance: Muhammad Abazaid
- Minister of Domestic Trade & Consumer Protection: Mahir Khalil al-Hasan
- Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources: Giyath Diyab
- Minister of Transport: Baha al-Din Sharm
- Minister of Communications & Information Technology: Hussein al-Masri
- Minister of Administrative Development: Muhammad Hassan al-Sakkaf

All ministerial positions are filled by men who are Sunni Muslims. Almost all directors of non-ministerial SCG bodies are filled by men who are Sunni Muslims. The notable exception is that the head of the Women's Affairs Office is a woman, the dual Syrian-Turkish citizen Aisha al-Dibs. Very little is known of her history and her political affiliation. Reportedly, she had previously worked in humanitarian and civil initiatives in Idlib.<sup>86</sup> Upon her appointment, remarks she made in an interview drew sharp criticism from women's activists and organizations and were interpreted as indicative of her support for an Islamist governance system, as covered later.<sup>87</sup>

83 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/documents/61c705e72a5e080001396ae4>

84 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/documents/64f1cf13fca81000019865b0>

85 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/6127457723df110001da0404>

86 <https://manhom.com/%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B4%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A8%D8%B3/>

87 <https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-officials-comments-women-spark-uproar>



## SYRIAN CARETAKER GOVERNMENT (FEBRUARY 2025-)



**MURHAF ABU QASRA**  
*Minister of Defence*



**ANAS KHATTAB**  
*General Intelligence  
Services Director*



**AHMED HUSSEIN AL-SHARAA**  
*President of Syria*



**ALI ABD EL-RAHMAN KEDA**  
*Minister of Interior*



**ASAD HASAN AL-SHAIBANI**  
*Minister of Foreign Affairs  
and Expatriates*



**MUHAMMAD ABAZAID**  
*Minister of Finance*



**MUHAMMAD AL-BASHIR**  
*Prime Minister*



**MAHER AL-SHARAA**  
*Minister of Health*



**OMAR SHAQROUQ**  
*Minister of Electricity*



**GIYATH DIYAB**  
*Minister of Petroleum  
and Mineral Resources*



**BASEL ABDUL AZIZ**  
*Minister of Economy  
and Foreign Trade*



**MUHAMMAD TAHA AL-AHMAD**  
*Minister of Agriculture  
and Agrarian Reform*



**FADI AL-QASSEM**  
*Minister of Social Affairs  
and Labour*



**BAHA AD-DIN SHARM**  
*Minister of Transport*



**USAMA ABUZAID**  
*Minister of Water Resources*



**NAZIR AL-QADRI**  
*Minister of Education*



**ABD AL-MUNIM ABD AL-HAFIZ**  
*Minister of Higher Education  
and Scientific Research*



**MUHAMMAD YAQOUB AL-OMAR**  
*Minister of Information*



**HUSSEIN AL-MASRI**  
*Minister of Communications  
and Information Technology*



**MAHIR KHALIL AL-HASAN**  
*Minister of Domestic Trade  
and Consumer Protection*



**SHADI MUHAMMAD AL-WAISI**  
*Minister of Justice*



**HUSSAM HAJJ HUSSEIN**  
*Ministry of Awqaf*



**MUHAMMAD MUSLIM**  
*Minister of Local Administration  
and the Environment*



In addition to the ministers, 10 regional governors have been named. This is according to the governorate system in which Syria is divided into 14 governorates. They are:

- Damascus: Mahir Muhammad Marwan. He is SSG/HTS-affiliated, variously previously serving as a member of the Supreme Judicial Council in the Ministry of Justice, heading the Sarmada Commission Court, chairing the Board of Directors of the General Zakat Authority, working in the SSG follow-up committee, and serving as deputy Minister of Awqaf, Dawah and Guidance
- Rural Damascus: Amir al-Sheikh. He has been the General Commander of Ahrar al-Sham since 2021
- Aleppo: Azzam Gharib. He has been the General Commander of al-Jabhah al-Shamiyah since 2023
- Lattakia: Muhammad Othman. He is SSG/HTS-affiliated.<sup>88</sup> Serving as his deputy is Hassan Soufan, who is also SSG/HTS-affiliated and contributed to process of SNA factions reconciling with HTS some years back, plus led



- a sect of Ahrar al-Sham
- Tartous: Ahmad al-Shami. He is SSG/HTS-affiliated, previously serving as director of the General Electricity Corporation media office<sup>89</sup>
- Hama: Abd al-Rahman al-Sahyan. He is reportedly HTS-affiliated<sup>90</sup>
- Homs: Abd al-Rahman al-Ama. He is SSG/HTS-affiliated, previously serving as Minister of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, 2018-2021<sup>91</sup>
- Deir ez-Zor: Hussein al-Salamah. He is SSG/HTS affiliated, previously serving on the Board of Grievances upon its establishment in 2024, and in the al-Fateh al-Mubin Operations Room (the name of the Idlib-based, HTS-led military command prior to onset of 'Deterrence of Aggression')<sup>92</sup>
- Idlib: Muhammad Abd al-Rahman. He is SSG/HTS affiliated, previously serving as SSG interior minister
- Suwayda: Mustafa Bakour. He had previously worked in Harim, Idlib, an area home to a small Druze population that had experienced forcible conversion by both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>93,94</sup>
- Raqqa: no one appointed
- Heseke: no one appointed
- Daraa: no one appointed
- Quneitrah: no one appointed

Besides HTS/SSG, two SNA factions are currently represented: Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabhah al-Shamiyah. Both factions participated in the 'Deterrence of Aggression' operation, hence their appointments were likely to consolidate their allyship as HTS sought to dissolve and integrate all factions within the Ministry of Defense. RIC presented a summary of the major SNA militias in its report 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria' in July 2021, available [here](#). An updated report, the 'SNA Encyclopedia', was published in August 2022, detailing the factions' history and connections with Turkey, which can be read [here](#).

## 2.4 THE 'VICTORY CONFERENCE'

Concurrent with the establishment of the SCG, HTS also sought to consolidate control on the military side. One consequence of this was the supposed dissolution of the SNA. Following the fall of Assad, Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, said that Turkey has ordered the SNA to hand over their weapons to the SCG, citing "the need to integrate all armed factions in Syria under one military umbrella."

89 <https://tinyurl.com/ycx7ra6u> (<https://www.enabbaladi.net>)

90 <https://t.me/asseraaalsham1/12232>

91 [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=641288204889681&id=100070255216482](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=641288204889681&id=100070255216482)

92 [https://t.me/AC\\_Syria/113](https://t.me/AC_Syria/113)

93 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/10/additional-notes-on-the-druze-of-jabal-al-summaq>

94 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/15969/jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-druze-of-idlib-province>

While the SNA has long proclaimed to be the army of Syria's opposition, the coalition group has been from its inception in 2017 under the thumb of the Turkish Army, acting according to Turkish interests first. The SNA has presented itself as a regular standing army, technically subordinate to the Azaz-based Syrian Interim Government (SIG), yet such subordination does not exist in practice, since it is Turkey that appoints the SNA's senior positions and organized the groups militarily. The SIG is made up of a typical council of ministers and is responsible for developing its own political and civil institutions in the territories it controls. In turn, it was controlled by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces or the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), an umbrella group made up of different organizations opposed to Bashar al-Assad's rule, headquartered in Istanbul. The SNC was founded in 2012 based on international quotas and ideological currents, economically and politically linked to Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. On February 11th, al-Sharaa announced that he had reached an agreement with the SNC to dissolve it as a body, as part of the process of integrating such "revolutionary institutions" into state structures.

In December and January, HTS held several meetings with different SNA military commanders and former FSA faction leaders who had supported the November 27 offensive, either under the HTS-led Military Operations Department, or as part of the Southern Operations Room.<sup>9596</sup> The largest of these meetings was on December 21st. An official statement described the meeting as a "gathering of Commander Ahmed al-Sharaa and military factions to discuss the structure of the military institution in the new Syria."<sup>9798</sup>



Ahmed al-Sharaa meet with leaders of military factions, 21.12.2024

95 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-are-syrian-national-army>

96 [https://x.com/BroderickM\\_/status/1864616325605175736](https://x.com/BroderickM_/status/1864616325605175736)

97 [https://t.me/G\\_CSyriaa/87](https://t.me/G_CSyriaa/87)

98 <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/12/profiles-of-new-syrian-military-leadership.php>

Smaller meetings in December and January also saw al-Sharaa or SCG Defence Minister Abu Qasrah convene with various faction leaders to further consolidate the formalities of the process of integration into the new Syrian Army.<sup>99100</sup>

From the SNA, those who were photographed at these meetings were numerous. From the Third Legion, there were commanders from al-Jabha al-Shamiyah, al-Furqah 51, and Jaysh al-Islam, plus the director of Third Corps public relations. The National Front for Liberation (NFL) was represented also, with commanders from Ahrar al-Sham, 77th Division, and Faylaq al-Sham, and Suqor al-Sham all attending. A Liberation and Construction Movement commander and a Jaysh al-Izza commander were also present, plus the SNA extremist Islamist outfit Nour al-Din al-Zenki. Perhaps reflecting the SNA's lack of genuine structural unity and cohesiveness – or more likely at al-Sharaa's insistence, given his wish to prevent pre-organized forces from entering into the new civil and military administration – the commanders came to these meetings in an individual capacity to negotiate their roles within the new Syrian military and political administration independently from the SNA. Seemingly, those factions that attended the meetings agreed to dissolve themselves and work within the Syrian Ministry of Defence, although there has not been a joint SNA-Ministry of Defence announcement to confirm this.<sup>101</sup> Some commanders of different southern FSA militias that had re-aligned with Assad in 2018 under the Russian-sponsored reconciliation process and then participated in or supported the Southern Operations Room were also present at these meetings.

Seemingly as the finale of these meetings, on January 29th, HTS organized a 'Victory Conference'. In practice, it did not resemble a conference. Rather, Hassan Abdul Ghani, a Military Operations Department spokesperson, announced that Ahmed al-Sharaa will become Syrian president for the transitional phase and will be authorized to form a temporary legislative council for this period until a permanent constitution is ratified and comes into effect.<sup>102</sup> Al-Sharaa was de facto already in this position following the fall of the Assad regime, but this announcement formalized it. The statement continued, declaring that the 2012 constitution will be abolished and all emergency laws suspended. Ghani's speech also announced that the Baath

99 <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/01/profiles-of-the-new-syrian-military-leadership-part-2.php>

100 <https://x.com/azelin/status/1875592148198027685>

101 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/12/24/syrian-armed-groups-agree-to-dissolve-and-join-defence-ministry-says-new-administration/>

102 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/01/general-command-appoints-ahmed-al-sharaa-as-president-of-syria/>

party in Syria – and any affiliated institutions, committees, or organizations – would be dissolved, particularly noting that security institutions linked to the previous regime would be disbanded and new ones created in their place. He stated that a new Syrian army would be rebuilt “on national grounds”, while all military factions and revolutionary civil bodies would be dissolved and integrated into state institutions.<sup>103</sup>

The ‘Victory Conference’ was a purely military affair, with no civil representatives present. One speech was made by US-sanctioned Hatem Abu Shaqra, leader of the SNA’s Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction, infamous for the extra-judicial execution of Syrian Kurdish politician, Hevrin Khalef, during Turkey’s 2019 invasion into Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.<sup>104</sup> Two days later, a women’s march in Qamishlo condemned Abu Shaqra's presence in the new government.<sup>105</sup> At the protest, RIC spoke to Kongra Star member, Ronahi Hassan. "The HTS administration has elected itself and will govern Syria," she said. "Within this administration are murderers of women. Their hands are tainted by this. Therefore, we say to these people 'you don't represent us. You can't silence our voices.' Because we are decisive. The people should choose a leader through elections."



Ahrar al-Sharqiya's Hatem Abu Shaqra speaks at the Victory Conference, 29.01.2025



Ahmed al-Sharaa meets with Abu Amsha and Abu Bakir, 17.12.2024

Two other of the SNA’s most notorious leaders were also present at the ‘Victory Conference’: Abu Amsha (Suleiman Shah Bridge) and Abu Bakir (Hamza Division). On December 17th, 2024, both had been pictured with Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus.

103 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8d9r0vg6v7o>

104 <https://rojvainformationcenter.org/2021/10/ahrar-al-sharqiya-war-crimes-with-impunity/>

105 <https://x.com/RojavalC/status/1885657530988151063>



The HTS-Hamza and Suleiman Shah relationship came into the spotlight when HTS intervened in the SNA's October 2022 infighting, entering Afrin. After HTS formally exited Afrin, many of its fighters and commanders covertly remained stationed there under the banners of their SNA allies.<sup>106</sup> The groundwork for this alliance had been laid in March 2022, when (as per interviews conducted by STJ with a Hamza officer) "an undeclared security agreement" stipulated exchange of weapons and fighters and mutual attack/defence support.<sup>107</sup> Both Abu Amsha and Abu Bakir are US-sanctioned for "serious human rights abuses" in Turkish-occupied Afrin.<sup>108</sup> In 2022, Jindires (Afrin) saw popular protests demanding that Abu Amsha be held accountable for participation in murders, rapes, torture, kidnapping and arms trafficking. Yet he evaded accountability - likely due to Suleiman Shah's strict adherence to Turkey's agenda, and Abu Amsha's closeness to Turkish intelligence (MIT), who went as far as to threaten to cut off funding for the SNA's al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction due to their support of the protests.<sup>109</sup> Hamza Division meanwhile, stands accused of torturing and raping women in their prisons, beating and humiliating Kurdish captives, looting, destroying public and private infrastructure, and conducting arbitrary arrests in Syria's Turkish-occupied regions.<sup>110</sup>

Another US-sanctioned figure present was Imad Abu Zureiq. A former FSA commander, he re-aligned with the SAA in 2018 as part of the Russian-sponsored reconciliation process, and went on to lead a militia aligned with Assad's Military Intelligence Directorate. He supervised the Nasib border crossing with Jordan. Leveraging this position and the crossing's strategic importance, he practiced smuggling and extortion. He is US-sanctioned due to his involvement in captagon trafficking. Just before Assad's collapse, Abu Zureiq strategically broke ties with the former government, and was later accused of destroying documents that implicated him in the drug trade and other crimes.<sup>111</sup>

## 2.5 THE 'NATIONAL DIALOGUE CONFERENCE'

The day after the 'Victory Conference', al-Sharaa published a pre-recorded televised public address. He announced that a committee would be made in order to prepare for a national dialogue conference, which would be "a

106 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

107 <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/>

108 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>

109 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/02/state-of-the-occupation-q1-q2-2022-lack-of-accountability-of-sna-crimes-hts-incursion-in-afrin-isis-in-turkish-occupied-territories/>

110 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2022/07/the-syrian-national-army-the-turkish-proxy-militias-of-northern-syria/>

111 <https://963media.com/33347/>



direct platform for discussions, to listen to different points of view on our future political programme." He also committed to creating a "constitutional declaration" that would act as a "legal reference" during the transition period, since the old constitution had been suspended.<sup>112</sup> References to an upcoming such dialogue conference – widely billed as an important step if a democratic political transition is to happen in Syria – had already been made in December. What actually materialized however, was widely regarded as a show of democracy lacking any real substance.

Acting as conference preparation coordinator, Muayad Qiblawi stated that around 1,200 people would be attending. Specifically, they would be attending as individuals, not as entities or political parties.<sup>113</sup> On January 2nd, Qiblawi said the conference would aim to produce guidelines on how the second transitional government should be formed, bringing together various voices and perspectives representing Syria, and to lay the groundwork for a constitutional committee to be set up, tasked with writing the new constitution.<sup>114</sup> Qiblawi also specified that the preparatory committee would not be the one setting the criteria for invitation, with the appointed actor for that task remaining undisclosed. He added that the conference results would not be binding for the next government, since the conference is not expected to be recognised as "a legislative body".

On February 12th, the Preparatory Committee for the Syrian Dialogue Conference was announced. The seven-person committee met with al-Sharaa that day.<sup>115</sup> The figures appointed were:

- Youssef al-Hajar, who is a senior HTS figure and one of the founding members of Jabhat al-Nusra, with very close ties to al-Sharaa and al-Shibani. He worked within HTS' political bureau and was involved in the group's external relations.<sup>116</sup><sup>117</sup> He then became a member of the SSG's Shura Council upon its inception in 2019.<sup>118</sup>
- Mustafa al-Mousa, who served as president of the SSG's Shura Council from 2021-2024 and before that had headed the SSG's health board.
- Mohammad Mastat, who was formerly politically affiliated to Faylaq al-Sham, before spending 6 years working as an Islamic preacher in the HTS-held Idlib countryside. He then moved to SNA-controlled Azaz and was

112 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/01/syrias-new-leader-pledges-national-dialogue-conference>

113 <https://tinyurl.com/4xy9392e> (<https://www.alaraby.com>)

114 <https://tinyurl.com/yrvp6yyk> (<https://aawsat.com>)

115 <https://x.com/CdricLabrousse/status/1889706131699671245>

116 [https://x.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/1001462629364355072](https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/1001462629364355072)

117 <https://x.com/HamamIssa7/status/1885349188122407240>

118 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/67ac969e252334fa26a2ad50>

involved in various development and education institutions. He was a member of the General Command's Public Relations team during 'Deterring Aggression'. When HTS secured Aleppo city, Mastat gave a speech after noon prayers at al-Rawda Mosque to the city's residents.<sup>119</sup> He had also previously served as the SSG's Director of Primary Healthcare in the Ministry of Health.<sup>120121</sup>

- Maher Alloush, who is an Islamist figure close to the HTS leadership. Alloush was a well-known figure in Opposition circles due to his writings on Syria's politics plus his work mediating disputes within Ahrar al-Sham.
- Hassan al-Daghim, who is the only man on the committee to not be previously affiliated with HTS/SSG. He has a background in Islamic education and was previously the head of the SNA's Moral Guidance Department. At the 'Victory Conference', he introduced Ahmed al-Sharaa.<sup>122</sup>
- Hind Qabawat, who is one of two women in the committee. She is a Christian Syrian-Canadian law specialist, who studied in the USA and has been involved in various international civil and women's peace-building initiatives. She was also deputy head of the Syrian Negotiation Commission's Geneva Office, and participated in the 2017 Geneva peace talks on Syria.<sup>123</sup>
- Houda Atasi, who is director of the International Humanitarian Relief Foundation, an aid organization and has co-founded several Syrian civil initiatives.<sup>124125</sup>

While al-Hajar and al-Mousa were directly affiliated with HTS, Mastat and Alloush have been aligned with Islamist factions Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham respectively, both of whom are allies of HTS. Al-Daghim was politically SNA-affiliated but his conservative Islamic background matches that of the others. Qabawat stands out as the liberal figure and the only religious minority, while Atasi has not openly expressed political stances, working instead within a humanitarian framework. The inclusion of two women, as a bid to present the committee as inclusive, did nothing to reassure the many Syrians concerned about the common ideological background of the five men. Qabawat's family is from Damascus. Atasi and Alloush are from Homs. Al-Mousa and al-Daghim are from Idlib. Al-Hajar is from Deir ez-Zor. Mastat is from Aleppo. No one from the south of the country, the coastal region, or NES was included in the committee. The lack of political and geographical diversity within the committee led to widespread criticism, and accusations that al-Sharaa was only catering towards his core support base. Many raised concerns that not all Syrian communities were being engaged in the shaping of the country's

119 <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/67ac9695252334fa26a2ad3c>

120 <https://tinyurl.com/598b9fpw> (<https://www.trtbhloinsta.com>)

121 <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrias-temp-government-forms-national-dialogue-committee>

122 [https://x.com/Hasan\\_Dagim/status/1885105006996586801](https://x.com/Hasan_Dagim/status/1885105006996586801)

123 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/hind-kabawat/>

124 <https://www.care.org/media-and-press/care-honors-three-syrian-women-with-deliver-lasting-change-award/>

125 <https://x.com/HoudaAtassi>

future. The lack of Kurdish representation in the committee also was met with condemnation from some Syrian Kurdish political parties<sup>126</sup> and the Kurdish National Council.<sup>127</sup> The Syrian Democratic Council also commented that the committee is composed of people of a “single spectrum and political orientation, which violates the principle of fair and inclusive representation of all components of the Syrian people.”<sup>128</sup>

Al-Daghim later revealed in an interview that the committee does not actually have a substantial authority of its own and that the outputs of the conference will be in the form of recommendations to the presidency, rather than binding decisions. “If this conference had come first, we would have given it authority,” he said. Instead, the military ‘Victory Conference’ was held first, in which “sovereign decisions were taken” such as appointing al-Sharaa as president, or dissolving all old security and military apparatuses. What will come out of the Dialogue Conference will be “recommendations written by Syrians and submitted to the presidency.” His comments were seen by some as an indication that the much-touted, civilian-led National Dialogue Conference would be merely a performance of democracy, with the impactful governance decisions, such as the appointment of a president, already made during the exclusive military ‘Victory Conference’.<sup>129</sup>

On February 13th, the preparatory committee held a press conference in which they outlined the purpose of the National Dialogue Conference, stating it “seeks to discuss social, political, economic and governance issues, laying solid foundations for a future based on national consensus, justice, and reform.”<sup>130</sup> Acting as preparatory committee spokesperson, al-Daghim indicated that NES’ military and political actors would not be invited to the conference, saying “whoever does not lay down his arms ... will have no role in the national dialogue,”<sup>131</sup> referencing the demand from Damascus that the SDF surrender its weapons, dissolve itself and merge its fighters into the new Syrian army (this issue is covered in more detail in subsequent sections). He said the SDF’s exclusion is also because “they do not represent the eastern provinces”.<sup>132</sup> Al-Daghim explained that in lieu of inviting NES actors in their

126 <https://tinyurl.com/yc8ahxwp> (<https://hawarnews.com>)

127 <https://www.r-enks.net/?p=58455>

128 <https://m-syria-d.com/?p=21359>

129 <https://x.com/Ramijarrah/status/1890387538809913527>

130 <https://t.me/syriafree25/757>

131 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-groups-must-disarm-take-part-national-dialogue-official-says-2025-02-13/>

132 <https://npasyria.com/205229/>

institutional capacity, the committee would be in communication with specific individuals from Heseke, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, no one will attend the conference on behalf of an organization or group; invitations would be on a personal basis only. He also said that the president has “a desire to involve the results and recommendations of the dialogue in the constitutional construction of the country,”<sup>134</sup> again clarifying that concrete actions towards such constitutional construction will be taken by appointed president al-Sharaa, with the Dialogue Conference merely providing “recommendations”.

NES’ political and military figures displayed their dissatisfaction with the ongoing process. Veteran Syrian Kurdish politician Saleh Muslim argued that if the bodies representing NES’ residents “are not represented fairly [at the Dialogue Conference], they will not be bound by the decisions of the conference.” He added that he feared HTS was seeking to secure its interests rather than those of the Syrian people. SDF Media Office director, Farhad Shami, described the situation as a “policy of exclusion”.<sup>135</sup> The DAANES argued that the preparatory committee “reflects clear shortcomings in the process of democratic transformation of the new Syria”.<sup>136</sup>

Some consultative dialogue sessions were organized by the preparatory committee, supposedly to gather local opinions on what issues should be raised in the conference.<sup>137</sup> Neither the preparatory committee nor the presidency clarified how people were selected to attend these dialogue sessions. In total, in just one week, the committee met with around 4,000 individuals. These sessions were described as rushed, with complex topics opened only briefly, and the large numbers of participants per session hindering proper discussion.<sup>138</sup>

The National Dialogue Conference finally took place in Damascus on February 25-26. Reportedly, 533 people attended, out of a total of 550 who were invited. The conference saw speeches from al-Sharaa and al-Shaibani, plus six workshop sessions on the topics of transitional justice, constitutional construction, institutional construction and reform, personal freedoms and human rights, the role of civil society and the economy. A final statement

133 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyede-silah-birakmayanlar-ulusal-diyalog-konferansina-davet-edilmeyecek/3481378>

134 <https://sanasyria.org/?p=2189652>

135 <https://tinyurl.com/cddjr7je> (<https://www.alarabiya.net>)

136 <https://www.facebook.com/aanes.official/posts/988820070016118>

137 <https://sanasyria.org/?p=2190208>

138 <https://en.majalla.com/node/324473/opinion/missteps-making-syrias-national-dialogue-risks-failure>

featured an 18-point list of recommendations for al-Sharaa and his SCG. These are – as was stipulated prior to the conference – not binding. In any case, the suggestions made were fairly vague.<sup>139</sup> They referenced maintaining the unity of the Syrian Arab Republic, condemning Israeli incursion into Syrian territory, rejecting any armed formations outside the official institutions, creating a temporary constitutional framework for the transitional phase, creating a temporary legislative council, and creating a constitutional committee to prepare a draft of a permanent constitution, as well as building mechanisms for transitional justice, focussing on peaceful social co-existence in which the rights of all are respected, and enhancing economic development, with sanctions on Syria lifted, plus reforming and restructuring public institutions, forwarding the educational system, and promoting more inter-Syrian dialogue.

The manner in which the conference was carried out triggered a wave of criticism from various actors across Syrian society.<sup>140</sup><sup>141</sup> While the conference was promoted as an opportunity to begin rebuilding the country, many observers and participants were left disappointed.<sup>142</sup><sup>143</sup> Only on February 23rd, did the preparatory committee announce the date of the conference and send out invitations, meaning some of those invited who live abroad could not attend due to the last-minute nature of the invitation.<sup>144</sup> The selection process was opaque, with no criteria given for how representation of all Syrians would be ensured, yet from the composition of the attendees some assumptions can be made about the criteria for invitation. The exclusion of groups with an alternative political vision to that of HTS' was blatant, such as figures from the main political forces in NES, Suwayda and the coastal region. Many lambasted the policy of forbidding individuals to attend as representatives of parties, organizations or unions. This was seen as a strategic decision on the part of the SCG, in order to prevent organized political forces from making their voices heard.<sup>145</sup> The conference was the first opportunity for the SCG to initiate a democratic process, yet the process that transpired was widely regarded as abysmal. The vague and non-binding nature of the output of the conference

139 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/with-18-points-national-dialogue-conference-concludes-its-work>

140 <https://x.com/IbrahimAlAssil/status/1894904471605649467>

141 <https://x.com/HussamHamoud/status/1894439611818025206>

142 <https://etansyria.org/blog-syrian-national-dialogue-conference-falls-short-of-expectations/>

143 <https://www.newarab.com/news/was-syrias-national-dialogue-conference-missed-opportunity>

144 <https://tinyurl.com/4wnap93d> (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk>)

145 <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/the-view-from-damascus-failure-of-syrias-national-dialogue-conference-and-its-implications.html>



left many concerned as to how future political matters would be handled. It is still unclear how the 18-point output of the conference will be used to legitimize future SCG decisions, as the unelected interim authority moves forward with the restructuring and re-building of the Syrian state. Indeed, rather than actually producing concrete outcomes, it seems that Ahmad al-Sharaa and the senior HTS/SSG figures around him sought to utilise the Dialogue Conference to legitimize their control over the process of directing the future Syrian state.

The DAANES described the conference process as "disappointing", saying that initial steps such as "to form an integrated committee to prepare for this dialogue" were not taken, which could have allowed discussion over attendance of different representatives.<sup>146</sup> The Kurdish National Council also criticized a "selective and individual invitation process, devoid of clear criteria ensuring balanced representation of Syria's diverse political and ethnic forces, including the Kurdish political movement".<sup>147</sup> The DAANES and KNC were not the only political forces in Syria to condemn the SCG's handling of the conference. The Syrian Turkmen Council (of which former SIG president Abd al-Rahman Mustafa is a member) was not invited, describing the exclusion as an "unacceptable situation".<sup>148</sup> The aforementioned SNA warlord Abu Amsha – who had already been awarded a position in the new Syrian Army as a commander of the X division – also posted a (since deleted) tweet terming the conference "a failure".<sup>149</sup> The Future Syria Party stated that "a lack of genuine inclusivity" at the conference raised wider concerns about how much the voices of all Syrians would be accounted for in decision-making processes further down the line for the building of the new Syria.

Syrian writer and analyst Omar Kaddour argued that while the conference was replete with references to "transitional justice," al-Sharaa is exploiting the general consensus that transitional justice is needed, while pursuing accountability only selectively, prosecuting some involved in Assad's repressive power apparatuses while integrating others to consolidate political control.<sup>150</sup> Researcher Alexander McKeever commented that the conference

146 <https://www.facebook.com/aanes.official/posts/996892859208839>

147 <https://tinyurl.com/3ex5vdbt> (<https://www.enabbaladi.net>)

148 <https://www.facebook.com/meclisturkmen/posts/pfbid02BhwXTMPcXPYQJJ4sg1utLdBX-EciVnLr2z2zTt4q5y23sPkUk4YzMEiqi4ReFNGnhl>

149 <https://x.com/SakherEdris/status/1894372317305639147>

150 <https://tinyurl.com/4c2rf63n> (<https://www.almodon.com>)

was “more reminiscent of Islamist ideas of consultative government rather than anything resembling democracy”.<sup>151</sup> World Bank senior consultant and economist Karam Shaar, who attended the conference, said “the conference’s final statement was fluffy, non-binding, and lacked a concrete roadmap. If there is no commitment to implementation, what’s the point of the discussions? Additionally, the role of civil society was framed as if it's subordinate to the state. While women’s rights were acknowledged, there was no explicit commitment to gender equality.”<sup>152</sup> Mohammad al-Abdallah, executive director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Center, argued the conference was doomed to be no more than symbolic from the outset due to how it was structured, with the dialogue lacking any political weight.<sup>153</sup>

## 2.6 THE TRANSITIONAL CONSTITUTION

On March 13th, the Syrian Caretaker Government (SCG) published the proposed constitution of the transitional period.<sup>154</sup> A five-year transitional period was outlined, which will supposedly end once there is a new constitution and elections, but it is unclear precisely how the permanent constitution will be negotiated and drafted. Officially, the transitional constitution was prepared by a small committee of seven people selected by the SCG.<sup>155</sup> There was no transparency regarding the selection process for this committee. All seven were Sunni Arabs, leading to predictable criticisms regarding the committee not accounting for Syria’s ethnic and religious diversity. Limiting the independence of this committee was the fact that their draft had to be accepted by the HTS-led SCG. Indeed, not hours after the formation of the committee, al-Jazeera published a leaked draft of the constitution, which some took to mean that the committee would only have the power to suggest edits on a predetermined document. The National Dialogue Conference was also theoretically meant to inform the constitution writing process, however, as already noted, the 18-point output from the conference was vague, opaque, and non-binding.

151 <https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-82025>

152 [https://x.com/Karam\\_Shaar/status/1895483225738539457](https://x.com/Karam_Shaar/status/1895483225738539457)

153 <https://www.facebook.com/mohammad.alabdallah.7>

154 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/iexplainer-syrias-transitional-constitution/>

155 [https://t.me/G\\_CSyriaa/565](https://t.me/G_CSyriaa/565)

In the state system described in the constitution, authority is heavily centralized in the hands of the interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa. He will maintain tight control of all state powers without proper checks and balances. The president will serve as supreme leader of the military, and will manage Syrian affairs alongside his (personally appointed) ministers. He can declare a state of emergency and martial law, with the approval of the (personally appointed) National Security Council. The president will also have the right to propose laws and issue decrees with the force of law. Laws passed by the legislative body (the people's council) can also be subject to the president's veto – which requires a two-thirds majority from the legislature to be overridden. The president's influence over the composition of the legislature means such an event is unlikely in any case.

One third of the members of the people's council will be directly chosen by the president. The rest of the council's composition will be determined by a 'high committee.' The president will appoint this committee. Additionally, the interim president has the power to appoint all judges of the Supreme Constitutional Court, which will serve as Syria's highest judicial authority. All in all, references to the separation of the executive, judicial, and legislative powers made in the constitution are proven completely worthless by the articles that follow, which stipulate a system in which the interim president has vast control over all three.

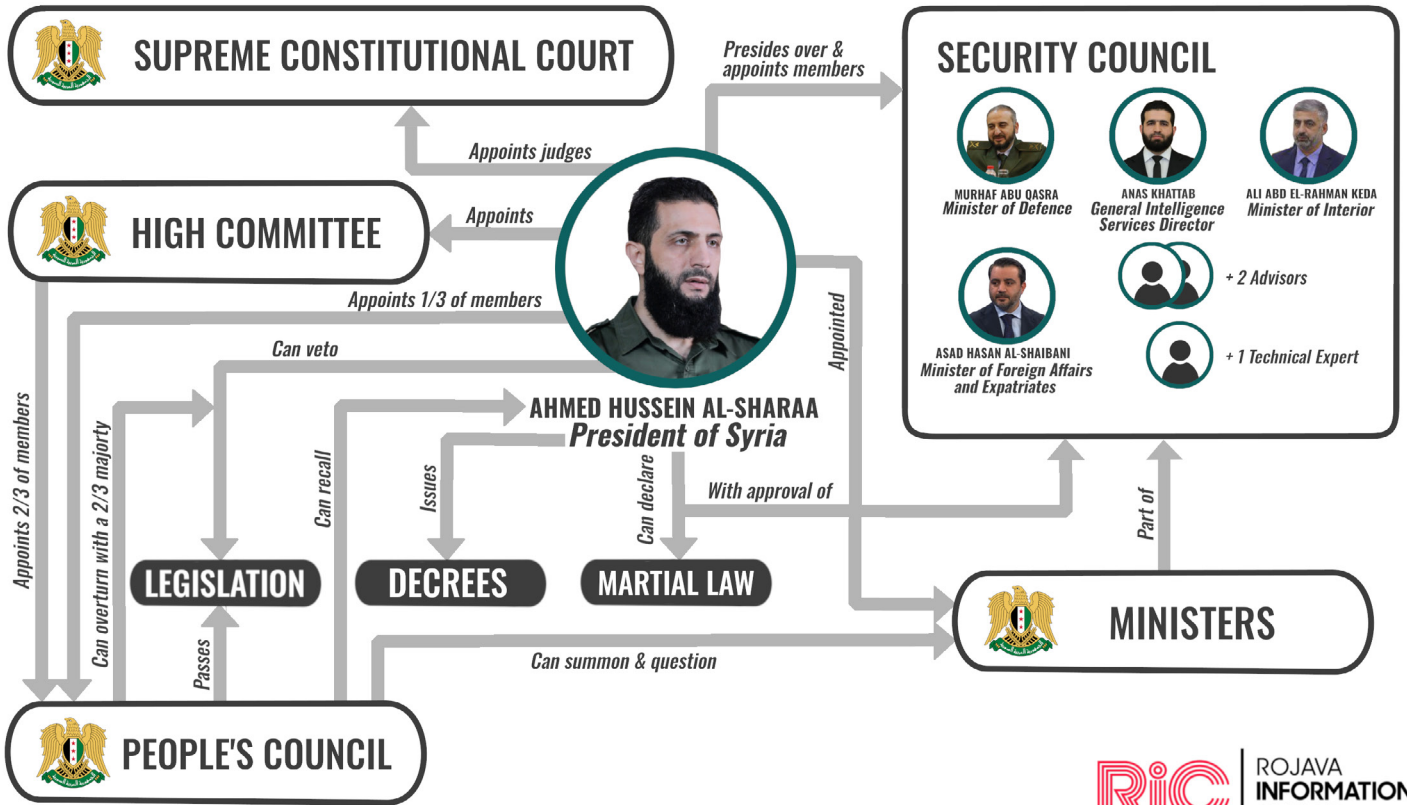
The National Security Council must approve presidential calls for a state of emergency. Yet the current – newly formed – eight-person National Security Council is already hand-picked by al-Sharaa, who heads the council. It contains the foreign minister, defense minister, interior minister, and national intelligence chief, plus two "advisory" members and a technical expert appointed by the president. Three of those current ministers, as selected by al-Sharaa, were long-time jihadists alongside him in Jabhat al-Nusra: foreign minister, Asad al-Shaibani, intelligence chief, Anas Khattab, and defense minister, Murhaf Abu Qasrah.

Additionally, the formation of Syrian political parties is forbidden until a "party law" regulating them is produced. This means there will be no chance of any kind of formal political pluralism or opposition. Human Rights Watch issued a warning that "the design of Syria's new declaration risks entrenching authoritarian control rather than facilitating a genuine transition to a rights-respecting democracy."<sup>156</sup>

The new constitution also has raised concerns about encroachment on civil freedoms. "Glorifying the obsolete al-Assad regime or its symbols" and "denying his crimes or praising, justifying, or trivializing them" are criminalized, but the vagueness of these articles and their broad scope means they could be used to limit freedom of speech.

156 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights>

# SYRIA'S NEW CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM



The transitional constitution outlines a governance system that displays several of the qualifiers of a dictatorship. Ahmed al-Sharaa has concentrated power in his hands, operating with almost unchecked authority without the consent of or accountability towards the population. Decisions are being made unilaterally, and he maintains influence over all key institutions: the military, judiciary, state bureaucracy and legislature. Political opposition is suppressed, with the formation of parties currently forbidden, and dissenting voices kept out of decision-making. There will be no elections for at least five years. Civil liberties are at risk of being curtailed. For a deeper overview of the transitional constitution and the critical response it received from several key Syrian actors, read RIC's [explainer](#).

## 2.7 GOVERNANCE TRENDS

In the post-Assad period, the HTS-led SCG is under the international spotlight and facing pressure to demonstrate democratic steps are being taken and civil society is being embraced. Yet the concentration of power in the hands of a core group of HTS figures does not bode well for either of these things. In Idlib, HTS' monopolization of authority – civil and military – facilitated its imposition of restrictions on the population and

suppression of dissent, with numerous human rights violations committed in the process.

Showing an evolution from their practices as Jabhat al-Nusra, in Idlib, HTS lessened their emphasis on dictating and enforcing policies related to daily life. They banned smoking for example, but did not enforce the law.<sup>157</sup> Instead, they focussed on cracking down harshly on political opposition. In November 2020, the UN noted “continued detention of civilians, including humanitarian workers” in Idlib, plus “deeply troubling reports of executions following the detentions and so-called trials by the de facto authorities” for people perceived as affiliated with an opposing group or party.<sup>158</sup>

HTS also made extensive efforts to control Idlib’s information environment. Established in 2019, the SSG’s Directorate of Information monitored and controlled the various media outfits in the region. While those outlets publishing views critical of HTS or the SSG faced no explicit ban, they were more subtly repressed, and any who were too outspoken risked detention and torture.<sup>159</sup> In contrast, those channels linked to HTS faced no restrictions in their work. By 2021, HTS’ harsh practices of repression, intolerance of political dissent, and crackdown on independent civilian journalists and progressive civil society groups prompted some commentators to compare the group to the various despotic regimes it professed to oppose in the Middle East.<sup>160</sup> The banning of Orient News from SSG territories made waves in August of that year.<sup>161</sup> HTS charged the widely-read outlet with “violations” such as using the phrase “armed militias” to describe HTS. The creation of the Electronic Cyber Entity, a body connected to the Security Service, at the beginning of 2022, enabled a more subtle monitoring of information spreading through social networks. This led to arrests of those who shared videos deemed immoral. When the authorities did away with a morality police patrolling the streets, they replaced it with more covert mechanisms of repression.

Protests against HTS-imposed restrictions on Idlib’s population had occurred

157 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-north-west-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>

158 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2020/11/press-briefing-note-syria-idlib-violations-and-abuses>

159 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-north-west-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>

160 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/global-jihad-local-regime-hts-builds-different-forms-legitimacy>

161 <https://syriadirect.org/in-assads-footsteps-media-restrictions-make-northwestern-syria-another-kingdom-of-silence/>



throughout their years in power, with demonstrators demanding Ahmed al-Sharaa step down and HTS leave Idlib.<sup>162</sup> HTS had acted by arresting some of the participants or people making critical remarks online and had also opened fire to disperse protest crowds.<sup>163</sup> None of this shook the balance HTS had established, until 2023.

Starting in the summer of 2023, the General Security Apparatus conducted a campaign of arrests which led to the detention of more than 400 HTS members.<sup>164</sup> The majority of the detained people were eventually acquitted and released, but HTS' handling of the case featured systemic detention without clear charges and without access to legal defense, with multiple accounts of mistreatment and torture of those detained. In some cases the Shura council sentenced the culprit to death if they were found guilty.<sup>165</sup> In addition to targeting their own members, HTS arrested those of other armed groups, plus non-armed political parties, civilians who had criticized HTS, and those who were victims of crime and were trying to seek justice through the SSG courts.

At the leadership level, two key figures exited the group: Abu Maria al-Qahtani was detained in August 2023. Al-Qahtani was the second most powerful figure in HTS after al-Sharaa.<sup>166</sup> HTS leaders potentially viewed him as threatening the stability and influence of HTS, prompting them to accuse al-Qahtani of preparing a coup.<sup>167</sup> Despite the accusations leveled against him, no conclusive evidence was presented to prove his involvement in suspicious activities and he was released and cleared of charges in March following seven months of house arrest. He was assassinated the following April. His assassination triggered strong internal turmoil, with some saying a faction of HTS leadership was behind the assassination. Another long-term member, Abu Ahmad Zakour, defected in December 2023, while the campaign of internal arrests was ongoing. He had promoted fostering HTS' relationships with some factions of the SNA. He was particularly connected to the SNA factions that facilitated the incursion of HTS into the Afrin region in October 2022.<sup>168</sup> The reasons for the defection are unclear: Zakour fled to SNA-controlled Azaz. HTS sent an armed cell to capture him, but he was

162 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSsXH10WJb8>

163 <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/133486>

164 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/crossroads-idlib-hts-navigating-internal-divisions-amid-popular-discontent>

165 <https://npasyria.com/177367/>

166 <https://tinyurl.com/4wus35pb> (<https://www.akhbaralaan.net>)

167 <https://tinyurl.com/yc3ut3ym> (<https://candlegrup.com>)

168 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

protected by SNA and Turkish army members and evaded capture.<sup>169</sup>

In February 2024, widespread reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees by the HTS general security service emerged. This was one of the reasons for the popular unrest that characterised Idlib region in 2024.<sup>170</sup> In February 2024, civilian activists initiated large popular protests which also drew support from some military and religious figures, demanding [1] the release of political and security detainees, [2] governance and socioeconomic reforms and [3] the removal of al-Sharaa as HTS leader. Al-Sharaa publicly acknowledged the use of “prohibited and severe means of pressure on the detainees” and offered to investigate and ensure accountability.<sup>171</sup> Initial peaceful demonstrations were met with use of force from HTS, with protestors assaulted and arrested. Relatives attempted to obtain information from HTS and SSG about their detained family members. In March, a dedicated office for providing information about detainees was established. HTS initially utilized the language of reform: the head of HTS’ Supreme Fatwa Council, Abdul Rahim Atoun, declared seven steps to address the issue of detainees, pledging to visit prisons, issue a general amnesty and establish a judicial committee to look into possible violations. Yet HTS later again resorted to force to suppress the demonstrations. Footage of masked and armed individuals assaulting protestors spread on social media in May.<sup>172</sup> The assailants were later identified as members of the SSG’s General Security Department.<sup>173</sup><sup>174</sup> The SSG and HTS’ discourse shifted too, taking a threatening tone instead of a reconciling one. Further protests<sup>175</sup> were met with harsh violence, with protestors beaten, tortured and ran over in the streets and journalists covering the events also targeted.<sup>176</sup> In May, the US Embassy in Syria commented on the events, stating “we deplore Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s regime-style intimidation and brutality against peaceful protestors as they call for justice, security, & [sic] respect for human rights.”<sup>177</sup>

Not three months before the commencement of ‘Operation Detering Aggression’, civilian frustration had again manifested in the form of a wave of widespread protests in Idlib. One protester told Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) that HTS

169 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/crossroads-idlib-hts-navigating-internal-divisions-amid-popular-discontent>

170 <https://www.voanews.com/a/protests-grow-against-powerful-jihadist-group-in-syria-enclave-/7518396.html>

171 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/133/77/pdf/g2413377.pdf>

172 <https://x.com/ShaaNetwork/status/1790343112843309542>

173 <https://tinyurl.com/bduyjnyt> (<https://www.syria.tv>)

174 <https://stj-sy.org/en/between-reformist-discourse-and-actual-repression-how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-handled-idlib-protests/>

175 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C15RKdv39cU>

176 <https://www.facebook.com/SyMediaA/posts/pfbid02h3P9u8uMjNe2KmBnXR9JAykL3HCiyZn-YPM9GtiRipsQ2gfpn3ti7D8t2RjF6C6Yl>

177 <https://x.com/USEmbassySyria/status/1795716674198573539>

had imposed itself over Idlib's institutions, setting conditions for work in them, selecting employees who are close or loyal to it in order to ensure that those institutions stay aligned with HTS interests.<sup>178</sup> This reflected that while these protests were sparked by HTS' internal crackdown and arrest spree, the grievances expressed by the demonstrators surpassed this matter, rather stemming from the accumulation of long-term discontent with HTS' monopolization of Idlib's administrative, security, military and civil society matters.<sup>179</sup>

HTS detained men, women, and children as young as seven for participating in the demonstrations. Detainees were subject to torture, as multiple detainees testified to the UN. There was an absence of fair judicial procedures, particularly for those detained in security-related cases, who were forbidden from acquiring legal representation. SSG Military Courts were also used to try civilians. Some detainees were convicted without knowing their sentence, or without ever appearing in court. The UN reported several instances in which people were released only after signing pledges not to oppose or criticize HTS.

The UN recorded four cases of execution or death in detention in November 2023 - three former HTS fighters and one civilian.<sup>180</sup> Some months later, their deaths were confirmed to their families who had been demanding information. None of the bodies of the executed prisoners were given to their families however. HTS and SSG personnel stated on two instances that the bodies had likely been buried in mass graves. In 2024, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that HTS carried out 17 executions of detainees.<sup>181182183</sup> In some cases, the detainees were accused of being ISIS members and had been in prison for years.<sup>184</sup> In other cases, the individuals had been only a few months in detention, on accusations of collaboration with external powers.<sup>185</sup>

In their examination covering the first half of 2024, the UN concluded that there are "reasonable grounds to believe that HTS members continued to commit acts of torture and cruel treatment, as well as passing sentences and

178 <https://stj-sy.org/en/between-reformist-discourse-and-actual-repression-how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-handled-idlib-protests/>

179 <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-arbitrarily-withdraws-professional-licenses-from-graduates-of-syrian-universities-outside-its-areas/>

180 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/133/77/pdf/g2413377.pdf>

181 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/331729/>

182 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/336239/>

183 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/349070/>

184 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/331304/>

185 <https://npasyria.com/177367/>

carrying out executions without a previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all judicial guarantees which are generally recognized as indispensable. These acts may amount to war crimes. Furthermore, there are reasonable grounds to believe that HTS members may have committed acts tantamount to enforced disappearance.”

Parts of Idlib’s local elite had supported the SSG, including urban professionals and tribal figures who participated in SSG governance structures. The pulling in of these individuals reflected the fact that HTS lacked the manpower and expertise to fully monopolize governance on its own – as is also the case now in Syria. Yet, “a significant proportion” of civil activists and journalists rejected SSG governance due to its closeness with HTS, corruption, and suppression of independent civil structures.<sup>186</sup> The reception of the SSG amongst Idlib’s inhabitants in general was mixed. While parts of the population welcomed the establishment of services, some also criticized the lack of representation outside of HTS members. Resentment had also built due to continued poor living conditions for most people, mismanagement and corruption in the administration, lack of employment opportunities, plus imposition of taxes and fees by the administration’s Zakat authority. The latter had been a long-term source of discontent. In November 2019 in Kafr Takharim, civilians stormed police stations and expelled HTS-linked officials due to grievances over mandatory zakat.<sup>187</sup> HTS responded by shelling the town, killing at least five people. Kafr Takharim had only been seized by HTS from Faylaq al-Sham control that year. According to residents of the town, HTS swiftly cracked down on those who might oppose or challenge their authority, but there was little protest due to fear of arrest. Yet in early 2024, as demonstrations erupted in other sites around Idlib, Kafr Takharim’s residents also joined in, with several demands: “abolishing the taxes imposed on everyone, ending the authority of the security office over the city’s families, dissolving the General Security Service, and forming an internal Shura (advisory) Council within Kafr Takharim city to participate in resolving the city’s affairs and participating in its management.”

Via the SSG, HTS also stamped large levies on several sectors such as construction, shipping, pharmaceuticals, currency exchange and remittances, and sanitation.<sup>188</sup> Other factors such as inadequate aid delivery after the earthquake that struck the region in February 2023 had aggravated frustrations in recent years.

In the initial years of HTS control, a morality police patrolled Idlib’s streets.<sup>189</sup> In 2018, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights referenced “severe psychological and physical harm to women, girls, and men, by [HTS]

186 [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69795/RSC%202021\\_08-EN.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69795/RSC%202021_08-EN.pdf)

187 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hts-evolution-jihadist-group>

188 <https://stj-sy.org/en/between-reformist-discourse-and-actual-repression-how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-handled-idlib-protests/>

189 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/059/73/pdf/g2105973.pdf?>

imposing religious dress codes and, in the case of women and girls, denying their freedom of movement without a male relative".<sup>190</sup> By 2022, the UN was still recording instances of HTS detaining people following comments in private conversations related to religious matters, arresting women for 'inappropriate' dress, and enforcing so-called morality codes.<sup>191</sup> At the same time, HTS was also taking a more 'internationally-cautious' approach, for example switching the morality police for information campaigns which de facto imposed misogynous and patriarchal customs and limited women's freedoms. In January 2024 however, a draft of a new public morality law was published on local media, stipulating restrictions on women's access to public spaces and employment, plus the establishment of a new morality police who could arrest and detain.<sup>192</sup>

In its February 2023 Syria report, the UN Human Rights Commission recorded HTS committing "the war crime of rape and other forms of sexual violence [...] against the framework of national legislation that fails to effectively criminalize domestic violence, marital rape and other forms of gender-based violence."<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, HTS in Idlib also holds a record of outright opposition to women's empowerment projects, ranging from threatening women's activists to burning down women's center, and a legal framework that included imprisonment, torture and even execution for crimes defined by sexist and patriarchal legislation.<sup>194</sup> Within the household and community, gender equality was not promoted. SSG and Idlib's religious establishment's restrictions on women's mobility, dress and basic liberties, combined with these domestic pressures, meant women's presence in the public sphere was limited.<sup>195</sup>

While HTS' religious curriculum was milder than that of other radical Islamist groups, SSG-run schools "leave little room for theological or ideological dissent from the group's Salafi-jihadist version of Islam", the US Committee on International Religious Freedom commented in 2022.<sup>196</sup> Additionally, the SSG Education Directorate of the Salvation Government instructed teachers to block married female students – including girls subjected to forced child marriage –

190 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-37-CRP-3.pdf>

191 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g22/251/52/pdf/g2225152.pdf?OpenElement>

192 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/133/77/pdf/g2413377.pdf>

193 [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4005953/files/A\\_HRC\\_52\\_69-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4005953/files/A_HRC_52_69-EN.pdf)

194 <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-did-not-spare-women-detention-or-physical-abuse/>

195 <https://stj-sy.org/en/silenced-and-defamed-womens-organizations-in-north-western-syria-under-many-layers-of-oppression/>

196 <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022%20Factsheet%20-%20HTS-Syria.pdf>



from attending.<sup>197</sup> In Idlib, child marriage remained a sharp reality. Exacerbated by poverty, lack of education, and a passive judicial body, it was a widespread and accepted practice to which HTS' fighters actively contributed, since many of them were married to minors.<sup>198</sup>

In HTS' public speeches in Idlib, the promise for security and "a dignified life" often featured prominently. Despite this discourse, such rights were not for all. Religious minorities experienced significant discrimination. Alevi and Druze, considered apostate by HTS' ideologues, had been obliged to publicly convert to Sunnism and, together with Christians, saw their properties confiscated.<sup>199</sup> In 2020, an initiative to return such seized properties to their rightful owners began, as HTS sought to scrub its image for the West by demonstrating tolerance for minorities. Such efforts were piecemeal and incomplete.<sup>200</sup> In 2022, al-Sharaa publicized himself meeting with some of Idlib's Christians and made further promises about property-based reparations.<sup>201</sup> Yet such minorities could not practice their religion freely; for example Christians were prohibited from ringing church bells.<sup>202</sup> HTS also pushed a sectarian appeal to Sunni identity, both directly and indirectly.<sup>203</sup>

The SSG's media directorate was effectively a policing mechanism. Local reporters described it as a tool for the HTS security services as they sought to control journalists and media workers.<sup>204</sup> In Idlib, journalists and media activists also are subject to arrests and interrogations based on accusations that they are in violation of the SSG-issued media law.<sup>205</sup> In an interview with STJ, a media worker said that while the provisions of this law had never actually been publicized, arrests could be made on the grounds that this law forbids covering protests without SCG approval.<sup>206</sup>

197 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/syrian-jihadist-group-hts-accused-blocking-married-women-studying>

198 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/04/child-marriage-in-idlib-permitted-by-tahrir-al-sham-reinforced-by-poverty/>

199 <https://stj-sy.org/en/idlibs-christians-disenfranchised-until-their-church-bells-ring-again/>

200 <https://syriadirect.org/hts-looks-to-idlibs-christians-and-druze-to-whitewash-violations/>

201 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/syrian-jihadi-leader-golani-meets-idlibs-christians>

202 <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022%20Factsheet%20-%20HTS-Syria.pdf>

203 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jawlanis-state-union>

204 <https://tinyurl.com/4hfpzs63> (<https://www.syria.tv>)

205 <https://syriadirect.org/in-assads-footsteps-media-restrictions-make-northwestern-syria-another-kingdom-of-silence/>

206 <https://stj-sy.org/en/northwest-syria-local-authorities-attack-journalists-suffocate-freedom-of-expression/>

The practices of the HTS-led SSG in the period since the fall of Assad have been under global media scrutiny, likely limiting the direct continuation of the group's repressive and authoritarian mechanisms employed in Idlib. International attention and monitoring is a new force that al-Sharaa has to reckon with. Yet he has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and evolve according to the situation, in order to preserve his power and survive. Since its origin, the methods of political jihadism that HTS adopted have undergone a continuous refinement. HTS showed remarkable ability to pragmatically adapt based on countering threats to its dominance and control, as well as more practical limitations it faced.

HTS' members who came from Jabhat al-Nusra were not involved in or motivated by the original Syrian uprisings in 2011. At that time, they had strict ideological differences with those who rebelled against Assad. In Idlib however, HTS began to make use of the discourse of the Syrian revolution, although it was still not adopting the Syrian independence flag. In August 2017, HTS sharia official - now intelligence director of the new Syrian Caretaker Government - Anas al-Khattab, publicly pushed for the legitimization of the word 'revolution', rejecting the stance of renowned Salafi jihadi ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.<sup>207</sup> At the same time as making HTS politics more internally palatable, Ahmed al-Sharaa sought to do the same externally. Chief amongst his aims was to shed the terror designation assigned to HTS. In an interview with Frontline in 2021, in which he publicly spoke to an American reporter possibly for the first time, he said: "Through our 10-year journey in this revolution, we haven't posed any threat to Western or European society: no security threat, no economic threat, nothing. That's why this designation is politicized." In the same year, HTS opened Idlib to limited visits from foreign media. This reflected HTS' desire to promote its 'new identity' globally.

Now HTS is in a new stage in which it is again re-considering how to strengthen its internal and international pull. This likely will involve another evolution in its practices from Idlib. What is evident so far is that HTS-dominated SSG is imposing its governance vision on a diverse population, triggering a strong negative reaction from portions of this population. Many say that the SSG's vision is failing to account for ethnic and religious plurality, while also limiting the role of



HTS fighters stamp on the Syrian independence flag, celebrating seizing al-Atareb town, Aleppo countryside, 2019.

women in political and civil life. The latter point has seen particular backlash from the NES region, where women's rights have undergone a transformation in the past 12 years. Now, many women there say they are unwilling to let these gains be trampled on by the SSG.

The exclusion of women from the transitional process underway in Damascus is notable. "It's very worrying that the dominant political scene now in Syria doesn't have any woman," commented Zeina Kanawati, who has worked for years in a Syrian women's rights organization, Women Now for Development, launched in 2012. "In the last 14 years, [women] were active on the forefronts of all the fields of struggle against the regime, and they paid double the prices of the war and the militarization."<sup>208</sup> The new constitution makes one generalised reference to women's rights to work and education, but does not mention equality between men and women.

Obaida Arnaout, spokesman of the political bureau of the Military Operations Department, gave an interview on December 18th.<sup>209</sup> He downplayed the possibility of women working in the field of law, adding "there is no doubt that women have their biological and psychological nature, as well as their specific characteristics and composition, which must align with particular tasks. For example, it is not appropriate to suggest that women use weapons or be placed in roles that do not suit their abilities, composition, or nature." When asked about whether HTS would permit women to work in politics, he was also noncommittal: "As for women's representation in ministerial and parliamentary roles, we believe that this matter is premature and should be left to legal and constitutional experts who will work on rethinking the structure of the new Syrian state." His comments were met with wide criticisms from Syrian women activists.<sup>210,211</sup>

Comments made on December 28th by Aisha al-Dibs, the newly appointed Head of Women's Affairs Office, sparked further outrage. "Women should not surpass their essential [God-created] nature. They should take care of themselves, take care of their families, and take care of their husbands," she said, adding "I will not allow space for those who disagree with my views".<sup>212</sup> When asked about the future of women in the judicial system, she replied "The

208 <https://newint.org/women/2024/where-now-syrias-women>

209 <https://www.juancole.com/2024/12/fundamentalist-biologically-universities.html>

210 <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrian-activists-outraged-over-obaida-arnaouts-remarks-on-womens-role-in-future-syria.html>

211 <https://newint.org/women/2024/where-now-syrias-women>

212 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xp-Jep91jtl>

Constitution will decide, and the basis will be the Sharia law.”<sup>213</sup> She continued: “We have a focus and that is Islamic Sharia. We won’t abandon Islamic Sharia.” When asked about the “space” that would be given to feminist organisations in the country, al-Dibs responded that if the actions of such organisations “support the model that we are going to build, then they will be welcome.” The backlash directed against this was not just related to the beliefs she expressed, but more due to the seemingly authoritarian stance she took on dissent.

In NES, the Arab women’s union, Zenobia,<sup>214</sup> and the Sara organization<sup>215</sup> which aims to combat violence against women, both published responses to al-Dibs’ interview. “Syrian women have struggled and made great efforts to achieve equality and justice in all areas socially, economically, politically, militarily, and in self-defense” stated Zenobia, adding “Aisha ignored the leading role of Syrian women in the revolution. From her statement it is evident that she wants to consciously limit the concept of empowering women, and limit women’s role to a narrow framework.”<sup>216</sup> The Sara organization wrote that al-Dibs’ view “rejects women working and holding positions in government,” which signifies a push towards “a return to Sharia law”, which is “not worthy of the struggle of Syrian women and does not reflect the diversity of Syrian culture.”<sup>217</sup>

Aside from al-Dibs being appointed to manage the Women’s Office, one other relevant position assigned to a woman was the management of the Syrian Central Bank. In conjunction with ongoing calls for the integration of Syrian women into the new circles of authority, Maysaa Sabrine became the first woman to lead the nation's primary financial institution. Less than three months into her post she resigned.<sup>218</sup> No women have been appointed to senior leadership positions or ministries as of yet. It seems the participation of women is limited or symbolic rather than genuine.

In the civil field, it seems that the SCG is somewhat wary of public criticism and has exhibited a willingness to adjust its course. For example, when proposed changes to the state school curriculum, announced by SCG Minister of Education Nazir al-Qadri, caused a fierce backlash, the amendments were temporarily repealed “until specialized committees are formed to review and verify the programs.” As of the time of writing, schools have not yet received any official new curriculum from the Ministry. The proposed changes<sup>219</sup> included wiping references to the Darwinian theory of evolution, Zenobia (the legendary Palmyran queen), Shukri al-Quwatli (the

213 <https://tinyurl.com/t67hrmx9> (<https://www.syria.tv>)

214 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2024/08/interview-zenobia/>

215 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2024/11/interview-sara-organization/>

216 <https://tinyurl.com/3z9zu3fr> (<https://hawarnews.com>)

217 <https://hawarnews.com/en/sara-organization-statement-of-womens-affairs-head-not-appropriate-for-struggle-of-syrian-women>

218 <https://npasyria.com/en/123662/>

219 <https://en.majalla.com/node/323783/politics/syrias-hts-packed-government-hints-authoritarian-future>

first president in post-independence Syria), the history of the Arameans, Canaanites, some ancient deities, and the 1916 Ottoman public executions committed against Syrian or Lebanese nationalists.<sup>220</sup> Critical changes were advanced also to impose a religious lexicon in place of a secular one: replacing “defense of the nation” with “defence of God”, “civic education” with “religious education”, and “homeland” with “God” in the reason for self-sacrifice in the definition of martyr.<sup>221222</sup>

The transitional constitution stipulates that freedom of belief is inviolable, and instructs the state to respect all religions and their associated practices. Yet it also states that the Syrian president must be a Muslim, and that Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) is “the main source of legislation.” This is a subtle yet significant change to the old constitution, in which it was pointed to as “a main source of legislation”. With Islamic law as “the” primary source of legislation, it is unclear how rights stipulated in the draft that contradict with Islamic law will be realised in practice. Many have highlighted the risk of a sectarian theocracy being established.<sup>223224225</sup> Al-Sharaa’s past leadership of HTS in Idlib saw strict religious rules imposed hence the constitution has raised concerns about the possibility of future restrictions on social freedoms.<sup>226</sup>

Mariam al-Asa’ad, an employee at Homs’ Justice Palace, said that senior HTS officials had recently ordered the removal of female judges from office, and that Sheikh Hassan al-Aqra, a religious rather than legally-educated figure, was put in charge of the Justice Palace. Meanwhile, female Ministry of Education employees have reportedly been ordered to all wear the hijab, and rules for segregation of women and men have been put in place at other state institutions.<sup>227</sup> Syrian journalist Maisa Salih argued that al-Sharaa’s leadership is being “pinkwashed”: in a rush to underscore the self-appointed president’s transformation into a “moderate” figure, the international community and media alike are downplaying or ignoring that misogyny defined HTS’ rule in Idlib.<sup>228</sup> Women were subject to violence and systematic restrictions on their freedoms – trends continuing under the new SCG.

220 <https://tinyurl.com/29huc2a3> (<https://arabi21.com>)

221 <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrias-new-curriculum-sparks-nationwide-outcry>

222 <https://tinyurl.com/5xr2jrh6> (<https://www.aksalser.com>)

223 <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-see-flaws-in-syria-s-temporary-constitution/8011117.html>

224 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/03/syrias-new-constitution-gives-sweeping-powers-ignores-minority-rights>

225 [https://x.com/joshua\\_landis/status/1900292761628065816](https://x.com/joshua_landis/status/1900292761628065816)

226 <https://thenewregion.com/posts/1827>

227 <https://www.moretoherstory.com/stories/syrian-rights-activists-voice-alarm-over-the-future-of-women-under-hts>

228 <https://meccatimes.com/concerns-grow-over-womens-rights-under-syrias-new-hts-led-government/>



While the constitution includes phrases affirming “cultural diversity” and cultural rights for all, this is left unsubstantiated and merely symbolic. The constitution retains the state’s official name as the “Syrian Arab Republic.” Arabic is the only language explicitly designated as official. This implicitly excludes Syria’s range of non-Arab communities from political and cultural recognition, and means the rights of those peoples are dependent on if the government chooses to grant them or not, rather than being constitutionally enshrined. The Syrian Democratic Council stated that this expresses a continuation of the Baathist authoritarianism, only with Islamist colours, saying that one “specific ideological vision” is being imposed on all, hence undermining personal freedoms and rights.<sup>229</sup> Minorities are concerned that their personal and national freedoms and rights are at risk, not to mention their personal safety. In the spate of kidnappings that have plagued Syria since the fall of Assad, many of the victims have come from Syria’s religious minority Druze, Christian, and Alawite communities,<sup>230</sup> with women and girls amongst them.<sup>231</sup>

### 3. CRIMES OF A JIHADIST CHARACTER

In the post-Assad period, crimes of jihadist character have been committed by the forces under the new Syrian army. This does not come as a shock, given HTS’ Islamic jihadist past and the recorded presence of former ISIS members within HTS and the other forces now under the SCG Ministry of Defence.

In a bid to at the very least not be targeted by US drone strikes, and at most improve its international standing and gain legitimacy, HTS contributed to the International Coalition efforts to track down ISIS and al-Qaeda cells in Idlib. This was confirmed directly by Hakan Fidan, current Turkish Foreign Minister and former head of Turkish intelligence agency,<sup>232</sup> but also implied indirectly by the freedom with which al-Sharaa had started to appear in public in Idlib in recent years, despite the fact that he had a \$10M bounty on his head.<sup>233</sup> Activities targeting ISIS cells continued in the post-Assad period, with a reported foiled terror attack against a Shia shrine in Damascus on Jan 11st.<sup>234</sup> The US also

229 <https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/syrias-temporary-constitution-ensures-an-islamist-sunni-state>

230 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/10/world/middleeast/syria-security-kidnappings.html>

231 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/356046/>

232 <https://en.haberler.com/minister-fidan-was-asked-directly-why-are-you-not-18180984/>

233 <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/us-lift-10-million-bounty-de-facto-syrian-leaders-head-rcna185076>

234 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrias-new-government-says-it-thwarted-islamic-state-attack-shia-shrine>

officially announced sharing intelligence data concerning ISIS with al-Sharaa after he came into power.<sup>235</sup> HTS strategically chose to pursue ISIS and Hurras al-Din (al-Qaeda's former official Syrian outfit, until they disbanded) cells in Idlib because the latter risked threatening the political project of HTS. At the same time, HTS continued to cooperate closely with other designated groups which did not pose the same threat, such as TIP.

SCG participation in US-directed counter-ISIS operations likely can and will contribute to degradation of the organizational structure of ISIS in Syria.<sup>236</sup> Truly combating the violent and intolerant ideology promoted by jihadist Islamist groups however, seems to not be a priority of the interim government. At least 1,500 Alawites were killed by SCG forces in Latakia across a few days in early March, in what was widely described as a systematic murder spree.<sup>237</sup> It starkly resembled the numerous massacres that occurred throughout the Syrian Civil War by jihadist groups including ISIS and HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra. The Syrian Caretaker Government (SCG) General Security forces and fighters under the SCG Defense Ministry are now implicated in grievous human rights violations against Alawites. This wave of violence, considered the worst seen in Syria since the fall of Assad, also exemplified the threats minorities are facing as the direction of the 'new Syria' is being charted.

### 3.1 MINORITIES IN SYRIA UNDER THREAT

Syria is home to a large number of ethnic and religious minorities. The largest of these are the Alawites, who comprise at least 10% of the population and ethnic Kurds (most of whom are Sunni Muslim, except for a very small proportion of Alevis and Sufis) who comprise another 10%. Alevis are not to be confused with Alawites; the two represent different strands of Islam. Additionally, Syrian Alevis are Kurdish while Syrian Alawites are Arab. Sunni Muslim Syrian Arabs comprise the majority of Syria's population, yet there are several Arab minority groups: [1] Christians, [2] Shia, Druze and Ismaili Muslims, and [3] Palestinian Arabs (both Sunni Muslim and Christian). Additionally there are Sunni Muslim ethnic minorities: the Circassians, Chechens, Nawar and Turkmen. Non-Arab Christians include Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Christians, plus some Kurdish converts to the Evangelical Church. The Yazidi ethnic and religious group are another minority.

During the Syrian Civil War, various minority groups were weaponized by both internal and external actors for their own interests, deepening fractures within the social fabric of Syria and putting these groups under existential threat. The

235 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/01/24/us-syria-intelligence-hts-isis/>

236 <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/isis-syria-al-sharaa-jordan>

237 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx20p0pj931o>

concurrent rise of Islamic extremist groups greatly increased the threats facing Syria's minorities. Following the fall of Assad, the already-seen and future-expected return of Syrian refugees has not and is unlikely to include minorities, many of whom have moved to Europe and the US. With an HTS-dominated government in Damascus, minorities who suffered under Islamic extremist organizations throughout the Syrian Civil War are largely not planning to come back to their homes in the near future.

During the Syrian Civil War, many of these minorities' populations fell dramatically as they fled the country facing persecution from jihadist Islamic groups. ISIS' violence was particularly focused against the Christians and Yazidi minorities, but also targeted members of minority Islamic sects. Christians in Syria now number less than 500,000, compared to 2 million in 2011, with many fleeing to Europe and the US. In 2015, ISIS launched an assault against the Christian heartland of the Khabour region in Heseke. 95% of the Assyrian population in the Khabour region fled, with only 1,000 people returning once the SDF expelled ISIS from the area. In Tel Abyad, the Armenian Apostolic community fled when ISIS took over the city in 2014 but returned when it was taken by the YPG in 2015. Prior to ISIS' attack on Kobane, 800 Armenians lived in the city. Their number is now just a handful, with most leaving to Armenia.

Another group to flee Syria en masse were the Druze. When the Syrian Civil War began, some Druze took up arms and formed Popular Committees to defend their localities. Others joined the pro-Assad National Defence Forces, a paramilitary group which fought alongside the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). As Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa promised not to harm Druze, so long as they do not fight against the group and "retreat from their religious mistakes". However, when an alliance led by al-Nusra seized control of the Jabal al-Summaq region of Idlib, hundreds of Druze were forced to convert to Sunni Islam, and Druze shrines and graves were destroyed. In the 2015 Qalb Loze massacre of 2015, 20 Druze were killed in the village by a Tunisian al-Nusra leader and his fighters. Attacks on the Druze community in Idlib persisted, even as al-Nusra evolved into HTS.<sup>238</sup> Top among those accused of being hostile to the Druze were Uyghur and Uzbek fighters of the TIP, a foreign jihadist outfit allied with HTS. Those who did not leave continued to face persecution and violence. Alawite localities also suffered at the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, which was involved in the massacre of Alawite civilians in Arima (Latakia) in August 2013 and al-Zarah (Homs) in May 2016.<sup>239,240</sup>

238 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-north-druze-murder-uyghur-militants-suspicion>

239 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24486627>

240 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/alawite-civilians-killed-homes-opposition-attack-hama-village>

## 3.2 ALAWITE MASSACRE

When Assad fell in December 2024, Alawite communities voiced fears that they would be subject to violence as a religious minority, due to the HTS' jihadist past as Jabhat al-Nusra, and the presence of numerous foreign radical jihadist groups within the HTS-led coalition that launched the offensive to take Damascus. Initially, a reported 1,000 Alawite families fled from Homs and Hama cities and countryside to the Alawite-majority coastal regions of Latakia and Tartous. The SCG made numerous diplomatic statements of commitment to respect for all Syrian minorities, seeking to allay fears, plus organized a meeting, convening with political figures from Latakia, including many Alawite notables, to discuss the governorate's future.<sup>241</sup> Amidst this there were numerous accounts of sectarian discrimination at checkpoints,<sup>242</sup> violence,<sup>243</sup> and looting at the hands of the SCG forces emerged in the period after Assad's fall,<sup>244</sup> plus the destruction of an Alawite shrine,<sup>245</sup> mass distribution of anti-Alawite flyers,<sup>246</sup> and dozens of disappearances and murders of Alawites.<sup>247</sup> In Homs city, HTS combatants reportedly conducted house-to-house search campaigns and held prisoners incommunicado, in the name of pursuing "remnants" of the former government.<sup>248</sup> On January 11th, Shehadeh Mayhoub, a former member of the People's Assembly for Homs Governorate, claimed that over 1,300 Alawite people had been detained in Homs city since the fall of Assad, the majority of whom were civilians and soldiers who had performed compulsory military service.<sup>249</sup> Videos also circulated of HTS supporters shouting anti-Alawite chants in the streets of Homs.<sup>250</sup>

On March 6th, a wave of attacks by pro-Assad fighters against SCG General Security checkpoints in the Latakia countryside saw scores killed or taken hostage.<sup>251</sup> The Assad-affiliated militiamen briefly took control of several towns, including Qardaha, Assad's hometown. SCG forces, struggling to pursue the ambushers due to rugged terrain, shelled the area from helicopters. This use of heavy weapons inflamed

241 <https://tinyurl.com/2x9hprch> (<https://www.alwatanonline.com>)

242 <https://npasyria.com/en/119917/>

243 <https://tinyurl.com/4pnvykd7> (<https://al-akhbar.com>)

244 <https://x.com/ScharoMaroof/status/1870224547640991781>

245 <https://x.com/qalaatalmudiq/status/1897242407730864431>

246 <https://x.com/timand2037/status/1896705168344772644>

247 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/syria-end-coastal-killing-spree-protect-civilians>

248 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-hts-raids-forced-disappearances-fuel-alawi-fear>

249 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/alawites-under-threat-syria>

250 <https://x.com/DisputingSunnah/status/1871996685486051395>

251 <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-845198>

tensions and triggered civilian protests. Videos of dead SCG Security members then spread on social media, and some Salafi preachers in mosques made calls to 'jihad' across Syria. On March 7th, al-Sharaa declared "the time for forgiveness is over" and that "the stage of purification" has begun.<sup>252</sup> The SCG announced a mass mobilization and initiated a large-scale security operation, sending forces from across Syria to the coast. Commenting on the mobilisation, the Military Operations Department used the phrase "Nusayri" to refer to the Alawites, which is a term that in the contemporary era has come to have derogatory connotations.<sup>253</sup> This mobilization included units from the SNA;<sup>254</sup> chiefly the 'Joint Force' comprising Hamza Division and Abu Amsha's Suleiman Shah,<sup>255</sup> plus foreign fighters from jihadist militias.<sup>256</sup> This mobilization was initially spread via official SCG Telegram channels, which encouraged people to "support our brothers" and go to the coast to fight. Clashes between the SCG forces and the Assad-affiliated militias ensued, with the latter quickly subdued by the former. In the subsequent hours and days SCG forces began an intensive combing operation.

On the 8th and 9th, violent attacks from SCG forces on Alawite villages surged, hundreds fled their homes, with looting and killings, including of children and women, reported by witnesses. A civilian from Latakia told RIC: "the situation has become volatile; the Damascus forces are firing indiscriminately on civilians and the population is terrified. Anyone over the age of 14 is targeted." Videos of SCG forces committing grievous violations were published by the very fighters who are carrying out the crimes.<sup>257</sup><sup>258</sup><sup>259</sup> These showed unarmed Alawites being executed,<sup>260</sup> abusive language directed at Alawites, the degradation of corpses,<sup>261</sup><sup>262</sup> the humiliation<sup>263</sup> and abuse of captives,<sup>264</sup><sup>265</sup> looting and stealing,<sup>266</sup><sup>267</sup> men in

252 [https://t.me/Syrian\\_Arab\\_R3public/264](https://t.me/Syrian_Arab_R3public/264)

253 [https://t.me/rd3\\_al3dwan/6631](https://t.me/rd3_al3dwan/6631)

254 <https://x.com/RojavalC/status/1898055427608195310>

255 <https://tinyurl.com/32pf23sj> (<https://www.almodon.com>)

256 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/syria-1000-dead-assad-supporters-latakia-b1215545.html>

257 [https://t.me/Kabos\\_2\\_TelRifat/19935](https://t.me/Kabos_2_TelRifat/19935)

258 <https://t.me/KabosTelRifat/22394>

259 <https://t.me/KabosTelRifat/22383>

260 <https://x.com/RojavalC/status/1898055433794867607>

261 [https://t.me/Kabos\\_2\\_TelRifat/19951](https://t.me/Kabos_2_TelRifat/19951)

262 [https://t.me/Kabos\\_2\\_TelRifat/19937](https://t.me/Kabos_2_TelRifat/19937)

263 [https://t.me/Kabos\\_2\\_TelRifat/19962](https://t.me/Kabos_2_TelRifat/19962)

264 <https://t.me/KabosTelRifat/22436>

265 [https://t.me/Kabos\\_2\\_TelRifat/19940](https://t.me/Kabos_2_TelRifat/19940)

266 <https://x.com/RojavaNetwork/status/1898750921766482057>

267 [https://x.com/joshua\\_landis/status/1898811112415773095](https://x.com/joshua_landis/status/1898811112415773095)



villages being rounded up and executed,<sup>268</sup> and the burning of Alawite homes. A recently disseminated video showed individuals who refer to themselves as the "Abaq Volunteer Team," engaging in a Ramadan initiative accompanied by sectarian and provocative rhetoric against Alawites.<sup>269</sup><sup>270</sup> In Baniyas, one of the coastal towns that experienced the most violence, bodies were left strewn on the streets or on rooftops for hours with SCG fighters blocking access to the dead.<sup>271</sup>

Rami Abdulrahman (director of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) said 38 Alawites had been killed execution-style in al-Mukhtareyah town.<sup>272</sup> "Gunmen coming from the direction of the Idlib region arrived at dawn and rounded up the men while telling the women to remain at home. The men were then executed," he said. Human Rights Watch also reviewed and geolocated videos and images of the same incident of mass execution in the village, and counted "at least 32 men's bodies."<sup>273</sup>

A group of Alawite civilians fled to the Russian base (Hmeimim) to plead for protection on the 7th. By the 13th, a reported 8,000 were sheltering there, camped out in tents and makeshift accommodation.<sup>274</sup> RIC spoke with one of them: Ammar Hassoun, an Alawite from Jableh, a locality that experienced some of the worst violence. He said that after Assad fell, the Damascus authorities allowed former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldiers to settle their status. Yet he describes that "raids began targeting those who had made settlements, especially junior and non-commissioned officers, who were arrested. In return, some senior military personnel and businessmen affiliated with the Assad regime were granted amnesty through financial or political channels. Following this, HTS began raiding civilian homes in Homs, Hama, the coastal areas, Aleppo, and Damascus, under the pretext of investigation. However, these individuals [whose homes were raided] were later found murdered and their money looted. Although the authorities claimed that these incidents were merely the actions of individual unruly individuals, they took no action to hold those involved accountable." This triggered some protests, which "were met with repression and attacks," he said. While committees were established to try to solve the situation, nothing changed. "Instead, campaigns of raids, arrests, kidnappings, robberies, and killings of civilians escalated, under the pretext of pursuing 'remnants of the regime.' Mass dismissals from jobs also increased. Furthermore, groups emerged that organized night-time demonstrations, including shouting offensive chants against the Alawite sect and attacks against Alawites, without any intervention or

268 <https://tinyurl.com/yc7y59s6> (<https://www.lemonde.fr>)

269 <https://tinyurl.com/3re8pfy2> (<https://www.facebook.com>)

270 <https://t.me/KabosTelRifat/22368>

271 <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/syria-violence-alawites-minority-sect-bashar-al-asad-13870255.html>

272 <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/gunmen-kill-dozens-in-syrian-alawite-town-sources-and-war-monitor-say>

273 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/syria-end-coastal-killing-spree-protect-civilians>

274 <https://npasyria.com/en/123160/>

deterrence from the so-called General Security," said Hassoun.

When the SCG mass mobilization began on March 6th in response to the attacks on SCG General Security positions by regime-affiliated cells, Hassoun described "waves of mass displacement began toward the airport and the Russian base." At the same time he said, "sectarian mobilization escalated in Idlib and Hama, with public threats of genocide being issued against the Alawites on the coast. Indeed, thousands of armed vehicles arrived and began carrying out indiscriminate killings and torture against men, women, and children, in massacres that lasted for three to four days. Those who managed to reach the airport escaped with their lives, while those who remained were killed or had their property burned. Shops were looted, cars and centers were stolen, and agricultural land was set on fire." Hassoun reported that a number of his friends and neighbours were killed.

It is estimated that the SCG forces killed over 1,500 Alawite civilians in just a few days. Reportedly, a number of Sunni Arabs were also killed while seeking to offer shelter to Alawites fleeing violence. One fighter within the SCG forces, Mohamed Haji Abu Oubida, recorded a video criticizing the situation on the coast.<sup>275</sup> He decried the murder of civilians at the hands of the SCG, stating "this is not why we have weapons" and called for accountability. He also specifically accused the SNA's Hamza and Suleiman Shah divisions of executing Alawites.

The response of the Damascus authorities downplayed the severity of the massacre. The SCG Interior Ministry acknowledged "individual violations" along the coast, blaming individual actors for carrying out acts of revenge, but referred to the killings as isolated incidents. A reported seven individuals have been arrested for taking part in attacks.<sup>276</sup> The SCG announced the establishment of a seven-member special commission to investigate the situation to bring those responsible to justice. The credibility of the committee's work is questionable because it is appointed by the new authorities, who are affiliated with the perpetrators. The committee also has no local members from the affected areas. Additionally, the geographical scope of the investigation is limited to the coast – but violations were committed also in Homs and Hama at the same time. The committee was given a mere 30 days to do its investigation and present findings, hence compromising the integrity of the work. This has raised fears that the culture of repression with impunity and unpunished abuses that characterized Assad's government is being continued. Hamdan al-Abd al-Jadid, a member of the DAANES' Executive Council, said to RIC: "The transitional justice that the Syrian interim government talked about is only in word. What we have observed in reality is vengeful and extremist justice and massacres against our Alawite community in the Syrian coast and the countryside of Hama and Homs, plus extremist discourse based on Islamist jihadist

<sup>275</sup> <https://x.com/VeSyria/status/1898477257254985972>

<sup>276</sup> <https://en.majalla.com/node/324772/politics/syria-coastal-violence-critical-test-sharaas-government>

ideology.”

Ahmad al-Sharaa, Syria's president, stated on the 9th that "the crisis is over," adding that there is no danger for Syria. Yet at the time of writing, violence targeting Alawites in the coastal region is still being reported,<sup>277</sup> and 2,000 Alawite families have fled to Lebanon.<sup>278</sup> "The country has the potential to survive and we are able to live together in this country," al-Sharaa said, describing what happened on the coast as within the "expected challenges."<sup>279</sup>

### 3.3 THE NEW SYRIAN ARMY

In many ways, the violence could have been expected, given the history and nature of the forces sent to the coast to carry out the SCG security operation. Amongst those participating – who are all contained within the new Syrian army – were: HTS, the SNA's Suleiman Shah and Hamza factions, and smaller foreign Islamic jihadist factions. Additionally, fighters seemingly aligning themselves with ISIS are also within the new Syrian army, as a part of HTS, the SNA or other factions.

[1] The SNA's Suleiman Shah and Hamza factions. As already mentioned, they are US-sanctioned for their crimes against civilians in the Turkish-occupied regions of northern Syria. Under Turkish direction, they have been responsible for carrying out forced displacement, murder, looting, theft, and other crimes primarily against the Kurdish, Yazidi and Christian populations of Afrin and Sere Kaniye.<sup>280</sup> A range of rights watchdogs, NGOs and local activists have testified to the violations conducted by the SNA, and particularly these two factions, as have RIC's occupation reports.<sup>281282283</sup>

[2] HTS. As the al-Qaeda Syrian offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra, it was responsible for numerous atrocities against minorities during the Syrian Civil war, and the persecution of the Druze and Christian populations in Idlib. Yet, in contrast to the gang-like SNA, within which infighting was commonplace, HTS forces were known for being highly disciplined, adhering to a rigid centralized structure.

277 <https://x.com/yazanbadran/status/1901034606544978358>

278 [https://x.com/dw\\_arabic/status/1899737022035550715](https://x.com/dw_arabic/status/1899737022035550715)

279 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/syria-s-interim-president-calls-communal-clashes-that-left-hundreds-dead-expected-challenges/ar-AA1Ayfcc>

280 <https://meforum.org/meq/turkeys-demographic-engineering-in-syrias-afrin-region-a-closer-look>

281 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria>

282 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies-2/>

283 <https://www.echr.eu/en/case/crimes-in-syria-the-neglected-atrocities-of-afrin/>

This means explaining the violations committed in Latakia through 'individual misbehaviour' is unconvincing. One masked fighter, who wore an HTS insignia, filmed himself parading around a looted home after executing the Alawite men inside, singing "ethnic cleansing, ethnic cleansing."<sup>284</sup> Suggesting that he did not fear consequences from his superiors, he posted the video on Facebook, where he has 28,000 followers.

[3] ISIS-inclined fighters within HTS, the SNA, or other groups. The presence of former ISIS fighters within HTS has been recorded, including by the UN Security Council.<sup>285</sup> While they are no longer taking orders from ISIS leadership, they still proudly show ISIS badges and symbols, clearly indicating an ideological stance.<sup>286287288</sup> RIC has also identified former ISIS members inside the SNA. Following HTS' ascendance to power in Damascus, ISIS badges and jihadist symbols were openly displayed in the streets of Damascus and other Syrian cities.<sup>289290</sup>

[4] Foreign jihadists. HTS still has a substantial number of radicalised foreign fighters in its ranks who proudly filmed themselves during military parades after the fall of Assad,<sup>291</sup> plus foreign extremist jihadist factions inside the HTS-led coalition.<sup>292</sup> HTS reportedly relies on them in many operations, since they fight for ideological reasons and are usually more experienced than the common Syrian rebel fighter.<sup>293294</sup> These were largely the fighters that appeared in videos conducting



Soldiers of the new Syrian army keep watch over a road in Damascus, one with an ISIS patch on his sleeve, December 11th, 2024

284 <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/17/middleeast/syria-massacre-alawite-minority-intl-invs>

285 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/201/01/pdf/n1820101.pdf>

286 <https://x.com/TankerTrackers/status/1862543957877469351>

287 <https://theconversation.com/who-is-syrias-new-prime-minister-and-what-will-he-do-245811>

288 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/2002758/chilling-images-fighters-ISIS>

289 <https://x.com/Ostensiblay/status/1875548308653142209>

290 [https://x.com/meme\\_syr3/status/1875187193603600630](https://x.com/meme_syr3/status/1875187193603600630)

291 [https://x.com/BroderickM\\_/status/1866819788359467394](https://x.com/BroderickM_/status/1866819788359467394)

292 [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op\\_eds/2024/12/18/who-will-form-the-core-of-jolanis-unified-army/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_eds/2024/12/18/who-will-form-the-core-of-jolanis-unified-army/)

293 <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241220-syria-foreign-fighters-jihadism-extremism>

294 [https://x.com/war\\_noir/status/1871551777931145226](https://x.com/war_noir/status/1871551777931145226)

summary executions that circulated in Telegram channels in December. As per estimates from Western intelligence officials, a few thousand foreign fighters were residing in Idlib under HTS prior to November 27th.<sup>295</sup> They all came to Syria as Salafists with the aim of "jihad". In recent years, al-Sharaa and HTS made a show of clamping down on foreign fighters inside Idlib. This was in a bid to evidence HTS' shift to a nationalist rather than explicitly jihadist force. However, rather than seeking to expel all foreigners per se, this push was more to neutralize groups with transnational jihad aspirations, such as Hurras al-Din, al-Qaeda's official Syrian franchise, in order to alleviate Western concerns and demonstrate that HTS itself was not posing a threat to the West.<sup>296</sup> For those fighters not within a group that publicizes waging transnational jihad and plotting attacks against Western targets, al-Sharaa took an embracing approach. He has even suggested they can gain Syrian citizenship. An HTS official told *The Economist*: "These people are part of our revolution. They [foreign countries] have nothing to worry about. We will give them passports. We will Syrianise them."<sup>297</sup> Indeed, on December 30th, al-Sharaa awarded 50 people high-ranking military positions, with several foreigners among them.<sup>298,299</sup> This also prompted the UN to express concerns.<sup>300</sup>

Abd al-Rahman al-Khatib (Abu Hussain al-Urduni), is a Jordanian national and close confidant of al-Sharaa's.<sup>301,302</sup> He was reportedly arrested by the Jordanian authorities due to his Salafist-jihadi activities before coming to Syria in 2013 to join al-Nusra.<sup>303</sup> He later served on HTS' military council and led HTS's special force 'the Elite Army'.<sup>304,305</sup> Another foreign HTS fighter who is very close to al-Sharaa is Turkish national Omar Mohammed Jaftashi (Mukhtar al-Turki). He has been appointed to lead the Damascus Military Division. Within HTS, Jaftashi reportedly played an important role in coordination between the group and MIT, the Turkish intelligence service. Although he was listed as a wanted figure in Turkey, he acted as a mediator between the two parties on multiple occasions.<sup>306</sup> Abdullah Shehadeh, a Lebanese national, has been named as the new head of Syrian intelligence in Homs, Tartus and Latakia.

295 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/01/27/syrias-new-rulers-say-they-are-keen-to-integrate-foreign-fighters>

296 <https://www.noonpost.com/285334/>

297 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/01/27/syrias-new-rulers-say-they-are-keen-to-integrate-foreign-fighters>

298 [https://t.me/G\\_CSyriaa/165](https://t.me/G_CSyriaa/165)

299 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c86w27d4qpeo>

300 <https://tinyurl.com/mtz9jeaz> (<https://reliefweb.int>)

301 <https://tinyurl.com/52kv6h9y> (<https://almashhad.com>)

302 <https://x.com/OAjjob/status/1888956796041036266>

303 <https://tinyurl.com/ygn3rtww> (<https://www.independentarabia.com>)

304 [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op\\_ed/2025/02/19/profiles-of-foreign-commanders-in-the-new-syrian-army/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2025/02/19/profiles-of-foreign-commanders-in-the-new-syrian-army/)

305 <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/28275>

306 <https://tinyurl.com/ygn3rtww> (<https://www.independentarabia.com>)



Shehadeh joined Jabhat al-Nusra in 2014 and took up senior military and security responsibilities in HTS as well. He is reportedly a close confidant of new Syrian intelligence chief, Anas Khattab.<sup>307</sup> Egyptian national Alaa Abdul Baqi, was awarded the rank of colonel in the new Syrian army, although no specific position has been assigned to him. It is expected that he will take up a senior role as he is a veteran HTS fighter, having joined al-Nusra in 2014. He is designated as a terrorist by the Egyptian authorities.<sup>308</sup> Abdulaziz Bichari (Albania), Maulana Tyrson Abd al-Samad (Tajikistan), and Ibn Ahmad Hariri (Jordan) were all promoted to the rank of colonel.

Beyond individual fighters inside HTS, there were several foreign jihadist groups militarily active inside Idlib who joined the 'Deterrence of Aggression' operation. What these groups have in common is a jihadist Islamist ideology, close ties to HTS and strict adherence to HTS' rules, and a strong connection to Syrian territory, with many fighters marrying Syrian women and starting families, even if they have aspirations to return to their home areas. They have all agreed to integrate into the new Syrian army under the Ministry of Defence. One of the largest foreign jihadist groups is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which was founded in Pakistan by Uyghur fighters aspiring to establish an Islamic state in Xinjiang and other parts of Central Asia. Their presence on the battlefield in Syria was first recorded in 2015. They soon forged close links with HTS and joined the HTS-led operations room.<sup>309</sup> Their manpower is estimated at 1,000-2,000 fighters. Another of these groups is Tawhid va Jihad (Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad), whose 400-500 fighters are mostly from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>310</sup> In September 2024, local agency North Press reported that militants from the group had also entered SNA-controlled Afrin, reinforcing the Hamza Division.<sup>311</sup> It has been designated as a terrorist organization by the US since 2022. Xhemati Alban<sup>312</sup> is another Sunni jihadist militant group that was active in Idlib and participated in the HTS-led offensive on November 27th.<sup>313</sup> It was founded in 2012. It has between 50 and 100 Albanian fighters from the states of Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Serbia and is known for its sniper squad. The leader and military commander is Abu Qatada al-Albani, who has been designated as a terrorist by the US since 2016 and was very close to the HTS leadership. Albanian Tactical is a subgroup of Xhemati Alban and provided tactical training to other jihadist

307 <https://lebnewsonline.com/469558/>

308 <https://x.com/AzharJumaili/status/1874497646632620103>

309 <https://www.gfatf.org/archives/turkistan-islamic-party-in-syria/>

310 <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/hts-and-its-allies-who-are-the-jihadist>

311 <https://npasyria.com/en/117030/>

312 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/04/an-albanian-muhajir-in-al-sham-interview>

313 <https://www.militantwire.com/p/weapons-of-jihadist-tactical-group>

groups in Idlib, rather like Malhama Tactical.<sup>314</sup> During the Syrian Civil War, Malhama Tactical was a key training outfit led by foreign jihadists, mostly from Uzbekistan and the Russian Caucasus. While the group had not publicized its activities for over 3 years, it began re-advertising itself following the fall of Assad.<sup>315316</sup> It was widely regarded as the world's first jihadi private military contractor (PMC) and consulting firm. In 2016, Malhama Tactical's units trained the Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham and HTS-predecessor Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in urban combat. It worked very closely with HTS.<sup>317</sup> Founder Abu Rofiq, an Uzbeki national, argued that the group were not mercenaries, merely working for money. "We are fighting for an idea," he said in 2017, referencing his Salafist-jihadist roots.<sup>318</sup> Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar is another foreign jihadist group, founded in 2012. It was briefly affiliated with ISIS in 2013, but then switched to ally with al-Nusra and joined HTS' operations room in 2017.<sup>319</sup> It has 400-500 fighters, mostly Chechens, Tajiks, Dagestani, Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs, and Ukrainians, plus some Libyans, Saudis and Turks within it. Its current leader is Abdullah Daghestani – who was one of 50 fighters given a promotional rank by al-Sharaa on January 30th.<sup>320</sup>

While HTS claimed to have purged its most radical wings from itself, it is not clear according to what criteria this was conducted, since each one of these foreign factions subscribes to the global jihad. These are the very same fighters that commonly address Shia Muslim as "kafir" ('unbelievers') or "fasiq" ('venial sinner') or "rafidas" (those who reject the 'true faith').<sup>321</sup> This lexicon evokes the legacy of ISIS and al-Qaeda. All-Sharaa has publicly considered granting Syrian citizenship to these foreign fighters due to the fact that they participated in the operation that saw Assad fall.<sup>322</sup>

## 4. TURKEY'S ROLE

A final point of concern relates to the role Turkey may play in Syria. Since 2016, Turkey has conducted three ground offensives into Syrian territory, resulting in swathes of

314 <https://greydynamics.com/xhemati-alban-albanian-snipers-in-syria/>

315 <https://x.com/MalhamaOfficial>

316 <https://www.aymennaltamimi.com/p/malhama-tactical-revisited-interview>

317 <https://aymennjawad.org/2020/02/malhama-tactical-interview>

318 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>

319 <https://www.gfatf.org/archives/abdullah-daghestani/>

320 <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/middleeast/syria/301220242>

321 <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241220-syria-foreign-fighters-jihadism-extremism>

322 [https://x.com/Levant\\_24\\_/status/1868988969205346725](https://x.com/Levant_24_/status/1868988969205346725)

northern Syria falling under Turkish occupation.<sup>323</sup> As already mentioned, the SNA factions that control the Turkish-occupied areas on the ground are under Turkey's direct command. In addition to this, Turkey has formal control over the internal security and civil apparatuses in these regions. Turkish administrators play a role in everyday matters and preside over the opening of public centers and municipal institutions, as well as conducting periodic meetings with local councils, and military and police forces. 'Turkification' policies are applied to both the economy and education, as well as to humanitarian aid and access to housing.<sup>324</sup> Turkish authorities control the establishment, governance, and access to IDP camps, and have furthermore monopolized the press' and NGO's access to the occupied territories, especially humanitarian aid access. For a detailed examination of Turkey's occupation in northern Syria, read RIC's report on the Syrian National Army, available [here](#).

While the SNA factions have agreed to participate in the new Syrian army, currently it seems they still maintain their former structure and receive pay from Turkey.<sup>325</sup> There has been no real transition of authority in the Turkish-occupied areas. A new Turkish military base is under construction at the Menagh airport site, in what was SNA-controlled Shehba, which now should be under the jurisdiction of the SCG.<sup>326327</sup> At the same time, in the SDF-Damascus agreement, a commitment to ensuring the safe return of all IDPs was stipulated. Should the SCG make an effort to realize this, it would likely have big implications for Turkey's activities in the north of the country. In this light, considering the relationship between HTS and Turkey is important.

In 2012, as leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Sharaa presented an ideologically critical stance towards Turkey, branding it an American puppet that could not genuinely serve the Muslim community.<sup>328</sup> Fast forward 10 years and al-Sharaa, now leader of HTS, was focussed on entrenching control over his statelet in Idlib. When Turkey began to attempt to normalize relations with the Damascus government, seeking to break the seemingly frozen military-political situation in Syria, al-Sharaa again issued a critical response, but this time stemming from strategic and geopolitical concerns, foregoing ideology. In a statement in January 2023,

323 <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/02/24/10-things-to-know-about-turkeys-interventions-and-influence-in-syria/>

324 <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>

325 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/17/world/middleeast/syria-military-assad.html>

326 <https://x.com/clashreport/status/1901562987992752248>

327 <https://npasyria.com/en/123287/>

328 <https://tinyurl.com/mr3sc6fp> (<https://jihadology.net>)

al-Sharaa condemned Turkey for flipping from supporting the Syrian Opposition and its aims of toppling Assad, to pursuing Erdogan's interests of returning Syrian refugees and preventing a Kurdish authority on its border.<sup>329</sup>

Turkey's relationship with HTS was forged in July 2017, when HTS seized control of the Bab al-Hawa crossing. While Turkey had both HTS and Jabhat al-Nusra listed as terrorist organizations, and Turkey had avoided any official public political or diplomatic engagement with either, the March 2020 Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement paved the way for a Turkish presence in Idlib. In 2019, the SAA and Russia had upped attacks on Idlib. Turkey opportunistically got involved on the HTS side, shelling SAA positions. Turkish military posts were established in Idlib nominally for the purpose of blocking SAA advances and preventing displacement of people. Turkish motivations for its involvement centered heavily around seeking to avoid another influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey - as would likely happen if Idlib fell back into GoS hands. In 2020, a big SAA offensive seriously threatens to topple the anti-government forces in Idlib. The government made rapid advances before Turkey turned the tables with a counter-offensive making extensive use of drones. Russia eventually brokered a ceasefire in February 2020, leading to the creation of the so-called Deconfliction Zone. Since then, the security and economic ties between the two steadily increased.<sup>330</sup> Turkey built a string of military bases around Idlib. HTS in many ways maintained its own position however, and was not under the thumb of Turkey like the SNA was.

Turkey practically took on the role of enforcing the ceasefire, which formed the basis for a strategic Turkish-HTS partnership in Idlib. Turkish trade and provision of humanitarian aid into Idlib helped the SSG gain legitimacy amongst the population. For Turkey, the interest in supporting HTS was also tied to gaining a better hand against the GoS in Syria for future negotiations. While some hardline Salafi groups active in Idlib, such as Hurras al-Din, expressed rejection of TAF involvement, castigating the latter as an apostate army, HTS accepted Turkey as a protector of Idlib. HTS went as far as arresting those who tried attacking Turkish army patrols on Idlib. Analysts Soner Cagaptay and Aaron Zelin write that according to their research, in the following years Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) "showed signs of shifting gears and cultivating deeper ties with HTS [... which] entailed providing the group with weapons, training, and intelligence leading up to the offensive that ousted the Assad regime."<sup>331</sup> By the summer of 2024, as per Cagaptay and Zelin's sources, Ankara gave up on attempts to deal with Assad and instead began to consider "an HTS offensive to either bring the regime back to the negotiating table from a position of weakness

329 <https://tinyurl.com/4wuu6hk7> (<https://jihadology.net>)

330 <https://en.haberler.com/minister-fidan-was-asked-directly-why-are-you-not-18180984/>

331 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria>

or simply oust Assad.”

Turkey publicly supported HTS’ offensive<sup>332</sup> while denying any official involvement.<sup>333</sup> Despite this, numerous analysts suggest that Ankara at least greenlighted the operation.<sup>334335</sup> Soufan Center research also indicated that HTS sought to make its move in mid-October, but Ankara requested a delay.<sup>336</sup> Indeed, from the start of its interventions in the Syrian Civil War, Turkey has sought to position itself as a determining force in the shaping of Syria. With Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers gone, Turkey’s hand has only strengthened. Since Assad’s collapse, Turkey has been at the forefront of international engagement with the transitional authorities in Damascus, paving a way that other states followed. In the first two and half months, Turkish government and non-governmental bodies met with the new government 93 times, far more than that of any other country. This engagement was not confined to the capital either, with Turkish bodies visiting Idlib, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Hama and Latakia to see local officials.

Upon ascension to power in Damascus, Ahmed al-Shaara positively emphasized Syrian-Turkish relations.<sup>337</sup> On its side, Turkey put in motion a series of diplomatic and material steps to foster Syrian reboot, involving itself in addressing the Syrian crisis in the energy sector, pledging to contribute to the Syrian reconstruction, and showing an interest in Syrian oil and natural gas projects.<sup>338339</sup> Turkey has expressed willingness to equip Damascus and Aleppo airports with radars, which would also have a military function. Turkey has already connected the electricity and communication infrastructure in the Turkish-occupied regions of northern Syria to Turkish networks across the border. Turkey’s overtures towards the HTS-led transitional government reflect Ankara’s desire to actively steer the new political process in Syria. Ankara-Damascus relations are currently unprecedentedly strong. Turkey has positioned itself to heavily influence Syria’s future diplomatically, economically, and militarily.<sup>340</sup> Syria and Turkey reportedly held talks probing a joint defense pact that would include new Turkish airbases

332 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-hopes-syrian-rebels-will-advance-raises-alarm-about-some-2024-12-06/>

333 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/02/syria-crisis-summit-turkey-iran-russia>

334 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-syrias-opposition-resurgence-means-ankara>

335 <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-backstory-behind-the-fall-of-aleppo/>

336 <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-december-2/>

337 <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>

338 <https://tinyurl.com/43ubjpr4> (<https://aawsat.com>)

339 <https://tinyurl.com/msrkarp9> (<https://www.majalla.com>)

340 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-ready-offer-military-training-syria-if-new-administration-requests-2024-12-15/>



in central Syria and training for the new Syrian army.<sup>341</sup> Turkish companies are expected to undertake the lion's share of the country's reconstruction.<sup>342</sup> A notable number of the key political and military HTS cadres now leading the SSG have previously lived in Turkey, hold Turkish citizenship, and still maintain connections to Turkey's economic, political, and security elites.<sup>343</sup> Several SNA figures now handed key military roles in the new Syrian army were long-time MIT (Turkish intelligence) assets.<sup>344</sup> Hence, the prospect of a new Syrian government very much under Turkish influence has also raised concerns.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The model of 'political jihadism' Ahmed al-Sharaa has taken on has seen him forced to operate pragmatically and discard the hardline extremist practices that characterised Jabhat al-Nusra. However, these have been replaced by authoritarian tendencies - as witnessed from HTS in Idlib, and the current HTS-dominated SCG.

The so-called transitional stage is currently under the control of the HTS-dominated Syrian Caretaker Government. Al-Sharaa has sought to cover such centralization of authority with a thin veneer of democratic discourse and references to inclusivity. At the same time, the transitional constitution paves the way for dictatorial rule. Compounding this, the authoritarian record of HTS in Idlib leaves doubt over whether the SCG can build up a governance structure that does justice to Syria's diversity and can administer the country such as to guarantee the basic rights and freedoms of its population. The crimes of a jihadist Islamist character committed by HTS and its Idlib allies in recent weeks have further deepened these fears, even as the SCG pays lip service to cross-sectarian outreach and embracing all components of the country. The aforementioned open displays of ISIS symbols and badges by fighters under the new Ministry of Defence in the post-Assad period suggests that while the SCG on the one hand participates in Coalition counter-ISIS operations, it on the other hand permits

341 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-discuss-defense-pact-with-turkeys-erdogan-sources-say-2025-02-04/>

342 <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkish-construction-firms-rally-on-syria-rebuilding-expectations>

343 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mepo.12807>

344 <https://rojvainformationcenter.org/2022/07/the-syrian-national-army-the-turkish-proxy-militias-of-northern-syria/>

an environment in which Islamist jihadists feel empowered and emboldened to flaunt themselves. The Alawite massacre in Latakia earlier this month can also be seen as practical consequences of this.

Assad's collapse opened the way for a new chapter in Syria. Yet genuine popular participation in transition processes, freedom from repressive state practices, the building of democratic institutions and structures, and advancement of peaceful and tolerant intra-Syrian relations have not been achieved. Al-Sharaa's declaration of 'victory' implied that the 'revolution' had reached the end of its course, hence limiting its objectives just to regime change. For the protestors who took to the streets in 2011 seeking democratic freedoms, dignity and equality, December 8th, 2024 did not bring with it the 'end of the revolution'.

The exclusion of women, minorities, and groups representing political visions that do not conform to that of HTS' from the current political process underway in Damascus is blatant. If Syria is to shift from dictatorship to a legitimate order characterized by the rule of law, this is conditioned upon genuine democratic participation from all of Syria's peoples and their representatives. As the UN has highlighted, civil society in general and specifically grass-roots organizations led by women and youth, play a crucial role in ensuring a successful transition.<sup>345</sup> Amplifying the voices and widening the channels for action of these groups allows their experiences to inform the direction of the transition. Currently, the SCG's makeup is monochrome; composed primarily of HTS-aligned Sunni Arab men. The key policies and strategies shaping the future of Syria are being decided by a narrow group. Decentralization of decision-making power and administrative control, and the empowering of civil society, are essential steps – towards which the SCG has displayed no inclination.

Additionally, the SCG shows little regards for ensuring accountability for crimes committed by the forces under its Ministry of Defence in the post-Assad period, creating scepticism about how it will fulfil its obligation as the interim authority to pursue truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition for the serious human rights violations and abuses committed by many parties throughout the Syrian Civil war. While the international community has widely referenced the need for transitional justice, such calls have not been directed in relation to the crimes HTS and its connected militias perpetrated in Idlib.

345 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2025/03/transitional-justice-confronting-past-building-future>

The collapse of Assad and the withdrawal of the Iranian and most of the Russian forces from Syria was met with ferment by Western media outlets. The discourse that developed around HTS and al-Sharaa's evolution has played a pivotal role in its international acceptance, notwithstanding its overtly jihadist past as al-Nusra Front and al-Sharaa's recent history in the authoritarian HTS. A range of foreign countries swiftly showed a willingness to re-open relations with Syria. These included Turkey, all Gulf countries, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, the US, Germany, France, Italy, Libya, Ukraine, Russia, Spain, Japan, and others. Aid was sent by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, and Libya, while the US removed the \$10M bounty over al-Sharaa and provided some temporary sanctions relief. Other countries' interaction mainly consisted in communications and visits from foreign ministers. The EU has promised both funding and sanctions relief. The UK has removed some sanctions and unfrozen Syrian central bank assets. Switzerland also has lifted certain sanctions against Syria's energy and transport sector. The UN has been actively involved in discussion with al-Sharaa. It called for the Caretaker Government to keep its word for a political transition that would include the broadest spectrum of Syrian society.<sup>346</sup> Geir Pedersen, UN Envoy in Syria, evaluated his visits to Damascus and meetings with al-Sharaa positively but cautiously.<sup>347</sup>

Seemingly in one day, Ahmed al-Sharaa went from being considered a terrorist, to being courted by all world leaders. Amongst other things, this reflected that it was not in their interests to see Syria plunge into further chaos, if only to facilitate the return of refugees living in Europe and prevent extremist jihadist groups from threatening the West. The potential for oil and gas exploration rights in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean is also a factor for Western governments. Prior to the war, Canadian, British, Chinese and French companies had been involved in natural gas development in Syria. Now, new exploration for oil and natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean is on the table. Syria is also being eyed as a transit state for natural gas from Israel and other Eastern Mediterranean producers to Turkey and Europe.

The international community has yet to establish clear principles upon which their support for al-Sharaa is conditioned, such as decentralization of authority and the build-up of democratic institutions which include women and represent the diversity of Syria. The international community has yet to play a meaningful role in ensuring justice accountability for crimes committed both pre- and post-Assad, such as establishing a fact-finding mission to investigate the killings of Alawites by SCG forces in the coastal region. Such a move would also

346 <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/un-envoy-meets-syrias-sharaa-urges-inclusive-transition>

347 <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/near-verbatim-transcript-press-conference-United-Nations-special-envoy-syria-mr-geir-o-pedersen>

demonstrate that the matter of protecting Syria's religious and ethnic minorities is being taken seriously – a pertinent issue in light of HTS' history of persecution of such groups. For Syrian IDPs who wish to return home to be able to do so safely, international monitoring is important, as the SCG has shown that it is not willing to hold its own forces accountable for their actions. Enabling safe return for IDPs also requires facilitating an ending of Turkey's occupation of northern Syria which would pave the way for the hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians from Afrin and Sere Kaniye to head home. Yet, current trends suggest Ankara's military presence in Syria is expanding – another point with which the international community can concern themselves.

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