Forum of Federations
The Global Network on Federalism and Devolved Governance

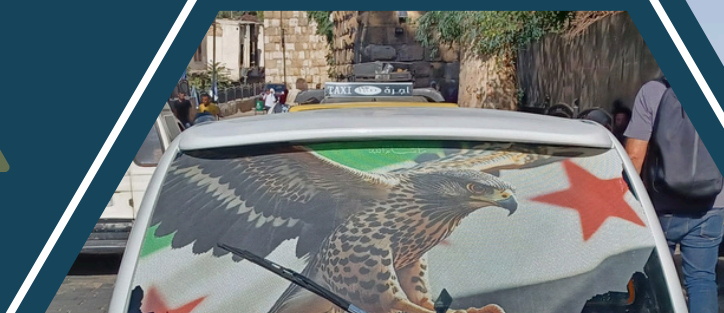# Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria
Balancing Unity and Diversity

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Foreword

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marks a historic turning point for Syria. The victory of opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the subsequent establishment of the Syrian Transitional Government, and the launch of a national dialogue process and the elections in October 2025, have generated cautious optimism about Syria's future. These developments indicate the possibility of a constitutional and political transition toward an inclusive governance model that reflects the country's diversity.

However, despite these promising developments, the situation remains fragile. After more than a decade of conflict, Syria is left deeply divided and faces immense challenges in rebuilding. A crucial element of this reconstruction will be establishing a just and inclusive political system that accommodates the needs and aspirations of all Syrian communities and groups, including women and youth.

Further, questions persist regarding the extent of the transitional government's authority over both territory and the numerous armed groups that opposed the Assad regime. Skepticism also remains about President Ahmed al-Sharaa's commitment to realizing his stated vision of an inclusive Syria, particularly as achieving an inclusive settlement among Syria's diverse communities will require some form of power-sharing arrangement.

When the Assad regime fell, the Forum of Federations was approached to contribute to the discourse on the future state structure of the country. Recognizing the importance of this moment, this request resonated strongly with the Forum's mission to:

Strengthen democratic, inclusive, and gender-responsive governance in established and emerging federal and multilevel countries through knowledge creation and mobilization, capacity development, and support to inclusive policy implementation processes.

Our approach is based on mutual learning and experience sharing, and not on prescribing a single model or blueprint. Drawing on our comparative international expertise in supporting post-conflict transitions, we aim to offer insights on federalization, decentralization, and multilevel governance.

The objective of this report is to contribute to discussions on Syria's future state structure by grounding them in an assessment of the aspirations of different communities across the country. It does not seek to promote any specific governance model as the right one for Syria.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that discussions about federalism in Syria remain polarized and politically sensitive. The concept of federalism is often perceived not as a governance reform option, but as a potential threat to national unity. This is a reflection of both the centralizing ideology of the Ba'athist state as well as the deep mistrust among Syria's communities after years of conflict.

Federal ideas may offer useful inspiration for exploring how Syria's national unity might be preserved while allowing flexibility in governance arrangements suited to local contexts. However, as this publication highlights, federal arrangements are only one among several potential options that stakeholders may consider. Indeed, there are many possible variations of such arrangements and multiple institutional configurations that could underpin an inclusive Syrian state.

The Forum of Federations has commissioned two complementary reports which comprise this volume:
The report "Actor Mapping of Inclusive Governance in post-Assad Syria" is authored by Soeren Keil and Eva Savelsberg. It presents findings from an extensive needs assessment and stakeholder mapping exercise. This report seeks to understand the visions of diverse Syrian stakeholders - including representatives of the Transitional Authority, various communities (components) of Syria, political movements, civil society organizations, women's rights organizations, youth groups, and local communities - regarding Syria's future governance and state structure.

We believe that locally-led governance solutions are not only desirable but essential to ensure that the new political order reflects Syria's diversity and addresses the deep mistrust that has resulted from years of conflict, centralization, and authoritarianism. Accordingly, the report aims to:

- Identify the aspirations and concerns of different Syrian communities about the future political system, including preferred governance models, power-sharing arrangements, and inclusivity mechanisms.

- Highlight key challenges and opportunities for building a more inclusive and equitable political order.

The second report on "Institutional Options for Inclusive State Building in Syria", written by Neophytos Loizides and Rupak Chattopadhyay, develops and analyzes a set of institutional options grounded in relevant international experiences. These options may provide pathways to address the diverse preferences of communities (components) reflected in the 'Actor Mapping' and are intended to inform Syrian policymakers and stakeholders as they deliberate on the country's future constitutional and institutional framework in the years to come.

The report examines how different models can balance the needs of Syria's diverse communities while preserving national unity. It also assesses potential challenges, explores strategies for effective implementation, and provides practical recommendations for the transitional period. It further examines how a federal framework might serve as a flexible toolkit for fostering inclusivity and cohesion in Syria's state-building process.

The research work for this report has been conducted aiming to respect diverse perspectives and experiences in Syria. The Forum of Federations hopes that this publication provides both a foundation for continued dialogue on Syria's political future and a modest but meaningful contribution to the country's journey toward peace, unity, and inclusive governance. It aimed to prioritize inclusivity and to ensure that the voices of all stakeholders – including women, youth, and marginalized groups – were heard and reflected. The objective of this report is to enrich the political discussion in Syria – and not to prescribe or suggest any solutions.

It is up to the people in Syria to decide which solutions are most suitable for their needs and aspirations. Ultimately, locally-led governance solutions are not merely a matter of constitutional or administrative design. They are a cornerstone of legitimacy, stability, and sustainable peace in post-conflict Syria. By anchoring the transition in the knowledge, capacities, and aspirations of Syrian communities themselves, the hope is that the country can chart a path toward an inclusive and durable political order, and that the insights contained in this volume may contribute to this path.

This volume is the result of a collaborative effort involving many individuals and institutions. I would like to acknowledge the time, insights, and expertise they have dedicated to its development.

Special thanks go to my colleague Liam Whittington for his substantive contribution, and coordination throughout the preparation of this volume. I also thank Carl Stieren for his editorial efforts to ensure quality and coherence of this publication, and Mohammed Islam Ounalli for the design work. Finally, I express my gratitude to Allison McCulloch, who provided important comments and feedback on the reports.

Further, the Forum of Federations acknowledges the continued support and engagement of its institutional funding partners in promoting inclusive, democratic, and gender-responsive governance in post-conflict and transitional contexts.

While this volume has benefited from the insights, contributions and review of many, the authors are responsible for the final content. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Forum of Federations, its partners, or its donors.

I hope that with this volume the Forum of Federation contributes to the political dialogue on Syria's future and inspires decision-makers and thought leaders to pursue pathways toward inclusive and sustainable governance.
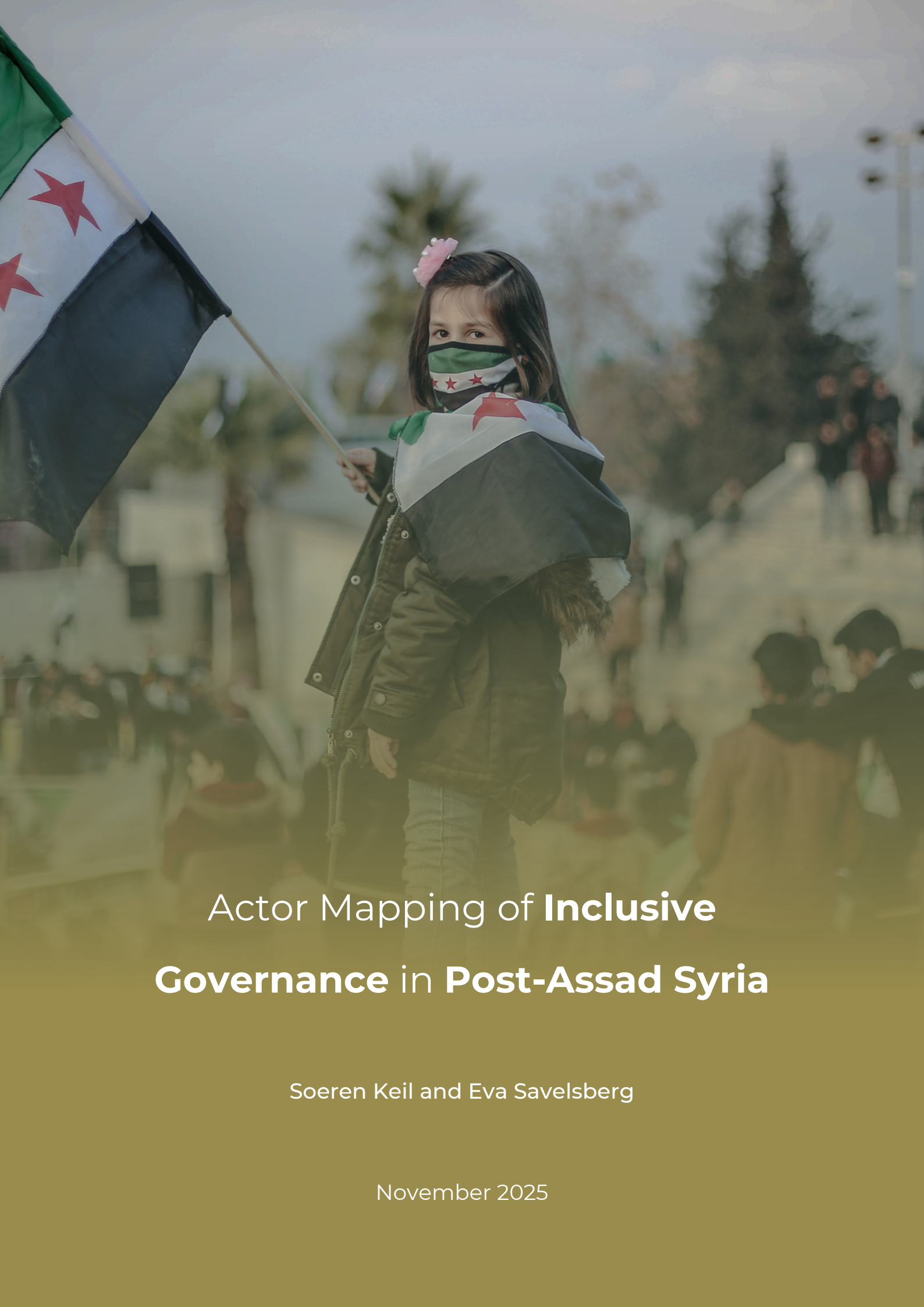

Felix Knüpling

Vice President, Forum of Federations

November 2025

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Actor Mapping of **Inclusive Governance** in **Post-Assad Syria**

Soeren Keil and Eva Savelsberg

November 2025

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1. Executive Summary

At the end of 2024, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies conquered first Aleppo and within several days all major cities of Syria, including Damascus at a speed that surprised everyone. Most Syrians then had a feeling of joy to see a dictatorship go that had brought destruction, war and suffering to the country and its people. The new leaders from HTS quickly organized a victory conference. They then put themselves and their allies in charge of the transition process and defined the next steps in the country's complex transitions. The transitions were expected to be not only from war to peace, but from dictatorship to more pluralistic governance, and the re-integration into the Arab and wider world after years of isolation of Syria during the Assad regime.

The first signs of transition raised some hopes for meaningful change when a National Dialogue conference with more than 600 participants representing different ethnic and religious groups took place in Damascus in February 2025. But over time Syrians and external observers became more skeptical towards HTS' intentions for the future of Syria. The Constitutional Declaration of March 2025 provided a framework for centralized governance, which gave nearly unlimited powers to the President—HTS leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa. Despite agreements with Kurdish and Druze leaders, there was little evidence of HTS' commitment to an inclusive and democratic transition process. Instead, key government positions were filled with HTS elites and affiliated allies, while newly-appointed province governors, and key officials in the security sector were also HTS members or supporters. More shocking was the excessive violence by HTS-affiliated or directly controlled security services, first in the west of the country against the Alawite community in March 2025. The violence was repeated in July 2025 against the Druze community in the southern province of Suweyda. These violent acts have raised additional questions about HTS' willingness to oversee a transition towards inclusive democracy that would reunite the fractured country.

Mapping the different political preferences of all the main actors and groups in post-Assad Syria reveals who holds how much power now and where. Starting with HTS, this mapping demonstrates how the group emerged as the Syrian wing of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2011, before adapting its Islamist ideology

several times. Its previous governance experience in the city, and parts of the province of Idlib have identified the path that the group and Al-Sharaa have taken. They have made governance decisions that were highly pragmatic on the one side, but still very much focused on centralized decision-making and holding power. That has prevented any democratic control within their rule. Their current record in Syria raises substantial concerns about their understanding of democratic principles and the separation of powers. Instead, their emphasis has been on reuniting the country under a strong President with extensive authority. They have relied on strategies that involve incorporating selected, rather than elected representatives of specific groups in their decision-making structures. More recently, however, Al-Sharaa, as well as several other HTS officials have voiced some support for discussions on limited decentralization–strongly rejecting federalism as a form of separatism in the process.

The largest non-Arab community in Syria consists of the Kurds, who live mainly in the north of the country. They are internally divided between two main factions, namely the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The SDC is led by the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat—Democratic Union Party) and its militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF has been the dominant actor in Northern Syria after the retreat of Syrian forces in 2011. It has been contested by the KNC but also more directly from the Islamic State and more recently from the Syrian National Army (SNA)—a Türkiye-backed association of mainly Arab militias. Externally, Türkiye has been in direct conflict with the PYD. Türkiye sees the PYD as a Syrian extension of the Türkiye based Kurdistan Workers' Party—PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê), which has led a violent uprising against the Turkish state for several decades.

The leaders of the PYD and its alliance partner, the SDF, have signed an agreement on the reintegration of Kurdish-controlled territory into the rest of the country with the HTS in March 2025. However, recent tensions have run high. The tensions arose as the PYD rejected the Constitutional Declaration and formed coalitions with the KNC and with other ethnic and religious groups to oppose the HTS' centralizing and exclusive policies. Instead, all major Kurdish groups agree on the need for an inclusive transitional process. This process would eventually lead to a system, in which the territories with Kurdish majorities would form their own region with a high degree of self-governance. Moreover, Kurdish representatives would be selected by the Kurds—and their political parties, to serve in key institutions, including in national courts and the national parliament and government, in Damascus. The rights of Kurds and other groups to use their own language and to protect their culture and customs would be protected. This vision of a future Syria is in direct conflict with the ideas of HTS.

The Druze community enjoyed a degree of self-governance during the war in Syria. After 2021, Druze militia de facto controlled the city of Suweyda and parts of the province, facing no resistance from the regime. While this autonomy was somewhat protected, when some Druze leaders struck an agreement with HTS leader Al-Sharaa on the reintegration of Suweyda into Syria, a new conflict broke out. This time, it was an outbreak of large-scale violence between Druze militia and Bedouins in July 2025, resulting in new challenges. HTS-controlled government troops initially sent to bring peace sided at first with the Bedouins, which resulted in further fighting and an Israeli military intervention in support of the Druze community. While the Druze have taken control of the city of Suweyda again with their own forces, trust and cooperation with the HTS have seriously suffered because of this violence. The Druze have joined Kurdish demands for a decentralized system that protects the rights of the different groups in Syria. They have also argued for a weak centre in Damascus that remains neutral in questions of religion and identity, thereby allowing different cultures, ethnic groups and religious faiths to coexist. Some radical voices within the Druze community have even openly questioned the territorial integrity of Syria, calling for complete Druze self-governance.

Similar objections against the HTS vision of a centralized and more exclusive system can be found in the Alawite community. This community has most to lose in post-Assad Syria, as Assad's membership of the group gave many Alawites exclusive access to employment in the administration and the government. Assad also gave them access to senior positions in the security sector. With the end of Assad-rule and the take-over of HTS, some members of the Alawite community are losing these privileges. However, those privileges were accessible only to those members of the community that supported Assad's reign—while those opposing it were excluded, discriminated against, imprisoned and persecuted by the regime.

Violence between supporters of the old Assad regime and HTS security forces in March 2025 indicated that integrating the Alawite community will be no mean feat. Subsequent reports of mass killings of Alawite civilians by HTS security services have further increased tensions and mistrust. The Alawites remain deeply divided between those that mourn the end of the old regime and resist the new leaders violently, and those that envision a transition process. The transition process would need to be more inclusive by allowing their rights as a religious group, and as a community within Syria, to be protected. More recently, Alawite leaders have supported Kurdish-led demands for a more inclusive transition process. The Alawite transition process would ensure the rights of all communities and protect them from a dominant centre in Damascus—including supporting the transition to a federal system.

In addition to the more territorially-bound Kurds, Druze and Alawite communities, there are also several groups in Syria whose members are spread across the country. These include for example the Assyrian community, as well as Yazidis and Turkmens, amongst others. While limited in numbers, they have nevertheless played a vital role in the resistance against Assad and in raising demands for inclusion and recognition in the new Syrian state. Assyrians have been worried about the Islamist background of HTS, which may threaten them as a Christian community. They support more inclusive structures, which do not just favour the larger and territorially concentrated components of Syria, but which also provide effective group rights to non-territorially bound communities.

The final actor discussed here is civil society, which plays a vital role not only in delivering humanitarian aid, but also in enabling discussions on the direction of the transition process. Civil society in Syria and abroad has been supportive of decentralized governance structures and a more inclusive transition process. A civil society transition process would not only represent the voices of the different ethnic and religious groups, but also the voices of women, young people and other major stakeholders.

We conclude with an outline of several policy recommendations for actors willing to support a more inclusive transitional process leading to a new governance system that will work for all Syrians.

2. Overview of Actors

Actor	Role in Syria
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	New political elites, dominating government in Damascus and controlling most cities in Syria. HTS started as the Syrian wing of the Islamic State, before joining forces with Al Qaida and then taking over control in Idlib in 2017. It is not a traditional political party but an Islamist resistance group against the Assad regime, that has forged alliances with other Islamist groups, warlords, Bedouins and mainly Arab clans in Syria. It is led by Ahmed Al-Sharaa (previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), a previously wanted Islamist leader and now Interim President of Syria. HTS has taken over all major state responsibilities, including the government, the security sector, the administration and public service delivery. They have focused on centralizing powers in the hand of Al-Sharaa and the HTS leadership, uniting the country's fractured security forces. Such a centralization would have a transitional path that focuses on consolidating their dominance in Syrian politics, with no visible attempts of proper inclusive governance or decentralization strategies so far.
Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)	A leading Kurdish actor controlling the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in the North-East of the country. Through its military coalition—the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—it maintains an American-trained and armed force of roughly 30,000 soldiers. The most important actor within the SDC is the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat), a Syrian party with strong ideological and personal relations with the Turkish PKK.

Actor	Role in Syria
Kurdish National Council (KNC)	A grouping of several Kurdish parties that oppose the authoritarian rule of the PYD and SDC in AANES. Since July 2025, they have joined forces with SDC in their request for a federal solution in Syria and in opposing HTS centralization. The KNC has strong personal and financial links to the Iraqi Kurdistan ruling party KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq).
The Druze community	An Abrahamic, monotheistic, and syncretic religion … (Wikipedia). Despite having only 3% of the population, they are an important actor. The Druze community has no political parties. Its elites are divided. Some seek negotiating and seeking agreement with HTS. Several militia leaders have been more confrontational with HTS and its allies. Druze leaders support decentralization and the protection of group rights, with a weak centre in Damascus.
The Alawite community	The community that former dictator Bashar Al-Assad belonged to. They were overrepresented in public administration and the civil service. In August 2025, there was the formation of the first Alawite political party in Syria. So far, the main representatives of the Alawite community have been military and religious leaders. Members of the Alawite community have argued for a more inclusive transitional process and a political solution that respects the rights of all communities in Syria.
Assyrian Democratic Organization ADO	The oldest and largest Christian community in Syria. ADO is the largest Assyrian political party, previously a member of the Syrian democratic opposition to the Assad regime. ADO and other Assyrian organizations have argued for a more inclusive peace process, decentralization and a Syria in which the rights of all groups are protected. Their focus is particularly on religious and language rights.

Table 1: Overview of different actors in Syria

Map of Syria (as of March 2025)
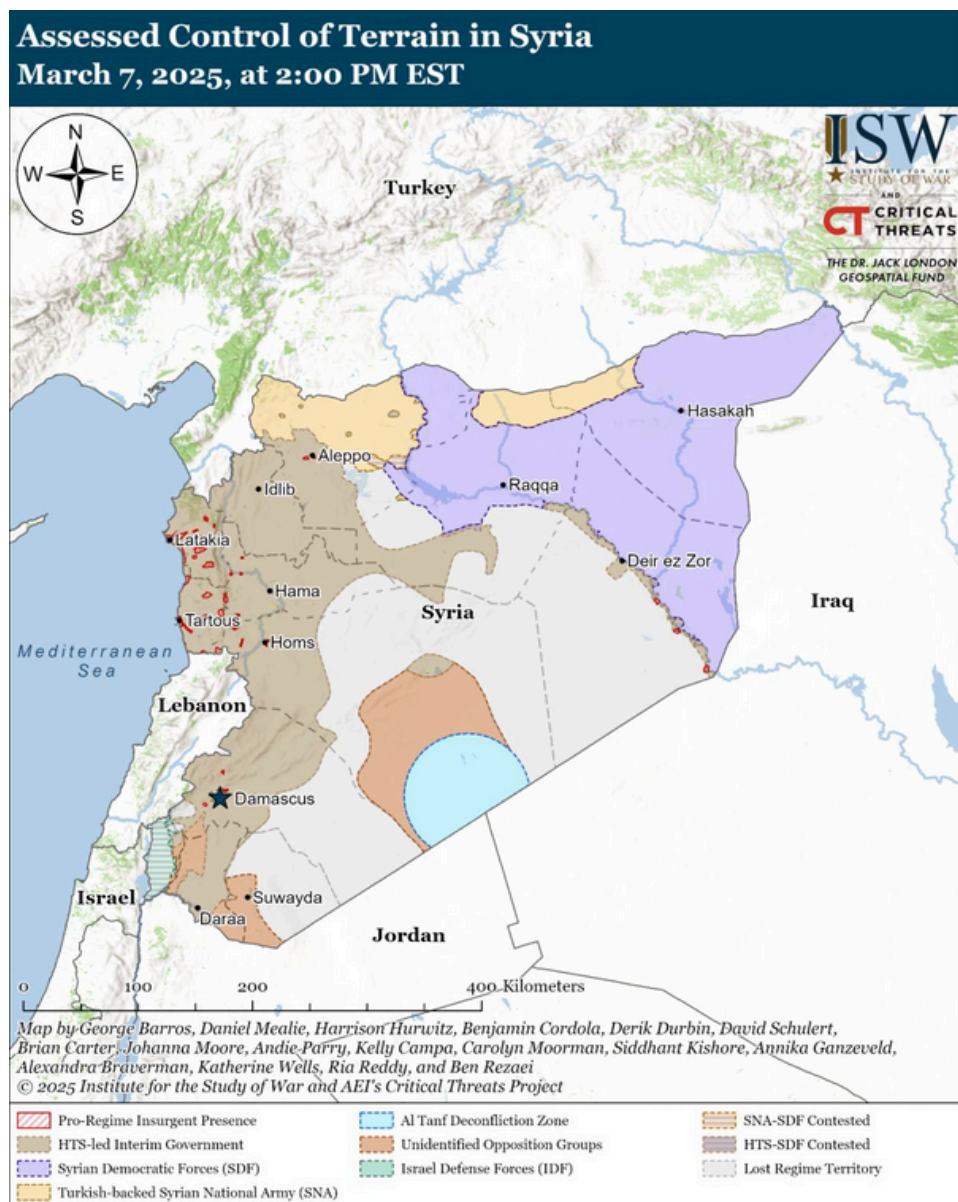
Source: Institute for the Study of War

3. Introduction

In July 2025, heavy fighting erupted in the South of Syria, in the province and the city of Suweyda, where Druze armed groups were engaged in conflict with mainly Sunni-dominated Bedouin fighters. After several days of clashes, the new government in Damascus sent reinforcements, which initially seemed to support the Bedouin fighters rather than ending the violence between the two groups. Only once Israel intervened militarily in support of the Druze community, and attacked government buildings in Damascus, as well as government and Bedouin troops in Suweyda, did the fighting end. The settlement re-established de-facto Druze self-rule, as well as control of Suweyda city, and the self-administration of the town (ICG 2025a). Hundreds of dead fighters on both sides, along with similarly high losses amongst the civilian population, were the result. The fighting reminded many observers of earlier violence in Western Syria between loyalists to the previous Assad regime and HTS troops, where in March 2025, more than 1,500 people died, mainly civilians belonging to the Alawite sect.

These incidences have raised many concerns. Security remains the major challenge for the new rulers in Syria, an alliance around Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader, new President Ahmed Al-Sharaa. First, the new regime must help with a country that has faced 14 years of civil war with substantial involvement of external actors, and an economy that has virtually collapsed. Secondly, it must oppose continued meddling from neighbouring powers and meet heightened expectations on a new beginning. Thirdly, HTS and its allied forces must ensure the safety and re-integration of different groups and territories in post-Assad Syria (Helberg 2025). Indeed, little is left from the initial feeling of overpowering joy and happiness when Bashar al-Assad left Damascus in the morning of the 8th of December 2024 to go into exile in Moscow. That flight ended six decades of rule by the Assad family, and marked the end the Syrian revolution that started in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011 (Hall 2025).

The initial feeling of positive change has been replaced by three risks:

1) The risks of new sectarian violence

2) The dangers of external intervention as seen by Israeli military action

3) The fear that the hope for an inclusive, democratic transition will instead result in a new centralized system around the HTS leadership (Haid 2025).

It is therefore vitally important to contextualize the developments in Syria since December 2024, identify the main stakeholders[1] in the country and their political preferences, both short-term and more long-term.

This actor-mapping looks at developments in Syria since the end of the Assad regime in December 2024 and discusses the many roles of different actors in post-Assad Syria, and the prospects for inclusive governance in the post-Assad period, up until the end of August 2025.

The paper will first discuss the research methodology and then highlight and contextualize developments in the country since the change of the ruling elite in December 2024.

It will look at the current political framework, the contrasting spheres of governance we can observe, and the growing divergence of political priorities among the major stakeholders. These stakeholders will then be discussed in the next section, starting with HTS as the new ruling elite, followed by a portrayal of different Kurdish factions and other components of Syria,[2] before contextualizing civil society organizations and their and their influence and priorities.

When we map these different actors, we focus on their origin, their political organization and emphasizes their attitudes towards inclusive governance, models of decentralization, minority rights and democratic and good governance models.

It is important to highlight here that we are using a very wide definition of inclusive governance. This definition includes elements of territorial and non-territorial autonomy, forms of power-sharing, rights of specific groups, asymmetry and confederal arrangements We are interested in how different actors assess the transition to democratic institutions if and if they support power-sharing between different groups, including on a territorial basis through federalism or decentralization, and how they position themselves in relation to the rights of the different communities in Syria. These dimensions of inclusive governance are discussed and summarized at the end of each section in a table.[3] We specify the priorities of these mechanisms for each group and actor in the sections below. Considering our interest in territorial power-sharing, we focus specifically on questions related to decentralization and federalism.

We conclude with some major insights and important recommendations for the next steps on how actors who want to support inclusive governance structures might be able to engage and get involved.

4. Methodology

This research combines a variety of research approaches used in social science research (della Porta & Keating 2008). First, we engaged in extensive literature review, particularly of academic journal articles, blogs, online contributions and other texts on the developments of post-Assad Syria. Here we also used a variety of primary sources, from the press releases of key actors, commentaries by leading politicians, to documents such as the Constitutional Declaration and a variety of constitutional and other political proposals by the different actors that we discussed in this actor mapping.

We applied a strict content analysis to key primary sources such as the final declaration of the National Dialogue Conference, the Constitutional Declaration and the agreement between HTS / Al-Sharaa and SDF / Abdi. Whenever necessary, we worked with Arab and Kurdish translators, who helped translate core documents that were not available in English. We combined the content analysis of key primary documents with semi-structured interviews. In total, we interviewed 18 people in Syria, Germany and online. These included eight women and 10 men. Interviews were conducted in German, English, Kurdish and Arabic, working with local translators. All interviews were conducted in the period between April and July 2025. Further discussions took place in September 2025, when we held several workshops on federalism in Damascus and Qamishli in Syria. We held informal conversations with HTS officials, and two formal focus group meetings with representatives of the PYD and representatives of Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

Conducting this research has raised several ethical issues. We have spoken to politicians and activists from different backgrounds, some close to and allied with HTS, but most of them in opposition to HTS and its governance practice. Despite several outreach attempts, we did not interview representatives from HTS, though we held informal discussions with them in September 2025. We are aware of this bias and have tried to counter it.

Our methods for countering bias in this case included these:

- We did a detailed analysis of HTS-related documents

- We did a detailed analysis of secondary sources on HTS

- We held additional interviews with external experts on Syria, who were more sympathetic to HTS and the challenges the group is facing in Syria.

We also decided to anonymise all interview data, even when interviewees gave us permission to use their name. This is to ensure that all data are treated confidentially and ensure better readability. All interviewees were informed about consent and that they can remove it at any time. All gave verbal consent at the beginning of the interview, as well as in writing whenever possible. All interviewees were fully briefed on the intention of the interview, the use of their information and received an overview of questions and themes that would be discussed during the interview in advance.

When discussing the transitional process and different actors in Syria, it is important to use the right methodology. In Syria, groups such as the Kurds, the Druze or the Alawites do not consider themselves as minorities but as essential components of the state. They see the word minority as a reduction in their status as essential elements and equal citizens of the Syrian state. We have therefore abstained from using the term "minorities" when referring to these groups, instead using terms such as components or ethnic / religious groups. We want to avoid any groupism or banal discussions on group coherence. To do this, we highlight in our discussions below the diversity of opinions, organizations and priorities within each group. Moreover, this focus also explains the structure of this actor mapping.

While HTS is discussed first as the most important actor in post-Assad Syria, the Kurds, Druze, Alawites and other communities are discussed in the following sections. While HTS is mainly built around Sunni Arab Islamist ideological ideas, for Kurds, Alawites, Druze and other components, their ethnic and religious identity explains their political programme. In other words, when discussing Kurds, Alawites, Druze etc., we recognize that ethnic belonging and the protection of identity and group rights are quite often at the centre of the political demands of these groups. Hence, we focus on ethnic groups—and the main actors that articulate them, because ethnicity frames the political programme and the political demands of these different actors.

5. Setting the Scene – Regime Change in Syria

Before the take-over by HTS and its allies, the conflict in Syria had been in a military stalemate since 2021. There were three major zones of control. The government controlled about two-thirds of the territory, including the major cities in the country and at the coast. In the northeast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) led by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a Kurdish-dominated alliance of troops and parties—controlled most of the oil-rich territories. Finally, the HTS and some of its allies controlled the city and parts of the province of Idlib in the northwest of the country (Adar et.al. 2025). In addition to these three larger zones of influence, territories were controlled by various armed factions, such as the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in the North, and Druze militia in the South in the province of Suweyda. Türkiye occupied parts of the North, too, while Israel substantially expanded its military presence in the Golan Heights, a reaction to the presence of Iranian and Hezbollah troops in Syria. Once HTS managed to capture not only Syria's second largest city, Aleppo, but to march on to Damascus within a few days between November and December 2024, it became obvious that the Assad-regime was collapsing—for many unexpectedly and surprisingly considering its previously strong support from Iran and Russia. However, externally, Russia was weakened by its ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, and Iran and Hezbollah had suffered substantial losses by military confrontations with Israel. Internally, Assad's army was tired, underpaid and unwilling to continue to fight in a battle that many considered in vain (Wedeen 2025).

HTS did not expect the regime to fall so quickly. Indeed, as one of our interviewees pointed out, "HTS was not planning on controlling Syria," which explains some of the rushed approaches to transitional governance arrangements, and the lack of clarity on the way forward, once the old regime had collapsed (Interview with E, April 2025). When it took over Damascus, it first put Mohammed al-Bashir, the Prime Minister of the previous HTS Salvation government in Idlib, in charge of a caretaker government for Syria, before appointing Ahmed Al-Sharaa, the military leader of HTS, as Interim President in January 2025.

Since then, Syria has had two transitional governments: one appointed immediately in the wake of the take-over of power and led by senior HTS figures around Mohammed al-Bashir; and the other appointed on 29 March 2025, once Al-Sharaa signed a Constitutional Declaration, which was written for a five-year period to provide a governance framework for the transitional period. The shift from an initial care-taker government to a transitional government in March 2025 has been welcomed by many observers, who highlight the appointment of previous regime members, Kurds, and a Christian Arab woman as new ministers as a milestone of inclusion and openness (see for example ICG 2025b). Others, however, have warned of over-centralization (Haid 2025) and even the threat of a new dictatorship (Interview with A, April 2025; Interview with B, June 2025), emerging from the new constitutional framework.

The Constitutional Declaration, whose content will be discussed in the section below on the HTS, was itself the result of the National Dialogue Conference, which took place at the end of February 2025 in Damascus. While many observers welcomed the idea of an inclusive process with more than 600 representatives, participants and those invited told us that they felt the whole process to organize the National Dialogue was rushed and many people were unable to attend due to short-notice invitations (Interview with C, April 2025). Others have pointed out that the conclusions of the National Dialogue, including the appointment of a constitutional drafting committee by the President and the move towards a new interim government, felt very much pre-prepared and did not necessarily portray some of the discussions during the Conference (see Al-Assil 2025, Interview with D, April 2025). Representatives of the SDF and affiliated Kurdish parties, and leading representatives of the Alawite community did not attend the National Dialogue Conference.

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However, an initial agreement between Al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi, leader of the SDF, signed on 10 March 2025, envisions the full integration of the AANES into the Syrian state, in exchange for full and equal citizenship rights, and recognition of the Kurds in Syria. A similar agreement was reached between Al-Sharaa and leaders of the Druze community in May 2025. Both agreements foresee the integration of different forces into a new Syrian army, and the re-integration of the different territories into Syria, thereby de-facto handing over the administration of these territorial units to the new leaders in Damascus.

However, in practice, there have been few steps towards implementation, and the agreements remain vague declarations of intent rather than legally binding, implementable contracts. Leading representatives of the PYD gave their reactions to the contradictions between the HTS-SDF agreement and the Constitutional Declaration. These PYD representatives said they do not believe that the agreement is still valuable as a framework for the future relations between HTS-controlled territories and AANES (Focus Group 1, September 2025). Moreover, as will be shown below, the agreements have been heavily criticized by representatives of the Druze as well as by the Kurdish community, and additional, highly critical statements of the HTS-led transition have been issued since then.

The political transition, including the National Dialogue Conference and the signing of the Constitutional Declaration took place amongst the background of continued sectarian conflict in the country.

The fragile security situation was illustrated by these three reactions:

- Unrest in the West, in the coastal area where the majority of the country's Alawite community live, in March 2025

- Violence against members of the Druze community in the suburbs of Damascus in April 2025

- Ongoing tensions between the Türkiye -controlled SNA and SDF forces in the North of the country highlight.

Foreign military intervention has included the expansion of Israel's occupation into further Syrian territory in the South-West, and the continued presence of Turkish troops in the North-East of the country, despite these external interventions and ongoing internal challenges there has been external support for Al-Sharaa and HTS. This is despite the indications that HTS and Al-Sharaa might be less interested in a democratic transition than initially expected (McCulloch and Keil 2025).

First, US President Donald Trump, after he met Al-Sharaa in Riad, and later the leaders of the European Union, announced steps towards lifting international sanctions on Syria (Al Jazeera 2025a). This step combined with new financial assistance for reconstruction made economic recovery possible. Al-Sharaa and his ministers have continuously emphasized that the lifting of international sanctions is vitally important for Syria's economic recovery. And that means major Western powers continue to have an influence over the transition process through the conditional lifting of sanctions and provision of reconstruction support.

Part II: Actor Mapping in post-Assad Syria

This section maps the major actors in Syria since December 2024. Starting with the new ruling elite around the HTS, the mapping highlights the importance and positions of different Kurdish groups, as well as the Alawites and their political positions, plus the Druze community. The roles of other communities such as the Assyrians, the Turkmens and the Yazidis are also examined. The actor-mapping finishes with a discussion on the role of Syrian civil society.

Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

6. The New Elites in Charge – Understanding HTS

History (until December 2024)

HTS was founded initially in 2011 as Jabhat an-Nusra li-ahl asch-Scham min mujahidin asch-Scham fi sabat al-jihad ("Front to support the people of Syria from the Syrian mujahideen in the arenas of jihad"), which later became known by its short form: Al-Nusra front. The front was founded by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (real name: Ahmed Al-Sharaa), a Syrian who had joined Iraqi jihadist groups in 2004 (Lister 2016). The group was founded as a military Islamist organization, designed to support the uprising against President Assad, and help establish the Islamic State in the Levante, under the command of the Islamic State's leadership in Iraq.

However, throughout 2012, increased friction between the Islamic leadership in Iraq and al-Jolani became visible, with al-Jolani increasingly influenced by al-Qaida leader Aiman al-Zawahiri. The break between al-Jolani and the Islamic State occurred officially in 2013, when his group announced support for al-Zawahiri (Al-Tamimi 2013). The Nusra Front officially cut ties with Al-Qaida in 2017, shortly after the renaming of the group to HTS (after a merger with other Islamist groups) and announcing the Salvation government in the city of Idlib (Steinberg 2025).

HTS was able to establish governance structures in Idlib, to some extent cooperate with international donor agencies and NGOs, and enforce basic rules on taxation, schooling, health care and local development. However, it is important to mention that all of this was only possible because of Türkiye's protection of the group's territory from joint Russian-Assad-troops attacks (Heller 2017). This protection by Türkiye allowed HTS also to recruit and train additional fighters, so that it had between 25,000 and 30,000 troops by the time it attacked Aleppo in November 2024, subsequently taking Damascus and other major cities (Steinberg 2025).[4]

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

HTS was not founded as a traditional political party, or even political / non-governmental actor, but was created as an Islamist, fundamentalist armed group. Its current organizational structure therefore continues to reflect this original traction – it is "highly centralized," with a small circle around President Ahmed Al-Sharaa taking all major decisions (Interview with E, April 2025). In addition to Al-Sharaa, the inner circle of HTS consists of between three and five close advisers, including foreign minister Asaad al-Shaibani, as well as former Prime Minister of the Salvation Government in Idlib, and current energy minister Mohammed al-Bashir (Interview with D, April 2025, Interview with E, April 2025).

Observers have highlighted that in addition to the inner circle of the HTS leadership, there are different wings within the group (Ajjoub 2024). Al-Sharaa and his close allies belong to a more moderate Islamist faction, supporting "some liberalism at the social level" (Interview with D, April 2025), and more open to cooperation with Western countries and other groups within Syria. More recently, it was also Al-Sharaa and supporters from his inner circle that have issued some willingness to discuss options for decentralization.[5] However, as pointed out by an international expert on Syria, Al-Sharaa fears a coup, of riots and a revolt—and the country still needs to stabilize. Thus, to consolidate his power, Al-Sharaa needs to work with the more radical Islamist factions within HTS (Interview with F, June 2025). These more radical factions include figures such as Minister of Justice Mazhar al-Wais who was also mentioned by many as the likely successor to Al-Sharaa in the past. The more radical factions within HTS do not constitute a majority, at least not within the leadership of the group, where Al-Sharaa and his allies remain dominant. However, they have the support of many ordinary fighters. In appeasing and dealing with the more Islamist elements within HTS, Al-Sharaa has demonstrated an extraordinary flexibility in terms of ideology and allies.

His group—started off as an offspring of the Islamic State, then switching sides to Al-Qaida, before distancing itself from them in the wake of taking over government responsibility in Idlib (Alterman 2025). In Idlib, HTS has been accused both of crimes against civilians such as physical torture, and arrests of those accused of supporting the former regime (Bakkour and Stansfield 2025). HTS also has been critiqued for its treatment of non-Sunni Arab religious and ethnic groups (USCIRF 2022).

There are no women amongst the HTS leadership, and there were none in the first caretaker government. As of August 2025, there is only one woman in the Syrian transitional government: an independent candidate from the Arab Christian community and Minister for Labour and Social Affairs. There were also no women amongst the HTS' fighters. While HTS did not implement a radical Islamic legal framework in Idlib, it did insist on the separation of men and women and boys and girls in schools and higher education facilities (Steinberg 2025). In January 2024, a report by the Syrians for Truth and Justice (2024) reporter network highlighted how HTS limits the political space and freedom of women's

organizations in its territory. The report explained that this limitation prevented women from establishing an open presence and engaging in political work.

HTS' focus on a centralized system is strongly visible in the Constitutional Declaration, first published in March 2025, and which, according to the International Crisis Group, demonstrates Al-Sharaa's "perceived drive to monopolise power" (ICG 2025c).[6] The draft does not mention any form of decentralization, federalism or local governance. In addition, Article 7 explicitly focuses on territorial integrity as a key task of the state in combination with combatting any secessionist and disintegrationist tendencies. This monopolization of power has also been highlighted in our interviews. One interviewee argued that "neither the Christian nor the Kurdish, nor the other religious minorities play any role in the transitional process or played a role in the development of the constitutional declaration" (Interview with R, 2025). The Declaration does not only highlight the unitary character of the state (Article 1), but also sticks to the name Syrian Arab Republic, thereby continuing decades of Arab nationalist dominance in its choice of a name. The official language, according to Article 4, remains Arabic, further manifesting the focus on one identity. Article 3 states that the President must be a Muslim, thereby excluding Christians, Druze and Yazidis, amongst others, from the highest office of the state. The exclusion of certain groups, and the limited focus on fundamental human rights have also raised concerns of organizations like Human Rights Watch (2025). In addition, the Constitutional Declaration also monopolizes powers in the hands of the President. He appoints a third of the members of the parliamentary assembly and puts in place the electoral colleges which elect the other two thirds of the members (Article 24). Moreover, he appoints his Vice-Presidents and other ministers (Article 31) and is Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Syria (Article 32). Article 36 allows the President to rule by decree, and Article 41 gives him the power to declare war, and to announce a national emergency in coordination with the National Security Council, which he also appoints. Article 47 states that the members of the Constitutional Court are appointed by the President.

There are no articles on any limitations of powers of the President, no term limits or instructions on how he could be held accountable or removed. The word "democracy" is nowhere to be found in the Constitutional Declaration, and the provisions on women's rights do not ensure the equality of men and women. Instead, these rights simply describe the role of women in society and their rights to education and work (Article 21). Some of our interviewees praised the Constitutional Declaration for its break with Arab nationalism and recognition of Syria's cultural diversity (Article 7.3) (Interview with D, April 2025, Interview with E, April 2025). Others referred to the Constitutional Declaration as a framework for a new dictatorship. A leading civil society activist working on democracy and inclusion said "a new dictatorship in Syria, which is (…) based on religious leadership [is being established]" (Interview with C, April 2025).

Likewise, a Druze human rights activist pointed out that HTS continues to take all major decisions without any consultation and there is no inclusion in the political process (Interview with I, April 2025). An Assyrian lawyer argued that the current system "drives Syria towards Sharia law with a radical religious dictatorship and religious characteristics" (Interview with R, 2025). In a discussion with leading members of the PYD in Qamishli, they made clear that in their eyes the Constitutional Declaration cannot be a ground for cooperation between them and HTS, also voiding previously established agreements. Moreover, they pointed to how the Constitutional Declaration neither provides a framework for the democratization of the country, nor allows for a transition to inclusive governance (Focus Group 1, September 2025).

Current role in post-Assad transition Syria

There was general agreement among most of our interviewees that HTS stands for a unitary and centralized political system, in which the political space for other actors is limited. It was also pointed out that HTS uses the tactic of divide and conquer. This has been described as "al Sharaa and his close associates keep a firm hand in all strategic matters, while seeking to incorporate others as subordinates to help consolidate the government's hold on the country and secure broader public legitimacy" (ICG 2025b). A similar point was made by a leading member of the former Syrian opposition, who pointed out that Al-Sharaa continues the Assad tradition of picking minority representatives that do not represent their groups or any political parties, while at the same time "groups are not allowed to organize political meetings" (Interview with H, April 2025). He also pointed out that many former opposition supporters now joined HTS, which has resulted in a substantial weakening of the opposition groupings. Since taking over from the Assad regime, HTS has appointed two governments—the initial caretaker government in December 2024 was only filled with HTS members. The current transitional government is more inclusive, but "the new authorities are highly centralized in their approach, [and] highly suspicious of civil society" (Interview with E, April 2025). Indeed, the same interviewee pointed out that HTS continues to control major ministries such as defence and finance and is keen on keeping a control on financial flows and security provisions. Several interviewees pointed out, that they are actively preventing political parties from forming, meeting and discussing (Interview with H, June 2025, Interview with D, April 2025, Interview with C, April 2025).

As P, an Alawite activist argued (April 2025),

> *they [HTS] dissolved all political parties, which was a historical mistake. […] There are no functioning trade unions, no functioning political parties, no functioning institutions, and even leading and well-known politicians and intellectuals were excluded. How and why? The participation of people is key [for the transition], but how can they participate?"*

While Al-Sharaa's agreements with Kurdish and Druze leaders in March and May 2025 were seen as a willingness to build common ground and promote a more inclusive process. However, the violence against the Alawites in March 2025, and the Druze community in July 2025 have raised important questions about his commitment to an inclusive peace process and his willingness to open the political space. HTS' ability to rule the country, reunite the different military forces and re-integrate different territories has seen further blows, when Kurdish and Assyrian leaders openly criticized the Constitutional Declaration, demanding a more inclusive process with participation of all of Syria's components.[7] Moreover, Al-Sharaa and HTS elites have been highly critical of the Kurdish-Kurdish unity agreement on federalism (see below) in response to the Constitutional Declaration, announcing that this is a breach of the HTS-SDF agreement of March 2025.

HTS elites have furthermore condemned attempts by Kurdish authorities to coordinate with Alawite and Druze leaders in their request for a more inclusive transitional arrangement and a new Constitutional Declaration, which includes the voices of all components of Syria. In response to these attempts by Kurdish elites to build coalitions among different groups (see below), HTS most recently cancelled a meeting with the SDF in Paris on the implementation of the HTS-SDF agreement from March 2025 (Rudaw 2025a).

Most recently, there has been a re-rapprochement by Al-Sharaa towards the Kurds, when he pointed out in an interview that decentralization might be an option. Arguing that "federalism is the way to division, the solution is decentralization." This is the first time, Al-Sharaa and HTS have opened the door to discussions on territorial power-sharing (Rudaw 2025e). This new focus on decentralization was supported in informal discussions with HTS advisers and members in Damascus in September 2025. Whilst there is a deep hostility towards federalism, which is seen as a first step toward separatism), there is a growing recognition that both the reconstruction of the country and the accommodation of Syria's diversity require decentralized approaches. Issues that were raised by HTS representatives included a focus on local decision-making on questions related to reconstruction and re-building, as well as local

and regional elections of representatives. There is also no support for any form of ethnic federalism or decentralized structures based on ethnic criteria, as this is seen as leading potentially to new discrimination on the one side, and paving the way to separatism on the other.

Political Preferences and Vision for Future Syria

In addition to HTS' ambition to limit political inclusion and avoid any political discussions amongst political parties that they see as potential rivals, their vision for the future of Syria is very much centred on three main issues.

- First, a unitary system that is centralized and where power is concentrated in the hands of the elites in Damascus, though most recently Al-Sharaa has opened the door for discussions on decentralization.

- Second, a Presidential system, in which the President is the main political actor, controlling both the Legislature and the Judiciary.

- Third, a moderately Islamic ideological framework, which first of all will keep non-Muslims out from major state institutions. Secondly, such a framework will also ensure that specific societal norms, such as the separation of men and women, elements of Sharia law, and the mixture of Sunni Islam and Arab nationalism remain dominant ideological frameworks in post-Assad Syria.

HTS's current ideology has been described as moderate Islamism and compared to the AKP of President Erdogan in Türkiye (Interview with F, June 2025). Another interviewee, who has worked closely with HTS elites, described their ideological framework as that of MBS (referring to Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman). This would allow freedom at a societal level and would focus on "economic development [while at the same time] close[ing] politics, so no participation, no political parties, no democracy, no representative bodies whatsoever" (Interview with D, May 2025). They argued that if HTS is unable to employ a unitary centralized model such as that of Saudi Arabia, Al-Sharaa and his allies would be happy with a system resembling that in the United Arab Emirates, which means "we find a leader for the Kurds. We find a leader for the Druze. [...], and we install some sort of small entities here and there and they become the Emirs of the Emirates...." (Interview with D, May 2025). There is, as of August 2025, no clear ideological framework identifiable amongst HTS elites. Beyond the three main pillars of future rule mentioned at the beginning of this section, there is little clarity about the vision for how Syria should look

in the future. However, there is a recognizable growing flexibility on the side of the HTS. Al-Sharaa has opened the door to discussions on decentralization with the Kurds and other groups in a recent interview with Kuwait's en-Nahar newspaper (see Rudaw 2025e).

Democracy	• No mentioning of democracy in Constitutional Declaration or in speeches of Al-Sharaa • No willingness to allow or engage with other political parties • No clear roadmap towards elections, no safeguarding of fundamental human rights in Constitutional Declaration • No willingness to respect separation of powers • Strong focus on Executive; Legislative and Judicial power limited and not directly linked to will of the people • Dominant position of President in institutional system
Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Partial inclusion of some representatives in current transitional government • No acknowledgement of formal power-sharing or specific group rights including any quotas or reserved seats • Key decisions taken by a small circle of HTS-leadership • Regular references to Syrian unity and common belonging to Syrian nation
Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• Initially form of territorial autonomy seen as threat to unity of the country, but more recently openness towards discussions on decentralization • Strong anti-secessionist and anti-separatist agenda • Federalism seen as road to secession • Re-establishment of territorial unity and joint administration of the whole territory of Syria as a key objective of HTS leadership

Table 2: Key positions of HTS in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

7. Kurds and the Kurdish Question

History (until December 2024)

An estimated 2 to 2.5 million Kurds in Syria constitute the second largest ethnic group (10-15 percent of the population) next to the Arabs. Traditionally, they are mostly settled in three enclaves along the Syrian-Turkish border: ʿAfrin (Jabal al-Akrad), ʿAyn al-ʿArab (Kobanî), and the area of al-Hasakah province known as the Jazirah.

The demands of the Kurds in Syria for a form of self-government has a long history: Between 1932 and 1939, a coalition of Kurds and Christians demanded that the French Mandatory Power[8] grant the Syrian Jazira a separate administrative status—like that of Latakia, Jabal Druz, and the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The actors of the so-called autonomy movement demanded that French troops remain stationed in the Jazira to guarantee the protection of minorities. They asked for language rights and complained that administrative posts were almost exclusively filled by Arabs from Damascus. They demanded that the ethnic composition of the local population should be considered when filling government positions, including the police (Savelsberg 2021: 9).

Over the years, the conflicts with Damascus remained similar: The first Kurdish political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS), was founded in 1957, as a response to increasing Arab nationalism after the end of the French mandate and Syrian independence in 1946. The KDPS pushed for the recognition of the Kurds as an independent group with cultural rights and criticized the economic underdevelopment of Kurdish regions.

In August 1960, the party leadership of the KDPS was arrested, the party structure dissolved, and within a few days more than 5,000 people had been detained and interrogated. The new provisional constitution of 1961, which transformed the "Syrian Republic" into the "Syrian Arab Republic", made a clear commitment to ethnic homogeneity.

Furthermore, Decree No. 93 of August 23, 1962 enabled the government to conduct an exceptional census in Hasakah province. As a result of the census, which was carried out on October 5, 1962, roughly 120,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and dispossessed. The official explanation for the denaturalization was that the Kurds concerned had illegally infiltrated Syria from Türkiye and Iraq, thereby threatening the "Arab character" of the country. In the 1973 constitution, Arab nationalism became a founding principle. For almost three decades, Kurdish political parties were banned or not admitted, while pro-Kurdish demonstrations and festivals were repressed by the security apparatus (KurdWatch 2009: 11–15).

The hope for change under Bashar al-Assad was short-lived, and the discrimination and exclusion of Kurds from public life continued. In 2004, rioting after a soccer game in al-Qamishli led to days of dissident protests in the Kurdish regions, as well as in Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities with a significant Kurdish population (KurdWatch 2009: 16–19).

When the protests in Syria began in spring 2011, many observers assumed that the Kurds would play a key role in the overthrow of the regime. Although the Kurdish opposition was fragmented into more than a dozen political parties, most of them splits from the KDPS, it was the best-organized part of the Syrian opposition. In October 2011, the Kurdish National Council was founded, it included most of the (then 15) Kurdish parties as well as representatives of various youth groups, women's groups and independent figures. Not included in the KNC was the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK, founded in 2003 (KurdWatch 2013: 1, 5).

The PYD gained significant influence at the onset of the revolution. Between 2012 and 2013, the Syrian government ceded control of large swathes of the areas of Syria populated predominantly by Kurds to the PYD and its militia, the People's Defence Units (YPG). In return, the PYD cracked down on the coordination groups and political parties that were committed to the revolution, especially during its first year. Later, the PYD became increasingly concerned with consolidating its own power. This meant that the parties within the Kurdish National Council would be granted virtually no political freedom. The closure and burning of party offices, the regular arrest of members of the KNC as well as the forced recruitment of young Kurds were common and have caused young people to leave, especially from the regions under PYD rule (Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 8).

In the fight against the Islamic State (IS) between 2015 and 2019, the YPG succeeded, supported by the United States and embedded in the new military alliance "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF), a multi-ethnic militia under Kurdish leadership, to also take over areas with a predominately Arab population such as al-Raqqah.

The regions controlled by the SDF are known under the name Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANEAS) (Wimmer 2024: 2).

The KNC, on the other hand, has gained recognition as a member of the Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC). Moreover, two members of the KNC have sat on the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) since 2018, one of them in the Small Body (the core group responsible for drafting the constitution). However, compared to their percentage of the Syrian population, this presence was small, and the Kurds were clearly underrepresented (Barisch & El Gamal 2021: 8; 16; Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 7–8).

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

When the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was founded in 2011, the number of Kurdish political parties was fifteen – with twelve of them originating from the first Kurdish party, the KDPS of 1957. By 2023, however, we counted more than 60 Kurdish parties (Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 3). The first important reason for this rise is the fact that almost all parties of 2011 have experienced one or more splits. This points to a major challenge to this day, that most Kurdish parties have not managed to establish internal structures that enable the resolution of conflict by means of debate and majority decisions within the party (Cf. Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 6). Another reason for the rapid growth is the foundation of new Kurdish organizations and some umbrella political organizations that include more than Kurdish groups. In December 2015, the PYD established the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) as an alternative party alliance to the KNC. The council perceives its role as that of an umbrella organization for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and as the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The council's member parties are predominantly Kurdish, but also include Arab, Assyrian and Yazidi organizations. Several of the member parties of the SDC were only founded after 2011 (Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 10). A third, even though much smaller umbrella organization is the Syrian Kurdistan Front, unifying several independent parties and CSOs.

What slightly obscures the high number of Syrian-Kurdish parties is the fact that a single party dominates within both the KNC and the SDC: In the KNC, this is the KDP-S, the actual successor party to the KDPS and the sister party of the Iraqi-Kurdish PDK-I. In the SDC, it is the PYD, the Syrian-Kurdish offshoot of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK. The principal difference between the SDC and the KNC refers neither to their goals nor their structures, rather to the fact that the PKK exploits the PYD's hold over the SDC to influence decisions in Syria, while the KDP Iraq uses the KNC for the same purpose. But unlike the KDP Iraq, the PKK has real power and control in the region.

A survey of a total of 28 Kurdish parties in 2023 shows that the overwhelming majority are focused on issues of ethnicity, relating to the specific rights of the Kurdish population and ranging from the recognition of Kurds to language rights. Federalism and decentralization are mentioned as the preferred forms of government. There is no difference in this regard between the parties that belong to the KNC or the SDC, nor do the few independent parties play a special role. The PYD, the strongest party in the SDC, describes in its statutes that democratic self-government in Rojava, another term for the Kurdish region administered by them, should be further developed as the most successful solution to all socio-political issues. This system must be extended to all parts of the country to create a democratic, pluralistic and decentral Syria (Cf. Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 10–13). Indeed, AANES is organized in regional (cantonal) areas that have their own institutions and are formally in charge of local decisions. However, when discussing specific issues with representatives of one of these cantons, it became obvious that central AANES institutions remain powerful and involved in their decisions.

Asked if cantonal authorities take decisions themselves, the answer was "yes we can but we coordinate with AANES and most decisions are taken collectively" (Focus Group 2, September 2025). Moreover, decisions within the AANES institutions and the cantons, as well as locally rooted decision bodies are not based on democratic elections. The PYD and AANES representatives blame instability, the continued challenge of ISIS and Turkish violent resistance against any attempted elections as the major reasons for their inability to organize elections in the last decade (Focus Group 1 and 2, September 2025). However, all major decisions within AANES are taken by a small circle of leading PYD executive committee members. This also became obvious in our focus group interviews, when asked who decides it was pointed out that key decisions are taken within the central AANES institutions. They also confirmed that it must be seen how the ongoing process of PKK dissolution will affect the PYD and the AANES as a whole. The last point raises questions about the accuracy of our interlocutors' statements that there are no organizational links between the PYD and the PKK.[9]

What is striking is that, while Syrian-Kurdish parties claim to uphold a Western code of values (democracy, decentralization/federalism, pluralism), one principle commonly viewed as central to democracies plays only a subordinate role. This principle is women's rights and gender equality. Only five of the 28 parties mention gender equality among their objectives and none of them belongs to the KNC. This translates into a low number of female leaders within the Syrian Kurdish party spectrum: of the 28 parties, only two had a proportion of 53 and 50 percent women respectively in their highest party body. The first belongs to the SDC, while the second is independent. Another five parties at least had a proportion of women above 25 percent, that is, between 31 and 40 percent female leaders (Savelsberg, Kolar & Hajo 2023: 14–15).

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Nevertheless, one of our Kurdish interviewees belonging to the KNC stressed that without women getting their rights, Syria will not turn into a democracy (Interview with A, April 2025). For the PYD, women's rights is an important element of its ideology. Women are involved in the co-leadership of all major AANES and PYD institutions, they are represented in the security services, including as soldiers and officers in the SDF.

However, the dynamics in focus group 2 showed that the proportional representation of women does not necessarily mean that they are on equal footing with men.

To bring together the different Kurdish factions, Kurdish-Kurdish talks were initiated by France and continued by the USA in 2019/2020 (Savelsberg, Kolar, and Hajo 2023:10). However, they were not successful. However, with HTS coming to power and the violence against other components in March and July, the different Kurdish groups approached each other, which is shown by the paper agreed on in April 2025. PYD representatives described the relationship between KNC and PYD as good and the representation of KNC-members in the AANES delegation negotiating with Damascus as one of the remaining difficulties (Focus Group 1, September 2025). Members of the KNC may see the relationship more critically—see the interviews below.

Current role in post-Assad transition Syria

When HTS took control in December 2024, immediately the question about the future of the AANES arose. Just like Bashar Al-Assad, interim president Ahmad Al-Sharaa has so far not included representatives of Kurdish (or other) political parties in his decision-making processes, but only hand-picked Kurdish personalities without any party allegiance or other affiliation. This is true for those invited to the National Dialogue and for the current government—the minister of education is Kurdish—and there was also one Kurd in the committee drafting the Constitutional Declaration. However, neither representative has a strong base amongst the main Kurdish parties, PYD or the KNC.

As discussed above, the Constitutional Declaration's centralization of power contradicts the Kurdish vision for decentralisation and power-sharing—there is no space for any form of self-determination. Moreover, even though Article 7 states that the state guarantees the cultural diversity of Syrian society and all its components as well as the cultural and linguistic rights of all Syrians, Arabic is the only official language in Syria (art. 4) and the name of the country is the Syrian Arab Republic (art. 1). instead of "Syrian Republic" as suggested by many Kurds.

Finally, the Constitutional Declaration states that the most important source of the legislation is Islamic law, that the president must be a Muslim and that the state respects all heavenly religions (art. 3), defined as Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Consequently, the Yezidi is not protected by the constitution – Yezidism being a religion exclusively practiced by Kurds.

One of our interviewees, a Kurdish politician belonging to the KNC, summarized his impression of Ahmed Al-Sharaa and HTS as follows:

> *"Everything is indicating that they are trying to establish a new dictatorship. [...] He believes what he says, but he says something [...] and does something else. And we saw that in the National Dialogue, the conference, and we saw that when he established the new government, and we saw that in the Constitutional Declaration. So, everything is indicating that he is not ready to have any agreement with the other components in Syria" (Interview with A, April 2025).*

As mentioned above, in March 2025 Al-Sharaa signed an agreement with Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the SDF. According to point 1, it guarantees "the right to representation and participation for all Syrians, regardless of their religious and ethnic background, in the political process and all state institutions.". Point 2 defines the Kurdish community as an "indigenous community of the Syrian state, and "the Syrian state guarantees its citizenship rights and all constitutional rights". These two paragraphs have often been quoted to argue that, for the first time, the Kurds have been accepted as citizens equal to their Arab counterparts.

However, point 4 envisions "[t]he integration of all northeastern Syria's civilian and military institutions, including border crossings airports, and oil and natural gas fields, into the management of the Syrian state" (Middle East Forum 2025). This paragraph leaves no space for any kind of Kurdish self-administration and was therefore harshly criticized by other Kurdish groups such as the Syrian Kurdistan Front (SANA News 2025). One of our interviewees, a member of the KNC, stressed that Mazloum Abdi did not have the right to discuss the Kurdish question alone with Al-Sharaa, but that only a delegation including representatives of the KNC could have signed such an agreement, highlighting a high degree of dissatisfaction with the agreement amongst other Kurdish groups (Interview with G, May 2025).

Another interviewee closer to AANES pointed out that the agreement is mainly a declaration of intent and will not result in the integration of AANES under HTS-control, as Kurds do not feel safe and have seen the violence against the Alawite and Druze communities as a warning (Interview with B, June 2025). Our discussion with representatives of the PYD leadership indicated that the contradictions between the Al-Sharaa-Abdi Agreement and the Constitutional Declaration mean that the initial Agreement is seen as invalid and not implementable anymore (Focus Group 1, September 2025). Instead, many Kurdish representatives argue for a new inclusive national dialogue – a key demand raised also in the outcome of the Hasakah News conference discussed below.

Political preferences and vision for future Syria

In February 2020, the Kurdish National Council and the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) agreed on a joint paper on the future of Syria. The key principles are as follows:

"1. Syria is a democratic state. State authority emanates from the people and is exercised for their benefit.

2. Syria is a constitutional state that respects, protects, and upholds the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, and the rule of law. The law is the basis of all state powers. [...]

3. Syria is a decentralized state that distributes power and resources between the central, regional, and local levels. The distribution of responsibilities is based on the principle of participation.

4. Syria recognizes, protects, and promotes the diversity of its population. All national, religious, denominational, and linguistic groups are part of the Syrian identity and are recognized as essential components of Syrian society. All of them, whether small or large, have the right to equal respect and protection of their rights, to the preservation and promotion of their cultural identity, and to equal participation in the affairs of the state.

5. The diversity of the population is appropriately reflected in the name, flag, national anthem, and other symbols of the Syrian state.

6. Syria recognizes, protects, and upholds human rights and minority rights in accordance with international norms and treaties, and bases all its actions on the standards of human dignity and personal freedom" (KNC-ADO paper, February 2, 2020)."

Moreover, Syria is presented as a secular state, with women to hold at least 30% of positions in all institutions at the central, regional, and local levels. Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Turkmen are to be recognized as equal official languages at the central level.

The agreement also stipulates a bicameral parliamentary system, with the second chamber representing the regions. Among other things, this chamber will be responsible for determining and changing the administrative boundaries between the regions with a two-thirds majority. The regions, for their part, recognize the right of all components to local self-government.

One of our interviewees, a member of the KNC, argued for federalism as follows:

"Today, after the new government came to power, the events at the Syrian coast have shown: Alawites are killed because they are Alawites. Today we have seen what happened at the University of Homs: people take the streets against the Druze; Druze students are beaten up. This is why stability and security in Syria can only materialize if the country is federal, if the rights of the nationalities are respected and secured and if the regions are administered by them. [...] Some understand the term federalism as a form of separation, even though the opposite is true. Federalism guarantees unity, secures plurality, fosters cooperation and prevents the return of dictatorships" (Interview with G, May 2025).

The latest, revised version of the PYD Social Contract was adopted in December 2023. It is the fourth revision of the Social Contract for "Northern and Eastern Syria" adopted on January 6, 2014. It had already been modified in February 2016 and July 2018. The document explicitly does not want to be a constitution —partly because the form of coexistence it describes does not want to be a state, but rather a "democracy without a state" (Jongerden and Akkaya 2014) or "democratic confederalism" (Knapp & Jongerden 2014, 88), a concept dating back to Abdullah Öcalan, the founding father of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK.

The preamble names "Kurds, Arabs, Syrian Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis" as those who have joined forces to establish a democratic system in northern and eastern Syria. The second chapter lists fundamental rights—for example, the right to freedom of expression (Article 40), freedom of assembly (Article 42), and freedom of the press (Article 65).

Moreover, women's rights are highlighted in several sections and a quota of 50 percent women in all institutions is guaranteed.

However, as soon as the contract deals with social order, it becomes clear that the system does not meet minimum democratic standards. The social system is essentially based on "councils." In villages, neighbourhoods, towns, cities, districts, and in the region (cantons) of northern and eastern Syria, "people's councils" are formed (Article 77). The principle of their "election" is always the same, as set out in Article 78: Sixty percent of the representatives are elected directly by the people, and forty percent by organized social institutions and ethnic and religious groups in a "transparent and democratic" manner.

It remains unclear which institutions are involved and how the ethnic and religious groups appoint their representatives. It also remains unclear what powers the individual councils have (see, for example, Article 80). Since the councils have no budget, they are ultimately powerless—which also explains the low level of participation at the local level (Wimmer 2024: 15). The social contract is thus characterized by a high degree of political decentralization, which is not complemented with the same degree of fiscal decentralization.

In addition, no elections have been held in the AANES region to date—here, too, democratic standards are being flagrantly violated. Article 120 states about the relationship with Damascus that "Within the Syrian Democratic Republic, the form of the relationship between the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria with the center and other regions is determined at all levels according to a consensual democratic constitution." However, beyond these commitments, there is no further detail on the relationship with the regions and the Syrian state. While in theory AANES is committed to language rights of different groups, including Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians, there have been practical challenges in ensuring these. For example, AANES authorities enforced a new school curriculum in its region, which was not recognized in other parts of Syria, limiting access to Arab-speaking government-run schools for specific groups (North Press Agency 2025a).

Despite the rivalries between KNC and SDC, on April 26, 2025, almost all Syrian Kurdish political parties— member parties of SDC and KNC as well as the majority of independent parties – gathered in Qamishli and agreed on several principles regarding the future of the Syrian state and the Kurdish region. Their agreement states that Syria is a multinational, multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious state and that its constitution must guarantee the right of all Syrian components, including Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, Tscherkess, Turkmen, as well as Alawis, Druze, Yazidi and Christians. It demands a decentralised state, and an administratively and politically unified Kurdish region as part of a federal Syria (North Press Agency 2025).

The Syrian as well as the Turkish governments sharply rejected the Kurdish vision for Syria (Enab Baladi 2025; Reuters 2025). However, this rejection is not the only challenge. One interviewee, who is a leading member of the KNC, was not very optimistic regarding the agreement between the PYD and the KNC (at the time of the interview the common declaration had not been made public). He feared that the PYD may engage in clandestine negotiations with Damascus, not including the KNC. There is not much trust between these two major Kurdish groups, and asked whether there are any institutions established in the region under control of the AANES that could serve as a good example for all of Syria, our interviewee from the KNC said that, "the PYD established a new dictatorship in the area" (Interview with A, April 2025). Indeed, Salih Muslim, a member of the Presidency of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), already questioned the agreement at the Joint Kurdish conference. According to a press statement of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, he criticized federalism during the conference of the Social Democratic Alliance of the Arab World in Sulaymaniyah and called for "democratic decentralization" and a "democratic nation", contradicting the provisions of the Joint Kurdish Conference document, which explicitly called for the unification of the Kurdish regions as an integrated political and administrative unit within the framework of a federal Syria (SAK 2025).

In early August 2025, AANES organized a first conference with more than 400 participants, including representatives of the Alawite and Druze community in Hassakah. The meeting was designed to push the HTS authorities to agree on a new Constitutional Declaration—based on a new, more inclusive National Dialogue process, which would recognize and protect the rights of different Syrian groups (Rudaw 2025b). The conference was again sharply criticized by the HTS authorities, though more recently Al-Sharaa has opened the door to discussions on decentralization (but not federalism) with the Kurds in particular.

Democracy	- Commitment to an inclusive democracy that would ensure representation of diverse groups within Syria - Commitment to separation of powers (KNC constitutional draft for Kurdish Region, PYD Social Contract Charter) - But no internal party democracy - No full commitment to fundamental and human rights - SDC has not organized any elections in AANES

Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Strong commitment to power-sharing and group representation in future Syrian government (see joint SDC-KNC declaration) • Demands for specific group rights and group representation, including reserved seats (KNC Constitutional Draft) • Focus on culture, language and religion as specific rights • Veto-rights for groups on specific issues related to identity (see KNC Constitutional Draft for Kurdish Region, PYD Social Contract Charter) • Representation of different groups in public administration and the security services (KNC Constitutional Draft, Focus Group 1 and 2)
Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• Commitment to bicameral central parliament in which territorial units / groups would be represented in second chamber (see KNC Constitutional Draft for Kurdish Region) • Commitment to federalism and territorial autonomy including the right of the Kurds to establish / keep their own region • Theoretical commitment to group rights within each territorial unit for members of the non-dominant groups (mentioned both in the KNC draft and the PYD Social Contract Charter)

Table 3: Key positions of major Kurdish parties in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

8. The Druze and Self-Governance in the South

History (until December 2024)

The Druze are a religious minority that emerged in the 11th century. Today, there are roughly one million Druze worldwide, with approximately 700,000 residing in Syria, where they make up about 3% of the population (Deutschlandfunk 2025). Many Sunnis, especially Islamist groups such as HTS consider them deviants from true Islam. However, many Druze have previously supported Syrian Arab nationalism, which also explains why many Druze were in support of the previous regime of the Baath Party.

After the invasion of French troops into Damascus in July 1920, France established a decentralized administration and created five different units: Damascus, Aleppo, Jabal Druz, Latakia and Lebanon. The emerging Syrian or Arab nationalism was to be curbed by the creation of autonomously administered areas dominated by ethnic or religious minorities. During the mandate period, both the exact boundaries of these different states and their competencies changed. However, the Druze uprising of 1925 marked the beginning of a Syrian nationalist revolt against the mandate power that encompassed large parts of Syria, highlighting France's inability to separate the Druze from the rising Arab nationalist movement (Savelsberg 2021: 147–155).

Although the 2011 revolution began in Daraa in southern Syria, this did not lead to the majority of Druze joining the rebels. In particular, the increasing radical Islamization of the opposition led many Druze to remain loyal to the regime. The Druze's fear of jihadist Islam was confirmed in June 2015 when dozens of Druze were killed in a village near Idlib by members of the Al-Nusra Front, the predecessor of the current HTS. This did not lead to open rebellion; however, some of the Druze preferred to join the Rijal al-Karama militia founded by Sheikh Wahid al-Balous to defend the Druze community rather than continue to serve in the Syrian army. In December 2024, the Druze welcomed the fall of the regime, but without showing much support for Ahmed Al-Sharaa. They did not allow the new government's troops to gather in their settlement areas, nor were they willing to surrender their weapons (Hazran 2025: 27–28). Instead, they continued to insist on their self-administration and self-governance, which they already established after 2021 in the wake of increased militarization in the Druze community and increased distancing from the Assad regime (ICG 2025b). Druze identity and nationalism has been substantially strengthened first by the events of the war in Syria, and more recently by the violence inflicted on them by Sunni Arab Bedouin militias and government troops under the command of the HTS.

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

Unlike the Kurdish community, the Druze community is not organized into political parties. Instead, there are various religious authorities or sheikhs who represent different political positions. The best known among them at present is Sheikh Hikmat Al-Hijri. Born in 1965 in Venezuela, he returned to Syria as a teenager and earned a law degree from Damascus University. With the sudden death of his older brother he became, in 2012, the highest spiritual authority in Druze tradition. Until 2021, he supported Assad and his regime. His break with the former government came in 2021, after a personal conflict that turned into a political one. When his followers took to the streets of Suweyda, the regime cracked down with force. Al-Hijri subsequently openly accused the regime of extremism and compared its military operations to the brutality of ISIS (Baku Network 2025).

It is not surprising that Ahmed Al-Sharaa's jihadist past caused reservations within the Druze community. These were reinforced in April 2025 when a voice message insulting the Prophet Muhammad, allegedly originating from the Druze community, led to protests and calls for the eradication of the Druze community (BBC Monitoring 2025). On July 13, 2025, tensions between Druze factions and Bedouin tribal fighters erose, following a kidnapping incident of a Druze on the Damascus-Suweyda highway. The Syrian government deployed military forces and allied militias to Suweyda, who intensified the violence by committing summary executions and torture of Druze civilians.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported 558 deaths and 1,341 casualties overall, including civilians, medical staff and journalists (The Syrian Observer, 2025). On July 16, Israeli airstrikes targeted Syrian military command centres in Damascus. At a 24 July meeting in Paris between the Syrian foreign minister Asaad al-Shaibani and an Israeli delegation, hosted by France and mediated by the US, the Israelis forced Damascus into making significant concessions. The result was the withdrawal of government forces from Suweyda, effectively ceding local government to a self-appointed council of Druze leaders, reestablishing the de facto autonomy that existed before (Syria in Transition 2025).

Already in May 2025, Sheikh al-Hijri had given an interview in the Washington Post, stating that Israel was not the enemy of the Druze (Washington Post, 2025), after the Israeli government openly announced that it will act as an ally and protecter of Druze interests in Syria. Not everyone rallied behind al-Hijri's new direction. Other Druze clerics like Sheikh Hamoud al-Hanawi and Sheikh al-Jarbu issued counter-statements that emphasized "national unity" and rejecting what they described as sectarian adventurism. The Council of Elders of the Unitarian Druze community released a statement reaffirming its commitment to Syria's territorial integrity (Baku Network 2025). However, the massacres of July 2025 clearly strengthen those arguing for autonomy among the Druze. They also demonstrated growing tensions within the Druze community, with some religious leaders more willing to come to an agreement with Al-Sharaa, while military commanders praised Israeli support and rejected any concessions to HTS and the new government (ICG 2025b).

Current Role in post-Assad Transition Syria

Unlike the Kurds, the Druze do not look back on a history in which demands for autonomy have regularly arisen. Rather, it was the violence perpetrated against them during the war and since the regime change, and the transitional government's inability or unwillingness to protect them effectively, that led to such demands gaining popularity almost overnight. The Kurds are no longer the only group in Syria promoting some form of self-determination. On the one hand, this strengthens their demand—even if the Druze component is very small at 3 percent. On the other hand, the Druze have not yet had time to develop concrete ideas on how the autonomy or self-determination they demand could be achieved. Unlike the KNC or the PYD, they have not yet been able to develop concrete concepts. In addition, the Druze do not have political parties that could represent their demands to the outside world. Their interests are currently represented primarily by religious leaders. It is unclear to what extent these leaders can represent the positions of young, more secular people and the positions of women.

Given this organizational weakness, it is difficult to predict the extent to which the Druze component can strengthen the demands of those groups calling for a more inclusive government or decentralized and federal structures.

Political Preferences and Vision for Future Syria

On August 16, 2025, hundreds of people demonstrated in Suweyda to demand the right to self-determination for the Druze community. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the protesters expressed their rejection of the interim central government in Damascus and demanded that those responsible for atrocities against Druze be brought to justice. Moreover, some of the protesters waved Israeli flags and called on Israel to support their demands (AP2025).

On the one hand, this protest is the largest Druze demonstration ever to demand self-administration. On the other hand, there are no concrete concepts yet as to what exactly this self-determination would mean, and different participants of the demonstrations voiced different visions, also including secession and independence.

Sheikh al-Hijri, who participated in the two-day conference organized by AANES in early August in Hassakah, issued in a statement the more conciliatory position that "diversity is not a threat, but a treasure strengthening unity" (Kurdistan 24: 2025). On August 27, however, Fadi Badiriye, another Druze Sheikh, told Rudaw, that the Druze want "independence" (Rudaw: 2025c).

This position did not correspond with that of our interview partners who were, however, interviewed before the massacres in Suweyda in July 2025. A Druze journalist explained that the Druze community had hoped that after the fall of the regime, a constitutional state would emerge, "a state of citizenship, justice, and equality." However, those with this hope have so far been disappointed. The interviewee emphasized that a decentralized system of government would both adequately represent the various communities and enable a fair distribution of resources.

Some regions of Syria are very rich, others poor—this could be balanced out through decentralization. The Druze journalist cited both administrative and political decentralization as goals and proposed a bicameral system. He justified this by saying that power could not be allocated solely by the majority principle. He also advocated the separation of powers and a parliamentary system, with the president being directly elected. A constitution must be drafted by experts with the involvement of all sections of the population and then confirmed by referendum.

It is important to achieve a high approval rating – it is not enough to look at the majority of votes alone; the voices of minorities must also be considered. Moreover, there must be binding quotas for women and young people in all institutions. At the same time, he spoke out clearly against minority rights—in a constitutional state, everyone must be equal before the law (Interview with K, April 2025).

Our second Druze interview partner, a female lawyer, emphasized that the Syria of the future must be a state governed by these principles: "the rule of law, a civil state that recognizes the principle of human rights and all international agreements and treaties as fundamental sources of law in order to guarantee the equality of all citizens without discrimination."

She further argued for decentralisation as "one of the solutions for Syria". However, she rather focused on the local than on the regional level:

> *"It is the local level that is capable of solving these problems and issues. Decentralization is crucial in Syria—and I am talking about administrative decentralization here. There must be a strong central state, as well as strong local structures, so that the local levels can administer their regions independently and the centre can support them in this process without controlling them. [...] When we talk about decentralization, we mean strengthening local levels, because they know their own circumstances and needs best at the administrative and service level."*

At the same time, she strongly argued against the separation of certain regions:

> *"In addition, there are actors today who do not have Syria's best interests at heart. These include those who call for the separation of certain regions, those who advocate foreign intervention, and those who welcome the presence of Israeli or other external forces in Syria. These actors are a threat to the transition process because they cause division in society, create misunderstandings, and show the world that Syrians are not united among themselves on the political transition process."*

Furthermore, and even though she understood decentralization as an instrument to preserve the cultural heritage of each region within state institutions, she argued for only one official language in Syria – Arabic. However, other languages should also be taught at school:

> *"Today, for example, English is taught, and in the past, Russian was also taught. Similarly, the languages of other communities, such as Kurdish or Syriac/Assyrian, should be taught not only in certain regions, but also in other parts of the country" (Interview with I, April 2025).*

As her Druze counterpart, she clearly argued against minority rights and even against thinking in categories as minority/majority.

Moreover, she argued for a parliamentary system, as parliament was able to monitor and ensure accountability, thus offering greater control and transparency, and for a strict separation of powers, missing in the constitutional declaration of Al-Sharaa. Regarding the drafting of the constitution, she criticized that it was still unclear whether this should be done by a committee, a panel, or through a referendum. Once there was a draft constitution, this should be put to a referendum, with a minimum approval of two-thirds or three-quarters. As women and young people represent more than 50% of the Syrian people, she argued that this proportion should be involved in the decision-making process at all levels, not only during the transition process in Syria.

While there is clearly some divergence on political preferences within the Druze community, not least in terms of relations with Damascus and Israel, several important commonalities are emerging. These include a focus on decentralized and strong local governance, as well as a more inclusive political process and governmental structures, which represent the different components of Syria. At the same time, it is clear to see that the violence against the Druze in Suweyda has led to a radicalization of positions.

Democracy	• Commitment to an inclusive democracy that would ensure representation of all people within Syria, but no clear expression of group right preferences • No established political parties, leadership through religious and military leaders • Focus on human rights, contradicting preferences on group rights, though generally support for language and cultural rights for all components. • Strong support for parliamentary system and against centralization of powers – emphasis on checks and balances
Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Strong commitment to power-sharing and more inclusive transition in Syria (see Hassakah discussions) • Some demands for specific group rights and group representation, reserved seats, including for women and young people, though not all leaders and interviewees supported specific group rights • Focus on culture, language and religion as specific rights after July 2025 massacre
Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• Commitment to decentralization and local governance • Commitment to bicameral central parliament • Individual requests for independence

Table 4: Key positions of major Druze community in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

9. The Big Losers? The Alawites

History (until December 2024)

The Alawites are a religious minority within Shiite Islam, making up about 12 percent of the Syrian population. They live mainly along the coast (in the provinces of Latakia and Tartus, but also in Homs and Hama (Haran 2025: 26).

As noted above, Latakia was one of the states established by France in 1920. Unlike the Druze, the Alawites showed interest in French support. In Latakia, France was able to win over the Alawite elite living in the cities, strengthening their position against the Sunni landowners, who were closely associated with the nationalists in Damascus and other cities. The fact that Syrian nationalists were unable to build up a real following in Latakia until the mid-1920s became apparent in early 1926: While in the cities of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs the boycott against the elections organized by the French was successfully carried out, voter turnout in the Alawite state was seventy-seven percent. Furthermore, in 1926, the newly elected Representative Council of the Alawites declared its intention to maintain the independence of the Alawite state (Savelsberg 2021: 151–152).

With the coup by the Baath Party in 1963, or at the latest with Hafiz al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970, Alawites were primary used as a recruitment base for the regime, which staffed much of its military, intelligence and security apparatus with its members. However, the disproportionate presence of Alawites in these areas does not mean that an Alawite minority ruled over a Sunni majority. Sunnis were not fundamentally excluded from the Baath regime, nor were disproportionate amounts of resources directed to the Alawite regions (Hazran 2025: 26).

Many Alawites joined regime forces after the start of the revolution, mainly out of fear for their own position, and indeed existence in a Syria that would be controlled by Sunni Arabs.

To this day, many Alawites fear being left out of the country's new political and economic dispensation (ICG 2025d). As indicated by one of our interviewees who is a member of the Alawite community, while the fear of oppression, and indeed extermination is very real within the community, there is a misconception in Syria and externally – namely to confuse the Assad regime with Alawite rule. Many Alawites, he argued, were against Assad, and the Alawite community was disproportionately represented amongst Syrian political prisoners (Interview with L, July 2025).

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

Unlike the Kurds, and similarly to the Druze, the Alawites have so far lacked political parties, civil society organizations or other forms of political clubs to voice their demands. Until very recently, even the foundation of a humanitarian NGO serving the Alawi population was perceived as dangerous: One of our interview partners reported that in 2023, he and some friends had considered founding an Alawi NGO, as they realized, that almost none of the earthquake aid was flowing into the Alawite areas. Often NGOs were arguing that cooperation with the regime was undesirable. Ultimately, they decided against founding an Alawi NGO for fear that the Assad regime might find out and hold family members in Syria accountable (Interview with L, July 2025).

However, on the 6th of March 2025 pro-regime paramilitary groups began launching attacks against the newly formed security forces in towns along the Mediterranean coast. Backing the new government, counter attacks by security forces and other armed fractions led to about 1,400 killings, most of them Alawi civilians (UN 2025). These massacres of Alawite civilians led to a debate about how Alawites could organize themselves to defend their interests.

One response was the so-called Mannheim Conference, which brought together over 100 expatriate academics and activists originally from Syrian regions affected by recent massacres, in addition to several Alawite Syrian associations, unions, and organizations from across Europe and the United States. The conference's concluding statement had all participants pledge "To exhaust all means – through coordination, documentation, and advocacy – to secure justice, end killings, and punish perpetrators," calling "to adopt positions consistent with international laws and human rights charters and take all necessary measures, whether related to investigation, follow-up, and monitoring, or to emergency relief, aid, and rehabilitation of affected areas" (Al Mayadeen 2025).

A second response to the violence was, at the end of August 2025, the foundation of the Political Council of Central and Western Syria (PCCWS). PCCWS is meant to include representatives from Latakia, Tartous, and the west-central provinces of Hama and Homs. Its goal is, according to Rudaw, quoting the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), "to build a 'civil and secular model' of governance and establish frameworks for executive, legislative, and judicial authority, while ensuring the political inclusion of all societal components" (Rudaw 2025d). PCCWS is the first explicitly political Alawi organization.

A third consequence could be rearmament and the establishment of separate Alawi troops – similar to Druze and Kurdish/SDF units, possibly with the support of Iran. Two of our Alawite interviewees mentioned that it had been a mistake for the Alawi community to surrender their weapons, as this had led to the massacres. However, O emphasized that, in his view, there were no ambitions to rearm. Instead, the Alawis would expect a solution based on autonomy and self-governance, similar to that in Suweyda or the Kurdish areas as they would no longer have any confidence in the government. P expressed the opinion that Alawites, Druze, and Kurds should form a joint force against the government (Interview with O, May 2025, Interview with P, April 2025).

Current Role in post-Assad Transition Syria

So far, the Alawi community has not played a significant role in Syria in the post-Assad period. The massacres of March 2025 intimidated many Alawites—they were already extremely cautious when it came to political engagement, and this tendency has only intensified. However, the founding of the first Alawite party could indicate that a change is looming, and that the Alawite community is beginning to publicly articulate specific group interests. This, again, may strengthen similar requests of the Kurds and Druze.

Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

Political Preferences and Vision for Future Syria

Our Alawite interviewees agreed in that they expressed little confidence in the transitional government. While one interviewee criticized the new government for copying the Assad regime and "establishing a new dictatorship" (Interview with L, July 2025), another explained that "it is contrary to the nature of the regime to allow participation and to include all ethnic and religious groups in the process" (Interview with O, May 2025). Both described the establishment of the rule of law and a focus on human and women's rights as central to the future of Syria. L mentioned additionally the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

Moreover, he stated that the ideal state would guarantee freedom of expression, democracy, religious freedom, and freedom of lifestyle. Women should be free to decide "whether to wear a niqab or shorts, and the state must protect both approaches." Currently, communication between the individual components is particularly important – "people know far too little about each other" (Interview with L, July 2025), while O pointed out that fundamental human rights cannot be subject to majority opinion:

> *"We can take the majority opinion into account in the detailed articles [of the constitution], provided that it does not cross the red lines of human rights" (Interview with O, May 2025).*

All emphasized that it is important for these rights to be implemented and not to just exist on paper. A democratic state, the separation of state and religion, and the separation of powers were important to all interviewees. According to L, the ideal Syrian state would be neutral regarding religion and ethnicity, while O elaborated:

> *"As for the religious identity of the head of state, I would like to ask a question: If the constitution does not stipulate that the head of state must be a Muslim, but the majority of the Syrian population is Muslim, is it not only natural that a Muslim president be elected? Why then should this characteristic be stipulated? The demand to include this characteristic in the constitution has only one purpose: to exclude other parts of society – an unjustified insult. Personally, I have no objection to the president being Christian, Jewish, or even non-religious, as long as he or she is elected in fair elections" (Interview with O, May 2025).*

P supported this vision and described the constitutional provision that the president must be Muslim as wrong and misguided (Interview with P, April 2025).

Moreover, L and O argued that the name "Syrian Republic" is preferable to "Syrian Arab Republic":

> *"What is the problem with calling it the Syrian Republic instead of the Syrian Arab Republic? Syria encompasses everyone: Arabs, Kurds, Suryoye, and others. So what is wrong with the name of the country reflecting this diversity?" (Interview with O, May 2025)*

All three interview partners asked for the inclusion of different Syrian components in the constitutional process and in institutions. L argued that "all ethnic and religious groups, men and women, people of different sexual orientations, especially young people, must also be involved in the constitutional process in order to achieve a stable solution" (Interview with L, July 2025). O argued that Syrian diversity must be reflected in Syrian institutions, but, alongside P, explicitly opposed quota systems:

> *"Personally, I have no problem with the mayor of my village being Kurdish, as long as he is qualified for the position. His background is irrelevant to me as long as he is qualified. I would prefer a competent mayor, even if he comes from a different family, rather than my unqualified cousin" (Interview with O, May 2025).*

The most significant difference between the interviewees was their attitude toward different forms of decentralisation:

For L, federalism was "part of the solution" because in federalism "all identities are involved in decisions." Federalism ensures that "traditions are not lost, such as the Assyrian language, because it is not decided by a single person in Damascus" (Interview with L, July 2025).

According to him, the Alawites also have an interest in presenting themselves as a separate group, as they too have ancient festivals and customs that they were not allowed to practice under Assad. Federalism "is not a step toward separation but contributes to people's well-being and ensures that they have no reason to secede" (Interview with L, July 2025). O, on the other hand, argued for administrative decentralisation instead of political decentralisation:

> *"Yes, administrative decentralization can be very successful in Syria, but only if the constitutional text governing the country is clear and unambiguous. It must be based primarily on the concept of equal rights for citizens and the separation of powers. Without a constitutional text that embodies these principles, administrative decentralization remains nothing more than empty rhetoric. As for political decentralization, I believe that it will lead to an actual division of Syria in the future" (Interview with O, May 2025).*

P, finally, spoke out in favour of federalism, but seemed to understand this to mean a kind of municipal self-governance (Interview with P, April 2025).

O and P both preferred a parliamentary system to a presidential system. While P generally considered the position of president to be superfluous, P argued that a presidential system would only be acceptable if the president's term of office were limited to two legislative periods and if he also had very limited powers. They all emphasized that parliament must represent the people. P pointed to the importance of political parties:

> *"Political participation should involve the participation of multiple parties in political decision-making. The most important step is to create a parliament that represents the people, not a parliament of 100 people chosen by the president. This is an unprecedented occurrence in human history and laughable: the president is the one who selects the members of the House of Representatives. I have never heard of such a thing in my life. […] There must be a parliament made up of parties. The role of institutions and trade unions must be reactivated" (Interview with P, April 2025).*

As far as communication between the various components as requested by L is concerned, this process has already begun. In addition to Kurds, Druze, and Assyrians, Alawites also participated in the conference in Hassakah—it was the first time that their representatives were included in such a gathering of different Syrian components. In a video message, Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal, head of the Religious Council of the Supreme Alawite Islamic Council, expressed strong support for the conference's goals and emphasized the importance of unity in addressing shared challenges (Syriac Press 2025a, 2025b), thereby highlighting the Alawites' focus on inclusive and representative governance, fear of HTS-dominated institutions and security services in Damascus and elsewhere, and the willingness of the Alawite community to cooperate with other groups in order to push for their main political objectives.

Democracy	• Commitment to an inclusive democracy that would ensure representation of diverse groups within Syria • Skepticism towards quota systems • No established political parties until very recently, leadership mainly through religious leaders, important exile Alawite structures • Strong fear of HTS dominance and discrimination, therefore strong support for checks and balances, separation of powers and a decentralized system with limited powers in Damascus • Support for parliamentary system
Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Aim to be recognized as a group with protection of group rights • Recently enhanced cooperation with Kurds and Druze on issues of inclusion in transitional process and decentralization • Specific focus on religion and cultural rights • So far, no clear institutional frameworks supported other than mechanisms of transitional justice and a parliamentary system that diffuses power

Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• Support for decentralization within the community especially because of the massacres and the existential threat to the group • Willingness to work with other groups and see Syria as a country of different components whose rights should be protected through territorial units • No clear vision on federalism, institutional arrangements or power-sharing, mixed views on political and administrative decentralization

Table 5: Key positions of Alawite community in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

10. Assyrians, Turkmens, Yazidis and Other Minority Groups

History (until December 2024)

In addition to the major ethno-religious components, there are various smaller components in terms of numbers: The Assyrians belong to the Christian community, although they define themselves as an ethno-religious group and not exclusively in religious terms. They have their own language, Aramaic and in this respect, they differ from Arab Christians, whose distinguishing feature is exclusively religion. While the Christian churches cooperated with the Assad regime, the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), the most influential Assyrian party, sided with the opposition at the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011.

Another component with members living in Syria is the Turkmen. However, this group is negligible insofar as it has not yet made any public statements or formulated any demands as an independent group. In general, it seems that the Turkmen – often in combination with the Circassians – are often mentioned when it comes to arguing against federal or decentralized models or against minority rights. The argument is usually that the Kurds cannot be granted special rights because there are too many different components that would then all have to be considered.

The situation is similar with regard to the Yazidi, a small religious minority that primarily defines itself as Kurdish and whose members come from Türkiye, Iraq and Syria. In Syria, Yazidism was never on equal footing with Islam and Christianity. Various forms of institutional discrimination existed (marriage, religious instruction). Nevertheless, public celebrations of Yazidi festivals were generally possible, and Yazidi identity is not suppressed per se (KurdWatch 2010). Furthermore, and this did not change with the start of the revolution in 2011, Yazidis were mostly marginalized in Syrian-Kurdish parties and rarely made their own demands public. This situation continues even after the fall of the regime. Given the jihadist background of the transitional government, many Yazidis fear that persecution of their group on religious grounds will increase.

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

The Assyrians have three political parties: the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), the Syrian Union Party (SUP) and the Assyrian Democratic Party. The three parties have different alliances in the Syrian conflict. The ADO is part of the larger Syrian coalition and founding member of the opposition bloc at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the while the SUP works with AANES led by the PYD and has the Sootoro security police and a military wing that has joined the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Assyrian Democratic Party cooperates to a certain extent with the PYD and also has a small protection group in the villages of Hassakah and Khabour (DOI 2024: 5–6). Currently, the various Assyrian parties are moving closer together, joint negotiations between ADO and the PYD-affiliated parties are planned.

Not all Assyrians support Assyrian parties. Instead, many Assyrians orient themselves religiously and politically toward the churches (Interview with R, April 2025) – which, under Bashar al-Assad, were generally loyal to the regime (Interview with M, July 2025).

Current Role in post-Assad Transition Syria

Currently, the Assyrians and their political parties play hardly any independent role in Syria. After the fall of the regime, the ADO leadership attempted to arrange a meeting with transitional president Al-Sharaa and stayed in Damascus for weeks for this purpose, but without success (Interview with M, July 2025). This is primarily because Al-Sharaa does not meet with representatives of political parties—the situation was no different for Kurdish parties. At the same time, unlike the Kurds, the Assyrians have no alternative means of exerting influence.

Political Preferences and Vision for Future Syria

As mentioned above, in February 2020, the Kurdish National Council and the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) agreed on a joint paper on the future of Syria.

Our interviewee from ADO confirmed most of its points – among other things, he formulated clear ideas for an inclusive constitutional process:

> *"We prefer the election of a constituent assembly that includes all the forces necessary for the drafting of the constitution and gives this body sufficient time to do so. This should be accompanied by the participation of the population through seminars, the media, and the creation of a dedicated website for the constituent assembly tasked with drafting the constitution, in order to receive comments and suggestions from all elites and all Syrian communities. I believe this will ensure the inclusiveness of the future constitution" (Interview with Q, May 2025)*

He described the absence of political parties as one of the greatest challenges in the current situation and argued for a parliamentary system:

> *"The presidential system was enshrined in the constitutional declaration and grants the President of the Republic far-reaching powers for the transitional period. This*
>
> *presidential system may be appropriate given the fragile situation in Syria. However, for the future, after the establishment of political parties, the emergence of civil society organizations, the organization of society within its ranks, and the development of a genuine constitution that establishes a democratic state with separation of powers, a decentralized state, a secular state with neutrality toward all religions, and other aspects that characterize a modern state, I consider the parliamentary system to be the most suitable" (Interview with Q, May 2025).*

However, regarding the desired form of decentralization, he expressed a slightly different opinion to the agreement with the KNC. On the one hand, he explained that while ADO stands for "extended administrative decentralization, they are also open to federalism, provided that the regions are based on geographical characteristics and not on ethnic ones:

> *"However, we are also open to federalism, but it must be based on geographical considerations and not on nationalism or ethnicity. The reason is simple: members of all ethnic groups are spread throughout Syria. There are no specific regions. For example, Christians, Suryoye, and Assyrians live in most Syrian cities, while Kurds are represented in northeastern Syria, northern Aleppo, Aleppo itself, Homs, Damascus, Latakia, and other regions" (Interview with Q, May 2025).*

Another interview partner close to ADO rejected federalism and argued for administrative decentralisation:

> *"I am convinced that the ideal system for Syria is to rebuild the country on the basis of administrative decentralization. Administrative decentralization will create a kind of balance between the [...] centre and the regions and will lead to a fair distribution of wealth between the centre and the regions, so that no one party controls another. Administrative decentralization is intended to reduce the problem of marginalization, i.e., the marginalization of some geographical areas at the expense of others. However, the success of administrative decentralization in Syria can only be guaranteed if there is a genuine, clear constitution that guarantees this" (Interview with R, April 2025).*

Our interview partners from the ADO youth organization supported decentralization as an alternative to dictatorship (Interviews with M and N, July 2025). Last but not least, and contrary to the views of other minority representatives, Q and R emphasized the need to merge the various military units and the need for a unified army:

> *"The state should be the sole holder of the monopoly on weapons. I am convinced that enforcing the state monopoly on weapons and disarming society will help to reduce conflicts – whether on the coast or in Suweyda – as well as the sectarian tensions and resentments arising in society"* (Interview with Q, May 2025).

On the other hand, they expressed understanding to why components such as the Kurds do not surrender their weapons: "for fear of massacres" (Interview with R, April 2025).

In summary, it can be said that ADO has been working for several years on a government concept for Syria that includes decentralization and a bicameral parliamentary system as core elements. Nevertheless, there is still uncertainty within ADO about what form of decentralization is desirable and what exactly the various forms of decentralization entail. Furthermore, the Assyrians were much more cautious in presenting their concepts to the public than representatives of the Kurds.

Democracy	• Commitment to separation of powers • Commitment to the inclusion of political parties in the political process • Focus on inclusive governance • Focus on human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially religious freedom and protection of language rights
Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Commitment to an inclusive constitutional process • Quota of 30 percent for women, but not for young people • Inclusive governance to ensure representation of different groups across Syria

Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• No clear vison of decentralization: Extended decentralization, federalism based on geography (no ethnic federalism), a decentralized state with financial powers and administrative decentralization are mentioned
	• Commitment to bicameral central parliament in which territorial units / groups would be represented in second chamber
	• Commitment to the right of all components to local self-governance

Table 6: Key positions of Assyrians in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

11. Civil Society in post-Assad Syria

History (until December 2024)

The Assad regime permitted no NGOs other than those directly linked to the government, often established or sponsored by the First Lady, Asma Fawaz al-Assad. Since the start of the revolution in 2011, Syria's civil society has expanded significantly. NGOs emerged across the country, particularly in areas outside government control, providing basic humanitarian assistance, supporting local governance structures, and offering trainings on topics such as gender equality, democracy, and good governance (Khalaf 2021). However, Islamic and Islamist civil society organizations also emerged in areas controlled by jihadist forces, most notably the Islamic State, which expanded its network and influence to consolidate control and impose its repressive rule (Hamming 2019). The UN provided a framework through the civil society support room, which "was established in January 2016 by the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria) as a mechanism to consult with a broad and diverse range of civil society actors."[10] Moreover, international donors funded Syrian and international NGOs and think tanks, which supported Track-II peace-building and democratization measures, bringing different actors together, and supporting issues such as gender equality, good governance and the recording of war crimes (Althousseiny and Afar 2021).

Organization and Structure, Members, Ideology

Since the end of the Assad regime, we can see the emergence of a variety of civil society organizations. On the one side, humanitarian organizations ensuring basic education, health, food security and improved access to clean drinking water and sanitation operate more widely across the HTS controlled territories, but also in the North-East and in the South of the country.

Second, local NGOs with Western-oriented agendas that focus on questions related to good governance, inclusion, minority rights, and democracy also operate across the country, though they find it hard (but not impossible) to get a licence in Damascus. As one of our interviewees confirmed, it was easy to establish their NGO focused on democracy promotion in AANES, but establishing a branch in Damascus has so far proven impossible, as no permission has been granted (Interview with B, June 2025).

Other local NGOs have no problems to register in Damascus, particularly if their founders are perceived as revolutionary-friendly. As of August 2025, no INGO has been registered in Damascus, and the process for local NGOs remains rather untransparent and unclear. As under Assad, the Ministry for Work and Social Affairs is responsible for their registration, whereas international NGOs fall under the responsibility of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. However, international NGOs can implement projects through local partners, a system that is widely used.

While one of our interviewees pointed out that HTS is much more worried about political parties than civil society organizations, highlighting that they have even been able to work on topics such as gender-based violence since January 2025 (Interview with D, April 2025), another was much more cautious, emphasizing that the new elites are "highly suspicious of civil society" (Interview with E, April 2025). An activist working on women's rights highlighted that currently, "it is important to include civil society organizations" in the transitional process, but with HTS, there is "no inclusion, and the word 'democracy' is mentioned neither in their documents nor in their political speeches" (Interview with J, May 2025).

Having said this, working conditions for NGOs in the Kurdish-majority regions of AANES are also restricted, in particular by control and censorship measures imposed by the Autonomous Administration. Projects can only be implemented if critical issues are avoided, particularly those relating to the Administration itself, its links with the PYD or the ideology of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan. The larger and more successful NGOs seem to have accepted the status quo and these restrictions. Another severe problem – for both local and international NGOs– is widespread corruption, both in the majority Kurdish as well as in the majority Arab regions of AANES (Hajo, Kolar & Savelsberg 2024: 18–19).

At the same time, it seems that the space for civil society has been growing. In September 2025, the European Centre for Kurdish Studies (ECKS) organized a workshop on decentralisation and federalism and to also highlight the challenges of these concepts. Moreover, in a discussion with Focus group 1, it was possible to criticize the poor services delivered in the Canton of Jazirah regarding road infrastructure, water, electricity, environmental protection and waste collection (Focus Group 1, September 2025).

Current role in post-Assad Transition Syria

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, civil society organizations remain vitally important for Syria's transition process. Not only because of the need of humanitarian organizations such as Doctors without Borders, who provide important health services across the country, but also because NGOs, think tanks and other associations form the backbone of political discussions in the country in the absence of political parties, which are not (yet) allowed to form and meet under HTS rule. NGOs play an important role on issues such as gender equality, where many fear that the new rulers will establish a system that will discriminate against women (Interview with B, April 2025, Interview with J, May 2025). They demand quotas, pushing for a minimum of 30% of positions held by women in all state institutions and important committees (Interview with J, May 2025). Some women's rights activists argue for a 50% quota and full legal equality of men and women as their demand (Interview with I, April 2025). The Center for Civil Society and Democracy with branches in Syria, Türkiye and the USA, amongst other countries, has listed in its demands for women's engagement in the transition period a 30% quota, and a National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security (CCSD 2024).

In the absence of effective opposition political parties and free and fair elections, civil society remains the principal actor to challenge HTS, discuss topics that contradict HTS positions and advocate for political change, greater inclusion and democratic reforms in territories controlled by HTS. The success of civil protests against HTS-imposed restrictions on women's rights has demonstrated its significance in post-Assad Syria (Khoury 2025).

Political Preferences and Vision for Future Syria

In addition to their stance on women's rights, many NGO activists we spoke to also supported decentralization initiatives. While there was some confusion between political and administrative decentralization (in the Interview with J, April 2025 for example, they argued for administrative decentralization, but highlighted that local and regional levels should have decision-making competences), overall there was strong support for decentralized structures amongst our interviewees (see Interview with B, April 2025, Interview with I, April 2025, Interview with D, April 2025, Interview with E, 2025).

All agreed that decentralization can be a tool to ensure better inclusion of different groups, while one interviewee also pointed out the avoidance of hyper-centralization as an important lesson from the past (Interview with E, April 2025, on this see also the report by Hallaj and Masri (2025), which makes a similar argument).

There are different understandings of decentralization amongst civil society groups. While some interviewees explicitly called for federalism (Interview with I, April 2025, Interview with E, April 2025), referring to the need of the different groups to administer their own affairs within their own territorial units, others (Interview with D, April 2025, Interview with C, April 2025) promoted forms of political decentralization without an explicit reference to federalism. They called attention to the need for decentralized decision-making structures to avoid hyper-centralization, while also recognizing the need to accommodate the diversity of Syria.

Some civil society members also mentioned administrative decentralization, which would traditionally give very limited decision-making and fiscal autonomy to territorial units (Interview with J, April 2025), but they nevertheless emphasized the need for regional levels to have autonomy in decision-making. All interviewees arguing for administrative decentralization supported the election of local and regional representatives and competences in decision-making, including in policy areas related to the reconstruction of the country. Those arguing specifically for a federal solution also emphasized the need to strengthen group rights and implement power-sharing mechanisms in the central government. Civil society activists have furthermore been very supportive of inclusive governance and the rights of different groups. As one interviewee pointed out "civil society institutions are particularly important in the transitional processes and during the development of a [permanent] constitution, as they ensure transparency," also pointing out that the inclusion of civil society might even make up for the lack of representation of women and different ethnic and religious groups through formal political parties (Interview with R, April 2025).

Democracy	- Strong support for democratic decision-making and citizen participation in the transition process - Strong support for civil society participation, consultation and inclusion in decision-making and implementation - Strong support for the separation of powers - Civil society strongly focused on protection and advancement of human rights and fundamental freedom - Civil society as main vehicle to hold HTS accountable - Key in transitional justice through reporting and recording of crimes and evidence

Inclusion and Power-sharing	• Diverse opinion, general support for inclusive process • No agreement on ethnic quotas or power-sharing, supported by some civil society organizations while rejected by others as a tool of division • Strong support for women's rights
Federalism / Decentralization / Territorial Autonomy	• Mixed opinions but general support for decentralization to limit the power of the centre in Damascus • Some support for federalism amongst civil society actors as a form to devolve power and ensure group self-governance • General support for local governance and subsidiarity

Table 7: Key positions of civil society actors in relation to democracy, inclusion and territorial autonomy / federalism

Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

Conclusion

This actor-mapping has accentuated the different priorities of key actors in post-Assad Syria. While HTS remains the most important government actor in Damascus and in major cities across the country for now, resistance against its centralized and exclusionist policies has been forming amongst Kurdish, Druze and Alawi elites and groups. Civil society has also commented and critiqued HTS governance intensively, thereby offering a counter-weight to HTS policies and proposals in the absence of effective opposition parties in the first months of the transition.

What is particularly important in the discussions presented above are key findings on the perceptions of democracy, inclusive governance / power-sharing and visions for territorial autonomy. There is, in none of these areas, a common vision identifiable amongst the actors discussed in this mapping. However, recent evidence points towards a growing flexibility of HTS to discuss issues related to more inclusive governance and particularly decentralization. The Kurds, Druze, Alawites and other components have started forming alliances to push for a common agenda that does not only demand stronger participation in the transition process but also includes issues such as group rights and decentralization. It remains to be seen if this common platform will be able to push Al-Sharaa and HTS to compromise and negotiate, and if the different actors that came together in the Hassakah conference will maintain their unity and alliance towards HTS.

Syria is clearly at a crossroads. The transitional process has the opportunity to establish a functional and inclusive democracy, as requested by so many that joined the revolution. At the same time, there is a real danger that HTS and Al-Sharaa will use their military victory as the foundation of a new authoritarian system, in which they are now the dominant elite. Such a development would substantially increase the risk of both further sectarian conflict between different groups on the one side, and the state falling-apart on the other side., It is possible that AANES and Suweyda, plus territories in the West where Alawites form the majority, could then refuse to integrate into a Syrian state that is dominated by the HTS exclusively. This development would also open the door to further external involvement and contestation, with Israeli support for the Druze, HTS-backing by Türkiye and different interests from the Gulf monarchies.

For those interested in stability and long-term peace in Syria – and as part of it, the wider Middle East – a functional and inclusive democratic framework is the best way to ensure this as expressed by most interviewees. It will clearly not be easy to forge the compromises and synergies among the different actors to reach this goal – but when the alternative is continued conflict and potential state failure, the stakes are particularly high.

12. Policy Recommendations

Local Actor Engagement

(1) Build the capacity of key stakeholders, decision-makers and activists on issues around inclusive governance. This should include training and educational campaigns on inclusive governance, democratic decision-making, territorial autonomy, power-sharing and group rights for major domestic actors.

(2) Support Syrian-led initiatives to design constitutional and legal arrangements on issues around inclusive governance

(3) Provide technical assistance to Kurdish, Druze, Alawite and other communities and their elites in designing their own territorial and local governance structures ("local governance pilots").

(4) Support discussions on regional institutions, intergovernmental relations and coordination between communities and facilitate cooperation between local authorities (e.g. in Kurdish, Arab, and Druze areas) on shared issues around service delivery and public administration (e.g. on energy, environment and in other key sectors).

(5) Engage HTS-affiliated academics, policy-makers, think tanks, civil society organizations in critical discussions on the opportunities and challenges of decentralized governance.

(6) Conduct "myth-busting" activities to address fears and misconceptions around federalism and political decentralization.

(7) Facilitate dialogues among various groups, including representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, civil society activists and political party officials, to foster cohesion and build consensus on Syria's future state structures and the value of inclusive governance.

(8) Create a forum for youth from all communities (with a special focus on Sunni Arabs) to discuss inclusive governance and diversity management in the Syrian context to exchange ideas and perspectives.

(9) Develop and implement leadership programs for women, and youth, from across the country to prepare them for participation in local governance structures and public administration.

Knowledge-Transfer, Education and Training

(1) Educate domestic and international actors for more inclusive transitional and long-term governance arrangements, including different forms of territorial autonomy, group rights and power-sharing for a democratic, peaceful, inclusive and prosperous Syria.

(2) Develpp educational material, including formal and informal educational materials on Syria's ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious and historic diversity and its contribution to Syria's shared identity. Use these materials to promote respect for, and the celebration of diversity.

(3) Work with media, social media and key influencers to design and develop information campaigns about Syria's diversity and ways to reintegrate the country and bring the different groups together, including "myth-busting" to counter misperceptions linking autonomy with secessionism.

(4) Support the creation of an inclusive, multi-stakeholder platform (online and/or offline) for ongoing dialogue on issues related to inclusive governance, constitutional reform and social cohesion.

International Actors and Donors

(1) Advocate donors and international agencies for providing support to decentralized structures and emphasize that decentralization has the potential to strengthen democratization in Syria.

(2) Enable and facilitate exchanges between Syrian advocates of inclusive governance in Syria and political actors from other countries with successful post-conflict transitions (such as South Africa and Nepal) to promote/strengthen mutual learning, understanding and the exchange of best practices and lessons learnt;

(3) Promote dialogues between representatives of Syria's different components with the international donor community to work towards reconstruction programs which are inclusive, equitable and oriented toward long-term peace and governance reform.

Endnotes

[1] We distinguish between HTS as the new governing elite and the most important new actor, and Kurdish, Alawite and Druze communities, who themselves are represented by a variety of political parties, military and religious leaders, as well as external organizations claiming to represent them. In addition to focusing on the main non-Arab Sunni components, we also discuss civil society as an important stakeholder in Syria's post-Assad transition. This mapping does not engage with external actors as such.

[2] We use the term components to refer to the different groups in Syria (see below). They see their belonging to the Syrian state on equal footing as a vitally important issue in the transitional period and reject the declaration as a "minority". See for further discussion: https://npasyria.com/en/46922/

[3] We are following in our conception of inclusive governance what Keil and Aboultaif have highlighted for many societies in the Global South, including for Syria, namely the use of a variety of instruments, territorial, institutional and constitutional, that somewhat fall in the category of power-sharing (Keil & Aboultaif 2024). Our emphasis is on the understanding of democracy, power-sharing – including federalism and decentralization and the recognition of different groups rights. See for a further discussion:
https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/fiap_inclusive_governance-paif_gouvernance_inclusive.aspx?lang=eng

[4] HTS was officially dissolved in the victory conference in Damascus in January 2025, together with all other armed groups from the resistance. Its structures were meant to be integrated into the Syrian state, including its military faction within the Syrian security services. De facto, however, HTS structures have continued to exist and some elements of HTS have partially merged with the state and others exist in parallel to official Syrian state structures.

[5] In informal discussions with leading advisers to HTS ministers and representatives in September 2025 in Damascus, it was confirmed that within the more moderate faction within HTS, there is an openness to explore different concepts of political decentralization, including locally and regionally elected officials and the decentralization of some decision-making powers.

[6] A draft of the constitutional declaration can be found here: https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf

[7] The AANES, KNC and ADO (the most important Assyrian political party) all published press releases, which rebuffed the HTS draft and demanded a new National Dialogue and a more inclusive process. See also Rudaw 2025b.

[8] The French Mandatory Power oversaw Syria and Lebanon after World War I with a mandate from the League of Nations.

[9] The fact that the relationships go well beyond ideological similarities is evidenced, among other things, by organizational overlaps between different PYD and PKK institutions and by overlapping staff between PYD leaders in Syria and (former) PKK cadres (KurdWatch 2013: 15–16). Additionally, many of the fighters who died in Kobanî in 2014 came originally from Türkiye, not Syria (KurdWatch, January 7, 2016) Last but not least, the PYD played a significant role in recruiting child soldiers for the PKK in Syria (KurdWatch 2015:10-11).

[10] Website of the Civil Society Support Room of the Office of the Special Envoy, available at: https://cssrweb.org/en/

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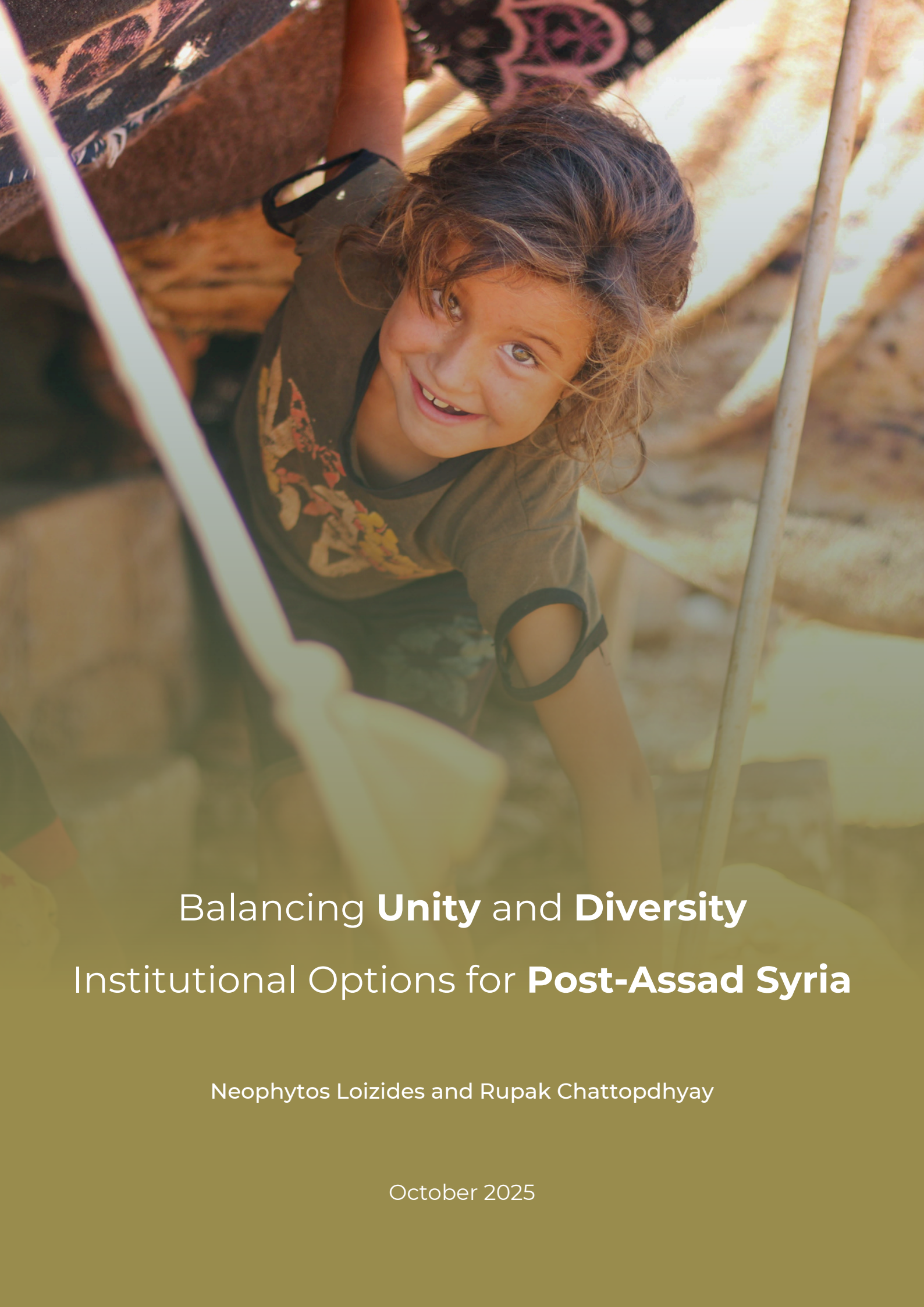
Balancing **Unity** and **Diversity**

Institutional Options for **Post-Assad Syria**

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Contents

Abstract

The fall of the Assad regime has presented the Syrian people with an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild their country's political, financial and security institutions. Like other post-conflict transitions in ethno-religiously diverse countries, this process faces the challenge of balancing unity and diversity, as well as inclusivity and representativeness.

This is laid out in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which prescribes an "inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people." Drawing from comparative federalism and the broader literature on conflict resolution, this discussion paper explores context-specific inclusive governance models as well as how those fit into the broader security architecture in the region. The paper is not meant to be prescriptive.

Rather, it aims to lay out a range of institutional options that could help build a reformed, robust and united Syrian state. It also focuses on an assessment of federal/decentralized governance frameworks in the Syrian context, taking into consideration how to best balance diversity and unity considerations as well as the effective delivery of public services. The paper concludes with concrete recommendations on institutional choice and sequencing, external facilitation and support mechanisms, and structured international learning through peer-to-peer engagements with Syrian stakeholders.

Introduction

In Syria, there is a narrow window of opportunity to negotiate and implement an effective, inclusive democratic governance system. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, the leadership of Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS) has to date exceeded experts' expectations as to a smooth transition.[1] However, competing political visions, regional autonomy claims, and deep-seated mistrust among communities remain high on the agenda. Despite violence in the coastal Alawite areas in March 2025 and the renewed conflict between Druze and Bedouin communities in July 2025, both the new Syrian administration and leaders of the Kurdish, Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities have signalled their willingness to negotiate inclusive arrangements. The establishment of a national dialogue conference (according to some sources with more than 1,200 participants)[2] and other initiatives have been seen as positive signals of commitment by both local stakeholders and by international donors supporting the transition process. [3] Yet so far, a shared understanding of how the general principle of inclusive governance translates into concrete and feasible constitutional steps is missing. Institution-building is not only important for inclusivity and representativeness but also for reconstruction and the effective delivery of public services following one of the longest civil wars in recent history.

Inclusive democratic governance could be the antidote to continuous violence. It could secure political participation across ethnic and religious lines and encourage power-sharing among the largest and territorially concentrated communities without excluding numerically smaller groups. While the United Nations (UN) and the international community have called for an inclusive transition,[4] Syria remains one of the least studied case-studies in constitutional transitions. If the Syrian national dialogue continues to take place, participants will be invited to participate in deliberations with comparatively little background knowledge on power-sharing and decentralization.

The difference is noticeable if one considers Farag's et al. (2023) study, which produced figures for the number of relevant studies per country in the past 50 years; for Syria, only two available studies were identified, compared, for instance, with 26 for neighbouring Lebanon and 16 for Cyprus.[5]

Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

On the one hand, Syrians are mandated by the UN and international actors to establish and maintain an inclusive transition, and on the other, there is very little material to draw on for either the members of the National Dialogue Conference, or the new National Dialogue Committee or civil society in general.[6] This is all the more surprising given that the modern Syrian state was established as the Federation of the Autonomous States of Syria in 1922.[7]

The 2025 Transitional Constitutional Declaration, issued on March 13, 2025, by interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa and his HTS group establishes a five-year transitional framework for Syria post-Assad.[8] It emphasizes national unity, transitional justice, and Sharia as the primary legislative source, drawing from the 1950 Constitution but retaining centralized powers. The president appoints key institutions without oversight, raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Sharia's prominence may limit secular reforms and minority rights, potentially undermining pluralism. The declaration's unitary stance implicitly rejects federalism, risking tensions with groups like the Kurds or the Druze seeking autonomy, and echoes Syria's authoritarian constitutional legacy.

HTS's aversion to Western-style democracy stems from its Salafi-jihadist roots, favoring Sharia-based governance over multiparty elections. Al-Sharaa's ambiguous stance on democracy suggests a pragmatic shift for legitimacy, but the delayed elections (up to four years) could entrench HTS's control. Similarly, HTS preference is to maintain a centralized state, clashing with Kurdish and Druze aspirations, which could fuel further conflict. Meanwhile, elections planned for September 2025 have faced both logistical delays due to voter registration and objections from civil society and rights groups as to the appointment of a third of the members of the proposed People's Council by the president himself, as well as reactions from minority groups excluded from the process.[9]

Moreover, HTS's rejection of foreign "interference" demands the exit of U.S., Turkish, Russian, and Iranian forces, complicating international engagement. For implementers, HTS's delisting as a U.S. terrorist group in July 2025 eases aid delivery, but UN/European Union sanctions and HTS's suspicion of foreign agendas (e.g., promoting secularism) pose risks.[10] Meanwhile, aid programs must navigate HTS's control to avoid being seen as interventionist, requiring localized, neutral approaches to support transitional justice and recovery while addressing sectarian violence and minority concerns.[11]

The bloody civil war in Syria has increased the salience of regional, religious and linguistic identity among all groups. Hence, it is important to recognize a priori that a nation-building process needs to generate, for all members of a nation, the feeling of belongingness in the sense of the "we" in relation to the "others".

Universal values such as rule of law, democracy and human rights by themselves will not bring diversities together because they apply too broadly and are aspirational in many parts of the world; they also do not adequately address the particularities of the socio-political realities of a particular country. A more specific value could be consociationalism, federalism, direct democracy or the bottom-up process of a consensus-driven democracy with a concept of regional autonomy close to collective group rights. If values that hold and bring the concerned nations together are commonly accepted, the composed nation can build a new feeling of a broader "we", including all identity and demographic groups within the polity.

This discussion paper aims to cover this need for an inclusive approach to institution-building and provide the broader spectrum of options that would allow decision-makers themselves to facilitate a Syrian transition. The first aim is to draw from the rich expertise of international organizations and scholars in the field, mapping negotiable and adaptable options for institutional reform in Syria. The second objective is to explore how the often-contradictory understandings locally of the implementation of such ideas could be addressed through context-specific solutions.[12] While options are often grounded in experiences derived from other countries/contexts, for Syria, any proposal will have to balance the needs and aspirations of its diverse groups while securing the key imperative of maintaining national unity. Drawing specifically on the work of Hartzell and Hoddie[13], this paper emphasizes questions of security and national unity. More importantly, it discusses a set of 'backstop mechanisms' aiming to mitigate potentially unintended consequences of federalism and decentralization. The paper explores specifically the extent to which federalism/decentralization could provide a framework for maintaining national unity in Syria. While it avoids prescriptive blueprints, it highlights the options within these frameworks and the viability of multilevel forms of governance in the Syrian context. Indeed, since we began working on this paper, HTS has softened on the idea of decentralization, given its need to reach an accommodation with the Kurdish entity.

Inclusive Democratic Governance: Alternative Pathways

For more than a decade, peace talks in Syria and the broader region have taken place in a conceptual vacuum, with policymakers often confusing the interrelated concepts of consociationalism, federalism/decentralization, and power sharing.[14] Power sharing is the broader umbrella term for models of inclusive democratic governance. These could take either territorial (federal/multi-level governance) or non-territorial forms (consociationalism). Consociationalism (as well as federalism) is a spectrum of options that policymakers in Syria could consider independently or in conjunction with each other. [15]

Consociationalism includes formal or informal arrangements such as:

- **Segmental autonomy**: possible arrangements that allow each community to run separate competencies in areas such as religious affairs, schools and social welfare, with the advantage of reducing acrimony in decision-making, but also with the limitation/challenge of replicating services and financial cost to the citizens.

- **Minority Vetoes**: formal veto rights for all main communities provide minority protections and could currently incentivize Syrian de facto entities to accept the authority of the central government in all areas, including security. However, vetoes could also lead to deadlocks and immobilism. For this reason, negotiations across divided societies often include provisions for vetoes to be restricted to issues of vital importance for each community and/or stipulate judicial or other deadlock resolving mechanisms. These mechanisms allow the central government to function even if disagreements persist and incentivize all communities to cooperate and to avoid as a first resort negative precedents in courts.

- **Proportionality**: consociationalism does not imply that ethnic or religious communities will be represented in equal numbers, e.g. in cabinet, but advocates instead the principle of proportionality when it comes to majority/minority representation. Exceptions are often made to disproportionally represent small numerical groups (or through electoral design that supports the elections of smaller

communities that are dispersed across the country). Moreover, attention is given to communities that have disproportionally suffered displacement (e.g. Syrian Christians), often by enabling diaspora representation.

- **Grand Coalitions:** inclusivity is a key feature explicitly mentioned in UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015). There are several examples of inclusive power sharing, and they differ significantly as to the spectrum of options: classic vs. liberal (as shown below) and/or presidential, semi-presidential and parliamentary. For instance, through the d'Hondt system in Northern Ireland cabinet posts are allocated automatically on the basis of the electoral strength of each party (liberal/parliamentary), while an arrangement for a collective presidency comprising Croat, Bosniak and Serb leaders is in place in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ethnic/presidential). Other systems include the allocation of certain key posts to members of main communities (e.g. Lebanon). The latter two models of ethnic consociationalism are often associated in the region with lack of flexibility and over-reliance on ethnic and religious markers, making a Bosnian or Lebanon-style arrangement less appealing to Syrian political elites.[16] However, as argued below, structured international learning through peer-to-peer engagements for Syrian stakeholders could facilitate potentially acceptable options across stakeholders. Here the aim should be to ensure that global experience informs, but does not dictate, local innovation enabling Syrian stakeholders themselves to have a first-hand experience with peace settlements elsewhere.

Federalism refers to situations where authority is territorially divided between central and provincial governments, with both enjoying constitutionally separate competencies.[17] The federal idea at its core is a form of consociationalism, which aims to achieve stability and pluralism by fostering power sharing among competing groups rather than relying on majority rule, which can marginalize minorities. Countries with high levels of diversity, such as Canada, India, Switzerland, Belgium, Ethiopia and Nepal, all embody varying principles of federal consociationalism as part of the way their states are structured.[18] To this point, Daniel Elazar's widely accepted view of federalism as a covenantal partnership, combining these principles to create a "matrix of power" of self-rule and shared rule,[19] has practical applicability in highly divided societies with territorially concentrated groups. Self-rule would allow ethnic and sectarian communities to manage local affairs, reducing tensions, while shared rule could integrate them into national decision-making, fostering inclusive democracy.

By definition, all federations are decentralized, but it is the specific mechanisms by which they allocate powers that determine their advantages and limitations. One of the potential limitations of a federal structure that one could anticipate for Syria relates to the fact that these structures could become tools for elite patronage, with leaders of armed groups converting at the same time into corrupt governors.

Inclusive governance arrangements are not immune to corruption charges, and while this is a common criticism across federal and decentralized systems from Nepal to Iraq, policymakers might balance this limitation by taking into consideration opportunity costs. For one thing, the absence of a federal or decentralized compromise could lead to continuous violence and deprive the Syrian leadership of foreign recognition and support in its territorial disputes with neighbouring states. For another, more effective governance practices could be promoted by organizations specializing on federal governance such as the Forum of Federations as part of structured international learning and peer-to-peer engagements between Syrian and international stakeholders. Importantly, foreign aid is more likely to be available to Syria from EU sources if inclusive governance structures are negotiated as part of a comprehensive peace arrangement and aligned with minimum accountability standards. Both are key pre-conditions and if properly negotiated they could facilitate rebuilding in the long-term the country's financial as well as political institutions.

Another critique relates to the fact that federalism is difficult to negotiate because of secessionist fears, which are present everywhere, but are especially prevalent in the Middle East.[20] In 1920, constitution Syria was divided into provinces with tax collection powers as well as the authority to pass laws. Between 1958-1961, the country was part of the United Arab Republic, which collapsed in the face of acrimony among the members, due to Egyptian dominance within the federation. For the most part, failures to federalize in the region have been prevalent, although Iraq in the past decade has been relatively successful compared to cases of non-federation facing similar challenges (e.g. Afghanistan or Syria itself).[21] However, the Iraqi example, despite its merits, has yet to be part of the political agenda in Syria.[22]

Engagement with alternative decentralized multilevel governance arrangements - less formalized compared to federal structures – is another potential option. Such arrangements could be internationally supported and resourced, as well as beneficial for all communities across Syria, addressing the country's territorial and administrative complexities while also granting autonomy to ethnically or regionally distinct populations. A decentralized system could entice the cooperation of Kurdish-majority areas, Sunni-majority regions, and Alawite or Druze strongholds, while maintaining national unity. This model would resemble Italian or Swiss structures, allowing regions or cantons to self-govern within a constitutional framework. A key challenge for multilevel governance is preventing secessionist tendencies by ensuring robust intergovernmental coordination and establishing national oversight mechanisms. As demonstrated below, Syrian leaders could opt to decentralize in ways that would safeguard the country's unity by ensuring all parties are tied by an international binding agreement with enforceable implementation and arbitration clauses. Moreover, in negotiations such as those to take place in Syria, there should be focus on the precise competences that central and regional governments will share; those could be context-specific and follow the principle of subsidiarity, aiming for decisions to be taken at the closest possible level to the citizen (e.g. municipal, regional, federal, central government).[23]

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Given the depth of divisions between the many sectarian and ethnic groupings in Syria, and the urgent need to rebuild a unified and functional Syrian state, the federal toolkit has the potential to offer a range of institutional options which could help mitigate conflict. Rather than being prescriptive, the federal logic relies on its adjustability as a flexible toolkit responsive to the needs of competing interests or ethnic and religious groups. The March 2025 agreement between Damascus and the SDF covers political and administrative issues that are just as important as the military ones. At the time, the Syrian state pledged to guarantee the constitutional rights of the Kurdish population and to recognize its distinctiveness within the framework of national unity. However, the real challenge lies in the details, particularly on the form of decentralized governance and the drafting of a new or interim constitution.[24] Still, the March 2025 agreement provides an important template for the possibility of reaching similar agreements elsewhere in the country. Clearly, the new Syrian government has an interest in holding together with minimal coercion different parts of the country and minimizing intervention from eager neighbours.

While any future constitutional solutions will have to emerge from among the various Syrian groups, and with the support of all Syrians, countries such as South Africa, Switzerland, Spain, Ethiopia, Nepal or India could provide important inspiration. In Syria itself support for a decentralized political system has been on the rise; in 2020 "compared to a survey conducted by the Syrian non-profit TDA (The Day After) two years earlier, there was an increase of over 20 percentage points among all respondents for a decentralized system in Syria"[25] with Arab and Kurdish participants reporting a 63.49% and 77.42% approval rate for decentralization respectively.[26]

Unity and Secession: The Elephant in the Room

A critical issue in Syria is how to address the security fears and expectations of all sides, including the HTS leadership and non-HTS-affiliated groups, particularly the Kurdish defence units.[27] The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have long pushed for federalism or significant decentralization as a condition for integration into a post-Assad Syria. This stems from their de facto autonomy established during the war against ISIS, where they control about a third of the country. In March 2025, an eight-point agreement between Rojava and the al-Sharaa government incorporated SDF structures into state institutions but preserved some local authority, though tensions persist. Senior PYD figure Salih Muslim has stated that Kurds will not accept a return to pre-2011 centralization and could demand independence if decentralization is off the table. Alawites, who formed the backbone of the Assad regime and dominate coastal areas like Latakia and Tartus, have faced sectarian reprisals since the regime's collapse. In response, groups like the Political Council for Central and Western Syria (PCCWS), formed in 2025, explicitly called for federalism in these regions to protect minorities and reject "one-sided" rule from Damascus. Such demands highlight federalism's role in addressing historical grievances and preventing cycles of revenge.[28] While Syria remains a unitary state under the new transitional government led by President Ahmad al-Sharaa (installed in March 2025), proposals for federal or decentralized systems are increasingly advocated as a means to ensure stability, protect minorities, and prevent further fragmentation.

Syria's dilemma appears to be difficult to address. On the one hand, committing to a decentralized structure at present would primarily satisfy the country's non-Sunni communities. On the other hand, agreeing to wait and review decentralization in a future Syrian constitution will exclusively serve the interests of the HTS leadership in Damascus.

Moreover, Turkey opposes Kurdish autonomy because of its own security concerns, Syria's Arab neighbours and Iran are equally opposed to federalism (particularly to Kurdish and Druze entities), while countries such as Israel are pushing towards the complete opposite direction with the creation of de facto territories in the region and on its immediate border.

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As demonstrated in the July 2025 Bedouin and Druze clashes, Syria seems to be particularly vulnerable to third-party interventions triggered by legitimate or perceived security concerns as well as co-ethnic demands across the border (e.g. by activists in the Druze community in Israel).

Each ethnic and religious groups in Syria might require different institutional arrangements depending on their historical ambitions, sizes and ethnic distribution. In northeastern Syria, since 2012 there has been a de facto Kurdish state, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), also known as Rojava, supported by regional allies and the United States (US) military. Turkey opposes Kurdish-led autonomy in northeast Syria because of the alleged association between Syrian Kurds and PKK.[29]

In a nutshell, two critical players—Ankara and Damascus—fear secession for different reasons. Ankara fears it because it would lead to an independent Kurdish state, an alarming possibility given the demographic growth of its sizable Kurdish minority. At the same time, the Turkish government has initiated its own peace process with the PKK Kurdish leadership, aiming to end the decades-long conflict in its southeast provinces as well as to secure Kurdish parliamentary votes for a constitutional amendment that would allow the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for another term. Likewise, Damascus fears secession because it will lead to the de facto (or even de jure) division of its territory, but also has multiple reasons to consider a compromise across similar lines.

While secession is a legitimate fear linked to the adoption of federalism and decentralization across divided and conflict-ridden societies[30] there are also significant counterarguments. To begin with, there is already de facto decentralization in Syria and therefore Kurdish leaders will need to be convinced rather than coerced into a new political system in which all sides have an advantage in a new territorial arrangement (e.g. negotiating the return of Arab majority cities and regions for historically Kurdish ones). Moreover, the preservation of de facto unrecognized entities, as demonstrated in the examples of Cyprus, Somalia or Georgia, might not be a desirable long-term outcome for the HTS leadership. The longer these entities persist outside a legally binding constitutional arrangement, the more likely their presence will be acknowledged in international practice, and reunification will become unfeasible. Future leaderships in Damascus are unlikely to fight a new civil war against entities backed by Israeli and/or US forces. However, they are nonetheless in a proper position currently to negotiate even-handed arrangements that balance national unity with diversity. This latter point suggests that inclusive governance is not only a UN Security Council precondition but also a strategic necessity for HTS leaders, even as significant elements within the HTS advocate for a centralized state.

Institutional Options

At the same time, regardless of how divisive this issue appears, negotiable arrangements can be reached by introducing options at the negotiating table that safeguard Syria's unity. Such options are commonly discussed among stakeholders in aspiring federations, along with, more suitably in the case of Syria, a decentralized systems that make no prior commitments to federal principles:

- **Multiregionalism**: The most stable federal/decentralization arrangements are those that possess more than a small number of constituent units e.g. having fifty (the United States) is much better than two (the old Czechoslovakia).[31] Provided that this is negotiated by genuine elites representing the interests of all communities, such arrangements will have a twofold advantage. It will match the interests of all communities, which tend to be small but territorially concentrated, allowing Syria's multicultural cities to self-govern, as well as create coordination problems for any major group that wishes to secede against the central government. This arrangement will potentially address another complex issue in decentralization practice: that of establishing the boundaries of constituent units, and in the case of Syria, enable self-government of units currently under the control of paramilitaries from another ethnic/religious group (e.g. Raqqa, Afrin). At the same time, the national government in Damascus could, in principle, remain in a position to determine the boundaries and competences of these units as well as reverse powers if units fail to deliver on their commitments (see below on decentralization vs. federalism options).

- **Decentralization**: Federal constitutions are more difficult to revoke because of the guarantees they provide to their constituent units. According to the Forum of Federations, in federal systems "the states or provinces are empowered to act within their areas of responsibility as it is described in the constitution. The federal government cannot take away the power of the federal units."[32] This is a key constitutional guarantee for non-dominant communities, yet the government in Damascus might not wish to follow this option and opt instead for decentralization mechanisms that are regulated by law rather than the constitution and tend to be also favoured by public opinion polls.[33] This will transform what is currently de facto decentralization into a legal framework that could be revoked at any point if a unit or ethnic group decides to unilaterally threaten secession.

This arrangement favours the central government, and might disincentivize the Druze Christian Alawite and especially the Kurdish parties, if they fear that HTS will unilaterally withdraw their privileges.

- **Backstops**: A backstop can serve as an insurance against the worst fears of all sides in the Syrian transition. Backstops could be best defined as a form of safeguard or contingency plan that aims to guarantee a certain positive result regardless of the outcome of negotiated transition.[34] Backstops have been the buzzword of international mediation in the past decade as parties seek reassurances in high-risk negotiations. Importantly, for Syria a security or 'federal backstop' will guarantee the unity of the country, in the scenario that any region uses its constituent powers to secede. This means that the international community will incentivise decentralization by backstopping secession while at the same time providing reciprocal guarantees to units against an unprovoked termination of their constituent powers. As backstops have gained prominence in UN and international mediations, Syrian leaders could identify precedents: Northern Ireland (a backstop preventing a hard border during the Brexit talks); Ukraine (a security backstop preventing the breakdown of a future agreement) and Cyprus (recommended in the process design). Providing insurance against each side's fears in Syria's high-stakes transition could transform even the most sceptical of minds in a difficult, high-risk securitized environment.

- **Arbitration**: Making inclusive governance negotiable might require introducing to the national debate the idea of neutral arbitration mechanisms.[35] Arbitrability in peace processes is defined here as the capacity of a post-conflict political system to overcome deadlocks through binding mechanisms that are pre-agreed, peaceful and discrete (i.e. arbitration could be specific to a given issue, institutional organ, or territory). If the parties in the new Syrian cabinet fail to reach an agreement on decentralization or other multilevel governance structures in the Syrian constitution, a neutral body could be authorized to make both interim and final decisions. This body could be national-based, comprising leading Syrian judges, for instance, similar to the Supreme Court of India, responsible for resolving disputes between the Union and the states, or among the states themselves. The supreme court could compose nominees from across the political spectrum, but also be chaired by a senior diplomat from a neutral country (e.g., Canada or Germany) or the United States and would have decision-making authority in cases when national representatives are unable to reach consensus. Whether national or involving international experts, these tribunals should aim for the following objectives: balancing decentralization and national unity; facilitating Syria's economic reconstruction and security; incentivizing cooperation among units; and rewarding in its decisions the parties that best comply with the negotiated agreement, thus enabling a self-enforcing virtuous cycle of implementation.

Moreover, if external arbitration becomes acceptable, then this will go hand in hand with the inclusion of more political parties representing broader interests in Syria. Constitutional experts in Syria could also consider focusing on arbitrability both as a challenge and a prospect, using judicial or other means as last-resort deadlock-resolving mechanisms. In the Northern Ireland context, the UK and Irish governments act as mediators if problems arise, and a default arbitration mechanism is present if power-sharing fails (i.e., transfer of power to London with Dublin's input). In a multi-ethnic society, not just judicial issues but also political deadlocks could be resolved through the intervention of courts comprising neutral (and sometimes foreign) judges. The supreme court could employ various methods of arbitration (some involving citizen assemblies), maximizing its effectiveness and legitimacy.[36] In essence, if arbitration mechanisms become an acceptable agenda item among Syrian stakeholders, they will incentivize the prior adoption of an agreement (by minimizing risk), as well as facilitate implementation (by rewarding best implementers) and adaptability (by helping adjust any agreements to new conditions).

For this to happen, priority in tribunal decisions should be given to the preferences of parties demonstrating the highest level of adherence to meeting their commitments, including in federal/decentralized units, the principle of preserving the unity of the country. Moreover, all sides should commit to facilitating the return of displaced individuals as well as to adhering to the principle of peaceful dispute resolution.[37] Failure by any party to uphold its obligations under the implementation process would result in the forfeiture of its legal or other entitlements, including rights. For the localized non-dominant communities, this could include loss of recognition of their autonomous status, while for the national government, non-compliance might lead to the loss of international recognition and aid. Neutral arbitration mechanisms could remain in place to address the legitimate national security concerns of all communities as well as neighbouring states. Such neutral tribunals could meet Turkey's key security concerns by curtailing Kurdish autonomy and other legal entitlements, if PKK ties in northeastern Syria result in activities that threaten legitimate Turkish security concerns, or PKK-linked groups interrupt the current peace process. At the same time, this approach is even-handed as it will uphold the prospect of Kurdish autonomy – secured in the context of the (continuous) war against ISIS – while maintaining the critical Kurdish-US relations and preventing the emergence of another destabilizing conflict that could draw in additional regional and international actors, including Israel.

Liberal vs Corporate Power Sharing: Institutional Alternatives for Syria

As noted above, introducing liberal and other forms of power-sharing into the discussion could potentially help identify negotiable options. This is because of the flexibility of liberal power sharing and its reliance on political parties as the main units in allocating cabinet posts, rather than relying on predetermined ethnic quotas. As mentioned above, there are different power-sharing models available; for example, even in European consociational systems, ethnicity is prioritized. These are forms of classic or corporate power-sharing e.g. under the Belgian constitution, half of the cabinet must be French-speakers, and the other half Flemish-speakers. If Syrian stakeholders appear apprehensive of such corporate or ethnic 'quotas' (see also Syrian views on Lebanon or Bosnia), they could instead consider 'liberal' power-sharing options. These involve more flexible electoral arrangements where citizens do not need to be associated with predetermined ethnic or religious identities specifically included in electoral rolls or with allocated posts reserved for specific groups. It would be possible, for example, to agree on provisions which simply specify that any party with a certain percentage of votes would get a cabinet ministry.

Such percentages have been set at 5% in South Africa (1994), 10% in Fiji (1997) and Burundi (2001). As long as there is no ethnic requirement favouring any particular group, this could be a fair, negotiable and liberal arrangement. It will be negotiable and adoptable as ethnic and religious groups might still run their own candidates and win significant posts, while liberal cross-ethnic coalitions might emerge as well. Meanwhile, smaller groups could also benefit either by electing their own representatives, e.g. under the 5% threshold, or form national coalitions thus enabling power-sharing at multiple levels. In other words, it will be up to the Syrian citizens to choose their political affiliations and how to engage with the political system.

In Northern Ireland, power-sharing in the Good Friday/Belfast agreement was also based on the liberal model of power sharing known as the D'Hondt model. The D'Hondt is the most common method of translating votes into seats in parliament across parliamentary democracies, but in Northern Ireland, the formula has been employed in the formation of government and for the allocation of cabinet seats.

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All elected groups are automatically included in the cabinet and decision-making through the D'Hondt allocation, which determines how many ministries each party gets and in which order cabinet posts are picked. This has also been termed sequential portfolio allocation and has precedents elsewhere, for instance, in the European Parliament and Danish Municipalities.[38] The Northern Irish version is widely known, often assessed, and very frequently praised by academics and policymakers. According to one account, Northern Ireland's power-sharing is by far the most studied case among academics and experts in the field.[39] The Northern Ireland Assembly has produced several reviews as well, including oral and written evidence from stakeholders.[40] Syrian constitutional experts can draw on these earlier assessments to consider the methodology and its alternatives. Academic projects and the Northern Ireland Assembly itself have also produced online animations that could be translated and utilised to inform Syrian experts and the public.[41]

Specifically, if a d'Hondt style executive is selected as a first-step option, then Syria's decision-makers could also engage the support of neutral arbitration mechanisms in breaking deadlocks. This is due to the fact that all power-sharing arrangements require deadlock-breaking mechanisms. However, the more inclusive a system is, the more likely it is for disagreements and deadlocks to appear. In d'Hondt-style executives, this is even more critical as government coalitions lack a pre-determined or post-election program. Trade-offs and overlapping interests might prevent deadlocks, but not always, and this is a risk that stakeholders need to address in advance of adopting such institutions. Such experiences with political systems and their distinct advantages could be shaped by Syrian leaders and civil society themselves, aiming for local ingenuity and democratic resilience in the reconstruction process.

Gender and Broader Inclusivity

Another major consideration for Syrian constitutionalists is the issue of gender equality. Beyond inclusivity, UNSC Resolution 2254 emphasises the inclusion of women in all decisions. Specifically, the drafters of 2254 argue that: "the goal is to bring together the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians, who will decide their negotiation representatives and define their negotiation positions to enable the political process to begin [while also] encouraging the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria."[42] UN Security Council Resolutions are binding, while more broadly, UNSC Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, urges all actors to increase the participation of women and to incorporate gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts.[43]

The Syrian government is tied to securing broader inclusivity, while foreign aid is implicitly dependent on constitutional options that integrate gender considerations. Each institutional arrangement comes with a different set of possibilities for inclusivity, not only with regard to gender but also ethnic/religious communities and the youth. The representation of young Syrians is also a major consideration, as demonstrated recently in Nepal following the Gen Z demonstrations. While presidential systems cannot guarantee the election of women to the presidency, they could still maintain a minimum representation of women in cabinet as well as quotas in parliament. Equally, in parliamentary systems, quotas could enhance the participation of women in coalition-building. Examples might involve:

- Gender quota laws, which require a certain percentage for the least represented group in parliament e.g. in Bosnia, this requires a 40 percent quota on list-PR tickets[44]

- Zipper quotas that involve, e.g. every second or third name of the list to be of a different gender (in combination with a closed list PR system to guarantee a certain balance of elected female representatives, e.g. Costa Rica).[45]

- Using e.g. the d'Hondt formula to ensure that parties with more than one cabinet seat allocate ministers from different genders in cabinet.

The same principles for inclusivity could apply to vulnerable groups. Special provisions could be introduced for (formerly) displaced persons and diasporas, aiming to preserve their rights in post-conflict Syria. In Syria, constitutional quotas could facilitate this transition. For instance, if a party wins more than one cabinet position, nominations could include individuals from a different gender or other backgrounds. Syrian leaders could apply the principles of Resolution 2254 more smoothly in a parliamentary d'Hondt system, as demonstrated in the Northern Irish case.

Concerning the displaced, following the collapse of the Assad regime, approximately 720,000 Syrians have returned to the country.[46] Previous research has demonstrated that women and the youth are less likely to return to their pre-conflict communities[47], suggesting the necessity of quotas for those groups if Syria aims to change this broader trajectory. For those not returning, diaspora voting could be particularly important for particular groups, for instance, the Christian community, who has suffered disproportionately from displacement and lacks its own territorial unit to preserve its own existence.

Overall, engaging with vulnerable communities, including potential returnees, could be a key priority for post-conflict governments and international organizations. At the same time, foreign governments should not dictate but facilitate these options in Syria. By emphasizing the need for these decisions to be made and approved by the Syrians themselves, the international community could establish a clear negotiating line balancing inclusive governance recommendations with local agency and practical support for Syria's immediate humanitarian concerns.

Conclusion

It is critical that the preferred options for constitutional design and institutional arrangements in a post-Assad Syria are identified locally, with Syrian stakeholders themselves involved in comparative lesson-drawing from international experiences, enhancing local knowledge and innovation. This process of facilitating decision-making in Syria should be a priority among governments and international organizations. The country is still marked by deep ethnic, sectarian, and regional divisions exacerbated by over a decade of civil war. The challenge in reconciling centralized authority with demands for autonomy from minority groups will not be easy. While non-prescriptive, this paper demonstrates how decentralization, power sharing and even federalism have emerged as highly relevant concepts in Syria's ongoing political transition.

Admittedly, the diverse features of a multicultural society create conditions that cannot be changed because they are rooted in a common history. Nor can they be effectively modified by violating fundamental human rights such as religion or language. Compared to economic diversities that can be changed in a society by improved equality or by political decisions approved by the majority, these diversities are not quantitative but qualitative, thus, cannot be changed only by a majority. Therefore, nation-building is a necessity when the social milieu is diverse, and the various constituent groups need both identity and voice within the nation-state rather than marginalization or homogenization.[48]

Decentralization and federalism could be included in the repertoire of options. To this point, policy think tanks and academic institutions should offer dedicated trainings to Syrian leaders on their relative merits and limitations. As noted in this paper, perceived fears are legitimate but could be addressed by institutionally innovative arrangements such as federal backstops, security guarantees to Syria's territorial integrity, and elements of arbitration. The latter will ensure that the post-conflict Syrian political system will overcome deadlocks through binding mechanisms rather than entering long periods of instability, thereby contributing to the effective delivery of public services, reconstruction and political stability.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

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[3] Syrian Leader Promises Inclusive Government, DW, February 13, 2015 available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5sgkDTwYrM

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[12] For a summary of current positions of different actors see Haid Haid "The promise and peril of Syria's National Dialogue conference" in Majalla 11 Jan. 2025 https://en.majalla.com/node/323840/opinion/promise-and-peril-syria%E2%80%99s-national-dialogue-conference; To the best of our knowledge, this is the only available reading on Syria on this topic and interestingly some recommendations have already been tentatively endorsed by Sharaa. See for instance comment by leading journalist Amberin Zaman https://x.com/amberinzaman/status/1892712644127166821

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[27] Each ethnic and religious group in Syria might require different institutional arrangements. In northeastern Syria, since 2012, there has been a de facto Kurdish state, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), also known as Rojava, supported by the US military. Turkey opposes Kurdish-led autonomy in northeast Syria because of the association between Kurds and PKK. There has also been a decades-long conflict in Turkey. For example, in October 1998, Turkey issued an ultimatum on Syria 's support of the PKK and the protection of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Following the October 1998 Turkish ultimatum against Syria, Damascus gave in, and Öcalan left Syria for Russia. He was arrested in Italy, which refused to extradite him to Turkey, and then rearrested in the Greek embassy in Kenya.

[28] Announcement of a Political Council Advocating for a Federal Region in Central and Western Syria - The Syrian Observer

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Pathways to Inclusive Governance in Syria: Balancing Unity and Diversity

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