

STUDY

Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria's Transition at 6 Months

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ETANA إيتانا SYRIA

Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria found itself at a critical juncture, a turbulent phase marked by deep political, legal, and social ruptures. The burden of rebuilding a functional state fell upon the newly formed transitional government, which inherited a fractured institutional landscape and a society grappling with decades of authoritarian rule. Amid high expectations and limited resources, the government's actions have been scrutinised by both Syrians at home and the broader international community. This evaluation seeks to assess how the interim authorities have fared in the first six months, focusing on state efficiency and effectiveness, institutional reform and input legitimacy.

Summary: Key findings

- **Partial institutional resilience, fragile progress:** Unlike Iraq or Libya's post-war collapse, Syria avoided wholesale institutional disintegration. Over 20 ministries resumed operations within 100 days, and public order was broadly preserved. However, institutional reactivation has occurred within a centralised framework, often lacking legal clarity, accountability, and inclusive oversight.
- **Risk of authoritarian continuity & consolidation:** Authoritarian practices persist under new leadership. Despite regime change, patterns of centralisation, opacity, and exclusion suggest a risk of reproducing past governance failures under a different guise.
- **Security institutions remain factional & unaccountable:** HTS affiliates dominate both the Ministry of Defence and Interior. Human rights abuses, sectarian violence, and attacks on minority communities have exposed serious gaps in command and control, civilian oversight, and institutional neutrality.
- **Judicial & constitutional reforms largely symbolic:** The Constitutional Declaration centralises power in the presidency with limited checks, while court appointments and transitional justice initiatives reflect political calculations more than institutional transformation.
- **Executive power entangled with familial & informal networks:** Key ministries and economic bodies are overseen by individuals close to President al-Sharaa, including his brothers, raising concerns about institutional independence and the concentration of authority in personal hands, within a broader culture that reflects the informalisation of state power.

- **Exclusion of key actors:** Key civic and political actors remain excluded. Groups such as the AANES, secular parties, and key independent civil society actors have been sidelined from core political processes, limiting pluralism in the transition.
- **Economic reform favour the connected:** investment is rising under liberalisation, but exclusionary practices and elite capture persist. At the same time, politically driven layoffs are eroding public sector employment and widening inequality.
- **Service delivery shows mixed gains:** Notable improvements in electricity and health provision have emerged, particularly where foreign support is present. Yet water and education sectors remain institutionally fragmented and hampered by the absence of a coordinated national strategy. Returns of displaced Syrians have increased, but infrastructure and planning remain inadequate.
- **Public confidence divided along regional & sectarian lines:** ETANA's survey data shows high support in Sunni-majority areas, while minority groups and independent civil society actors report low levels of trust, safety, and representation.
- **Public engagement mechanisms undeveloped:** While national committees and dialogues have been launched, their closed nature and lack of civic participation and genuine inclusion have limited their effectiveness and public credibility.

Methodology

This evaluation applies an analytical framework that assesses governance across three core dimensions:

1. **State Efficiency and Effectiveness** (service delivery, economic performance, security and military governance),
2. **Institutional Reform** (constitutional reform, judicial reform, and transitional justice mechanisms), and
3. **Input Legitimacy** (public engagement, inclusivity, and civil liberties).

It draws on primary data, including findings from ETANA's national public opinion survey (12–17 May 2025), as well as insights from Syrian field researchers and ETANA's extensive networks of sources across the country. Secondary sources include ETANA reports, official statements, and legal documents. ETANA's multidisciplinary team of political, legal, economic, civil society, military, and security experts reviewed all materials and played an integral role in developing the report's analysis and content. The analysis is qualitative and evaluative, aiming to identify key strengths, challenges, and trends in Syria's transitional governance.

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State efficiency & effectiveness

In contrast to other post-collapse contexts such as Iraq or Libya, Syria has thus far avoided wholesale institutional disintegration. Within just 100 days of the Assad regime's fall, over 20 ministries and hundreds of service directorates were operational again. Public order, however fragile, was broadly preserved across most urban centres, and essential services such as electricity and public health, though uneven, continued to function. These early developments suggest a degree of institutional continuity and adaptive capacity that has helped stabilise core state functions. At the same time, the transitional government continues to face significant challenges in restoring key infrastructure, ensuring equitable service delivery, and establishing effective systems to meet the needs of a population that has long been deprived of responsive governance.

Delivery of essential services

From the outset, the transitional government has faced significant challenges in restoring basic infrastructure such as electricity, water, healthcare, and education, all of which are essential for a return to everyday life. While institutional efficiency has slightly improved compared to the Assad era, particularly in the availability of goods like heating fuel and cooking gas, key service delivery (water, electricity, health and education) remains inconsistent. Public optimism, however, is relatively high: according to ETANA's recent survey, around 75% of respondents expressed confidence in the direction the government is taking, buoyed by the lifting of sanctions and agreements signed with foreign firms. Yet, excluding these exogenous factors, underlying institutional challenges persist. These include a shortage of skilled personnel due to low public sector wages, previous brain drain, limited adoption of modern technologies, and a significant loss of institutional memory, either destroyed by pro-Assad actors during the transition or eroded through neglect by the new administration.

This institutional fragility is being further tested by population movements, particularly the return of displaced Syrians to areas ill-equipped to absorb them. The return of Syrians to their places of origin marks a hopeful step in the country's long path toward recovery, reflecting a degree of confidence in stability and the desire to rebuild lives in familiar surroundings. From the ground, we are witnessing significant policy shifts: a notable decline in politically motivated arrests, eased border re-entry, and reduced internal checkpoints, all of which have enabled thousands of families to return, especially from Lebanon and southern Turkey. While return numbers remain modest, these developments mark a tangible shift in state posture toward the displaced and represent a potential inflection point in Syria's protracted displacement crisis. However, the government appears to lack a clear plan to address the implications of returnees, whether coming from abroad or from other parts of Syria. While the number of returnees is not yet large, 1.7 million as documented by ETANA's recent report, it is nonetheless significant, with many returning to homes that have been damaged or destroyed. This trend presents several challenges, including increased pressure on already fragile infrastructure, unresolved HLP (housing, land and property) rights issues, and emerging social tensions between returnees and those who have settled in these areas during the conflict.

Electricity

Electricity supply remains highly uneven, with urban centres receiving just 2-6 hours per day, some areas facing prolonged blackouts, and rural communities increasingly unable to rely on costly private generators. The current government has made efforts to improve the electricity sector, but progress remains heavily dependent on external support. A notable example is the provision of free gas from Qatar, delivered via Jordan, which has helped stabilise electricity supply compared to the immediate post-Assad period. Under Assad, Syria relied heavily on Iranian fuel to sustain electricity generation, but this support ceased with the regime's collapse, placing considerable strain on the new government. The Ministry of Electricity has announced plans to rehabilitate power stations and signed a \$7 billion investment agreement to renew the sector. While these initiatives suggest forward planning, the sustainability of the electricity system remains uncertain without more diversified domestic energy sources and reduced reliance on unsustainable external aid. This reliance, along with the growing role of private providers, raises concerns about future affordability for ordinary Syrians.

Despite persistent sectoral challenges, there are growing opportunities to strengthen institutional performance. The electricity sector illustrates both the urgency and the potential for more effective governance. While the government has not published recent nationwide electricity data, highlighting ongoing gaps in transparency and institutional capacity, these shortcomings also underscore the importance of building systems for evidence-based policymaking and public accountability. Repeated maintenance announcements, though yet to yield major improvements in reliability, reflect some level of institutional responsiveness and point to the need for deeper structural reforms in planning and implementation.

Water

The water sector reflects the scale and complexity of the challenges inherited by the interim authorities, particularly in regions that have suffered from years of conflict, neglect, and underinvestment. Decades of mismanagement followed by widespread infrastructure damage have left many communities reliant on unsafe groundwater and informal supply systems. To date, there has been little visible progress in restoring or regulating water services, and there is no clear national rehabilitation plan. In eastern Deir Ezzor, residents draw from shallow, contaminated wells near makeshift oil refineries; in southern and western Idlib, shared wells are rarely tested. Displacement camps in the north remain without piped water, and in informal neighbourhoods of Damascus such as Tadamon and al-Hajar al-Aswad, residents still rely on private tankers or unlicensed wells due to stalled reconstruction. The government has not published national water usage or quality data, nor clarified institutional responsibilities for oversight. While these conditions reflect deep-rooted infrastructural and governance failures, they also point to the urgent need for a coherent, equity-based water strategy that can begin addressing the country's most acute public health risks and service gaps.

Health

The Ministry of Health is making concerted efforts to keep the system functioning and improve it. In Latakia, for example, public hospitals are operating at full capacity to meet demand. According to the acting director of the health affairs directorate in Latakia, health services have improved by nearly 40% compared to the Assad era. However, the sector continues to face serious challenges, including a shortage of skilled medical personnel, many of whom resigned or were dismissed from the public sector after the regime's fall. There is also a significant lack of

financial resources to meet the growing need for medicines, equipment, and the rehabilitation of damaged health facilities. Despite these difficulties, the Ministry is actively coordinating with international organisations, local communities, and the Syrian diaspora to address these gaps and strengthen the sector.

One of the central challenges facing the healthcare sector is the absence of a coherent, government-led national health recovery strategy. While it is still early in the transition for such plans to be fully operational, the groundwork for a coordinated approach has yet to be laid. In the meantime, healthcare delivery remains largely dependent on international and local actors, with the state's role mostly administrative and focused on licensing and logistics. Although this arrangement has allowed basic services to continue, it has also delayed the development of a unified vision for health system recovery. No comprehensive roadmap has yet been published to guide the rebuilding of national health services or to clarify institutional relationships between public health authorities and humanitarian actors. Taking initial steps toward a national strategy will be essential to move the sector beyond fragmented crisis response and toward long-term, sustainable recovery.

Education

The Ministry of Education has launched a national school rehabilitation plan, marking an important step toward rebuilding the country's educational infrastructure. However, the process has faced criticism for its lack of transparency, with limited clarity around school selection criteria and bidding procedures, raising concerns about favouritism and uneven implementation. More broadly, education provision remains fragmented, a reflection of years of territorial division and parallel governance structures. Inconsistent curricula and the absence of a unified accreditation framework have created confusion over grading, diploma recognition, and access to higher education. For example, many schools in Idlib continue to use HTS-era curricula, particularly in religious education, while some private schools in Deir Ezzor still rely on outdated regime-era materials. These challenges underscore the difficulty of establishing coherence across key service sectors at this early stage of the transition.

Recent disputes over teacher bonuses have also drawn attention to perceptions of regional inequality. During Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in 2025, teachers in SNA-controlled areas of northern Aleppo were initially excluded from one-time holiday payments, while those in former HTS-held areas received them. Although the decision was later reversed following public pressure, the incident highlighted the unevenness of current administrative decision-making and the importance of building fair, consistent mechanisms for public sector governance going forward.

Across many sectors, governance processes in some sectors continue to reflect ideological influences, raising questions about the extent to which policymaking represents a broad national consensus. In the education sector, for instance, although the current minister has a Kurdish background, the senior leadership remains dominated by individuals with Islamist affiliations. This has led to a growing Islamist influence within the educational sphere, not through formal curricula, but via extracurricular activities and the growing role of private institutions. One such example is the Dar al-Wahi al-Sharif schools, Quranic institutions established in Idlib in 2017

that promote an extremist Islamist ideology and are now reportedly planning to expand into Damascus and Aleppo.

While the transitional government has taken visible steps to resume essential service provision, its efforts are unfolding within a context of significant institutional constraints and a legacy of fragmented governance. Encouraging improvements in sectors such as health and electricity in some areas point to the potential for recovery, even if progress remains uneven and sometimes difficult to sustain. Structural challenges persist, including the lack of nationwide data systems, limited coordination across sectors, and underdeveloped regulatory oversight, but these also reflect the early stage of transition and the scale of the task ahead. Issues such as inequitable resource distribution, politicised staffing, and the influence of ideologically driven actors continue to complicate implementation and risk reinforcing regional disparities. Moving toward more accountable, transparent and inclusive institutional practices will be critical to ensuring that service delivery shifts from reactive crisis management to a more stable and sustainable foundation for recovery.

Institutional transparency & executive accountability

Strengthening institutional transparency and reducing the concentration of executive authority remain important areas for improvement in the interim government's performance. At present, many decisions are made without clear legal justification, public explanation, or formal oversight, which limits opportunities for accountability and public engagement. The following examples demonstrate an ad hoc informalisation of state power that reinforces the perception that legal authority is applied selectively, shaped more by sectarian and ideological considerations than by consistent administrative principles.

A particularly controversial move was the Foreign Minister's creation of a "General Secretariat for Political Affairs", a body with no constitutional or legal basis. The decision involved repurposing assets formerly owned by the dissolved Baath Party, which, under the Constitutional Declaration, should have been transferred to the state. The decision was made without Cabinet, parliamentary, or public consultation, reinforcing patterns of executive overreach and undermining procedural legitimacy. There are further concerning reports that the Foreign Ministry has embedded political units inside other ministries, extending its influence over internal affairs and mirroring Assad-era practices of informal political control.

Another troubling example of such ad hoc decision making was the Governor of Damascus's abrupt order to close a restaurant in the upscale al-Malki district for alleged licensing violations. The order was reversed the following day after public backlash, typifying a reactive and politicised approach to executive action, issued without consistent legal review.

This pattern of decision making has extended into social and cultural freedoms. On 22 May 2025, the Damascus governorate launched a broader campaign targeting liquor shops and bars across predominantly Christian neighbourhoods like Qassaa and Bab Touma. While the stated reason was expired or missing commercial licences, the timing, immediately after Eid al-Fitr, raised concerns about selective enforcement and political signalling. The campaign was suspended after public criticism, again highlighting the fragility of enforcement policies. No public data was

released about how many establishments were shut down, the specific legal criteria used, or whether business owners had access to appeals or compliance procedures. This lack of transparency illustrates the absence of consistent, rules-based enforcement and a failure to uphold public accountability.

A further incident on 30 January 2025 involved individuals distributing Islamic religious leaflets in Bab Touma and Qassaa, urging residents to adopt “morally acceptable” behaviour. The act alarmed local Christian communities and was seen as a threat to the city’s pluralistic fabric. Although security forces reportedly detained those involved, no statement was issued clarifying the charges or legal grounds for their arrest. The absence of information about due process again underscores the institutional gap in public oversight of security actions.

These examples highlight a deeper institutional challenge: the informalisation of state power in the absence of effective legislative and judicial oversight. Governance is often shaped by ad hoc decisions and perceived sectarian or ideological considerations, rather than by consistent legal and administrative norms. This reliance on informal mechanisms risks eroding legal predictability and deepening the trust gap between citizens and the transitional government. Addressing this dynamic will be critical to fulfilling the government’s stated commitment to a rule-of-law culture that marks a clear departure from the authoritarian legacy of the past. Regular performance reporting by ministries, greater publication of budgetary information in addition to the inclusion of civil society in decision-making would help build citizen trust and support more effective governance over time.

Economic performance

After decades of international isolation and economic exclusion, Syria has begun a tentative re-entry into regional and global systems. There have been early signs of reintegration: renewed diplomatic ties with Gulf states, exploratory visits by U.S. and European delegations, and signed agreements with international firms. While still nascent, these developments suggest a degree of external confidence in the transitional authorities and point to emerging opportunities for recovery, investment, and conditional support.

However, concerns persist in the economic sector. The interim government has adopted a model of economic liberalisation that privileges market forces, foreign investment, and deregulation, often at the expense of transparency, equity, and social protection. One of the clearest examples is the sharp rise in bread prices, which have increased nearly tenfold. As bread remains a dietary staple for most Syrian households, the impact has been severe, particularly given that nearly half the population is food insecure. Despite initial signs of consumer price stabilisation in early 2025, anecdotal evidence and recent survey data suggest that inflation is again on the rise. According to ETANA’s survey conducted in May 2025, 77% of respondents said their economic situation is the same or worse than before the fall of the Assad regime.

Labour rights have also suffered under the guise of promoting business. On 8 May 2025, the Minister of Economy issued a decision freezing the requirement for employers to register their workers in the national social security system, a move framed as reducing burdens on traders and stimulating the economy. In practice, it allowed companies to renew commercial licences

without any proof of employee registration, undermining basic protections for workers. The measure, widely criticised by labour advocates, was implemented without a legal framework or enforcement mechanism, reinforcing concerns about opacity and bias toward capital interests.

Despite the government's stated efforts to reconnect different regions of Syria, the actions of security and military personnel on the ground are reinforcing social and geographical fragmentation. These practices hinder the revival of cross-regional value chains and restrict the movement of people and goods between areas. Most importantly, they have contributed to a significant erosion of trust between many Syrians and the government, where trust is a fundamental pillar for any socioeconomic development.

Public sector employment has also been severely affected. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been dismissed, with little transparency around the criteria. While authorities cited the need to eliminate “ghost workers,” reports suggest the process has been arbitrary and, at times, influenced by sectarian or political motives. These layoffs have deepened poverty, contributed to rising unemployment, and risked the loss of institutional memory among experienced civil servants. Meanwhile, the state's ongoing liquidity crisis has made it difficult to meet even modest fiscal commitments. Retirees frequently report receiving only a fraction of their pensions, with banks citing cash shortages. This pattern of over-promising and under-delivering is contributing to a growing disconnect between citizens and the state.

Further compounding this trust deficit is the expanding role of the Economic Committee, formerly affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which now functions as one of the most powerful economic entities within the transitional administration. The committee has assumed control over the seizure and administration of properties and businesses linked to former regime elites, but its activities have gone well beyond this mandate. Reports indicate that the committee has extended its reach into major urban centers like Damascus and Hama, where it now exerts pressure on business owners and company operators, particularly those from the so-called “grey zone” who had no formal ties to the Assad regime but operated within its jurisdictions. Traders and industrialists have been subject to informal levies, administrative obstruction, and politically motivated audits, fostering a climate of intimidation and economic exclusion.

Adding to this resentment are serious restrictions on financial mobility: business owners frequently report difficulties withdrawing funds from local banks, often requiring personal approval from senior financial figures such as the de facto Central Bank head or Abdulrahman Zarba, a senior economic figure within HTS. This concentration of discretion reinforces the perception of a non-transparent financial system operating without clear legal frameworks or appeal mechanisms.

So far, all agreements, projects, signed MOUs, and investment initiatives have been secured either through personal connections to the presidency or the authorities, or via favoured states such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and others. These have not followed a systematic process based on merit, credibility, or quality, nor have they involved transparent public tenders. The model strongly resembles that of Asmaa al-Assad's so-called “inclusive economy” delegation, which selected projects based on personal influence and networks, rather than public need or institutional planning.

Another key source of grievance is the growing disparity in economic opportunity. Businesspeople affiliated with HTS-linked networks reportedly enjoy preferential access to credit, tenders, and commercial licenses, while others, particularly independent actors or those who previously worked legally under the former regime, face systemic exclusion. It is important to clarify that this critique does not target the regime's former patronage network but rather independent, law-abiding entrepreneurs now sidelined in favour of politically connected interests. Together, these dynamics fuel the perception that the current administration is replacing one form of favouritism with another, rather than laying the foundation for inclusive, rules-based economic governance.

The broader economic strategy of the interim government appears oriented toward privatisation and external dependence. Contracts worth billions have been signed with Qatari, Turkish, and American firms, such as the \$7 billion deal to rehabilitate the electricity sector, without public consultation, competitive bidding, or disclosure of terms. One particularly opaque arrangement involved an unregistered Chinese company being granted investment access to Syria's industrial zones. These practices have raised concerns about cronyism and corruption, with no clear evidence of institutional reform or regulatory oversight accompanying the influx of foreign capital.

This free-market orientation is compounded by growing reliance on Gulf states and international financial institutions. Qatar has begun paying a portion of public sector salaries, and Saudi Arabia is expected to follow suit. Both countries have reportedly agreed to cover Syria's debt obligations to the World Bank and IMF, giving them potentially an outsized influence over domestic economic decisions. At the same time, Syria's limited negotiating capacity and absence of a coherent national economic plan make it highly vulnerable to externally imposed conditions. Cuts to public spending, often prioritised by institutions like the IMF, would likely affect employment, subsidies, and essential services in ways that could undermine long-term social stability.

Current investment trends further reflect the rentier nature of the emerging economic order. The focus remains on non-productive sectors such as real estate, rather than industry or agriculture. Projects like the "Boulevard of Victory" in Homs exemplify this trajectory: high-profile developments with questionable affordability, lacking transparency, and raising concerns over housing, land, and property (HLP) rights. At the same time, liberalised imports have flooded the market with low-cost, low-quality goods, placing Syrian manufacturers, especially micro and small enterprises, at risk of collapse due to high production costs and outdated infrastructure.

The fall of the Assad regime, alongside the gradual easing of sanctions and increasing international support, particularly from Turkey and Gulf countries, has created new economic opportunities and generated momentum for recovery and investment. However, to ensure these gains translate into inclusive and sustainable development, it will be important to address concerns around the concentration of economic power. Current patterns of economic governance, including growing influence among politically connected actors, uneven application of market principles, and perceived favouritism toward certain networks, risk reinforcing social divides and replicating aspects of the rentier structures that contributed to past unrest. Promoting transparency, fair competition, and broad-based

participation in economic decision-making will be essential to avoiding the emergence of a new cycle of exclusion.

Corruption

In 2024, Syria was ranked 177th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index, reflecting deeply entrenched practices of corruption under the former regime. With the fall of Bashar al-Assad and the dismantling of the networks tied to his family, the transitional period was widely seen as an opportunity to lay the groundwork for more transparent and accountable governance. While some institutional steps have been taken, progress remains uneven. Efforts to strengthen the rule of law and establish effective oversight mechanisms are still at an early stage, and the legacy of opaque decision-making continues to challenge reform. Nonetheless, ongoing public pressure and international engagement offer potential levers for advancing anti-corruption measures.

Amid ongoing dire economic conditions, including widespread layoffs of public sector workers, persistent liquidity shortages, and the absence of an effective monitoring system, many public employees continue to engage in corrupt practices to supplement their incomes. Notably, even after the recent 200% increase in public sector salaries, the real wage remains only about 30% of its 2010 level. As a result, corruption continues to permeate daily activities, and there is still no clear strategy in place to effectively address it.

Most importantly, corruption and favouritism are apparent at the highest levels of the new government. Ahmad Al-Sharaa and his brothers, Hazem and Jamal, appear to be positioning themselves to control the country's entire economy. Ahmad Al-Sharaa is directly involved in Sham Bank in Idlib, which oversees the Sham Cash application, an application through which all public sector salaries and transactions are processed. This arrangement lacks clear justification, especially given that the existing banking system, while weak, remains functional and considerably safer than the largely unregulated Sham Cash platform. The insistence on using Sham Cash, which controls millions of US dollars of Syrians' money through such an insecure channel, raises serious concerns about transparency and potential misuse, particularly that it is linked to the interim president.

Hazem al-Sharaa has been tasked with overseeing all national and foreign investment. He is currently leading the establishment of a Higher Investment Commission with broad powers over reconstruction and regulatory reform. While this may offer an opportunity to centralise and coordinate economic recovery, it also carries the risk of institutional capture if left unchecked. Jamal al-Sharaa, though not formally in government, continues to exert influence through extensive business ties, including with former regime-linked actors such as Farhan al-Marsoumi, who has recently obtained licenses to trade in tobacco products and import related equipment.

In addition to the Al-Sharaa family, key figures within HTS are actively redistributing what remains of Syria's wealth for their own benefit. For example, Abu Maryam Al-Australi, who is not Syrian, is responsible for managing properties and assets formerly belonging to the Assad regime, which are believed to be worth billions of US dollars. This distribution process is driven entirely by loyalty, favouritism, and corruption, rather than any institutional criteria.

This concentration of power among individual actors, combined with the adoption of neoliberal policies and the outsourcing of public functions, is fostering a governance environment vulnerable to elite capture. The risk is not merely a continuation of past patterns, but the emergence of a new form of centralised crony capitalism. Addressing this will require bold steps to empower independent institutions, introduce oversight over public assets and revenues, and build transparent mechanisms for investment and public service delivery.

Security & military performance

Since the 1970s, the Assad regime constructed a byzantine, intrusive and inherently repressive military-security apparatus built on patronage, coup-proofing and a desire to control Syrian society from the top down. One of the most pressing priorities for interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa and interim authorities after the downfall of the regime was the wholesale reformation of the regime's armed forces and the security apparatus. In the six months since then, interim authorities' efforts have focused on eradicating regime structures and protecting them against the threat of a regime fightback, rebuilding and stabilising the post-Assad Syrian state, and threading direct or indirect HTS control into new institutions.

Ministry of Defense

In the six months since 8th December, the interim Ministry of Defence created 20 divisions of a new Syrian army and has begun work on appointing defectors, HTS affiliates and select former regime-era personnel into military departments responsible for the logistical and technical operations of the armed forces. Particularly in the wake of al-Sharaa's so-called "victory conference" in late January, new divisions effectively integrated the command structures of HTS-friendly factions into their own divisions; other factions, like the National Liberation Front, were subsumed within other divisions. Throughout, HTS commanders dominate. Of the 20 divisions, nine (45%) are directly led by HTS personnel while the remainder are led by former HTS allies or groups that participated in Operation Deterring Aggression last year:

Division Commander Affiliation	Army Divisions	% Total Control
HTS	44 th Division - 50 th Division – 56 th Division - 60 th Division – 66 th Division - 70 th Division – 72 nd Division – 98 th Armored Division – 112 th Division (Marches Brigade)	45
Ahrar al-Sham	40 th Division – 54 th Division	10
Failaq al-Sham	64 th Division	5
Hamza Division	76 th Division	5
Jaish al-Izza'	74 th Division	5
Jund al-Aqsa	82 nd Division	5
Suleiman Shah Brigades	62 nd Division	5
Suqour al-Sham	42 nd Division	5
Turkestan Islamic Party	84 th Division	5
Unknown affiliation	52 nd Division – 80 th Division	10

(The percentages in the table above were calculated using information about the factional background and affiliation of division commanders. The factional affiliations of two division commanders, from the 52nd and 80th Division, were not known at the time of writing.)

Nevertheless, in a marked departure from past practice, the new Syrian army divisions have not been deployed to checkpoints or tasked with internal policing roles. This separation between military and civilian security functions appears to reflect an effort to distance the army from the pervasive intrusion into public life that characterised the Assad regime. While still at an early stage, this division of responsibilities is a promising step toward professionalising the armed forces and delineating the roles of civil and military institutions.

Ministry of Interior & security apparatus

Efforts to reform and rebuild Syria's Interior Ministry followed broadly similar lines, belying a desire to consolidate internal security and send the right messages abroad. Regarded as a shrewd strategic and intelligence operator from years in the senior ranks of HTS (having served as al-Sharaa's deputy and head of the group's security apparatus), interim Interior Minister Anas Khattab has engaged in a balancing act between immediate security challenges and more strategic priorities since being in late March along with the rest of the interim cabinet. As such, Sunni ministry defectors and regime-era personnel (not involved in abuses) were reinstated immediately; the same happened in front-line nodes such as regional police stations and the traffic police. Over time, al-Khattab has transformed the Interior Ministry into one of the key fulcrums of centralised, consolidated power under interim authorities. Most recently, Khattab oversaw the wholesale reorganisation of General Security (rebranded as Internal Security) under the direct control of the ministry with General Security chief Abu Bilal al-Quds reappointed as deputy minister of interior. The presence of Khattab and al-Quds at the helm of the ministry points to the level of HTS penetration in strategic positions of government and security administration.

Early institutional reforms within the Ministry appears to signal a break with some of the most abusive practices of the former regime. In contrast to the Assad era's widespread use of arbitrary detention based on political opinion, there have been fewer reports of politically motivated arrests since the Interior Ministry's restructuring, particularly in areas under centralised interim control. While it is too early to assess whether this shift will be sustained, the return of professional policing norms has been cautiously welcomed by civil society actors. The Interior Ministry has also achieved early success in counter-narcotics operations, disrupting key trafficking routes and securing major drug seizures since December. While challenges remain, this represents one of the most tangible security achievements of the transitional period so far.

Under the new status quo, General Security now operates as a kind of external intelligence branch while several internal branches have also been created, tasked with counter-smuggling, counter-terrorism and the pursuit of "regime remnants." On paper, at least, this has created a more professionalised, streamlined structure broadly in line with western states' own apparatuses, and the restructuring is likely designed to be palatable to regional states and the international community by following a broadly western-style mode of security administration. Even so, the "army of militias" envisaged by al-Sharaa, the presence of extremist foreign fighters and the piecemeal integration of factional structures, though pragmatic for the immediate post-

Assad moment, write conflict-era factional divisions and the potential for instability into institution-building.

Security situation & concerns

For months, military and security administration in Syria has been at times balkanised and chaotic. Widespread human rights violations have been committed by groups and affiliated factions operating under General Security as well as the Ministry of Defence; in some cases, massacres, extra-judicial killings, and kidnappings were often conducted by unknown groups posing as official security forces. The lack of command-control threaded through this system was demonstrated most shockingly in March when pro-government groups responded to a small-scale regime insurgency on the coast by conducting village-to-village sectarian massacres targeting Alawi communities in Latakia and Tartous. More recently, the 22 June 2025 suicide bombing at Mar Elias Church in Damascus, which left at least 20 civilians dead and dozens more injured, further underscored the fragile security environment and the inability of authorities to prevent attacks on minority communities.

Although there are hopes that planned six-month trainings for Ministry of Defence troops will instil greater command-chain integrity in the new system, there are also myriad concerns. One such concern is the penetration of hardline groups into official security forces: extremist factions including former ISIS allies Ajnad al-Sham have effective control over a division within the Syrian army (the 82nd Division); the broad recruitment efforts of both General Security (now Internal Security) have also increased the risks that ISIS and other extremist actors have been able to embed hardliners into state institutions aided with the cover of an official salary and uniform. Even if this is not done on a systematic level by extremist groups, the presence of hardline fighters within a purportedly professionalised, neutral security force meant to uphold the rule of law is already leading to chaotic, prejudicial securitisation, as seen with abuses against civilians on the coast, attacks on nightclubs in and around Damascus, and now, the targeting of religious sites.

Concerns are further compounded by the nature of training and recruitment within the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior. Most training courses are short, ranging from 22 to 45 days, and include measures such as six hours per day dedicated to teaching the Quran and Sunna, bans on smoking, and enforced participation in the five daily prayers. These practices have prompted fears that the emerging security apparatus may mirror the Assad-era model of ideological militarisation, albeit under a different set of values and narratives.

Meanwhile, resistance to integration into the Ministry of Defence, particularly from Ahmad al-Awdeh's groups and Druze factions, created conflict on more than one occasion, most recently in the fierce clashes that broke out between Druze groups in Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya and General Security and affiliated pro-government groups. While al-Awdeh's groups were effectively encircled and disbanded in March, thorny, unresolved talks between interim authorities and Druze groups in Suwayda could lead to further conflict moving forwards. Talks between interim authorities and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been given extra weight since the US administration gave the SDF a timeline in which to integrate into the new Ministry of Defence. However, the SDF are unlikely to relinquish their territory or weapons without meaningful structural changes. They are operating from a position of confidence and remain deeply focused on issues such as amending the Constitutional Declaration.

Lack of civilian oversight & accountability

Greater oversight over the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior is required for the future. Human rights violators in both institutions have not been held accountable, if anything, commanders of groups responsible for violations on the coast were promoted rather than censured, and the current trajectory of interim authorities' "transitional justice" efforts belie a focus on regime-era crimes while ignoring the crimes of HTS and opposition groups. While there is only nominal civilian control over the new military and security apparatus, in the sense that the overwhelming majority of senior officials and commanders are not conventional military personnel, i.e. they do not have a background in the Syrian army but instead rose through the ranks of HTS and other armed factions that emerged in Syria after 2011, there is no coordination between military and civilian authorities at present. Effectively, civilian authorities have no oversight over the activities of military authorities. Al-Sharaa maintains ultimate control over both the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, with the most senior security figures, Abu Qasra and Khattab, answering to him only. In a replication of regime-era practices, less formal networks exist within the traditional command chain from president down to rank-and-file: al-Sharaa, Abu Qasra and al-Khattab maintain small numbers of undeclared advisers and security personnel around them, who are all senior HTS insiders, to provide advice and handle sensitive military and security matters.

In the six months since the fall of the Assad regime, interim authorities have moved quickly to dismantle the former security apparatus and build new military and internal security institutions, with the stated aim of stabilising the state and asserting central authority. There have been some early signs of progress, including the professional separation of army and civilian policing roles, a reduction in politically motivated arrests, and successful counter-narcotics operations led by the Interior Ministry. However, the consolidation of influence by HTS-linked figures within both the Ministry of Defence and the Interior Ministry has raised concerns about the long-term cohesion and neutrality of these institutions. Nearly half of the new army's divisions are led by HTS commanders or allies, and several hardline factions have been formally integrated into the armed forces. Meanwhile, security actors linked to both ministries have been implicated in human rights abuses, and mechanisms for civilian oversight remain limited. Strengthening accountability, clarifying command structures, and embedding institutional checks will be essential to prevent further abuses and to build credible, nationally representative security institutions.

Institutional reform & pathways to inclusive governance

The transitional cabinet

The formation of Syria's transitional cabinet in March 2025 and the promulgation of the new Syrian Constitutional Declaration were framed by the interim authorities as major milestones in building a post-Assad political order. The inclusion of ministers from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as a Kurdish academic as the Minister of Education and a Christian woman civil society figure as the Minister of Social Affairs, is a positive initial step that can signal a commitment to diversity. Symbolic appointments are an important starting point, but meaningful impact will depend on the extent of operational empowerment. The individuals selected are not affiliated with representative political parties or elected community structures, and their influence over national decision-making remains limited.

The appointment of a significant number of technocrats in the government is also a step in service of institutional effectiveness. Nevertheless, technocrats remain subject to the centralised power of individuals affiliated with former Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) networks loyal to the interim president. Such individuals have control over the most powerful ministries - Interior, Defence, Justice, and Foreign Affairs. Compounding this consolidation of power, the interim presidency has abolished the Prime Minister's role, merged, or eliminated several ministries without public input or parliamentary debate and placed Sharaa's family members in top economic and administrative posts. These developments point to a centralised and personalised governance model with limited meaningful representation.

Administrative structure & institutional fragmentation

Coordination across ministries and agencies remains uneven, reflecting the complexity of unifying a country emerging from years of fragmentation. Ministers and local governors sometimes issue overlapping or contradictory directives, highlighting the urgent need for a shared legal and administrative framework to guide the transitional period. In the absence of such a framework, government bodies often apply divergent laws and procedures, which can lead to contradictory decisions, public confusion and frustration.

The following examples illustrate this challenge: in early 2025, the Ministry of Economy issued company registration guidelines based on pre-2011 laws, particularly the 2007 investment law. Meanwhile, the Legal Affairs Council promoted procedures derived from legislation used in former opposition-held areas, such as the 2019 corporate law from northern Syria. As a result, identical company registration applications were accepted in Aleppo but rejected in Damascus.

In another expression of this dynamic, courts in regime-held and former opposition areas apply different personal status codes. Some retain the original 1953 law, while others use revised frameworks that alter custody and divorce provisions. This has led to contradictory rulings for displaced families depending on jurisdiction. In some cases, authorities apply Assad-era laws such as Law No. 10 (2018) to confiscate or manage property, while other areas continue to use frameworks established under the HTS-linked Economic Committee. These competing legal framings generate conflicting claims over property rights, with no mechanism for resolution.

These examples not only show the scale of the legal and institutional harmonisation challenge facing interim authorities, but also demonstrate a deeper problem: institutions operate on parallel legal tracks, and without a central reference point, the rule of law becomes fragmented and inconsistent across the country.

Constitutional reform: Progress or placeholder?

The Syrian Constitutional Declaration of March 2025 outlines the legal and institutional framework for the country's transitional period. Amid deep political uncertainty, it establishes a centralised presidential system aimed at providing stability and coherence. Notably, the declaration includes provisions on transitional justice and women's rights, marking a positive step in acknowledging war-time violations and the importance of gender equality. Articles referencing accountability, education, employment, and protection from violence for women represent an effort, albeit incomplete, to incorporate key societal concerns into Syria's transitional legal order.

At the same time, the declaration concentrates executive power in the presidency. The interim president has sweeping authority: appointing ministers (Article 35), initiating legislation (Article 39), commanding the military (Article 32), and exercising decisive influence over the legislature by directly or indirectly appointing its members (Article 24). While such consolidation is often justified in fragile post-conflict contexts, the absence of independent oversight bodies and meaningful checks on executive power undermines the credibility of this governance model.

The declaration does gesture toward judicial independence (Article 43) and incorporates international human rights treaties (Article 12), both of which are encouraging on paper. However, in practice, it grants the president the power to appoint members of the Constitutional Court (Article 47) and fails to establish procedures for appealing its rulings. Provisions on rights and freedoms (Article 23) are framed within broad and undefined limits such as "national security" and "public morals", leaving them vulnerable to restrictive interpretations.

Efforts have begun to lay the foundations for future political institutions. A committee has recently been formed to establish the People's Assembly, the legislative body mandated to participate in lawmaking and executive oversight. The declaration also affirms cultural and linguistic rights and acknowledges political participation (Article 14), though both are framed in vague terms that limit enforceability. As of mid-2025, no enabling law for political parties has been issued, leaving Syria's political space devoid of legal pluralism or structured opposition.

Despite its shortcomings, the declaration contains foundational elements that could enable a break from the authoritarian practices of the past. Its references to accountability, human rights treaties, and gender protections offer a basis for progress, but these require credible enforcement mechanisms and democratic guarantees. Without such reforms, the transitional framework risks reproducing the exclusionary dynamics of the previous regime. There is a growing danger that disenfranchised communities will disengage from formal political channels and seek representation through informal networks, local actors, or parallel governance structures. This would weaken national coherence and threaten the long-term stability of the transition. However, with strategic implementation and sustained

pressure for reform, the declaration could still serve as a foundation for a more inclusive, accountable, and participatory political order in Syria.

Progress toward an interim legislative body

Six months into the transition, the formation of a legislative body has begun with the establishment of the Supreme Committee for People's Assembly Elections, created by presidential decree on 13 June 2025. The 11-member committee, chaired by Mohammad Taha al-Ahmad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is tasked with overseeing the formation of a 150-member Assembly. In accordance with the Constitutional Declaration, two-thirds of the Assembly will be indirectly elected via regional subcommittees, while one-third will be appointed by the president.

This development marks an important step toward creating an interim legislative body. The committee's mandate includes drafting electoral regulations, allocating seats by population, defining candidacy criteria, and supervising the Assembly's inaugural session. Its formation introduces a formal mechanism for legislative renewal. The inclusion of two women and several minority representatives signals an intent to reflect Syria's social diversity, even if symbolically. Nonetheless, the broader process remains limited by structural challenges. The design is largely elite-driven, and subcommittees, appointed by the central committee, are responsible for selecting "notables" in each governorate, who in turn will form electoral assemblies and vote on candidates. The process does not currently incorporate public consultation, and selection criteria have yet to be clarified, raising concerns about transparency and the risk of exclusion.

The composition of the committee has also drawn scrutiny. Chairing the body while serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may blur the line between executive and legislative functions, challenging the principle of separation of powers. Several other members have known affiliations with the president's inner circle, including figures formerly associated with HTS. The absence of robust representation from key independent civic actors, legal experts, grassroots groups, women's organisations, professional syndicates, and newly marginalised communities such as the Druze, has led to concerns that the process does not yet reflect the full spectrum of Syrian society. Rather than introducing fresh leadership from civil society or the broader revolutionary movement, the appointments have largely reinforced existing political dynamics.

At the subnational level, the proposed electoral arrangements have raised questions about their impact on representation and political legitimacy. Each governorate functions as a closed electoral college, subdivided into regions with fixed seat allocations. Voters may only choose candidates from within their own subregion, preventing cross-district alliances. Critics argue that this structure allows areas with little revolutionary involvement, such as Qatana or Jdeidet Artuz, to receive equal representation to more mobilised regions like Douma or Harasta. In this context, some contend that the design flattens the political landscape by treating all regions equally in representation, regardless of their level of civic engagement, sacrifice, or contribution to the country's transition. This may risk sidelining constituencies that were at the forefront of resistance and political mobilisation, potentially eroding their trust in the new system. Further subdivision into administrative and security districts reinforces geographic isolation and enables the central authorities to prevent coordinated representation based on shared political interests.

On the other hand, some defend the approach, arguing that it ensures geographic representation and equal weight for all regions, irrespective of their political histories. Geographic representation is a recognised principle in electoral design, intended to ensure that all parts of the country have a voice in the political process, regardless of their past allegiances or levels of mobilisation.

The committee's establishment represents procedural progress and a necessary starting point for building a legislative institution. However, for the People's Assembly to develop into a credible and representative body, further steps will be needed. These include clear and inclusive selection criteria, greater participation from civic and professional sectors, transparent appointment procedures, and avenues for public engagement. With such changes, the Assembly has the potential to evolve into a meaningful vehicle for democratic transition.

Judicial reform

To date, meaningful judicial reform in Syria remains a significant challenge. The first government formed after 8 December 2024 lacked the authority to initiate major structural changes. Since taking office over three months ago, the transitional government has begun to engage with judicial institutions, though efforts to date have been limited and often controversial. Most actions have centred on key appointments, which many observers view as attempts to establish political influence over the judiciary. While some improvements in judicial independence are visible when compared to the Assad era, these appear to result more from the collapse of former coercive mechanisms than from deliberate institutional reform.

The judiciary continues to face serious vulnerabilities to executive interference. Echoing earlier concerns about the informalisation of state power, political considerations continue to influence appointments, and ministerial decrees frequently override judicial rulings. In the absence of an independent complaints mechanism, courts remain at risk of functioning as extensions of the executive rather than as autonomous adjudicators.

In early 2025, the Minister of Justice appointed heads of first-instance and appellate courts in Deir Ezzor, Daraa and Aleppo without consultation with the High Judicial Council or any independent vetting body. The exclusion of qualified junior judges raised questions about transparency and procedural fairness. Similarly, in February 2025, the Interior Minister overruled a magistrate's court order to reopen a media outlet that had been previously closed for administrative reasons. Citing "national security concerns", the minister maintained the closure without legal review or appeal, raising concerns about judicial independence. In another instance, the Ministry of Economy suspended enforcement of a final commercial court judgment in favour of a businessman, citing "administrative reassessment". No appeal mechanism was offered, effectively nullifying the court's ruling. These examples illustrate the persistent challenges facing judicial autonomy and the need for safeguards to reinforce the separation of powers.

There have also been concerns about the legality of certain judicial appointments. The Minister of Justice has named new heads and members of the Higher Judicial Council and installed court presidents in major cities, reportedly without adhering to formal legal procedures. Some appointees lack formal legal qualifications, raising questions about compliance with Article 51

of the Constitutional Declaration, which affirms the continued application of existing laws unless amended or repealed. This includes the Judicial Authority Law No. 98 of 1961, which sets out the criteria for judicial appointments (Article 70), the composition of the Supreme Judicial Council (Article 65), and the structure of the Court of Cassation (Article 49). Appointing individuals without recognised legal credentials to senior roles, including the chair and deputy of the Court of Cassation, risks undermining confidence in the rule of law.

Nonetheless, the Ministry of Justice has taken some initial steps towards accountability. In February 2025, it referred 87 judges from the terrorism courts for investigation. On 14 June, 67 were formally dismissed by presidential decree, and the terrorism court itself was suspended. The Ministry has also removed a number of judges affiliated with the Baath Party and the former People's Assembly. These actions could represent a measure of institutional responsiveness to past abuses, although there is little transparency surrounding the process. Affiliation with the Ba'ath Party was widespread and does not necessarily imply corruption. For much of the public sector, particularly during the Hafez al-Assad era, party affiliation was a prerequisite for employment or access to state institutions.

More comprehensive reforms are needed to build a judiciary that is independent, capable, and trusted. Many judges implicated in corruption or with strong ties to the former regime are believed to remain in office. Meanwhile, an acute shortage of qualified judges persists. To address this, the government could explore a range of remedial measures, such as reinstating defected judges, launching competitive recruitment drives, or appointing experienced lawyers and legal scholars to the bench. Notably, Article 70 of the Judicial Authority Law allows the Supreme Judicial Council to make exceptional appointments under defined conditions, provided they do not exceed 25% of existing vacancies. Leveraging this provision could offer a credible pathway to address urgent capacity gaps while reinforcing merit-based standards. To ensure its effectiveness, however, it will be important to safeguard the impartiality of the Supreme Judicial Council and ensure broad-based representation, particularly given concerns about potential influence from HTS-affiliated actors.

Transitional justice

Progress on transitional justice has been gradual, with some important first steps signalling a willingness to engage with Syria's legacy of violence and impunity. The most notable development occurred on 17 May 2025, when the interim president issued Presidential Decree No. 20 establishing the National Commission for Transitional Justice. The move was framed as a demonstration of commitment to accountability and reconciliation, and it represents an initial effort to address one of the most complex and politically sensitive aspects of the transition.

While the creation of the Commission is a positive step in principle, questions have been raised about its legal foundation, institutional design, and leadership structure. The body was established by executive decree, even though the Constitutional Declaration limits the president's lawmaking powers. Its formation did not involve parliamentary endorsement or wider public consultation, which may affect perceptions of its legitimacy and alignment with broader justice sector reforms.

Notably, the Commission's mandate focuses exclusively on crimes committed by the former regime, with no provisions to investigate or address violations carried out by opposition groups,

HTS-affiliated actors, or other armed factions. This selective scope has raised concerns among victims' groups and legal experts that transitional justice may be instrumentalised, rather than serving as a comprehensive and impartial process.

The decree appointed Brigadier General Abdulbaset Abdullatif as head of the Commission, granting him authority to form a working team and draft internal bylaws within 30 days. However, details about his selection process, qualifications, or approach to team formation and rule-setting were not made public. Clarifying these aspects could strengthen the Commission's credibility and build public trust in its independence and competence.

As of early July, the Commission remains in an early stage of development. Internal bylaws have not yet been finalised, and a full staff team is still being assembled. Nevertheless, some initial engagement with international actors has taken place, suggesting an openness to collaboration and technical support. Moving forward, the establishment of a clear operational strategy, a defined public mandate, and independent, representative staffing will be essential for the Commission to function as an effective and trusted mechanism for transitional justice.

Input legitimacy: Public engagement, inclusivity & civil liberties

Input legitimacy in Syria's transitional governance hinges on two dimensions: representation and inclusivity. The former concerns who holds formal authority, such as cabinet ministers, and whether they reflect societal constituencies. The latter refers to who participates meaningfully in shaping decisions, regardless of title. A process may appear representative while excluding key actors like women, sects, victims, etc. from meaningful influence. For legitimacy to take root, both dimensions must be broadly aligned and responsive to the public. Together, these determine if the transition reflects Syria's diversity or reproduces elite-driven rule under a new guise.

Political communications & engagement

The recurring theme of the informalisation of state power and the ad hoc nature of state management is particularly evident in the continued reliance on platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp for official communication, even several months into the transition, highlighting the absence of formalised and accessible channels for public engagement.

More broadly, the interim authorities' approach to communication also reflects a broader institutional tendency toward centralisation and limited transparency. Although references to reconciliation, participation, and pluralism have become more frequent in official discourse, the mechanisms to support meaningful public influence remain underdeveloped. Government messaging has largely followed a top-down model, and the absence of a clear, unified communication strategy has limited the effectiveness of outreach. Establishing regular, inclusive forums for public dialogue could help align rhetoric with practice.

This detachment is further reinforced by legal ambiguity: the authorities have yet to clarify which legal framework they recognise, whether pre-2011 Syrian law, legislation from the Salvation Government in Idlib, or a transitional hybrid. This lack of legal clarity not only undermines judicial consistency and institutional credibility, but also erodes public trust by making it difficult for citizens to understand their rights, challenge decisions, or hold institutions accountable. In the absence of a transparent legal baseline, meaningful public participation becomes harder to achieve.

Despite the recent formation of a committee to support the election process for the People's Assembly, the absence of an interim legislative body until now has significantly hindered the government's ability to make and legitimise foundational legal decisions. With no authority empowered to enact temporary legislation to govern the transitional phase, and no legislative oversight to review or challenge executive decisions on legal grounds, critical legal reforms, such as harmonising laws from different regions or repealing obsolete legislation, have been delayed or bypassed altogether. As a result, most decisions are issued through executive decrees by the President or ministers, often without legal clarity or procedural safeguards. This has led to inconsistent legal interpretation, administrative confusion, and a growing public perception that the transitional government lacks a solid legal foundation. The absence of a functioning legislative framework not only compounds the problem of legal ambiguity, it also undermines the legitimacy and stability of the entire governance structure during this critical period.

Across the four major national initiatives launched to date, the National Dialogue Conference, Constitutional Declaration Committee, Civil Peace Committee, and National Commission for Transitional Justice, a consistent pattern has emerged. Structures have been created rapidly, but without transparent procedures, inclusive selection processes, or institutionalised channels for public input and oversight.

The National Dialogue Conference, for example, was framed as a milestone in participatory politics. However, inconsistent invitation practices and the underrepresentation of key constituencies, including women, members of the AANES, Alawite community leaders, and key independent civil society actors, undermined its inclusivity. Participants also reported that their input was not adequately reflected in the final communiqué. For many, the conference stands as a missed opportunity to build trust through meaningful public engagement. Moving forward, future national forums would benefit from earlier outreach, transparent selection, and public reporting on outcomes and follow-up mechanisms.

Similarly, the Constitutional Declaration Committee operated without open nominations or consultation. Nevertheless, the Committee introduced a transitional framework and could serve as a basis for future reform if reconstituted with broader representation and clearer legal foundations. Civil society actors have called for procedural safeguards to ensure that such bodies reflect the diverse constituencies affected by the transition, noting that with inclusive engagement, such bodies could still evolve into legitimate vehicles for transition.

The events in Jaramana and the coastal region in March and April 2025 highlighted the limitations of the authorities' current engagement model, particularly in addressing intercommunal tensions. Initial responses were marked by a lack of timely, clear communication. Official statements were either delayed or general in nature, falling short of directly condemning hate speech, sectarian incitement, or extrajudicial violence. This response gap impacted perceptions of neutrality, particularly among Alawite and Druze communities, and contributed to a sense of marginalisation in affected areas.

In a constructive move, the authorities responded by establishing two key bodies: the National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ) and the Civil Peace Committee. The NCTJ, created by presidential decree in May 2025, aims to advance truth-seeking, legal reform, and pathways for redress. Its establishment has helped bring transitional justice back into national political discourse and signals a formal acknowledgement of the need to address past abuses.

The Civil Peace Committee, established in response to rising local tensions, was designed to facilitate dialogue, promote de-escalation, and support social cohesion in sensitive areas. While its launch reflected recognition of the need for localised peacebuilding mechanisms, its credibility faced early challenges. The informal involvement of Fadi Saqr, a figure associated with the Tadamon massacre, raised serious concerns, particularly considering Article 49 of the Constitutional Declaration, which emphasises victim-centred accountability. These concerns intensified following the 10 June 2025 press conference, where the authorities' announcement of the release of former regime figures, particularly Fadi Saqr, drew strong public backlash and was widely seen as legitimising impunity. Further, the overlap between the Committee's functions and those of the National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ) has also led to some ambiguity regarding roles and responsibilities.

Public discourse in the transition remains largely centralised; while steps have been taken to project an image of consultation, meaningful inclusion remains limited. Civil society, though active and capable, continues to be underrepresented, not due to a lack of interest or readiness, but because structured mechanisms for participation have yet to be developed. Key initiatives, including the National Dialogue Conference and the Constitutional Declaration Committee, have so far operated without transparent procedures, formal channels for feedback, or clear opportunities for public scrutiny. These constraints have contributed to perceptions that engagement has been more symbolic than substantive, with limited space for shaping outcomes. As a result, some communities have grown disillusioned, particularly those who had hoped the transition would offer a genuine departure from top-down, elite-driven governance.

Perception of inclusivity by political, ethnic, and religiously diverse groups

The transitional authorities have consistently articulated a commitment to building an inclusive political system. Yet this has been undermined by patterns of symbolic inclusion and operational exclusion. The Constitutional Declaration reinforces a Sunni-majoritarian framework, offering no enforceable protections for minorities or legal pluralism. This architecture is recasting state identity along sectarian lines, deepening both structural and perceived marginalisation among non-Sunni communities.

ETANA's survey findings confirm this imbalance and its associated experienced. Following the massacres on the coast and violence in Suwayda, technocratic and diversity appointees, particularly Druze and Alawites as well as unaffiliated Sunni officials, lacked any operational authority to prevent or respond to the violence. In March 2025, during anti-insurgency operations in the coastal region, Alawite civilians were subjected to mass extrajudicial killings and detentions, underscoring the rise of militant sectarianism. That same month, Druze-majority towns such as Jaramana experienced state-tolerated sectarian attacks following digitally circulated incitement, with no institutional condemnation or protective intervention. And on 22 June, the bombing of a Christian church in Damascus further deepened fears of rising religiously motivated violence. ETANA's May to June 2025 survey found that over 85% of Sunni respondents felt safe under the transitional authorities, while only 21% of Alawite and 18% Druze respondents reported feeling safe, while only 22% of Christians felt satisfied with the level of freedom they are currently experiencing in Syria.

Disparities in political empowerment reinforce exclusion. 77% of minority respondents do not believe the interim authorities represent their interests, and 78% are dissatisfied with transparency in governance. By contrast, Sunni-majority areas such as Idlib, Daraa, Raqqa, Aleppo, and Deir Ezzor report high satisfaction. These governorates also express strong approval of the authorities' performance on women's rights and freedoms, with 93% in Daraa and Idlib stating that women's rights are protected. In sharp contrast, only 15% in Suwayda, 12% of Alawite and 11% of Druze respondents, express similar confidence. Christians, Ismailis, and Shia respondents also report low levels of satisfaction, despite symbolic cabinet appointments. These patterns point to an emerging identity-based populism, where political favour and

perceived protection track closely with religious affiliation and geography, rather than inclusive citizenship or democratic representation.

The transitional process has yet to fully reflect Syria's political, ideological, and social diversity. Key civic and ideological actors, including secular parties, the Kurdish-led AANES, and key independent feminist and civil society organisations, have so far been marginalised from both the constitutional process and the national dialogue framework. Although a Kurdish delegation visited Damascus in May and June 2025, AANES leadership was not included in the National Dialogue Conference and has not been formally engaged in shaping transitional legislation. Public statements from AANES and Kurdish parties characterised the meetings as procedural and one-sided, noting the absence of joint agenda setting. This continuation of exclusionary practices has hindered opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

Broader societal groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and independent trade unions, have also seen limited participation. No mechanisms such as quota systems or proportional representation frameworks have yet been introduced to ensure the inclusion of historically underrepresented communities. Such tools are common in transitional settings and are critical for establishing inclusive governance and reinforcing equal citizenship.

Some appointments, such as the inclusion of women in the cabinet, mark a modest departure from past regimes, where female ministers were rare and largely symbolic. While these roles remain confined to marginal portfolios, their visibility carries weight for many Syrians, particularly women and youth, and could evolve into more participatory norms if accompanied by real authority and institutional support. For instance, the appointment of a Christian female academic as Minister of Social Affairs was welcomed in principle, but has been criticised for lacking a reform mandate or backing from representative Christian communities. More broadly, however, the government's approach has prioritised symbolic inclusion over structural change. Appointees from minority or underrepresented communities often lack clear mandates or links to connections to legitimate constituencies, which limits their influence. The appointment of the head of the transitional justice commission, made without consultation and widely seen as aligned with the interim president, has further deepened doubts about impartiality and independence. These patterns reinforce perceptions of executive dominance and erode confidence in the government's commitment to genuinely inclusive governance.

These concerns are not abstract; they have material consequences. In regions such as Suwayda and Deir Ezzor, marginalised communities are increasingly turning to informal power structures, including tribal councils, de facto local authorities, and armed factions, to mediate disputes, provide services, or voice local demands. If left unaddressed, this exclusionary and authoritarian trajectory risks producing a negative peace, defined by the absence of overt violence but the persistence of unaddressed grievances, traumas, and inequality. Syria's legacy of sectarian repression, unresolved war crimes, and political exclusion continues to shape public disillusionment. Meanwhile, the rehabilitation of former regime officials and ex-jihadist commanders into administrative roles has fuelled fears that the post-Assad transition is a rebranded authoritarianism, not a democratic renewal. These fears, if ignored, may encourage renewed calls for autonomy, disengagement from state institutions, or future cycles of mobilisation. A more sustainable path must begin with recognition of Syria's pluralism as a source of resilience. Inclusion through decentralised

governance, participatory constitution making, and legal pluralism is essential. The legitimacy of Syria's transitional process will depend not on rhetorical commitments, but on measurable reforms that allow all components of society to shape the future state.

Civil liberties & media freedom

Civil liberties & social freedom

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2025" report continues to classify Syria as "Not Free," assigning the country a score of 0 out of 40 for political rights and 8 out of 60 for civil liberties. The report highlights ongoing restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and religion. It observes that while the fall of the Assad regime has created new political space, many core authoritarian practices remain in place, including arbitrary detention, suppression of dissent, and a lack of judicial independence. Although the transitional authorities have made only limited moves toward reform so far, these initial steps offer entry points for further engagement. With sustained pressure and clear institutional safeguards, the transitional period could still be redirected toward stronger protections for civil and political rights.

Under the interim authorities, Syria's transitional period has seen a notable reassertion of moral conservatism in the regulation of social life. While not formally codified in most cases, emerging practices suggest increasing interference in matters of personal freedom. Authorities have introduced "modesty" guidelines for women's dress in public spaces, including a June 2025 decree requiring burkinis at public beaches, although Western swimwear remains permitted in private resorts. Alcohol consumption, though not officially banned, has come under scrutiny, with signals that future legislation may impose further restrictions, particularly in Sunni-majority areas. Instances of gender segregation have also surfaced, most visibly in April 2025 when Al-Muwatat Hospital in Damascus mandated separate seating for women on staff transport, prompting backlash and a subsequent policy reversal. Such measures reflect restrictions in Idlib, where HTS enforced dress codes, limited women's mobility, and took punitive action against perceived moral infractions. These developments have raised concerns among civil society actors about the gradual erosion of social freedoms and the risk of entrenching a gendered authoritarianism in the post-conflict order. However, Syria's transition is unfolding within a contested and dynamic social landscape, where public debate, policy reversals, and grassroots mobilisation suggest that the emerging order remains open to negotiation and civic influence.

Media freedom

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, local observers celebrated what appeared to be a renaissance in independent journalism. Syrian and international media actors operated with unprecedented access, offering a rare glimpse into the potential of a pluralistic media sector to contribute to national reconciliation, civic accountability, and informed public discourse. In a post-conflict context marked by sectarian violence, fragmented communities, and widespread disinformation, media independence plays a critical role in stabilisation and peacebuilding in enabling rights and freedoms, fostering accountability and trust, amplifying marginalised voices, promoting civic dialogue, and supporting transitional justice.

The interim authorities' public rhetoric on rights protection, underscored by Article 13 of the March 2025 Constitutional Declaration, which guarantees "freedom of opinion, expression, information, publication, and the press", initially raised hopes for a freer and more independent media environment that would lead the way towards stabilisation and peacebuilding as noted. However, this opening is proving increasingly fragile. The re-emergence of operational constraints, legal ambiguity, and institutional selectivity has raised serious concern among civil society actors and international observers.

The launch of the official Syria TV channel was met with widespread criticism among Syrians, particularly regarding its quality, editorial freedom, and hiring practices. The selection of staff has been seen as highly selective, with many experienced journalists excluded, while the channel's messaging remains rigid and tightly controlled. This has come as a major disappointment and shock to journalists and media activists both inside and outside the country, who had hoped for a more open and professional media landscape in the post-Assad era.

Legal ambiguities & structural constraints

Previous papers from ETANA in addition to reporting from Human Rights Watch have flagged problematic language in the interim constitution that conditions media freedoms on undefined principles of "morality" and "national unity." Such provisions grant discretionary power to the executive, particularly in the absence of judicial independence or institutional safeguards. Without concrete legal instruments or oversight mechanisms to uphold press freedom, the protections outlined in Article 13 remain largely theoretical.

Despite formal guarantees, access to the media space remains uneven and heavily mediated by political considerations. Independent journalists and outlets report multiple barriers, including visa denials, surveillance, reported regional access restrictions, particularly in coastal areas, with cases of informal intimidation extending to smear campaigns. These patterns have contributed to fear and self-censorship.

In parallel, state-aligned influencers and well-funded external outlets such as Al Jazeera, Syria TV, and Al Araby enjoy privileged access to government briefings and high-visibility platforms. Several citizen journalists previously aligned with governance structures in Idlib have been absorbed into formal media institutions. While some present as independent voices, questions persist around professional standards and impartiality, with many amplifying narratives aligned with the interim authorities. This has contributed to growing concerns about media pluralism and the risk of loyalty-based information systems.

The retention of the Ministry of Information, officially announced on 30 March 2025, has further heightened concerns. As noted by Enab Baladi's report, this decision is widely viewed as a continuation of centralised control over narrative production. The Ministry's role goes beyond mere media management; it appears instrumental in engineering a new media complex loyal to the interim authorities, combining traditional state control with new influencer media.

Repressive measures & institutional regression

Repressive tactics also appear to be returning. On 6 February 2025, the interim authorities dissolved the General Conference of the Journalists' Union and replaced it with a temporary council appointed by the government, in what Syria Untold saw as a step toward institutionalising loyalty and limiting media autonomy. These actions suggest that censorship is no longer an emergency measure, but part of a broader strategy of monopolising meaning-making and aligning public perception with the new interim authorities.

The cumulative result is a growing crisis of trust, both in state-aligned media and in civil space more broadly. ETANA's May-June 2025 national survey reveals this fragmentation starkly. Among self-identified Sunni respondents, 78% expressed satisfaction with their freedoms under the interim government. In contrast, only 17% of the self-identified non-religious Syrians, 18% Alawites, 18% Druze, and 22% Christian respondents (prior to the Mar Elias church explosion) reported similar levels of satisfaction regarding their freedoms. This polarisation reflects deepening identity-based divides and the risk of echo chambers in public discourse. As public confidence erodes and pluralistic media voices are crowded out, audiences increasingly retreat into ideologically aligned silos, undermining shared civic space and weakening the foundations of social cohesion.

While the fall of Assad created a brief opportunity for genuine media reform, the al-Sharaa interim government has yet to institutionalise the legal protections or accountability structures necessary to safeguard media freedoms and civil liberties. The current trajectory suggests a shift from overt repression to more systemic, centralised control. Without urgent structural reforms, Syria risks replacing one form of authoritarian media governance with another, undermining both democratic transition and the prospects for a sustainable peace.

Conclusion

Six months into Syria's transition, the interim authorities have succeeded in re-establishing a functioning central administration and preserving basic order across much of the country. Compared to other post-collapse contexts, the speed with which ministries resumed operations and public services were restored represents a significant achievement. Early signs of international engagement and limited returns of displaced Syrians offer further glimpses of a possible pathway to recovery. These developments should not be underestimated.

At the same time, any evaluation of the interim authorities depends on the baseline from which progress is measured. If judged against the legacy of the Assad regime, with its brutality, collapse of public trust, and widespread institutional decay, the pace of reconstitution is notable. But if assessed against the benchmarks of credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance, the record to date is far less favourable. Institutional consolidation has too often come at the expense of legal accountability, inclusive decision-making, and meaningful public participation. Core state functions have been reactivated, but largely within a framework that mirrors earlier patterns of centralisation, unchecked power and elite dominance.

The continued dominance of HTS-linked actors in the security and economic spheres, the personalisation of executive authority, and the marginalisation of independent actors raise serious concerns about the trajectory of reform. While formal structures have been created, from a transitional cabinet to committees on justice, elections, and dialogue, many remain disconnected from the broader public and risk being co-opted by dominant political networks.

Syria's new authorities now face a critical choice. The initial legitimacy gained from the fall of the Assad regime and the restoration of basic services is limited and will erode without a shift in direction. If political space is not expanded, rights protected, and governance made genuinely representative, the transition could settle into a more diffuse but still authoritarian order. A sustainable path forward requires more than technical delivery or external support. It calls for enforceable legal safeguards, clear limits on executive power, and inclusive institutions that reflect the full spectrum of Syrian society. Without such a course correction, the promise of a post-Assad transition risks giving way to renewed repression under a different name.