

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime opened the possibility of a different relationship between Syrians and the state. For many Syrians, hope for change remains mixed with fear of renewed authoritarianism and state capture. Support for the current authorities does not automatically mean trusting state institutions or recognizing their legitimacy, as people may cooperate out of necessity and self-interest. At the same time, criticism of government performance does not necessarily mean rejecting the authorities or denying the legitimacy of their institutions. This suggests that institutional legitimacy should be examined separately from political support for leading authorities. This policy brief examines the factors shaping people's acceptance of institutional authority in everyday life and what is needed to build a relationship based on rights, accountability and transparency.

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Background & Methodology

Background

This policy note is based on focus group discussions conducted in different areas of Syria between June and July 2026. These focus groups were themselves intended as a response to, and conversation with, a previous survey [conducted by ETANA in November 2025](#), which provided a gauge of Syrians' thinking nearly one year after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime but also raised several pertinent questions about how Syrians perceived key areas of society and what policy changes could ameliorate conditions moving forward.

Methodology

The analysis draws on four focus group discussions held in June and July 2026 in Aleppo, Damascus, Hasakeh and Homs, involving a total of 38 participants, including 19 women. All participants are engaged in public affairs in some capacity and included civil society actors, professionals and local officials. These discussions do not constitute a survey or a representative sample of the populations in these areas. Instead, they reflect local experiences with state institutions, informed by participants' assessment and public engagement. The findings identify factors participants associated with legitimacy, while also showing how institutional practices shape perceptions of legitimacy and how experiences differ within and between different areas of the country. This brief operationally defines institutional legitimacy as acceptance of state institutions' authority and right to make decisions that govern people's lives.

Acceptance as Conditional & Contingent

The focus group discussions show that acceptance of the authorities in Syria takes different forms and varies in degree. Practical acceptance reflects a willingness to cooperate with the authorities without necessarily recognizing their legitimacy.

In Homs, one participant said: “I accept [authorities] without granting them legitimacy, and I am willing to engage with them and help them in the hope that things will improve.” Here, cooperation is motivated by the hope of improving conditions, while reservations about the authorities’ right to govern remain.

I am willing to engage with [authorities] and help them in the hope that things will improve.

Focus group participant from Homs

However, assessing acceptance is difficult when people fear expressing disagreement. In Damascus, some described it as “fearing the reproduction of an authoritarian or repressive system similar to the previous regime.” Reflecting on the regime years, a participant in Hasakeh said: “We grew up believing that silence was safer than speaking.” In this way, fear can produce performative compliance without acceptance. This fear extends to include intimidation by the interim authorities’ supporters. As one participant in Homs explained: “I am afraid to speak on social media, and I fear the authorities’ supporters more than the authorities themselves.”

Practical acceptance gives institutions time to meet these expectations without granting them full legitimacy. Fear further complicates assessment as it limits expression, while performative acceptance may conceal reservations. In general, neither cooperation nor silence is sufficient evidence of legitimacy, just as criticism does not necessarily mean rejection.

Expectations

The findings indicate that acceptance is conditional on expectations of security, improved livelihoods and a break with past repression. For some, this acceptance stems from protection and practical needs. A participant in Aleppo said: “Some groups grant the authorities conditional or ‘pragmatic’ legitimacy out of a desire to secure a minimum level of safety and security and protect their vital economic and commercial interests.” In both cases, acceptance depends on the authorities’ ability to maintain security and protect livelihoods, rather than agreement with their political position.

For others, acceptance draws on the end of Assad’s rule and the hope for wider change. In Homs, participants mentioned the “importance of functioning institutions” and how their teenage children had begun thinking differently about the future after previously worrying about military service and their safety.

In Hasakeh, one participant expressed expectations that went beyond these immediate improvements by stating: “I am very optimistic that things will improve, that sectarianism and racism will end, and that participation will take their place.” Such expectations may give institutions time to demonstrate their value, but do not establish lasting acceptance of their authority.

Representation: Identity, Interests & Equal Citizenship

The discussions show that sharing a religious or ethnic identity with those in power does not guarantee feeling represented. In Homs, a participant said that “if we look at public opinion, we see that Sunni Muslims are not collectively represented by the authorities, and there are many divisions over them within the Sunni community itself.” Thus, the presence of senior officials from one community does not establish that the community’s members regard institutions as representative or legitimate.

Many examples indicate that material interests shape this relationship. In Hasakeh, one participant argued that “these authorities represent everyone who has self-interests with them, while anyone whose interests do not overlap with the current authorities does not feel represented. The basis is purely self-interest.” The Damascus discussion provided an example, describing “new employees, from different communities and sects, who feel fully represented because their interests and job security are tied to the current authorities.” These cases suggest that institutional benefits and personal interests can create a sense of representation across communal divisions. However, acceptance among those who benefit does not automatically mean fair treatment of the wider population.

Participants also linked representation to recognition of different identities and equal citizenship, describing experiences that fell short of these expectations. In Hasakeh, for example, a participant said that “only when rights, ethnic identities and languages are recognised, will I feel a true sense of belonging to this country.” Some participants stated that they still have to identify themselves as Arabs, which does not reflect their actual ethnic identity. In Homs, a participant described how “some groups have had to prove their patriotism simply because they belong to a particular sect.” Both arguments concern equal citizenship, as institutions weaken their legitimacy when they use communal identity to question a person’s rights.

The discussion from Homs illustrates how political labels can also obstruct recognition of personal loss. One participant, a lawyer, said: “I have a client who had two sons, one in the regime’s army and the other with the revolutionaries. She lost both and is asking which one is considered a martyr and which one is not.” According to the participant, the mother approached authorities from the Homs Governorate office for clarification about her sons’ statuses but received no answer. The unanswered claim raises a question about whether institutions can recognise families’ losses fairly when those losses cross former conflict lines.

Only when rights, ethnic identities and languages are recognised, will I feel a true sense of belonging to this country.

Focus group participant from Hasakeh

The discussions show that representation in Syria has both a material dimension, shaped by whose interests institutions serve, and a rights dimension, shaped by whose identities and claims they recognise. However, shared identity with officials or benefits for selected groups cannot alone establish institutional legitimacy when others must deny their identity, defend their loyalty or struggle to have their losses acknowledged. More durable institutional legitimacy depends on equal citizenship in which institutions recognise different identities, rights, losses and claims.

The legacy of conflict-era geographies & territorial fragmentation

This dimension highlights the legacy of the Syrian conflict's geography, extending it beyond territorial control to issues of classification, memory, stigma, administrative systems and unequal access. It notes that wartime residence and displacement created institutional histories and affect how state institutions and authorities classify, recognise and treat people.

Where people lived during the conflict could affect how current authorities and their supporters treat them. In Homs, a participant mentioned that “when I criticise the cleaning campaign, for example, people at work call me a regime remnant because I lived in regime-controlled areas.” In Damascus, participants linked the current political exclusion to the “implicit accusation that the capital's residents failed to act because they remained under the former regime's authority.” These arguments show how residence during the conflict can be used to discredit present-day claims, without considering whether people had a choice about staying. Another participant in Homs challenged this assumption, saying: “I feel we had a role in liberation because we stayed here, remained honourable and worked.”

In Aleppo, these judgements reportedly affect access to employment and civic work. Residents of the city's western neighbourhoods, which remained under Assad regime control throughout the conflict, described facing “prohibitive conditions and complex security checks when trying to enter public employment or undertake civic work” under the new authorities. Yet these neighbourhoods were also described as retaining better services and a greater concentration of administrative institutions throughout the conflict until the present day. Thus, the level of services in an area does not determine whether residents receive fair treatment when seeking employment or participating in public life.

On the other hand, coming from former opposition-held areas does not guarantee favourable treatment. In Aleppo, participants associated advantages in appointments and recruitment with some groups from these areas and not the areas themselves, “particularly those linked to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [HTS].” In Damascus, “returnees from rural Aleppo, Al-Bab and Azaz feel that they face injustice and marginalization and have not received their rights.” The concern for institutional legitimacy is selective treatment; geography may benefit people with the right connections while offering no protection to others from the same area.

Returnees from rural Aleppo, Al-Bab and Azaz feel that they face injustice and marginalization and have not received their rights.

Focus group participant from Damascus

For displaced people, the prospect of return creates a further test of institutions' ability to protect rights and livelihoods. In Hasakeh, a participant described displaced friends from Ras al-Ain considering return as being “very grateful to the new authorities because they would finally be able to live in homes with walls and a door to protect them, instead of living in camps.” Another participant described a different situation by stating that “for someone who found an income and stability in the area of displacement, returning may mean a major loss, so they may not feel a sense of belonging or appreciation towards the new authorities.” Acceptance may depend on what return allows people to recover and whether they can maintain a secure life after moving.

In Hasakeh, participants also raised concerns about moving between different administrative, educational and judicial systems. One participant said that “whether the coming system is centralised or decentralised, I believe we will face major challenges in adapting and integrating.” This raises practical questions about

whether qualifications, records and existing rights will remain recognised, and which procedures people will need to follow.

Participants' assessments of the Self Administration in Hasakeh help explain what they may want preserved or changed from the institutional perspective. One participant said that its social contract "recognized the presence of different communities, their rights and cultures, and strengthened mutual respect between them." However, another participant criticized service allocation by stating that "streets where Self Administration employees and officials lived were paved, while other areas continued to suffer from poor services." Acceptance of a successor institution may depend on preserving valued rights in addition to correcting unfair practices. A change of administration alone does not resolve these concerns or confer legitimacy.

The legacy of conflict geography thus shapes political labels, access to employment and civic participation, prospects for return, and the recognition of existing rights and records. Institutional legitimacy will depend in part on whether the new order can move beyond wartime classifications while preserving rights and practices that communities value.

Procedural and distributive fairness in access to services & opportunities

Participants assessed institutional performance through improvements in their daily lives. That is, they assessed the services and opportunities available to them and how they are provided.

In Hasakeh, “people’s interests mainly lie in securing basic needs, such as diesel, electricity and water.” Participants also argued that service availability does not mean it reaches everyone regularly. In Homs, a participant described conditions in some areas by stating that “they receive water only once every several days.” In Aleppo, “eastern neighbourhoods continue to suffer from damaged infrastructure and severe delays in repairing and rehabilitating water and electricity networks.” These discussions place reliable provision of basic services at the centre of expectations from state institutions.

People’s interests mainly lie in securing basic needs, such as diesel, electricity and water.

Focus group participant from Hasakeh

Decisions about public spending also shape this assessment. In Damascus, participants noted that “citizens see a contradiction when the state has resources for major projects but cannot protect their housing and property rights or stop projects that harm them.” This argument extends beyond the shortage of services and support to how institutions prioritize projects and whether that is publicly justifiable. When basic needs remain unmet, residents question why other projects receive funding and whose interests they serve.

Services must also be affordable, as service provision may do little to strengthen legitimacy if prices prevent people from benefiting. In Damascus, “refusing to pay electricity bills” was discussed as a form of objection, alongside explanations such as low purchasing power, the lifting of subsidies and disorder. However, inability to pay may not necessarily mean opposition to the institution or rejection of charging for electricity. In Aleppo, participants described transport as controlled by “networks of brokers and patronage” and raised concerns about private education costs and the burden of energy costs on industry.

The ability to meet these costs depends on employment and income. In Homs, a university student said that “we thought they would come and provide us with jobs, but we have not felt much change.” Participants also judged salaries by comparing pay for similar work. In Homs, a participant mentioned that “in the same office, someone who came from the north earns more, even though we do the same work, make the same effort and have the same competence.” In Damascus, participants reported that “previously dismissed employees are reinstated on high salaries, while longstanding employees remain on low pay despite their seniority.” The discussions do not establish the reasons for these differences, which can undermine confidence in institutional fairness even when some salaries increased.

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Focus group participant from Homs

Similar concerns apply to recruitment. In Aleppo, participants said hiring criteria “pay less attention to qualifications than to loyalty or revolutionary and geographical background.” Where recruitment criteria are seen as politically and geographically biased, institutional legitimacy is affected through unequal opportunity

and by raising doubts about the competence and quality of public institutions. This also applies to the exclusion of pre-existing qualified staff. In Homs, one contribution described “former employees being dismissed” and then some being brought back after difficulties emerged in running institutions without them.

A participant in Hasakeh linked these expectations directly to representation, stating that “I believe the authorities exist to serve citizens. If they cannot serve me, they certainly do not represent me.” This may express one participant’s position, rather than a rule that every service failure ends acceptance. The broader issue, visible across the discussion groups, is whether institutions deliver improvements through decisions people consider fair in terms of who receives services, who can afford them and how jobs and pay are allocated.

Networks of influence & the limits of civic participation

The discussions suggest that unequal access to decision-makers shapes perceptions of institutional legitimacy. In Hasakeh, one participant stated that the “groups that can influence the current authorities are those that took up arms, whether alongside them or against them.” In Damascus, “an endorsement from a *sheikh* or religious movement can be enough to secure someone a job, taking precedence over academic and university qualifications.” In Aleppo, people close to political leaders and business figures were described as having “direct channels of communication to protect their privileges and shape economic decisions in their interests.” These discussions suggest that influence depends heavily on power and connections. This raises questions about whether institutions consider people’s claims fairly, regardless of who makes them.

For those without these connections, raising a demand and receiving a response can be difficult. In Homs, one participant noted that “people find it difficult to make their voices heard.” A participant in Hasakeh explained: “We do not have the means to influence decisions. There are no elections, no clear channels for conveying demands, and no one to listen to them.”

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Focus group participant from Hasakeh

Where formal channels exist, participants questioned their effectiveness. In Aleppo, workers, junior employees and people earning a daily living reportedly “feel that our voices are not heard at all, however much effort we make or however many complaints we submit through official channels.” These discussions describe a lack of accessible channels and frustration with those already available. When formal complaints go unanswered while personal connections secure a response, people may question whether institutions exercise their authority fairly.

When official channels fail, media attention can offer another way to seek a response. Some of this influence still depends on proximity to power. In Homs, a participant identified “influential media figures who are already close to the authorities.” However, widespread coverage can create pressure without a direct connection. A participant in Hasakeh said that “social media influencers are among the most influential groups, alongside issues that become ‘trending.’” In Aleppo, participants reported that “fear of media scandals sometimes pushes the authorities to respond immediately to service demands or reverse unfair decisions to protect their public image.” These discussions suggest that public pressure can secure a response, but its effectiveness remains uncertain. In Homs, some participants described successful campaigns, while others reported declining responsiveness or doubted their ability to influence decisions. People without a wide audience, or those who fear public exposure, may struggle to attract attention. Therefore, responding to prominent cases may resolve particular grievances without addressing the unequal access that leads people to question institutional legitimacy.

Fear of media scandals sometimes pushes the authorities to respond immediately to service demands or reverse unfair decisions to protect their public image.”

Focus group participant from Aleppo

Collective civic action can also help people raise demands. In Homs, a participant described challenging gender-segregated seating at a cultural centre, saying that “I can say that we won, and there is now no segregation at the cultural centre.” This discussion illustrates a successful intervention, although it does not establish how widely such opportunities are available. Participants in Damascus proposed “activating civil society organizations to organize dialogue sessions and invite government representatives to respond to demands.” A participant in Hasakeh similarly suggested that the “available alternative is to strengthen civil society organizations and community dialogue so these groups can make their voices heard more effectively.” These proposals would allow people to organize shared demands and engage directly with institutions, reducing reliance on personal connections.

However, organizations need the freedom to undertake this work. In Aleppo, they were described as “avoiding dialogue sessions or discussions of sensitive governance and administrative issues for fear of prosecution or closure.” Participants reported that “associations and organizations repeatedly decline to hold events, dialogue workshops or awareness-raising seminars.”

Across these discussions, the issue is whether people can raise claims safely, access decision-making through clear channels, and have their claims considered regardless of their loyalty connections, wealthiness or public profile. Where influence depends on personal networks, armed power or media visibility, civic participation becomes unequal. Strengthening institutional legitimacy then requires both accessible and effective formal channels for participation, alongside sufficient civic space for people and organisations to use them safely.

Women between participation & uncertain rights

The discussions distinguish women's presence in institutions from their ability to influence decisions. In Homs, one participant said: "I am rejected not because I lack competence, but because I am a woman." In Hasakeh, a participant asked that "if women do not have genuine representation within the [governing] authorities, how will their other rights be guaranteed?" These arguments link representation to the power to shape policies and defend rights.

If women do not have genuine representation within the [governing] authorities, how will their other rights be guaranteed?

Focus group participant from Hasakeh

Daily treatment provides a separate basis for assessing institutions, and experiences differ. In Hasakeh, a participant said: "I do not see clear exclusion of women in everyday life." In Homs, a participant distinguished social practices from those of the authorities and noted differences between administrations. In Damascus, contributions welcomed female police officers' role in making "women more comfortable during legal proceedings and protecting female detainees." However, participants also reported pressure on women "who do not wear the hijab in movement and employment." These discussions suggest that supportive practices can coexist with restrictions, even within the same area.

Such variation raises questions about whether fair treatment for women is a protected right or depends on the institution and people involved. In Hasakeh, a participant linked some women's hesitation to travel or apply for jobs to "anxiety and uncertainty about what might happen in the future," despite the absence of an official ban. Therefore, for women at least, access to services today may not provide confidence that rights will be respected tomorrow.

For institutional legitimacy, the issue extends beyond access and individual experiences to whether women can rely on equal treatment, challenge gender-based discrimination and influence decisions affecting their lives. Uncertainty looms when such rights depend on different officers' ideology and whims. Positive individual experiences matter, but consistent protection of these rights and ensuring they are predictable, protected and enforceable throughout the country provides a stronger basis for recognizing institutional authority.

Trust in the interim president & blame on institutions

The discussions show that trust in interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a can persist despite criticism of state institutions. In Hasakeh, a participant said that “personally, I trust the president more than the government.” In Homs, another reported that “people make excuses for him but not for the [state] institutions.” These discussions suggest that personal confidence in the president does not necessarily extend to the institutions under his leadership. They also raise the question of whether people apply the same standards when judging al-Shara'a's performance and that of state institutions.

The president is a person who may change over time, but the state must remain, and its institutions must protect people's rights regardless of the ruler's identity.

Focus group participant from Hasakeh

This distinction matters when institutions bear responsibility for decisions they may not control. In Aleppo, institutions were described as “merely formal structures stripped of authority.” This view highlights a possible gap between where authority lies and where blame is directed. Personal trust should not place the president outside the accountability expected of those institutions.

Other contributions linked institutional legitimacy to protecting rights that endure beyond the current leadership. In Hasakeh, a participant said that “the president is a person who may change over time, but the state must remain, and its institutions must protect people's rights regardless of the ruler's identity.” In Damascus, participants stated that “institutions belong to the people, and building the state should not be tied to the ruler's legitimacy.” Participants also identified elections, an independent judiciary and elected local councils as conditions for building institutional trust.

These views suggest that lasting legitimacy depends on institutions and rules that protect rights, distribute authority and hold office-holders accountable through and across leadership changes. Trust in the president may sustain support for him, but it cannot substitute for confidence in and acceptance of institutions.

These discussions reveal an important accountability gap. This shows participants retain trust in the president while attributing failures to institutions operating under his leadership. This may reflect the president's association with the broader promise of political change, alongside perceptions that institutions are weak, ineffective or lack real authority. Whatever its source, this separation between political authority and institutional blame risks obscuring where decisions are made and who should be held accountable for their outcomes.

Recommendations

Strengthening the legitimacy of institutions among Syrians requires a comprehensive reform strategy at both national and local levels. The recommendations below address the challenges identified in the discussions, draw in part on participants' suggestions and should inform that wider strategy. Progress should be assessed through people's ability to exercise their rights and obtain fair decisions, rather than increases in declared political support.

Establish clear authority & effective accountability

- The presidency, ministries and governors should make clear where power lies—that is, who controls appointments, pay and service spending. Devolution of authority is strongly encouraged, but where decisions are largely made centrally, ministries and the presidency should answer for them rather than leave local institutions to bear the blame.

Guarantee equal citizenship & protection from discrimination

- Public administration, security and justice bodies should issue and ensure enforcement of written instructions preventing religious or ethnic identity, gender, former residence or presumed political affiliation from replacing individual assessment in employment, services and complaints.

Strengthen representation & meaningful participation

- State institutions should ensure women and less represented groups have fair access to positions with authority over staffing, budgets and policy, and act against restrictions on work and services based on gender or dress.

Ensure transparency & fairness in public employment

- Ministries and public entities should investigate reported pay differences between longstanding employees, reinstated staff and new arrivals from the north. Personal connections, religious endorsement and place of origin should not take precedence over competence.

Make service provision transparent, responsive & equitable

- State institutions should prioritize restoring regular water supplies and repairing damaged electricity networks, with residents involved in deciding the allocation and order of repairs.

Protect rights across former conflict divisions

- State institutions should not use residence in former regime or opposition-held areas as a basis for restricting employment, services or civic participation. In north-east Syria, any changes to administrative arrangements should clarify how qualifications, records and employment rights will be recognized, while preserving linguistic and cultural rights.

Conclusion

The discussions suggest that institutional legitimacy in post-Assad Syria remains conditional, shaped by whether institutions can provide security, services and equal treatment while breaking with patterns of repression and exclusion. Cooperation with the authorities may reflect pragmatism or necessity, while trust in the president does not necessarily translate into confidence in the institutions operating under his leadership. Across the discussions, perceptions of legitimacy are closely linked to representation, equal citizenship and access to services, employment and decision-making, with personal connections, wartime geography and perceived political loyalties continuing to shape access to opportunities and influence.

If these patterns persist, they risk reproducing new forms of exclusion and patronage, weakening confidence in state institutions and limiting the willingness of Syrians to participate in or invest in the emerging political order. This could also undermine longer-term efforts to encourage return, retain skilled Syrians and build the institutional capacity required for recovery. Conversely, predictable rules, accountable institutions, meaningful civic participation and equitable access to services and opportunities could allow the authorities to convert conditional acceptance into more durable institutional legitimacy. The extent to which the post-Assad state can establish credible institutions that outlast individual leaders will therefore be central to Syria's longer-term stability and ability to consolidate the transition.