Perceptions of presidential and institutional legitimacy in post-Assad Syria

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Decades of personalised rule and authoritarian, violent dictatorship were bound to leave deep scars on Syrian society. So far, the post-Assad transition has seen emerging replications of the Assad period, particularly in the concentration of power, personalised rule, clientelism and patronage, which have triggered further inequality and strained service provision. Still, to date, the widely held perception over the past two years is that interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a holds legitimacy—but discernible cracks in this image are beginning to show, particularly amongst urban Syrians. Meanwhile, more junior officials and institutions have become targets of calls for accountability and charges of illegitimacy. Drawing from focus group discussions (FGDs), this assessment explains why this is the case, how it is changing and what could be done to redress mounting grievances.

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Methodology

The analysis draws on two focus group discussions held in Damascus and Homs in June and July 2026. The FGDs included 18 participants, 10 of whom were women. Participants were from diverse age groups, with strong youth participation. All participants were engaged in public affairs in some capacity, spanning civil society actors, local media personalities, professionals and local officials—including candidates to the People's Assembly. They came from across Syria's political spectrum, from opponents to supporters of the new authorities.

This focus group discussion (FDG) was 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.

These FGDs do not constitute a survey or a representative sample of the populations in the targeted locations. The discussions help explain how participants understand legitimacy, where they place it, how they separate it from the presidency and state institutions and which they prioritise. Consequently, they also navigate where participants place responsibility and accountability for governance.

Participants' Understanding of Legitimacy: Fluid, Personal, Legal, Political & Social

Participants did not share one settled understanding of legitimacy. Most agreed it is complex and can take many forms, with some noting they could not define it as a term. One participant linked her own difficulty defining legitimacy to spending four decades under political repression and fear.

Those who reflected on the notion, however, echoed popular views that equate legitimacy with people's acceptance of a ruler. Many participants saw that acceptance in a rational-legal way. Some cited the legal status of the new authority along with international recognition; others reflected on notions of representation and popular participation. To others, that acceptance was emotional, often linked to a shared identity or to the historical moment of "winning" the revolution.

The discussion in Homs captured this diversity particularly clearly: there, participants described legitimacy as popular acceptance, legality, revolutionary entitlement, domestic support and international recognition. Others pointed to representation, participation, accountability, transparency, security and service provision as factors that enable legitimacy. One participant stressed:

> **Legitimacy comes from participation, from ensuring that no one is excluded and from transparency. For example, people should know where funds come from, where they are spent, how decisions are made and why and what policy direction we are following.**
>
> **I feel that this is what makes legitimacy. If we focus only on services, we overlook many of the needs of Syrian society.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

In a similar vein, one participant associated the pursuit of legitimacy with power and the reaching of a balance of forces, noting:

> **For an unelected authority to maintain legitimacy, it needs to draw on a plurality of forces to create balance. Its legitimacy therefore also depends on how far it can open space for participation and democracy.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

Some participants, nonetheless, viewed legitimacy in more formal and rational-legal terms. They linked its granting across different states to law, whether religious *Sharia* law, constitutional law or hereditary law. One participant from Damascus defined legitimacy as the "legality of any work"; another described it as "general acceptance of rule—legal, political and constitutional—that is locally consistent with local and international legal norms."

Several participants added that legitimacy requires a broad social base from below and recognition from an international state system above: i.e., internal and external legitimacy. A few saw international interveners as drawing "the wide lines"; others, meanwhile, argued that, without a social base, legitimacy may be withdrawn, as happened with Bashar al-Assad.

Many participants saw the current social base as strongly tied to the post-2011 uprising. In Damascus, one participant described revolutionary legitimacy as attached to "the idea and the historical moment" rather than exclusively to a particular person (hinting at al-Shara'a himself). They argued that whoever ultimately

embodied victory over Assad would inherit legitimacy from that historical rupture. In Homs, participants similarly linked legitimacy to those who had carried or fulfilled the revolution and to Bashar al-Assad's overthrow. Al-Shara'a encompassed that victory to many.

Critically, this idea of "revolutionary victory" reflected the specific starting point in Syria from which participants explained legitimacy. Revolutionary experience, fear of violence and repression, identity, economic circumstances and expectations of change shaped their perceptions. In Homs, one participant openly connected part of their support for al-Sharaa to a shared social and religious background. He explained:

> **We all have a paternal and emotional attachment to the president, perhaps because he aligns with my affiliations, my background or because he is one of us or resembles us. However, in the end, the presidency is a functional position, and I believe that legitimacy belongs to the presidency, not to the institutions in our Syrian situation.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

Others strongly rejected that idea. One participant responded:

> **We produced al-Shara'a, and we can produce another [...] Power belongs to the people, not to leaders.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

Another, whose identity differed from al-Shara'a's, still expressed confidence in him because Syria had regained international engagement.

These exchanges reveal competing, and at times intersecting, ideas of authority inside and outside the same political constituency. More importantly, they show that legitimacy in the Syrian context is both personal and political. To them, legitimacy is understood through feelings, positionality, power, state performance and legal and constitutional dimensions. It is also fluid, as the following section notes.

A historic moment: Al-Shara'a's Legitimacy as 'victory of the revolution' & Internationally Supported Actor

Participants largely detached al-Shara'a's legitimacy from the government's internal performance, even as they strongly critiqued the latter. Some participants prioritised his legitimacy over that of institutions. To some, it rested on the limited functionality of state institutions and their responsiveness to the presidency. This is even as others placed greater importance on the legitimacy of legislative powers or state institutions.

To most, however, legitimacy rested on what al-Shara'a symbolised: his victory over the Assad regime, the Sunni identity, order, security or simply the best available option given the current regional and local militarised context. Several participants particularly praised him for being able to "unify" the armed jihadi factions (though this is technically contested), for his skill in talking to international state actors and for his ability to restore Syria's international legitimacy.

Homs participants linked al-Shara'a's legitimacy to his "revolutionary" role, particularly with the overthrow of Assad, and to his provision of relative security, factional unification, foreign relations and international recognition.

Beyond that symbolic and external political dimension, al-Shara'a's legitimacy also has a personal and prospective dimension. Several participants shared their faith in his ability to help Syria's state (re-)building. One participant from Homs highlighted:

> **Ahmad al-Shara'a is not the kind of person I had imagined taking over Syria. He does not resemble me in either his religious or social background. […] Yet I have a great deal of affection for [him].**
>
> **I see him as capable of leadership and as someone with a better vision for Syria's future. The way he deals with the outside world makes me feel reassured, and I feel that he does not want to drag Syria into another war.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

Many argued that, given the post-war destruction and losses, the transition needs time and patience. When hearing criticisms of the president's performance, one participant explicitly asked people to account for the scale of the challenge facing the transition: "I want to look at things from the inside: they face terrifying and almost impossible challenges."

Another participant argued that interim authorities had a reasonable legitimacy to govern through a prolonged transition. He calculated this could take potentially, "five years or more, depending on the circumstances and surrounding conflicts […] until a constitution, political process and elections could transfer authority to constitutional legitimacy."

Yet the participants never awarded the ministers or state institutions that same patience or optimism. They judged institutional legitimacy through a different, much more immediate lens tied to people's everyday lives. Detrimental here was the ability to improve livelihoods, security, access to public services, affordability, the economy, transparency, representation and accountability.

Temporality: Many Participants Expect Legitimacy to Move from 'Revolutionary Victory' into Governance

Many participants valued al-Shara'a's leadership, seeing it as necessary for the country's transition. To some—but not all—legitimacy derived from the revolutionary moment. It is thus time-bound, closely tied to Syria's current historical moment linked to Assad's overthrow and the uncertainties of transition. Ultimately, many participants saw other forms of legitimacy (constitutional, democratic, participatory and institutional) as a more durable foundation for the state. One participant from Homs elaborated:

> **The president is legitimate; his legitimacy derives from the revolution. However, this legitimacy is not an open card [carte blanche]. It decreases day by day; eventually, we want to move towards electoral legitimacy through building institutions and society.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

This shift also describes what could strengthen or weaken al-Shara'a's legitimacy from participants' viewpoints. One participant argued:

> **As long as we continue in the current approach, which is the monopolisation of powers by one person, namely Mr. Ahmad al-Shara'a, and neglecting internal affairs at the expense of external affairs, and not looking inward, legitimacy is weakened. Many social issues need urgent attention and should not be left to become a trend first before being attended to.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

Participants repeatedly called for transparency, participation, accountability, clearer communication, economic improvement and justice, personal freedoms and, particularly, transitional justice. Several criticised authorities' tendency to respond only after an issue becasme prominent on social media. Participants especially wanted to be heard, to understand how decisions are made, to influence them, to participate in local decision-making and to have ways to complain. To them, participation meant far more than elections. As one participant explained it:

> **Greater participatory dialogue produces greater trust in institutions.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Damascus*

The discussion therefore moved quickly from the duration of revolutionary legitimacy to a more maximal understanding of legitimacy as such. Participants criticised Syria's inherited tendency to merge the presidency, government and state into a single person. One Damascus participant asked what would distinguish the emerging order from previous authoritarian rule if legitimacy continued to centre on one leader, while another argued that institutions should place real limits on presidential authority through a genuine separation of powers.

Participants from Homs shared similar sentiments. Some insisted institutions must eventually carry the state forward because presidents come and go. Without directing blame at al-Shara'a, one participant bluntly asked:

What would happen if al-Shara'a suddenly disappeared for one reason or another? What will we do? I think, in our situation, it would be catastrophic because everything is concentrated in his hands. Even the smallest details had to pass through [interim Foreign Minister Asa'ad] al-Shibani. This is scary. Even on social media, we observe people asking him not to travel because they fear for his life.

Focus group participant from Homs

This concern recentres the need for accountability, the rule of law, non-centred leadership and representation. It is also important to remember Syrians' context and the inherited legacy of a conflict that has led to devastating losses. That same participant captured this when stating:

In our situation in Syria, people are clinging to the president out of fear, grief and brokenness.

Focus group participant from Homs

The responses suggest that al-Shara'a's higher legitimacy ranking over institutional legitimacy does not necessarily indicate a preference for personalised rule. A deeper look suggests possible fear of renewed instability and weak institutional alternatives, as well as revolutionary identification and confidence in one actor's ability to hold Syria together. But for that leadership to bridge the transition, many participants repeatedly argued that legitimacy must eventually move into constitutions, law, judicial independence, legislative authority, elections and autonomous institutions. One participant summarised the point plainly:

We have to focus on building state institutions because these are the foundation; Ahmad al-Shara'a, with all due respect, may or may not stay.

Focus group participant from Homs

This said, the gap between al-Shara'a and Syrian institutions' legitimacy may be temporary. Expectations are already shifting from what al-Shara'a represents to what the transition is, and will actually deliver.

Recognition vs. Accountability

Participants continued to discuss the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of state institutions. However, many did so without returning to the topic of presidential accountability. This is whilst raising practical issues of service delivery, payment, affordability, effectiveness and so on. The Damascus and Homs discussions linked institutional legitimacy directly to the ability to meet basic needs, including wages, services and the cost of living. They complicate this notion by raising issues of participation, representation, accountability, and inclusion.

A participant from Damascus particularly problematised the selective and discretionary application of law, appointments based on *wasta* (connections) and recommendations, unequal employment opportunities, political intervention in recruitment and promises that remain unimplemented.

Several participants from Homs raised similar issues. They wanted equality before the law, transparent budgets, competent appointments, delivery on commitments and protection from discrimination or exclusion. A Homs participant put it succinctly:

> **We want to feel equal and that the law governs us. Every transaction completed fairly and correctly increases trust.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

As noted in ETANA's previous assessment, institutional legitimacy for participants thus rested on two linked issues: delivery (which shows whether the institution has capacity and is effective and efficient); and whether that institution acts fairly and transparently (and is thus perceived as acting legitimately).

Regional favouritism also emerged. Some Damascus participants perceived advantages for people coming from north-west Syria, particularly in appointments and access to opportunities. Some participants elaborated on the differences in institutional performance even within the same region and across institutions. Many focused on regional issues, noting that appointing unqualified people simply because they came from northern Syria (especially Idlib) weakened institutional credibility. Another went further, warning:

> **We are currently witnessing the rise of regionalism, which in my assessment is uglier and more dangerous than sectarianism.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Damascus*

This is one participant's perception, not necessarily evidence of systematic policy or reflective of systemic practice by default. Nevertheless, perceptions themselves are politically consequential. If citizens believe place of origin, sect, revolutionary history or political loyalty determines access to jobs, services or decision-making, institutions struggle to establish themselves as common national institutions.

This is also significant because it shows participants did not see the state as a single coherent unit; they could differentiate its actors and components. This was clearest when participants discussed responsibility across institutions. In Homs, several participants singled out security and emergency institutions as performing better than health and education. But even then, the presidency stayed outside this equation.

In both discussions, al-Shara'a largely received credit for political direction, international engagement, security, promises and the broad trajectory of the transition. Yet this often came without blame for failures in the state's implementation of its (and his) promises and responsibilities. Many participants instead readily blamed ministers and the state bureaucracy. For instance, a participant from Damascus described placing responsibility for the failure to apply a presidential decision to increase wages on the institutions and ministries involved, while leaving presidential legitimacy largely untouched.

In a way, participants largely gave political credit to the presidency and blame to state institutions, even when issues clearly fell within the presidency's remit. A familiar phrase (recalling pro-Assad political discourse) captures it almost perfectly. As a participant from Homs recalled:

> **We often hear in the street that Ahmad al-Shara'a is good, but that those around him are not good.**
>
> *Focus group participant from Homs*

This phrase is very risky. It lets dissatisfaction with the government coexist with confidence in the person at its apex, that is, the president. This may reflect both an inherited culture of fear and deference and a conscious understanding of the presidency as the political and symbolic representative of the transition, one that should not be hindered or pushed back by blame.

Still, some participants refused to draw a clear distinction between al-Shara'a as president and the institutions, as he concentrates control over them. A participant in Homs raised this directly. They asked whether a governor could make a locally popular decision if it contradicted al-Shara'a's preference.

The legitimacy gap is thus also an accountability gap. Syria's emerging political order has yet to make sufficiently clear where presidential authority ends, where institutional autonomy begins and who answers when policy fails.

Recommendations

For international actors:

- **Move away from re-enforcing personalized elite-centred legitimacy:** Enable and strengthen independent judicial institutions, representative local governance, unions, professional associations, independent grass-roots civil society and the media.
- **Judge the transition by whether or not it results in a widening of political space and power, and use leverage to ensure it does not become more concentrated:** Push to widen political space by protecting civic organising, independent media, unions, women's political participation, freedom of expression and equal treatment under the law.

For Syrian authorities:

- **Clarify who holds power and who carries responsibility:** Clarify the lines of authority and advance clear constitutional mandates, separation of powers, judicial independence, civic space, equality, and transitional justice.
- **Ensure governance is participatory and inclusive:** Establish regular channels for communities, civil society, professional groups and associations, independent unions, and local actors to influence policies and services and to act as centre hubs for participation and negotiation of societal interests.
- **Challenge regional favouritism and treat economic and regional inequality as legitimacy issues:** Monitor and transparently explain differences in wages, employment, public investment and spending as well as service provision.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions helped explain why al-Shara'a retains greater legitimacy than the institutions operating under his leadership. The two are drawing legitimacy from different sources: his legitimacy remains strongly attached to the historical moment of Assad's overthrow, revolutionary symbolism, international recognition, political leadership and expectations of stability; institutions, meanwhile, receive much less symbolic credit. People judge them by the difficult work of everyday governance. However, this distinction has limits and may not be long-lasting.

Participants increasingly expect the president to deliver transparency, participation, accountability, rights, economic justice and transitional justice. At the same time, they expect institutions to become more competent, fair, predictable and independent. This calls for moving away from the centring of power in the hands of political elites, towards greater accountability and transparency in governance and meaningful political mechanisms for state-society dialogue. Revolutionary legitimacy always has an expiry date; the longer the transition goes on, ordinary Syrians' patience will start to run out if daily governance, economic and other matters are not resolved in meaningful, forward-thinking ways.