



## Institutions and Governance in the New Syria

Continuity and Change from the Idlib Model

Aaron Y. Zelin



Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa takes notes during a cabinet meeting in Damascus on October 12.

**O**n May 13, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump updated U.S. policy on Syria with an announcement calling for the full cessation of sanctions. The move effectively built on the Biden administration's earlier outreach, including a visit by the assistant secretary of state to President Ahmed al-Sharaa in December 2024,<sup>1</sup> just weeks after his group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), overthrew the Assad regime.

Trump, who made the announcement while attending the Saudi Investment Forum in Riyadh, said that he wanted to “give [Syria] a chance at greatness” and called for the Syrian government to “show us something very special.”<sup>2</sup>

While not all U.S. sanctions related to Syria have been lifted, Trump's announcement has fast-tracked Damascus's transition and its opportunity to rebuild a country whose destruction was sparked by the Assad regime's war on its own people. The evidence suggests the new Syrian authorities have taken up the challenge with determination, even as President Sharaa has requested "patience because Syria has much to rebuild."<sup>3</sup>

But much also remains uncertain in a country of great sectarian complexity emerging from a decade of civil war and more than a half-century of brutal dictatorship. Many countries post-civil war fall back into conflict,<sup>4</sup> and it can be counted as a success that Syria has not yet done so, despite flare-ups of violence and vigilantism. Levels of violence, moreover, have dropped over the past year. Other causes for optimism include governance improvements, diplomatic openings to countries around the world, and increased access to resources facilitated by the lifting of sanctions. Yet the government's report card is understandably mixed, and worries today center on the hobbling effect shadow institutions have on official ones and the persistence of corruption.

One could focus on any number of themes when assessing the Sharaa government in its first year—from the ideological transformation of authorities since their HTS days (along with the complicated issue of dealing with foreign fighters among them); to diplomatic efforts with foreign actors; to efforts to navigate domestic politics and relationships with Syria's minorities. The last is an important challenge given actions by Damascus that have alienated minorities as well as massacres against Alawites and Druze.<sup>5</sup> (A related problem involves the role of actors abroad as spoilers to the transition.)

But this essay seeks specifically to shed light on Syria's new institutions and governance apparatus, an essential topic given the corruption and unaccountability of the Assad era. A successful Syrian government is very much in U.S. interests, and could alter the region's geopolitics in ways that undermine Iran's regional hegemony and lessen

Russian influence. But the new Syrian leadership faces a staggering set of challenges, which at the start of the transition included:

- 7.4 million internally displaced persons
- more than 300,000 unexploded mines from the war
- 90% poverty, 70% dependence on humanitarian aid, 65% unemployment
- destruction of 30% of national infrastructure
- inoperability of 35% of school infrastructure
- just 1–2 hours daily of electricity

Taken together, the costs of reconstructing Syria, according to the World Bank's estimate, could range from \$200 to \$400 billion.<sup>6</sup> President Sharaa sought to indicate his comprehension of this massive scale when, just after taking power, he said that "there are too many problems in Syria. The smart thing here is to divide these problems and solve each problem separately"—by implication, with different ministries working simultaneously—"until we reach more realistic results."<sup>7</sup>

Sharaa also explained early in the transition that "Syria needed to prioritize building a state and creating public institutions that [serve] all residents."<sup>8</sup> Such an approach echoed the pragmatism employed by HTS when governing territory in northwest Syria's Idlib governorate. Yet unlike HTS institutions, the national caretaker authority (December 2024–March 2025) and later transitional authority (March 2025–present) have faced the unpleasant task of building on the carcasses of their Assad-era predecessors, which were gutted by corruption and stripped of any semblance of meritocracy. Sharaa has stated his goal of rebuilding Syrian institutions "based on efficiency and justice, free of corruption, favoritism, and bribery."<sup>9</sup> This paper hopes to illuminate whether and to what extent his administration has lived up to this high aspiration.

The challenge touches every aspect of the Syrian state, from bricks and mortar to staffing. According to Minister of Information Hamza al-Mustafa, he and his colleagues encountered an office in shambles when they first arrived.<sup>10</sup> They later found that of the seven thousand people employed by the Assad-era ministry, a full thousand were “ghost” employees.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Abdulkader Husrieh, the governor of Syria’s Central Bank, explained that the country’s institutions were “beyond imagination,” saddled with what he described as “tons of corruption,” perhaps an allusion to embezzlement, including by the Assad family. A general lack of resources and the absence of digitization—reflecting a state bypassed by modernity—presented additional hurdles.<sup>12</sup> Remedying these and other problems will take significant time, funding, and personnel.

A further difficulty for the new government has involved the lack of information-sharing from former regime officials still in the bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup> Without their help, authorities lack the institutional knowledge to understand the intricacies of the state and find themselves starting from the beginning—a cost of sidestepping de-Baathification. The new government has sought technical assistance for institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, whose officials have thus far learned from counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, and Romania.<sup>14</sup> But such efforts cannot be expected to cover all their needs, and intensive institutional support will remain necessary for some time.

A cause for acute concern in the new Syrian administration, as noted earlier, is the presence of a shadow government, which has thwarted transparency and is said to be engaging in micromanagement. This essay will focus first on the public record—and the narrative presented through official communication channels—and then on the shadow world.

## Priorities for the Sharaa Government

According to a database that covers the published daily work of all Syria’s ministries, governorates, and directorates, on November 4, 2025, the government posted eighty-two discrete activities or announcements.<sup>15</sup> By way of comparison, for the full week before the Assad regime fell, HTS’s Syrian Salvation Government and its local Administration of the Liberated Areas posted 110 discrete activities or announcements,<sup>16</sup> indicating that the new government is roughly as busy in one day as it had previously been in a full week—understandable considering that it is running a much larger part of the country.

This section should not be regarded as exhaustive, since it covers only a random day under the new Syrian government, but the details provide insight into the scope of activities on the docket. For example, one of its first items posted for November 4 involved workshops under the Information Ministry’s Directorate of Press Affairs aimed at preparing a code of professional media conduct and ethics.<sup>17</sup> The code, to be drafted by ten invited journalists alongside the ministry, had been under consideration since at least April and began to take form in early September.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere that day, ministers were attending conferences abroad to help integrate Syria back into the global economy and its institutions, along with raising awareness about opportunities in post-Assad Syria. Specifically, the education minister spoke at a UNESCO conference in Uzbekistan, the energy minister attended the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference, and the social affairs and labor minister attended the World Summit for Social Development in Doha.<sup>19</sup> None of these activities would have been open to the civil war-era HTS Salvation Government, given its lack of legitimacy.

At home on November 4, Syrian coordination with foreign actors included a visit by the Italian ambassador to Deraa to meet the provincial governor,<sup>20</sup> while Idlib Governor Muhammad Abdul Rahman received a delegation from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the president of the Syrian General Authority of Civil Aviation and Air Transport met with representatives from Lufthansa,<sup>22</sup> and the health minister engaged with the Red Cross.<sup>23</sup>

On the institutional front, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates reinstated employees who had defected to join the revolution,<sup>24</sup> highlighting how very basic administrative decisions are still playing out, and how expecting large-scale or innovative changes in the near term is highly unrealistic. Other ministries are taking similar steps, reflecting efforts to enlist non-jihadists at the official level. Outsiders need to understand that Syrian authorities are dealing with fundamental challenges, like filling staff positions. The new Syria is still in an early formative stage. Yet these challenges have not stopped Syrian authorities from seeking to reinforce the state in specific ways.

## Drug Interdiction and Arrests

Interdiction of narcotics, especially Captagon—a trade that grew so large as to render the Assad regime a narco-state while operating under sanctions—also occupies Syrian authorities on a regular basis. On November 4, Interior Ministry agents caught a smuggler trying to use balloons and electronic equipment to guide drugs across the Syrian border.<sup>25</sup> In total, since the regime's fall, Damascus has interdicted at least sixty cases related to Captagon networks.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, security forces in Latakia governorate arrested regime remnants affiliated with Bashar Talal al-Assad, a relative of the former president.<sup>27</sup> And according to Syrian media, between August and October 2025, the government arrested thirty-eight former regime members for their involvement in various crimes both before and after the December 2024 overthrow.<sup>28</sup>

## Service Provision

On November 4—the spotlighted day for the database—the government's engagement with Syrian communities included a meeting between the director of the al-Haffah district, Latakia governorate, and Latakia city residents aimed at improving basic services and enhancing civil initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Latakia district director met with residents of the Saliba neighborhood to discuss security concerns.<sup>30</sup> In Hama, the Directorate of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection conducted tours of production facilities “with the aim of promoting a culture of food safety and supporting the commitment of industrial facilities to health conditions and approved standard specifications.”<sup>31</sup> Poor food and water quality have caused illness across the country, including among foreign visitors, making such steps imperative. Food provision is also a top priority amid the country's worst drought in more than thirty years. On a single day in early November, about 23,500 tons of imported wheat arrived at the Port of Latakia,<sup>32</sup> and such shipments have continued.

## Education

Also on November 4, as part of a broader effort to rehabilitate the country's education system, the director of Latakia governorate's northern district toured schools in the town of al-Shabatliyah “to review the status of the educational process, assess service and educational needs...to improve the educational environment and secure the schools' requirements in a way that ensures the continuity of the educational process in the optimal manner.”<sup>33</sup> Such efforts include rebuilding school structures and ensuring adherence to the curriculum, which is said to mirror the prewar contents but without mentions of Baathism or the Assad regime. This continuity hints at the major work still to be done on school reform. As of early November, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education had restored 823 school structures and were rehabilitating 838 more throughout areas under the transitional government's control.<sup>34</sup> Still, large numbers of children remain out of school, constituting a steep future challenge.

## Energy and Investment

Syria's government has sought to reinforce national institutions and governance through arrangements with foreign actors focused on energy, infrastructure, health, and other sectors. For example, to ease the country's acute energy shortage, Syria has worked with Turkey to facilitate the movement of 1.2 billion cubic meters of gas annually from Azerbaijan.<sup>35</sup>

The government has also begun essential work on infrastructure, including on November 4 through the installation of new electrical transformers in northern Suwayda,<sup>36</sup> the revamping of the telephone network in Deir al-Zour,<sup>37</sup> and the asphaltting of roads in Damascus's Harasta and al-Shaalan areas.<sup>38</sup>

On investment projects, Damascus has worked closely with Riyadh, such as through the July 2025 conference in Syria involving both government officials and entrepreneurs that led to \$6.4 billion in investment pledges.<sup>39</sup> Then, on August 18, 2025, a conference in Saudi Arabia yielded announcements on forty-seven investments valued at over 24 billion riyals (about US\$6.4 billion) in sectors including real estate, infrastructure, finance, communications, IT, energy, industry, tourism, trade, investment, and health. The real estate and tourism projects included a mixed-use development in Homs, investments in Yafour—in the Rif Damascus governorate—and agreements to rehabilitate prominent hotels and resorts. An effort focused on the cement industry, meanwhile, was valued at more than \$200 million, including a joint China-Saudi commercial venture to establish a plant with a capacity of 6,000 tons per day.

Another initiative yielded a feasibility study on constructing an infant formula factory in Aleppo.<sup>40</sup> A week and a half later, on August 28, 2025, Syria's Energy Ministry signed agreements and memorandums of understanding with multiple Saudi companies covering electricity projects, transmission and distribution stations, geophysical and geological surveys, oil field services, drilling and maintenance of wells, technical training, workforce development, and provision of integrated solutions for the development and management of oil and gas fields.<sup>41</sup>

## The Shadow State

Overt progress aside, much of the real decisionmaking in the new Syrian administration is happening behind the scenes, largely under the Foreign Ministry's General Secretariat for Political Affairs (GSPA), which is run by Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani.<sup>42</sup> This parallel operation undermines confidence in a transformed, transparent, and inclusive Syrian governance structure.

The GSPA might be understood as a political vessel akin to the Assad-era Baath Party, but it appears to be focused on political management rather than ideological enforcement.<sup>43</sup> Many government decisions, including those deferred by Sharaa, Shaibani, or members of their inner circle, must pass through the GSPA to gain approval. In the Idlib government run by HTS, the secretariat had an antecedent in the Department of Public Affairs, which Shaibani also ran beginning in April 2022. The current GSPA supervises multiple offices that coordinate with Syria's provincial capitals as well as secondary cities.<sup>44</sup> This arrangement has reportedly created a decisionmaking bottleneck characterized by micromanagement of officials who should be empowered to run the country's ministries, governorates, and directorates.<sup>45</sup> It is also affecting relations with foreign countries. According to Western officials, such centralization under one minister has delayed the Damascus government's responsiveness to concerns raised in meetings.

The opaque position of "sheikh" offers further cause for concern. According to the human rights NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice, this new role—which effectively sits above the country's Judicial Directorate<sup>46</sup>—"has no foundation in any Syrian law currently in force."<sup>47</sup> The current system also demands that judicial candidates have *tazkiya* (endorsement) and rewards nepotism and *wasta* (connections) above merit.<sup>48</sup> More worrisome from a procedural standpoint are the powers accorded to sheikhs, which exceed those granted by law to the attorney general or Supreme Judicial Council.<sup>49</sup>

This uneven hierarchy undermines judicial independence, especially since sheikhs lack any legal qualifications.

Beyond the GSPA and the sheikh positions, many of Sharaa's family members have also assumed senior roles in the new government. For example, during the caretaker administration, one of the president's older brothers, Maher al-Sharaa, served as minister of health, and he is now secretary-general of the presidency. Another of Sharaa's older brothers, Hazem, although holding a less public role, is rumored to be a power broker in the national economy and possibly the head of the Syrian Investment Agency.<sup>50</sup>

The new Syrian president is sensitive to bad optics as well as hints of corruption. Thus, in August, he shut down the Damascus office of yet another older brother, Jamal, who had stoked controversy by flaunting his family name to exploit potential business deals around the capital.<sup>51</sup> Rooting out a culture of corruption that dates to the Assad era could take as much as a decade, according to one diplomat who compared modern Syria with Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>52</sup> Actions would include eliminating the shadow government and economy, and building transparency around salaries and contracts relative to the official budget. Specific rules would include barring officials from maintaining side businesses that overlap their public role.

Related are concerns about lack of transparency in Syria's economy, with one report warning of an "Idlibization" scenario characterized by decisions behind closed doors, away from public scrutiny or media coverage. Dubious practices include the issuance of investment licenses without accompanying public tenders and payment of salaries using digital currencies to circumvent the country's liquidity crisis.<sup>53</sup> Such a climate, according to this report, "risks perpetuating the same corrupt economic structures inherited from the former

regime."<sup>54</sup> An economist adds that the Idlib model, functional to some extent in northwest Syria, is not scalable at the national level.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, potential Gulf investors worry about outright kleptocracy,<sup>56</sup> and all international businesses face a regulatory void that becomes ever more apparent when one pushes Syrian officials for specifics.<sup>57</sup>

It does not help that many Assad-era financial players are cutting deals in an effort to ingratiate themselves with the transitional authorities.<sup>58</sup> This includes figures like businessman Muhammad Hamsho and former cabinet secretary Fadi Saqr. The Damascus leadership, if it finds remaining sanctions too onerous, could see in such cooperation a path to navigating the shadow economy. It has already taken such a course by continuing to welcome oil shipments from Russia's sanctions-busting shadow fleet.<sup>59</sup> This behavior is undoubtedly self-defeating, given that former regime officials are ineligible for Washington's sanctions relief and that evasion efforts with Russia could ultimately revive the very sanctions Syria is trying to lift—and give rise to new ones.

This activity also undermines Syria's official economic authorities, led by the central bank governor and the economy and finance ministers, who understand international standards and how to engage Western countries and businesses. Key goals on this front include securing a rating within the global financial sector, refashioning Syria's Financial Intelligence Unit, and working with the transnational Financial Action Task Force to create a robust anti-money laundering/counter-terrorist financing (AML/CFT) policy to lower risk exposure.<sup>60</sup> An opaque economic system, by contrast, will make it difficult to earn trust from U.S. regulators and scare away Western and Gulf businesses that perceive too high a risk in doing business with Syria.<sup>61</sup> Overall, potential corruption, lack of transparency, and capacity issues could threaten Syrian reconstruction even after sanctions are fully removed.

## Undermining Transitional Justice?

In May, the Syrian government announced the creation of a National Commission for Transitional Justice, and its work began in late August. The commission's members are said to have broad support within Syrian civil society and among government officials, but the latter worry that overpublicizing the process could hurt its results.<sup>62</sup> Commission members have engaged local stakeholders and even traveled to Rwanda to learn lessons from the country's sectarian bloodletting.<sup>63</sup> Yet Syrians fear that widespread regime offenses will go unpunished. They specifically report seeing former officials roaming the streets who were implicated in crimes against individuals and families, prompting a backlash of vigilante violence around the country. Such incidents could spiral out of control and lead to more potential massacres if left unaddressed by the commission under the rule of law. The public trials for the coastal massacres, which began in November and will continue later this month, could provide a framework for transparently dealing with this monumental challenge.<sup>64</sup>

A further problem involves the uncertain fate of criminal detainees from the Assad regime, given scarce public accounting of their detention or release. Absent more transparency, the perception of either disingenuousness or leniency could trigger new cycles of violence, and the Syrian people are unlikely to be reassured by reports from foreign diplomats that Syrian officials are pleased with their own efforts.

No one expected Syria to blossom into a Scandinavian democracy in a single year, but U.S. officials still have a responsibility to advise the new Syrian government on improving its performance and avoiding a backslide. In offering clear, actionable advice to the new government, U.S. officials can promote stability and revitalization in Syria while preserving its own interests in the country and the region.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In a meeting with the author on September 17, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa explained that “the process of building is gradual, and the state is still being built in different stages. That is why this is a transitional period.”<sup>65</sup> He also suggested that some advances may be invisible now that “will show themselves at a later time.”<sup>66</sup> Other indicators of progress in the new Syria are quite visible, however, such as electricity for fourteen hours a day and growing—with Aleppo sometimes enjoying service all day—versus only an hour or two under the Assad regime.

But the nascent state faces serious challenges, and must correct course in areas like reliance on a shadow government and informal economic networks that include regime-era figures. Analysts must avoid the temptation to regard the situation in black-and-white terms. Only a nuanced, item-by-item appraisal of Syria under Sharaa can facilitate realistic goals and sustainable progress over the long term. In embracing such an approach, Washington can take several steps to help Damascus address challenges related to institution building and governance:

- **Complete the “full and clean” repeal of Caesar and State Sponsorship of Terrorism sanctions.** Ending these restrictions will open up greater opportunities for technical assistance to Syria, while helping plug the many holes in Syria's economic and financial expertise. It will also provide greater assurance to Western and allied partners considering investment in Syria. For energy markets, these repeals will give Syrian leaders an incentive to stop acquiring sanctioned oil from Russia and buy instead on the open market. At the same time, Washington should retain mechanisms for reimplementing certain types of sanctions if Damascus runs afoul of U.S. requirements, especially relating to the Trump

administration’s “five points,”<sup>67</sup> or breaks U.S. sanctions on Russia.

- **Accelerate the process and conditions for reopening the U.S. embassy in Damascus.**

Closed since 2012,<sup>68</sup> the American embassy in the Syrian capital can be prepared for eventual reopening, but only after an assessment of the security scene and necessary modifications to the compound. Such a step would allow for closer engagement and immediate provision of U.S. technical assistance, while aligning with American permission granted to Syria to reopen its Washington DC embassy. It would also reinforce Washington’s position given that Russia’s embassy is already open and China is seeking to reopen its own in early 2026.

- **Call for the eradication of shadow governance.**

Washington should reiterate to Damascus that tolerating patterns that undermine the government’s legitimacy and transparency and facilitate corruption will constrain the bilateral relationship. Damascus should view the U.S. opportunity granted through sanctions relief as a path to discard past governance structures from northwest Syria and residual elements of the Assad system. Doing otherwise would contravene the hopes articulated in President Trump’s May 2025 announcement.

- **Develop an official U.S.-Syria business working group.** Such an entity could help American businesses navigate the investment landscape in Syria, while giving them a platform to provide technical assistance to Syrian counterparts regarding activity in the global economy. U.S. firms could also advise on reforming Syrian institutions to meet international business standards.

- **Enlist the Treasury Department to help Syria reform its Financial Intelligence Unit**

**and AML/CFT regime.** These efforts could build significant trust in Syria’s economic and financial system, in large part by dislodging corruption old and new and sidelining the shadow economy in favor of a transparent, rules-based system.

- **Provide assistance on forensic drug testing and missing persons cases.** The first item would entail connecting the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration with the Syrian Ministry of Interior, which could facilitate analysis of Captagon and other drugs following smuggling interdictions. Syrian authorities in turn could better understand the full cycle of the drug trade and more effectively crack down on perpetrators. On the missing persons file, Damascus lacks the equipment and ability to DNA-test individuals buried in mass graves.<sup>69</sup> Providing equipment and expertise could help Syrians learn the fate of their loved ones and bring closure after more than a decade of brutal war.

- **Advocate Ukraine-supplied wheat shipments and military servicing.** Far preferable to relying on Russia, a Syrian relationship with Ukraine in these areas would serve U.S. interests, provide a clean slate for Damascus, and shield Syria from Russia-related sanctions.

- **Support sustained Syrian national and local dialogues focused on transitional justice.** The national dialogue held February 25, 2025, began the process of bringing together individuals from the multiple communities that make up the Syrian nation—but it was not sufficient. Today, many minority and civil society groups still feel left out. A reimaged dialogue might be continuous and occur at the local level as well, with initiatives focused on equitable institution-building. Such an undertaking could establish trust and goodwill, while alleviating pressures on the National Commission for Transitional Justice should it need extra time for investigations. ❖

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## The Author

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**AARON Y. ZELIN** is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University, and the author of the Institute study *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* and the book *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (Columbia University Press). He has conducted two field research trips across seven Syrian governorates since the fall of the Assad regime.

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