From Idlib to Damascus:

National Power and the Question of Legitimacy

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Preface

This thesis emerges from a journey that has been both personal and intellectual. As a Syrian who took part in the uprising against the Assad regime through years of civil and political engagement, my struggle was never only for the fall of a ruler. It was for a different Syria: free, democratic, pluralistic, just, and grounded in human rights, women's rights, equal citizenship, and the rule of law.

The fall of the Assad regime brought a brief moment of extraordinary euphoria. It soon gave way to disappointment as an armed jihadist movement, long internationally designated as a terrorist organization, assumed national authority. The deeper shock came later, when massacres and grave atrocities associated with the new authorities were committed against Alawite communities on the coast and later against the Druze community in my own hometown of Suwayda. Many people with whom I had worked toward what I believed was the same political and moral vision denied, minimized, justified, or defended what had happened. I was left confronting a painful realization that exposed a new fracture in Syrian society—one that even years of violations under the former regime had failed to produce in this form: empathy with victims and a sense of moral solidarity I had understood as common ground appeared, for some, to have become conditional on how they locate themselves within the emerging order.

At that point, the question of legitimacy was pulled beyond abstraction and into an immediate political reality. It demanded closer examination of what distinguishes the acquisition of national power—along with the justifications surrounding it—from what can legitimately qualify as grounds for rightful national rule.

Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of legitimate national authority following Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) transition from rebel governance in Idlib to national power in post-Assad Syria. It asks how authority developed under wartime rule is reproduced, adapted, or transformed when extended across a wider and more diverse political community. Using critical qualitative discourse analysis alongside institutional, documentary, and interview evidence, the study examines the relationship between the consolidation of national authority and its domestic legitimacy. It finds that this process involved partial institutional adaptation alongside continuities in the relationships and practices shaping how power was exercised. International normalization advanced alongside this uneven domestic transformation. The thesis argues that the move from rebel rule to national power cannot be understood through institutionalization or governing capacity alone, but through whether the foundations and practices of authority are sufficiently transformed to support a claim to rightful national rule.

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1. Introduction

Syria's current political transition emerged from more than a decade of civil war following the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime. Protests began in Daraa province in southern Syria and quickly spread across the country after security forces opened fire on demonstrators. The escalation of repression and violence contributed to the formation of armed opposition groups (UN Human Rights Council 2016, 5). Among them was Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then leader of al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq and later the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), sent Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani and other senior operatives to Syria to establish a Syrian presence (John 2016). Al-Nusra formally emerged in 2012. It combined opposition to the Assad regime with a jihadist project that called for Sharia law and employed tactics including urban suicide bombings (John 2016).

Its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, later known by his real name Ahmed al-Sharaa, led the organization through its later evolution. In 2013, al-Nusra rejected al-Baghdadi's attempted merger into ISIL and remained aligned with al-Qaeda (UN Human Rights Council 2016, 5; John 2016). In 2016, it rebranded as Jabhat Fath al-Sham and claimed separation from al-Qaeda; the organization was reorganized under the name Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) the following year. The United Nations (UN) nevertheless continued to list HTS as an alias of al-Nusra under the ISIL and al-Qaeda sanctions regime, while al-Jawlani remained separately listed as an individual associated with al-Qaeda (UN Security Council 2025b).

HTS's development involved more than rebranding. It consolidated power in northwestern Syria and built a governing apparatus in Idlib

through the HTS-linked Syrian Salvation Government. From 2017 onward, administration, security, courts, and economic regulation became increasingly organized through this structure. Haenni and Drevon interpret this period as involving substantial political adaptation and growing pragmatism under the demands of governance, while HTS's jihadist origins remained central to debate over the depth of that transformation (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 220–24, 265–74).

By late 2024, HTS entered the final phase of the war with Assad with military power, as well as several years of governing experience. It initiated and led the "Deterrence of Aggression" offensive in late November alongside other armed opposition groups from northern Syria (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 19). The advance moved rapidly toward Damascus amid a broader regional and international shift that had weakened the Assad regime and its external support, altering the balance of power. It culminated in the collapse of Assad's rule in December 2024 (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 8–9). HTS thus moved within days from governing part of northwestern Syria to occupying a central position in the construction of the post-Assad state.

The move from Idlib to Damascus therefore raised a problem of legitimacy, not simply one of governing capacity. HTS entered national power with institutions, personnel, and practices developed under armed rule. It now claimed authority over a country exhausted by prolonged war, with devastated physical infrastructure, fractured social and political relations, and substantial ethnic, religious, geographic, and political diversity. The challenge became greater than administering territory or maintaining order. Authority formed within

a narrower wartime setting now had to operate across an entire national political community. Here lay the tension: the very structures and experience that enabled HTS to enter national power had been formed under conditions that could also limit their acceptance as rightful authority across Syria.

This transition could combine continuity, adaptation, or transformation. Existing structures could facilitate rapid state-building in some areas, while new responsibilities and broader political pressures could reshape them. Yet incorporation into the state does not itself establish legitimate national authority (Hurd 1999, 381–90). The issue is whether coercive power becomes accountable public authority, whether concentrated institutional power is reorganized beyond factional networks, and whether political membership is constituted on equal terms across Syria's diverse society. Legitimacy therefore provides the central lens of the thesis: not whether HTS had simply "changed," but whether and how changes within HTS, together with its rise to national power, altered the foundations of its authority sufficiently to support a claim to rightful national rule.

This leads to the central research question:

How is legitimate national authority constructed when an armed movement moves from rebel governance into state power?

Here, construction refers to how claims to national authority are advanced through institutions, practices, and political discourse, and how those claims are interpreted and contested. It does not presume that legitimacy has been achieved.

HTS is analytically significant because its transition exposes a broader post-conflict paradox. When such actors enter state authority, they may fill a governance gap by providing a degree of administrative capacity after institutional collapse. At the same time, their transition raises questions about whether the forms of authority they bring can support legitimate national rule. The case therefore matters beyond Syria as an example of the opportunities and risks involved when rebel governance is extended across an entire country.

The period examined runs from the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 to February 2026. It captures the formative stage of the new national order and extends to a major point in HTS's international normalization. On February 27, 2026, the UN Security Council committee responsible for ISIL and al-Qaeda sanctions removed al-Nusra Front and its aliases, including HTS, from its sanctions list (UN Security Council 2026). Thus, this timeframe covers the early construction of national authority as external recognition expanded and domestic legitimacy remained contested.

Internal legitimacy is assessed through three interconnected dimensions: security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging. These concern the transformation of coercive authority, how political and administrative power is organized and constrained through state institutions, and the terms of membership in the national political community. External recognition is treated as a cross-cutting condition rather than evidence of domestic legitimacy (Buchanan 2003, 162–65).

The thesis ultimately identifies an asymmetry between the nationalization of authority and the construction of national legitimacy: the expansion of state rule did not produce an equivalent

transformation in the basis on which that rule could be regarded as rightful across Syria.

Methodologically, the thesis follows a qualitative single-case design and uses critical qualitative discourse analysis as its principal analytical method. Official and institutional discourse is examined alongside laws and institutional practices, with semi-structured interviews and contextual documentation providing complementary evidence.

The Literature Review develops the conceptual framework, the Method sets out the research design, and the Analysis applies that framework to the case. The Conclusion brings the findings together to answer the research question and considers their broader implications.

2. Literature Review

This chapter brings political legitimacy into conversation with rebel-governance scholarship to examine the challenges surrounding the transformation of wartime authority into legitimate national authority when an armed movement enters state power. The analysis of internal legitimacy is structured around three dimensions: security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging. External recognition and normalization are treated as cross-cutting conditions that may shape this transition without determining domestic legitimacy.

2.1 Rebel Governance and the Extension to State Power

Rebel-governance literature examines how armed groups move beyond fighting to administer territory, regulate civilian life, provide security and services, and construct institutions where state authority collapses, withdraws, or loses effective control (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 1–3).

These governing practices can generate substantial administrative and political capacity. Florea and Malejacq show how they secure civilian compliance, resource extraction, and organizational consolidation (Florea and Malejacq 2024, 6–10). Mampilly identifies security provision, dispute resolution, services, and civilian administration as central features of armed rule (Mampilly 2011, 3–6). Such experiences may provide institutional experience relevant to later authority expansion and state-building.

These capacities should not, however, be treated as neutral state-building assets. Grajales and Lévy show how wartime authority may become embedded in socio-economic structures, local power relations, elite alliances, and longer-term forms of domination (Grajales and Lévy 2024, 1–5). What may be carried into state power may therefore include not only administrative capacity but also personnel networks, command structures, institutional dependencies, and established relationships of authority. These features may persist through new institutional forms even when wartime organizations themselves change.

Rebel governance, however, is not a single or uniform phenomenon. Furlan shifts attention from whether rebels create order to what kind of order they create. She distinguishes forms of governance through participation, coercion, relations with civilians and other actors, institutional organization, and executive practice (Furlan 2020, 478–90). Mampilly emphasizes the interaction between insurgent organizations, civilian populations, and existing social and political structures (Mampilly 2011, 48–53). Kalyvas shows how the degree of territorial control shapes patterns of violence and civilian behavior (Kalyvas 2006, 173–75).

Together, these contributions suggest that similar institutional forms can rest on very different political relationships. Rebel institutions may provide order while restricting participation, producing dependency or linking administration to coercion and exclusion (Furlan 2020, 478–92). Consequently, assessing the transition from rebel governance to state power requires considering whether the relationships and practices developed under rebel rule are reproduced, adapted, or transformed.

Rebel-governance scholarship therefore provides considerable evidence of the capacity of armed movements to establish institutions and maintain order under wartime conditions (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 3; Florea and Malejacq 2024, 3–4). What it does not establish is how such capacity can support a rightful claim to national authority. Addressing this distinction requires turning to political legitimacy.

2.2 Conceptualizing Legitimate Authority

Political legitimacy refers to the justification and acceptance of a claim to rule. Power becomes legitimate authority when that claim is recognized as rightful and appropriate within the political community (Bernstein 2011, 20–21, 24).

Weber provides a classical starting point by treating political rule as a relationship in which rulers claim authority and the ruled submit on particular grounds of legitimacy, including traditional, charismatic, and legal grounds (Weber 2008, 157). Hurd develops this by shifting attention to the reasons underlying compliance, treating legitimacy as a subjective and relational quality based on the perception that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed, rather than compliance driven by

coercion or self-interest (Hurd 1999, 379–81). Beetham goes further by identifying three criteria through which legitimate power can be assessed: conformity to established rules, the justification of those rules through shared beliefs, and evidence of consent (Beetham 2013, 16).

These approaches distinguish legitimate authority from domination and governing capacity: neither the capacity to rule and secure compliance nor the means through which rulers acquire power establish a rightful claim to national authority. Such a claim depends instead on the grounds on which power is justified and on its reception across the wider political community.

- **Beyond Order, Capacity, Compliance, and Legality**

Order, protection, and governing performance can provide important grounds of legitimation without independently establishing a rightful claim to rule. Bernstein identifies order, stability, welfare, and efficiency as performance-based grounds of legitimation (Bernstein 2011, 23). Cozzaglio and Greene similarly show how protection from disorder may authorize power without making that power self-legitimating (Cozzaglio and Greene 2019, 1018–21).

Hurd distinguishes coercion, self-interest, and a sense of rightful obligation as different reasons for compliance (Hurd 1999, 379–89). Because they may produce the same observable behavior, compliance alone cannot demonstrate legitimacy (Hurd 1999, 390). Accordingly, in conflict-affected transitions, silence, participation, or the absence of resistance may also reflect fear, dependency, strategic accommodation, or limited alternatives.

Weber distinguishes traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal grounds of authority, based on established customs, devotion to a

leader's perceived qualities, and the recognized validity of legally constituted rules and offices (Weber 2008, 79–80). These grounds can coexist in practice: authorities initially grounded in revolutionary victory or personal appeal may also seek legitimacy through legal procedures and formal institutions.

Beetham develops the distinction between legality and legitimacy more explicitly. Legality concerns whether political power is acquired and exercised in accordance with established rules (Beetham 2013, 4). Yet legal validity does not settle the question of legitimacy, since conformity to established rules does not confirm whether those rules are themselves justifiable (Beetham 2013, 4–5). Sultany similarly rejects constitutional form as an automatically valid foundation for legitimate authority (Sultany 2017, 33–36).

- **Legitimacy as Relational, Constructed, and Contested**

Legitimacy is not a fixed attribute of authority but a relationship between claims to rule and the political communities whose recognition they require (Bernstein 2011, 19–20, 24). Its reception may therefore vary across groups with different experiences of protection, representation, coercion, and political inclusion (Bernstein 2011, 21, 28).

This becomes important when an armed movement extends authority beyond its wartime territorial and social base. Support among established groups or participation by selected elites cannot by themselves demonstrate broader legitimacy. A claim to national authority must therefore be assessed across the society it now claims the right to rule.

Legitimacy may consequently remain contested and uneven despite attempts to settle it through a single constitutional moment (Sultany 2017, 35–39). This is especially relevant where access, protection, and political belonging are distributed unevenly across the political community.

This relational understanding also distinguishes legitimacy from legitimation. Legitimacy concerns whether authority is regarded as rightful; legitimation concerns efforts to justify political power and secure acceptance (Cozzaglio and Greene 2019, 1017–18). Legitimation, however, does not demonstrate that legitimacy has been achieved. Cozzaglio and Greene further warn that authorities may shape the conditions under which acceptance occurs and then present that acceptance as evidence of legitimacy (Cozzaglio and Greene 2019, 1027–29).

Finally, external recognition must be distinguished from domestic legitimacy. Buchanan separates internal political legitimacy from recognitional or international legitimacy: acceptance by states or international organizations does not itself establish the rightfulness of power exercised internally (Buchanan 2003, 162–65). External and domestic legitimacy may interact, but they remain analytically distinct.

2.3 Dimensions of Internal Legitimacy

Building on the conceptual distinctions developed above, this section develops three interconnected dimensions for analyzing internal legitimacy in the transition from rebel rule to national authority: security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging. Together, they provide a framework for distinguishing the

transformation of wartime authority into legitimate rule from its extension through state institutions.

- **Security Authority**

Security authority concerns whether wartime coercive control is transformed into a legitimate system of public security. The central distinction is between the incorporation of wartime forces into the state and the transformation of their command, conduct, accountability, and protective function through public rules and civilian oversight.

Rebel-governance scholarship identifies coercive relationships that may persist into state authority. Furlan shows how armed groups combine coercion and persuasion in generating compliance (Furlan 2020, 491–92). Kalyvas demonstrates how information, monitoring, detention, and punishment shape the identification and deterrence of suspected collaboration (Kalyvas 2006, 173–75). Such wartime classifications and coercive practices may continue to structure security after entry into state power.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) scholarship distinguish formal incorporation from structural transformation. Knight argues that DDR must address surviving organizational structures and networks, not only individual combatants (Knight 2008, 10–12). Berdal and Ucko similarly treat reintegration as a political and context-dependent process, not merely a technical one (Berdal and Ucko 2013, 316–19). Civic and Miklaucic emphasize changes in command, recruitment, training, and civilian oversight so that security institutions serve a public instead of factional purpose (Civic and Miklaucic 2011, 234–39). Liu shows that without such transformation, wartime institutions and coercive networks may

extend forms of wartime control through formal state authority (Liu 2024, 1129–32).

Legitimate security authority is therefore relational as well as institutional. Security institutions need to operate professionally, while their legitimacy also depends on whether different communities experience them as protective, impartial, restrained, and accountable, in contrast to experiences of arbitrary detention, collective punishment, identity-based targeting, or unequal protection. The use of force must therefore be assessed not only through institutional control, but through whether it is regarded as justified domestically.

- **Institutional Authority**

The second dimension concerns whether state institutions become public bodies serving the national political community or vehicles through which wartime networks acquire national authority. Institutional continuity may preserve some administrative capacity and expertise while appointments, resources, and decision-making remain concentrated within factional networks. Weber grounds rational-legal authority in the recognized validity of legally established rules and competences (Weber 2008, 157). Sultany similarly shows that constitutional or legal form cannot by itself legitimate the authority that creates or exercises it (Sultany 2017, 35–36). The relevant test is then whether institutionalization constrains power and opens it to meaningful political contestation instead of merely formalizing inherited authority.

In this context, rebel governance can generate institutions, personnel, bureaucratic practices, and political relationships that later support rapid state-building (Furlan 2020, 478–90). Mampilly emphasizes,

however, that these capacities develop through interaction with particular civilian populations and local political conditions (Mampilly 2011, 48–53). Extending them nationally therefore requires adaptation beyond the context in which they developed.

Institutional incorporation may reproduce wartime authority, but governing responsibility may also generate adaptation. Haenni and Drevon show how the demands of governance can encourage greater pragmatism and changes in political practice (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 71–76, 220–24). Such adaptation, however, does not by itself establish institutional transformation. Mouffe adds a different test by focusing on contestation: legitimate order requires opponents to remain adversaries within meaningful contestation rather than being treated as enemies to be excluded (Mouffe 2005, 14–19). Thus, institutional transformation concerns not only administrative adaptation but also whether autonomous opposition remains politically possible.

Grajales and Lévy's concept of embedded armed governance shows how wartime authority may acquire institutional permanence through socio-economic structures, elite alliances, and administrative dependencies (Grajales and Lévy 2024, 1–5). After entering state power, this may appear through appointments, privileged institutional access, control over resources, or informal networks. Institutional authority can then be assessed through whether access, influence, and effective power remain structured by wartime affiliations and relationships or are governed by transparent and generally applicable rules.

- **Political Belonging**

The third dimension concerns whether different groups are recognized as full and equal members of the national political community. Beetham makes consent and recognized authorization part of legitimate political power (Beetham 2013, 12–18). Mouffe adds that citizens must be able to contest authority and organize political alternatives without being treated as enemies (Mouffe 2005, 14–19). Political belonging also requires equal access to institutions and protection. Formal claims to represent the whole population may nevertheless coexist with unequal forms of political membership.

Furlan shows how wartime authority may construct differentiated relations with civilian populations, distinguishing between loyal and disloyal, protected and suspect, or excluded and tolerated groups (Furlan 2020, 489–91). Rebel legitimation may also draw on shared historical or cultural symbols, constructions of threat and community (Terpstra and Frerks 2017, 285). The central test after entry into state power is whether such classifications are dismantled or reproduced, allowing formal citizenship to coexist with conditional political membership.

Sen's critique of identity reduction shows why political belonging cannot be organized around a single communal classification. Individuals occupy multiple and overlapping identities and do not belong exclusively to one category (Sen 2006, 1–4, 19–23). When one affiliation becomes the principal measure of political trust, citizenship itself can become differentiated, making equal political belonging conditional on perceived loyalty or threat.

Gender provides a further test of equal political membership because formal representation alone does not establish political agency. Ponzanesi emphasizes women's self-determination and political agency, rejecting their representation as passive or symbolic figures (Ponzanesi 2024, 7–8, 20). Crenshaw's intersectional approach further shows why women cannot be treated as a uniform political category, as experiences of marginalization may be shaped by multiple dimensions of identity (Crenshaw 1991, 1242–44).

Political belonging must also be considered through civilian responses, without treating official declarations or visible participation as evidence of it. Arjona shows that civilians may negotiate, resist, withdraw, or otherwise respond strategically to armed authority, going beyond simple acceptance or rejection (Arjona 2015, 180–84). Participation therefore cannot automatically be read as acceptance.

Kalyvas further shows how information and civilian reporting can shape the identification of collaborators and enemies within wartime violence (Kalyvas 2006, 173, 178–80). Such classifications may persist after transition, reproducing wartime boundaries within the terms of political membership.

- **External Recognition versus Internal Legitimacy**

External recognition can shape the conditions under which internal legitimacy is pursued without determining whether authority is regarded as rightful domestically. Hurd's relational understanding requires specifying whose judgment of legitimacy is at stake (Hurd 1999, 381–82). Diplomatic engagement may strengthen an authority's international standing without demonstrating domestic recognition of a rightful claim to rule.

Haenni and Drevon interpret HTS's political realignment and changing governance practices as evidence of genuine adaptation (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 220–24, 265–74). Jo, by contrast, cautions that compliance with international expectations may also reflect strategic efforts to obtain recognition, reputation, or material advantage (Jo 2015, 60–64).

International normalization may expand diplomatic access, resources, and institutional capacity. It can then support reform, but may also strengthen an authority's capacity to consolidate power while inherited coercive practices, institutional networks, concentrations of power, or exclusionary boundaries persist.

Overall, rebel-governance scholarship explains how armed movements develop governing capacity, coercive structures, organizational networks, and differentiated relations with civilian populations (Furlan 2020, 478–92; Grajales and Lévy 2024, 1–5). Legitimacy scholarship distinguishes effective rule from a rightful claim to govern (Hurd 1999, 381–92). DDR and SSR scholarship further direct attention to whether wartime coercive and organizational structures are sufficiently transformed after conflict (Berdal and Ucko 2013, 316–19; Knight 2008, 10–12). Together, these literatures provide important insights, but offer less guidance on how coercive authority, institutional organization, and political membership interact when territorially bounded rebel governance is extended into national state power.

This thesis addresses that gap through an integrated framework that examines whether inherited coercive relationships become accountable public security, whether governing institutions become constrained and contestable beyond wartime networks, and whether differentiated

relations of loyalty and protection are transformed into equal political membership. Hurd and Bernstein make rightfulness and its reception across the affected political community central to this assessment (Hurd 1999, 381–89; Bernstein 2011, 19–20). External recognition is treated as a condition that may alter the resources and incentives surrounding this transformation without establishing domestic legitimacy.

The literature therefore suggests that extending rebel-governance capacity into state institutions is not sufficient for legitimate national authority. What matters is whether this transition transforms the relationships and practices through which wartime authority was exercised, or reproduces them within new state forms. This framework provides the basis for assessing that process empirically.

3. Method and Analytical Strategy

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This thesis adopts a qualitative single-case design to examine HTS's movement from territorially bounded rebel governance in Idlib into national state authority. HTS is treated as an analytically revealing case, without claiming statistical representativeness, because institutions and political practices developed under rebel rule later became relevant to national state-building. The analysis draws principally on official and institutional discourse, complemented by interviews and contextual documentation.

3.2 Critical Qualitative Discourse Analysis

This thesis uses critical qualitative discourse analysis, with political legitimation as its principal focus. Because legitimation involves the

justification of claims to political authority, discourse is central to examining how such claims are articulated and given meaning. Hardy et al. situate discourse within wider historical and social contexts (Hardy et al. 2004, 19–20). Taylor links language to institutions, practices, authority, and power (Taylor 2013, 9–10). Jackson and Dexter extend discourse beyond statements to laws, symbols, institutional practices, and procedures (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 10).

The analysis examines how HTS and the new authorities justify national rule, define legitimate political actors and threats, assign responsibility, and frame security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging. Official discourse is treated as evidence of legitimation strategies, not proof that legitimacy has been achieved.

The analysis is critical because it examines how discourse operates through power: how coercion, exclusion, and concentrated authority are justified, how boundaries of political belonging are constructed, and how opponents or alternatives are marginalized or framed as threats (Taylor 2013, 18–19). Jackson and Dexter further highlight how binary oppositions and constructions of enemies and victims structure political violence narratives (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 14–17). This critical orientation does not, however, entail a formal linguistic model of Critical Discourse Analysis based on grammar, syntax, or textual structure.

Following Schneider, the analysis uses repeated reading and broad thematic coding rather than a rigid sequence of linguistic procedures (Schneider 2013). Recurring legitimation claims, actor positions, constructions of responsibility and threat, contradictions, and variation across contexts are identified and compared across the material. Consistent with this, Hardy et al. describe discourse analysis as an

interactive process moving between texts and analytical categories while locating meaning in relation to its social context and other discourses (Hardy et al. 2004, 21).

3.3 Sources and Selection of Discourse Material

The primary discourse material consists of publicly available open-source material, including major speeches, official and institutional statements, constitutional and legal documents, government media, and verified institutional social-media material. Selected authority-affiliated media are included where the institutional relationship is sufficiently clear. Material is selected for its relevance to the research question and analytical framework (Trachtenberg 2006, 140–43).

Documents are selected where they contain relevant discourse, legal provisions or institutional content. Selection also considers political significance, identifiable authorship and origin, coverage across the research period, and variation across actors and contexts. Because documentary selection risks investigator bias and unwarranted selectivity, the criteria guiding source selection are made explicit (Thies 2002, 355–56).

International and diplomatic material is used selectively where external recognition affects legitimation or institutional adaptation. Human-rights reports, non-governmental organization documentation, and reliable journalism provide contextual and corroborating evidence of practices and events, while interviews provide complementary interpretive and experiential evidence. These remain analytically distinct from the official discourse that forms the main object of analysis.

Documents are treated as partial and situated sources, not transparent records. They are interpreted in relation to their authorship, audience, purpose, timing, and political circumstances. Thies emphasizes evaluating sources within their historical, situational, and communicative contexts (Thies 2002, 357).

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews and Sampling

Semi-structured interviews provide complementary qualitative material rather than the thesis's principal method. They examine how official legitimacy claims are interpreted, negotiated, challenged, or rejected by differently positioned actors. Some interviews also provide informed or direct evidence of institutional practices and of how authority is experienced in everyday life. Qualitative interviews are useful for understanding processes not fully visible in formal records (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 2–4).

Interviews follow prepared questions flexibly, allowing rephrasing and probes according to participants' knowledge and responses. Taylor treats interview talk as situated and co-constructed through interviewer-participant interaction (Taylor 2013, 62–63). Responses are therefore interpreted in relation to participants' knowledge, experience, and positioning.

Participants were selected purposively to capture informed and varied perspectives, not to represent Syrian public opinion. The sample prioritizes relevant expertise, political or institutional experience, professional engagement, and continuing knowledge of developments inside Syria. Rubin and Rubin emphasize knowledgeable participants alongside varied and contending perspectives (Rubin and Rubin 2005,

65–69). The analysis draws selectively on interview material relevant to legitimacy and the transition from rebel governance into state power.

Intersectionality is used as an analytical sensitivity rather than a separate method. It avoids treating affected groups as internally homogeneous and draws attention to how gender, religion, sect, ethnicity, locality, and political position may shape experiences of security, participation, protection, and belonging. Crenshaw shows that single identity categories can obscure intragroup differences and the effects of intersecting social positions (Crenshaw 1991, 1242–45).

3.5 Limitations, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Credibility is strengthened through transparent source selection, comparison across actors and contexts, and active consideration of contradictory evidence. Triangulation compares official claims, institutional arrangements, reported practices, interview interpretations, and contextual material as potentially conflicting forms of evidence. Thies emphasizes openly weighing supporting and contradictory evidence (Thies 2002, 364–66), while Trachtenberg stresses comparison with other records, actors' positions, contextual knowledge, and subsequent actions (Trachtenberg 2006, 156–57).

Several limitations and potential biases remain. Official discourse cannot reveal private intentions directly because public claims are shaped by their audience (Trachtenberg 2006, 153–54). Authority-affiliated media may reproduce official narratives, while online and documentary material may be incomplete, selectively accessible, altered, or poorly archived (Trachtenberg 2006, 157–58). Purposive selection may also favor material consistent with theoretical expectations. In addition, silence or omission cannot automatically be

interpreted as deliberate exclusion, and discourse analysis cannot establish what audiences think or believe (Schneider 2013). In this sense, it cannot determine whether observed adaptation reflects genuine transformation of underlying beliefs or motivations.

Arabic-language competence, academic training in English–Arabic translation, and familiarity with Syria's political context provide important access to the material. At the same time, proximity to the case may shape source selection, interview interactions, credibility assessments, and the treatment of contradictory evidence. Rose emphasizes that knowledge is partial and that researchers retain power through deciding what questions to ask, how evidence is assessed, and how it is presented (Rose 1997, 305–8). Reflexivity in this sense means making positionality and uncertainty visible without claiming neutrality. The same consideration applies to translation as Arabic-language material is translated by the researcher. Rose also notes that meanings, tensions, and ambiguities cannot always be transferred completely through translation (Rose 1997, 314–15).

Interviews are voluntary. Participants are informed of the research purpose and provide separate consent to recording. They may decline questions, end the interview, or request that material not be quoted or used. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained unless explicit consent to identification is given. Identifying details are withheld where disclosure could create risk, and recordings and transcripts are securely stored. Quotations are selected and translated cautiously, particularly where participants discuss sensitive identities, violence, or political and security actors. Fujii emphasizes that ethics is an ongoing responsibility and that informed consent requires understanding possible risks and

benefits (Fujii 2012, 717–19). These procedures are detailed in the interview protocol.

4. Analysis

The fall of the Assad regime created an opening for HTS to convert military victory and accumulated rebel-governance capacity into national authority, but victory itself could only initiate a claim to legitimate rule. The new authorities presented the transition through legality, state-building, national unity, participation, and non-exclusion. In his first presidential address, al-Sharaa connected his assumption of office to legal consultation and the acquisition of the "legitimacy required," while promising participation without exclusion and a government reflecting Syria's diversity (Al-Sharaa 2025c; Alioglu and Sio 2025). He had similarly framed the transition as a shift from a "revolutionary mentality" toward state-building through law and institutions (Al-Sharaa 2024b; Okuroglu and Ozcan 2024).

The transition simultaneously raises a problem of continuity: wartime institutions and coercive practices may become organizing foundations of post-war governance and political control (Liu 2024, 1131–32). The analysis examines how HTS's inherited institutions, practices, networks, and governing relationships were reproduced, adapted, or transformed after the transition to state power. It does so across security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging.

Across the three dimensions, it assesses how claims to rightful rule are articulated and institutionalized, and where practices and outcomes reinforce, qualify, or contradict them. Interviews and contextual evidence help interpret and test these claims, while external

normalization is considered where it shapes the conditions surrounding this transition to national authority.

4.1 Security Authority

From Wartime Coercion to the Claim of Regulated National Force

Security Authority examines whether coercive capacities inherited from rebel governance were transformed into public authority through changes in command, conduct, civilian protection, restraint, and accountability (Civic and Miklaucic 2011, 234–39). The authorities legitimated the emerging security order through liberation, professionalization, protection, and the unification of force under the state (Al-Sharaa 2025d, 2025b). These claims are assessed by examining the organization, control, and exercise of coercive authority, including how force was incorporated into the state, regulated in practice, and justified across different security contexts.

- **Victory, Security-Sector Reorganization, and Incorporation**

The initial legitimation of the new security order rested heavily on liberation and military victory. At the January 2025 Victory Conference, revolutionary victory accompanied the dissolution of the former army and Baath Party, suspension of the 2012 Constitution, and al-Sharaa's assumption of the transitional presidency (Shaam Network 2025). His framing positioned the victorious forces as authorized to dismantle the former regime's coercive order and reorganize force nationally (Al-Sharaa 2025d). Shortly after the conference, the broader circulation of *man yuḥarrir yuqarrir* ("those who liberate decide") exposed the potentially exclusionary logic of this claim: military

liberation could become a privileged claim to political authority in shaping the post-Assad order (Raseef22 2025; Alhaj Saleh 2026).

Liberation nevertheless carried genuine political significance for many Syrians without necessarily translating into authorization of the incoming rulers. Ahed Al Hendi, a Christian from Damascus, a Syrian-American political activist and Senior Fellow at the Center for Peace Communications, recalled intense happiness at the regime's collapse, but alongside caution toward those assuming power (Interview with Ahed Al Hendi, July 21, 2026).

Following this initial reorganization, the authorities sought to institutionalize the emerging security order through incorporation, recruitment, and professionalization (Enab Baladi 2025). HTS nevertheless entered national power with a General Security apparatus whose coercive relationship with opposition to its rule formed part of its Idlib legacy (Jazmati 2024). Armed formations were formally dissolved or incorporated into Defense and security institutions and presented as components of a regulated national apparatus. Yet General Security training reportedly lasted approximately fifteen days, while the new army continued to use forms of "moral guidance" or ideological instruction (Enab Baladi 2025; Jazmati 2025a). SSR scholarship makes professionalization dependent on meaningful reform of security institutions, rather than formal incorporation alone (Civic and Miklaucic 2011, 234–39). This short training period and continued ideological instruction complicate the claim that such reform transformed coercive practice rather than primarily its institutional form.

Organizational structures may survive formal dissolution (Knight 2008, 11–12), while wartime coercive arrangements can persist within

newly institutionalized forms (Liu 2024, 1131–32). The relevant issue was therefore whether incorporation changed the underlying relationships of coercive authority, not simply their institutional location.

Mais Katt, a Syrian investigative journalist and media expert specializing in conflict reporting and media development, described armed formations whose relationship with state authority remained ambiguous, moving between alliance, autonomy, and resistance. She interpreted some of these groups as being used by the authorities without clear or publicly declared arrangements (Interview with Mais Katt, July 16, 2026). Mohammad Bassiki, a Syrian investigative journalist and Director of Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism, viewed broader recruitment and prospective Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) integration as a movement toward an army representing a more diverse Syrian population (Interview with Mohammad Bassiki, July 23, 2026).

External pressure entered this process through concerns over the incorporation of foreign fighters. The United States, France, and Germany objected to their appointment to senior military positions (Azhari and Irish 2025). Al-Sharaa defended their wartime contribution while stressing their submission to Syrian law, absence of external threat, and that any acquisition of Syrian citizenship would be determined constitutionally (SANA 2025a). This made the position of foreign fighters relevant to both international security concerns and the domestic transformation of wartime security structures.

Formal incorporation did not by itself resolve the persistence of wartime organizational structures (Knight 2008, 10–12). Reintegration likewise depended on political relationships and context, rather than

functioning as a purely technical process (Berdal and Ucko 2013, 316–19). The broader issue was therefore whether security-sector reorganization altered the wartime structures and relationships underlying coercive authority.

- **The Coast: From Threat Framing to Promises of Accountability**

In March 2025, violence erupted on the Syrian Coast after attacks by armed supporters of the former regime on the new authorities' security forces. It was followed by a large-scale security response involving government forces, affiliated armed groups, and other mobilized fighters, including foreign ones. The Coast is predominantly Alawite, the same community from which the Assad ruling family originated. The resulting violence included widespread killings and other abuses against civilians, particularly Alawites (UN Commission of Inquiry 2025). This crisis tested whether the emerging national security order could maintain its protective character during a major security confrontation.

Al-Sharaa, as head of state, framed the confrontation around *fulūl* ("remnants") of the former regime and the restoration of security and order (Al-Sharaa 2025a). This constructed coercion as reactive and protective: insecurity originated with armed enemies of the post-Assad order, and the state presented itself as restoring order. Although this framing appeared to distinguish former-regime fighters from civilians, the use of *fulūl* risked extending suspicion beyond those directly involved, allowing a political category to become associated more broadly with Alawite communal identity.

Independent findings raised doubts about whether this boundary was sustained in practice. The United Nations Independent International

Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Commission of Inquiry) documented widespread and systematic violence and called for measures to prevent recurrence and restore public confidence. The Syrian Feminist Lobby likewise condemned both the initial attacks and violations committed by security forces and affiliated militias, linking civilian killings and sectarian incitement to failures of accountability and transitional justice (Syrian Feminist Lobby 2025a). These findings did not dispute the existence of an armed threat; they challenged the authorities' claim that the force used in response remained protective and disciplined. Under the discourse of restoring security, state-associated force itself had become a source of civilian insecurity.

Interview testimony makes this gap between claimed security and experienced insecurity more concrete. An anonymous female Alawite teacher from the Syrian Coast, who witnessed the events on March 6, 2025, recalled seeing civilian bodies in the streets and vehicles entering the city while firing randomly. She described several armed groups operating without clear coordination and characterized the violence she witnessed as directed rather than random (Interview with Anonymous female Alawite teacher from the Syrian coast, July 18, 2026). Bassiki, by contrast, condemned the violations but gave greater explanatory weight to fragmented command, weak control, and transitional disorder than to systematic state policy (Interview with Mohammad Bassiki, July 23, 2026). The distinction between deliberate policy and loss of control matters, but both interpretations expose a legitimacy problem: national security authority requires the capacity to regulate forces acting under or alongside the state and make protection and restraint more than uncertain outcomes.

The authorities responded to the violence by introducing a further legitimation claim centered on truth, justice, and accountability. Through the establishment of an investigative committee, the authorities represented state-associated violence as subject to truth-seeking, remedy, and judgment (Syrian Presidency 2025b; National Investigation Committee 2025). Authority was then justified not only through confronting threats but through a claimed capacity to judge coercion associated with the new order itself.

The critical distinction is therefore between accountability as a legitimation claim and accountability in practice. Establishing an investigative committee placed state-associated violence within an official process of investigation and judgment, but its credibility depended on independence, attribution of responsibility, and willingness to address command failures. The Coast therefore showed that whether violence reflected deliberate policy or loss of control, security authority was weakened when forces acting under or alongside the state became a source of civilian insecurity.

- **Suwayda and the Contested Use of Force**

Suwayda is a southern Syrian governorate where the majority of the population is Druze (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 51). In July 2025, clashes involving local Druze and Bedouin armed groups escalated into government security and military intervention. This was followed by extensive violence against civilians, mainly Druze, by actors aligned with the authorities, and later armed tribal mobilization toward Suwayda. Investigations documented massacres, extrajudicial executions, and sectarian abuses directed at Druze civilians, alongside serious violations by other armed actors (Amnesty International

2025b; UN Commission of Inquiry 2026, 17–18, 24–26). Suwayda therefore subjected the authorities' security claim to a sharper test because intervention was justified through civilian protection and the restoration of security and order (UN Commission of Inquiry 2026, 10). Israeli intervention then altered the trajectory of the crisis. After striking Syrian government forces in the south, Israel escalated its intervention on July 16 by striking the Defense Ministry and military headquarters in Damascus and a target near the presidential palace, while demanding the withdrawal of government forces from Suwayda. Government forces subsequently withdrew amid ceasefire efforts and wider U.S. and regional mediation (Azhari and Pamuk 2025).

Interior Minister Anas Khattab framed the deployment of Internal Security as contributing to stability and de-escalation in Suwayda (Khattab 2025). Ahmed al-Dalati, commander of Internal Security in Suwayda, likewise presented the entry of Defense and government forces as necessary to protect civilians and restore security, while calling on Druze armed factions to hand over their weapons to state authorities (Al-Dalati 2025). Consequently, intervention was represented not simply as superior coercive capacity, but as the restoration of national public authority over fragmented armed space.

This claim establishes its own standard: different armed actors should be regulated according to publicly defensible principles, independent of political proximity. The state's claimed monopoly of legitimate force places the authority to regulate force within state institutions (Weber 2008, 156–57).

Al-Sharaa's praise of the tribal *faz'a* (collective tribal mobilization in support or defense) shortly afterward exposed a contradiction within this claim to a national monopoly of force. During the same crisis in

which local Druze armed autonomy was presented as an obstacle to sovereignty, he publicly thanked tribal forces that mobilized toward Suwayda in support of the centralizing project (Al-Sharaa 2025b). The discursive division was therefore not simply state versus non-state force: armed actors outside formal institutions could be incorporated positively into the national security narrative when politically aligned with the center.

The claim to protective and nationally regulated force was also challenged by the violence itself. BBC News documented grave violence at Suwayda's main hospital (BBC News 2025), while Amnesty International verified extrajudicial executions of Druze civilians by government and government-affiliated forces accompanied by sectarian abuse (Amnesty International 2025b). The UN Commission of Inquiry later documented massacres and other grave violations across the July violence (UN Commission of Inquiry 2026). These findings do not establish a single chain of command or explanation. They nevertheless challenge the authorities' representation of intervention as protective, disciplined, and nationally regulated.

This contradiction was also reflected in the experience of those affected by the violence. Dr. Osama Abo Alhosn, a Druze general surgeon from Suwayda and medical witness to the July 2025 attacks, described how his initial willingness to support the transition gave way after the violence to a substantial loss of confidence in national authority. He described the result as a "deep wound," arguing that rebuilding trust requires recognition, actual investigation, accountability, and compensation from those claiming state authority (Interview with Dr. Osama Abo Alhosn, July 18, 2026). The legitimacy problem was

therefore not only whether the state could provide protection, but whether it could rebuild trust after coercion exercised under its name.

The interpretation of that coercion, however, remained contested. Prof. Dr. Muhammed Nur Alnamer, a professor and researcher at Karabük University specializing in Sufi Islam and the history of Islamic thought, interpreted the coercive response primarily through preservation of central power and reaction to perceived challenges rather than through a straightforwardly sectarian project (Interview with Prof. Dr. Muhammed Nur Alnamer, July 17, 2026). This explanation, however, does not remove the legitimacy problem: coercion in defense of central power remained problematic where its exercise was not effectively regulated.

- **The Uneven Construction of a National Monopoly of Force**

Across the transition, the authorities increasingly presented the concentration of armed force under state authority as essential to sovereignty (Al-Sharaa 2025b). Yet this process took different forms: former-regime military and security personnel were required to surrender their weapons through reconciliation processes, allied factions were incorporated, Suwayda faced an attempt at coercive centralization, tribal forces temporarily supported the center, and the SDF entered negotiated integration into Syrian state institutions (European Union Agency for Asylum 2025; Syrian Presidency 2025e; Al-Sharaa 2025b).

Variation is not itself evidence of illegitimacy. Reintegration need not follow a single sequence or institutional route (Berdal and Ucko 2013, 317–19). Hybrid security arrangements may likewise complement state authority or undermine it, depending on how they operate (Bagayoko,

Hutchful, and Luckham 2016, 14–15). What matters more is consistency of principle: different routes can remain legitimate when their distinctions are publicly defensible, and their implementation does not itself undermine legitimate security authority.

The SDF agreement provided a contrasting route to national unification. Integration through Syrian state institutions presented negotiated incorporation, rather than coercive absorption, as compatible with the same claim to national control of force. International concern with counterterrorism cooperation and stability in the northeast may also have encouraged this negotiated route (International Crisis Group 2025). Prof. Dr. Sarbast Nabi, a Kurdish Syrian professor of political philosophy at Koya University in Iraqi Kurdistan specializing in the state and civil society, stressed that security integration does not resolve Kurdish demands for political recognition and cultural rights, or their place within the broader national settlement (Interview with Prof. Dr. Sarbast Nabi, July 21, 2026). Negotiated integration could therefore advance security unification without resolving wider political legitimacy.

Security Authority therefore shows adaptation in the organization and legitimation of coercive rule, but limited transformation in practice. Claims of professionalization, protection, accountability, and national control of force increasingly accompanied liberation-based authorization. Yet the Coast and Suwayda showed persistent problems in how force was regulated and experienced, while political and communal distinctions continued to shape its application. The central legitimacy problem was therefore not simply whether force had been nationalized, but whether national security authority had moved beyond wartime and identity-based hierarchies toward equal

protection, restraint, and accountability across the political community.

4.2 Institutional Authority

From Territorial Governing Capacity to National Power

Institutional Authority examines whether governing capacities, personnel, and networks inherited from rebel rule were transformed as HTS moved into national state power, or instead extended through state institutions. The authorities legitimated this transition through claims of governing competence and consultation, later extended through constitutionalization and representation (Al-Sharaa 2024a; Syrian Arab Republic 2025). The question is whether institutionalization reorganized and constrained inherited power instead of simply relocating it within the formal structures of the state (Weber 2008, 157; Sultany 2017, 35–36).

- **Scaling Idlib Governance: Capacity and Adaptation**

In al-Sharaa's early discourse, revolutionary authorization was progressively recast through legality, institutions, and governing competence. In his first presidential address, he connected his assumption of the transitional presidency to legal consultation and the acquisition of the necessary *shar'iyya*—legitimacy (Al-Sharaa 2025c). In an earlier interview with Syria TV, he framed the transition as a shift from revolutionary mentality toward state-building through law and institutions (Al-Sharaa 2024b). He also invoked governance in Idlib as evidence of administrative experience while differentiating the emerging Syrian order from Afghanistan (Al-Sharaa 2024a). Yet the move from governing competence to legitimate authority is not

automatic, because effective rule remains distinct from authority regarded as rightful (Hurd 1999, 381, 387–89). At the same time, according to Haenni and Drevon, HTS's experience of governing contributed to shifts in its political practice (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 71–76, 220–24).

Alnamer located this adaptation in the relationship between ideology and governing responsibility, arguing that ideology can become more pronounced when detached from practical rule, while responsibility for services and administration forces it to confront and adjust to social reality (Interview with Prof. Dr. Muhammed Nur Alnamer, July 17, 2026). Yet adaptation through governing experience did not mean that the Idlib model could simply be extended nationally. UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen's warning against extending the Idlib caretaker model nationally exposed the corresponding limit of the competence claim: administrative experience could facilitate state-building without supplying the broader foundations required for national institutions (UN Security Council 2025a).

- **National Dialogue: Consultation and the Limits of Participation**

The National Dialogue shifted legitimation from governing competence toward participation and inclusion. By establishing a preparatory committee and presenting broad consultation as part of constructing the transitional order, the presidency represented national rule as participatory, no longer grounding its legitimacy in competence or revolutionary victory alone (Syrian Presidency 2025c). But participation has legitimating force only where it constitutes meaningful political involvement, rather than mere incorporation into a process designed by those already governing (Beetham 2013, 18–19).

Its legitimacy also depends on whether political difference can be expressed within a plural political community without being transformed into antagonistic exclusion (Mouffe 2005, 15–16).

Independent assessments complicated this participatory framing. Most members of the preparatory committee had strong political or ideological ties to HTS. Gender balance was limited, while Alawite, Druze, Shiite, and Kurdish participation was minimal or absent (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 112). Working-group discussions also lasted only four to six hours (Madaniya 2025). These limitations matter not in demographic terms or duration alone, but because they shaped who could participate and with what influence. The legitimating value of consultation therefore depended on how the process was experienced and judged across affected groups (Bernstein 2011, 24, 28). Where the authorities themselves shape the conditions through which acceptance is expressed, participation cannot be treated straightforwardly as evidence of legitimacy (Cozzaglio and Greene 2019, 1017, 1027–28).

Alice Mufrej, a Syrian feminist politician and former member of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, described the authorities' treatment of the organized anti-Assad opposition as that of a rival or threat rather than an equal, autonomous partner. Selected individuals willing to work within authority-led structures were instead brought into positions and committees (Interview with Alice Mufrej, July 18, 2026). Dr. Osama offered a different perspective as someone who was invited and attended the process. He explained that the few attendees from Suwayda initially felt welcomed and heard. He later concluded, however, that their presence had no influence on actual decisions (Interview with Dr. Osama Abo Alhosn, July 18, 2026). Together, these

perspectives distinguish consultation from meaningful political participation.

The Dialogue's final statement adopted 18 non-binding outcomes, including institutional reform, political participation, a temporary legislature, and continued dialogue (Syrian National Dialogue Conference 2025). Because these outcomes were non-binding, their significance depended on whether they were later reflected in decisions shaping the transitional order.

Before the Dialogue, Pedersen had called for participation across regions and social groups, effective participation by women, and avoidance of a "one-colored" transition (UN Special Envoy for Syria 2025). Against that standard, the Dialogue also helped present the transition as taking the expected steps of a post-war political process and thus as more internationally legible.

- **Constitutionalization and Embedded Networks**

With the Constitutional Declaration and the formation of the national government, the transition acquired a more formal legal and institutional shape. The Declaration established a transitional architecture while concentrating key appointment and executive powers in the presidency and defining Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation (Syrian Arab Republic 2025). What matters, however, is whether this formalization was reflected in the political-legal order in practice. Rational-legal authority depends on rule through defined offices and competences (Weber 2008, 157), while constitutional form alone does not determine whether authority is effectively constrained (Sultany 2017, 37–40).

Government composition showed some broadening beyond HTS and Salvation Government personnel through professional and technocratic appointments. Yet continuity remained strong, as most ministers had previously served in the Salvation Government (SANA 2025d). Official biographies nevertheless emphasized professional experience and institutional qualifications, presenting the cabinet in more technocratic and institutional terms (SANA 2025b). Bassiki interpreted this broadening as recognition that national administration could not rely on Idlib experience alone (Interview with Mohammad Bassiki, July 23, 2026). Alnamer, however, stressed that the early transition still privileged loyalty over expertise, as limited trust encouraged reliance on figures from the movement's narrower organizational circle (Interview with Prof. Dr. Muhammed Nur Alnamer, July 17, 2026).

Jazmati's investigation of the General Secretariat for Political Affairs complicates this formal architecture, describing ambiguity in its institutional position, subordination, and breadth of responsibility (Jazmati 2025b). Where influential bodies exercise cross-institutional functions without clearly bounded competences, the formal distribution of authority may no longer reflect where decisions are actually made. Mufrej similarly described a divide between formal offices and less visible centers of political and economic power (Interview with Alice Mufrej, July 18, 2026). Sarbast Nabi distinguished representative institutions from parallel ideological structures that continued to exercise significant influence (Interview with Prof. Dr. Sarbast Nabi, July 21, 2026).

The economic sphere makes this pattern more concrete. Reuters documented major restructuring through a secretive committee in

which the president's brother, Hazem al-Sharaa, played a central role, bringing familial ties into public decision-making (Azhari and Dalatey 2025). Grajales and Lévy help explain why this matters: the effects of armed rule can remain after the structures that produced them have changed, especially when they are tied to enduring social, economic, and political relations (Grajales and Lévy 2024, 13–14, 20–21). The tension was therefore between an order represented as increasingly impersonal and legally organized and decision-making that could still depend on personal, organizational, and familial proximity.

Al Hendi questioned whether the observed adaptation reflected genuine change or strategic adjustment, while allowing that strategically driven change could deepen over time (Interview with Ahed Al Hendi, July 21, 2026). Pedersen similarly treated formalization as potentially meaningful, welcoming the Constitutional Declaration's role in filling the legal vacuum and advancing the rule of law while stressing credible and inclusive implementation (UN 2025). Together, these perspectives suggest that institutional change becomes meaningful only where formal structures matched the real exercise of authority.

- **Representation, Centralization, and Contestability**

Presidential Decree No. 66 of 2025 established a presidentially appointed Supreme Committee that supervised electoral bodies selecting two-thirds of the People's Assembly, while the president directly appointed the remaining third (Syrian Presidency 2025a; Syrian Arab Republic 2025). The arrangement created some space for political participation, but its formation remained largely controlled by the presidency. Independent political influence therefore remained

limited. Meaningful participation also requires genuine space to contest those governing within the political order (Mouffe 2005, 17–19).

Mufrej's interpretation sharpens the legitimacy implication here: the issue is not simply whether individuals with different political positions obtain seats, but whether they can organize and challenge the governing center within institutions protected by effective rules and legal constraints (Interview with Alice Mufrej, July 18, 2026). Mona Alfrej, a feminist activist and human-rights defender from Raqqa, from a tribal/Bedouin background, and a former member of the UN Special Envoy's Women's Advisory Board, broadens this further, arguing that civil society cannot perform an independent monitoring role where organizations remain silent, fearful, or dependent on the authorities instead of being protected by enforceable rules (Interview with Mona Alfrej, July 22, 2026). The broader implication is then that institutional openings may exist without securing the conditions needed for effective political challenge or oversight.

The analysis across this dimension reveals adaptation without a corresponding redistribution of authority. New constitutional, consultative, and representative arrangements expanded the formal institutional framework developed in Idlib, but decision-making remained shaped by concentrated power and organizational, personal, and ideological relationships. Political participation opened in limited ways without consistently producing independent influence. The result was an increasingly formalized national order in which inherited networks remained embedded in institutions and continued to shape who could influence decisions and exercise authority.

4.3 Political Belonging

From "All Syrians" to Conditional Political Membership

Political Belonging examines whether nationalization transformed wartime distinctions of loyalty, suspicion, and exclusion into equal membership in the national political community (Furlan 2020, 489–92). The authorities claimed to govern all Syrians, extending their political claim beyond HTS's former base in Idlib (Al-Sharaa 2025c). The issue is whether that claim was maintained when communal identity, political disagreement, or collective difference had to be recognized within the emerging national order. Equal political membership requires that political opponents remain legitimate adversaries rather than enemies (Mouffe 2005, 15–19). It also requires governance and protection to apply across the political community on equal terms (Furlan 2020, 489–90). At the same time, communal identity should not become the decisive category through which political membership is judged (Sen 2006, 19–23).

- **Constructing the National "We"**

The authority's foundational claim was explicitly universal. In his first presidential address, al-Sharaa called for participation without exclusion or marginalization, an inclusive government reflecting Syria's diversity, and national unity under a single authority (Al-Sharaa 2025c). The discourse extended authority beyond HTS's wartime order by claiming to represent Syrians collectively, including those politically, ideologically, or communally distant from the victorious movement.

This universal framing was complicated by pro-authority invocations of Bani Umayya and the Umayyad past, including descriptions of al-Sharaa through Umayyad symbolism and its circulation in supportive

social-media spaces (Ali 2025; Akhbar Syria 2025; Darb al-Abaʾ 2025). The Umayyads, whose caliphate (661–750 CE) was centered in Damascus, carry particular significance as an Arab-Islamic political legacy associated with the formative history of Islam (Marsham 2024). Their invocation in narratives of political renewal can therefore contribute to a symbolic appropriation of Damascus and national political authority through a Sunni historical inheritance, privileging one communal-historical tradition within the national "we." The use of shared historical and cultural symbols can also function as a form of rebel legitimation (Terpstra and Frerks 2017, 292). In a national setting, such privileging may narrow the terms of belonging by reducing political identity to a dominant communal category (Sen 2006, 19–21). Al Hendi described this problem from a Christian Damascene perspective, contrasting a longstanding sense of belonging to the country with a present feeling of estrangement. In his assessment, the emerging order appeared "designed for one group, not for everyone" (Interview with Ahed Al Hendi, July 21, 2026).

- **From Political Adversary to Communal Suspicion**

The Coast first tested whether "all Syrians" could withstand confrontation with a population associated with the defeated regime. Al-Sharaa framed the immediate enemy primarily as fulūl ("remnants"), a category initially referring to association with the former regime rather than explicitly to the Alawite population (Al-Sharaa 2025a; Military Operations Administration 2025a). The threat framing was therefore political at this stage, not explicitly communal.

That boundary became less stable as violence affected Alawite civilians, while reported abductions of women and girls raised a further question

of equal protection. The Interior Ministry stated that it had investigated 42 reported cases but confirmed only one kidnapping (Al-Baba 2025). Amnesty International, by contrast, received credible reports of at least 36 abductions and directly documented eight cases; in seven of those eight, police or security officials failed to investigate effectively (Amnesty International 2025a). An anonymous Alawite teacher from the Coast described persistent fear after the violence, restricting her movement and work and at times wearing a hijab (headscarf) to conceal her communal identity (Interview with Anonymous female Alawite teacher from the Syrian coast, July 18, 2026). Ninar Hassan, an Alawite Syrian writer, feminist, and activist from the Coast who participated in the 2011 uprising, argued that Alawite women could not expect protection from state institutions that she regarded as implicated in both the abuses and the hostile discourse directed against them (Interview with Ninar Hassan, July 15, 2026). These developments indicate that political suspicion and classifications of loyalty were becoming attached to collective identity (Furlan 2020, 489–91; Kalyvas 2006, 181–82). The claim to represent all Syrians was weakened as suspicion and unequal protection increasingly followed communal identity.

- **Suwayda: Contesting the Boundaries of the National "We"**

Suwayda subjected the claim to govern "all Syrians" to a sharper test as political opposition increasingly intersected with communal classification. Official discourse framed intervention through protection, state preservation, and national unity, presenting the center as acting for Syria as a whole rather than against a particular community (Al-Sharaa 2025b; Khattab 2025; Al-Dalati 2025).

Yet authority-affiliated media discourse increasingly blurred political opposition and collective identity. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, a prominent Druze religious leader in Suwayda and opponent of the central authorities (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 52), and associated forces were repeatedly framed through treachery and collaboration. References to "Druze militias" and "Hijris"—Druze identified as followers of al-Hijri—moved the discourse toward communal classification (Military Operations Administration 2025b). More explicitly, a formulation described al-Hijri as a traitor whose supporters bore hatred toward the "Syrian Muslim people" (Military Operations Administration 2025b). This framing intensified after Israeli intervention, as narratives linking Druze actors to an "Israeli project" added another register of treachery to their portrayal (Syrians for Truth and Justice and Suwayda Press 2026; UK Home Office 2026). Suspicion could therefore move from political opponents toward a wider community, narrowing the "all Syrians" proclaimed at the transition's outset. The boundary was no longer simply between competing political positions, but between legitimate membership and an enemy category placed outside political contestation (Mouffe 2005, 15–17).

The killing of Munir al-Rajmeh, a Druze civilian and water-well guard in Suwayda, starkly illustrates identity reduction in practice. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Defense Ministry and General Security fighters, backed by armed tribal men, questioned him about his sectarian identity. He first identified himself as "Syrian," but was pressed to specify whether he was Muslim or Druze; after identifying himself as Druze, he was killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2025; Euronews 2025; France 24 2025). The case cannot establish general state policy, but it shows how national

identification can be displaced when communal identity becomes the decisive basis through which a person is judged (Sen 2006, 19–21).

Communal identity was also targeted through humiliation. Amnesty International documented Druze religious men being forcibly shaved during the July violence and noted the cultural significance of mustaches within the community; its Evidence Lab verified photographs and videos of such incidents (Amnesty International 2025b). The practice then went beyond physical abuse by targeting a visible marker of communal dignity.

This communalization also extended into the formal media environment. The Ministry of Information incorporated digital influencers into its public communication efforts, presenting them as contributors to public awareness, cohesion, and stability (SANA 2025c). Yet fact-checking documented false and misleading material during the crisis, including videos falsely portraying Druze as perpetrators of violence (Al-Khatib 2025). A joint investigation by Syrians for Truth and Justice and Suwayda Press found that narratives of "tribal rescue," state control, and an "Israeli project" blurred distinctions between civilians and fighters and extended responsibility from particular armed actors toward entire communities. It also documented images of Druze victims recirculated as evidence of Bedouin victims allegedly killed by Druze actors, further collapsing individual responsibility into communal guilt (Syrians for Truth and Justice and Suwayda Press 2026). Katt described authority-affiliated media as reinforcing division and incitement, while arguing that it was not sufficiently professional to operate through a fully coherent and systematic editorial policy. She also described government-linked media as channels for messages official institutions could not

communicate directly and characterized the authorities as participants in producing hate speech, not merely failing to limit it (Interview with Mais Katt, July 16, 2026).

Nibal Al-Nabwani, a Druze writer from Suwayda, direct witness to the July attacks and involved in assisting affected residents, described how identity shaped movement and safety. She recalled feeling afraid when others knew she was from Suwayda and said that some people concealed their identity or avoided traveling for fear of being recognized (Interview with Nibal Al-Nabwani, July 20, 2026). This illustrates how communal suspicion could affect everyday freedom and ordinary life.

Students from Suwayda revealed this conditional belonging in another sphere: education. Thousands of Druze university students left campuses elsewhere in Syria amid sectarian threats, hostility, and violence, while school students in Suwayda faced unrecognized examination results and continuing educational disruption (Al Modon 2025; UK Home Office 2026; Al Nofal and al-Nashit 2026). Officials nevertheless promised safety, educational rights, compensation for lost study, and support for return (Syria TV 2025). Nabwani, however, described these responses as remaining largely at the level of statements, without concrete measures (Interview with Nibal Al-Nabwani, July 20, 2026). The contrast between official inclusion and continued exclusion exposed the limits of equal national membership, as consequences were experienced collectively across the population associated with Suwayda.

- **Political Agency and Equal Membership**

Political belonging also depends on whether citizens can act as political agents rather than merely be included as members of the national community. This requires the ability to organize, criticize, and advance claims without political participation being conditioned by loyalty or communal identity. Women's participation and civil-society autonomy therefore test whether the national "we" permits autonomous political agency rather than formal inclusion alone.

The authorities referred to women's inclusion as part of the emerging national order, particularly in external-facing discourse (Al-Sharaa 2024a). Hind Kabawat's appointment as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor placed one woman among 23 ministers, indicating limited female representation at the official level (Sallon 2025). Alfrej, however, questioned whether such inclusion translated into real decision-making power, arguing that political and civil-society participation remained confined within boundaries set by those governing (Interview with Mona Alfrej, July 22, 2026).

The Syrian Feminist Lobby criticized women's marginalization and called for both broader representation and effective participation in political decision-making, reconstruction, local councils, and state institutions, together with an independent civil-society role in oversight (Syrian Feminist Lobby 2025b). Together, these demands highlight that representation mattered not simply in numbers, but in whether women could exercise political voice, influence, and autonomy (Ponzanesi 2024, 7–8, 20). Gender also intersects with other identities and structures of power. Women's experiences of inclusion cannot therefore be treated as uniform, requiring attention to differences among women themselves (Crenshaw 1991, 1242–44).

Overall, women's inclusion was limited both in reach and political influence, while intersecting identities and unequal power relations shaped how that inclusion was experienced.

- **Collective Difference and the Renegotiation of Membership**

Equal membership also concerns whether collective identities and political claims can be recognized within the national community. Kurdish demands therefore test whether the universal Syrian "we" can accommodate collective difference. Kurdish leadership demanded constitutional recognition and political, cultural, and administrative rights, alongside decentralized or federal arrangements presented as compatible with Syrian unity (Roj 2025). The Presidency affirmed Kurdish equality and citizenship but rejected federalism or autonomous entities outside a nationally agreed framework, defining national unity as a "red line" and describing such claims as *khurūjan ʿan al-ṣaff al-waṭanī*—being "outside the national line" (Syrian Presidency 2025d).

The discursive boundary matters because constitutional disagreement becomes a question of belonging when particular demands are positioned against the "national line." In this case, decentralization, federalism, and cultural recognition raised the question of whether Kurdish claims could remain within legitimate political disagreement or be recast as disloyalty. This concerned whether Kurdish and national political identities could coexist without one being reduced to or displaced by the other (Sen 2006, 19–20). Nabi described this problem through language rights, arguing that recognizing Kurdish only as a "national" rather than official language leaves it without equal constitutional status and, as a result, reproduces unequal citizenship at

the level of the state (Interview with Prof. Dr. Sarbast Nabi, July 21, 2026). The negotiated agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces nevertheless allowed the authorities to present Kurdish-led forces as incorporable through bargaining rather than exclusion (Syrian Presidency 2025e). Such bargaining suggests an effort to negotiate the terms of authority rather than simply accept or reject the governing order (Arjona 2015, 191–95). Yet negotiated security incorporation remained distinct from recognition of Kurdish political, cultural, and constitutional claims.

A similar renegotiation of collective membership emerged in Suwayda after mass violence and identity-based insecurity weakened confidence in protection within the national order. Demands for self-determination developed into an organized campaign, with figures such as Firas al-Shoufi advocating alternatives to centralized rule (Al-Shoufi 2025; Jarous 2025). Proposals ranged from decentralization and self-administration to independence, although they should not be treated as representing the entire Druze community. Rather than amounting simply to acceptance or rejection of the national order, these demands can be understood as attempts to preserve autonomy and bargain over the terms on which authority would be exercised (Arjona 2015, 191–95). Where protection and political agency were no longer seen as adequately secured within the existing order, self-determination could also come to signify communal survival and the renegotiation of the terms of political membership itself.

Political Belonging therefore reveals a universal claim to govern "all Syrians" that was undermined by the authorities' own classifications and governing practices. Wartime distinctions of loyalty and collective suspicion persisted, shaping protection, recognition, and political voice

where disagreement intersected with identity, gender, and collective difference. The central problem was not only incomplete inclusion, but the persistence of boundaries that made national membership conditional rather than equal.

Across the three dimensions, the transition involved increasingly elaborate efforts to legitimate national rule without equivalent transformation in domestic legitimacy. The authorities justified their claim to rule through legality, professionalization, participation, constitutionalization, protection, and national unity, yet these claims remained contested where wartime power structures continued to shape coercion, decision-making, and political membership. Neither compliance nor institutional participation alone establishes legitimacy, which depends on authority being regarded as rightful across the political community (Hurd 1999, 390; Bernstein 2011, 19–20). Hassan cautioned that apparent acceptance could reflect fear, relief after Assad's fall, sectarian identification, social pressure, or interests rather than genuine legitimacy (Interview with Ninar Hassan, July 15, 2026). Katt similarly described the violence as deepening a winner–loser divide among Syrians that increasingly mapped onto sectarian belonging, further weakening the shared political basis on which domestic legitimacy could be constructed (Interview with Mais Katt, July 16, 2026).

External normalization deepened this asymmetry. International recognition expanded diplomatic standing, resources, and governing capacity. Recognitional legitimacy nevertheless remained distinct from internal political legitimacy (Buchanan 2003, 162–63). Overall, the pattern was one of uneven transformation: national authority became more institutionalized and internationally normalized, while domestic

power relations and governing practices changed only marginally and selectively.

5. Conclusion

This thesis asked how legitimate national authority is constructed when an armed movement moves from rebel governance into state power. The Syrian case shows that this construction depends not simply on acquiring national institutions or extending control, but on changing the relationships through which authority is exercised and recognized. Institutions can be nationalized more quickly than the political relationships underlying them. Legitimate national authority therefore requires more than converting wartime capacity into state capacity: coercive authority must become publicly accountable, decision-making power must be subject to meaningful constraint, and membership in the political community must cease to depend on political or communal proximity to those governing. Because legitimacy is relational, its construction depends on whether authority is regarded as rightful across the political community rather than inferred from compliance or institutional presence alone (Hurd 1999, 381, 389–90). Authority originating in coercion may become legitimate, but only if the basis on which it is exercised and accepted changes (Hurd 1999, 388–89).

Security authority, institutional authority, and political belonging cannot be transformed independently of one another. Institutionalization loses legitimating force where coercion is experienced as unequal or where effective power remains inaccessible to meaningful contestation. Likewise, formal citizenship and inclusive political discourse cannot establish equal belonging where protection or political agency varies according to communal identity or perceived

loyalty. Weaknesses in one dimension can undermine change in the others. Legitimate power is not simply organized through rules but limited by them, and its legitimacy is weakened when those exercising power cease to observe those limits (Beetham 2013, 35–36).

The transition also raises the problem of whether authority rooted in revolutionary leadership can be routinized into more impersonal and rule-bound institutions (Weber 2008, 157–58). Rebel governance can itself develop formal institutions, specialized personnel, and hierarchical structures of administration (Furlan 2020, 494–95). At the same time, the relationships in which armed rule is embedded may persist even as its original form changes (Grajales and Lévy 2024, 1–4, 20–21). The Syrian case suggests that institutionalization can advance without fully displacing the personal, organizational, and ideological relationships through which effective power is exercised. This matters beyond HTS because the networks and organizational cohesion that help armed movements fill institutional vacuums during political transitions may also make the depersonalization and constraint of authority more difficult.

The divergence between external normalization and domestic contestation also shows that differently positioned audiences may evaluate authority through different criteria (Bernstein 2011, 24, 27–28). In the Syrian case, international actors could therefore prioritize stability, institutional capacity, or pragmatic adaptation, while communities subject to authority judged it through experiences of protection, accountability, political agency, and equal membership. Recognition does not resolve these competing judgments; it can privilege some over others. Consequently, external normalization may strengthen the authority's diplomatic, economic, and institutional

position while domestic legitimacy remains contested (Council of the European Union 2025; White House 2025). More importantly, where inherited coercive or exclusionary practices remain insufficiently transformed, greater external support may also increase the reach and consequences of those practices.

These conclusions remain bounded by an early and continuing transition. The study does not measure Syrian public opinion or determine the underlying intentions of HTS and its leadership; it examines the construction and contestation of authority through available discourse, institutional practices, contextual evidence, and situated interview perspectives. Future developments may therefore deepen or redirect patterns identified during this period.

A rebel movement may acquire state power and institutionalize its rule, but becoming legitimate national authority requires transforming the terms on which power is exercised, constrained, and shared across the political community.

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