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Reshaping Power in Post-Assad Syria: A Neopatrimonial Approach إعادة تشكيل السلطة في سورية ما بعد الأسد: مقاربة نيوباتريمنية



This article examines the reconfiguration of power in post-Assad Syria through the lens of neo-patrimonialism. It asks whether the policies, appointments, and institutional reforms adopted by the new leadership mark a departure from personalist and clientelist rule, or a recalibration of authoritarian governance within a new ideological and organizational framework. Drawing on a theory-guided qualitative analysis of presidential decrees, official discourse, elite appointments, and institutional restructuring between December 2024 and March 2026, it argues that the emerging order combines bureaucratic expansion with personalized control. While new institutions project legality, reform, and technocratic governance, effective authority remains concentrated in presidency-linked bodies, trusted intermediaries, familial networks, and former HTS/Idlib elites. Strategic moderation and institutional reform thus function less as evidence of democratization than as mechanisms for adapting, legitimizing, and consolidating neo-patrimonial authority. Although this configuration may provide short-term cohesion and administrative flexibility, it risks constraining institutional autonomy, meritocratic governance, and durable political inclusion.

Keywords: Neopatrimonialism, Syria, Post-Assad Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Political Transition, Clientelism, Personalistic Rule.

تبحث هذه الدراسة في إعادة تشكيل السلطة في سورية ما بعد الأسد من منظور نيوباتريمني، وتتساءل: أكانت السياسات والإصلاحات المؤسسية التي اعتمدها القيادة الجديدة تمثل قطيعة جوهرية مع الحكم الشخصي والزبائني، أم أنها تمثل إعادة ضبط للحكم السلطوي ضمن إطار أيديولوجي وتنظيمي جديد؟ تحلل الدراسة المراسيم الرئاسية، والخطاب الرسمي، والتعيينات في مواقع النخبة، وإعادة هيكلة المؤسسات الأمنية والإدارية والاقتصادية والدينية خلال الفترة كانون الأول/ديسمبر 2024- آذار/مارس 2026. وتجادل بأن النظام الناشئ يجمع بين التحديث البيروقراطي والإشراف الشخصي؛ إذ تظهر المؤسسات الجديدة صورة من الشرعية القانونية والإصلاح والحوكمة التكنوقراطية، في حين تبدو السلطة الفعلية متمركزة حول هيئات مرتبطة بمؤسسة الرئاسة، ووسطاء موثوق بهم، وشبكات عائلية، ونخب سابقة من هيئة تحرير الشام وفترة حكم إدلب. وتبين الدراسة أيضاً أن الاعتدال الاستراتيجي والإصلاح المؤسسي لا يشكلان دليلاً على التحول الديمقراطي بقدر ما يعلمان بوصفهما من آليات تكيف السلطة النيوباتريمنية، وإضفاء الشرعية عليها وترسيخها. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه الصيغة قد توفر قدرًا من التماسك والمرونة الإدارية على المدى القصير، فإنها تتطوي على مخاطر إضعاف الاستقلال المؤسسي، والحوكمة القائمة على الجدارة، والإدماج السياسي والمشاركة.

كلمات مفتاحية: النيوباتريمنية، سورية، ما بعد الأسد، هيئة تحرير الشام، الانتقال السياسي، الزبونية، الحكم الشخصي.

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Introduction

The December 2024 collapse of the Assad regime has not produced the democratic breakthrough long anticipated by much of the Syrian opposition. Instead, it appears to have ushered in a recalibration of power within a new ideological and organizational framework. The emerging political order, led by the transitional president Ahmed al-Sharaa and shaped by the networks of power surrounding Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), reflects a process of re-centralization masked by the language of reform and reconstruction. al-Sharaa's public pledges to protect minorities and build a government "grounded in institutions" – stand in stark contrast to the institutional architecture subsequently erected.⁽¹⁾ The Constitutional Declaration of March 2025, far from dispersing power, concentrates executive authority in the presidency to an extraordinary degree: the president appoints all seven members of the Higher Constitutional Court, chairs and determines the composition of the National Security Council, and can unilaterally declare states of emergency, without meaningful parliamentary or judicial oversight.⁽²⁾ This structural consolidation is further reinforced by the composition of the governing coalition itself, which remains dominated by HTS-affiliated networks; the parliamentary process of October 2025 was conducted through locally appointed subcommittees, granting al-Sharaa decisive influence over the assembly's formation and entrenching political authority.⁽³⁾

The central question of this article is: to what extent do the post-Assad policies and institutional reforms represent a departure from, or a continuation of, the logic of personalist and clientelist rule? Subsidiary questions concern the mechanisms through which loyalty and

proximity to power are rewarded, the ways in which formal institutions coexist with informal networks, and how this duality is reflected in official discourse and bureaucratic practice. The analysis draws attention to recurrent patterns of dual governance: formal versus informal authority, technocratic versus loyalist appointments, and rhetorical modernization versus entrenched centralization. These dualities together reveal the anatomy of a new order seeking to gain legitimacy without relinquishing control.

Rather than representing a straightforward restoration of autocracy, the post-Assad order is characterized by façade institutionalization, whereby new structures are established to project an image of legality and accountability while real power seems confined within opaque, personalized circles. This form of governance relies on what may be termed dual institutionalization, by which I refer to the coexistence of nominally autonomous bodies and shadow networks operating under the direct supervision of the ruling elite. Such an arrangement projects institutional reform while reproducing patronage, rewarding loyalty and subordinating the bureaucracy to political will.

The article is theoretically grounded in the literature on neo-patrimonialism and hybrid regimes to interpret these developments as part of a broader continuum rather than a radical rupture.⁽⁴⁾ In this context, neo-patrimonialism is a dynamic mode of adaptation that thrives in transitional settings where institutions are weak and legitimacy is contested. Examining appointments, economic policies, and the restructuring of the security and administrative apparatus since late 2024, the study identifies how personal networks and organizational and ideological loyalties are being woven into the fabric of state reconstruction, giving rise to a complex hybrid that blends bureaucratic form with patrimonial substance.

1 Ahmed al-Sharaa, "Syrian Rebel HTS Leader Says Goal Is to 'Overthrow' Assad Regime," *CNN*, 6 December 2024, accessed on 14/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sOY>

2 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights," Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2025, accessed on 14/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2t5z>

3 Patricia Karam, "Prospects for Syria's Democratization Under Ahmed al-Sharaa," Arab Center Washington DC, 21 November 2025, accessed on 15/3/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2si6>

4 See Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 63–68; Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Revisited: Beyond a Catch-All Concept," GIGA Working Paper, no. 16 (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2006); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Notably, while such loyalty-based appointments and managed pluralist arrangements may preserve cohesion in the short term, they risk undermining the stability of the polity in the long run. In personalist regimes, as Geddes observes, access to office and its material rewards depends entirely on the discretion of the ruler, such that "the whims of the ruler prevail" over any institutionalized selection or accountability procedure.⁽⁵⁾ By privileging allegiance over competence, such practices hinder the consolidation of general rules, the emergence of a professional bureaucracy, and the rooting of meritocratic governance. The result is a fragile equilibrium that sustains order through dependence and co-optation at the expense of institutionalization and systemic resilience.

The article adopts a theory-guided qualitative case study approach to its analysis. Given the fluid and highly securitized nature of the transitional context, the research relies on a triangulation of three qualitative strategies: documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and elite or appointment mapping. It begins by examining formal institutional developments through official sources, including presidential decrees, government announcements, and organizational restructuring measures. It reviews the literature on neo-patrimonialism, hybrid regimes, and façade institutionalization, situating the Syrian experience within comparative debates on post-conflict governance. It then explores the immediate post-Assad phase, outlining the key policies, appointments, and discursive shifts that define the new leadership's approach to reconstruction and authority-building. It conducts a focused discourse analysis of statements, speeches, and media interviews by key members of the emerging political elite. The coding process focuses on recurring markers of centralization, presidential appointment powers, institutional displacement, elite circulation, familial proximity, and the use of reformist or technocratic language.

Finally, the study analyses patterns of appointments and informal authority by drawing on publicly available

records to trace the trajectories of selected elite figures whose appointments across military, economic, and administrative institutions reveal patterns of relational trust and elite circulation within the transitional order. The empirical materials cover the period from December 2024 to March 2026. The analysis compares discursive claims with institutional design and observes patterns of authority allocation. This enables the identification of recurring configurations, such as the coexistence of formal institutional upgrading and informal personalized control. It seeks to develop a theoretically informed interpretation grounded in traceable evidence, capable of explaining how neo-patrimonialism is reproduced through formal policies and informal practices in a transitional setting. The conclusion revisits the central question and reflects on the conditions under which this emergent hybrid order may evolve, consolidate, or unravel.

I. A Neo-Patrimonial Lens on Post-Assad Syria

The emerging political order in post-Assad Syria presents a distinctive analytical challenge. Having arisen from the disintegration of a consolidated authoritarian structure, it does not fit neatly within conventional categories of political transition, whether democratization, hybrid regimes, or post-conflict state reconstruction. What renders this case particularly complex is the apparent gap between the normative register of the new leadership's public discourse – invoking themes of institutional reform, national inclusion, and legal-rational governance – and the structural logic underlying the political arrangements taking shape on the ground. Within this context, neo-patrimonialism offers a useful analytical lens for understanding this contradiction.⁽⁶⁾

Applied to the ongoing Syrian transition, this framework encourages a more cautious reading – one attentive to

5 Barbara Geddes, "Authoritarian Breakdown," working paper, Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles, January 2004, pp. 4–5.

6 Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2007), p. 105.

the possibility that institutional reform may mask the reconfiguration of personalized rule in new organizational form.

1. From Patrimonialism to Neo-Patrimonialism

Max Weber's typology of authority remains foundational to understanding the persistence of personalized rule in modern politics. In Weber's account, patrimonialism constitutes a sub-type of traditional authority in which obedience is grounded in personal loyalty to the ruler rather than adherence to an impersonal legal order.⁽⁷⁾ The ruler's household forms the nucleus of governance; administration is conceived as an extension of his private will, and the distinction between public and personal property becomes blurred. The ruler's control over appointments and resources thus transforms office into a form of property, granting him the prerogative to allocate and withdraw positions as favours. Governance becomes a network of personal dependence, sustained by patronage and reciprocal obligation rather than legal rationality. In such a system, the capacity for autonomous institutional development is structurally constrained because political loyalty consistently outweighs procedural norms.

The reinterpretation of Weber's patrimonialism in the second half of the twentieth century reflected the changing political realities of post-colonial and developing societies. Scholars such as Eisenstadt (1973), Médard (1982), and Clapham (1985) observed that many new states combined bureaucratic institutions with informal practices of patronage and personal rule.⁽⁸⁾ This duality produced the analytical category of neo-patrimonialism which refers to

a hybrid form of governance where modern bureaucratic structures coexist with patrimonial practices. According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997), Erdmann and Engel (2006), and Bank and Richter (2010), neo-patrimonial regimes maintain the façade of legality and bureaucratic order while relying on informal systems of clientelism and rent distribution to secure elite loyalty.⁽⁹⁾ The ruler's authority thus operates simultaneously through formal offices and informal networks that extend deep into society. Institutions are tolerated and even expanded, but only insofar as they serve personal or factional interests rather than constrain them.

Neo-patrimonialism captures the central paradox of modern authoritarianism: the coexistence of bureaucratic form and personal substance. It also provides a vocabulary for analysing regimes that appear reformist or technocratic but remain governed by the calculus of loyalty and reciprocity. In such systems, parliaments, elections, and cabinets function less as arenas of accountability than as mechanisms for regulating intra-elite competition, distributing rents and privileges, and managing public perception by signalling responsiveness and containment of discontent.⁽¹⁰⁾

2. Neo-Patrimonialism and the Arab State

Within Arab political thought, the concept of patrimonialism acquired distinctive contours reflecting the historical experience of state formation in the Arab world. Arab scholars such as Khaldun al-Naqeeb (1991) and Ashraf Othman (2015) have situated the

7 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 231–34.

8 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1973); Jean-François Médard, "The Underdeveloped State in Tropical Africa: Political Clientelism or Neopatrimonialism?" in *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State*, ed. Christopher Clapham (London: Frances Pinter, 1982), 162–92; Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

9 Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63–68; Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Revisited – Beyond a Catch-All Concept," *GIGA Working Paper* no. 16 (German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2006); Andre Bank and Thomas Richter, "Neopatrimonialism in the Middle East and North Africa: Overview, Critique and Alternative Conceptualization" (Hamburg: GIGA, 2010).

10 Steven Heydemann, "Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World," *Saban Center Analysis Paper*, no. 13 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007), 10–12, 14–15.

persistence of personalized rule within the nexus of colonial legacies, rentier economies, and communal politics. Al-Naqeeb's notion of the state of coercion and communal solidarity captured how regimes in the Arab world fused bureaucratic centralization with the moral economy of kinship and sect.⁽¹¹⁾ Othman's work on the neo-patrimonialist state in the Arab Levant reframed the Weberian paradigm for Arab contexts, defining the neo-patrimonial state as one that speaks the grammar of modern bureaucracy yet operates through informal, loyalty-based networks.⁽¹²⁾

These analyses suggest that patrimonialism in the Arab world should be understood not as a relic of pre-modernity but as a structural feature of modern state-building. The post-independence republics of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq replaced colonial tutelage with authoritarianism grounded in kinship, regional, and sectarian loyalties. Economic rents derived from oil, foreign aid, or militarized control served as the material foundation of these networks. Even subsequent waves of economic liberalization and political reform merely reconfigured the existing system by incorporating new elites into the same structures of personal dependence. In effect, the Arab state modernized bureaucratically but not politically: it achieved institutional form without civic substance.⁽¹³⁾

The endurance of such systems has led scholars to situate neo-patrimonialism within broader debates on hybrid authoritarianism and façade institutionalization. Contemporary regimes across the region exhibit what Levitsky and Way (2010) term "competitive authoritarianism": a repertoire of controlled pluralism and procedural reform that preserves personalized

power under the guise of legality.⁽¹⁴⁾ Elections are held, cabinets reshuffled, and reform committees convened but these mechanisms primarily manage elite circulation rather than enable genuine accountability or broaden opportunities for social mobility. The ruler's legitimacy depends less on coercion than on the performance of legality and inclusion. As scholars such as Schlumberger (2007) and Heydemann (2013) note, the coexistence of informal authority and formal institutions produces what looks like a performative display of rational governance that conceals the reproduction of hierarchical dependence.⁽¹⁵⁾ This dynamic characterized the late-Assad era and seems to be re-emerging, albeit with modified discourse and tools, under the new leadership since late 2024.

3. Strategic Moderation as a Mechanism of Neo-Patrimonial Consolidation

Within this theoretical framework, the concept of strategic moderation, developed in my work on intentionality and radical flank effects, offers an interpretive extension.⁽¹⁶⁾ Moderation, in this formulation, does not necessarily signify mere organic ideological evolution but rather a calculated strategy of survival and consolidation. It reflects the agency of political actors who adapt their discourse and behaviour to shifting constraints and opportunities while preserving the underlying hierarchies of power. In post-conflict Syria, the leadership emerging from the former HTS exemplifies this process. Facing a fragmented society and the need

11 Khaldoun Hasan Al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective*. (London: Routledge, 1991), 91-105.

12 Ashraf Osman, "The Neo-Patrimonialist State in the Arab Levant: On the Logic of Group Solidarity and the Reproduction of Sectarianism," *Oman for Social Sciences* 3, no. 11 (Winter 2015): 39–62.

13 Nazih Ayubi. *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1995; pp.328-345, Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 7-11.

14 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 5-6.

15 Oliver Schlumberger, "Arab Authoritarianism: Debating the Dynamics and Durability of Nondemocratic Regimes," in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, ed. O. Schlumberger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–8; Steven Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): pp. 59–73.

16 Azzam Al Kassir, "Intentionality' in Radical Flank Effects: Reflections on Al-Nusra Front's Discourse of Moderation between 2012–2017," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 4 (2025): pp. 954–974.

for both domestic and international legitimacy, the new rulers deploy the language of civility, inclusion, and reform to frame their rule as a break from the coercive practices of the Assad era. Yet beneath this moderated surface persists a deeply personalistic logic of control, where appointments, resources, and political access are tied to loyalty networks and informal negotiation.

In this case, strategic moderation functions as a discursive technology of neo-patrimonialism. It allows rulers to appropriate the rhetoric of rational governance while neutralizing potential challenges and challengers from within and without. The carefully measured moderation of tone and policy often aims to legitimize the institutionalization of power without its democratization. Hence, far from signalling a departure from patrimonial practices, this strategy modernizes them by embedding personal loyalty within the idiom of state-building and political performance.

Seen through this lens, Syria's emerging order epitomizes the adaptive resilience of neo-patrimonial governance in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Across the region, regimes that survived or re-emerged from upheaval did so not by dismantling personalized rule but by re-packaging it within moderated, civic-sounding frameworks. The Syrian case demonstrates how moderation and institutional reform operate as the performative grammar of post-revolutionary governance which entails simultaneously promising change and entrenching centralization.

II. From Idlib to National Stage: HTS's Road to Power

The dramatic collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a significant turning point in Syrian political life. On 8 December 2024, HTS-led rebel forces captured Damascus and effectively ended more than five decades of Assad family rule. The moment was both sudden, in the sense of the rapid collapse of regime control, and long anticipated, given the protracted civil war, deep fragmentation of the

regime's base, the depletion of its resources and external backing, and the shifting regional context.⁽¹⁷⁾

1. HTS: From Insurgency to De Facto Authority

HTS traces its origins to the earlier insurgent formations of the Syrian civil war, specifically Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate 2013-2016) and other Islamist militias. Formally established on 28 January 2017 from a merger of several groups, HTS sought to consolidate Islamist opposition dominance in Idlib and surrounding areas. Over the subsequent years HTS developed a dual strategy of military effectiveness and local governance: it eliminated rival groups, tightened control in Idlib, and built quasi-state institutions under the umbrella of the "Syrian Salvation Government". Scholars note how HTS gradually shifted its posture away from pure transnational jihadism to a more territorially-rooted, pragmatic form of Islamist governance focused on Syria.⁽¹⁸⁾

By late 2023 and into 2024, HTS had emerged as the most capable and effective opposition actor. It possessed not only a coherent territorial base and effective administrative control in the northwest, but also the military capacity, alliances, and negotiating leverage necessary to coordinate the *Rad' al-'Udwan* campaign (Deterring' Aggression), which was a joint offensive that brought down regime forces in just eleven days.⁽¹⁹⁾ This evolution is crucial for understanding the transition: HTS was no longer merely a rebel faction, but a proto-state actor able to mobilize coalitions, broker agreements, and anticipate the shape of a post-regime order.

17 Taim Jbour, "The Fall of Syria's Regime: The Rise of HTS and the Nation's Uncertain Future," *The Gazelle*, 31/12/2024, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://bit.ly/4nyEvpe>

18 Azzam Al Kassir, "Survival Strategies of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: The Trilogy of Administration, Militarism, and Discourse," *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies*, 2023.

19 Huzeir E. Dzulhisham, "Explaining the Collapse of Syria's Assad Regime," *RSIS Commentary*, no. 193/2024, 13/12/2024, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://bit.ly/4ujS4vw>

The rise of HTS cannot be understood without reference to the wider political and social transformations that reshaped Syria and its surrounding region over the past two decades. The collapse of state authority in large parts of the country after 2011 created an environment in which a range of armed actors competed to fill the security and administrative vacuum. Among these, Jabhat al-Nusra which was officially established in January 2012, was initially distinguished by its operational discipline, ideological coherence, and access to transnational jihadi support networks. Between early 2013 and mid-2016, it served as Al-Qaeda's sole official affiliate in Syria, using that connection to strengthen its capabilities, attract recruits, and counter the threat posed by ISIS.⁽²⁰⁾

By 2016–17, however, the group embarked on a process of rebranding and organizational recalibration. The announcement of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in mid-2016, followed by the formation of HTS in January 2017, marked an attempt to reposition the movement within the Syrian revolutionary milieu.⁽²¹⁾ This shift reflected mounting external pressure, including from local communities wary of bearing the costs of association with Al-Qaeda, and also the ambitions of its leadership to transcend the constraints of a narrowly jihadi frame. Under al-Sharaa's direction, HTS increasingly presented itself as a local revolutionary actor capable of both resisting the regime and providing viable model of governance in the areas under its control.

In the period between its formation and the months preceding the *Radʿ al-ʿUdwan* campaign, HTS developed a

governance model that combined ideological signalling with pragmatic state-building. One of the most consequential developments during this phase was the establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) to function as a bureaucratic framework tasked with managing public services, municipal affairs, and civil administration in HTS-controlled areas. While formally distinct from HTS's military structures, the SSG operated within boundaries implicitly defined by the organization's leadership. Decision-making power remained concentrated in Jolani's inner circle and the security organs, particularly the General Security Agency, which exercised effective oversight over judicial, administrative, and economic activity.

Judicial institutions were similarly structured. HTS adopted a modified Sharia framework, but in contrast to the rigidity associated with earlier Salafi-jihadi models, the group incorporated elements of customary law and local arbitration, allowing for forms of dispute resolution familiar to local communities. This flexible application of Islamic law mitigated popular resistance and bolstered HTS's claim to offer a stable alternative to the chaos that characterized other opposition-held areas.

In addition to these developments, HTS expanded its policing and security forces, creating structures that functioned as state-like enforcement bodies. The group also engaged in limited diplomatic activity, particularly with Turkey, thereby reinforcing its image as the sole actor in the northwest capable of providing relative stability. Yet beneath these institutional forms laid a deeply centralized system that revolved around informal networks of loyalty, personal authority, and the securitized management of dissent. Thus, by the eve of the *Radʿ al-ʿUdwan* campaign, HTS had constructed an administrative order that outwardly resembled a civil governance system but in practice remained aligned with the imperatives of a militarized, hierarchical movement.

2. HTS and the Post-Assad Transition

When the Assad regime collapsed, HTS and its allied forces stepped into the vacuum, but the transfer

20 Between early 2013 and mid-2016, Jabhat al-Nusra capitalized on its status as Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch to bolster its ranks and resources. Al-Qaeda's central leadership (Ayman al-Zawahiri) formally designated al-Nusra as its affiliate after the group's split with ISIS, conferring on Nusra both ideological legitimacy and access to transnational jihadi funding, foreign fighters, and expertise. This partnership enabled al-Nusra to wage war on multiple fronts: including against Assad's forces, ISIS, and factions of the Free Syrian Army. Refer to: Aqeel Hussein, "Al-Jolani and the Salafi Current: When Grievances Become a Point of View!" *Al-Modon*, 24/6/2020, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/ktV4MkRQ>; Al Kassir, "'Intentionality' in Radical Flank Effects," pp. 954–974.

21 Aymenn J. al-Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 2018.

of power unfolded in stages. Under al-Sharaa, the new leadership moved quickly to consolidate power, announcing transitional arrangements within weeks. The old parliamentary and Baathist structures were put aside, and a new constitutional declaration process was initiated. By 13 March 2025 an interim constitutional declaration was signed, establishing a five-year transition period. HTS and the new leadership emphasized themes of reconstruction, civic restoration, and inclusivity in public language, signalling a departure from the war years and the purely insurgent discourse. Meanwhile, loyalty networks, personal appointments and rapid restructuring would define the early phase of the new order.⁽²²⁾

In the months following Assad's fall, the new leadership moved swiftly to consolidate authority and project an image of national rebirth. The formal remnants of the old regime were dismantled: security agencies, Baath Party institutions, and elite military units were either dissolved or absorbed into newly formed structures. A caretaker government was established in late March to steer the transitional period,⁽²³⁾ with HTS-affiliated figures occupying most of the key senior posts. This was preceded by a rushed round of national dialogue that was publicly framed as inclusive, though in practice opposition, minority, and civil society participation remained limited.⁽²⁴⁾

The three months following the fall of the Assad regime were widely regarded as smooth, though signs of deeper challenges were already beginning to appear beneath the surface. The wave of optimism that had swept across Syria during this early period came to an abrupt halt with the mass killings in the Alawite-majority coastal areas in March

2025. The shocking footage and testimonies that emerged at the time starkly contradicted the image of restraint and responsible governance that al-Sharaa's leadership had sought to project. The sudden surge in sectarian violence indicated that the newly formed security and military bodies were either complacent or dangerously inept.⁽²⁵⁾

Matters deteriorated further with the leadership's handling of the Suwayda crisis in July, when security forces and their allied paramilitary groups launched a deadly assault in areas in the south inhabited predominantly by the Druze minority.⁽²⁶⁾ The ill-prepared military campaign failed on every front and opened a deep rift that will require substantial time and deliberate effort to repair. These security failures intensified public unease and exposed the limits of the new authorities' ability to act as neutral arbiters in a fragmented and wounded society.

Alongside this rapid deterioration in the security landscape, a host of economic and political policies have raised further questions about the direction of the post-Assad transition. Although al-Sharaa's leadership placed considerable emphasis on national reconciliation, announced amnesties for former regime personnel, and extended selective overtures to individuals from Alawite, Christian, and Kurdish backgrounds, these goodwill gestures did not evolve into meaningful power-sharing or wider political participation. Key posts and decision-making authorities remained overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of individuals either directly affiliated with HTS or closely connected to its senior leadership.

Even though HTS was formally dissolved in January 2025, its networks and alliances have continued to overshadow the emerging polity, shaping both formal and informal appointments. The prominent roles assumed by the president's brothers and close relatives exemplify this

22 See, for example, Feras Dalatey and Timour Azhari, "Syria Is Secretly Reshaping Its Economy. The President's Brother Is in Charge," *Reuters Investigations*, 24/7/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/vtV4NXpm>.

23 Al Jazeera Media Network, "Syrian President al-Sharaa Unveils Transitional Government," *Al Jazeera English*, 30/3/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/KtV4Mim5>.

24 Thaer al-Mhammad, "Conference of the National Dialogue for Syria: Key Milestones from Beginning to End," *Syria TV*, 25/2/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/8tV4MHUe>.

25 "UN Syria Commission Finds March Coastal Violence Was Widespread and Systematic," *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, 12/8/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/rtV4M1t3>.

26 Abdullah al-Bashir, "UN Experts Call for Accountability for Those Involved in the Violence in Suwayda," *The New Arab*, 20/8/2024, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/ntV41aq0>.

pattern, fuelling public anxiety in a country still haunted by decades of dynastic control under the Assad family. In parallel to the formal bureaucratic structures, new offices directly linked to the presidency have been established. One notable example is the Sovereign Fund (Presidential Decree No. 113 of 2025) which is a new institution linked to the president.⁽²⁷⁾ Another example is the appointment of the president's brother, Maher al-Sharaa, as Secretary-General to the Presidency on 5 April 2025,⁽²⁸⁾ replacing Abdulrahman Salama, himself another powerful figure from HTS-controlled Idlib commonly known as Abu Ibrahim.⁽²⁹⁾ Furthermore, in July 2025, an investigation by Reuters revealed a significant strategic role played by the president's elder brother, Hazem al-Sharaa, who allegedly is supervising the committee tasked with restructuring Syria's economy and negotiating with businessmen linked to the Assad regime.⁽³⁰⁾ Such developments reinforce the perception that familial networks and loyalty-based appointments are becoming defining features of the emerging order, despite official rhetoric emphasizing reform and accountability.

All of this has unfolded within an exceptionally complex geopolitical environment suffering the consequences of a prolonged conflict that combined elements of a civil war, a proxy war, and a popular uprising. The cumulative consequences of this prolonged turmoil have left the country exhausted and structurally fragile. It is understandable, therefore, that no government could be expected to achieve rapid stability or prosperity under such conditions. Nevertheless, a series of signals revealing the trajectory and priorities of the current transitional

leadership is identifiable, which the next section explores in light of their wider political implications.

III. Neo-Patrimonial Logics in Practice

The post-Assad order exhibits the core features of neo-patrimonial adaptation rather than a categorical break with personalist governance. At the centre sits a presidency encircled by a tight network of trusted figures who mediate access to decision-making, resources, and protection. Ministries, councils, regulatory agencies among other formal bodies have been reconstituted with updated mandates and modern political vocabulary, yet their effective authority is heavily affected by proximity to the ruling circle. The result is institutional dependency whereby formal bodies look rational and differentiated while operating under the shadow of personalized oversight. The presidency functions as the nodal point where policy, appointments, and funds converge.

This pattern is demonstrated here across five domains: decree-based institutional centralization, elite circulation from HTS/Idlib networks into state offices, familial concentration around the presidency, political and media coordination through trusted intermediaries, and the incorporation of religious authority into presidency-shaped structures.

A defining feature of the emerging order is a pattern of dual institutionalization, by which the public, codified sphere of state bodies is paired with a parallel, informal sphere of brokers, envoys, advisers, and security liaisons. The front-stage institutions project the aesthetics of legality through constitutional language, audit offices, strategic plans, and continuous engagement with the public. Backstage networks, however, arbitrate personnel flows, licensing, land and asset allocations, procurement awards, and security exemptions.

On the surface, there is a technocratic layer: ministers, governors, and senior administrators with managerial credentials are elevated in fields where the appearance

27 "Decree No. 113 for 2025: Establishing the Sovereign Fund," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 24 June 2025, <https://cutt.ly/mtV41KZo>.

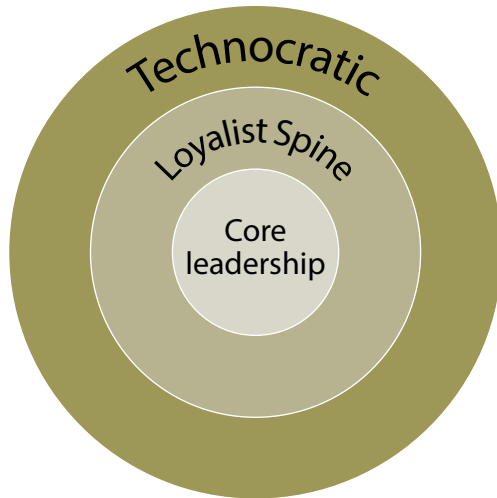
28 Jullanar al-Ali, "Maher al-Shar'a Appointed Secretary-General of the Syrian Presidency: Justifications and Concerns," *The New Arab*, 7/4/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/5tV40sZm>.

29 "Who Is Abdulrahman Salama, the Man Behind Al-Shara?" *Enab Baladi*, 5/4/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/otV402zE>.

30 Feras Dalatey and Timour Azhari, "Syria Is Secretly Reshaping Its Economy. The President's Brother Is in Charge," *Reuters Investigations*, 24/7/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/7tV42FIK>.

of competence is indispensable. This includes finance, planning, health, utilities, and other domains where performance is immediately tangible to the public. Running beneath this veneer is a more consequential architecture. The strategic levers of power: defence, security and intelligence, energy, sovereign funds, reconstruction authorities, telecommunications, and border revenue remain in the hands of trusted confidants and long-standing allies. Here, formal titles matter less than proximity. Advisory positions around the presidency proliferate and increasingly outweigh ministerial offices, serving as relay points between the palace, the security services, and the financial networks underpinning the new order.

Figure 1.
Layered structure of the emerging
neo-patrimonial order



Comparisons with similar governance systems offer insight into how such a structure typically protects itself. Rotation and layering, whether pairing formal posts with informal briefs or shifting figures laterally rather

than upwards, are known techniques used to avoid the emergence of autonomous power centres. To clarify, when controversial or powerful personalities are required for operational effectiveness, they are often cushioned by deputies or advisers with reputational capital, influence, or proximity to the decision-making core. The underlying rationale, familiar from the literature on neo-patrimonialism, is simple: while competence is welcome, dependence and containment are indispensable.

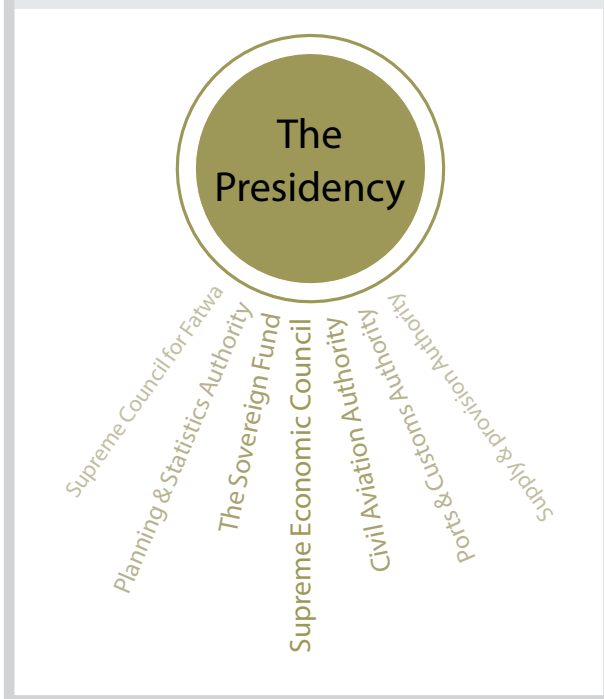
This institutional duality aims to resolve three problems at once:

Speed	Deniability	Discipline
Informal channels cut through the slowness of bureaucracies to deliver decisions on investment, appointments, or threat mitigation.	Sensitive or unpopular bargains with former military actors, business magnates, or foreign counterparts remain outside the documentary trail.	Officials learn that advancement depends on relational loyalty as much as performance, ensuring loyalty and alignment without overt coercion.

This hierarchy signals to both the bureaucracy and the wider public that formal rules are contingent and ultimately subordinate to political discretion even as the official rhetoric continues to emphasize rule-bound governance.

These dynamics become visible in political discourse as well as in the institutional architecture emerging through presidential decrees, strategic appointments, and governance restructuring. One of the clearest manifestations of neo-patrimonial restructuring in post-Assad Syria has been the proliferation of new authorities, councils, and governance bodies that concentrate strategic functions around the presidency either directly through institutional linkage or indirectly through presidential appointment powers.

Figure 2.
Selected presidency-linked governance bodies
established or reorganized in Syria
(March 2025–March 2026). The list is
illustrative rather than exhaustive.



Between March 2025 and March 2026, a series of presidential decrees reorganized major state sectors by relocating planning, investment, logistics, procurement, and oversight functions into newly established or restructured bodies operating outside conventional ministerial frameworks. Although these institutions were presented in the language of administrative reform, efficiency, coordination, and modern governance, their cumulative effect has been the consolidation of authority within tightly centralized presidential structures.

An early example appeared in May 2025 with the establishment of the Planning and Statistics Authority through Decree No. 18 of 2025. The decree transformed the former General Authority for Planning and International Cooperation into a new body attached to the Presidency's General Secretariat, while international cooperation functions were transferred to the Ministry

of Foreign Affairs.⁽³¹⁾ The reform also subordinated the Central Bureau of Statistics to the new authority, thereby concentrating planning and data production within a single presidency-linked institution. This arrangement effectively merged the production of official data with macro-level planning under executive oversight.

The process intensified in July 2025 through a cluster of economic decrees that substantially reconfigured the architecture of economic governance. Decree No. 113 established the Sovereign Fund as a financially and administratively independent institution tasked with managing strategic investments and state assets.⁽³²⁾ Decree No. 114 simultaneously elevated the Syrian Investment Authority into a presidency-linked body endowed with broad powers over investment licensing and land allocation⁽³³⁾, while Decree No. 115 created the Supreme Council for Economic Development under the chairmanship of the president himself.⁽³⁴⁾ Together, these measures concentrated major investment and development decisions within a narrow executive framework operating above sectoral ministries. Even where ministries formally retained representation, presidential appointment powers and centralized oversight mechanisms significantly limited institutional autonomy.

A similar pattern emerged in the transportation and logistics sectors. Decree No. 213 of 2025 established the Civil Aviation Authority as an independent body placed under direct presidential oversight, replacing the former civil aviation institutions previously located within the

³¹ "Decree No. 18 for 2025: Renaming the General Authority for Planning and International Cooperation as the Planning and Statistics Authority," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 17/5/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/UtV43nvx>.

³² "Decree No. 113 for 2025: Establishing the Sovereign Fund," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 24/6/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/YtV438Xs>

³³ "Decree No. 114 for 2025: Amending Certain Articles of the Investment Law," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 24/6/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/ttV48QLt>

³⁴ "Decree No. 115 for 2025: Establishing the Supreme Council for Economic Development," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 24/6/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/stV480P6>

Ministry of Transport. The authority's president was granted ministerial rank and extensive financial and administrative powers, including the ability to establish subsidiary companies and partnerships.⁽³⁵⁾ Parallel to this, Decree No. 214 established the Syrian Aviation Holding Company, further separating operational and regulatory functions from traditional ministerial control.⁽³⁶⁾

The same logic extended to border management and customs administration. Decree No. 244 of 2025 established the General Authority for Ports and Customs as a financially and administratively independent body directly attached to the presidency.⁽³⁷⁾ The authority unified customs administration, ports, maritime transport, border crossings, and free zones under a single institutional umbrella headed by a presidentially appointed figure with ministerial status. The decree also granted the authority broad supervisory and regulatory powers, including control over logistics coordination, revenue collection, and internal inspection mechanisms.

This trajectory continued into 2026 with the establishment of the General Authority for Supply and Provisioning through Decree No. 63 of 2026.⁽³⁸⁾ The authority centralized large-scale state procurement by making itself the primary gateway for government purchasing contracts above designated financial thresholds. Instead of ministries independently managing procurement processes, major acquisitions became increasingly concentrated within a single presidency-linked institution whose leadership is appointed by presidential decree. As a

result, substantial areas of state spending and contracting were effectively relocated from dispersed bureaucratic channels into centralized executive oversight structures.

Centralization was also evident within the constitutional and judicial sphere. The Constitutional Declaration issued in March 2025 dissolved the existing Supreme Constitutional Court and provided for the establishment of a new court whose seven members are appointed directly by the president.⁽³⁹⁾ Although the declaration framed the appointments in terms of integrity, competence, and expertise, the arrangement concentrated the formation of the country's highest constitutional oversight body within presidential authority itself. In the absence of an independent parliamentary or judicial appointment mechanism, the measure once again reinforced the broader pattern through which strategic oversight institutions became increasingly tied to executive discretion and presidential influence.

Institutional restructuring was accompanied by the circulation of trusted wartime figures into strategically sensitive state positions. A notable example was the appointment of Qutayba Badawi as head of the General Authority for Ports and Customs with ministerial rank following the establishment of the authority in late 2025.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Prior to assuming this role, Badawi, also known by the nom de guerre "Abu Hamza Binnish" or "al-Mughira Binnesh," had been closely associated with Jabhat al-Nusra and later HTS, where he served in administrative and economic capacities, including the management of the Bab al-Hawa crossing and border administration in Idlib. His transition from insurgent governance structures into one of the country's most strategically important economic and territorial institutions illustrates how wartime trust networks are now being incorporated into the emerging state apparatus.

35 "Decree No. 213 for 2025: Establishing the General Authority for Civil Aviation and Air Transport and Regulating Its Functions and Powers," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 7/10/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/WtV44yiA>

36 "Decree No. 214 for 2025: Establishing the Syrian Aviation Holding Company," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 7/10/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/dtV7tZcE>

37 "Decree No. 244 for 2025: Establishing the General Authority for Ports and Customs and Defining Its Functions and Powers," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 12/11/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/UtV7yCbE>

38 "Decree No. 63 for 2026: Establishing the General Authority for Supply and Provisioning," *Alikhbarya Syria Facebook Page*, 15/3/2026, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/RtV7urGk>.

39 "Article 47," *Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic*, Wikimedia, March 2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/2tV7uzLF>.

40 "Decree No. 264 for 2025: Appointing Qutayba Ahmad Badawi as Head of the General Authority for Ports and Customs," *Syrian Memory Institution*, 23/11/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/JtV7ihZV>.

A similar case can be observed in the career trajectory of Abdulrahman Salama, who moved through a succession of sensitive administrative and political positions following the fall of the Assad regime. Salama, who had previously held administrative responsibilities within HTS and economic management roles in Idlib, initially became Secretary-General of the Presidency before later serving as deputy governor in Aleppo and subsequently governor of Raqqa.

These appointments reveal an important dimension of neo-patrimonial governance in the Syrian transition. Control is exercised not solely through formal institutions, but through the placement of politically trusted actors in strategically important nodes of administration and logistics adding more weight to loyalty, personal proximity, and wartime association.

This reliance on trusted networks also extended into familial proximity to the presidency. One prominent example was the appointment of Maher al-Sharaa, the president's brother, as Secretary-General of the Presidency in April 2025.⁽⁴¹⁾ Although Maher al-Sharaa's professional background in health administration was emphasized in official narratives, the appointment nevertheless reflected the concentration of sensitive coordinating functions within the president's immediate familial circle. The significance of the post was further amplified by the absence of a traditional prime ministerial structure following the constitutional reorganization of executive authority, allowing the presidential secretariat to assume expanded coordinating functions across state institutions.

Maher al-Sharaa was not an isolated case. Reports and investigative accounts increasingly pointed to the growing role of the president's brother, Hazem al-Sharaa, in the economy, despite the absence of a formally announced senior governmental position.⁽⁴²⁾ According to a Reuters

investigation published in July 2025, Hazem al-Sharaa was reportedly involved in overseeing aspects of Syria's economic restructuring and was linked to influential committees responsible for negotiating with business elites, managing seized assets, and shaping investment policy. Additional reports suggested that he exercised influence over newly established economic bodies, including the Sovereign Fund and the Supreme Council for Economic Development. Although many of these claims remain based on unofficial accounts rather than formal governmental disclosure, their recurrence across multiple sources contributed to perceptions that major economic decision-making processes were increasingly concentrated within a narrow circle connected personally to the presidency.

From a neo-patrimonial perspective, these developments are significant because familial proximity appears to function as a mechanism of political trust and executive consolidation. The concentration of strategic administrative and economic influence within kinship-based networks echoes broader historical patterns in authoritarian governance.

Centralization also operated through presidency-adjacent ministerial and advisory structures that extended executive influence into the management of political activity, civil society, and public discourse. A particularly important role emerged around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Asaad al-Shaybani, who has been a close associate of President Ahmad al-Sharaa from the Idlib period. Beyond its conventional diplomatic functions, the ministry became linked to a broader network of political and coordination mechanisms whose activities stretched into domestic governance and societal management.

The establishment of the General Secretariat for Political Affairs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2025 illustrate these dynamics.⁽⁴³⁾ Although formally presented as a coordinating body for the transitional

41 Faisal al-Imam, "Maher al-Sharaa Appointed Secretary-General of the Syrian Presidency," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 5/4/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/rtV7iEG4>.

42 Feras Dalatey and Timour Azhari, "Syria Is Secretly Reshaping Its Economy. The President's Brother Is in Charge," *Reuters Investigations*, 24/7/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/MtV7i9BW>.

43 Hussam Jazmati, "What Is Syria's 'General Secretariat for Political Affairs'?" *Al-Jumhuriya*, 8/4/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/3tV7o3f8>.

period, observing its activities suggests that its functions extended beyond the traditional remit of a foreign affairs. Through provincial branches and affiliated offices, it became involved in supervising political activities, coordinating with civil society organizations, overseeing certain public events and associations, and managing aspects of post-Baath political restructuring.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Despite uncertainty surrounding its long-term future, the institution reflects tendencies toward centralized oversight of political and civic space.

A related example was the appointment of Ahmad Mwaffaq Zaidan as media adviser to the presidency in August 2025.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Although the position was not embedded within a clearly defined ministerial framework, it effectively concentrated strategic media and narrative management within a presidency-linked advisory structure. Zaidan, a veteran journalist originally from Idlib who maintained proximity to HTS circles during the Idlib period, was widely known for his longstanding engagement with Islamist and jihadi movements through his reporting in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His appointment followed the tendency to place sensitive functions such as media strategy, public messaging, and international communication in the hands of trusted associates operating within flexible presidential networks instead of institutionalized channels.

The same logic extended into the management of religious authority. In March 2025, President Ahmad al-Sharaa issued a decree establishing the Supreme Council for Fatwa and simultaneously reinstated the position of Grand Mufti of the Republic, appointing Sheikh Osama al-Rifa'i to lead the council.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The new body was entrusted with issuing fatwas on major public matters, supervising

provincial fatwa offices, appointing muftis and religious committees, and guiding the country's broader religious discourse.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Although the council was presented as a collective institutional mechanism intended to promote moderation and prevent fragmentation, its structure placed religious authority firmly within a presidentially constituted framework, especially that the council's members were appointed through presidential authority.

The composition of the council further reflected the incorporation of religious figures closely associated with the Idlib-era environment. Among its members were figures such as Abdul Rahim Attoun and Mazhar al-Wais, both of whom had longstanding connections to HTS-associated religious and political circles, with al-Wais later becoming minister of justice. Overall, the establishment of the council indicated an attempt to centralise and regulate religious authority through trusted clerical networks. In neo-patrimonial terms, this represented another mechanism through which potentially autonomous spheres of influence were selectively incorporated into presidency-shaped structures of oversight and coordination.

The official discourse surrounding the council also revealed the new leadership's understanding of religion as a strategic domain of governance. During the announcement ceremony, President al-Sharaa emphasized the need to "discipline moderate religious discourse" and preserve social cohesion while preventing division and conflict. Such language framed religious management as part of a state-building project in which religious legitimacy, social order, and political authority became increasingly intertwined under executive supervision.

A notable thread of continuity seems to have survived the political transition, that is the informal mechanisms through which trust, access, and opportunity circulate. This practice, which is known locally as *wasita* (personal

44 Zeina Shahla, "Activity Prohibited by Order of the General Secretariat for Political Affairs!" *Al-Jumhuriya*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/xtV7pvej>.

45 "Officially: Ahmad Mwaffaq Zaidan Appointed Media Adviser to the Syrian Presidency," *Al-Modon*, 18/8/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/GtV7pGN0>.

46 "Al-Sharaa Appoints Sheikh Osama al-Rifa'i as Grand Mufti of Syria," *Al-Jazeera*, 29/3/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/BtV7awm2>.

47 Ahmad Jasim al-Hussein, "Does the New Supreme Fatwa Council Reflect Syria's Religious Reality?" *Syria TV*, 31/3/2025, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/ltV7aQNL>.

endorsement and relational brokerage), has not disappeared in the shift from insurgency to governance; rather, it has adapted to new settings. Even within Islamist circles, analogous practices such as *tawsiya* and *tazkiya* (recommendation and endorsement) shape appointments and access to influence. These forms of mediated endorsement serve to reproduce circles of familiarity, sustain trust-based networks, and lower the perceived risks of integrating new figures into sensitive structures.

During HTS's rule in Idlib, such relational mechanisms operated alongside formal procedures, often determining who was deemed reliable, promotable, or suitable for key roles. Technical competence or ideological commitment mattered, but they outweighed the reassurance provided by interpersonal recommendation. This logic appears to persist in the current transitional phase. Even after the dissolution of HTS, the interpersonal pathways through which trust is conferred, and authority is delegated continue to reflect long-standing social and organizational practices that are not necessarily unique to Islamist actors. Understanding these continuities clarify how informal brokerage structures remain part and parcel of political decision-making, even amidst claims of institutional reform.

At the level of political discourse, the new leadership's discursive moderation is not epiphenomenal; it is instrumental. Language choices, including the use of "civic governance", "equal citizenship", and "state mentality", perform several functions.⁽⁴⁸⁾ They aim to reduce external vetoes and reservations, and reassure cautious domestic constituencies (minorities, professionals, wartime neutrals). Such intentional discursive choices aim also to narrow the repertoire of repression by replacing indiscriminate coercion with compliance-seeking discourse, such as national dialogue, patriotism, reconstruction, reconciliation, and amnesties.

Yet moderation has ideological edges. Core terms that would shift authority from persons to rules, including "democratic alternation", "party competition", and an "independent judiciary with binding review", are conspicuously absent or diluted. For instance, Ahmad al-Sharaa's avoidance of the term "democracy" in all his speeches since the fall of the Assad regime is telling and raises the question: if the country is not moving towards democracy, then where is the political system heading? This is not simply a matter of semantics. It signals the limits of pluralism and openness the leadership is prepared to tolerate. At the same time, running parallel to the official register, a sub-official discourse among loyalist intermediaries periodically surfaces. It is assertive, exclusionary, and hierarchical, and serves to remind audiences that inclusion remains conditional and revocable.

In practice, institutional upgrading sits alongside mechanisms that keep authority personalized and ultimately reversible. Reform is presented in the language of professionalization, coordination, and service improvement, but the basic architecture remains anchored in informal oversight. Whether in security, economic management, or legal administration, formal procedures are selectively applied: routine matters follow codified channels, while strategic appointments and high-value decisions continue to be mediated through trusted intermediaries and ad hoc authorizations.

A recurring pattern stands out: formal bodies are refurbished to signal institutional renewal, yet their autonomy is softened by layered supervision, cross-cutting advisory roles, and reliance on personalized gateways for access, protection, or approval. While limited decentralization initiatives and regulatory reforms may broaden the surface of legitimacy, the core levers of authority stay insulated within relational networks that can overrule, redirect, or suspend formal processes when needed. This configuration may permit flexibility and responsiveness in the short term, but it also embeds a hierarchy in which institutional performance

⁴⁸ See, for example, "Ahmad al-Shara: We Must Move from the Mentality of Revolution to the Mentality of the State in Leading Syria," *Syria TV*, 14/12/2024, accessed on 25/8/2026 at: <https://cutt.ly/utV7sjV3>.

is contingent on proximity and favour, reinforcing the neo-patrimonial logic at the system's centre.

These examples suggest that centralization in post-Assad Syria does not occur only through direct institutional subordination to the presidency. In some cases, authority is concentrated through newly established presidency-linked bodies; in others, through presidential appointment powers, trusted intermediary figures, familial proximity, or loosely institutionalized advisory and coordination structures. The cumulative effect is the emergence of a governance structure in which bureaucratic forms are expanded, but effective influence remains carefully concentrated around a narrow circle of presidentially trusted actors.

This neo-patrimonial configuration is not cost-free. As noted above, it may build cohesion and flexibility in the short term, but it generates vulnerabilities that accumulate over time; as informal mediation becomes the dominant route for resolving disputes and accessing state services, bureaucratic initiative declines. Officials learn to wait for signals rather than interpret rules. This limits initiative and, in moments of crisis, can translate into paralysis, as lower and mid-level administrators hesitate to act without explicit cover from above.

Economically, the reconstruction promise rests on the expectation of sustained flows of aid, investment, and commodity-linked revenues. External shocks, including sanctions tightening, donor fatigue, regional geopolitical crises, or shifts in energy markets, can quickly produce fiscal problems. When rents shrink, the networks that stabilise the system in normal times can become possible channels of discontent. In other words, when previously protected allies experience loss of privilege they will likely seek alternative patrons or platforms.

Managed pluralism and discursive moderation may buy time, but the gap between the formal promises of equal citizenship and institutional renewal, on one hand, and the lived experience of conditional inclusion and selective justice, on the other hand, is likely to widen especially for professionals, youth, and peripheral communities.

If routes for merit-based advancement remain blocked and rights and licenses continue to be administered as favours, frustration is likely to accumulate beneath the apparent stability.

Dual institutionalization, loyalty-based brokerage, and discursive moderation and openness can deliver short-term cohesion and stability. However, they are far less well suited to producing the general rules, professional autonomy, and meritocratic pathways associated with durable stability, unless deliberate choices are made to convert discretion into rule and personal brokerage into routinized, predictable governance.

Conclusion

HTS's experience in Idlib reveals a great deal about the post-Assad governing project in Syria. The evidence suggests that the group's years in northwest Syria produced a governing repertoire that blended coercive security structures with a basic administrative architecture capable of delivering limited but reliable services. While this model generated short-term stability, it remained centralized and narrow, relying heavily on personal authority, loyalty-based networks, and informal channels that sat alongside the formal bureaucracy.

These continuities have not disappeared with the nominal dissolution of HTS in January 2025. Although the organization no longer exists as a formal entity, many of its senior figures now constitute the backbone of the new ruling elite. The personal connections, habits of coordination, and shadow networks developed during the Idlib years have survived the transition and continue to shape decision-making, often behind the scenes. This continuity of personnel and informal influence does not predetermine the future political order, but it does frame the parameters within which institutional reform will need to take place.

The central finding of this paper is therefore twofold. First, while HTS's earlier governing experience gives the new leadership a degree of administrative confidence, it also comes with structural and ideological constraints

that are ill-suited to governing a socially diverse country. Second, the endurance of informal patronage networks risks limiting the emergence of transparent, inclusive, and decentralized forms of authority. A governing model designed for a relatively cohesive region cannot simply be scaled up without significant adaptations.

A political system that acknowledges the varied social and cultural landscapes of regions such as Suwayda, the coastal areas, and the northeast is more likely to cultivate durable cooperation than one shaped predominantly by a single, inherited network of former HTS elites. Allowing space for locally grounded forms of authority and community engagement can help ease the transition away from the informal loyalties that characterized earlier phases of governance. Likewise, widening the channels through which different groups contribute to policymaking and security arrangements would signal a gradual shift towards a more inclusive social and political contract that builds on, rather than abruptly disowns, the experiences and identity that shaped the current leadership.

Syria now stands at a formative moment in which political institutions, norms, and expectations are being renegotiated. The Idlib years offer a useful window into administrative experience and cautionary lessons, particularly regarding the risks of informal dominance and overcentralization. Whether the post-Assad order develops into a more inclusive, institutionalized system, or slides into a pattern of neo-patrimonial governance, will depend on the choices made by the current transitional leadership. The challenge is whether the emerging elite can move beyond the shadow networks that brought them to power.

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