



spotlight

MORE GRADUALISM THAN SHOCK?

Observations on how Syria's New Islamist Rulers Are Building a State

When Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies swept into Damascus in December 2024, many observers feared a replication of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. After all, HTS was a group with roots in Al-Qaeda and IS, ideologically committed to establishing an Islamic state. Yet a year into their rule, the most striking feature of Syria's political transition is not revolutionary zeal but gradualism in institution-building, in many cases working within and slowly reforming existing bureaucratic structures rather than replacing them wholesale. Whether this approach succeeds will be decisive for Syria's stability. This analysis is based on interviews with mid-level and local governance officials in Syria in May and December 2025.



Hoping for peace: Private initiatives in Aleppo are making the city more beautiful. In the foreground, a woman is painting a dove of peace on a wall. Photo: © PRIF/Schwab.

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Rebel governance during war is not new. A growing research field examines how rebels regulate civilian life and provide services in territories they control.¹ In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to wartime governance by militant Islamist groups, such as the Taliban, Islamic State, and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin. But what happens when radical groups move from the periphery to the centre of power? So far, this has been a relatively anomalous occurrence, with only two cases in recent years: the Afghan Taliban came to power

after the international withdrawal in 2021; HTS and its allies have governed northwest Syria since 2015 and are now the core of a new government.

In contrast to the Taliban and other revolutionary organizations that aim to deeply transform society and state, the Syrian experience thus far has been characterized by gradualism in institution-building and bureaucratic reform.² This may be surprising considering the radical origins of those in power. The transitional government, led by former HTS-commander al-Sharaa, is in control of most parts of the country, excluding a few Kurdish-majority cities in the north and large parts of Sweida governorate in the south.³

WARTIME FOUNDATIONS

The former rebels now ruling the country have accumulated significant experience in governance, starting in March 2015 with the so-called Executive Administration, affiliated with the rebel coalition Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest) that ruled over parts of Idlib.⁴ This administration, which was staffed by members of rebel groups or civilians affiliated with them, acted more as a quota system to distribute power and positions among the participating groups rather than a functioning government.⁵ This failed experience led to increasing pressure to establish a government that was at least, nominally, independent of these groups. In 2017, this took shape in the foundation of the Salvation Government, a technocratic administration initially run by academics. However, the financial sector remained under HTS control.⁶ Initially, the current government was a continuation of the Salvation Government, but

is now increasingly merging with other administrative systems.

ONE COUNTRY, FOUR SYSTEMS

The challenge facing Syria's new rulers is unprecedented in its complexity. The new authorities are building a state by integrating four separate administrative systems: the HTS-backed Salvation Government in northwest Syria, the Turkish-backed administration in the north, the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the deficient bureaucracy of Assad's regime.

Beyond their differing ideologies, all these systems had different bureaucratic logics and legal frameworks, which makes their integration highly challenging. The ongoing problem of differing pay scales in the Aleppo governorate, which has experienced all four governance systems, embodies this condition most clearly. Teachers in formerly regime-held Aleppo city earn the least, followed by those from Turkish-backed areas, with former Salvation Government areas in western Aleppo earning the most. Thus, an issue that at first seems simple may have profound implications for societal peace.

CONTINUITY AND SELECTIVE RENEWAL

The new Syrian authorities have decided not to dissolve state institutions and to retain most personnel. Reportedly, members of the new administration have studied the Iraqi experience, where the US decision to dissolve state institutions in 2003 led to chaos and civil war. Choosing gradualism has enabled the normal continuation of life after the rebels took Damascus. Apart from exceptional laws and courts, such as the notorious terrorism court, most laws,

institutions, and personnel have been kept in place. This gradual approach follows a clear pattern: in most institutions, the top layer has been entirely replaced with HTS members or rebel allies, such as members of Ahrar al-Sham, while street-level bureaucrats have largely been retained. For instance, the Syrian Development Organisation – previously Asma al-Assad's notorious Syria Trust for Development – was restructured with new leadership while retaining most existing staff. This gradualism can be seen even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of the core ministries led by the president's long-term aide Asaad al-Shaibani. While HTS cadres occupy most leading positions, 70% of lower-level personnel are holdovers from the previous regime.

The new leadership also brings a different professional profile; many of the new directors are young, highly qualified, and have backgrounds in engineering or informatics. However, all of them are male. Some, like the director of the Civil Affairs Department in Aleppo city, studied at Idlib University under rebel control, where he had already helped build a more citizen-centred, digital bureaucracy under the Salvation Government.

JUSTICE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Nowhere is gradualism more evident than in the judicial sector. According to an official of the High Institute of the Judiciary, approximately 200 judges – about 10% of the total – have been dismissed for corruption, involvement in killings, or "moral issues." Currently, judges' rankings are being reevaluated based on their achievements and academic research. "Before, children of judges were nominated routinely as judges just because they were their offspring," the official noted, describing a system built on *wasta* (connections) and seniority, rather than merit.

At present, Syria needs at least 3,000 judges. Given the dismissals and ongoing re-evaluations, there is pressure to integrate former judges from opposition-held territories, even those with only Islamic law credentials. Before resuming their positions, however, these judges are to be retrained in Syrian law. Furthermore, apart from the personal status courts, Syrian law is applied exclusively. As the official clarifies, "no one with only a sharia degree got a position as a judge without having been a judge before." Such judges with purely religious legal training constitute only about 5% of those appointed after the rebel victory. "Now, we do not accept any judges from a Sharia university unless it also includes law modules."

Regular meetings bring together judges and lawyers

LEGALLY UNSOUND

There is one exception to the otherwise high rate of retention in public institutions. When the new Minister of Justice took over, a judicial training course was underway. The minister dismissed all participants on grounds of corruption, a decision the official of the High Institute of the Judiciary criticized as legally unsound, arguing that from a legal perspective, there must be evidence for such claims. He told the dismissed they could file complaints before an administrative court, but the judge did not accept the case out of fear.

from different systems – Turkish-supported areas that used Syrian law and Idlib that used Sharia law – to integrate these different structures and mentalities. An Alawite lawyer we spoke to in Damascus offered a surprisingly positive assessment of the judicial reforms: “The procedures are better now – I as a lawyer can work with them.”

THE PRICE OF CONTINUITY

However, the decision to leave most institutions, laws, and even personnel in place has created its own absurdities. Old Assad-era laws remain in force, including fines for internally displaced persons who fail to register their documents with the respective authorities. As the official of the High Judicial Institute noted, it is difficult to recognize university degrees from other countries, which becomes essential for the new Syrian state if it wants to make use of its highly educated diaspora.

The ministries that were dissolved completely, like the Ministries of Defence and Interior, have advanced most quickly in their work. In contrast, the Ministry of Local Administration – one of the institutions experiencing the most continuity – faces immense challenges in getting to work. In many institutions, whether ministries or local bureaucracies, the strong centralism of the Assad era remains in place. Long hierarchical chains delay decision-making, prompting some officials to bypass formal channels and take legal risks to get things done faster. Procedures and organizational workflows have likewise remained outdated, contributing to slow progress during the first year.

Regarding personnel, Syrian bureaucracy suffers from severe bloat. The Aleppo governorate alone employs over 3000 staff, many with unclear functions. Syria’s ministries together employ roughly one million people. “Many employees have no clear role, yet cannot simply be dismissed,” one official noted, reflecting on lessons learned from mass layoffs in some institutions immediately after the rebel victory. Solutions like retraining or compensation packages for early retirement are under consideration but are costly. Furthermore, many of the existing state employees, even in high positions, lack basic qualifications, with some reportedly not able to use a computer. Syria’s labour law has not been updated yet, which has limited directors’ ability to hire qualified staff on permanent terms. Instead, they have to rely on temporary contracts. This replicates different wage schemes in the ministries, where those who were employees under the former regime receive the lowest wages, followed by former employees of the Salvation Government. Employees with the new temporary contracts earn the most.

TRAVEL BANS

Another problem is that many individuals continue to suffer from travel bans issued by the former regime’s terrorism court. A Kuwait-based Syrian we spoke to, who had been convicted by the court, was surprised to find upon returning in February 2025 that his charges and travel ban remained in force. Resolving the case proved difficult: it required navigating the Ministries of Justice, Finance, and Interior, and was further complicated by the court’s closure and the loss of documents. He eventually obtained a one-time travel permit to leave, but without resolving his case. Others reported smuggling themselves out of the country.⁸

Understandably, this creates confusion and grievances among personnel.

The solutions to these complex problems so far have been personal initiatives and the use of social connections. While enabling relative success considering the enormous challenges – from merging different administrative systems to coping with immense destruction and displacement – these ad hoc solutions harbour danger. They risk renewing a culture of nepotism, which is already visible in the upper echelons of the state.⁷ Furthermore, at least some appointments are not based on their appointees’ qualifications. The reason, according to a Foreign Ministry worker, is that “all members of HTS have to get work,” describing it as “their creed.”

GRADUALISM = PRAGMATISM?

Gradualism in institution-building does not necessarily mean a general ideological pragmatism. The new regime’s continued ideological commitment can be seen in a string of controversial decisions, such as the recent banning of makeup for female employees in Latakia public offices (adjusted to “light make-up” after backlash), the ban on male employees in women’s clothing stores in al-Tall municipality close to Damascus (decried as gender segregation), and an earlier decree to enforce fully-covering clothes on women beachgoers.⁹ Despite their local scale, such moves suggest that elements of the new administration are still trying to implement its broader ideological agenda.

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OUTLOOK

Syria's new power holders seem to understand that to move from revolution to state-building they need non-revolutionary personnel and institutional structures. Yet whether this gradualism represents lack of capacity or a strategic decision to consolidate power gradually remains unclear.

What is clear is that Syria is witnessing neither revolutionary transformation nor shock therapy in its administrative institutions, but rather a slow, improvisational merger of fundamentally different systems. However, a pattern emerges when examining different sectors: gradualism characterises civil administration, while security and military domains have seen radical breaks. In the political-military sphere, the new administration is pursuing violent unification, as seen in the recent offensive against the SDF in Northeast Syria. It remains to be seen whether institution-building in newly controlled areas will follow the gradual integration observed elsewhere or mirror the more

abrupt transformations in the Ministries of Interior and Defence.

This divergent approach raises critical questions about Syria's trajectory. Can administrative gradualism coexist with military force without triggering the very instability the new authorities sought to avoid? And as patronage networks increasingly favour personal connections to top leaders over mere HTS affiliation, will relative inclusivity give way to a narrower, more exclusionary system? For now, Syria's future depends on whether this hybrid model – gradualism in civil administration, shock in the military-security sphere – can deliver stability and basic governance, or whether the contradictions between these approaches will deepen the country's fragmentation.

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