Syria in Transition

SiT

Issue 27 – August 2025

Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

Covered in the current issue:

Syria in Transition is produced pro bono by Conflict Mediation Solutions (CMS), a consultancy dedicated to improving the understanding of conflicts and increasing the efficiency and impact of Track II diplomacy.

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Double or quits

Syria's leader flirts with Moscow as he decides whether to fight or talk

Nine months in, Ahmad al-Sharaa's leadership of Syria faces an acute crisis. His promise to unify the country under his authority was initially hailed by Sunni Arab constituencies and regional patrons, particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Circumstances, however, have intervened. Sharaa's inability to foster genuine inclusivity, compounded by bouts of sectarian violence, has driven the Druze to cut loose with Damascus. In doing so, they have followed the path blazed by the Kurds, who over the past decade have carved out self-rule in northeastern Syria.

The Druze are now pushing to establish their own autonomous region in the south. Their efforts have been bolstered by support from Israel, which has long harboured an interest in Syria's territorial fragmentation. At a 24 July meeting in Paris between the Syrian foreign minister Asaad al-Shaibani, and an Israeli delegation, hosted by France and mediated by the US, the Israelis effectively pressured Damascus into making significant concessions. The result was the withdrawal of government forces from Suwayda, effectively ceding local government to a self-appointed council of Druze leaders. This move has catalysed a wider decentralisation push, with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) eagerly seizing the opportunity to advance their own autonomous agenda. On 8 August, a meeting in Hassake, attended by representatives of various ethnic and religious minorities, called for the creation of a decentralised state and the drafting of a new constitution that would guarantee religious, cultural, and ethnic pluralism.

The devil you know

As the momentum for decentralisation grows, Turkey – already opposed to Kurdish autonomy – has become increasingly alarmed. Sources in Ankara have confirmed to *Syria in Transition* that, concerned by Damascus' mishandling of the Suwayda situation and fearing further forced concessions, Ankara has pressured Sharaa into withdrawing from another round of French-hosted, US-mediated peace talks, this time with the Kurds. Turkey opposes both Israeli and French involvement in Syria and remains wary of the US due to its continued military support for the SDF. On 6 July the Pentagon announced a fresh $130 million allocation to fund the SDF's counter-ISIS operations through 2026.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has helped to legitimise Sharaa's leadership, granting him "Arab cover" and burnishing his image on social media, but it has refrained from directly funding his government; and Saudi influence failed to shield him from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's wrath. Riyadh enjoys greater flexibility than Ankara in its alliances and, until December 2024, had been prepared to back Bashar Assad's rehabilitation. Whoever holds power in Damascus needs Riyadh's political and economic backing, but not necessarily Ankara's. Turkey in Syria finds itself without significant allies in its mission to restore a strong and credible centralised state.

The "zero problems" strategy that Sharaa adopted upon taking power is also unravelling. Israel is a hostile actor, the US maintains a contradictory stance, and the Europeans, once eager to engage, have gone quiet. The convergence of regional and international interests that Sharaa had hoped would sustain his regime hasn't materialised, and that's largely because of unresolved internal fractures that hostile actors were able to exploit. In the aftermath of Suwayda, which deepened these fractures, Ankara has issued a stern rebuke and is now trying to take a more assertive role in shaping Syrian policy. According to informed sources, Turkey's message to Sharaa is clear: strengthen ties with Moscow. Only with Russia back in the fold can Damascus – and Ankara – balance Israeli, Saudi, and Western influence in Syria, while preserving the country's territorial integrity and a strong central government.

So it was that on 31 July Syria's foreign minister headed to Moscow. "The current period is full of various challenges and threats, but it is also an opportunity to build a united and strong Syria. And, of course, we are interested in having Russia by our side on this path," he declared at a press conference, alongside Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. While Moscow's presence in Syria had never truly ended – it maintains naval and air bases along the coast, and a base in the northeast – Russia had, until now, been lying low, biding its time.

Now, Turkey sees a possible return to the Astana formula, a framework in which Ankara and Moscow coordinated closely, creating on-the-ground realities that Israel and the West could not bypass. For Turkey, what is now sought from Moscow is clear: a willingness to limit Israeli ambitions; resolve problems with the Druze and the Alawites; supply the weak Syrian military with arms and recondition existing stockpiles; and back the removal of the UN Security Council's terrorist designations on Sharaa and his interior minister, Anas Khattab. More crucially, Russia's support will be pivotal if Turkey decides to resolve the Kurdish issue in the old fashioned way. This could involve a Syrian army offensive supported by Turkish airpower, in a repeat of the 2016, 2018, and 2019 operations, all of which had been coordinated with Moscow. According to sources familiar with the talks, Russia has made its own demands. It seeks the restoration of Assad-era officers to the Syrian army, particularly those with strong ties to Moscow; the re-hiring of Druze and Alawite security officers to manage security in Druze- and Alawite-majority areas; and a restructuring of Syria's debts, estimated at around $50 billion; and agreements granting Russia full legal status for its military bases in Syria.

Solution from above

President Sharaa, like his predecessor, finds himself caught between two inescapable realities – maintaining a unified central state or facing Syrian fragmentation – while dealing with the inherent tensions between regional alliances and international expectations. If Sharaa takes Turkey's advice and deepens ties with Russia, it might secure military and strategic support for a coercive solution to the "alliance of minorities"; but it risks alienating key segments of his Sunni base, which sees Russian backing as too close an echo of Assad's repression.

At the same time, aligning more closely with Russia could place Sharaa at odds with the West, which has shown little appetite for working with a Syria under Moscow's direct influence. While calling for a unified Syria, the West insists on a political solution that

involves a power-sharing arrangement, particularly with the Kurds and other minorities. From Sharaa's perspective, this would establish rival centres of power that run counter to his goal of maintaining total control over the nation's political and military apparatus. Indeed, it is a dilemma also faced by Assad, who sought to preserve his rule through military means but faced persistent international pressure to talk and share power.

There is growing international recognition that the Syrian conflict (that has not yet ended) cannot be resolved by Damascus' top-down approach. To break the deadlock, a broader international conference – similar to the "Friends of Syria" format from earlier in the conflict – could provide an appropriate forum. A conference that brought together key players, including the US, Turkey, Russia, Israel, the Arabs, and the Europeans, could be a critical step in forging a UNSCR 2254-inspired roadmap on what needs to happen in the next three years. The carrot would be reconstruction funds for use once a political agreement had been reached. The roadmap could specify clear benchmarks for the return of displaced persons, reconstruction, and economic revitalisation, to be attained by transparent processes – all of this contingent on the success of a genuine national dialogue.

Such a dialogue would need to include all relevant Syrian parties – Sharaa's government, the wider Sunni community, Kurds, Alawites, the Druze, and other minorities. A national pact, negotiated and agreed upon by all domestic sides, could provide the foundation for a permanent constitution and a political system that balanced the need for central authority with a degree of devolution and representation required to accommodate the country's diverse communities. In this scenario Sharaa's legitimacy might be strengthened, if he was recognised as President by all those convened.

Critical decision

Sharaa was badly burned by the Suwayda debacle. He had attempted to "impose the aura of the State" on the Druze – in the process intimidating the Kurds – but instead his defence ministry was bombed and he ended up ceding sovereignty. The longer that the matter remains unsettled, the more likely it is that temporary arrangements will become permanent.

Now, Sharaa faces a critical decision: to continue pursuing a coercive strategy to unify the country, potentially with Turkish and Russian military backing; or to embrace dialogue and a degree of decentralisation and political pluralism. If his past political instincts are any guide, he will likely remain on his current course. The allure of one-upmanship (*muzayada*) and brinkmanship (*siyasat hafat alhawiya*) aligns with the populist impulses of his administration. Even in defeat, Sharaa could deploy the "I did not back down" narrative to bolster his credibility with his supporters and offer a lifeline to continue being the Sunni hardman. There may, however, be another, more productive way.

Lions of Syria

Damascus' mobilisation of tribes and monarchical ambitions

Sheikh Humeidi Daham al-Jarba, the late chief of the Shammar tribe in Syria, often entertained guests at his guesthouse with colourful tales from his travels. One anecdote dated back to the mid-2000s when he visited Yemen and found himself in conversation with the then-President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, at a gathering of the country's political and social elite. The topic at hand was rather delicate: Saleh was contemplating disarming Yemen's tribes, many of which had tanks and rocket launchers in their arsenals, and who frequently kidnapped Westerners to strong-arm the government.

Sheikh Humeidi, however, was having none of it. "Mr. President," he began, "tribes are like lions. The tribes of Yemen are like jungle lions – wild, free, and fierce, thriving in their natural environment. The tribes of Syria and Iraq, on the other hand, are like zoo lions. People come to admire them but they are caged and lacking the vigour they once had. As for the tribes of the Gulf, they're like circus lions: trained to perform tricks to please the audience." Humeidi finished: "So, Mr. President, which kind of lion would you prefer to have on your side?"

This question has long preoccupied Middle Eastern rulers, and it centres around two main concerns: social progressiveness and the utility of power. Saudi Arabia's King Abdulaziz, not socially progressive, had no qualms about maintaining tribal traditions. He subdued the tribes by settling them, marrying into them, and offering their leaders lavish subsidies. Jordan's King Hussein, though socially progressive and living a Western lifestyle, relied heavily on the East Bank tribes to secure his throne. This dependence granted the tribes a more prominent role in the country's politics and national identity. Iraq's Saddam Hussein was socially progressive in the Soviet sense (an advocate of women's rights and modern dress) and found the tribal system incompatible with his secular and centralised vision of the state. His primary organisational tool was the Ba'ath Party, and he saw little need for the tribes, even banning tribal surnames. After 1991, however, when the Sunni tribes of Tikrit and Anbar helped crush the Shia uprising in the South, his attitude shifted.

Taming the lions

Hafiz Assad, on the other hand, was vehemently and consistently against the tribes, viewing them as backward and a threat to his regime. In Syria's 1950s democratic heyday, the tribes mustered power through the ballot box, and tribal politicians like Trad al-Mulhim of Homs emerged as influential power-brokers. This would not do in Ba'thist Syria. Early in his reign, Hafiz gave tribal leaders a stark choice: join the Party or remain excluded from political life. Many tribal leaders with connections to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia emigrated, while those that didn't were relegated to the B-League.

The Assads nevertheless had consistent policies to manage the tribes. Key leaders were co-opted with seats in the People's Assembly and municipal councils, while others were bought off with perks like smuggling rights, free fuel, and occasional meetings with security chiefs. The tribes' roles varied by region: in Homs and Hama they were part of the "alliance of minorities" alongside Alawites, Shias, and Ismailis to balance urban Sunni influence; in Deir Ezzor, tribal leaders' sons were given opportunities in the Ba'th Party and the security services, with several (like Riad Hijab and Nawaf al-Faris) serving in senior roles; in Hassake clans of sedentary farmers from Raqqa were imported to build the Arab Belt; in Daraa, where clans tended to be better educated, many attained high office, including Prime Minister and Vice-President (Mahmoud al-Zo'bi and Faruk al-Sharaa, respectively, the latter a distant relative of Syria's current president). As an organised sub-national group, however, the tribes were never part of the regime's core power. They were carefully managed – co-opted, kept on a tight leash, and prevented from exercising true political influence.

Tribal resurgence post-Assad

All of that changed on 8 December 2024. The triumph of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its rebel alliance was not only a victory for the opposition but also for the Sunni tribal leaders who had invested in the cause. Every tribe had at least one senior member embedded within the three main factions – regime, opposition, and SDF – in a widely accepted practice of bet-hedging. Today, many tribal leaders find themselves with hundreds, if not thousands, of kin serving in the formal army and security forces. This trend took root in rebel-held northern Syria, where entire tribes displaced by Assad's war machine joined armed groups *en masse*. Over time, tribal military command-

ers emerged, adding their clan-based support to formal military and security roles. Mohammad al-Jasim, also known as Abu Amsha, is perhaps the most prominent example. While this kind of merger is new for tribes in Syria, it is already familiar to tribes in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Indeed, the tribes are part of President Sharaa's social milieu, as he himself hails from a family of rural notables in Quneitra with connections to the Annaza tribal federation. His ability to mobilise the tribes, most dramatically seen during the coastal massacres and the battle of Suwayda, is striking. Tribesmen who served in the formal army and security forces simply shed their uniforms, donned traditional gear, and joined armed cousins, seamlessly shifting between their state and militia roles, well-placed sources in Damascus confirmed. In the case of Suwayda this resulted from a deliberate decision taken at the highest levels, intended to avoid Israeli airstrikes and create plausible deniability. Also in the Suwayda crisis, tribal leaders delivered rousing oratory on camera about how they were "defending the state", striving to prove their loyalty and capitalise on the resulting goodwill. July's *faz'a* (tribal mobilization call) became a strategic show of strength, directed not only at domestic adversaries – such as the Druze, Kurds, and sceptical urban Sunnis – but also at hostile regional actors. Tribesmen from Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia responded to the call with convoys of SUVs, further emphasizing the breadth and reach of Sharaa's authority over the tribes.

Future kingdom?

Sharaa became President after being acclaimed as such by opposition armed factions at the Victory Conference on 29 January. Sources close to the leadership, however, confirm that Sharaa has ambitions to become King. For this, he would need recognition from a much broader segment of the population – and in this the tribes are uniquely positioned. The tribes claim to account for around 40 per cent of the population. This may not be an exaggeration, given that most Sunni Arab rural communities maintain some form of tribal affiliation, even though, under the Assads, these ties were largely ignored by the regime. In a new system that acknowledges tribal identity and rewards collective loyalty to the state, this could change. Tribal leaders in Syria with close connections to Saudi Arabia, such as Abdulilah al-Mulhim, grandson of Trad al-Mulhim, are championing the idea of Sharaa as king. They assert that a monarchy would be the ideal system, to enable Sunni Arabs to retain power and to assure long-term political stability. After all, they say, it has worked in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, so why not Syria? The British themselves had always envisioned Syria as a constitutional monarchy, with Faisal I serving as king from 1918 to 1920 after being thrust into that role by the tribes of the Great Arab Revolt.

The tribes of Syria have the potential to be much more than mere auxiliaries; they could become a crucial source of legitimacy or an obstacle to statehood. The lions have been uncaged.

Fault lines abroad

How Syria's transition is reshaping its German diaspora

The recent violence in Suwayda has brought the Syrian diaspora in Germany into the public eye as never before. Prior to the Assad regime's overthrow in December 2024, there were occasional, small-scale protests against the regime, pro-Rojava rallies, and even smaller gatherings of regime supporters. But Assad's fall brought thousands into the streets. Syrians across Germany celebrated the end of a dictatorship that since 2011 had forced 14 million Syrians to flee their homes in search of safety. The mood was euphoric. The rallies were peaceful and driven by a shared sense of hope for the future.

Continued violence in Syria, however, has exposed political and social fault lines and has been echoed in Germany. In Berlin and Düsseldorf groups of an estimated 300-400 supporters of the Syrian transitional government under President Ahmad al-Sharaa clashed in July with members of the Kurdish and Druze communities and with other protestors. Accounts of who started the confrontations vary, but in Berlin a small group chanted inflammatory slogans against Druze and Alawites while praising Sunni tribes, members of which had committed serious human rights violations in Suwayda.

Incidents such as these within the over 1.2 million-strong Syrian community in Germany have been extremely rare. Every community includes radical elements, and focusing too narrowly on this fringe risks pouring fuel on a fire that remains, for now, small. What matters far more are the deeper currents shaping the Syrian diaspora in Germany: a community in the midst of reconfiguring its relationship to an emerging new state back home that most of its members had once fled in despair. These trends offer insight into the mood and direction of the second largest Syrian community abroad (after that in Turkey) – young, growing, and already playing a meaningful role in German society.

Better to understand the underlying debates, *Syria in Transition* spoke with a range of Syrians living in Germany: activists, members of community organisations, and politically unaffiliated individuals. The portrait that emerges is not meant to be statistically representative. That would be difficult to achieve even through large surveys. Expectations influence what people are willing to say, as several interviewees emphasised. In the Syrian context, it reflects a deep yearning – especially among Sunni Arabs – to protect the dignity they feel was partly restored with Assad's fall. Other communities, such as the Kurds or Druze, express their own fears. For them, the fall of the regime could mark the beginning of a new chapter of marginalisation and persecution.

Reclaimed dignity

Many of the debates within the Syrian diaspora reflect broader international discussions. At the heart lies an unresolved question: what kind of state should Syria become, and who has the right to shape it?

Among many Sunni Arabs – who often define themselves simply as "Sunnis," merging religious and ethnic identity – there is widespread hope for a democratic model loosely inspired by Turkey. They envision a state that embraces Islamic values, but not necessarily strict Sharia law. They imagine a society rooted in Islamic principles but without excluding minorities. Islam, they say, stands for diversity, and this is something they want to demonstrate to the world. At the same time, many believe in the legitimacy of a Sunni-led majority culture and the "soft dominance" that comes with it. The question of how to square the circle of an implicit claim to power and equality for minorities remains unanswered.

Conversations with Sunnis often involve a narrative that they have suffered for decades, not only in Syria but across the region. In the West, they say, Sunni Arabs have often been stigmatised and cast as the modern barbarians. The fall of Assad marks, in their view, a long-overdue turning point. They now see themselves as having the right and duty to rebuild the Syrian state in their own image. Some admit that resultant harm to other groups is deeply unfortunate but frame it as collateral damage that, at a small scale, may be unavoidable. Others deny outright that minorities are being harmed, or suggest that the Sharaa government is not repressive towards anyone. For them, the eight months since Assad's fall have proven the good faith of Syria's new rulers.

The precious state

One word keeps surfacing in these conversations: *al-dawla* (the State.) Many feel that Syria, after years of chaos, finally has a government capable of rebuild-

ing a shattered nation. This, in itself, they argue, grants it legitimacy. When the new state uses force, as it did in Suwayda, it is seen by some as an unfortunate but understandable assertion of state sovereignty. In this context, support for Sharaa is often explained as having less to do with his person and more to do with what he represents. He is regarded by many as the man who liberated Syria from Assad; but more importantly, he is seen as one of their own. His faith, his beard, his conservative demeanor are the key elements of the typical Sunni 'barbarian'. That he rose to become a recognised president is a source of immense pride.

What Sharaa may or may not have done in the past is often dismissed as irrelevant. Most diaspora members haven't been closely following the details of what happened in Syria at least for the past 5-6 years. They remember that the northwest was controlled by an array of armed groups, some more Islamic than others; but what matters is that those groups eventually united and marched on Damascus. "It's like Sunnis found their MAGA caps, just with the *shahada* on it," said one interviewee wryly.

This pride, however, is fragile. "There's no second chance," several interviewees opined. If the Sharaa project fails, Syria as a unified state could collapse entirely. One person recalled meeting a Sunni who said he didn't like Sharaa, but would be ready to sacrifice his soul for him because now it is about Syria's survival.

Disillusionment and doubt

There are also voices of deep disillusionment. Many Syrians, especially those who mingle in progressive urban political or social circles, feel that early hopes have given way to disappointment. One woman in her early twenties, living in western Germany, said she was ashamed of the optimism she had felt during the first few months after Assad's fall. She now sees the Sharaa government as authoritarian and increasingly sectarian. The fears of minorities, she believes, are entirely justified. Her parents, who are from Idlib province, had planned to return to Syria, but after the escalation in Suwayda, they cancelled their appointment with German immigration officials.

Stories of repression, kidnappings, and targeted killings are spreading quickly through diaspora chat groups. Many blame Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its affiliates, while others point to corrupt remnants of the old regime. "No one knows the facts," remarked the owner of a family business in his thirties, who has lived in Germany since the early 2000s and is of Kurdish origin but not aligned with the Rojava movement. He added: "People's interpretation of who's responsible depends entirely on their political perspective." This polarisation abroad highlights the absence of a genuine national dialogue in Syria. In its absence, the security dilemmas facing communities in Syria are reproduced within the diaspora. As long as people fear that their newfound dignity could be taken from them, or that they will be the losers in the nascent state, they feel compelled to adopt a posture of preemptive defence.

The level of identification with Syria plays a major role in that regard. Those who feel more connected to Germany, or who have emotionally distanced themselves from Syria, tend to be less drawn to these defensive reflexes. Many – younger Syrians in particular – have focused on integration: learning the language, seeking citizenship, pursuing education or employment. Some even stopped following Syrian news altogether – although this turning away has rarely been final.

Community and political organisation

Even if Syria experiences economic recovery, most exiles are unlikely to return. For many, Germany has become home – citizenship or not. Among those who haven't yet secured citizenship, fear about the future is widespread. Most risked everything to reach Germany, and they don't want to leave, and certainly not without a passport.

The emotional bonds, tied to pain, history, and intergenerational memory, however, remain strong. Like many other displaced communities, Syrians in Germany appear deeply political. Syrian associations have existed in Germany for decades, originally founded mostly by students and businesspeople. The wave of refugees since 2015 has sparked the creation of new organisations. These newer groups are more diverse, reflecting the country's complex social fabric, and include a significant Kurdish presence. Most are motivated by a desire to support Syria's reconstruction.

Efforts to build structured representation are emerging. In early 2025, the "Syrian Community in Germany" was founded. Its flagship project so far has been coordinating with Syria's Ministry of Health to send doctors from Germany to assist in urgent humanitarian work. Without claiming to represent the entire dias-

pora, the group aims to strengthen internal organisation. To the surprise of no one, even its name sparked controversy, as other Syrian groups objected to what they saw as a claim to speak for all. This again reflects the pluralism and internal conflict that also hampered the formal opposition during the war. "That's okay," one of the founding members said. "What matters is the work being done. And with so much need, there's room for many initiatives."

Whether the Syrian diaspora in Germany can become as cohesive and professionally organised as, for example, the Turkish community, remains an open question. Some believe it's possible, but only with support from both German institutions and the Syrian government. At present, Syria doesn't even have an ambassador in Berlin. The path forward will be long.

What happens in Syria doesn't stay there

The internal dynamics of the diaspora are inseparable from developments in Syria. At a migrant organisation in Germany, a serious conflict recently erupted between Syrian Arabs and Kurds in response to the violence in Suwayda. It was the first time in the organisation's history that tensions had flared so openly. Relations between certain communities had previously been cordial, but tensions are now rising. At the same time, new alliances are forming. Activist Druze and Kurds are increasingly seeking not only passive solidarity but active coordination.

Between less politically active diaspora members, especially older Syrians, there has traditionally been little contact via ethnic- or sectarian-based associations. This might present an opportunity for a measure of grassroots dialogue that might send positive messages back home. Presently, it's the other way round, with the shock waves of what happens in Syria shaping currents within the diaspora.

The diaspora's fault lines aren't just ethnic or religious. Within Sunni Arab communities, for example, the figure of Ahmad al-Sharaa is driving a fresh wedge between secular-liberal and religious-nationalist circles. The rhetoric mirrors wider polarised debates in Western societies. Liberal Sunnis are derided by conservatives as "cute Sunnis" (similar to 'woke' in Western discourses); while they, in turn, brand devout Sharaa supporters as the "new *shabiha*."

The fall of Assad has reawakened old debates without yet producing any new consensus. Diaspora communities, however, have a habit of outlasting the regimes that drove them away. Beyond the fault lines, Syrians all share the experience of suffering and fear of losing what's left, what they've built, or what little hope they've found. The diaspora in Germany can lean on the values and experiences of their new home to find common cause beyond sect and slogan. In doing so, they may yet help shape not only the future of their fractured homeland, but their own place in the country many of them now call home.

New Age Salafism

Syria's embrace of obedience over jihad

The rise of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to power in Syria has triggered a subtle yet significant ideological shift within the group and its supporters. While the gradual "Salafisation" of society continues through control of mosques, universities, and military academies, the government is moving away from traditional jihadi-Salafism and begun to align more closely with Madkhali Salafism. This school of thought, supported by Saudi Arabia and accepted by the West for its ability to counter jihadi-Salafism, has increasingly found support within HTS circles. This shift is being presented to hardliners within the group as a necessary response to public fatigue with prolonged war and the negative legacies of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). The aim is to offer a more moderate and domestically focused Salafi approach.

Enter the Madkhalites

Madkhali Salafism, named after its key Saudi proponent, Rabi' Hadi al-Madkhali (1933-2025), emerged as a counterforce to jihadist-Salafism in the early 1990s. Very much in the tradition of 'quietist Islam', its founders rejected political engagement and emphasised unconditional loyalty to the ruling regime, regardless of its repression. Unlike the more militant, global jihadist factions such as Al-Qaeda and IS, Madkhali thought advocates adherence to traditional Islamic law, obedience to authority, and a rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood and any religiously-inspired political organisation. This ideology gained traction among conservative elements within the Salafi movement, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and parts of North Africa, where it was promoted as a bulwark against the destabilising effects of political Islam.

In Yemen, when the Houthis took control of Sana'a in 2015 and advanced towards other provinces, the Madkhali movement took up arms after receiving backing from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Figures like Hani bin Braik, a prominent Madkhali preacher in Aden, rose to prominence. Under UAE pressure, he was appointed Minister of State in the first transitional government, in which role he oversaw the creation and financing of the Security Belt Forces – which allegedly targeted and assassinated imams who disagreed with him. In Egypt, the Madkhali movement supported President Sisi's coup, with figures like Muhammad bin Saeed Raslan, known for his fierce attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood, playing a key role in the ideological arena.

In Libya, too, the Madkhali movement has played a significant role. Initially it sided with Gaddafi against the protests, considering them sedition. As the conflict evolved, however, the Madkhalis called for support of General Khalifa Haftar, with figures like Ashraf al-Mayar, a senior officer in Haftar's army, praising "the war against the Kharijites." Al-Mayar, who became known as "Haftar's Mufti", issued a fatwa calling for the killing of Haftar's captured opponents, claiming they had "apostatised."

Five Tenets

For Syria's new rulers, the ideas of Madkhali Salafism represent a strategic opportunity to reshape the ideological trajectory of the emerging conservative Sunni elite. No longer focused on exporting jihad or promoting internationalism, Syria's leadership appears to be pivoting towards a more domestically oriented ideology that aims to consolidate power while aligning more closely with the religious values promoted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This shift is subtle, occurring without grand announcements or public declarations; but it is evident through the actions and rhetoric of key religious figures. Clerics with significant followings within HTS and beyond, such as Syria-based Saudi preacher Abdullah al-Muheisni, Presidential Adviser on Religious Affairs Abdulrahim Atoun, and more mainstream figures like Minister of Religious Endowments Mohammad Abu al-Kheir Shukri, have increasingly espoused Madkhalite ideas on the pulpits and in their social media posts. This shift aligns conveniently with Syria's rulers, as radical jihadism – due to its inherently violent and revolutionary nature – poses an obstacle to the state-building process they now seek to undertake.

Madkhali Salafism has five major tenets:

1. Unquestionable loyalty to the ruler. Madkhali Salafism's most striking feature is its absolute obedience to the ruler, even when the ruler is viewed as sinful. Syria's leadership has begun to adopt this principle, positioning President Sharaa as *wali al-amr* ("guardian of authority.") His supporters promote the idea that any criticism of the government is not only disloyal but blasphemous. This shift is part of a broader attempt to centralise power under Sharaa, with some

even suggesting a hereditary monarchy in the future – a concept that resonates with the ultra-conservative elements within the government.

2. **Rejection of political pluralism.** The Syrian government has tacitly embraced the Madkhali Salafi stance that politics and democracy are inherently corrupting. The government has actively discouraged political parties and opposed the notion of political freedom, framing the revolution as a rebellion against the "infidel" Assad regime rather than a genuine struggle for democracy and political pluralism. This ideological contradiction – opposing political freedoms while claiming to uphold them – speaks to the government's struggle to balance appeasing the West while maintaining internal legitimacy.

3. **Return to traditional jurisprudence.** Another key development is the abandonment of the more flexible, reformist interpretation of Islamic law championed by the late Syrian Salafist cleric Nasir al-Din al-Albani. Instead, Syria is returning to more rigid, sectarian forms of jurisprudence, aligning itself with the centuries-old Ash'ari, Maturidi, and Ahl al-Hadith schools. This move has deep implications for Syria's juridical and religious landscape, potentially eroding the intellectual diversity that has characterised the country's religious scholarship and making *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) nearly impossible.

4. **Rejection of jihad and advocating peace with Israel.** One of the more notable changes in HTS's ideological pivot is its abandonment of jihad as a guiding principle. HTS's previous alignment with jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and IS was largely rooted in a shared goal of resisting West-backed rulers, but Madkhali Salafism rejects such campaigns. Syria's leaders have begun to promote a message of reconciliation, even with Israel, as part of their efforts to position themselves as pragmatic actors. According to Madkhalites, the domain of politics belongs solely to the legitimate ruler and whatever he decides in terms of treaties and alliances must be in the state's best interest.

5. **Nationalism over internationalism.** Unlike the earlier Salafi-jihadist vision, which saw Syria as part of a larger pan-Islamic movement, Madkhali Salafism is focused on national interests. Syria's leadership appears intent on fostering a sense of Syrian nationalism, sidelining the once-prominent rhetoric of Islamic universalism that had been championed by a previous generation of Salafist clerics such as Saudi Arabia's Ibn Baz and Ibn Uthaymeen. This shift is consistent with broader regional trends. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has embraced a more nationalistic vision, distancing itself from the pan-Islamic ideals that once defined its foreign policy.

Break with the past

The government's ideological shift may resonate with certain conservative factions within Syrian society, but it faces significant challenges. Resistance from HTS hardliners, who still adhere to jihadi-Salafism, could be substantial. Syria's Sunni majority, which traditionally follows Sufi or Ash'ari doctrines, is unlikely spontaneously to embrace Salafism. The country's deeply rooted religious diversity, coupled with the entrenched influence of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, are further reasons why the government's efforts are likely to encounter opposition. While the Brotherhood is currently weakened, it could still serve as a counterbalance to the government's ideological overhaul, particularly in mosques and communities that remain beyond the state's control.

Key regional powers take contrasting positions. While Saudi Arabia is supportive, the UAE remains sceptical, unconvinced that the Syrian government has fully severed ties with its former jihadist allies. Turkey is also doubtful, but for a different reason: Salafism strongly opposes Sufism, the dominant form of Islam practised in Turkey. Israel, meanwhile, rejects all Islamist movements but sees HTS as a particular threat due in part to its ability to adapt and transform ideologically. What is clear, however, is that a complex mix of experimental ideas is permeating the public sphere. While the outcome remains uncertain, the process itself is fascinating, and underlines the adaptive pragmatism of the group now leading Syria.