Syria: Unfinished Uprising, Structural Persistence and the Recalibration of Conflict Mechanisms under Ahmed al-Sharaa

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving mechanisms that transformed Syria's 2011 popular uprising into internal conflict, arguing that these dynamics, though reconfigured, persist under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Drawing on Adrian Florea's "Contentious Politics Approach", the analysis focuses on three interlinked processes: erosion of legitimacy, radicalisation, and militarisation. The empirical foundation of the study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 32 individuals, including civilian actors formerly affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition and military personnel who later served in the Syrian National Army, previously known as the Free Syrian Army. The sample was selected to reflect variation in gender, age, regional origin, professional background, and socio-economic status. Data were analysed using MAXQDA 24 Analytics Pro, enabling both thematic coding and statistical mapping of participant narratives. The findings reveal how structural conditions, particularly socio-economic exclusion and authoritarian resilience, continue to drive identity politicisation, which in turn facilitates radicalisation and militarisation through sustained regional and global interventions. By situating Syria's post-uprising trajectory within broader debates on post-conflict reconstruction, rebel victory, and civil conflict, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how legitimacy crises and external entrenchment perpetuate cycles of instability in fragmented state contexts.

Keywords: Legitimacy contestation, radicalisation, militarization, civil conflict, politicisation of identities.

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Introduction

This article argues that the structural mechanisms that transformed Syria's 2011 popular demonstrations into a full-scale civil conflict — namely the erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — remain operative, albeit recalibrated, under the transitional leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Despite the passage of more than a decade, Syria continues to grapple with the fragmentation of central authority, the proliferation of armed actors, and the erosion of institutional trust, all of which have rendered conventional post-conflict reconstruction paradigms inadequate.

On May 20, 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned that Syria was "on the verge of potential collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions" (Gritten, 2025). While such statements underscore the persistence of conflict dynamics, they often obscure the deeper structural drivers of instability, particularly the transitional government's failure to establish inclusive and pluralistic institutions capable of addressing longstanding grievances and fostering societal reconciliation.

Although the early phase of the Syrian conflict has been extensively studied (Hinnebusch, 2012; Phillips, 2016), recent developments — especially those following the formation of the transitional government in December 2024 — have introduced new dynamics that remain underexplored. Moreover, few studies offer a longitudinal and comparative analysis that connects the initial and current phases of the conflict within a unified conceptual framework. This article addresses that gap by employing Adrian Florea's (2017) *contentious politics approach*, which conceptualizes civil conflict not as a singular rupture but as a dynamic process shaped by strategic interaction, identity mobilization, and contested legitimacy. This framework enables a mechanism-based analysis of how structural conditions — particularly socioeconomic exclusion and authoritarian resilience — continue to fuel identity politicization, which in turn sustains radicalization and militarization.

The empirical foundation of this study is based on 32 in-depth interviews with Syrian opposition actors, including representatives of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), journalists, civil society activists, and former members of the Free Syrian Army (now operating under the Syrian National Army). These narratives provide a rich dataset for tracing the transformation of protest dynamics into militarized governance and for examining how legitimacy is negotiated in the absence of a functioning state.

The central research questions guiding this inquiry are:

- What mechanisms triggered the transformation of Syria's mass protests into armed conflict in 2011?
- In what ways do these mechanisms persist during the interim administration period?
- What are the implications of these dynamics for post-conflict reconstruction and long-term stability?

To maintain analytical clarity and depth, the scope of this article is deliberately limited to three interlinked mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — while broader themes such as transitional justice, economic liberalization, and regional geopolitics are addressed only insofar as they intersect with these core processes.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the conceptual and explanatory framework. Section 3 details the methodology, including the sampling strategy, data collection, and ethical considerations. Section 4 presents the findings, organized around the three core mechanisms. Section 5 discusses the broader implications of these findings and future research directions. Section 6 concludes with reflections on policy relevance.

Conceptual and Explanatory Framework

This study adopts Adrian Florea's (2017) *contentious politics approach* as its central analytical framework to examine the transformation of Syria's 2011 uprising into a protracted civil conflict. Rather than treating civil war as a singular rupture, this framework conceptualizes conflict as a dynamic and iterative process shaped by three key mechanisms: militarization, encompassing the strategic interactions of state and non-state actors; radicalization, referring to the mobilization and politicization of identity-based claims; and the contestation of political legitimacy, which underpinned the emergence of popular demonstrations.

According to the *contentious politics approach*, background structural factors do not automatically translate into the institutionalization of violence. Instead, mediating mechanisms play a central role in this process. By linking structural conditions to violent outcomes — particularly through radicalization, whereby the state marginalizes opposition actors, and militarization, which intensifies through regional and global intervention — this framework facilitates a detailed understanding of how factors such as socioeconomic exclusion, authoritarian resilience, and institutional fragmentation contribute to the sustained institutionalization of violence.

Within this framework, the Syrian conflict is analyzed through three interlinked mechanisms:

- Erosion of legitimacy: The gradual breakdown of state-society relations, driven by the regime's failure to deliver inclusive governance, uphold accountability, and respond to citizen grievances. This process is marked by the delegitimation of state institutions and the proliferation of alternative sources of authority.
- Radicalization: The intensification of oppositional discourse and identity-based mobilization, often catalyzed by state repression, exclusionary policies, and exploitation by regional and international actors. Radicalization is closely linked to identity politics at national, regional, and international levels. It is understood here not merely as ideological extremism but as a strategic shift in claims-making and collective action in response to perceived existential threats.

- Militarization: The transition from civil resistance to armed contention, facilitated by internal dynamics — such as the collapse of nonviolent opposition and the marginalization of moderate actors — as well as by external interventions that provide material and symbolic support to armed non-state actors. In this sense, militarization is conceptualized as a reconfiguration of contention, wherein violence becomes institutionalized as a primary mode of political engagement.

These mechanisms are not discrete or sequential; rather, they operate in recursive and mutually reinforcing ways. For instance, the erosion of legitimacy creates fertile ground for radicalization, which in turn increases the likelihood of militarization. The *contentious politics approach* thus provides a coherent lens through which to trace the continuity and transformation of conflict dynamics from 2011 to 2025.

By applying this framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of the Syrian conflict and toward a mechanism-based explanation of its persistence. While this article does not offer a comparative analysis, the proposed model may be applicable to other fragmented post-authoritarian contexts such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, where similar structural vulnerabilities and contentious dynamics have shaped conflict trajectories. Ultimately, the framework underscores the importance of understanding civil conflict as a process embedded in structural fragilities and shaped by the strategic behaviour of actors navigating contested political spaces.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, mechanism-oriented research design to investigate the structural persistence of conflict dynamics in Syria between 2011 and 2025. Anchored in the *contentious politics framework*, the methodology is structured to trace how the mechanisms of legitimacy erosion, radicalization, and militarization have evolved over time and across political contexts. The research design integrates semi-structured interviews with thematic and process-tracing analysis to uncover the causal pathways linking structural conditions to conflict escalation via mediator dynamics.

Research design and case selection

Given the study's focus on dynamic mechanisms operating across time, a longitudinal within-case design was adopted. Syria was selected as a paradigmatic case of post-uprising conflict transformation, where the initial mass mobilisation of 2011 evolved into a protracted and multilateral civil war and, later, into a contested transitional governance process. The case offers a unique opportunity to examine how conflict mechanisms persist and recalibrate under changing political configurations.

Data collection

Primary data were collected through 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2023 and May 2024. Respondents included a diverse cross-section of Syrian opposition actors, such as former members of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), Civil society activists and journalists and former military personnel affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its successor, the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in gender, age, regional origin, political affiliation, and socio-economic background. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and Turkish, depending on participant preference, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a protocol designed to elicit narratives related to perceptions of state legitimacy and governance (legitimacy erosion), experiences of repression and identity-based mobilization (radicalization) and views on armed resistance and external intervention (militarization).

Analytical strategy

The data were analysed using a combination of thematic coding and mechanism-based process tracing. Coding was conducted in MAXQDA Analytics Pro (v24.10.0), using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. The initial coding framework was derived from the *contentious politics* literature and included categories such as state abandonment, sectarian legitimacy claims, grievance escalation, structural violence, collective mobilisation and armed resistance rationales.

Process tracing techniques were utilized to examine the operation of mechanisms over time by identifying recurring patterns in actor narratives and connecting them to broader structural conditions. Document variables, including respondent role, region of origin, administrative status preference based on sectarian and ethnic identity, and temporal context, were assigned to each transcript to facilitate comparative analysis across subgroups. Cross-tabulations and code co-occurrence matrices were used to explore correlations between mechanisms and respondent characteristics. Secondary sources, including policy reports, media archives, and academic literature, were used to triangulate interview data and contextualize findings within broader political developments. This multi-source strategy enhances the validity of the analysis and supports the identification of causal mechanisms.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the research context, strict ethical protocols were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. The study received ethical

approval from the Altınbaş University Research Ethics Committee and complied with all relevant data protection regulations.

Limitations

While the study provides a rich and context-sensitive account of conflict dynamics, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample is composed exclusively of opposition-affiliated individuals, which may introduce bias and limit the inclusion of regime-aligned or neutral perspectives. Additionally, due to security constraints, fieldwork was conducted outside Syria, primarily in neighbouring countries and exile communities. These factors may affect the representativeness and immediacy of the data. Nonetheless, the study's mechanism-based design and triangulation strategy mitigate these limitations by focusing on causal processes rather than population-level generalisations.

Findings: Mechanisms of Escalation in the Syrian Conflict

The findings of this study are organized around three core mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — which trace the escalation of the Syrian conflict from peaceful protest to protracted civil war through processes of radicalization and militarization. In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that they derive from interviews with 32 opposition-linked actors, a non-representative sample reflecting primarily anti-regime perspectives. While these accounts provide rich insights into the perceptions and experiences of Syrian opposition members, they do not encompass the full spectrum of viewpoints (e.g., those of regime supporters or neutral civilians).

The analysis of the 2011-2012 uprising and the onset of civil war draws heavily on first-hand interview data and is therefore comparatively well grounded. In contrast, evidence on the 2024-2025 interim period is drawn from a combination of limited interview material (collected by the end of 2024) and secondary sources, including policy reports and expert commentary, given the scarcity of direct field data for this fluid period. Accordingly, the discussion of the transitional era is framed with caution and appropriate qualifications and is further supported by external analyses, such as those produced by the International Crisis Group and the Royal United Services Institute, to avoid overstating conclusions.

The results are presented below for each mechanism, beginning with the well-documented events of 2011-2012, followed by a carefully qualified examination of continuities and changes under the interim government of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2024-2025.

2011-2012: Erosion of legitimacy: From reformist demands to ongoing crisis

The collective mobilization of 2011 in Syria was rooted in a deep-seated crisis of state legitimacy. Participants consistently described how, in the years leading up to 2011, the Ba'ath administration failed to meet public expectations of good governance. Key

grievances included entrenched socioeconomic exclusion — manifested in corruption, crony capitalism, and stark urban–rural inequalities — alongside a lack of political freedoms and the pervasive influence of the *mukhabarat* (secret police). These longstanding issues eroded the regime's legitimacy and public trust in state institutions, thereby fueling popular discontent.

When mass protests erupted in March 2011, the regime's response further accelerated the breakdown of its legitimacy. Participants widely recounted how peaceful demonstrations were met with indiscriminate repression, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and violent crackdowns on protesters. Rather than quelling dissent, this heavy-handed approach confirmed many Syrians' view that the state had become, in the words of Participant 16 from Homs, "the people's adversary, not its protector" (Interview 16, ex-military, 2024).

Importantly, opposition-affiliated respondents emphasized that the initial protesters largely sought reform, not regime change. Many demonstrators called on the government to address corruption and injustice, hoping for inclusive reforms that would restore public trust. However, as Participant 22 from Dar'a noted, "We were asking for reforms, not war, but the regime treated us like enemies from the beginning" (Interview 22, private sector, 2024). The Ba'ath government's unwillingness to engage in dialogue or compromise — epitomized by President Bashar al-Assad's dismissive speeches and violent security responses — destroyed what remained of its political legitimacy.

By mid-2012, even Syrians who had been undecided came to view the state's authority as no longer representative of the broader population. This process of delegitimation unfolded rapidly: the state's refusal to acknowledge legitimate grievances and its framing of all dissent as treason or terrorism alienated large segments of society. The majority of participants described this period as a "point of no return" when hopes for reconciliation vanished under the weight of state violence. The result was a profound loss of trust in official institutions and a deep delegitimation of the regime in the eyes of protesters and many ordinary citizens alike.

Empirical findings on mass mobilization dynamics

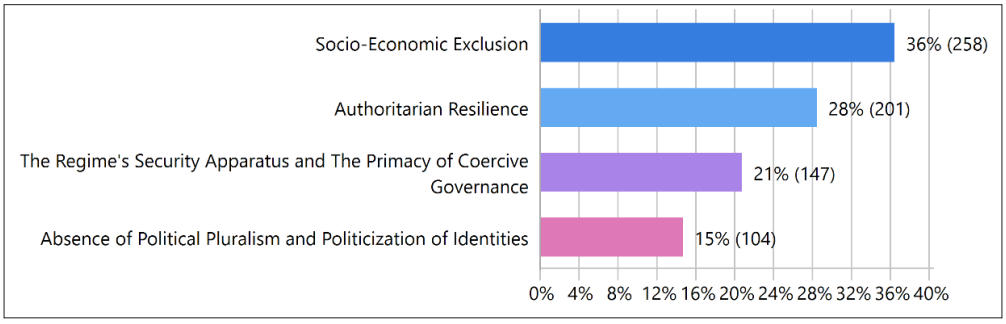

Figure 1: Pre-uprising mobilisation dynamics

The graphic illustrates the key variables that significantly contributed to the outbreak of collective mobilization in Syria, triggered by the legitimacy crisis. A thorough understanding of these dynamics is essential, as they represent central challenges and focal points that must be systematically identified, analyzed, and addressed throughout the post-reconstruction process. Recognizing how these interconnected forces operate — politically, economically, and socially — allows stakeholders, policymakers, and implementing agencies to develop more targeted, context-sensitive interventions. Without this foundational awareness, efforts to rebuild institutions, restore livelihoods, and reestablish social cohesion risk being fragmented, misaligned with ground realities, or unsustainable in the long term.

First, socioeconomic exclusion operated as a persistent and deeply rooted undercurrent of discontent, shaping the grievances of large segments of the Syrian population long before the outbreak of open conflict. The Ba'ath government's approach to economic governance was characterized by a set of structural and policy failures that opposition-affiliated participants consistently identified across their accounts. These failures coalesced around six interrelated themes defining both the regime's policy orientation and its broader structural outcomes: entrenched corruption and cronyism, which concentrated wealth and opportunity among regime loyalists and connected elites; extensive nationalization and centralized state control over key industries, which stifled competition, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification; selective liberalization and privatization initiatives that, rather than broadening economic participation, primarily benefited regime-connected business networks; the strategic yet distorted role of private manufacturers, who operated within a system of patronage rather than a genuinely competitive market; persistent macroeconomic instability, including high unemployment, inflation, and deteriorating living standards, particularly in rural and peripheral regions; and the compounded effects of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, which deepened existing vulnerabilities and accelerated the erosion of livelihoods across already marginalized communities. These findings echo Abboud's (2015) comprehensive study of Syria's political economy, which highlights how decades of crony capitalism and rising inequality underpinned public disillusionment with the regime's legitimacy.

Second, the regime's authoritarian resilience was maintained through a sophisticated hybrid governance model that combined selective, carefully managed liberalization with systematic coercive retrenchment. This model allowed the Ba'ath government to project an image of modernization and openness, particularly during the early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency — often referred to as the "Damascus Spring" — while simultaneously reinforcing the structural foundations of authoritarian control. Political openings were superficial and tightly controlled, engineered to serve as instruments of regime adaptation and legitimation rather than as pathways to genuine democratic reform. Concessions were strategically calibrated: enough to manage international pressure and co-opt segments of the educated urban middle class, but never sufficient to meaningfully alter the distribution of political power or threaten the regime's core interests. Civil society actors, opposition figures, and independent media faced continuous and systematic surveillance, harassment,

arbitrary detention, and repression, effectively limiting the institutional space available for organized, sustained dissent. Security agencies operated with broad discretionary authority, creating a pervasive climate of fear that discouraged political mobilization and constrained public discourse. Minority communities, tribal networks, and regional elites were managed through a combination of co-optation, patronage, and selective coercion — a divide-and-rule strategy designed to fragment potential opposition coalitions and reinforce the regime's indispensability as a guarantor of stability. The cumulative effect was a political environment in which formal institutions — parliaments, courts, and local councils - existed largely as facades, providing a veneer of governance legitimacy while real decision-making authority remained concentrated within the regime's inner circle.

Third, the primacy of coercive governance, anchored in the expansive reach of the security apparatus, functioned as both a deterrent and a catalyst for mobilization. The *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) permeated everyday life, instilling a culture of fear and self-censorship. However, this omnipresent coercion also contributed to the erosion of regime legitimacy, as citizens increasingly viewed the state not as a provider of security, but as its principal threat.

Fourth, the absence of political pluralism, compounded by the deliberate politicization of identity, further entrenched authoritarian control while progressively fragmenting societal cohesion across Syria's diverse communities. The Ba'athist administration's monopolization of political space systematically eliminated meaningful avenues for peaceful contestation, dissent, or negotiated political change. By suppressing independent political parties, trade unions, and civil associations, the regime ensured that no organized alternative power base could emerge to challenge its authority. In the vacuum created by this enforced political uniformity, identity — sectarian, ethnic, regional, and tribal — became one of the few remaining axes around which collective grievances could be articulated and mobilized (Zaiter, 2020).

The regime's instrumentalization of sectarian and ethnic identities was not incidental but strategic. By selectively privileging certain communities — most notably through the disproportionate representation of Alawite networks within the security and military apparatus — while marginalizing others, the Ba'athist state cultivated a landscape of mutual suspicion and intercommunal mistrust. Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Druze, Christians, and other communities were positioned in relation to the state not as equal citizens within a shared civic framework, but as distinct groups whose loyalties were managed, rewarded, or punished according to their perceived alignment with regime interests. This dual strategy of political exclusion and identity fragmentation did not immediately inhibit collective action; in the short term, the climate of fear and absence of organizational infrastructure constrained open mobilization. However, over the longer term, it laid the structural groundwork for identity-based political mobilization, as deepening alienation among marginalized communities transformed latent grievances into active sources of opposition, ultimately contributing to the conditions that made the 2011 uprising both broad-based and difficult to contain.

Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria entered a crucial and turbulent period that significantly affected multiple aspects of life within the country. This era was characterized by substantial upheavals across economic, political, legal, and social dimensions, leading to widespread uncertainty and instability.

2024-2025: Early signs of persistent legitimacy deficits under the interim government

In late 2024, Assad's ouster and the rise of an interim government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa created cautious optimism for a more inclusive, accountable Syrian state. Yet opposition-linked participants (participants 3 and 22, interviewed after the collapse of the Ba'ath administration) already voiced skepticism about the new administration's commitment to transparency and broad-based governance. They noted that the initial steps of the transitional leadership, such as the drafting of a 2025 Constitutional Declaration and the formation of a National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ), were conducted in a top-down manner, dominated by Sharaa's inner circle. As human rights observers have pointed out, the 2025 Constitutional Declaration's lack of public consultation or minority protections has raised fears that it is merely a "rebranding of authoritarianism," leaving many Syrians suspicious of the new government's legitimacy (Abdulghany, 2025; Khaddour, 2025). Observers immediately warned of a "dangerous drift" in the transition (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2025), noting that early governance missteps, such as top-down decision-making and the exclusion of key minority groups, risked reproducing the very legitimacy deficits that had fueled the uprising.

These perspectives, while reflecting the particular concerns and experiences of opposition-affiliated actors, find significant resonance in a broader body of external analyses, policy assessments, and independent monitoring reports produced by international observers and research institutions.

For instance, the Crisis Group Middle East Briefing (2025) observed "growing uncertainty over interim President al-Sharaa's perceived drive to monopolize power" and highlighted fears that the transition might not yield a truly inclusive government representative of Syria's diverse communities. These concerns centered on the concentration of executive authority within a narrow leadership circle, the limited participation of non-Islamist factions in transitional institutions, and the absence of transparent mechanisms for political accountability. The risk, as analysts noted, was that the post-Assad transition would reproduce familiar patterns of exclusionary governance under a different ideological banner, undermining the foundational principles of a legitimate and durable political settlement.

Similarly, policy commentators have warned that the transitional authorities' approach to transitional justice risked becoming symbolic and one-sided, aimed more at consolidating the new leadership's legitimacy and settling scores with the former regime than at genuinely addressing the grievances of all affected communities. Meaningful transitional justice, scholars and practitioners have consistently argued, requires impartial truth-

telling processes, inclusive victim participation, and accountability mechanisms that apply universally rather than selectively. Without these elements, transitional justice initiatives risk deepening intercommunal divisions rather than healing them and may generate new cycles of grievance among communities that feel excluded or instrumentalized by the process.

Indeed, an independent parliamentary briefing noted that by mid-2025 the interim authorities still struggled to extend governance and public services beyond core urban centers, reflecting only a partial and uneven restoration of state authority across Syrian territory (Loft & Mills, 2025). Peripheral regions, rural areas, and communities historically marginalized under the Ba'athist state continued to experience significant governance deficits, including limited access to justice, basic infrastructure, and administrative services. This geographic unevenness in state reach not only undermined the practical effectiveness of transitional institutions but also reinforced perceptions of continued exclusion among communities whose buy-in is essential for any sustainable post-conflict political order. The absence of genuine political pluralism, evidenced by the exclusion of certain minority groups from decision-making and the dominance of HTS-linked figures in key posts, was frequently cited by interviewees as a red flag suggesting that Syria's legitimacy crisis was not yet resolved.

It must be stressed that conclusions about the interim government's legitimacy are tentative. Our direct evidence on the 2025 period is limited, and the situation remains highly fluid. Nonetheless, preliminary signs raise concern that some structural issues persist. For example, early decree laws and appointments by President al-Sharaa signaled continuity with past practices: significant decisions were made by executive fiat, and power remained concentrated within a tight circle of elites. An independent analysis of Syria's transitional governance noted that the interim administration's heavy reliance on emergency decrees and exceptional powers (e.g., the unilateral establishment of the NCTJ by presidential decree) may undercut the very accountability and rule of law that the new regime has pledged to uphold (ICG, 2025; Loft & Mills, 2025).

While average Syrians initially welcomed the end of Assad's repressive rule, by mid-2025 many were expressing frustration that daily hardships — from economic insecurity to the lack of local political voice — had not substantially eased. Credible reports suggested that public trust in the transitional authorities was eroding in some areas, particularly where communities felt underrepresented or excluded from the national political process (Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025; ICG, 2025). These observations do not imply a complete return to the old authoritarian order; rather, they indicate that achieving legitimacy remains a work in progress. Addressing this first mechanism - rebuilding state legitimacy through inclusivity and accountability — emerges as a fundamental challenge if Syria's new leaders are to prevent the recurrence of conflict. In summary, the erosion of legitimacy that undermined Assad's rule is only partially repaired: early transitional reforms and institutions have yet to convince all segments of Syrian society that the state truly represents and serves them.

2011-2012: Radicalization, identity, repression, and the shift to extremism

A second pivotal mechanism in Syria's conflict trajectory is the radicalization of the opposition. What began in 2011 as a diverse protest movement with broad calls for reform gradually splintered and, under intense pressure, took on increasingly radical and sectarian overtones, according to opposition-affiliated participants. This transformation is attributable in large part to the regime's actions. Participants recounted how state violence and propaganda fueled a sense of existential threat among Sunni communities, laying the groundwork for extremist narratives to gain traction. For example, Bashar al-Assad was accused of deliberately stoking sectarian fears: this strategy portrayed overwhelmingly Sunni protesters as Islamic extremists and, in a calculated move, reportedly led to the release of a number of Islamist militants from prisons in 2011–2012. Several participants interpreted these events as a regime strategy to "taint" the uprising's image and justify harsh reprisals. The immediate effect, however, was to deepen communal mistrust and fear. Minority groups, such as Alawites and Christians, grew more fearful of Sunni Islamist dominance, while many Sunnis came to see the regime's Alawite leadership and its allies, including Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias, as threats to their community's survival. One former opposition fighter described how, after witnessing regime atrocities against Sunni civilians, he felt "there was no choice but to fight fire with fire," even if that meant aligning with hardline Islamist factions he had initially distrusted (Interview 6, ex-military, 2024).

By late 2012, the moderate, pluralistic ethos that had characterized the early protest movement had given way to a significantly more militant, fragmented, and ideologically charged opposition landscape. The transformation was neither sudden nor monolithic, but rather the cumulative product of sustained regime violence, the collapse of nonviolent organizational infrastructure, and the progressive entry of well-resourced armed actors into a conflict space that had been forcibly vacated by peaceful civil society.

Secular youth activists, grassroots coordination committees, and local civil society networks — the organizational backbone of the uprising's early phase — lost influence rapidly as Islamist and ethnically based armed factions filled the vacuum created by the regime's brutal crackdown on peaceful dissent. The suppression of unarmed protest left communities feeling that nonviolent resistance was not only ineffective but existentially dangerous, creating conditions in which armed mobilization appeared to many as the only viable path to protection and political change. International actors, including Gulf state donors and jihadist networks, exploited this vacuum by channeling financial and material support to armed factions whose ideological orientations frequently diverged from the democratic aspirations of the uprising's founding constituencies.

This radicalization process was not linear or uniform across Syrian territory; its pace and character varied significantly depending on local dynamics, community composition, and the intensity of regime violence in particular areas. Nevertheless, participants identified several catalysts that recurred across many locales. Chief among them was the

regime's deliberate deployment of sectarian violence and inflammatory rhetoric, which progressively convinced significant segments of the Syrian population that the conflict had become a zero-sum battle for communal survival rather than a shared struggle for political transformation. By framing the uprising as an existential sectarian threat — particularly to Alawite and Christian communities — the regime succeeded in fragmenting the cross-sectarian solidarity that had briefly characterized the early protest movement and in recruiting communal fear as a tool of political mobilization on its own behalf.

This trajectory accords closely with Hokayem's (2013) observation that an initially broad-based, "upbeat and peaceful uprising quickly and brutally descended into a zero-sum sectarian civil war", as the regime's tactics, including the deliberate release of Islamist militants from detention, systematically stoked sectarian fears, deepened intercommunal mistrust, and fractured the opposition along ideological and identity lines (pp. 49–52). The long-term consequences of this engineered radicalization extended well beyond the immediate conflict: by reshaping the opposition's composition and public image, the regime complicated international support for anti-Assad forces, narrowed the political space for negotiated settlement, and embedded sectarian narratives into the conflict's identity narratives that would prove extraordinarily difficult to dislodge in subsequent peace and reconstruction efforts.

The influx of well-funded foreign jihadist groups, along with their provision of humanitarian and military aid, established an alternative source of support for civilians and fighters facing desperation. Participant 6 from Idlib province noted that foreign Islamist groups delivered social services and security in areas abandoned by the regime, resulting in either support or acquiescence from communities exhausted by conflict (Interview 6, ex-military, 2024). This phenomenon is extensively documented by Lister (2015), who explains that jihadist groups capitalized on the power vacuum and wartime chaos to secure local legitimacy by offering services and security, thereby diverting support from moderate rebels. Likewise, Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) argue that violent regime repression and the arrival of foreign fighters in 2012 contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition into competing armed social orders, each characterized by its own radical ideology (pp. 85–89).

In summary, the interplay of internal repression and external influences contributed to the radicalization of Syria's opposition. As peaceful avenues for change remained inaccessible and violence intensified, armed resistance became increasingly extreme and sectarian.

Empirical findings: Radicalization and identity-based threat perception in the Syrian conflict

Field data reveal that the proliferation of Iranian-backed militias has exerted a more immediate and tangible influence on Sunni radicalization than the infiltration of transnational Islamist networks. This pattern is best understood through the lens of identity-based threat perception, particularly the notion of existential extinction. Sunni communities interpreted the regime's sectarian alignment — especially its facilitation of

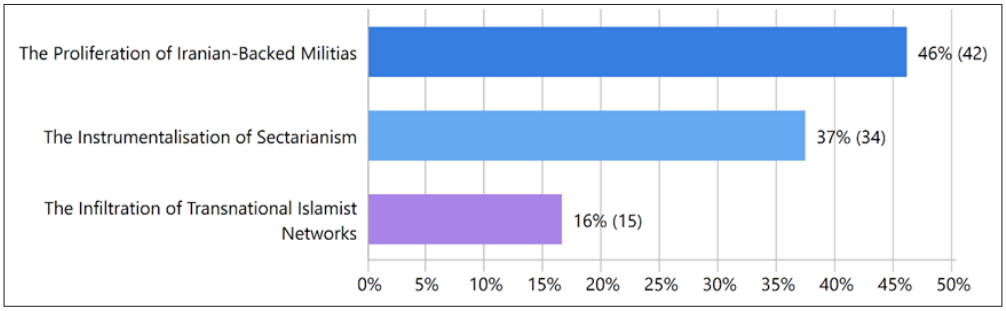

Figure 2. Radicalization and identity-based threat perception in the Syrian conflict

Iranian influence and the granting of citizenship to foreign Shia fighters — not merely as exclusionary, but as a direct threat to their communal survival. Two dimensions of this threat perception proved especially salient: its external origin and its historical continuity. Interviewees consistently framed Iranian-backed actors as part of a long-standing geopolitical project aimed at demographic and ideological transformation. This framing intensified Sunni vulnerability and contributed to a defensive posture that was not primarily ideological but strategic.

Consequently, many Sunni groups exhibited increased susceptibility to transnational Islamist networks. Their engagement with actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS was often driven by a logic of survival rather than doctrinal alignment. These networks were perceived as provisional shields, a "lesser evil" in the face of regime-militia collusion that had redefined the boundaries of citizenship and belonging. The radicalization process, therefore, was not simply a product of ideological indoctrination, but a response to perceived existential threat, shaped by the instrumentalization of sectarianism and the historical depth of external danger.

2024–2025: Cautious optimism and ongoing risks of radicalization

The removal of Assad and the establishment of an interim government in late 2024 significantly altered the conflict's landscape, but it did not automatically eliminate the risk of continued radicalization. On one hand, some positive developments were noted. Interviews conducted largely in early 2024 captured cautious optimism among opposition activists that the end of Assad's "politics of fear" might gradually reduce sectarian tension. Indeed, early in the transition, there were anecdotal reports — from participants and local media — of goodwill gestures, such as the release of some political prisoners and outreach meetings with leaders of minority communities intended to build trust. These steps aligned with the new government's public narrative of fostering national unity and reversing the divisive policies of the Assad era.

However, as the transitional period unfolded, many underlying drivers of radicalization remained unresolved. Participants, whose insights into the interim government were

limited and one-sided given their opposition background, worried that identity-based mistrust could resurface if reforms stalled. Events on the ground by mid-2025 lent some support to these concerns. For instance, in March 2025, violent clashes erupted in Latakia and Suwayda, areas with significant Alawite and Druze populations, illustrating that communal tensions were still raw. The new administration's challenges in extending effective governance over Kurdish-held northeastern Syria also meant that questions of political inclusion for the Kurds remained unanswered (Loft & Mills, 2025).

Analysts caution that identity-based mistrust remains deeply embedded and operationally significant in Syria's transitional period, representing one of the most complex and potentially destabilizing challenges facing post-conflict governance and reconstruction efforts. The sectarian divisions and intercommunal fears deliberately cultivated and instrumentalized during the conflict have not dissipated with the fall of the Ba'athist regime; rather, they have been carried forward into the transitional environment, where they continue to shape political behavior, community relations, and perceptions of the new order's legitimacy.

Khaddour (2025) notes that many Alawites fear exclusion and retribution in the new political order, a fear rooted not only in the community's historical association with the Assad regime but also in early transitional dynamics that have done little to reassure minority communities of their place in a post-Ba'athist Syria. This fear, if left unaddressed through credible inclusion mechanisms and transparent accountability processes, carries a significant risk of driving radicalization among minority groups, potentially generating new cycles of violence and undermining the broader project of national reconciliation. The challenge for transitional authorities is therefore not merely symbolic: it requires the construction of genuine institutional guarantees, constitutional protections, representative governance structures, and impartial security arrangements capable of convincing historically marginalized or regime-affiliated communities that the transition represents a departure from exclusionary governance rather than its continuation under new management.

Likewise, Erkmen and Özçelik (2025) argue that the July 2025 clashes in Suwayda, a Druze-majority region in southern Syria, demonstrate with stark clarity how unresolved grievances, when left unaddressed within transitional frameworks, can rapidly rekindle localized radicalization and violence. The Suwayda clashes illustrated that peripheral and minority communities retain both the motivation and the capacity for armed mobilization when they perceive the transitional order as failing to protect their interests or deliver meaningful change. Such episodes carry systemic risks that extend beyond their immediate geographic scope: they erode confidence in the transitional authorities' capacity to maintain security and manage diversity, embolden spoiler actors who benefit from continued instability, and reinforce the narrative that Syria's post-conflict order is replicating rather than transcending the exclusionary patterns of the past.

This continued salience of sectarian framing in 2025 is also powerfully evident in online and media discourse, where the information environment remains deeply contested. Zaiter

(2020) finds that throughout the conflict, Syrian media spaces functioned as active arenas for "constructing identities" and amplifying polarizing narratives, processes through which sectarian identities were not simply reflected but actively produced and hardened through communicative practice. This dynamic almost certainly endures in the transitional period's fragmented information environment, where multiple competing actors —including transitional authorities, armed factions, diaspora communities, regional powers, and international media — each seek to shape the dominant narrative of what the Syrian transition means and whom it serves. In the absence of trusted, independent, and inclusive public information infrastructure, the risk is that identity-based polarization will continue to be reproduced and amplified through media and social media channels, complicating efforts to build the shared civic identity that sustainable post-conflict reconstruction ultimately requires.

These unresolved questions — how to integrate Kurdish regions, how to reassure Alawites and other minorities, and how to handle hardline Islamist factions — contributed to a continuing climate of uncertainty and fear. Analysts cautioned that Syria's transition, while free from full-scale war in early 2025, was "neither a flawless transition nor a descent into chaos". This in-between state, however, was fragile.

Syria's tradition of identity-based political mobilization has persisted despite the regime change. Analysts have highlighted the interim government's limited capacity or willingness to integrate all sectarian and ethnic groups into the new power structure, noting that certain key minority factions were excluded from early power-sharing arrangements (ICG, 2025; Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025). This perceived lack of inclusivity may perpetuate the grievances and sense of exclusion that contributed to radicalization during the civil war. It is important to note that conclusions regarding ongoing radicalization remain tentative, as the 2025 data are primarily derived from secondary sources and opposition perspectives, and the situation is still evolving. Nevertheless, available evidence indicates that although political discourse under al-Sharaa is less overtly brutal than under Assad, Syria remains vulnerable to further radicalization. If segments of the population, including disenfranchised minorities or disillusioned former rebels, perceive the new system as a continuation of previous practices, they may resort to extreme measures outside the political process. Therefore, the mechanism of radicalization, closely linked to identity politics and perceived existential threats, continues to pose a risk of instability during Syria's transitional period, despite widespread aspirations for a return to normalcy and peace.

2011-2012: Militarization. From civil resistance to entrenched armed factionalism

The third mechanism, militarization, denotes the transition from civil resistance to large-scale armed conflict. In the Syrian context, this shift was neither rapid nor consistent nationwide; however, interview data reveal several recurring factors that compelled segments of the opposition to adopt armed resistance. The regime's escalating violence emerged as a primary catalyst. As nonviolent demonstrations were met with live ammunition and mass

arrests, some protesters and defected soldiers formed local defense committees and nascent militias, initially to protect their communities. As Participant 26 stated, "When they started shooting at unarmed crowds, what option did we have?" (Interview 26, private sector, 2024). Regime actions, such as the brutal crackdowns in Daraa and Homs in 2011, were frequently identified by interviewees as pivotal moments when "the struggle changed", leading many to conclude that peaceful resistance was no longer viable.

The emergence of external support for the armed opposition represented a significant turning point. By late 2011 and early 2012, several participants observed that weapons and financial resources began arriving from abroad, primarily through sympathetic networks in the Gulf states, to select opposition groups. Although this assistance was initially welcomed by those seeking means of self-defense, it produced unintended consequences. The influx of resources empowered more militant factions and intensified divisions, as secular or localized rebel units were often outgunned or absorbed by better-funded Islamist brigades. As one former Free Syrian Army commander reflected, "We needed help, but what we got was chaos. Everyone had their own agenda, highlighting how a diverse array of foreign sponsors — from individual Gulf donors to regional powers — supported competing rebel leaders" (Interview 15, former FSA commander, 2024).

This external intervention, combined with the Assad regime's loss of control over extensive territories by mid-2012, resulted in the proliferation of armed groups with divergent loyalties. Consequently, the military landscape became highly fragmented, with dozens of rebel factions — some coordinated, many not — engaging in simultaneous conflicts against the regime and, at times, against each other. This development aligns with Kaldor's (2012) concept of "new wars", in which internal conflicts merge with transnational struggles, driven by non-state networks and external sponsors. In the Syrian context, the regime's severe crackdowns and the collapse of state authority by 2012 facilitated such external involvement, as foreign funding and arms supplied emergent rebel militias and significantly escalated the militarization of the uprising (Hokayem, 2013; Lister, 2015).

The militarization mechanism, therefore, was driven by both push factors — regime violence that forced opposition fighters to take up arms — and pull factors — the availability of external arms and support that incentivized violent resistance. By the end of 2012, Syria was embroiled in a full-fledged civil war, and any semblance of a unified opposition movement had largely given way to a constellation of armed actors.

Empirical findings on militarization

This perspective enables a more nuanced analysis of militarization as a process shaped by diverse actors and marked by strategic ambiguity, including the roles of domestic intelligence agencies and transnational support networks. Foreign intervention significantly altered the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, transforming it into a prolonged proxy war. Phillips (2016) notes that, starting in 2012–2013, Iran's military assistance and Hezbollah's direct

Figure 3: Armed resistance and the reconfiguration of contention

participation bolstered the regime, while financial support from Gulf states and the arrival of foreign fighters enhanced the capabilities of various rebel factions.

2024–2025: Incomplete demilitarization and continuing security challenges

Following the December 2024 regime change, a key challenge for the new authorities was reversing the entrenched militarization of Syrian politics. Some progress has been made: large-scale pitched battles of the civil war subsided after Assad's fall, and many former rebel fighters were incorporated into collective security frameworks such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) or local police forces. However, evidence suggests that full demobilization and integration of armed actors remain incomplete. The participants, speaking mostly in early 2024, expressed concern that the transitional government might struggle to control all militias and autonomous armed groups operating in Syria. Multiple participants emphasized that security sector reform lagged behind other aspects of the transition, leaving power vacuums in some regions. Participant 29 from Daraa noted in April 2024, "The guns haven't gone silent; some have just changed uniforms" (Interview 29, public sector, 2024). This perspective reflects a concern that various militias, especially those with Islamist or tribal affiliations, were being superficially rebranded as units of the new national forces without fully dissolving their parallel command structures and loyalties. This observation aligns with the International Crisis Group's (2025) assessment that Syria's security landscape in 2025 is characterized by a "patchwork of militias" integrated into security forces without full disarmament or central control. A UK parliamentary research brief further confirms that armed groups continue to operate semi-independently, noting that the interim government's forces are "a mixture of former rebel militias and repurposed regime units, with uneven loyalty to the new state" (Loft & Mills, 2025, p. 4).

Subsequent reporting by international observers has highlighted similar issues. By mid-2025, the interim government's security forces remained a patchwork of pre-existing rebel factions and hastily recruited former regime soldiers, with uneven discipline and allegiance (Loft & Mills, 2025). In some majority-Sunni areas, local SNA units were accused of acting as law unto themselves, raising fears among minority communities. Conversely, in formerly regime-held areas with large Alawite populations, insurgent attacks by pro-Assad

groups continued, suggesting that not all remnants of the old order had accepted the new dispensation. The International Crisis Group noted in March 2025 that Syria's security forces were overstretched and struggling to contain insurgencies brewing at the periphery. The same briefing warned that "outside actors are meddling", as various foreign powers maintain proxy forces or direct military presence on Syrian soil. Indeed, the footprint of external actors remains significant: Turkey continues to back armed factions in the north, Iran's allied militias still operate in parts of the country, and Israel has sporadically conducted airstrikes in southern Syria (ICG, 2025; Loft & Mills, 2025). The continuing presence of foreign-backed forces underscores that Syria's conflict remains internationalized. A recent RUSI analysis notes that Turkey's support for rebel factions in Idlib and Iran's backing of militias in the south persist into the transitional period, complicating the interim government's efforts to monopolize the use of force (Erkmen, 2025). These interventions, while beyond the control of the Damascus leadership, perpetuate a climate of militarized instability and complicate the interim government's efforts to consolidate a monopoly on violence.

The Syrian case exemplifies, with particular clarity, what Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) describe as the emergence of "competing social orders" during civil war — a condition in which the collapse or fragmentation of central state authority creates a governance vacuum that multiple armed actors move to fill, each establishing its own administrative, judicial, and coercive structures in the territories under its control. Rather than representing a simple absence of governance, this phenomenon reflects the active construction of alternative political orders, each with its own logic of legitimacy, resource extraction, social regulation, and relationship to the civilian population.

In the Syrian context, this dynamic became unmistakably visible by 2013, as the conflict landscape fragmented into a complex mosaic of overlapping and competing jurisdictions. The Islamic State established a highly bureaucratized proto-state across large swaths of eastern Syria and northern Iraq, complete with taxation systems, courts, schools, and public services — a governance model designed as much to entrench territorial control as to fulfill ideological objectives. Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor formations administered areas of northwestern Syria through a distinct Islamist governance framework, while the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), commonly known as Rojava, developed an elaborate decentralized governance structure grounded in the ideological principles of democratic confederalism. Meanwhile, in regime-held areas, the Ba'athist state continued to function, albeit in a severely degraded form, alongside a proliferating network of pro-regime militias that exercised localized coercive authority largely outside formal state command structures.

This fragmentation of political authority carries profound implications for Syria's post-conflict reconstruction. As Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) indicate, the governance structures established by armed actors during conflict are not temporary arrangements that dissolve upon the cessation of hostilities; they tend to endure, embedding themselves in local administrative practices, community expectations, and power relations

in ways that resist displacement by a returning central state. Populations that lived under these alternative orders for extended periods — some cases nearly a decade — developed functional relationships, however coerced or imperfect, with the institutions that governed their daily lives. Dismantling or bypassing these structures without offering credible, legitimate, and effective alternatives risks creating new governance vacuums, generating local resistance, and undermining the transitional authorities' capacity to extend meaningful state presence across Syrian territory. The reassertion of a strong, inclusive, and legitimate central state therefore emerges not merely as a political aspiration but as a foundational prerequisite for sustainable reconstruction — one that must navigate the entrenched legacies of competing social orders rather than assume their disappearance.

Crucially, the limited scope of the interview data on the 2024–2025 period means that this assessment of ongoing militarization is informed largely by secondary sources and should be interpreted with care. Contemporary policy analyses underscore that Syria's security situation in 2025 is tenuous and fluid. A research brief published by the UK House of Commons Library in mid-2025 documents that even after the regime's fall, sporadic violence — including revenge attacks against Alawite communities and clashes involving Druze militias — continued to erupt, requiring the new government to launch investigations and navigate complex communal tensions (Loft & Mills, 2025). At the same time, the transitional authorities had to contend with remnants of the Islamic State (IS) in the east and negotiate uneasy ceasefires among various non-state armed groups (Loft & Mills, 2025; Erkmen, 2025). These realities highlight that the militarization of Syrian society cannot be swiftly unwound. Years of conflict have normalized the presence of armed actors and weapons, and new power structures have formed that do not vanish with regime change.

Despite these hurdles, the interim government, with support from international partners, has declared its intent to demobilize militias and rebuild a unified national army. The effectiveness of such efforts remains to be seen. What is clear from both our respondents' accounts and current events is that the militarized nature of political contention in Syria endures, even if large-scale combat operations have ceased. The persistence of this mechanism means that any misstep in the transition — such as a breakdown of political talks or a failure to provide local security — could quickly lead to an uptick in violence. For now, Syria's new authorities have prevented a relapse into nationwide warfare, but the foundations of peace remain fragile. Ongoing militarization, manifested in the incomplete integration of armed groups and continuous external meddling, stands as a potent reminder that resolving Syria's conflict will require more than a change of leadership; it demands a deliberate dismantling of war-era structures and careful confidence-building among all factions. Interviews and external reports alike suggest that without such efforts, the risk of renewed fighting remains, particularly in areas where grievances are high and weapons remain readily available.

Discussion

This study has argued that the foundational mechanisms that precipitated Syria's descent into civil conflict — namely fragmented governance, sectarian polarization, and institutional erosion — remain deeply embedded in the country's political architecture as of 2025. While prevailing scholarship has emphasized the role of regional and international actors in escalating the conflict (Phillips, 2016; Lister, 2015), it has often underexamined the structural conditions that enabled radicalization and militarization in the first place. As Hinnebusch (2012) and Heydemann (2007) have shown, the Assad regime's strategy of "authoritarian upgrading", combining selective liberalization with coercive retrenchment, ultimately undermined its legitimacy and created fertile ground for identity-based mobilization.

The findings presented here build on and extend this literature by tracing how these structural vulnerabilities persisted and evolved under the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Rather than marking a rupture from authoritarianism, Syria's post-Assad governance appears to reflect a reconfiguration of exclusionary logics under a new institutional guise. The concentration of executive authority, the opacity of transitional justice mechanisms, and the marginalization of minority actors suggest that the interim administration has struggled to establish inclusive legitimacy (International Crisis Group, 2025; Abdulghany, 2025). As one civil society activist recalled, "People felt the fever of hatred was breaking; we thought maybe we could finally stop seeing each other as enemies" (Interview 17, civil society activist, 2024). Yet, this optimism has been tempered by the persistence of coercive governance and the absence of meaningful pluralism.

The radicalization of oppositional discourse, a key mechanism in Syria's conflict trajectory, has also shown signs of continuity. As Hokayem (2013) and Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) have documented, the regime's early release of Islamist detainees and its sectarian framing of dissent contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition and the rise of extremist factions. These dynamics were not merely the result of ideological shifts but were shaped by strategic calculations and identity-based threat perceptions. In the transitional period, unresolved grievances and uneven representation have continued to fuel communal anxieties, particularly among Alawite and Druze communities (Khaddour, 2025; Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025). The July 2025 violence in Suwayda, for instance, underscored the fragility of intercommunal trust and the risks of renewed radical mobilization.

Militarization, the third mechanism examined in this study, remains a defining feature of Syria's post-conflict landscape. As Kaldor (2012) has argued, contemporary civil wars are often characterized by the proliferation of non-state armed actors and the erosion of centralized authority. In Syria, the failure to fully integrate or demobilize armed factions has resulted in a fragmented security apparatus, with competing loyalties and limited state control (Loft & Mills, 2025). The continued presence of foreign-backed militias, whether aligned with Turkey, Iran, or other regional powers, has further complicated efforts to

consolidate a unified national military (Phillips, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2025). These dynamics have not only undermined the interim government's legitimacy but have also perpetuated the logic of militarized governance.

Theoretically, this analysis challenges linear models of democratization and regime change by demonstrating how authoritarian practices can be reconstituted within transitional frameworks. Rather than a clean break from the past, Syria's post-Assad governance reflects a continuity of centralization, elite consolidation, and coercive control. Empirically, the study underscores the importance of internal political architecture in shaping conflict trajectories. While external interventions have undoubtedly influenced the course of the war, their impact has been mediated by domestic vulnerabilities, particularly the state's inability to accommodate pluralistic demands and address socio-economic exclusion.

These insights suggest that policy interventions aimed at stabilization must move beyond short-term security arrangements and engage with the structural foundations of legitimacy, accountability, and civic inclusion. Without transparent and inclusive governance mechanisms, transitional justice initiatives risk reinforcing factionalism and deepening societal fragmentation (Makdisi, 2019). Moreover, the persistence of informal networks and politicized identity structures poses challenges to regional coherence, particularly in fragile states where governance vacuums invite external competition and proxy entrenchment.

Regionally, Syria's trajectory reflects broader patterns of post-authoritarian resilience observed in other Middle Eastern contexts. For regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states, Syria's post-conflict governance model serves both as a strategic concern and a potential template for influence. Understanding the interplay between domestic fragility and external pressure is therefore essential not only for Syria's future but also for the broader architecture of post-conflict governance in the Middle East.

Conclusion

This study has examined the transformation of Syria's 2011 uprising into a protracted civil conflict and the persistence of its core mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — under the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Drawing on the *contentious politics approach* (Florea, 2017) and grounded in empirical fieldwork, the analysis demonstrates that these mechanisms, far from being resolved, have been recalibrated and embedded within the post-Assad governance framework.

The findings suggest that Syria's interim government has inherited not only the institutional void left by the collapse of the Ba'athist regime but also many of its authoritarian legacies. The centralization of power, the exclusion of key minority actors, and the instrumentalization of transitional justice have undermined efforts to build inclusive legitimacy. Rather than dismantling the structures that facilitated conflict escalation, the transitional authorities appear to have reconstituted them under a new political order — one that continues to marginalize dissent and reproduce identity-based inequalities.

Radicalization and militarization, once seen as symptoms of regime repression, now manifest through new channels. Sectarian tensions, unresolved grievances, and the proliferation of armed actors remain salient features of Syria's political landscape. The failure to demobilize militias, the persistence of foreign-backed armed groups, and the absence of a coherent national security strategy have perpetuated insecurity and hindered the consolidation of state authority. These dynamics not only threaten the fragile gains of the transitional period but also risk reigniting cycles of violence.

Ultimately, the Syrian case underscores the limitations of transitional governance models that prioritize elite bargains and security sector consolidation over structural reform and civic inclusion. Without addressing the root causes of legitimacy erosion, socio-economic exclusion, authoritarian resilience, and identity-based marginalization, efforts at post-conflict reconstruction are likely to remain superficial and unstable. As the Syrian experience illustrates, the end of authoritarian rule does not guarantee the emergence of democratic governance. Instead, it may give rise to new forms of exclusion and coercion unless accompanied by deliberate, inclusive, and transparent institutional transformation.

Future research should continue to interrogate the evolving nature of post-conflict governance in Syria, particularly the interplay between formal institutions and informal power networks. Comparative studies across transitional contexts in the Middle East may also yield valuable insights into the conditions under which rebel victories can lead to sustainable peace or, conversely, to renewed authoritarianism. For policymakers and international actors, the Syrian transition offers a cautionary tale: stabilization without legitimacy is not only insufficient but potentially counterproductive, reinforcing the very dynamics it seeks to resolve.

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