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Summary

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, a hybrid form of governance—in the arenas of local administration, security, and justice—emerged across Syria. Neither decentralized nor centralized, the hybrid governance structures combine elements of central rule with grassroots initiatives and local adaptability. Damascus should expand on these models as it continues to develop its state institutions. However, major challenges continue to affect services and civil peace, and they must be addressed swiftly and decisively.

Key Themes

- The new authorities inherited a broken and corrupt state bereft of human and material resources, the rebuilding of which will require an immense amount of effort.
- In the post-Assad security and administrative vacuum, locals created their own councils and networks aimed at maintaining civil peace and providing basic services.
- These local networks have gradually merged with regional administrative bodies established by the new authorities in Damascus, with varying degrees of success.
- Security remains a contentious matter, with Damascus trying to exert control over all armed groups while also delaying the integration of minorities into local security forces, exacerbating tensions in Syria's coast.

- The state-run justice system remains severely hobbled, which has pushed locals to establish alternative justice models. This has alleviated some pressure but also undermined the authority of the state.

Recommendations

- The continued success of hybrid governance is dependent on forward-thinking regional officials working with effective civil society networks. Damascus should look to those regions where hybrid governance has succeeded for models it can employ in other areas.

- Local civil society is, in general, still hindered by a lack of clarity from Damascus on the legality of its activities. Some regional officials use this gray area to suppress civil networks, while others actively embrace them. Damascus must clarify its stance on civil society, particularly in minority regions, and enforce appropriate behavior by its regional officials.

- Damascus' struggles with the integration of armed former opposition groups into a new army will not be resolved overnight. However, integrating minority communities into local security structures will help alleviate some of the pressure on the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, reducing their reliance on unruly ex-opposition groups while improving trust between regional security officials and minority communities.

- Damascus must identify and address the factors underlying the dysfunction of the justice sector. Reopening courts across the country—not just in governorate capitols—and beginning a comprehensive and transparent transitional justice process is crucial for easing social tensions.

Introduction

The rapid collapse of the Syrian regime on December 8, 2024, left the militarily victorious opposition group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had been confined to ruling the rebel-held enclave of Idlib through the "Syrian Salvation Government," with little time to prepare a nationwide governing structure. The caretaker government that HTS initially appointed to run the country faced a range of interrelated challenges, particularly regarding local administration, security, and justice. It was also severely hamstrung by a lack of financial and human resources, and a decisionmaking process largely in the hands of a few senior HTS officials.[1] Whether the interim government, created on March 29 and broader in composition than the caretaker one, can overcome these obstacles is an open question.[2] Either way, dealing with the country's cratered economy will remain a major and pressing challenge. Every Syrian this writer spoke with in six weeks of field work in the aftermath of the toppling of the Bashar al-Assad regime emphasized the impact of the economic crisis, with many rapidly losing patience with the lack of quality-of-life improvements.

The structural weaknesses of the central state, together with the strength of regional politico-military factions outside its control, have led the authorities to adopt an ad hoc approach to governance. Whether out of willingness or by necessity, both the caretaker government and the subsequent interim one have reached agreements with Syrian minority communities and political actors outside the HTS sphere in order to help stabilize certain regions. This dynamic reveals the two sides of Syrian state-building in the immediate aftermath of the regime's fall: on the one hand, HTS quickly recognized the need to work through local institutions due to its own shortcomings; on the other, local communities and civil society managed to carve out a role for themselves in administering their areas.

The result is a hybrid state system, particularly regarding administration, security, and justice, with these sectors varying in their degree of decentralization. Damascus focused much of its efforts in the first months after December 8 on engaging with the international community as well as on rebuilding central state structures to extend their reach from urban centers outward.[3] Many local communities, facing an immediate need to maintain basic services and civil peace, established their own systems in this vacuum, including alternative justice models for overworked or non-operational courts. The new authorities have had little choice but to engage with and work through these new systems, something that has strengthened non-HTS participation in post-Assad state-building at the local level.[4]

These bottom-up administrative models are now being merged into HTS's top-down structure. Furthermore, security priorities in the first weeks after Assad's exit meant that HTS leaned on allied and independent opposition factions to impose authority in many parts of the country. While this ensured the continuation of basic services and the gradual return of government institutions, it has largely failed to address—and often exacerbated—many local grievances along Alawite-Sunni fault lines. In fact, the same challenges that have resulted in this hybrid governance structure, and in some ways the implementation of security and justice systems within it, helped fuel the violence on the coast in March: attacks by pro-Assad insurgents on security forces, followed by massacres carried out by the latter as well as independent Sunni factions. This breakdown in security was exacerbated by the state's failure to disarm or rein in armed Sunni groups, and its related failure to address growing tensions over sectarianism and accountability. None of this could have been fully resolved by March, but the decentralized approach to security and a lack of justice reforms combined with Damascus' inattention to these growing issues only made them worse.[5]

Despite the shock of the violence in March, developments in local governance continue across the country with largely positive results. It is clear that the central government in Damascus views the establishment of effective local governance, security, and justice systems as key pillars not just for improving basic services and government functions, but also for maintaining civil peace. In interviews, multiple regional officials have emphasized the need to "resolve the security and military instability" before addressing widespread resource and infrastructure rehabilitation.[6] Current conditions across three unique regions—Damascus' Qalamoun, Hama's Salamiyah District, and the Tartous Governorate—serve as clear examples of the successes and shortcomings of this approach, which may become a model for Syria's emerging state.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Governance

By the time regional directors were appointed to much of rural Syria, many found an already established network of local administrative structures. Thus, local and regional governance in Syria post-Assad is developing at both the grassroots level and from the top down. In several communities, these two systems appear to have merged fairly well, with centrally appointed regional directors coordinating closely with a variety of local administrative systems. This engagement has been, in the areas visited by the author, mostly amicable and cooperative.

Nonetheless, the resource strain impacting central ministries is even more acute for regional officials, hindering their ability to engage in any serious service or reconstruction initiatives. As one regional official put it in early May, "we must rebuild the state before we can rebuild the country."[7] Actual governance in early 2025 therefore remained generally limited to security coordination, basic service provision, and needs assessments.[8] This has resulted in a situation in which locals feel that they have easy and open access to appointed officials, but also that the latter are doing little to improve living conditions. Additionally, whereas in some towns and villages the new governing structures have proven inclusive of all residents, other initiatives have only empowered those who are native to the area, leaving displaced people with much less representation. Still other communities, especially but not universally Alawite areas, have not taken the initiative to build their own local governance structures, owing to a lack of experience in self-administration and civil activism as well as a fear of drawing the ire of government-appointed regional officials.

Local governance in Syria today generally takes one of two forms: regime-era mayors and municipal councils or post-December 8 elected mayors and councils. Where locals did not care to replace them, regime-era mayors continue to operate; where locals have demanded new structures, they have duly created them. Newly elected local councils can therefore be found across previous opposition strongholds—as might be expected—but also in Alawite and Ismaili communities that were always under the control of the regime but where local political activists have taken the initiative to build new social and political structures.

Damascus' Qalamoun region, known for hosting robust local councils as early as 2012 that were subsequently targeted and destroyed by regime offensives, has witnessed a resurgence of local councils after December 8. Local councils have been established in Rankous, Qara, Nabek, and Assal al-Ward in the western Qalamoun, as well as places such as Daraya, Jobar, Saqba, and Douma on the Damascus city outskirts.[9] However, Qalamoun towns that were generally neutral or pro-regime, such as Maaraba, Mneen, Sednaya, and Maaloula, continue to be run by their old mayors.[10] The Rankous council was formed on January 23 following ten days of deliberation, at which point the regime-era mayor stepped down.[11] According to the head of Rankous' 2012 local council, who is now advising his successor, people from

across the community selected representatives for the body, which then elected a council head. The latter effectively serves as the city's mayor, coordinating with sector-specific committees and with the HTS-appointed regional director.[12]

The experience was slightly different in al-Tal, a hub of opposition activity during the revolution. Here, a family council encompassing representatives from each of the city's main families has existed for years, helping to fill service and mediation gaps left by the regime's municipal council.[13] The strong intercommunal bonds and civil society groups in al-Tal and the presence of the family council meant that no local council was formed after Assad fell, as most immediate needs were already met. It was not until January that Damascus appointed a regional director (*mudir*) for the larger al-Tal *mantiqa*, or district (the administrative level directly beneath governorate), who then met with the Family Council and civil society representatives to create a list of acceptable mayoral candidates for the town itself.[14] The mayor now serves as the central authority figure in al-Tal, with his work supported by civil society and the family council.

This marks a middle-of-the-road approach, one in which the central government picks local officials, but does so in close consultation with locals themselves. However, as a result of the war, a majority of al-Tal's population came to consist of internally displaced persons (IDPs). None of these people are represented on the family council, creating a power imbalance within the town, where native families have a stronger voice. In a country with much internal displacement, this is a key shortcoming of the localized approach to governance.

The emergence of local councils in former opposition strongholds in the vicinity of Damascus is mirrored within Ismaili towns across Hama and Tartous, even though these remained under regime rule throughout the war. In Salamiyah city, the decades-old Ismaili Council has expanded its initially social work-centered role so that it now encompasses many of the duties of a traditional local council, despite officially retaining its "non-political" identity. It consists of a range of committees that coordinate between locals, civil society organizations, and government-appointed local bodies to facilitate the smooth functioning of administrative and service provision.[15] These committees emerged after the December 5 handover of the town to HTS forces, but before any new government institutions were established.[16] Their main focus in the months since has been to provide basic services and facilitate communication between the government and civil society.

For example, one of the committees' first projects was to provide supplementary funds and diesel to the city's hospital to keep it running for around ten days until the new Hama Governorate authorities established a regional office in Salamiyah that took over fuel provision duties.[17] Despite its name, the Ismaili Council in Salamiyah is not restricted to one sect. In practice, it does a better job of representing minority voices—whether local non-Ismaili or IDPs—than al-Tal's Family Council.

Similarly, the Ismaili-dominated town of Qadmus established its own local council within days of Assad's downfall. One member described the impetus for its establishment as stemming from the fact that "after Assad, there was no government and no security, so before the new government came we made this new local council and started efforts to maintain the local government office and hospitals."[18] The council helps administer the city and maintain civil peace with the surrounding Alawite villages through outreach programs begun immediately after December 8. After the arrival of government administrators, this initial security council worked with activists in the city to elect an administration-focused council, which in turn formed a civil peace committee. "We manage our city in cooperation with the new government," explained a member of the local council. "All administrative, logistical, and security issues are coordinated."[19]

While the vast majority of Alawite communities continue to be led by their regime-era *mukhtars* and mayors, some have established new local councils instead. As in Damascus, Salamiyah, and Qadmus, these systems were created by locals as a direct response to pressing security needs in the absence of the new state, and have since built a functioning relationship with the centrally appointed regional directors. The Salamiyah countryside saw a number of local councils form after December 8. Some were formed by Sunni opposition activists inside their mixed-sect towns, but others were established in Alawite towns such as Sabburah. Once the core of the former regime's *shabbiha* network in the countryside, the town is now run by a local council established by two ex-political detainees, Tawfiq Imran and Kareem Akkari, both of whom were long-time officials in the local branch of the Syrian Communist Party.[20]

The Sabburah council's leaders frame their role as filling critical gaps in governance and security while working to build operational capacity. According to the founders, the council is "focused on rebuilding government systems . . . [including] providing basic services and water provision, engaging in civil dialogue, and maintaining education."[21] These last two objectives have been the council's main duties in the past four months. "A lot of people came here in the weeks after [the fall of] Assad demanding a return of their rights," explained Akkari, referring to neighboring Sunnis and Bedouins who had for years been attacked, detained, and robbed by regime militia networks based in Sabburah, "so we used negotiations and payments to prevent killings and maintain civil peace." The council also reopened the town's school, which had shut following the departure of most teachers in the wake of the regime's collapse. Today, some twenty volunteers and paid workers, organized and facilitated by the town council, teach approximately 150 students. As with all other local councils the author met, that of Sabburah coordinates closely with government representatives—in this case, the regional director and local security forces deployed in and around the village.[22]

In Tartous, the Sheikh Badr district has been administered by a local council since mid-December. The thirteen-member council consists of Alawite representatives from the city and surrounding villages, as well as one Ismaili representative for the small pocket of Ismailis

in Khawabi; all council members served in the regime's municipal government prior to December 8.[23] The body's stated responsibilities revolve around maintaining civil peace rather than grappling with economic issues. This was a common trend across the regions in February, and reflective of how the widespread lack of resources inhibits any real economic policy or development.[24]

However, many locals accuse this council of being inept and corrupt, pointing to its roots in the regime-era administration, and give it no credit for the fragile peace that Sheikh Badr has experienced since December 8. Activists instead highlight the role of two influential locals who have become key intermediaries between security officials and the community, maintaining a dialogue with the Tartous Governor's office and coordinating police and administrative activities in the district on their own terms.[25] These types of ad-hoc intermediary systems are widespread in Alawite and Christian communities, where new local councils have not formed but tensions around security and civil peace issues remain high and underscore the fragility of new local governance structures.

Across Syria, the new government engages with both these old and new local structures via a system of regional directors appointed either to one of Syria's sixty-five districts or to one of its 281 subdistricts. This system is modeled on Idlib's *Idarat al-Manatiq* (Regions Administration), which was designed to facilitate better government responses to local communities by assigning directors to smaller administrative districts within Idlib.[26] The new *mudir*s, appointed by the Ministry of Interior, serve as the backbone of local administration, connecting town mayors and local councils with the governor's office, security forces, and central ministries.[27] Initially, their main responsibility was to coordinate security; many of the directors are graduates of the Salvation Government's police academy.[28] Service provision and more day-to-day administrative duties were left to local officials and councils at the town level.

However, given their role as heads of regional police and General Security Services (GSS) offices, the *mudir*s also came to play a key role in coordinating and supporting service and aid delivery.[29] Additionally, they served as the central government's "eyes and ears" in the countryside and were tasked in the first months of 2025 with conducting "needs assessments" for their respective regions.[30] This work involved regular meetings with local residents, civil groups, and local officials, further enmeshing the grassroots and centrally appointed systems.[31]

By March, this structure began to evolve, with additional officials appointed alongside the regional directors. Many regions now have both a security and a military official, who are responsible for, respectively, the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense units deployed there.[32] This has allowed the *mudir*s to take on duties of civil peace, mediation, and administrative matters. Local activists and councils have said that these changes have facilitated their relationships with *mudir*s. In late May, the Ministry of Interior held a consultative session to determine further reforms, including transitioning these director positions into purely civilian roles.[33]

The complexity of the *mudir mantiqa* system varies by region, with some directors having larger areas of responsibility than others.[34] This variance appears to reflect both the new government's human resource limitations and its prioritization of potential conflict zones, such as the coast, where it is appointing more *mudir*s. In Tartous, *mudir*s have been appointed across most subdistricts (the administrative level directly below district), rather than just at the district level, increasing the number of officials and reducing their areas of responsibility to help ease their burden. For example, in Tartous, directors have been appointed for the Christian-majority subdistrict of Mashta Halou, the mixed Christian-Alawite subdistrict of Safita, the mixed Ismaili-Alawite subdistrict of Qadmus, and the Alawite-majority, Sunni-minority subdistrict of Mitras.[35] In all of these, the *mudir*s work alongside town-level councils or mayors, whether newly elected or holdovers from the regime,[36] and report directly to the Tartous City Council Director, who despite his title is actually the administrative head of the entire governorate.[37] Unlike the regional directors, he does not have a police background, but rather served on the Salvation Government's Shura Council as a representative of the Kafr Nabl region.[38]

Where possible, HTS appears to have appointed regional directors to their communities of origin. The district *mudir*s of al-Tal, Salamiyah, and Suqaylabiyah are from their respective regions, for example. However, all *mudir*s come from core Idlib institutions—officials from within HTS, the GSS, or the GSS-affiliated police department—and are Sunni. As such, in minority-dominated regions such as Tartous there are no local *mudir*s, something that is a source of anger for most Alawites who spoke with the author.[39] Whereas some *mudir*s appointed to Sunni areas such as rural Damascus have looser ties to HTS, those in Alawite-populated regions appear to be close allies of Damascus, suggesting that the latter is prioritizing trust and a strong chain of command to better manage the developing structures in these areas.

The regional director system most likely represents the extent to which the new government is capable of building local governance structures within its own limitations. However, its willingness—whether born of desire or circumstance—to work closely with grassroots local structures has naturally empowered local political initiatives and provides rural civil society with ample space to operate. With the passage of time and the growth of security and governance challenges, the new government seems to have embraced these institutions as key partners in ensuring stability. In February, the regional director of Tartous Governorate told the author that, in his opinion, "civil society is the future of Tartous," said that he regularly consults with such groups, and added that he hopes the future administrator will be elected from their ranks. The same mentality can be seen in the Tartous governor's approach to Sheikh Badr: rather than appoint a regional director to oversee the council's work, he accepted its proposal in January to "self-administer" and coordinate with a police director. Similarly, after the violence in early March, GSS officials, regional directors, and even some locally deployed military commanders across Tartous, Latakia, and Hama have begun to extensively engage Alawite *mukhtar*s and local councils in order to resolve civil tensions and lingering security issues peacefully, rather than relying on military raids and operations.[40]

The exact motivations for establishing each council vary, but they generally include filling the governance gap in the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall. The former head of the Rankous Council described its role to the author thus: "The areas need to help the government [by taking these initiatives], and the government needs to help the areas with resources and coordination."[41] On their own, local councils can do only so much in the new Syria. The resource limitations affecting the central government are even more acute at the local level, limiting most councils' direct work to basic services: the provision of water, healthcare, and fuel, and the collection of trash. Supporting coordination between these communities is itself an important role for the centrally appointed regional directors.

All of this will help strengthen future civil engagement, but the high variance in the shape of local governments will eventually create inequalities in how disparate communities are represented and how regional administrators provide services. Already, the unequal application of these initiatives—particularly in Alawite areas—has resulted in a lack of representation in one of the most crisis-prone parts of the country. As the aftermath of the March massacres on the coast has also demonstrated, the relationships built between local actors and regional directors are key for maintaining civil peace and rebuilding trust between Alawite communities and the new government.

The dual impact of resource scarcity and highly varied local circumstances is also reflected in the government's evolving security approach, though with far more negative consequences than seen in the local governance system. Syria's new government focused most of its early efforts on quickly filling the security vacuum left by the sudden collapse of the Assad regime. The melting away of the army and the government's decision not to rehire any soldiers left the state with a relatively small number of HTS-controlled military forces (known at the time as the Department of Military Operations, or DMO) and the Salvation Government's Ministry of Interior forces (police and GSS from Idlib) to control the entire country. These limitations obliged the authorities to lean on other former opposition factions for support: namely, those from close HTS allies within the National Liberation Front (NLF), and those of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), with which HTS had long had a contentious relationship.

Throughout December and January, Damascus began appointing DMO, NLF, and SNA units to the GSS as well as to military positions across the country. Most GSS officials continued to come from the Idlib branch or from HTS, but in Homs a significant number were assigned from local SNA factions after they had returned home from the north.[42] Military factions from all three groups were assigned to man checkpoints across Syria in support of GSS and police operations.[43]

Often, it appears that Damascus tried to place factions in their areas of origin—most likely because these men had not been able to return home for years after being exiled by Assad and would chafe at being deployed far away. Two security officials told the author that despite this approach, they would prefer to not keep men locally deployed in order to avoid the risk of corruption and lax policing.[44] Nonetheless, in the weeks after December

8, many SNA commanders who had originally led Free Syrian Army battalions in and around Homs city and Talkalakh were assigned to head GSS offices in their home cities and neighborhoods, while some HTS field commanders from Salamiyah were transferred to lead GSS units in that region.[45] This policy was even extended to the coast; security officials assigned to Jableh, Baniyas, and Latakia all hailed from those cities.[46] By March, it was clear that the policy was being applied to the restructuring of the new Syrian army: SNA factions from Aleppo were merged into an Aleppo-based division; tribal groups were merged into an eastern-Syria-based division; and the remaining Homs factions of the SNA and NLF were merged into an HTS-led Homs-based division.[47]

These military and police units were not enough to provide security across Syria, so the new government also authorized the establishment of volunteer police forces to assist with security at the micro-local level. In al-Tal, only around half of the security forces were formal police as of February, with the rest coming from town volunteers, who help with tasks such as night patrols.[48] Similar local volunteer forces have been established in Damascus' Christian neighborhoods, while the suburb of Jaramana, where the Druze community holds sway, is policed by an all-Druze force supported by a small number of GSS administrators.[49] All of these volunteer units are armed. The Ismaili community also provides its own volunteer security force to assist local police in the cities of Salamiyah and Qadmus, with those in the latter city being assigned personal weapons by the government police forces.[50] This approach has contributed much to trust-building between Ismailis and Christians on the one hand and the new authorities on the other.

Alawites remain the sole group that, with one exception, has not had any role in local security, a clear sign of the new government's deep fears of integrating what many Syrians view as a deeply pro-Assad community into the new security forces.[51] The one known exception is in Qadmus, where the Ismaili-run security council convinced the Qadmus Regional Director to establish around eighty self-administered checkpoints in the surrounding Alawite villages.[52] Otherwise, the new government has adamantly refused to re-hire any Alawite police officers dismissed from the regime's forces on December 8.[53] This has caused great tension in the coastal region, where the government's overstretched resources have left significant gaps in policing across Tartous and Latakia, and where many Alawites are demanding that fired policemen from their community be allowed to return to service inside their towns.[54]

Alternative Justice Models and Localized Security

One of the most controversial and opaque topics post-December 8 has been the reformation of the regime's legal system. As with all other aspects of governance-building, the lack of human resources and finances is straining the new government's ability to quickly develop

and deploy a reliable justice system. Unlike the governance and security sectors, however, the justice sector suffers from a lack of physical infrastructure, with many courts and jails completely destroyed by locals when the regime fell. While multiple government ministries have worked together to develop new court systems since December, they face pressure from local communities, which have their own preferences and fears, and from diaspora Syrians, many of whom have spent the past fifteen years working in justice-oriented organizations abroad.

As an initial stopgap measure undertaken in December, HTS selectively applied the Salvation Government's legal code from Idlib to the rest of Syria, reportedly adapting it to "match the local realities" and not challenge preexisting social norms.[55] Officials in Syria's new government said in late January that they were taking their time to develop a system that would adequately address the immense domestic needs of maintaining civil peace as well as addressing crimes by the Assad regime.[56] By February, however, the new government had opted to revert to the regime's legal code, with only some minor modifications in what would be enforced.[57] Relying on these preexisting legal codes meant that security forces and courts were theoretically able to operate within an established framework, something that would have facilitated their work. However, the many structural problems with the justice system stemming from both human and physical resource constraints have resulted in a very low rate of court hearings and in the release of many low-level offenders due to lack of collected evidence.

Meanwhile, the courts appear to have worked almost exclusively on local criminal issues, not transitional justice for Assad-era crimes. At the same time, the interim officials fired many regime-era judges, appointing some sharia officials in their place but largely leaving the positions empty for lack of funds and candidates.[58] Whether or not this is a temporary measure, it has deepened many locals' distrust of the courts. The loss of functioning court buildings to vandals and the reduction in the number of judges has also widened the service gap for significant legal needs across Syria. For example, there are no functioning courts in western or eastern Hama, with residents of the entire Masyaf and Salamiyah regions forced to visit the governorate court in Hama city for any legal issues.[59]

Locals have stepped in to fill this gap, developing alternative justice systems to "ease the burden on the courts," as many describe it.[60] Some candidly say that the development of these systems was a necessary response to the complete collapse of state institutions in the immediate aftermath of December 8 and the pressing threat of inter-communal conflict as certain people sought revenge.[61] The legal systems in question vary in both form and function, but can be found across a diverse range of communities in the country, regardless of their experiences and position during the war. Some are built around specific religious leaders, others are tied to the local council movement, and yet others are linked to the newly elevated role of civil society. Each system is reflective of a specific local reality or condition. Additionally, much like the local administration movement, each represents a highly decentralized approach to justice that—theoretically—still respects the central government.

In al-Tal, two alternative justice systems exist today, one that predates December 8 and one that emerged after the fall of Assad. The family council, as described in the previous section, does not just function as a government intermediary but also as a means to resolve civil disputes within the city. It utilizes the representation of all major families native to the city to resolve basic disputes.[62] The council also serves as a forum for displaced Syrians living in the city to have their disputes heard.

In the weeks after Assad's fall, a new office was established in the city with a more religious approach to civil disputes; it is run by Sheikh Abu Malik al-Talli, a prominent opposition commander from al-Tal and the former Nusra commander of Arsal, Lebanon, where the rebel group established a presence from 2014 until 2017.[63] Local notables in al-Tal did not object to his return to the town, and framed his new office as an acceptable option for those who wanted to use a more sharia-oriented framework to resolve their disputes.[64]

A similar system has developed in the coastal city of Baniyas. Here, the famous local opposition leader Sheikh Anas Ayrout has established his own court, which locals can choose to use.[65] Ayrout works with a man from Idlib's Jabal Zawiyah known as Sheikh Abboud, whom some locals described to the author as an Islamist, as compared to the "more moderate" Ayrout.[66] A recent example of Ayrout's work occurred in early February, when two Sunnis, one a local and the other from Aleppo, had a dispute. The Aleppine man went to the GSS office, which issued a harsh ruling against the Baniyas man. The latter went to Ayrout, who issued a more lenient ruling against him and then tried to intervene with the GSS, which initially rejected his petition but ultimately coordinated with him to lessen the punishment against the local man after Sunnis in the town mobilized to protest the GSS ruling.[67]

Conversely, in Salamiyah, the alternative justice systems are rooted in the local councils and civil society rather than religious offices. In the city itself, the Ismaili Council plays a central role in legal affairs, along with its aforementioned role in security and service provision. The council formed a Legal Committee after the fall of Assad, which provides legal advice and assistance to any local who needs it, particularly with regard to filing required legal forms, the processing of which is otherwise delayed by the over-worked court systems.[68] Civil society groups in the city also play a role as intermediaries, helping communities that have been attacked or targeted since December 8 to receive proper support from the new government.[69]

In Salamiyah's eastern countryside, the new local councils play a central role in dispute mediation between communities. For example, in Sabburah, one of the first jobs of the newly formed council was to prevent bloodshed as neighboring Sunnis sought "justice" for the crimes of Sabburah's Alawite *shabbiha* over the past fourteen years. The council engaged in lengthy negotiations with the surrounding communities, often providing financial compensation out of their own pockets for claims of past theft and abuses.[70] However, by their own admission, the councils are not suited to deal with any cases of murder, for which they rely on the GSS's intervention and the state's assistance.[71]

In mid-February, the local councils in Salamiyah's eastern countryside met to discuss the formation of a new regional forum that would further ease tensions and facilitate dispute resolutions. This meeting was attended by an invited member of the GSS, and one of its key conclusions was to hold a second meeting in which all of the east Hama Bedouin tribes would be represented.[72] These Bedouins, many of which had been expelled by the regime and are now returning, have been the source of many random thefts and kidnappings in the countryside.[73] Local officials hope that establishing a forum with representatives from every village plus the tribes will reduce crime as well as improve communication and coordination when it occurs. They see the GSS's role as a supportive one, providing legitimacy to the new institution without having to dedicate extensive resources to running something similar.[74]

The Ismaili community in Tartous' Qadmus played a similar role in the first days after Assad's fall. According to one of its members, a chief motivation for forming a local council was to create a body that could quickly engage the Alawites living in the city's environs. These meetings were aimed at easing civil strife and convincing the Alawite villages to work with the new government.[75] The Ismaili activists who spoke with the author explained that they took this initiative prior to the establishment of the regional director's office and the GSS branch in Qadmus because they knew that relations between the Ismaili-dominated city and Alawite-dominated countryside were tense and required immediate intervention.[76] Once these central authority bodies arrived, they quickly supported and worked through the established Ismaili initiatives.[77] The nearby Masyaf Ismaili Council played an identical role with its rural Alawite community and new security officials after December 8.[78]

Administrative, security, and justice systems are all interlinked with the ongoing successes and challenges Syrians face in the realms of civil peace and institution-building. The violence experienced on Syria's coast in March is not a direct result of these approaches—that is, a more decentralized or centralized approach to the three core institutions would not necessarily have prevented what occurred, only reduced the degree of violence. The massive, coordinated pro-Assad insurgent campaign was almost certain to occur no matter what actions Damascus had taken in the three previous months.[79]

However, some of those actions did affect the degree to which Alawite civilians joined the insurgents and the ease with which government-affiliated and Sunni civilian armed groups were subsequently able to engage in four days of massacres. The empowerment of local opposition commanders and factions in Homs and the lack of oversight of these local actors, rather than maintaining tight HTS control over the region, resulted in immediate and widespread violations against Alawites.[80] The actions and inaction of local security officials also empowered Sunni citizens to gradually escalate their own campaigns of harassment and attacks against their Alawite neighbors, often using their newfound impunity to seize Alawite-run businesses or harass Alawite families until they left their homes for Lebanon.[81]

These low-level but consistent violations in Homs were widely reported across the Alawite community, in addition to fake claims of massacres pushed daily by pro-Assad media networks.[82] The combined effect was that many coastal Alawites feared that violence by the state was imminent. The new government's refusal to apply its localized security approach to the Alawites of the coastal region deepened the distrust.

Despite this, in February, all locals interviewed for this paper said that conditions in Tartous and Latakia were continually improving. Damascus had withdrawn almost all of its military factions and ended house raids following the massacre in western Homs in late January.[83] The remaining GSS and police forces were well-regarded. This is a trend that the author has found across most minority regions, and seems to reflect a generally higher degree of professionalism on the part of Ministry of Interior units when compared to the various military factions.[84] The March 6 uprising and subsequent massacres rolled back much of this progress, breaking what trust had been built between Sunni, Ismaili, and Alawite activists, and cementing the fear of "othering" among Alawites.

The Way Forward for Syria

Decentralized or centralized governance are the wrong frameworks for Syria's future. Rather, Syria's state-building experience since December 8 has underscored the benefits of effective local structures working in conjunction with strong central institutions. Syria today faces endless challenges, all of which require immense human and material resources. The administrative arm of the state can make use of strong civil society networks and local councils to quickly scale up its work—and for the most part has embarked on this very path. The security sector must now follow, bringing together centrally commanded officials who understand the importance of law and order with local recruits who reflect the demographics of their own communities. Transitioning out of the Assad-era security state to a genuine civil government requires that extra attention be paid to trust-building between civilians and security forces, something that requires the recruitment of all minorities. Lastly, Damascus must take a strong and transparent stand on justice, clarifying where alternative justice models fit within its vision of a reformed justice system, and clearly outlining what transitional justice for Syria will look like.

Locals have created or expanded alternative justice models as a direct response to the rapid collapse of the Syrian state and the weakness of the new government. The new authorities have little choice but to engage with these systems. In every community the author visited, government-appointed officials and security forces seemed eager to engage with them. Such systems can increase the strength of, and locals' trust in, grassroots civil or administrative bodies. However, they also reflect a general lack of faith in the new government. Many

activists and locals interviewed in recent months expressed a desire for the return of state-run courts and a civil justice system. Opinions on centralization versus decentralization of the state seem unrelated to the desire for a clear, effective, and universally applied legal system.

While all alternative justice models represent, at their core, a failing of the central state, sharia-oriented justice systems go further, in that they undermine government credibility. Whereas in cases such as al-Tal—where the population is much more homogeneous—these offices are viewed approvingly, Ayrout's office in Baniyas clearly weakens the strength of the GSS while empowering local Sunnis to challenge the new government. The presence of sharia-oriented offices today provides a potential outlet for more conservative Sunnis who might balk at using civil courts, but this is simply a band aid for the underlying problem of radicalization and extremism among parts of Sunni society. Ignoring this phenomenon risks enabling sectarian violence of the sort seen in Baniyas in early March.[85]

Furthermore, many of these alternative justice models, relying as they do largely on civil rather than legal interventions, are incapable of dealing with more serious crimes such as murder.[86] As violence escalates in certain parts of Syria, it is imperative that the new authorities demonstrate basic state functions by rapidly creating dependable justice systems that can effectively hold to account all guilty parties. Relying on alternative systems as a stop-gap for its own shortcomings would further deepen locals' distrust in the new government.

Rebuilding the Syrian state is not about choosing between a dichotomy of power structures; rather, it is about fostering Syrians' trust in the state at all levels while providing effective services across all sectors. Rather than being decentralized or centralized, the system of governance should be a hybrid one, empowering locals to manage their own communities in partnership with central state institutions. Although security and justice must remain within the exclusive purview of the central state—particularly at a time when the country is flooded with weapons and permeated by hate—a centrally commanded security structure can and should reflect local demographics. Moreover, *mudirs* can, if competent, ensure that the new government's basic principles are being enforced universally. At the same time, local institutions, if given the space and resources to develop, can manage the more minute tasks of daily life within their own communities.

That said, hybrid governance structures alone are not enough to erode decades of division and radicalization seeded by the former regime. Fear is rampant across all Syrian communities, and any policy must take into account ways to reduce this fear and prevent it from metastasizing into deeper division. For example, no regime official has faced trial for his crimes, spreading fears among Sunnis that there will never be justice. This belief has helped to fuel some of the Sunni violence against Alawites.[87] Meanwhile, the lack of transparency around accountability and continued vigilante killings of Alawites have pushed that community into a state of trepidation and confusion over its future security. Thus, over and above hybrid governance structures, Syria requires robust truth and reconciliation committees to address tensions between Alawites and the rest of Syria.

Indeed, reconciliation is a core aspect of transitional justice. The lack of any such institutional process has had manifestly negative effects. It has left anti-Assad Syrians furious over the apparent integration of some prominent regime businessmen and military commanders, such as Fadi Saqr, into new government-affiliated committees.[88] It has also left ordinary Alawites feeling as though low-ranking security members and civilians are facing far more scrutiny than serious war criminals, further deepening these Alawites' distrust of Damascus' motives.[89]

To be sure, there are many unofficial local organizations conducting inter-communal dialogue sessions, which have increased greatly since March. However, they need international funding as well as more engagement and support from Damascus. Specifically, minority-led activist networks remain deeply worried about the legality of their pursuits. They cite a lack of transparency from Damascus and inconsistent treatment by local officials, who view these organizations as shields for former regime operatives, political challengers to the current government, or both.

This distrust among Alawite communities in general has played a key role in preventing the integration of minorities into local security forces. A localized security approach in the coastal region, with Alawites serving under HTS commanders in local police forces, could have built ties between communities and security officials, helping Alawite men buy into the new government. Instead, their near-complete exclusion from the security sector, even at the micro-local level, ensured that pro-Assad remnant networks remained highly influential. To be fair, senior government officials have repeatedly acknowledged this issue in private—but they have emphasized the challenges they face in vetting potential recruits.[90]

The experience of Qadmus shows that simply integrating Alawites into local security apparatuses was not enough to prevent widespread uprisings in those areas.[91] Security officials in Qadmus focused on recruiting ex-regime soldiers—in an attempt to have the men "buy in" to the new government—and in turn sidelining civilian Alawites from the new security apparatus.[92] In Sheikh Badr, the local council's formation around ex-regime officials left it non-functional and deeply distrusted by locals from the start. This severely limited any potential use it might have. The failure of these programs should not be seen as a failure of minority integration, but rather as a further sign that Damascus must work with Alawite civil society, not ex-regime networks.

Damascus' security approach in January and February was naive, with the government underestimating the depth of the crisis in Alawite areas as well as the security forces' lack of control over armed Sunnis. At the time, the government tried to integrate all former opposition factions into state structures—but only on paper. The resulting lack of real command-and-control over armed Sunni groups played a large role in the violence seen in March, even if some of the killing was by centrally controlled government forces as well. The necessity of relying on these same factions to man new checkpoints in the coastal region

exacerbated the issue; GSS officials were left trying to prevent violations by military factions, whose supposed Ministry of Defense affiliation placed them beyond their authority as well as that of regional directors.[93]

Damascus is aware of these shortcomings but has continued to complain about the difficulty in finding and vetting "trustworthy" Alawite interlocutors, particularly for the security sector.[94] However, in mid-May, locals in the coastal region reported that officials had begun reaching out to both Ismaili and Alawite officers from the Syrian regime who had been dismissed on December 8. If this development gains traction, it will be a crucial first step toward addressing many of the concerns locals have in these regions, as the security risks arising from unemployed and disenfranchised ex-soldiers remain daunting. However, the emphasis must remain on the recruitment and empowerment of civilians. Despite the risks, the integration of all minorities into local security forces is a base necessity for Syria to enter its next stage of transition.

Ultimately, despite ongoing security challenges in parts of the country, Syria's hybrid governance system has done well to prevent a collapse of the state and to strengthen local actors in many areas. Additionally, Damascus' gradual expansion of state institutions from the center toward the periphery has thus far meshed well with locally built administrative systems. And government-appointed regional officials have demonstrated flexibility in supporting local security and judicial demands. This flexibility grew following the coastal violence of March, as leaders in Damascus began to understand the limitations of their central structures and the importance of working through more decentralized systems.

Yet more must be done. Damascus must now direct its efforts toward institutionalizing the proactive policies of regional officials who have made real improvements at the local level. Larger security changes—including accountability for security forces and the removal of foreign factions from minority areas—are also required. Finally, the rapid rehabilitation of the justice system and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation mechanism is imperative. These internal reforms should be undertaken together, and sooner rather than later. Only then can Syria begin to move away from instability and toward a new and more promising phase.

Conclusion

Major questions remain for the future of governance in the new Syria. Two of the most pressing concern the Druze-dominated Suwayda Governorate and the Kurdish-led northeast. Whereas Damascus-Druze talks have largely stalled, Damascus-Kurdish talks accelerated in March, resulting in a set of agreements to negotiate how their systems will merge over the next seven months. This deal now appears to be leading Damascus toward a more decentralized approach than it was prepared to accept before the March massacres, according to several mediators involved in recent discussions.[95]

Indeed, the violence in March placed extreme pressure on Damascus to step up its reforms, particularly with regard to integrating non-Sunnis into local governance and security structures. Government officials may have initially viewed these structures as temporary until a more centralized state took shape over the following year, but no such development occurred. At the national level, this reality could change the trajectory of the state-building project in favor of increased decentralization. As such, the hybrid state structure that emerged in several parts of the country following the fall of Assad may serve as the foundation of the new Syria, at least for some time.

About the Author

Gregory Waters is a researcher at the Syrian Archive and a Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Syria Project. He formerly worked as a consultant for the International Crisis Group, where he conducted field work in northeast and northwest Syria before the fall of Assad. He now conducts research in western Syria as an independent analyst. His research focuses on Syrian security institutions, local governance, and sectarian relations. He has previously been published by the Middle East Institute, Newlines Institute, Atlantic Council, and Bellingcat, and runs the Syria Revisited website.

Notes

1 Assessment regularly conveyed to the author by various foreign and Syrian officials between December 2024 and March 2025.

2 Carlotta Gall, "Syrians Wake Up to a New Government," *New York Times*, March 30, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/middleeast/syria-new-transitional-government.html.

3 Interviews with officials and activists in Damascus, Hama, and Tartous, December 2024 through February 2025.

4 See, for example, the case of the Ismaili community in Salamiyah and Tartous: Gregory Waters, "Inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Diplomatic Offensive with Syria's Christians and Ismailis," Atlantic Council, March 19 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/hts-diplomatic-offensive-with-minorities/; and Gregory Waters, "The Ismaili Mediators of Qadmus," Syria Revisited, March 18, 2025, https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/the-ismaili-mediators-of-qadmus.

5 Amnesty International, "Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes," April 3, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/syria-coastal-massacres-of-alawite-civilians-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/.

6 Interviews with regional officials in Hama and Tartous and with local elites in Latakia, February and May 2025.

7 Interview with regional director, northwest Hama, May 2025.

8 Interviews with regional directors in Damascus Countryside, Hama, and Tartous countryside, February 2025.

9 Interview with former head of Rankous local council, al-Tal, January 2025. For the full story of the new council's creation, see Gregory Waters, "Return of the Local Council: Rankous Interview," Syria Revisited, January 30, 2025, https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/return-of-the-local-council-rankous.

10 Interview with former head of Rankous Local Council, al-Tal, January 2025.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Interview with local activist and former member of al-Tal Family Council, al-Tal, December 2024.

14 Interview with former member of al-Tal Family Council and al-Tal Regional Director, January 2025.

15 Interview with head of the Salamiyah Ismaili Council, local political and security officials, and Salamiyah civil society representatives, December 2024 and February 2025.

16 For a detailed history of the council's evolution and relationship with the new government, see previously cited Gregory Waters, "Inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Diplomatic Offensive with Syria's Christians and Ismailis."

17 Interview with the head of the National Ismaili Council, Salamiyah, February 2025.

18 Interview with member of the Qadmus Council, remote, March 2025.

19 Gregory Waters, "The Security Situation in Qadmus—Interview," Syria Revisited, March 15, 2025, https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/the-security-situation-in-qadmus.

20 Gregory Waters, "Interview: The New Sabburah Local Council," Syria Revisited, February 21, 2025, https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/interview-the-new-sabburah-local.

21 Interview with Tawfiq Imran and Kareem Akari, Sabburah, February 2025.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with member of the Sheikh Badr Council, February 2025.

24 Ibid.

25 Interview with local activist as well as one of the intermediaries in Sheikh Badr, May 2025.

26 In Idlib, these men were appointed directly by HTS and were independent of the Salvation Government. Interviews with multiple regional directors in Idlib, September 2022, and Tartous and Hama, February 2025.

27 Interviews with activists and local officials, Damascus, Hama, and Tartous, January and February 2025.

28 Ibid.

29 Interview with civil society members in Tartous and Latakia, March 2025.

30 Every director interviewed stated that they were conducting "needs assessments," Damascus, Hama, and Tartous governorates, February 2025.

31 Interviews with multiple directors and local activists across eight regions in Damascus, Hama, Tartous, and Latakia governorates, January and February 2025.

32 Interviews with security officials, regional directors, and local activists across Tartous, Latakia, and Hama, May 2025.

33 A civilian participant in this consultative session, Aref Al-Shaal, wrote on Facebook about some of the decisions reached in that meeting. لاعشلا فراع, Facebook post, May 22, 2025, 8:14pm, https://www.facebook.com/arfalshal/posts/9798792186870379.

34 Ibid.

35 Interviews with local officials across Tartous governorate, February 2025.

36 Ibid.

37 Interview with Tartous City Council Director, Tartous, February 2025.

38 Background provided by an ex-Free Syrian Army commander from Kafr Nabl, who also described the official as having never been part of HTS or any armed faction, and as a well-loved secular businessman.

39 Interviews with multiple directors and with local activists across eight regions in Damascus, Hama, Tartous, and Latakia governorates, January and February 2025.

40 Based on reports from local Facebook pages as well as interviews with Ismaili and Alawite activists in those areas, March 2025.

41 Interview with former head of Rankous Local Council, Damascus Countryside, January 2025.

42 Gregory Waters, "Security in Alawite Regions in Post-Assad Syria," Middle East Institute, 21 January 2025, https://www.mei.edu/publications/security-alawite-regions-post-assad-syria.

43 Interviews with local officials in Damascus Countryside and Hama, February 2025; observations from local Facebook pages reporting on security deployments across the country.

44 Interview with security officials, Damascus and Hama, February 2025.

45 Based on interviews with local security officials in Salamiyah and announcements on local Facebook pages in Homs.

46 Community Facebook pages from these areas regularly spoke positively about the officials being "sons of the city."

47 Observations based on public reporting of appointments and mergers in new military divisions between February and April 2025.

48 Author's observations and interviews with officials in al-Tal, January 2025.

49 Interview with locals in Damascus, February 2025.

50 Author's observations and interviews with Ismaili officials in Salamiyah and Qadmus, February and March 2025.

51 One Sunni man in Latakia told the author in February 2025 that five of his Alawite friends had recently joined the new police forces and were currently training at the Tartous Police Academy.

52 Interviews with Ismaili activist and a Qadmus Council member, remote, March 2025.

53 Interviews with Syrian officials and foreign mediators, February 2025.

54 Interviews with Alawite civil society members and locals, Tartous and Latakia, December 2024 and February 2025.

55 As an example, the police official cited Tartous' openness to alcohol consumption and lack of *hijab*s, saying that police would be uninvolved in either of these issues. Interview with Tartous Police Chief, Tartous, December 2024.

56 Interview with senior Foreign Ministry official, Damascus, January 2025.

57 Interviews with two government officials, Damascus, January 2025.

58 Interview with source familiar with the judicial reform process, February 2025.

59 Interview with the Ismaili Council in Masyaf and Salamiyah, February and May 2025.

60 Interviews with local leaders across Damascus, Salamiyah, and Tartous, January and February 2025.

61 Interviews with civil society activists and local council members in Salamiyah and Tartous, February 2025.

62 Interviews with a former member of al-Tal Family Council and various locals, al-Tal, January 2025.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ayrout had briefly served as governor of Tartous following the fall of Assad, but was replaced after one month, whereupon he returned to Baniyas and opened his new office. Interview with Baniyas civil activist, Baniyas, February 2025.

66 Ibid.

67 Story recounted by a local civil activist in interview, Baniyas, February 2025.

68 Interview with Ismaili Council officials and a member of the legal committee, Salamiyah, February 2025.

69 For example, unknown armed men attacked the Alawite village of Anz on January 27, killing five men they had demanded by name in what was likely an act of revenge. The head of Anz personally knows the head of the Democratic Civil Action Committee in Salamiyah, a Mr. Hussein, and called him that night for help. Mr. Hussein then contacted a well-trusted GSS commander from another region of Salamiyah, a man known as Abu Islam, who quickly contacted Faylaq al-Sham, which is responsible for the Anz region, and went to the village with some of their men. Abu Islam took statements and opened an investigation, while the Civil Action Committee lobbied Faylaq al-Sham to expand security in the region and prevent another attack. New checkpoints and patrols were established by the next afternoon. Interview with Ismaili Council

officials and a member of the legal committee, Salamiyah, February 2025.

70 Interview with Sabburah Council heads, Sabburah, February 2025.

71 Ibid.

72 According to Sabburah notables as well as Salamiyah security officials, Salamiyah, February 2025.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Interview with Ismaili activist and a member of the Qadmus Local Council who participated in the December outreach, online, March 2025.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Interviews with members of the Masyaf Ismaili Council and Qadmus Civil Peace Committee, May 2025.

79 The author met with pro-insurgency Alawite leaders in February who made it clear that they intended to conduct an uprising unless they were handed complete power over the coast. Other researchers similarly heard about plans for a coordinated uprising in early March, before it occurred. Interviews with field researchers, March 2025.

80 Interviews with locals in Talkalakh and Homs City, January and February 2025.

81 Ibid.

82 As one Alawite activist described it to the author in February, "There are many real violations happening, but these Facebook pages are posting dozens of claims a day, most from unrelated or old events. They are not trying to document crimes but rather increase the fear and confusion among the Alawite community." A second Alawite activist documenting human rights violations on the coast for years agreed with this assessment.

83 The withdrawal of forces and ending of raids was widely reported online at the time and confirmed by the author's observations and interviews with locals in February. See also Syrian Network for Human Rights, "SNHR Urges the Transitional Government to Bolster Measures for Protecting Civilians During Security Operations in Light of the Complex Challenges Confronted by Syria," January 31, 2025, https://snhr.org/blog/2025/01/31/snhr-urges-the-transitional-government-to-bolster-measures-for-protecting-civilians-during-security-operations-in-light-of-the-complex-challenges-confronted-by-syria/.

84 While some GSS members participated in extrajudicial executions during the March violence on the coast, Alawites and Ismailis have consistently described GSS behavior as much better than that of the factions in Hama, Latakia, and Tartous. Facebook posts and author's interviews with locals.

85 Gregory Waters, "Baniyas Massacre Through the Eyes of Survivors," Syria Revisited, June 1 2025, https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/baniyas-massacre-through-the-eyes.

86 As cited in interviews by many activists across Damascus, Hama, and the coast, February 2025.

87 An Amnesty investigation into the March violence provides some examples of how Sunni perpetrators framed the murders as revenge for deaths in their own families earlier in the war. See previously cited Amnesty International, "Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes."

88 Interviews with Sunni activists and civilians across Syria and in the diaspora, February and March 2025.

89 Interviews with Alawites across the coast, February 2025.

90 Interviews with senior Syrian officials, May 2025; also interviews with senior Western officials, April 2025.

91 See previously cited Gregory Waters, "The Ismaili Mediators of Qadmus," Syria Revisited.

92 Interview with security official in Qadmus, May 2025.

93 This problem was described at length to the author by local officials and activists in March 2025.

94 Interviews with senior Syrian officials as well as Western officials, March and May 2025.

95 Interview with mediators, remote, April 2025.

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