

In March 2025, Ahmad al-Charaa declared himself interim president and prime minister of a supposedly “inclusive” government. On the surface, he seemed to check all the boxes that the West required, but his power remained firmly authoritarian. Beneath the institutional façade, sheikhs and warlords wielded true power, thwarting any chance of genuine democratic change.

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In March, Ahmad al-Charaa became the interim president and prime minister of a government that he described as “inclusive” because he appointed several ministers from minority groups. This was in line with Western expectations. To meet the requirements of Resolution 2254 of 2015 [1], a five-year transition period is in place to draft a constitution and hold democratic elections. This is a prerequisite for obtaining the lifting of Western sanctions and gaining international legitimacy.

The Syrian president’s trip was a resounding success, with Emmanuel Macron [2] welcoming him with great fanfare at the Élysée Palace on May 7, 2025, and Donald Trump [3] doing the same during his visit to Riyadh on May 14, 2025. At the United Nations General Assembly, the Syrian president was allowed to address the world from the podium, an opportunity that had been denied him since 1967. He even had the privilege of engaging in a conversation with the former head of the CIA and commander-in-chief of military operations in Iraq (2007–2008), David Petraeus.

Why a new Parliament?

The recent parliamentary elections in early October were praised as a significant stride towards democracy by advocates of the new administration. However, the response from Western governments was more reserved. For instance, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs made no statement regarding the ceasefire agreement between Kurdish fighters and those of Ahmad al-Sharaa, despite approving it.[6]

It is important to note that the circumstances surrounding the election of parliamentary members were far from inspiring. A mere 6,000 voters, handpicked by the regime, chose 140 representatives from their own ranks. However, only 119 seats were filled due to the exclusion of the Druze province of Suwayda and the Kurdish-dominated northeast region from the ballot. As a result, the parliament consisted predominantly of Sunni Arab men. Women made up only 4% of members, and parliamentarians representing minority groups accounted for less than 15%, [8] although they comprised at least 30% of the resident population.

Turkmen are disproportionately represented, making up 1-2% of the population, yet they secured 3.4% of the seats, the same as the Kurds and Alawites, who each account for approximately 10% of the population. This unequivocally shows Turkey's sway over the election of lawmakers, even among Sunnis in Aleppo, where the tallying of ballots was halted due to Ankara's dissatisfaction with imposing its own nominees.

The head of state has the power to designate one third of the parliament (70 members). At the time of writing, he had not yet made his choice. It is hoped that he will take this opportunity to redress the imbalance caused by the election, which has favored men and certain minorities.

So, what is the real purpose of this gathering? It holds no legal authority, only a consultative role. This arrangement allows the Syrian president to feign compliance with Resolution 2254. However, this parliament could serve a specific function: to convince the Syrian people, whom he represents, to accept a peace agreement with Israel that would involve Syria giving up the Golan Heights. Ahmad al-Sharaa's signature would underscore the importance of his participation in a fresh iteration of Camp David.

A Collaborative Platform for Warlords

The current administrative structure, consisting of provinces (mohafaza), districts (mantiqa), cantons (nahyeh), and municipalities, remains unchanged. However, in most cases, the administrators have been replaced by individuals hailing from Idlib, a region under the direct control of Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Not surprisingly, they all adhere to Sunni Islam, the faith of the dominant political party. They may hail from Idlib or the region where they are currently stationed, but they all share the experience of having lived in Idlib during the years of conflict.

The current governor of Aleppo province is under the control of individuals from Azaz who were once part of Jabhat al-Shamia, a former faction of the Syrian National Army (SNA). Despite being integrated into the newly formed Syrian army, this pro-Turkish militia group remains subordinate to Ankara. As a result, Ahmad al-Sharaa had to relinquish his position in Aleppo and in the regions where this militia continues to operate, including Afrin, Tel Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn.

In the southern region, Ahmad al-Awada's insurgent forces merged with HTS in April. The powerful figure of Bosra al-Sham still wields significant influence in the area, potentially positioning him as a possible ally for a foreign entity looking to counter al-Sharaa. It is important to recall that he was financed by the United Arab Emirates from December 2024 to

April 2025. Previously, he had been Russia's representative in the south (2018-2024) and the United States' ally before that.

The Power of the Sheikh

Clan disputes are escalating across the nation, leaving the administration powerless to enforce its authority. It manages only the primary highways and urban centers, while the rural regions remain under the control of local chieftains, who are simultaneously subject to the authority of a designated representative, the sheikh.

The sheikh is a powerful figure, holding both spiritual and political influence. Despite a lack of formal education, he has earned respect from the troops for his dedication and bravery, having fought alongside Ahmad al-Sharaa. These are the individuals who truly wield power at the local level and even within the central administration. Ministers must seek the sheikh's approval for their decisions.

He governs in accordance with Sharia law and the guidance of Ahmad al-Sharaa. This resembles the Ba'athist regime, where all cabinet members and executives were overseen by a mukhabarat (intelligence agency) agent and had limited latitude. The sheikhs serve as guardians of order and justice in their communities, but they may not prioritize fairness.

I was able to collect several accounts of people summarily dismissed for complaining about the expropriation of their homes by men affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Furthermore, it is futile to seek assistance if a family member is abducted, which suggests that the sheikh is fully cognizant of the criminal acts committed by the armed individuals under his command.

As a result, Syrians are losing faith in the institutions established by the liberators of December 2024, which is having a major impact on the economy and national unity.

[1] The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution, which demands a ceasefire and calls for the UN to convene the parties for formal negotiations. It also calls for free and fair elections under UN supervision and a political transition. Resolution 2254 serves as the legal basis for the European Union and the United States to maintain or lift their sanctions.

[2]
<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/05/07/entretien-avec-ahmed-al-charaa-president-interimaire-des-autorites-syriennes-de-transition>

[3] Le Monde, "Donald Trump met with President Ahmed Al-Charaa after lifting sanctions

against Syria,” May 15, 2025,

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/05/14/donald-trump-a-rencontre-le-president-syrien-apres-avoir-leve-les-sanctions-contre-damas_6606046_3210.html

[4] Durieux, Jeanne, “Do you get enough sleep?” “The unlikely exchange between the former CIA chief and the Syrian leader al-Sharaa, of whom he is ‘a fan’,” Le Figaro, September 23, 2025.

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/dormez-vous-assez-l-improbable-echange-entre-l-ancien-patron-de-la-cia-et-le-dirigeant-syrien-al-Charaa-dont-il-est-l-un-des-fans-20250923>

[5] Charles Lister, an analyst at the Middle East Institute in Washington, writes in the weekly newsletter Syria Weekly: “This electoral protocol has continued to reduce the influence of radical Islamists within the structures of Syrian governance (...) None of the newly elected MPs are affiliated with HTS, and only four of the 119 MPs (3%) are considered committed Islamists.” This is an extremely positive sign that Syrian policy is consolidating around a more moderate, centrist base. Unfortunately, I do not have access to her letter, which is behind a paywall, so the quote comes from Sophie Woeldgen’s article, “In Syria, a democracy hanging in the balance behind the first election results,” Le Temps, October 8, 2025, <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/en-syrie-une-democratie-en-suspens-derriere-les-premiers-resultats-des-elections>.

[6]

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/syrie/evenements/article/syrie-accord-de-cesser-le-feu-entre-les-autorites-de-damas-et-les-forces>

[7] “Syria’s First Post-Assad Parliament: Political Restructuring in a Region of Uncertainties”, ISPI, October 9, 2025,

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/syrias-first-post-assad-parliament-political-restructuring-in-a-region-of-uncertainties-219475>

[8] <https://x.com/TheSyriaReport/status/1975921901739405672>

[9] Ahmad al Awda, “the power broker of southern Syria”, The Syrian Observer, February 5, 2025

<https://syrianobserver.com/who/ahmad-al-awda-the-power-broker-of-southern-syria.html>