POST-ASSAD SYRIA: CONFLICT, IDENTITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This article analyses Syria's political and identity trajectory from the colonial period to the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2024, arguing that political Islam has consolidated itself as a response to crises of legitimacy and belonging in the post-colonial context. The temporal scope begins with the French Mandate, encompasses the rise of the Ba'ath from the 1940s onwards, and extends to the developments that culminated in the fall of Bashar al-Assad and the rise to power of HTS. The theoretical framework combines post-colonial theory—drawing on Fanon, Said and Aslan—with the literature on political Islam, particularly Kepel and Roy, situating the Syrian case within a broader process of identity reconfiguration in the Muslim world. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach, based on a review of the relevant literature. It concludes that Syria's stability will depend on the articulation between internal dynamics and external geopolitical pressures.

Keywords: Syria; Islam. Identity. Colonialism. Cultural identity.

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SÍRIA PÓS-ASSAD: CONFLITO, IDENTIDADE E OS DESAFIOS DA RECONSTRUÇÃO

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a trajetória político-identitária da Síria do período colonial à queda do regime Ba'ath em 2024, sustentando que o islamismo político se consolida como resposta às crises de legitimidade e pertencimento no contexto pós-colonial. O recorte temporal inicia-se com o mandato francês, abrange a ascensão do Ba'ath a partir da década de 1940 e alcança os desdobramentos que culminaram na queda de Bashar al-Assad e na ascensão do HTS. O referencial teórico articula a teoria pós-colonial – a partir de Fanon, Said e Aslan – à literatura sobre islamismo político, sobretudo Kepel e Roy, situando o caso sírio em um processo mais amplo de reconfiguração identitária no mundo muçulmano. Metodologicamente, adota-se uma abordagem qualitativa de caráter histórico-analítico, baseada em revisão bibliográfica. Argumenta-se, por fim, que a estabilidade da Síria dependerá da articulação entre dinâmicas internas e pressões geopolíticas externas.

Palavras-chave: Síria. Islã. Identidade. Colonialismo. Identidade cultural.

SIRIA TRAS ASSAD: CONFLITO, IDENTIDADE Y LOS RETOS DE LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la trayectoria político-identitaria de Siria desde el período colonial hasta la caída del régimen baazista en 2024, y sostiene que el islamismo político se consolida como respuesta a las crisis de legitimidad y pertenencia en el contexto poscolonial. El marco temporal comienza con el mandato francés, abarca el ascenso del Ba'ath a partir de la década de 1940 y llega hasta los acontecimientos que culminaron con la caída de Bashar al-Assad y el ascenso del HTS. El marco teórico articula la teoría poscolonial –a partir de Fanon, Said y Aslan– con la literatura sobre el islamismo político, sobre todo Kepel y Roy, situando el caso sirio en un proceso más amplio de reconfiguración identitaria en el mundo musulmán. Metodológicamente, se adopta un enfoque cualitativo de carácter histórico-analítico, basado en una revisión bibliográfica. Por último, se argumenta que la estabilidad de Siria dependerá de la articulación entre las dinámicas internas y las presiones geopolíticas externas.

Palabras clave: Siria. Islam. Identidad. Colonialismo. Identidad cultural.

Introduction

Syria, a nation of rich cultural and historical heritage, has, over recent decades, become one of the epicentres of the most complex and devastating conflicts of the twenty-first century. Situated within a region shaped by millennia of civilisation, the country has become the stage for intense political, ideological, and religious disputes that challenge conventional interpretations of identity, power, and authority in the Middle East.

The rise of the Ba'ath Party and the subsequent *quasi*-dictatorial rule of the Assad family profoundly shaped Syria's political landscape over the past decades. Its abrupt downfall in late 2024, at the hands of a myriad of rebel groups, reconfigured both the social actors and the broader macropolitical landscape of the Middle East, reflecting the tensions and transformations that permeate the region.

The roots of this conflict, however, extend beyond secular politics, penetrating deep questions of ethnic and religious identity, as well as the intersection between tradition and modernity. In this context, political Islam emerges as a central element for understanding the aspirations, frustrations, and antagonisms that traverse Syrian society, functioning simultaneously as a response to the crisis of authoritarian secularism and as an alternative proposal for political and social organisation.

The civil war that began in 2011 not only exposed the internal fractures of Syrian society but also intensified broader debates regarding the role of Islam in the contemporary world. Attempts at Islamic reform, historically present in different contexts across the Muslim world, acquired renewed urgency amid institutional collapse and prolonged violence, raising fundamental questions concerning the possibility of reconciling Islamic values, political pluralism, and the imperatives of modernity.

This article aims to analyse the historical and contemporary dynamics that have led to Syria's current political and social configuration, with particular emphasis on the role of political Islam, the activities of armed actors, and the geopolitical disputes shaping the post-Assad landscape. The research question guiding this investigation examines how the fall of the Ba'ath regime and the reconfiguration of political actors in Syria influence the relationship between identity, religion, and the state within the country's reconstruction process. It is argued that the fragmentation of the Syrian state and the collapse of the secular Ba'athist model not only created space for the emergence of new politico-religious actors but also revealed the limitations of imposing exogenous

state models, reinforcing the centrality of identity and religious dynamics in the reconfiguration of political power within the country.

From a methodological perspective, the article adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach situated within the tradition of area studies in International Relations. The research strategy is based on an in-depth case study, combining a review of specialised literature with an interpretative analysis of political and social processes in the Syrian context. Primary sources include official documents and statements issued by both state and non-state actors, while secondary sources encompass academic scholarship on the contemporary Middle East, political Islam, and postcolonial theory, complemented by authoritative journalistic analyses. This approach is directly aligned with the objectives of the article, as it enables an understanding of the connections between long-term institutional transformations, identity dynamics, and geopolitical disputes in the Syrian case.

This study therefore seeks not only to reconstruct the principal events that led to the current situation but also to analyse the groups coexisting within Syrian territory, their alliances, rivalries, and political projects, as well as the ways in which religious and ethnic identities shape political discourse in Syria and across the broader Islamic world.

1. The Construction of Syria

As in other societies subjected to intense processes of colonial domination, the constitution of a Syrian state endowed with a unified national identity is relatively recent. Arabised only in the seventh century CE (Common Era) and historically subjected to different imperial dominations—Egyptian and Ottoman—the region that today corresponds to Syria was incorporated into the French colonial mandate following the First World War (1914–1918). This historical trajectory contributed to the formation of a society profoundly marked by ethnic and religious diversity, in which local and communal identities frequently preceded—and at times superseded—political and cultural identification with a centralised state (Scullard 2026).

Situated within the predominantly Muslim Arab world (today, approximately 85% of the Syrian population adheres to Islam, the vast majority being Sunni), Syrian society shared, throughout much of its history, a broader cultural and political identification with the Muslim community—the *Ummah*—in which the sense of belonging and respect for the transnational moral and political

authority of the Caliphate—considered the successor to Muhammad's original community—were fundamental.

Cultural and political identification with the immediate territory was therefore secondary and subordinate to the transnational vision offered by the Muslim faith and the Arabic language, which functioned as unifying elements among the region's diverse populations despite their cultural particularities. Simultaneously, non-Arab peoples—Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians—as well as non-Muslim communities—Christians, Druze, and Alawites—who resided, and continue to reside, within Syrian territory, occupied their own place within the Muslim social order. Classified as *dhimmi*—protected peoples—within Islamic jurisprudence, these groups largely coexisted in an integrated manner within the social structures of Muslim kingdoms, participating in the organisational *axis mundi* provided by Islam (Aslan 2011).

This pre-colonial identity configuration finds analytical support in the work of Rashid Khalidi, particularly in *The Iron Cage* (2006). According to the author, Middle Eastern societies historically operated through overlapping identities—local, religious, linguistic, and imperial—which coexisted fluidly, without any single identity exclusively defining political belonging. This plurality of loyalties did not signify an absence of cohesion but rather a complex form of social organisation that articulated different scales of community, from the local sphere to the Ummah.

The disruption of this arrangement intensified in the early twentieth century with the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate and the consolidation of French colonial rule over Syria from 1922 onwards. The imposition of the nation-state model—based on fixed borders, exclusive identities, and territorial sovereignty—profoundly reconfigured these dynamics by categorising populations within rigid frameworks that were often dissonant with their historical experiences. In this sense, the metaphor of the "iron cage" expresses the structural constraints imposed upon autonomous political projects, limited by exogenous institutional arrangements (Khalidi 2006). In the Syrian case, this process not only redrew the political landscape but also contributed to the crystallisation of previously more fluid identities, embedding them within a state structure whose formation was more closely associated with external intervention than with endogenous processes of political constitution.

The imposition of these structures was not limited to institutional and territorial reorganisation. As Frantz Fanon (2019) argues, colonialism also operated at the level of subjectivity, disrupting traditional forms of authority and introducing new political and cultural frameworks that reshaped how these societies came to understand themselves. Imperial domination therefore entailed

not only material control but also the production of a crisis of belonging, in which previously fluid identities were strained, reformulated, or reaffirmed in response to exogenous models of political organisation.

In Syria, this process fostered the emergence of two distinct currents seeking to redefine identity and oppose the Western colonial structure by mobilising the populations' sense of cultural and political belonging to their territory. On the one hand, religiously inspired groups regarded Islam as an endogenous form of organisation which, despite foreign occupation, represented the region's authentic social and political order in opposition to the Western Kantian state. For these actors, the reconstruction of the Ummah constituted a political project capable of adapting to the demands of the modern world. This current found its most structured expression in the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, which rapidly expanded throughout the Islamic world (Aslan 2011).

On the other hand, the influx of foreign political ideas—particularly socialism and secular nationalism—stimulated the emergence of groups composed of intellectuals, academics, and military officers who sought to distance themselves from religion as a unifying element and instead embrace a common Arab identity. Inspired by anti-colonial sentiment, these actors advocated the secularisation of the state and the integration of Arab peoples through Pan-Arabism, conceived as a political alternative to European imperialism.

In Syria, this movement culminated in the formation of the Ba'ath movement (Arabic for "resurrection") in 1940, while the country was still under colonial rule. The movement was founded upon the promotion of Arab unity in opposition to European imperial occupation through the development of a shared and autonomous Arab identity consciousness. According to John Galvani in his article "Syria and the Baath Party":

> The basic insight of the Baath's two founders and ideologues, Michel Aflak and Salah Bitar, was that a united Arab nation had been divided by imperialist intrusion. The Arab nation, however, is a permanent entity in history, at present in a state of decadence and in need of regeneration or resurrection (baath). That regeneration must take place in each Arab individual, and through a process of internal liberation the Arab people will be restored. That individual regeneration is not a religious process, but a moral one. To be Arab, to regain a consciousness of being Arab, does not mean being Muslim or religious at all. Islam was one of the greatest creations

> of the Arab nation, but is not the soul of that nation. Arabism is (Galvani, 1974, p. 5).

By advocating structural reforms such as land reform, workers' unionisation, and the democratisation and secularisation of institutions, the Ba'ath secured support from a broad segment of the Syrian peasantry, which had historically been marginalised from political life, as well as from religious minorities embedded within the country's complex social fabric. Simultaneously, the party expanded its influence within the military ranks, driven by the appeal of Pan-Arabist ideas among army officers. In contrast, the upper bourgeoisie and large landowners, fearing the changes proposed by the Ba'ath and seeking to preserve the status quo, aligned themselves politically with more conservative national movements, thereby deepening political polarisation during this period.

Following independence in 1946, the Syrian Arab Republic entered a prolonged phase of political instability, marked by successive coups d'état and sectarian tensions. This scenario reflected both the identity fragmentation inherited from the colonial period and the institutional fragility of the new state, creating opportunities for governments dominated by economic elites and circumstantial political alliances (Galvani, 1974).

The failure of the First Arab–Israeli War (1948–1949) and the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights intensified the crisis of legitimacy affecting Syrian governments. Within this context, the strengthening of the Ba'ath and the activism of sectors of the military, led by figures such as Akram Hourani, facilitated the consolidation of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Closer relations with the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser, likewise aligned with socialist Pan-Arabism, further reinforced this process (Scullard 2026).

This trajectory culminated in the fall of the government in 1954 and, subsequently, in the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, uniting Syria and Egypt. Although initially greeted with enthusiasm, the experiment proved problematic due to the centralisation of power in Cairo and the marginalisation of Syrian interests. The dissolution of the UAR in 1961 restored Syria's formal sovereignty but left profound marks on the political imagination and on perceptions of Pan-Arabism.

The experience of the UAR reshaped Syrian perceptions of Pan-Arabism, generating a division between those who continued to believe in Arab unity and those who became sceptical of unification projects led by a regional power. Within this context, a faction of the Syrian military led by Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad began to reorganise itself, proposing a new strategy for

achieving Arab unity, but now focused on a form of socialism adapted to local conditions and a more pragmatic approach to regional alliances. In doing so, they abandoned the pan-cultural idealism of the original movement and prioritised a perspective more directly concerned with Syria's economic and political consolidation.

The military coup of 1963 marked the rise of the so-called Neo-Ba'ath, which sought to implement social and economic reforms aimed at addressing the demands of the peasantry and urban workers while simultaneously centralising power in order to prevent future internal divisions. Agrarian reforms and the nationalisation of strategic industries were among the most significant measures adopted to consolidate state control over the economy and weaken both the traditional elite and foreign influence (Galvani 1974).

Hafez al-Assad, then Minister of Defence, gradually distanced himself from Jadid's policies, advocating a more pragmatic approach and a strengthening of the armed forces. These tensions culminated in November 1970, when Assad seized power through a palace coup. Under his rule, Syria experienced a period of relative authoritarian stability characterised by the centralisation of political power. Assad consolidated his regime through the strengthening of the armed forces and intelligence services while simultaneously promoting a personalised form of secular Arab nationalism (Devlin 1991).

This arrangement may be understood as a form of "populist authoritarianism," in which the regime combined mechanisms of selective social mobilisation with a robust coercive apparatus, sustaining itself simultaneously through clientelist networks and systematic repression (Hinnebusch 2001). This configuration was accompanied by the emergence of a new state-linked economic elite whose interests became intertwined with the very reproduction of the regime (Perthes 1995). Assad's strategy therefore consisted of balancing different religious and ethnic factions through a unifying nationalist narrative, combining material concessions—such as public investment and social policies—with mechanisms of political and security control.

The repression of political religiosity, particularly that associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, became one of the central pillars of the regime. Following a series of violent confrontations, including the Hama massacre of 1982, the government dismantled Islamist opposition and imposed strict control over public religious expression. This repression contributed to a growing divide between the secular state and religious movements, creating a fracture that would persist in subsequent decades.

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency while maintaining the regime's authoritarian foundations.

Despite initial promises of reform, his government reinforced mechanisms of political control and systematically repressed dissent. The intensification of repression, particularly against sectors of the Sunni majority, deepened the estrangement between the state and religious society, contributing to the accumulation of grievances that would erupt during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Devlin 1991).

Initially peaceful, the movement rapidly evolved into a widespread uprising as a result of the central government's violent response. The civil war that followed was marked by the rise of extremist groups, which not only challenged the Assad regime but also rejected the very notion of a secular state. This scenario resulted in the continued fragmentation of Syria and the prolongation of a conflict that fundamentally redefined the country's political and social dynamics.

2. Contemporary Developments

The Syrian Civil War, resulting from the escalation of tensions following the 2011 protests, served as a catalyst for the emergence of a range of identity-based, ideological, and political groups seeking to challenge the Assad government, as well as for the involvement of foreign actors whose interests were amplified by the power vacuum created by the conflict. Before examining the most recent developments, it is essential to identify the principal actors involved and analyse their interests, political agendas, and strategies within the Syrian context.

Among the most significant non-state actors in the contemporary landscape is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whose influence extends into Syria through the People's Protection Units (YPG). Grounded in an ideology inspired by libertarian socialism and democratic confederalism, the Kurdish movement seeks the political and cultural autonomy of Kurdish populations, historically divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Within Syrian territory, its primary objective has been the consolidation of an autonomous administration in the north of the country, in opposition both to the central government and to external actors that perceive such autonomy as a threat to regional territorial integrity.

Despite the multiplicity of insurgent actors, Bashar al-Assad's government remained a central pole of the conflict, sustained above all by Russian support. From 2015 onwards, Russian intervention proved decisive in preventing the collapse of the regime through the provision of weaponry, logistical support,

and financial assistance, enabling the restructuring of the Syrian armed forces and the recapture of territories previously lost.

Moscow's interest in the conflict derives largely from Syria's strategic position between the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The establishment of strategic Russian bases, including the naval facility in Tartus and the airbase at Hmeimim, together with the strengthening of ties with Assad, enabled greater Russian power projection and reinforced its global position. Furthermore, the Syrian civil war proved to be a profitable market for Russia's expanding defence industry while also serving as a testing ground for new military technologies. Politically, Russia has sought to position itself as an indispensable mediator in Syria's future, challenging Western hegemony and consolidating its role as a global power (Petkova 2020).

Another highly significant pro-government actor is Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia political-military organisation supported by Iran. Hezbollah played a central role in supporting the Assad regime by providing experienced fighters and logistical assistance. The preservation of an allied government in Damascus is strategically important for the organisation, as it guarantees the continuity of the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah axis, facilitating the flow of weapons and resources while containing the expansion of hostile jihadist groups in its immediate vicinity. In this sense, Hezbollah's involvement is directly linked to its rivalry with Israel and to the expansion of Iranian influence throughout the Levant (Weiniger 2024).

Conversely, the weakening of the Syrian state and the fragmentation of territorial authority facilitated the expansion of Sunni jihadist groups, particularly those linked to Al-Qaeda, especially in the eastern regions of the country during the second half of the 2010s. Although the presence of these organisations has diminished in recent years, one of them—formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Nusra Front) and subsequently renamed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant)—emerged as one of the principal actors in the contemporary evolution of the Syrian conflict. HTS, which remained within Al-Qaeda's ideological sphere until its formal separation in 2017, has played a central role in Syria's political and military reconfiguration (Al Jazeera 2024).

It is precisely this turning point that Charles Lister's work (2015) allows us to situate analytically. In his study of Syrian jihadism, the author identifies as a defining feature of this milieu the tension between the imperatives of a transnational agenda—associated with Al-Qaeda's global logic—and the pragmatic demands of local governance, including the need to secure social legitimacy, control territory, and ensure the political survival of armed groups.

This tension is never fully resolved but is instead continuously managed by different actors throughout the conflict.

The trajectory of HTS constitutes an emblematic example of this dynamic. Its formal disengagement from Al-Qaeda did not represent a complete ideological rupture but rather a strategy of adaptation to the Syrian context, oriented towards the construction of local legitimacy. At the same time, the organisation has preserved key elements of Salafi-jihadist thought and continues to be designated as a terrorist organisation by numerous states and international bodies, highlighting the limits of this repositioning.

In recent years, HTS has consolidated both its military and administrative structures, financing itself through taxation in areas under its control while benefiting from the tacit support of sectors of the former Syrian elite opposed to the Assad regime. Simultaneously, shifting priorities among Damascus's international allies—particularly Russia's military and political focus on the war in Ukraine since 2022—and the escalation of the conflict in the Gaza Strip involving Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran in 2024 significantly weakened support for Assad's government. This created a window of opportunity for HTS to advance towards the seizure of power in Syria (Frayer 2024).

Taking advantage of these circumstances, HTS rebels launched a broad offensive, rapidly occupying major cities, including Damascus. The takeover occurred with limited resistance, given the exhaustion of the Syrian armed forces, effectively displacing the existing leadership of the country. The regime change was welcomed by long-standing adversaries of the Assad government, such as Israel, which seeks to reduce Iranian influence in the region, and Turkey, which views governmental stabilisation as a means of weakening Kurdish militias (The New York Times 2024).

International public opinion, however, has observed these developments with scepticism. The rise of a regime with historical ties to Al-Qaeda-linked extremism raises questions regarding the future conduct of HTS, despite the organisation's efforts to project a more moderate image. There are concerns that such moderation may prove unsustainable, echoing events in Afghanistan in 2020, when the Taliban's promises of moderation failed to materialise.

Despite concerns regarding the new leadership, a significant portion of the Syrian population has viewed the change of regime with a degree of optimism. After years of oppression under the Assad regime, marked by political repression, human rights violations, and a devastating war, many Syrians hope that the new government may provide a break with the authoritarian past. The exhaustion produced by the prolonged conflict and the widespread disillusionment with the former regime's promises of reform have fuelled

expectations that, despite the uncertainties involved, the transition may usher in a new era of stability and reconstruction for the country.

2.1. Political Islam

The rise of movements such as HTS is intrinsically linked to the complex identity-related questions that permeate Syrian society and the Islamic world more broadly. These movements represent a direct reflection of the colonial experience and of attempts to reintegrate Islam as a central political system in the formation of an autonomous collective identity. European colonialism imposed state, institutional, and symbolic structures rooted in Western traditions that frequently disrupted traditional forms of governance, affecting not only political organisation but also the construction of collective subjectivity. As a consequence, a recurring search has emerged for indigenous alternatives capable of restoring senses of belonging, autonomy, and political legitimacy (Aslan 2011).

The resurgence of Islam as a political system, however, cannot be understood solely as a reaction to colonial domination. It is also embedded within an ongoing process of internal reform within the Islamic tradition itself. Contemporary Islamic movements channel social, economic, and political grievances by arguing that the application of Islamic principles can provide responses regarded as more authentic and morally legitimate to the modern dilemmas faced by Muslim-majority societies. In this context, religion once again occupies a central position in political identity, in contrast to Western secular models that are frequently perceived as imposed, alienating, or disconnected from local realities.

This transformation, however, is not uniform and assumes different forms according to the context in which it occurs. The search for political and symbolic autonomy has led to the emergence of movements that, drawing upon Islamic reference points, propose alternatives to Western liberal democracies, frequently presenting themselves as a "third way" within the global political landscape—distinct from both secular authoritarianism and Western liberalism (Said 2007).

In recent years, advances in information technologies, particularly the Internet, have accelerated the process of reinterpretation within Islam. The theological and moral authority traditionally exercised by the *ulama*—Islamic scholars historically recognised as the primary interpreters of the Qur'an—has increasingly been challenged. Growing numbers of believers now seek religious guidance through informal leaders, digital preachers,

and independent scholars operating through social media, online forums, and virtual platforms, transforming the dynamics through which religious knowledge is produced and disseminated (Aslan 2011).

This process has contributed to a relative democratisation of moral authority within the *Ummah*, enabling the emergence of multiple interpretations and ideological currents no longer confined to traditional circles of religious scholarship. From this phenomenon, two broad tendencies have become increasingly apparent.

On the one hand, there has been an adaptation of Islamism to contemporary realities through the promotion of alternatives to Western secular concepts, reflecting the traditional process of *tajdid* (renewal) within Islam and encouraging a pluralistic and democratic interpretation of the faith. On the other hand, more conservative sectors of society have rejected foreign influences altogether, opting instead for a radical and comprehensive Islamisation of society, a phenomenon that has served as one of the foundations of contemporary Islamic radicalism (Aslan 2011).

The coexistence of these tendencies is not static, however, but is marked by recurring processes of tension and realignment. In this regard, the work of Gilles Kepel (2002) offers a valuable interpretative framework by arguing that jihadism does not represent the culmination of political Islam but, paradoxically, one of its symptoms of failure. When moderate Islamist movements are prevented from transforming religious legitimacy into effective political participation—whether through state repression or institutional constraints—segments of their support base tend to radicalise due to the perception that conventional political channels have been blocked. Radicalism thus emerges not from an excess of political Islam but from its structural frustration.

This diagnosis sheds direct light on the Syrian case. The repression of the Muslim Brotherhood under the regime of Hafez al-Assad—whose most notorious episode was the Hama massacre of 1982—did not eliminate political Islam but instead contributed to its reconfiguration into more radicalised forms by restricting opportunities for institutional participation. From this perspective, the trajectory of HTS may be understood less as an anomaly than as a historically conditioned outcome of decades of political exclusion and state repression.

The growth of politico-religious movements in the Middle East should therefore not be viewed in a uniform manner, as such movements may function as mechanisms of political mobilisation and popular participation,

employing languages, symbols, and values familiar to local populations. In this regard, it is necessary to recognise that:

> [...] true democracy must be nurtured from within, founded upon familiar ideologies, and presented in a language that is both comprehensible and appealing to the indigenous population. For democracy to be effective and compelling in Muslim-majority states, it must balance the sometimes contentious relationship between faith and government that, as we have seen, has been the hallmark of political culture in Islam for centuries (Aslan 2011, 261).

In this context, the construction of a secular state modelled on Western liberal democracies tends to encounter significant limitations when transplanted into political and cultural settings shaped by different historical experiences. This often contributes to the persistence of religious forms of resistance within societies where such systems are implemented. Consequently, political movements that engage with religion in a pluralistic and contextualised manner may, under certain conditions, contribute to the development of more stable and socially legitimate political regimes (Aslan 2011).

Conversely, radicalised movements such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban instrumentalise religion in an authoritarian manner, transforming it into a mechanism of social control, repression, and exclusion. The legitimisation of regimes that follow this model undermines efforts to promote democracy in the region while perpetuating cycles of violence and regression. The central challenge, therefore, lies in the search for interpretations of Islam capable of fostering authentic, just, and inclusive democratic systems that remain consistent with the cultural and spiritual traditions of Muslim societies.

3. Future Prospectives

The contemporary developments in Syria are directly embedded within this broader process of reinterpreting the role of religion in politics. The collapse of Ba'athist ideology, which, despite its ambitions, failed to integrate faith into the ethnic and social constitution of Syrian society, ultimately strengthened more radical visions, contributing to the emergence of an ideological plurality that culminated in the current political landscape.

The rise of HTS to power highlights a structural dilemma that Olivier Roy (1994) identifies as characteristic of radical Islamist movements that attain governmental authority: the difficulty of formulating an economic, social, and

institutional programme that genuinely constitutes an alternative to the modern state order. According to Roy, once these movements assume responsibility for governing, they inevitably operate within the very structures they originally sought to challenge—negotiating with international creditors, administering inherited bureaucracies, and establishing conventional diplomatic relations. The result is what Roy describes as a form of "superficial Islamisation," in which the rhetoric changes while the underlying institutional logic remains largely intact.

HTS has already confronted a preliminary version of this dilemma through its administration of the Idlib region as a proto-state, developing taxation mechanisms, limited public services, and channels of communication with external actors. By transferring this experience to the national level, the organisation now faces the challenge on a much larger scale: reconciling an Islamist political project with the practical demands of contemporary state governance. Ultimately, the question posed by Roy remains central: is the objective to Islamise the modern state, or does the state itself ultimately reshape Islamism? The manner in which this dilemma is negotiated in the Syrian case is likely to prove decisive not only for the country's future but also for broader debates regarding the role of political Islam in the contemporary world.

Amid these challenges, the new authorities have sought to establish dialogue with international organisations and institutional mechanisms as part of a strategy aimed at reconfiguring their public image and mitigating HTS's association with extremist movements. Media campaigns and symbols of political normalisation—including public statements concerning civil rights and promises of representation—signal an effort to position the organisation as a legitimate actor within the international system. Nevertheless, the credibility of this transformation remains the subject of considerable scepticism among external observers, particularly in light of domestic practices that continue to raise questions regarding pluralism and inclusion (Nasr 2024).

Nevertheless, promises of openness to negotiations and foreign investment, coupled with the abandonment of the former regime's nationalist orientation, have generally been viewed positively by Western actors. This shift may contribute to the suspension of sanctions and foster greater economic engagement between the two sides. Furthermore, expectations have emerged that the new government may initiate dialogue with Israel, including the possibility of a ceasefire and the return of territories occupied in southern Syria, as suggested by HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (Nasr 2024).

One of the principal challenges to Syria's future stability concerns the Kurdish question and the reintegration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following a period of confrontation and negotiation, the Syrian transitional government has sought to initiate a new cycle of dialogue with Kurdish forces, mediated by external actors such as the United States, with the aim of integrating Kurdish civil and military institutions within a unified state framework. Although negotiations remain ongoing, they reveal persistent disagreements regarding decentralisation, regional autonomy, and guarantees for minority protection—issues that are likely to determine the degree of Syria's territorial and political cohesion in the medium term (Gebelly 2026).

Relations with Turkey remain equally critical. Ankara views the reconfiguration of Syria's balance of power as an opportunity to strengthen its regional influence and limit the political and military presence of Kurdish forces, which it regards as a threat to its internal security. The issue of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey also remains a sensitive geopolitical variable, as the large-scale return of these populations would require levels of infrastructure, security, and political stability that remain far from consolidated in post-conflict Syria (Hayatsever 2025).

The role of external powers likewise continues to shape Syria's future. Although Russia lost a strategic ally with the fall of the Assad regime, it does not necessarily regard the new government as an inevitable adversary. Moscow has already signalled an interest in maintaining negotiations aimed at preserving its presence and strategic partnerships in the region. The Russian position suggests cautious engagement with the new authorities, viewing stability as a means of strengthening economic and political ties while preserving its role as an influential mediator in future regional negotiations.

At the same time, Moscow has increasingly redirected its attention towards Africa, particularly Libya, another country fragmented by prolonged conflict. This initiative forms part of a broader strategy of regional influence expansion, seeking to counterbalance the growing presence of Western actors, especially the United States and Europe, across the continent. With strategic interests linked to security and natural resources, Russia aims to consolidate its position through the strengthening of political and economic ties with African states (Cordall 2024).

By contrast, the regional position of Hezbollah and Iran has become increasingly complex following the disruption of the traditional land routes connecting Tehran to Beirut through Syria—a corridor that historically played a crucial role in supplying the Lebanese Shia organisation with military, financial, and logistical support. With the collapse of pre-war support infrastructures

and the restrictions imposed on both air and land transit, Iran and Hezbollah have been compelled to recalculate and diversify their methods of transferring resources and materials. Part of this adaptation has involved the establishment of alternative maritime routes and transit networks through third countries such as Turkey and Iraq, as well as the use of parallel financial systems and informal money-transfer networks designed to circumvent restrictions on traditional corridors (Weiniger, 2024).

In light of these developments, the Syrian situation reflects a broader regional trend across the Muslim world, characterised by attempts to redefine the role of faith in the political reconstruction of post-colonial societies. The democratisation of access to religious interpretation, facilitated by the Internet, has encouraged the emergence of movements that challenge the nature of the political systems in which they operate, particularly among groups that perceive themselves as alienated from those structures. Some of these movements have adopted more radical perspectives, while others have embraced pluralistic and modern interpretations of Islam (Aslan 2011).

Syria therefore exemplifies these transformations, remaining at the centre of a strategic arena in which questions of identity, religion, and international politics are continuously intertwined and renegotiated. Understanding the evolution of the events that brought Syria to its current situation, as well as the interests of the various actors involved, is essential for developing a holistic understanding of the conflict. Such an approach allows Syria to be situated within the broader context of a wider sociocultural and political macrocosm.

Ultimately, the future of the country will depend upon the ability of its new leaders to balance internal and external demands while promoting stability and inclusion amidst profound divisions. The path pursued by Syria's new leadership may inaugurate a new phase for the region and contribute to the broader process of Islamic reform and the construction of an autonomous political identity, provided that a pluralistic approach is adopted. Nevertheless, the road towards peace and reconstruction is likely to be long and uncertain, with the resilience of the Syrian people and the evolution of international relations serving as decisive factors in determining the success or failure of this new chapter in Syria's history.

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