

# Syria in Transition



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

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## Fraying at the edges

Amid a seemingly frozen conflict, two revolts shook Syria in the past month. The first was in Suwayda, the Druze-majority province in the south, and was directed against the Assad regime. The second, involving Arab tribes, was in Deir Ezzor province, and targeted the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The former was entirely peaceful, the latter violent. Though only 400kms apart, the two revolts appear to have little in common, each happening within its own eco-system of local, regional, and international drivers, actors, and dynamics. Both, however, are manifestations of the slow break up of Syria.

The Druze of Suwayda, turning their backs on the failing Assadist state, seek a form of *de facto* autonomy within it under international protection. The Arabs of Deir Ezzor want much the same: autonomy within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) under a US security umbrella. Where maps once shaded Suwayda province a solid red for 'regime control', now they must show it as 'disputed.' It could be the same for swathes of Deir Ezzor if the revolting tribesmen manage to negotiate favourable terms. The breakup of territories into autonomous sub-units is not new, at least to the opposition, HTS seceding from the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to form its own administration in Idlib in 2017. The state decay, social dislocation, growing localism, and the war economy that first eroded the opposition are now doing the same in the other two 'areas of control.' The likely result of the Suwayda and Deir Ezzor revolts will be six such areas instead of four.

## Bottom-up federalisation

In recent years, the prospect for a sudden or over-all change in the balance of power has always been slim. The Syrian conflict nevertheless continued to evolve within the different areas of control in terms of the power relations between competing foreign and

local interest groups. This paradox of national conflict stalemate and local conflict evolution unfolded in relative calm after the Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement of March 2020, which ended large-scale fighting and froze the frontlines. The humanitarian hardship caused by the conflict has in large part resulted from territorial division, which aggravated an already profound socioeconomic crisis by fragmenting resources and trade flows and making permanent the displacement of people. Existing divisions are further accentuated when people must turn to the limited services and governance provided by a patchwork of state/semi-state/non-state armed groups, reinforcing the control of such forces but also breeding local resentment that at times boils over. This dynamic will likely lead to further fragmentation until the *de facto* division of Syria is complete.

The diffusion of power away from a controlling centre is sometimes cited as the work of a foreign conspiracy. Foreign actors indeed might stoke and inflame; but what the revolts in Suwayda and Deir Ezzor show is that local popular opinion favours a 'go-it-alone' approach. For the few remaining Syrian communities still possessing leaderships and the ability to mobilise, staking a claim to a chunk of territory, seeking external guarantees for that claim, and awaiting a political solution for the meta conflict is the only logical course of action. The Druze and the Arab tribes entered the political scene not only because centralised governance in their regions was failing, but because the frozen national conflict encouraged sub-national loyalties and aspirations. Following the regime's military takeover of the south and the defeat of the Islamic State, the lack of immediate external threats allowed both the Druze and the Arab tribes to take stock and – perhaps for the first time in the conflict – focus on bread-and-butter issues that directly affect their community's prosperity and well-being. With dwindling resources comes heightened competition over what remains. The Arab tribes want a fair share of the oil in eastern Syria; and Suwayda wants to be the economic gateway to Syria's south. These are legitimate and reasonable aspirations for two communities facing a collective decline in fortunes.

No one wants permanent partition. Maintaining Syria's unity and territorial integrity is one of the few issues on which all conflict stakeholders agree. The present trajectory suggests something more nuanced: a bottom-up federalisation of Syria. Absent a comprehen-

sive political solution that re-unifies Syria under democratic governance, the regions will inevitably have to work out a *modus vivendi* based in large measure on the commitment of external patrons to guarantee terms. This trend is an opportunity – separate from any arising from a conflict management and resolution perspective – that allows for engagement, dialogue, and negotiation between the regions on aid, security, and economic affairs. Transparent discussions and deals on crossline relations would allow greater regional and international scrutiny and buy-in, and would give local residents key information on decisions affecting their everyday lives. Crossline engagement will require flexibility and pragmatism. A synthesis of the collective bottom lines of all the regional and group interests could be the strategic entry-point to a resolution of the Syrian conflict; and this could be achieved under the banner of the UN's call for a "safe, calm, and neutral environment" – an environment that has yet to be defined.

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## Great Arab Revolt redux

One of the enduring effects of Britain's historic involvement in the Middle East is a certain type of ambition among Arab tribal leaders. Having seen the rise to power and wealth of certain tribal families on the back of British arms throughout the Twentieth Century, a natural tendency among tribal leaders has been to attach themselves to a foreign power and make trouble. The game plan is straight out of the Great Arab Revolt playbook: receive external support, lead a tribal alliance, and stake a claim to autonomy, usually by means of violent revolt. The goal has not always been outright military victory. Rather, it was to "register a position" that won the tribal leader acclaim as a warrior with a virtuous cause; and "accreditation" by at least one major external power that he was "their man", with all that that entailed in resources and political support. Over many years, and through a mixture of force and cunning, the tribal leader carved out his domain until he established a ruling dynasty like the Hashemites or the Al Sauds. This remains the essential ambition of most if not all Arab tribal leaders of the first rank.

Decades of Assadist dictatorship thwarted the pursuit of such ambitions in Syria. In the 1970s, many tribal leaders emigrated to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf where they felt more welcome, while those that remained became little more than regime cheerleaders. Now, with power in the Middle East shifting once again, and regional and international interests converging, some Syrian tribal leaders are eyeing new opportunities. Enter the 34-year-old Ibrahim al-Hifel, brother of Musab, the Doha-based headman of the Bukamil clan and chief of the large Ugaydat tribal confederation in Deir Ezzor. The brothers are not short on lineage: their grandfather revolted against the French mandate and was elected to Syria's first post-independence parliament. Ibrahim and Musab assumed leadership of the tribe after their father's death in 2016, and they have tried to maintain a non-aligned position in the Syrian conflict given that members of the tribe fought on all sides.

Recently, however, growing anger at aspects of the PYD's ideology imposed on a largely conservative society, and the failure of genuine power- and resource-sharing with the Arab tribes, gifted the Hifels the virtuous cause they were looking for. Talk of a US-sponsored "Sunni belt" to keep IRGC militias out of Deir Ezzor further encouraged their ambitions, especially at a time when US forces were reengaging with the Sunni Arab tribes of Anbar and strengthening their presence in several military bases in Iraq. The Hifels may have figured that it was the right time to stake a claim to a prized piece of real estate. What may have really decided the timing, however, were the actions of a key rival within the Ugaydat tribe. Deir Ezzor Military Council chief Ahmad Al-Khubayl (aka Abu Khawla), in recent months attempted to usurp the Hifels and have himself declared the chief of the Ugaydat on account of the military force at his disposal. His botched coup against the SDF, and subsequent arrest on 28 August, raised the bar for the Hifels: if they hadn't followed suit and rebelled against the SDF, they would have allowed the initiative to pass to Al-Khubayl and his Bukayr clan. On 31 August, Ibrahim al-Hifel – the field commander – erected a "war tent." The revolt was on.

The dust has settled somewhat since then. Predictably, the revolt failed militarily but succeeded politically. The Hifels' position at the top of the Ugaydat pecking order was cemented by way of the acclaim they received from the people of Deir Ezzor, Syrian tribes

more broadly, and Qatari and Turkish-backed media outlets. The Assad regime and Iran also encouraged the revolt in moral and material terms because they hoped to see a weakened US presence in eastern Syria – support that was gladly accepted by the tribes without too many questions asked. But the US, which did not directly intervene in over ten days of fighting, prefers a negotiated agreement, and it pressured the SDF into making conciliatory statements to that effect.

Come the negotiation, speaking for Deir Ezzor will of course be the Hifels. They are expected to promote an all-Arab administration for the province underwritten by the US but remaining within an SDF zone. Little wonder then that pro-regime commentators that had so far praised the tribal revolt are now condemning it as a traitorous act. Far from weakening the US presence, an Arab entity tied to the US and not at war with the Kurds could help strengthen it. In the coming weeks, the Hifels' political acumen and organisational abilities will be tested to the full. Either they prove themselves effective US clients, or they will have created the kind of *fitna* between Arabs and Kurds that Assad, Iran, and Turkey could only dream of.

### Tribals at war

Viewing combat videos released by combatants has become an essential activity for Syria-watchers. The garments worn, weapons fielded, tactics employed, slogans shouted, and music played provide valuable insights into the protagonists, and how they themselves want the world to see them.

Of the videos shot during the brief Arab revolt in Deir Ezzor, four distinct types can be discerned. First is the 'threat video.' These involve a commander reading out a pre-prepared statement and/or making a rousing speech flanked by notables in traditional clothing and armed men brandishing assault rifles. The aim is to establish seniority, display societal buy-in, and underscore combat readiness. A second type is the 'convoy video.' These feature an impressive fleet of pick-up trucks fitted with heavy machine guns and filled with exuberant-looking fighters flying flags as they head to battle. These videos usually come with tribal music; exhibition of identity akin to the MAGA convoys in support of Donald Trump. A third type is the 'corner firefight video.' These feature a group of up to a dozen lightly armed fighters who temporarily abandon cover behind a wall to empty their maga-

zines in the general direction of the enemy. Hip-fire is frequently employed. Such videos can also feature an anti-aircraft gun mounted on a technical, usually firing in the evening hours to emphasise the dramatic muzzle flashes. The goal is to show that the rebels are giving it their best. The fourth and final type is the 'storming video'. In these, a group of fighters fervently shouting 'Allahu Akbar' charge towards an enemy position that has already been captured. The precise details of the enemy's retreat remain obscure, and the absence of on-screen casualties on any side may raise doubts; but the message is clear: we are winning.

Western observers often deride Syrians for what appears to be militarily unprofessional behaviour. Why squander precious ammunition? Why not maintain cover? Why not aim properly? Such questions may have merit if one assumes that the fighters' goal is to kill. Most often, however, it is not. The 'spray-and-pray' tactics and showy videos constitute what Clausewitz famously referred to as "politics by other means." The aim of the tribal way of war is primarily political, with a focus on marking territory and bolstering legitimacy and negotiating position. It is about performance over lethality, and dialogue over a fight to the death. It might look ridiculous, but it is arguably a relatively civilised form of warfare.

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## Plan B for northwest Syria

More than a month has elapsed since Martin Griffiths, the UN's aid chief, reached what humanitarians call a 'consent agreement' with the Assad regime to ensure the continuation of UN cross-border aid to northwest Syria. The agreement's contents remain a well-kept secret. This lack of transparency is particularly concerning given the regime's earlier, 14 July, offer to grant the UN access that was so deficient that it was dismissed by UN OCHA. In a letter to the Security Council, the regime's UN ambassador, Bassam Sabbagh, conditioned cross-border operations on full cooperation with the Syrian government, boycott of non-regime authorities, and supervision of implementation by the SARC/ICRC - both of which are controlled by Damascus and absent in the northwest. The conditions were so at odds with humanitarian princi-

ples that they could only be understood as an attempt to set a high bar for the negotiations that would follow.

After weeks of negotiations, the agreement was described by Griffiths as "consistent with the core principles and current structure and practice that comprise the UN's humanitarian response in Syria." Given the less-than-favourable state of the UN's humanitarian response in Syria, this announcement had an ominous ring. OCHA has refrained from disclosing any details, and observers in northwest Syria note the absence of the trumpeting that would usually accompany such an agreement. Regardless of the agreement's content, tangible outcomes on the ground have yet to materialise. Since mid-July, the cross-border operation via Bab al-Hawa and al-Rai has stalled, while only limited UN aid has entered the country through Bab al-Salameh. For humanitarians reliant on a minimum level of planning security, this situation is alarming. In late August, the Northwest Syria NGO Forum, a coordination platform of Syrian and international NGOs, sent the UN a list of questions to clarify the situation. To date there has been no response.

What is clear is that the regime's engagement with OCHA comes with a price tag. The collapse of the Security Council's cross-border resolution has already favoured the Assad regime, transforming the mechanism into a bilateral affair between Damascus and the UN. The regime's authorisation of Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai expires on 13 November, while the consent agreement on Bab al-Hawa is set to expire in January. Echoing Russia's veto of the Security Council cross-border resolution, a series of further demands by the regime and its allies can be expected.

### Birth of the AFNS

For years, Western donors have been devising contingency plans in case the UN cross-border mandate was not renewed. One such was the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS.) The notion of an independent fund that prioritised direct contracts with Syrian NGOs to deliver aid is not new. It was only in June 2022, however, that a consortium led by Adam Smith International (ASI), a private company, was commissioned by the United Kingdom's FCDO to design a multi-donor pooled fund focused on northwest Syria. When in July 2022 the cross-border mandate was again extended for only six months, the FCDO activated its plan.

The AFNS was formally established with its inaugural Steering Board meeting in December of that year. The board comprises three donors (FCDO, USAID, Germany/France), three INGOs (People in Need, IRC, SAMS), and three Syrian NGOs (Physicians across Continents, Mercy Without Limits, Violet.) Despite its relative youth, the AFNS so far has delivered two allocations amounting to approximately \$60 million in this year alone; and it hopes to match the scale of the UN's Syrian Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), which donates about \$150 million annually. Realising this ambition will necessitate securing additional donors and expanding the number of partner NGOs – presently around 40. In addition to the members of the Steering Board and the Channel Island of Jersey, fifteen donors have recently attended board meetings as observers. If some of them commit, the AFNS will emerge as northwest Syria's financial heavyweight.

Some critics are concerned that spending decisions and partner selections could be influenced by the UN, who have a representation in the AFNS' Technical Review Committee that makes recommendations to the Steering Board. With the uncertain future of the UN's Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) and lack of clarity on OCHA's consent agreement with the Assad regime, it remains uncertain whether the cluster system can continue to rely on sufficient and impartial data to identify priorities. However, the AFNS is not at the UN's mercy. Ideally, it can utilise the cluster linkage to ensure effective coordination and avoid overlaps while identifying needs through its local partners and own assessments.

Ultimately, the AFNS is a work-in-progress. Presently, it positions itself as a complement to, rather than a replacement of, the UN's humanitarian fund in northwest Syria. Nevertheless, its design allows for a transition if required. Should the UN's cross-border operation eventually falter, the AFNS would depend on alternative mechanisms, including on access. In such a scenario, an NGO-led approach with a significant role for the Northwest Syria NGO Forum is the most probable outcome, particularly as 70% of cross-border assistance is already conducted by NGOs.

### **The model next door**

Despite not being a pooled fund, an already established mechanism in northeast Syria serves as a useful example of how a donor/NGO-led humanitarian

programme can evolve independently while maintaining engagement with the UN. After the Yarubiyah crossing was closed in January 2020 due to a Russian veto, northeast Syria became reliant on crossline deliveries from the Damascus-run UN operation. This gave Assad-appointed governors in the northeast veto power over UN activities in their provinces, despite the governors' marginal or even non-existent presence.

Parallel to this, donors and INGOs established the NES NGO Forum. This coordinates on behalf of its 40 members that are registered with the AANES. Beyond that, however, and unlike usual NGO forums, it fulfils OCHA-like functions of leading operational coordination for the wider humanitarian response in the northeast. These include the coordination of sector and sub-sector working groups, the equivalent of the UN's humanitarian clusters such as WASH and Early Recovery assistance. Although the NES Forum operates in parallel to the UN, it integrates into the UN's whole-of-Syria framework by sharing data and maintaining active communication with UN counterparts. Nevertheless, operating outside the UN's framework and without access to the UN pooled funds, NGOs have little incentive to share comprehensive data, particularly when protection concerns arise. After all, trust in the UN's Damascus operation is limited due to the pervasive influence of the Assad regime there.

Despite the UN's cross-line footprint in the northeast being larger than in the northwest, the NES Forum's performance suggests that the UN's services are not indispensable. The efficacy of such a model hinges on the relationship with local authorities, which seems viable in AANES areas, where profiteering and misconduct are considerably less prevalent than in regime territory. In northwest Syria, Western donors would need proactively to modify their stance towards both the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-aligned Salvation Government and the Syrian Opposition Coalition's Interim Government. This is essential as donor restrictions on Syrian NGO engagement with local authorities deemed unpalatable only empower malevolent actors. Red lines are crucial, but potential recipients should be afforded the opportunity to meet highest standards. The UN offers a positive example in this regard, having recently begun meetings with the Interim Government in northern Aleppo after years pretending that it doesn't exist.

The UN cannot be entirely superseded when it comes to aid. But with increased interest in linking relief aid, early recovery, and peace-building efforts (the Syria version of triple-nexus), donors are shifting away from putting their money in the UN's pooled fund and are instead exploring creative solutions to achieve political as well as humanitarian goals. The AFNS, serving as a counterbalance to the UN's dependence on Damascus, is a viable Plan B option. It achieves short-term goals while testing an alternative approach to meeting humanitarian challenges in complex environments like Syria that can be replicated elsewhere. That could only be a good thing.

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## Jump starting a process

The constitutional process in Syria is still alive – just about. No progress has been made since its inception in 2019, of course, but formally putting it out of its misery would be inconvenient for too many players. The Constitutional Committee can therefore claim the title of being the most stalled political initiative in the Syrian conflict, the last meeting having taken place in May 2022. Afterwards, Russia, despite not being a party to the Committee, decided to boycott Geneva as a venue due to Swiss positioning on the Ukraine invasion, and no new meetings have been arranged since. The question, then, is whether maintaining a semblance of a process reflects a pragmatic cost-benefit calculation, or an unhealthy case of avoidance behaviour.

Recent attempts to revive the Committee have been marked by disagreement over the venue. In June 2023, with Arab normalisation in full swing and keen to boost its diplomacy, Egypt proposed hosting the Committee. Russia voiced cautious support for the proposal, but it was quickly rejected by the Assad regime that argued it had already promised it to the Omanis. A suggestion by the opposition Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) to rotate between Oman and Kuwait was also rejected. Discussions between Turkey and Russia on hosting it in Astana were disrupted by Kazakhstan calling off the Astana process – a situation that is still unsettled.

For the Assad regime, Muscat would be an attractive option. It would symbolically distance the Committee from the UN while avoiding subordinating it to Egypt and the Arab League. During the regime's meeting with the Arab Contact Group in Cairo on 15 August 2023, the latter voiced support for Muscat and a meeting before the end of the year was proposed. For the UN, losing Geneva as a venue would be a major blow to its mediation process given both its symbolic value and the very real value of its being on one's home turf. Concerningly, according to an Arab diplomatic source, the Arab Contact Group's endorsement of Muscat occurred without prior consultations with the UN Envoy Geir Pedersen or the SNC, placing at grave risk the UN's facilitator role and the principle of parity of negotiating parties.

In a familiar pattern, however, the regime backtracked on Muscat at the sidelines of the Arab League Council in Cairo on 8 September, a source close to the League said. A few days later, meanwhile, the UN Envoy informed European and US diplomats in Beirut that the venue issue had been resolved. It remains unclear whether this news has reached the conflict parties.

### Inertial mass

Creating deadlock over the venue is way more convenient for the Assad regime than deadlock over the real and persistent issues. Recognising the risk of more procrastination by Assad, Pedersen in 2021 acknowledged the need for a “work plan and genuine interaction on concrete proposals.” In January 2023 Pedersen told the Security Council that he was awaiting a response from the regime-nominated co-chair, Ahmad Kuzbari, to a letter on improvements to the Committee's working methods. By that point, Kuzbari had left the letter unanswered for six months.

Since the Committee's creation in October 2019, the regime delegation has entangled the opposition and civil society counterparts in fruitless discussions. “General patriotic principles” and the colour of the Syrian flag helped waste two meetings. The other big problem is that Ahmad Kuzbari, who heads the “Government of Syria delegation” and co-chairs the committee, does not really represent the Syrian government at all. During the Committee's inaugural meeting, Bashar al-Assad dismissed the Geneva process, adding that the regime delegation merely comprised individuals “supported by the Syrian government.” In the

same manner, the so-called government delegation stated in November 2019 that it would not be bound by the agreed Terms of Procedure given that it did not represent the Syrian government. The implication is clear: the Assad regime will not respect the Committee's decisions. Instead of demanding formal commitment from Damascus, the Office of the UN Special Envoy continued the constitutional process regardless. Apparently, it was unthinkable that progress – any progress – might be thwarted after almost two years of preparations. This has led to the absurd situation where Assad regime officials, when asked about the Constitutional Committee, would refer diplomats and journalists to Kuzbari while denying any responsibility for his decisions.

The factors that have caused the Constitutional Committee's prolonged stagnation have only grown more severe. Why, then, does it still enjoy the formal backing of most external stakeholders? Partly, it's sheer inertia: once in motion, initiatives tend to persist regardless of actual merit. At the same time, there are no alternative pathways that are as low risk. Should the West pull the plug, the pro-regime camp would have ammunition to accuse the Syrian opposition and its Western backers of destroying the political process. For the opposition, struggling with low visibility and limited support, an end to the constitutional process would make its position worse. Furthermore, it would deprive the UN Envoy of the last iron he has in the fire. Supporting the Committee, therefore, is a convenience that spares external powers the need to invest more political capital and embrace a more creative diplomatic approach.

### Call the bluff

This dilemma leaves the UN Envoy and his political advisors in a challenging position. They can persist with the established process at any cost, ensuring that if windows of opportunity should open there is no need to start from zero. Critics, however, assert that this approach does more harm than good by perpetuating the illusion of an extant political process while facts are being created on the ground. They argue that it would be better if the Envoy reported the “obstacles it is facing” in clear terms to the UN Security Council and awaited further instructions, as the opposition co-chair Hadi al-Bahra has suggested. Although such a move wouldn't necessarily enhance the prospect of progress, it would end any misplaced hopes regard-

ing the constitutional process and UN mediation more broadly. In turn, this might lead to a more creative diplomatic approach; or it could kill the political process entirely.

There is, however, a third option: the UN could call Assad's bluff. Given that the regime does not want a new constitution pursuant to which free and fair elections under UN supervision are supposed to take place and is only interested in the Constitutional Committee as a tool to delay and frustrate the peace process, perhaps the UN could simply start holding regular meetings of the Committee irrespective of regime participation. The meetings will be open to all members that are willing to make the trip to Geneva, and will serve as a useful platform for a comprehensive dialogue on the type of social contract that should govern a post-war Syria. If Committee members that take orders from Damascus stay away, too bad. Progress can only be made if the regime's ability to manipulate the Committee is neutralised.

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## The Jolani tax

It's hard not to feel sorry for Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. The leader of HTS (real name: Ahmad Hussein al-Shar'a) and *de facto* governor of the rebel province of Idlib has expended much effort to revamp his image. He disavowed Al-Qaida, suppressed foreign fighters, and cooperated in the war against the Islamic State (IS). He also kept some distance from Turkey despite coming under its security umbrella; and he opened channels with the SDF, the UN, and Western intelligence agencies on trade, aid and security respectively. To boot, he has empowered a quasi-technocratic government in Idlib that collects taxes, maintains order, and invests in infrastructure. His hope appears to be that by doing all this he will be regarded not as a terrorist but as a pragmatic and responsible actor with a legitimate political role in Syria's future. So far though, it hasn't quite worked out that way.

For a former ISIS emir, admission into the club of international respectability comes with a steep price tag. 'Security cooperation' (i.e. keeping one's own radicals in line) is good but not good enough. Hamas is a

serial cooperator and gets a stipend from Qatar for its efforts, but in Western eyes political legitimacy lies with the secular Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Similarly, Western engagement with HTS has not extended to the political sphere where the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) is still considered the legitimate representative of the opposition. A big hurdle is the UN Security Council's designation of Jolani as a terrorist leader. The West might be pragmatic enough to conduct deals with him, but only within limits. Perhaps he might consider alternative pathways to a future political role – ones that are less linear and more inclusive.

### No taxation without representation

The redevelopment of the border crossing complex at Bab al-Hawa is an impressive showcase of the new HTS-run Idlib. A mountainside was sacrificed to make way for a Dubai-style highway complete with palm trees; and buildings that host foreign visitors are freshly decorated and scented with burning *oudh*. A sense of order and calm has replaced the former organised chaos. Drive less than a mile into Idlib proper, however, and the giant Atmeh camps come into view. Jolani's fiefdom has 3.2 million residents, more than half of whom are IDPs living in tents. The money spent on sprucing up Idlib's gateway to the world, and other large expenditures, including on an administrative bureaucracy and a security apparatus, was extracted from an already impoverished population through a complex system of direct and indirect taxation. The taxes range from charges that the Salvation Government imposes for services to import duties on all goods including fuel, building materials and foodstuffs. In Idlib, meanwhile, prices are expressed in US dollars while payments are made in Turkish lira. As the lira has depreciated sharply against the dollar, local prices have risen sharply.

Heavy taxation and dollarisation mean that the cost of everyday items are noticeably higher in Idlib than in any other area of control. This has given rise to widespread smuggling, with goods bought more cheaply in neighbouring SIG-run Afrin being sold for a small profit in Idlib. As a result, all vehicles entering Idlib undergo rigorous inspection by HTS men looking not for bombs or drugs but for hidden fuel tanks and secret compartments for cigarettes. The growing imposition of taxes, tariffs, and fees has been the cause of much simmering resentment on the part of locals,

who accuse the HTS government of monopolisation and profiteering. Generating local revenue to improve infrastructure is of course important; but taxing people until the pips squeak is risky and likely to backfire.

Perhaps the problem is that Jolani has focused too much on impressing the West and not enough on giving back to his people. With taxation comes the question of representation, which in Idlib is conspicuously absent in any credible or democratic form. Offering the people of the province a stab at free-and-fair municipal elections would be an opportunity for Jolani to demonstrate his commitment to reform. Such a step would allow a new crop of elected politicians, untainted by terrorist affiliations, to emerge at a time when dialogue and coordination with the mainstream political opposition, as well as the rest of Syria (e.g. Suwayda), is needed more than ever. This should go hand in hand with lifting restrictions on civil society activism and the media. Should Jolani wish to signal his sensitivity not only to Western security concerns but also to Western political values, it would be the logical next step.

Some might regard this type of 'concession' as a Western tax that unfairly targets Islamist groups at a time when the same is not asked of, say, the PKK's Syrian arm. A more circumspect view is that such a step would represent a worthwhile investment in the political culture of the northwest and would likely strengthen the opposition's overall position in the medium to long-term. It would not mean the end of Jolani, whose Godfather-like influence will likely persist. What it would mean is the re-orientation of his so-called "Sunni project" towards a more democratic and inclusive path consistent with the trends of localism and pluralism evolving elsewhere in Syria, and indeed greater Syria. From Gaza to Deir Ezzor, one-party rule and heavy-handed governance have failed. Jolani would be wise to take note.