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frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 10 November 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1938912

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OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 15 July 2026
REVISED 04 October 2026
ACCEPTED 10 October 2026
PUBLISHED 10 November 2026

CITATION
Ansorg N and Tlass Y (2026) Shifting power, fragile peace: the challenges of peacebuilding in Syria.
Front. Polit. Sci. 8:1938912.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1938912

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Shifting power, fragile peace: the challenges of peacebuilding in Syria

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The collapse of the Assad regime has opened both opportunities and profound challenges for peacebuilding in Syria. Whilst no peacebuilding process follows a single blueprint, Syria's trajectory is particularly complex: it is shaped by shifting regional power balances, the enduring legacies of authoritarian rule, and the emergence of local institutions. This article explores how peacebuilding is evolving in the absence of a strong central state, arguing that institutional adaptation, through local councils, tribal networks, minority communities, and security actors, has become the primary vehicle for negotiating order and reconciliation. Three dynamics stand out: the reconfiguration of authority between state and non-state actors; the contestation between demands for minority inclusion and the risks of sectarian or regional fragmentation; and the influence of external powers whose shifting alignments continue to shape Syria's institutional landscape. Thus, this paper is guided by the following research question: How is peacebuilding evolving in the absence of a strong central state? In what ways do shifting local, regional, and international power relations shape – and potentially undermine – the prospects for sustainable peace in Syria? And how can peacebuilding approaches be adapted to address these multilayered challenges? We find that peacebuilding is relational, that asymmetric network positions strongly shape patterns of institutional adaptation, and that the cases suggest that local stability is closely linked to how governance arrangements interact with the external networks in which they are embedded.

KEYWORDS
network analysis, peacebuilding, post-conflict, state reconstruction, Syria

1 Introduction

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 marked a major turning point in Syria's 13-year civil war and ended over 50 years of Assad family rule. When news of the regime's collapse spread, Syrians celebrated in the streets, toppled statues, and released political prisoners from detention centres. For many Syrians, this was more than just the removal of a dictator. It represented a chance for real political change, the possibility of having a say in their own governance and building a country that works for all Syrians, not just those in power. The widespread joy reflected deep hopes for a new era of peace and inclusion. However, as the initial excitement faded, the difficult realities of rebuilding a fractured society became clear.

More than a year onwards, Syria's interim government faces major challenges in state reconstruction. Its trajectory defies the traditional models of peacebuilding that assumes state consolidation with a clear central authority.

At the domestic level, authoritarian legacies continue to shape the behaviour and composition of emerging institutions, as well as citizens' relationships to them, both horizontally with each other and vertically with state structure (Ouandjeli and Kachee, 2025; Waters, 2025b). This is the result of decades of coercion, elite co-optation, and sectarian manipulation under Assad rule. The interim government's attempts to centralise authority are constrained by the very patterns of mistrust, fragmentation, and ideological polarisation inherited from the decade-long conflict. Moreover, the economic devastation, including destroyed infrastructure, collapsed currency, and mass displacement, severely limits the state's capacity to deliver basic services or establish legitimacy through material improvements in citizens' lives.

At the same time, local governance bodies such as tribal councils, minority committees, armed coalitions, and municipal structures have adapted to fill gaps in security and service delivery where the state was absent. Combined with the complexity of Syria's ethnic and sectarian makeup, these dynamics generate a form of peacebuilding that must be negotiated across multiple scales. In this context, peacebuilding is less a linear, state-centred process than a series of adaptive bargains between local and external actors and a transitional government struggling to balance competing pressures whilst asserting coherence.

At the regional level, the withdrawal of the Iranian support has weakened the networks that once dominated Syria's political economy and security architecture. In parallel, Turkey has emerged as the primary source of authority and security guarantees in the region, shaping developments across the northern and central governorates of Syria. Israel, meanwhile, has expanded its strategic objectives through continued military strikes and territorial positioning, fundamentally altering the security landscape. The regional level is particularly critical for peacebuilding in Syria because external actors not only provide essential resources and security guarantees but also possess the capacity to either enable or obstruct the consolidation of domestic authority. This means that no sustainable peace can be built without navigating these regional power dynamics. This redistribution of power amidst shifting regional balances has reconfigured the conditions under which peacebuilding occurs, creating both opportunities and constraints for Syria to reconstruct itself as a state and reposition itself as a no-longer isolated regional actor.

Despite growing scholarship on post-conflict reconstruction and hybrid governance, there remains a significant gap in understanding how peacebuilding unfolds in contexts where state authority is fragmented, regional powers remain heavily involved, and local structures have become entrenched during conflict. Existing frameworks often assume either a functioning central state or a clear international peacebuilding mandate, neither of which applies to post-Assad Syria. This paper addresses this gap by examining how peacebuilding is evolving on the ground in Syria's unique post-Assad, multi-layered governance landscape.

This leads to three interrelated research questions: How is peacebuilding evolving in the absence of a strong central state? In what ways do shifting local, regional, and international power relations shape – and potentially undermine – the prospects for sustainable peace in Syria? And how can peacebuilding approaches be adapted to address these multilayered challenges?

We apply a network approach to peacebuilding, understanding it as interconnected actors and practices operating across local to global levels (Björkdahl and Höglund, 2013; Coning, 2018). Methodologically, the paper adopts a network-informed qualitative mapping of institutional adaptation to trace institutional adaptation events across different Syrian localities from the collapse of the regime in December 2024 through to the end of 2025. Institutional adaptation here refers to the formal or semi-formal changes in governance arrangements (e.g., through the merging of bodies, the issuance of decrees, shifts in mandates, or the creation of new coordination mechanisms for security, service delivery, or administration) that emerge in response to shifting political, economic, and military conditions in a post-conflict landscape (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Lund, 2003). Adaptation can take multiple forms: structural changes in institutional architecture, functional shifts involving new roles, tasks, or network configurations, or relational transformations such as new patron-client ties or emerging coalitions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). We identify adaptation events only when they are publicly documented, either through media reports, official statements, or other publicly available sources. This allows for systematic tracking whilst acknowledging the limitations inherent in studying a context where information flows remain contested and incomplete (Weidmann, 2016).

In our analysis, we find that peacebuilding in post-Assad Syria is shaped by asymmetric and hierarchical networks of authority, with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) occupying the strongest position due to external legitimacy and support from Turkey, parts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and acceptance from the United States and European countries. By contrast, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast and Druze authorities in Suwayda possess more limited leverage, relying primarily on local legitimacy, informal arrangements, and *ad hoc* security guarantees. Across all regions, however, the most effective peacebuilding outcomes emerge where local and transitional bodies negotiate inclusive arrangements for security and service delivery rather than imposing top-down solutions. We find that ultimately, peacebuilding is driven by uneven, multilevel bargains shaped by each locality's political weight, its demographic composition, and the strength of its external alliances. This is a pattern that both enables localised stability and complicates efforts at national reconciliation.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four sections. First, we situate our analysis within the literature on liberal, hybrid, and networked peacebuilding, highlighting how network approaches offer analytical tools suited to Syria's fragmented landscape. Second, we discuss the theoretical approach to our analysis. Third, we outline our methodology and justify our focus on three key governance ecosystems: HTS-controlled areas in the northwest, SDF-controlled areas in the northeast, and the Druze-majority governorate of Suwayda in the south. Fourth, we analyse patterns of institutional adaptation across these localities, examining how regional and international networks shape, and constrain, peacebuilding outcomes in each context. Finally, we reflect on the broader implications of Syria's experience for peacebuilding theory and practice in highly fragmented post-conflict states.

2 Literature review

For much of the post-Cold War era, international peacebuilding efforts were guided by what has come to be known as the liberal peace paradigm. This is a model premised on the belief that sustainable peace emerges through democratisation, market liberalisation, the establishment of rule of law, and the promotion of human rights (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2009). This approach, institutionalised through organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and various bilateral donors, operated on the assumption that

replicating Western-style liberal democratic governance in post-conflict societies would create the conditions for lasting stability (Paris, 2010). Liberal peacebuilding interventions typically combined security sector reform, constitutional engineering, economic restructuring, and capacity-building programmes designed to transform war-torn societies into functioning market democracies (Campbell et al., 2011).

However, the liberal peace framework has faced sustained and multifaceted critique over the past two decades. Scholars have argued that it is fundamentally top-down and technocratic, prioritising institutional templates over contextual realities and treating peacebuilding as a technical problem rather than a political process (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2011). The approach has been criticised as Western-centric, imposing particular cultural and political norms whilst dismissing alternative conceptions of peace and governance as illegitimate or backward (Campbell et al., 2011; Richmond and Mitchell, 2012). Perhaps most dramatically, critics contend that liberal peacebuilding is inherently depoliticising, focusing on procedural reforms whilst avoiding engagement with underlying power structures, historical grievances, or competing visions of social order that drive conflict in the first place (Paris, 2010; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013).

The critiques have generated important conceptual turning points in peacebuilding scholarship. The notion of "post-liberal" peace emerged as scholars sought to move beyond the limitations of the liberal paradigm without abandoning attention to governance, justice, or human welfare (Richmond, 2011; Finkenbusch, 2016). This shift involved reconceptualising peace not as an end-state to be achieved through institutional engineering, but as an ongoing process, practice, or performance continuously negotiated amongst multiple actors (Mac Ginty, 2010; Millar, 2014). Peace, in this view, is fundamentally relational and situated, built through everyday interactions, embedded in specific cultural contexts, and shaped by local social orders rather than imposed from above (Richmond and Mitchell, 2012; Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016).

Hybrid peacebuilding recognises that most post-conflict societies are characterised by plural and hybrid forms of governance, where international norms and local practices interact, compete, and blend in complex ways (Belloni, 2012; Richmond and Mitchell, 2012). In that sense, it is a space of negotiation between different normative frameworks, institutional logics, and sources of authority (Mac Ginty, 2010; Höglund and Kovacs, 2010). Hence, one that is recognising non-Western epistemologies and approaches to peace, including indigenous, feminist, and decolonial perspectives that challenge the universalist assumptions of liberal peacebuilding (Cruz, 2021; McLeod and O'Reilly, 2019; Lottholz, 2019).

Building on these conceptual shifts, recent scholarship has emphasised the importance of everyday peacebuilding – the routine practices, informal networks, and community-led initiatives through which people navigate conflict and build social order in their daily lives (Mac Ginty, 2014; Randazzo, 2016). This approach foregrounds local ownership not as a box to be ticked in international programming, but as the central dynamic through which peace is actually made and sustained (Donais, 2009; Paffenholz, 2010). The "everyday peace indicators" framework developed by Mac Ginty and Firchow (2016) exemplifies this shift, moving beyond elite-level agreements or institutional benchmarks to examine how ordinary people experience and evaluate peace in their own contexts. Everyday peacebuilding scholarship reveals that communities often develop their own conflict management mechanisms, security arrangements, and governance practices that operate alongside, beneath, or in tension with formal peacebuilding interventions (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016).

Whilst this scholarship provides essential analytical tools, the Syrian case presents levels of complexity that stretch existing frameworks. Unlike many cases examined in hybrid or everyday peacebuilding literature, Syria lacks even minimal consensus on basic questions of political order, territorial integrity, or legitimate authority (Hinnebusch, 2020). The country faces not simply the challenge of negotiating between international and local actors, but of managing peacebuilding across multiple, overlapping networks of authority, each backed by different regional powers, operating under distinct ideological frameworks, and serving populations with divergent visions of Syria's future (Paes et al., 2025; Okcuoglu, 2026; Üçok, 2026; Jeong, 2026). The extreme fragmentation of both territory and authority, combined with the continued military involvement of Turkey, Israel, Iran, the United States, and Russia, means that peacebuilding cannot be understood through dyadic relationships between international and local actors, but must be traced across multilayered networks where regional geopolitics, domestic power struggles, and local survival strategies intersect (Okcuoglu, 2026; Millar, 2020).

Moreover, Syria's transition is occurring without the institutional scaffolding typically assumed in peacebuilding literature. There is no comprehensive peace agreement, no UN peacekeeping mission, no neutral international guarantor (International Crisis Group, 2025b). Instead, peacebuilding is emerging through incremental, contested bargains amongst actors with vastly asymmetric power and radically different interests. In this context, institutional adaptation becomes a critical but under-theorised mechanism through which peacebuilding actually unfolds (cf. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Understanding how these adaptations occur, who drives them, and how they relate to broader peacebuilding outcomes requires analytical frameworks capable of handling extreme fragmentation, persistent violence, and the absence of a coherent national peace process. The network approach, with its emphasis on relational dynamics and distributed authority, offers such a framework.

2.1 Theoretical framework: network approaches and institutional adaptation

Network approaches to peacebuilding represent a significant departure from traditional state-centric frameworks that dominated international intervention throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Conventional peacebuilding models focus primarily on institutional reconstruction and governance capacity-building within fixed national boundaries, treating the state as both the primary agent and ultimate endpoint of peace processes (Paris, 2004; Call and Wyeth, 2008). However, contemporary conflicts increasingly expose the limitations of such state-centric thinking. Many of today's conflicts are fundamentally transnational and internationalised, involving cross-border actors, diaspora networks, regional powers, and transnational ideological movements that render national boundaries analytically insufficient (cf. Ansorg, 2013). Resources and political ideas flow across borders through complex networks that transcend state authority, whilst peacebuilding itself must navigate terrain where multiple, overlapping forms of governance coexist and compete (cf. Schneckener and Zürcher, 2007).

Network approaches to peacebuilding extend the emphasis on multiplicity and relationality found in hybrid and everyday peace scholarship by conceptualising peace as emerging from

interconnected webs of actors, relationships, and practices operating across local, national, regional, and global scales (Luna-Pla, 2024; Ricigliano, 2003; Hunt, 2017; Cechvala and Miklian, 2025). Rather than assuming a clear hierarchy with international actors at the top and local communities as recipients, network frameworks acknowledge that peacebuilding authority and capacity are distributed across multiple sites and that outcomes depend on the configuration of relationships amongst diverse actors (ibid.). This perspective is particularly valuable for understanding hybrid governance arrangements, and specifically the negotiated orders that emerge when no single actor possesses a monopoly on authority and where legitimacy must be continuously produced through bargaining amongst international actors, state institutions, armed groups, traditional authorities, and civil society actors (Moe and Müller, 2017).

Equally important is the framework's attention to cross-scale dynamics. This encapsulated the ways in which peacebuilding processes at local, national, regional, and global levels interact and influence one another (Olsson and Moore, 2024). Rather than treating these levels as discrete analytical domains, network approaches focus on relational and connective processes: how actors coordinate, negotiate, and adapt across contexts and scales rather than through centralised authority (Luna-Pla, 2024). This focus reveals that peacebuilding outcomes often depend less on the strength of formal institutions than on the quality and configuration of relationships amongst actors positioned at different nodes within overlapping networks (Cechvala and Miklian, 2025). A local council's effectiveness, for instance, may hinge not only on its internal governance capacity but on its connections to regional patrons, international donors, and neighbouring communities. These are relationships that provide resources, legitimacy, and security guarantees that no single institution could generate alone (Moe and Müller, 2017).

In this paper, we connect network approaches to ideas of institutional adaptation as primary vehicle for negotiating post-war order. Institutional adaptation is understood as formal and informal adjustments governance bodies make in response to shifting political, economic, and security conditions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). These adaptive processes occur through diverse institutional forms: local councils that blend elected representation with traditional authority structures, tribal networks that provide security and dispute resolution where state capacity is absent, minority community committees that negotiate protection and resource access, and armed groups that transition into political and administrative roles (Boege et al., 2009; Mampilly, 2012; Arjona, 2017). Rather than viewing such arrangements as deviations from ideal-typical state institutions, network approaches treat them as exemplifying networked governance. These arrangements function as contexts where formal and informal institutions cooperate, compete, and negotiate to stabilise and potentially transform post-conflict societies (ibid.).

Understanding these hybrid institutional networks is crucial for analysing how peace is produced and sustained on the ground, revealing patterns of power, legitimacy, and trust between state and non-state actors. It shows which actors possess the capacity to broker or block agreements; which relationships are resilient and which fragile; and how resources and authority flow through the system.

The network approach fundamentally reframes peacebuilding as a dynamic, relational, and multi-actor process rather than a linear intervention with predetermined stages and endpoints (Luna-Pla, 2024; Cechvala and Miklian, 2025). This reframing carries several important analytical implications. First, it foregrounds connectivity, interdependence, and adaptability as theoretical lenses for understanding peacebuilding practices (Luna-Pla, 2024). Success or failure cannot be attributed to single actors or interventions but emerges from the interaction effects amongst multiple initiatives, the alignment or misalignment of diverse actors' strategies, and the capacity of networks to adapt to changing conditions (Cechvala and Miklian, 2025). Second, the framework opens space for analysing power asymmetries not as fixed attributes of actors but as products of network position and relational configurations (Cechvala and Miklian, 2025). An actor's power depends not only on resources they control directly but on their location within networks, i.e., their ability to broker between disconnected groups, their centrality to flows of information or resources, or their capacity to exclude others from valuable connections.

Third, network approach provides analytical tools for examining how legitimacy is negotiated and trust is built (or eroded) within and across networks (cf. Dylag et al., 2026). Legitimacy in networked governance emerges not from formal mandates alone but from demonstrated effectiveness, perceived fairness in distributing benefits, alignment with local norms and expectations, and the endorsement of key network nodes whose authority others recognise.

Finally, a network approach highlights that peacebuilding interventions themselves reshape the networks they seek to influence (Luna-Pla, 2024). Providing resources to particular actors alters power balances within networks; creating coordination mechanisms establishes new nodes; supporting some institutions whilst marginalising others reconfigures which actors can access international legitimacy and material support. These dynamics mean that peacebuilding is never a neutral technical assistance but always a political intervention that affects the distribution of authority, that network analysis can help to trace and evaluate (cf. Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016).

Network approaches are particularly well-suited to analysing peacebuilding in highly fragmented contexts where state authority is weak, contested, or non-existent across significant territory (Schneckener and Zürcher, 2007). Understanding how these networks interact, where they cooperate, where they compete, and under what conditions negotiated orders emerge, becomes essential for both analytical and practical purposes.

Moreover, in contexts characterised by significant external involvement, network approaches illuminate how regional and international actors are not simply external to local peacebuilding but constitutive elements of the networks through which peace is negotiated. Regional powers may provide resources, security guarantees, or political backing that enable certain local actors to consolidate authority, whilst international organisations may facilitate coordination amongst otherwise antagonistic groups or provide neutral spaces for negotiation (Lilja and Höglund, 2018). Conversely, external actors may fuel fragmentation by backing competing factions, imposing contradictory demands, or shifting support in response to their own strategic interests (cf. Ansorg, 2014). Tracing these external linkages and their effects on local governance networks is essential for understanding peacebuilding dynamics in internationalised conflicts.

We use peacebuilding outcomes to refer to the durability and inclusiveness of the governance arrangements that institutional adaptation produces; specifically, whether an arrangements (i) combines security provision, dispute resolution, and basic service delivery rather than any of these alone; (ii) rests on locally legitimate participation

rather than on external recognition alone; and (iii) survives political or military shocks rather than dissolving under them. This assesses peacebuilding outcomes as positive, i.e., relationship demonstrably contributes to reducing violence, building institutions, or enabling reconciliation; negative, i.e., relationship undermines stability, entrenches fragmentation, or enables harm; or mixed, i.e., relationship has positive effects in some dimensions and negative in others, or its net effect is unclear. More importantly, it allows us to distinguish *peace* from mere *stability*. By stability, we mean the persistence of a given local governance arrangement without violent breakdown; by peace, we mean the rebuilding of trust and inclusive political relationships across communities divided by the conflict.

Given the study's temporal scope, these indicators are not treated as evidence of sustainable peace as an achieved outcome; rather, they capture early institutional and relational conditions that may strengthen or weaken the prospects for sustainable peace over time.

2.2 Methodology

This paper adopts a network-informed qualitative mapping of institutional adaptation to examine how peacebuilding is evolving in the absence of a strong central state. To capture patterns of institutional adaptation, we systematically trace events of institutional adaptation across Syria from the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 through to the end of 2025. Institutional adaptation here refers to formal or semi-formal changes in governance arrangements, e.g., through the merging of administrative bodies, the issuance of decrees or formal agreements that alter institutional mandates, shifts in coordination mechanisms, or the creation of new structures for security provision, service delivery, or political representation (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). The same mechanism, i.e., a decree, a merger, a new coordination body, may advance inclusive and locally legitimate governance in one instance and entrench coercive or purely symbolic authority in another. We therefore distinguish throughout between adaptation that builds peace and adaptation that reproduces domination and specify the basis for that distinction in our analysis below. These adaptations emerge as responses to shifting political, economic, and military conditions in a context where no single authority possesses comprehensive territorial control or uncontested legitimacy (Branović and Chojnacki, 2009). This process yielded 51 documented adaptation events across national and cross-border governance arenas, from which we construct a network of actor-nodes and relational ties linking local authorities, regional patron states, international organisations, armed groups, tribal networks, minority communities and cross-border institutions across the three governance ecosystems examined below.

Events were identified through systematic monitoring across the studied period: major international and regional news agencies, reports, official decrees and statements issued by governing authorities in each ecosystem, in both English and Arabic. The methodological choice of using event data reflects both practical constraints – the impossibility of comprehensive field research across contested Syrian territory – and an analytical rationale: publicly announced institutional changes represent moments when actors seek to establish, signal, or contest authority in ways visible to multiple audiences (Arjona, 2017; Arjona et al., 2015). We acknowledge that this approach necessarily captures formal or semi-formal adaptations whilst potentially missing informal arrangements negotiated behind closed doors. However, in contexts of fragmented authority, public documentation of institutional changes serves as a critical mechanism through which actors claim legitimacy, signal commitments to constituencies and external patrons, and establish precedents for future governance (Mampilly, 2012; Staniland, 2012).

Network nodes were derived inductively from these events; an actor was included as a node when it was a named party to at least one documented adaptation event. Each node is classified by actor type using the taxonomy in the codebook. We operationalise network position through two standard relational dimensions: connectivity (whether an actor is central, holding many direct ties that shape flows of resources, security, and legitimacy, or peripheral, with only a few) and brokerage (whether an actor bridges otherwise disconnected groups). We therefore treat relational configuration as one important source of actors' leverage in peacebuilding bargains, alongside material capacity, territorial control, and political legitimacy. Finally, we bounded the network on institutional and governance actors with the capacity to author or block adaptation, which necessarily excludes the civil-society organisations, refugee and diaspora networks, and translocal constituencies whose role we take up as a scope limitation below.

Ties were coded from the event record. Each tie carries four attributes (see codebook). First, a relationship type records the substance of the tie (for example, security patronage, mediation, contested integration, coercive pressure). Second, direction is coded as unidirectional where resources, authority, or influence flow primarily from source to target, or bidirectional where the relationship is reciprocal. Third, each tie is assigned an ordinal weight on a three-point scale: strong (3) for institutionalised, documented, ongoing relationships with clear material or security effects; moderate (2) for partially formalised or episodic ties; and weak (1) for informal or minimally documented ties. Fourth, we code the peacebuilding effect of each tie as positive, negative, or mixed, as defined above.

The full dataset of adaptation events, network nodes, and ties is provided in Appendix 1. Events are included in our dataset only when they are publicly documented through media reports, United Nations situation reports, official decrees or statements from governing authorities, civil society documentation, or other publicly available sources, all listed in the codebook which can be found in the Excel sheet in Appendix 2. Because reporting in a conflict or post-conflict environment is sometimes contested, each event is supported by two independent sources.[1] Individual events are then translated into network graphs that represent the interconnected ties linking local authorities, regional patron states, international organisations, armed groups, tribal networks, minority community structures, and cross-border institutions. The resulting network contains 22 actors, and 46 ties, of which 21 are unidirectional and 25 bidirectional; 10 are coded strong, 23 moderate, and 13 weak.

We analyse the resulting network using a set of descriptive network measures. At the actor level, degree centrality captures connectivity by counting the number of distinct actors to which a node is

1 Where sources diverge in their interpretation of an institutional change, this does not affect our coding, as we code the occurrence of the institutional change itself rather than the meaning or significance attributed to it by the source. In other words, the coding captures whether an observable institutional adaptation event took place, not how this event was interpreted by those documenting it.

connected, whilst in-degree and out-degree distinguish incoming from outgoing relationships in the directed network. Strength incorporates the coded intensity of these relationships by summing tie weights. Betweenness centrality captures brokerage by measuring the extent to which an actor lies on paths connecting other actors. At the network level, density measures the proportion of possible actor relationships that are observed. These measures are treated as indicators of structural position and interpreted alongside the qualitative event evidence rather than as independent measures of political power or peacebuilding effectiveness.

We assess the robustness of the principal findings to several alternative representations of the network. Specifically, we compare the weighted network with an unweighted network, use the strongest single relationship rather than summed weights for actors connected by multiple ties, and exclude weak ties. We also re-estimate the analysis excluding three bodies created directly by presidential decree, whose ties to the transitional government and other parties exist by construction. These robustness cheques are reported in Appendix 3. All network measures are calculated in R using igraph; code and data are provided in the replication materials.

The analysis focuses on three governance ecosystems, each representing a distinct constellation of authority structures, external influences, and communal dynamics: areas governed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS); areas governed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); and areas with Druze-majority populations in southern Syria, particularly the governorate of Suwayda. These cases capture contrasting configurations of domestic authority and external patronage: attempted centralisation supported principally by Turkey; decentralised territorial governance supported by the United States; and localised communal governance shaped partly by Israeli and Jordanian involvement. This variation allows us to examine how different relational configurations correspond to patterns of institutional adaptation.

The map below illustrates the different zones of territorial control in Syria as of November 2025.

2.3 The challenges of peacebuilding in Syria: local, regional, and international dynamics

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 triggered a rapid shift of political authority across Syria. Rather than producing a unified transitional process, the collapse intensified competition amongst pre-existing governance structures such as local councils, armed factions, tribal networks and other minority bodies. The section that follows organises this complex landscape around three themes. First, we examine how authority has been reshaped through negotiated order and its limits. Second, we analyse the contestation over legitimacy and inclusion by minority communities. Third, we trace the cross-scale dynamics through which regional and international patrons and actors have become constitutive elements of Syria's peacebuilding networks, shaping institutional trajectories in ways that neither internal actors nor external powers fully control. Figure 1 provides an overview of the full relational architecture of

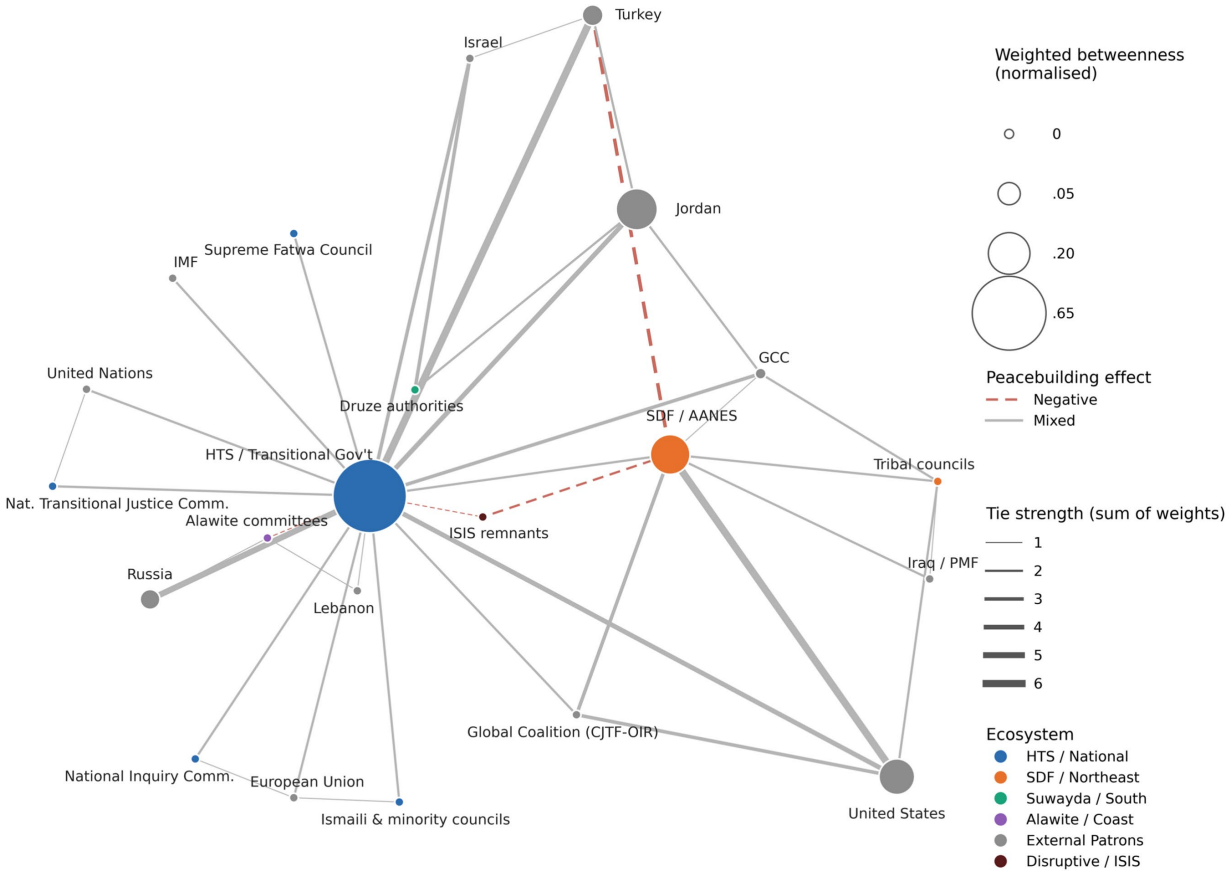


FIGURE 1
Syria peacebuilding network – all actors visualisation produced using igraph and ggraph in R.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the post-Assad governance network.

Network characteristic	Value
Actors	22
Coded relational ties	46
Unique connected actor pairs	40
Directed arcs	61
Directed density	0.132
Undirected density	0.173
Reciprocal directed arcs	0.689
Degree centralisation	0.732
Betweenness centralisation	0.610

Syria's post-Assad governance landscape, mapping all 22 actors and documented relational ties. Table 1 summarises the network; it is sparse and highly centralised: Only 13.2 per cent of possible directed ties are observed, whilst degree centralisation reaches 0.732, indicating that direct connections are distributed unevenly across actors. Approximately 69 per cent of directed arcs are reciprocated, consistent with the presence of substantial reciprocal relationships alongside asymmetric flows of resources, authority, and influence.

2.3.1 Reconfiguration of authority and negotiated order

Where peacebuilding has produced tangible results in post-Assad Syria, it has done so not through top-down institutional design but through the accumulation of local bargains. These are arrangements in which multiple actors cooperate to fill governance voids under conditions of mutual dependency. This section traces those arrangements and then turns to the contexts where they have broken down or remained structurally incomplete.

In HTS controlled areas, the most effective governance outcomes emerged where attempts to centralise authority were mediated through prior negotiation with local intermediaries rather than imposed unilaterally. Many local communities (e.g., Salamiyah, Sabburah) faced an immediate need to maintain basic services after the regime collapsed, and established their own systems in this vacuum, including alternative justice models for overworked or non-operational courts. The new authorities of HTS had little choice but to engage with and work through these new systems, strengthening non-HTS participation in post-Assad statebuilding at the local level (Waters, 2025b). For example, in Salamiyah, early negotiations between HTS and the Syrian National Ismaili Council produced a hybrid governance set-up: a volunteer security force assisting local police and a joint civil–military committee mandated to handle abuses and security violations (Waters, 2025a). One of the Ismaili Council's first actions was to provide supplementary funds and diesel to the city's hospital to keep it running for around 10 days, until the new Hama Governorate authorities established a regional office and took over fuel provision duties (Waters, 2025a). Similarly, in nearby Sabburah, the local council reopened the town's school, which had shut following the mass departure of teachers after the regime's collapse. Today, some twenty volunteers and paid workers, organised by the town council, teach approximately 150 students (Waters, 2025b). These arrangements exemplify institutional adaptation through negotiated order, where HTS exercised authority whilst preserving a degree of communal autonomy and protection amongst actors whose cooperation is contingent and must be actively maintained.

Similar patterns can be observed in several northern towns in Idlib, western Aleppo, and northern Hama, where municipal councils and HTS-linked security offices have created joint security rooms that coordinate patrols, checkpoint management, and rapid-response teams during crises (Tlass, 2025). These bodies often include community leaders and representatives, who help prioritise the reopening of markets, bakeries, and clinics after episodes of violence. In mixed or contested neighbourhoods, *ad hoc* policing arrangements have emerged in which former opposition fighters, local notables, and newly integrated HTS units jointly staff checkpoints under agreed rules of engagement, including restrictions on heavy weapons and basic complaint mechanisms for residents (International Crisis Group, 2025d; Al-Mounes, 2025).

A further step of institutional adaptation emerged in response to European conditionality (European Commission, 2026). As international engagement became increasingly contingent on demonstrable commitments to human rights and institutional accountability, HTS established human rights liaison units to facilitate engagement with external actors (Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). This development illustrates how external conditionality prompted the creation of dedicated mechanisms designed to meet the expectations of external actors.

Whilst basic services seemed to be re-established fairly quickly, the decision to dismantle the security services illustrates the difficulty arising when dealing with post-authoritarian institutional reform and ongoing sectarian conflicts. The day after the March 2025 coastal massacres, the interim President Al-Sharaa appointed a National Inquiry Commission. However, this body's mandate was immediately bounded to exclude post-Assad crimes and whose accountability actions were later characterised as largely symbolic, specifically to respond to Western pressure (Human Rights Watch, 2026). In May 2025, Decrees 19 and 20 established a National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ) and a National Commission for Missing Persons; each carrying structural limitations likely to undermine peacebuilding outcomes, such as authority concentrated in the presidency, oversight absent, and the scope of accountability deliberately confined to the former regime (Enab Baladi, 2025b; Abdulghany and Teitel, 2026). The NCTJ illustrates this challenge: the first report was issued 60 days late, and it had not published a workplan. According to the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, "the Commissions' work thus far remains marked by limited procedural clarity, undefined institutional roles, and weak coordination with judicial authorities" (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2026). This kind of institutional limitation depicts peacebuilding not as a single coherent state-reconstruction project, but one that is multilayered in which gaps left by slow or thinly resourced formal institutions are absorbed by other nodes of authority. The Grand Mufti's fatwa banning extrajudicial killings (The New Arab, 2025), issued in the same period, is perhaps the most telling illustration: a religious authority expanding juridically to fill a security gap that sits outside of, and bypasses the rule of law.

A further complication is the persistence of ISIS remnants in eastern Syria, where the post-Assad power vacuum allowed the group to reassert presence in areas where gaps in governance were largest (Al-Ahmed and Franjieh, 2025). The threat is significant enough to force an institutionally unusual outcome: under sustained US pressure, civil-military coordination offices were established in Hasakah and Raqqa, and in November 2025 Syria formally joined the international coalition against ISIL (Al-Jazeera, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). What made this significant was not the counter-terrorism cooperation itself, but who was involved in it. For the first time, HTS-led ministries and SDF commanders were compelled to coordinate on a shared institutional file – two governance frameworks that had otherwise remained structurally antagonistic throughout the transition. The ISIS threat, in other words, produced a point of convergence that no domestic political negotiation had managed to generate.

The October 2025 People's Assembly elections exposed most clearly the gap between peacebuilding and inclusive legitimacy. Syria held its first parliamentary elections since the regime's collapse, filling 119 to 122 of 210 assembly seats[2] through an indirect committee-based selection process under Law No. 143 of 2025 (Etana, 2025). Kurdish-held areas and the Druze governorate of Suwayda were excluded entirely, leaving 19–21 seats vacant (Etana, 2025). Women accounted for only 3 % of those selected (Etana, 2025). Most critically, the Higher Elections Committee was appointed by the interim president, meaning the body overseeing the process derived its authority from the same actor whose legitimacy was already contested. As one analyst observed, "whilst presidential decrees will decide all critical matters, parliament will contribute little beyond legitimising the new order" (Erkmen, 2025). The elections illustrate a broader pattern: formal institutional adaptation can generate internationally legible signals of state-building without producing the distributional fairness and inclusive representation that minority communities treat as prerequisites for legitimacy.

2.3.2 Legitimacy, inclusion, and the contestation over minority integration

The pattern of minority resistance to HTS-led centralisation reveals the limits of authority built on external recognition without corresponding local legitimacy.

Non-Sunni armed groups have largely refused to integrate into Al-Sharaa's HTS-led government on his terms and have formed political alliances to advocate for guarantees of protection or autonomy. Their resistance operates on four intersecting grounds: ideological mistrust of HTS's Islamist-jihadist origins; HTS's failure to demonstrate distributional fairness in governance composition (president Al-Sharaa surrounded himself with civil war allies sharing the same Sunni Islamist background); abuses of power by undisciplined security actors such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Muawiyah Brigade; and competing visions of Syria's future governance, ranging from representation guarantees to full self-determination (International Crisis Group, 2025c; Human Rights Watch, 2026; Salih, 2025). Together, these grievances led to minorities resisting the state consolidation process. Figure 2 makes this visible through ego networks.[3] Whilst HTS connects to the most actors, the Kurdish and the Druze ecosystems are embedded in independent external patron networks that provide them with resource flows and security guarantees. Crucially, these ecosystems are geographically anchored and produce distinct governance logics.

First, the SDF and AANES held areas in northeast Syria that could not be bypassed in any viable national settlement: it controlled border crossings to Iraq and Turkey (see map above), approximately 90 % of the country's oil and gas fields, and IS detention facilities holding approximately 9,000 ISIS members, including European fighters that al-Sharaa wanted as bargaining chips with European governments (Al Jazeera, 2026). In mid-March 2025, a fourteen-point agreement was brokered by the United States and signed between Al Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi. It stipulated guarantees over energy security for the national grid, Kurdish political integration, and the incorporation of SDF units into the national army as "three sub-divisions" and "independent special operations brigades" whilst preserving their organisational structure (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2025a). In practice, energy security referred to the reintegration of northeastern oil, gas, and electricity infrastructure into the Syrian national grid under Damascus' authority. This included strategic assets such as the al-Omar oil field, the Conoco gas complex, and the Tabqa Dam, which supplies electricity to much of northern Syria, thereby reconnecting northeastern hydrocarbon production to the state's broader reconstruction and energy strategy (Ibrahim, 2026).

However, the agreement's implementation stalled immediately. Turkey, which is the primary patron of HTS-led governance in the North, had no interest in seeing the Kurdish-led SDF survive as a coherent military organisation, regardless of what any bilateral US-mediated agreement specified (Reuters, 2025). Turkey has consistently treated the SDF as an extension of the PKK and views any arrangement that preserves Kurdish military cohesion along its southern border as an existential threat. Turkey and HTS jointly set a 31 December 2025 deadline for full SDF integration, with Turkish officials demanding SDF fighters join the army as individuals rather than cohesive units. The SDF rejected this condition as existentially threatening, however (van Wilgenburg, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2026).

The SDF's bargaining leverage derives not from military capacity alone but from its structural position at the intersection of US security interests, cross-border energy flows, and counter-terrorism imperatives. This specific status gave the SDF negotiating power disproportionate to its formal political status that was insufficiently acknowledged (al-Ahmed, 2025; Hamidi, 2026). The SDF is directly connected to eight actors, the second-highest degree in the network, and has a weighted strength of 36, ranking second only to the transitional government. Its weighted betweenness (0.182) is also amongst

2 Of the 210 seats, 140 seats were allocated to be filled through a constituency-based electoral college system, with 119 seats elected on election day. The remaining 70 members of the People's Assembly will be appointed directly by the president, with no seats being elected by direct popular vote. The remaining 14 seats are currently vacant due to their represented regions having their elections postponed. These regions were not under the control of the transitional government (Etana, 2025).

3 Ego networks are diagrams centred on a single actor that map all its direct connections and ties between them, revealing each actor's structural position and external dependencies.

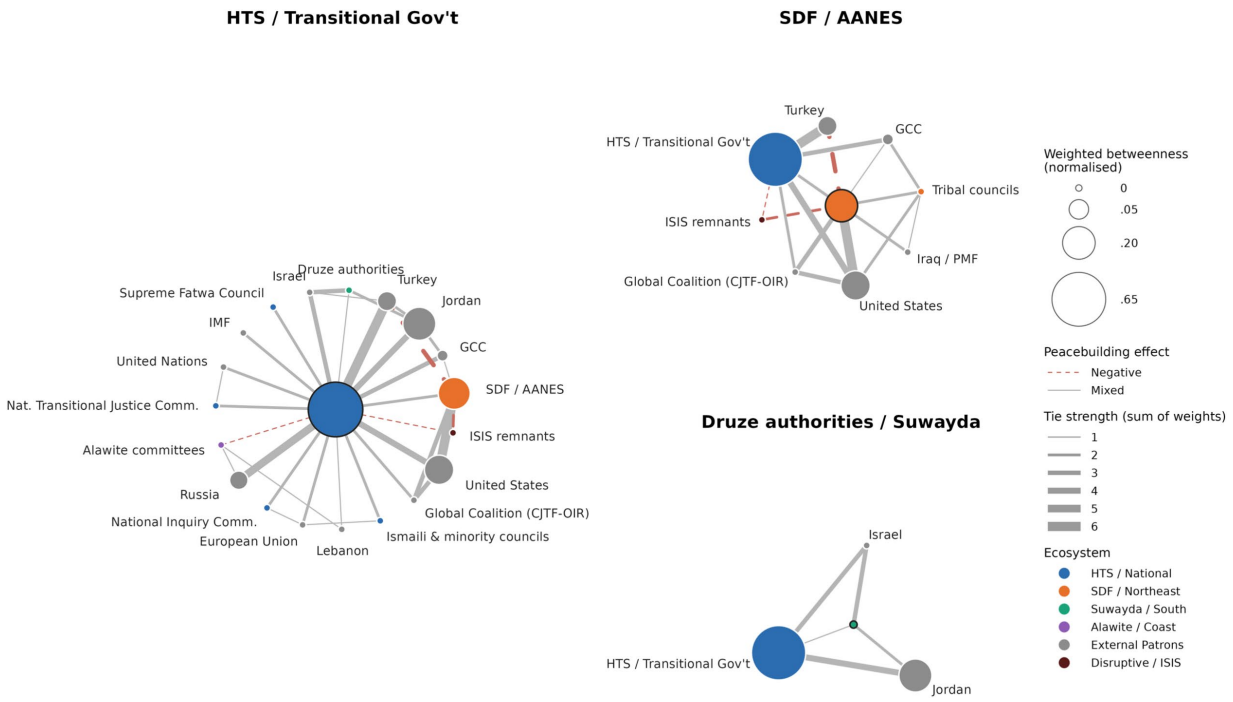


FIGURE 2
Ego networks: three governance ecosystems: visualisation produced using igraph and ggraph in R.

the highest in the network. Importantly, betweenness captures a specific form of structural brokerage rather than overall political influence. Some actors with relatively few ties nevertheless occupy particular bridging positions. Jordan, for example, has only four direct partners but records comparatively high weighted betweenness (0.198), illustrating that brokerage reflects the structural location rather than simply the number of ties.

Second, in Suwayda, weak military capacity was combined with high symbolic legitimacy, tight communal cohesion, and protective ties to an external patron (Israel) that Damascus could neither ignore nor easily override. Israel's role in the South is the mirror image of Turkey's patron role in the north: where Turkey's actions are consistent with a preference for a strong centralised Syria capable of dismantling any threat of Kurdish autonomy, Israel's posture is consistent with an interest in a fragmented Syria that will not threaten its border or consolidate over the governorate it has declared as a demilitarised zone. The Druze leadership, positioned between these two logics, became a beneficiary of Israeli protection.[4]

Shortly after Assad's fall, Israel has been secretly supplying weapons to a Druze militia called the Military Council in Suwayda (Shih et al., 2025). Around 3,000 Druze fighters received monthly stipends, with arms transfers peaking in April 2025 amid clashes with forces loyal to Al-Sharaa (Middle East Monitor, 2025). The patron relationship was not merely protective, but rather constitutive of Druze governance capacity.

In July 2025, after clashes erupted between Druze fighters and Bedouin tribes and the Syrian government forces moved into Suwayda to restore order, Israel struck the Syrian Defence Ministry headquarters in Damascus explicitly to pressure government forces to withdraw from Suwayda (Al Jazeera, 2025a). Syria subsequently announced a ceasefire and withdrew (Kourdi et al., 2025). The September 2025 US-Jordan-Syria roadmap introduced a thirteen-point confidence-building framework, but Druze spiritual leadership rejected it, emboldened by Israeli backing (International Crisis Group, 2025c). Suwayda's trajectory illustrates how actors with weak military power, but strategically valuable external protection ties can resist incorporation into dominant governance frameworks: authority was not conferred by hierarchical mandate. Where HTS and the SDF adapted by negotiating new institutional arrangements, Druze leadership adapted by avoiding one through its network ties.

Finally, despite Al-Sharaa's public commitment to inclusive governance, no formal meetings with senior Alawite representatives were reported, in contrast with the administration's documented meetings with leaders from other minority groups including Kurds, Christians, and Druze. Militia factions affiliated with the interim authority – including Ahrar al-Sham and the Muawiyah Brigade – exploited the security vacuum, triggering violent clashes that displaced over 40,000 Alawites to Lebanon (Davis, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2026; Sharawi, 2025). Russia's Hmeimim base served as an informal protection mechanism, sheltering displaced civilians and preserving

4 The Druze position is not uniform: leadership was internally divided. The three principal spiritual authorities (Mashyakhat al-'aql) diverge; Hikmat Al Hijri has articulated the most autonomist line and cultivated the protective relationship with Israel, while Hammoud al-Hinnawi and Youssef Jarbou have signalled openness to a negotiated reintegration with Damascus. Civil and armed actors are similarly split (Yavorsky, 2025). The salient point for institutional adaptation, however, is which actor benefits from external backing. Because it is al-Hijri's autonomist project alone that is underwritten by a regional patron able to impose costs on the centre, it holds the greatest bargaining standing vis-à-vis Damascus. It is therefore this faction's preferences, rather than those of the more conciliatory currents, that most powerfully condition the terms on which any institutional accommodation in Suwayda can be reached. Patron backing thus confers leverage disproportionate to internal consensus.

Moscow's residual influence over coastal Alawite communities without any formalised institutional arrangement (Poroskoun, 2026) (see Table 2).

2.3.3 Cross-scale network dynamics that shape post-Assad Syria

Syria's post-Assad governance is not simply fragmented; it is relationally organised. And the organisation is one of structured incompatibility. The external patrons shaping Syria's post-Assad governance do not pursue parallel objectives that could be reconciled at the national level. They pursue contradictory ones. These contradictions are resolved locally, case by case, through adaptive bargains, shaped by the configuration of external relationships that local actors hold at regional and international scales. The result is an asymmetric peacebuilding landscape in which adaptation is patterned by the position each local actor occupies within wider patronage and security networks (as shown above).

The network measures (Table 3) also underscore the distinction between structural centrality and external influence. Turkey and the United States each connect directly to four actors, but their weighted strengths (15 and 23, respectively) indicate concentrated relationships of considerable intensity. Israel is connected to only three actors and has negligible overall betweenness, yet its military intervention in Suwayda demonstrates that a low-centrality external actor may nevertheless exert substantial political influence through a strategically consequential tie.

The most consequential structural incompatibility in Syria's external patronage landscape is the direct conflict between Turkish and Israeli strategic objectives. A Syria strong enough to satisfy Turkey's requirements is precisely the Syria that Israel has been systematically preventing from emerging. In the 2 days following Assad's fall, Israel carried out nearly 500 airstrikes that destroyed approximately 85 per cent of Syria's remaining military capabilities (airports, air defence systems, naval vessels, and weapons depots) and simultaneously seized the 235 square kilometre UN-monitored demilitarised buffer zone established under the 1974 disengagement agreement (International Crisis Group, 2025d). As a result, Damascus entered its post-Assad transition without a functioning military, making it structurally dependent on Turkish security guarantees precisely when it most needed to assert sovereign authority. The Israeli strikes did not prevent a new Syrian government from forming, rather, they shaped the limits within which that government could

TABLE 2 Minority actors dynamics.

Actor	Primary source of legitimacy	Main security guarantee	Position towards state consolidation	Preferred institutional outcome
Kurdish authorities (SDF/AANES)	Territorial control, military effectiveness, AANES governance experience	US military backing; oil, detention sites, border corridors	Conditional; resists absorption without guarantees	Integration with preserved organisational autonomy and decentralised governance
Druze authorities, Suwayda	Religious leadership, local cohesion	Israeli deterrence, Jordanian corridor influence, US diplomatic (pragmatic) backing	Sceptical of rapid reintegration under HTS-led rule	High autonomy during transition, conditional cooperation on national questions
Ismaili and Christian local councils	Local service provision, mediation capacity, community trust	Negotiated local bargains and selective links to Damascus	Pragmatic; willing to cooperate if protected	Hybrid local governance with representation and policing guarantees
Alawite community	Historical minority community	Limited: local self-organisation; residual external (including Russian) protection	Defensive and distrustful; no formal engagement with Damascus	Security guarantees, accountability, and phased reintegration

TABLE 3 Network position of main actors.

Actor	Degree	In-degree	Out-degree	Strength	Weighted betweenness
HTS	19	16	13	70	0.650
SDF	8	8	5	36	0.182
US	4	2	4	23	0.145
Turkey	4	2	4	15	0.043
Jordan	4	4	4	20	0.198
Druze authorities	3	3	2	9	0.000
Israel	3	1	3	8	0.000

Degree measures the number of distinct directly connected actors; in- and out-degree distinguish incoming and outgoing relationships; strength sums coded relationship weights; weighted betweenness measures the extent to which an actor lies on weighted shortest paths connecting other actors. Betweenness is interpreted as a measure of structural brokerage, not political influence.

exercise authority. In Southern Syria, Israel's protection of Suwayda indirectly strengthened the local Druze institutions by creating a "protected" political space in which alternative governance structures such as the Suwayda's Supreme Legal Committee could consolidate. At the same time, this allowed Suwayda to resist attempts by Damascus to reincorporate it under a central state authority. Simultaneously, Israel facilitated some cross-border humanitarian access through Jordan's Jaber crossing on the condition of a Druze-led distribution, further reinforcing Druze autonomy and ownership. These practices have enabled southern Syria's Druze-concentrated districts to preserve a degree of de facto self-governance. The broader consequence has been the re-emergence of decentralisation demands alongside growing fears that territorially embedded sectarian governance could deepen communal fragmentation and increase the risk of future intercommunal conflict.

Turkey's response was not to confront Israeli actions directly but to deepen its own institutional penetration of HTS-controlled areas before Israeli pressure could establish facts on the ground in the south (see Table A4in the Appendix 1). This is done by using education as a governance penetration mechanism, embedding Turkish administrative standards at the level most likely to shape long-term identity. The pattern of aligning with a dominant external patron in exchange for protection, operational continuity and resource access (first consolidated by councils in Afrin, Azaz, Jarabulus and Idlib well before the regime collapse) has extended to the post-Assad governance (Enab Baladi, 2018; Levant24, 2026; Enab Baladi, 2025).

The Turkey–Israel contradiction created a direct governance consequence in April 2025 when the two countries held de-escalation talks in Baku, Azerbaijan, to manage their competing objectives and prevent inadvertent military confrontation (Abouyoussef, 2025; Berman et al., 2025). No formal agreement was reached. The talks established a communication channel but did not resolve the underlying structural conflict. Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan subsequently said Turkey viewed growing Israeli influence over HTS as an existential threat; Israeli Defence Minister Katz described Turkish military ambitions in Syria as a "direct threat" that would not be tolerated (Strachota et al., 2025). Importantly, talks between two external patrons about their activities, without Syrian representation confirms that the primary governance negotiations shaping Syria's institutional landscape are not occurring between Syrian actors but between the external geopolitical relations within which those actors are embedded.

The United States remains the key international actor shaping behaviour across Syria's governance landscape, operating through two clusters: security-driven reforms (counter-ISIS coordination, civil-military offices in Hasakah and Raqqa, and tribal engagement in Deir Ezzor) and national-level negotiation leverage (the fourteen-point HTS-SDF agreement, revenue-sharing committees for northeastern oil fields, and the permanent US base near Damascus announced in November 2025) (Al-Khalidi et al., 2025). The sanctions architecture forced HTS to adapt economic governance in response to financial conditionality, meaning US influence shaped security, economic, and political institutions simultaneously. This pattern is reflected in the network data: although the United States has only four direct partners, its weighted strength of 23 is substantially greater than its degree alone would suggest, reflecting a smaller number of comparatively strong relationships.

Taken together, these various dynamics produce a set of local governance adaptations calibrated to the specific demands of a particular patron, and collectively incompatible with the national reconciliation that sustainable peace on a national level requires. What distinguishes Syria's peacebuilding from other post-conflict transitions is not merely the fragmentation of domestic authority, it is the degree to which that fragmentation is structurally reproduced by the contradictory agendas of the external actors whose resources, recognition, and coercive power make local governance possible in the first place.

Our findings demonstrate that peacebuilding in post-Assad Syria unfolds through asymmetric, hierarchical, and highly contingent networks of authority, rather than through any coherent national strategy. The patterns illustrate a recurrent dynamic: local structures adapt primarily in response to their positionality within broader regional and international networks, not because of domestic directives issued by the interim government. In conclusion, we identify three main dynamics of post-war peacebuilding.

First, whilst the year post-collapse was met with numerous actions to attempt to consolidate the state, the pattern is centralisation without accountability. New ministries, commissions, coordination bodies created the appearance of institutional consolidation, yet many lacked the administrative capacity, transparency, legitimacy necessary to produce durable authority.

The result is better understood as state-building performance rather than state consolidation (International Crisis Group, 2025c): the creation of internationally legible institutions whose relational foundations are too thin and contested to sustain long-term governance. The transitional justice track illustrates this most clearly: as noted above, the NCTJ's delayed rollout, for example, points to institutional steps that are largely symbolic rather than operational, with little evidence of meaningful enforcement capacity developing.

Second, relational position contributes to power asymmetries amongst domestic governance actors, but different forms of relational advantage matter in different cases. The SDF combines comparatively broad connectivity, ranking second in both degree and weighted strength, with US security backing, territorial control, energy resources, and control of detention infrastructure. Druze authorities, by contrast, are relatively peripheral in the overall network, with only three direct partners and negligible betweenness, yet possess a strategically consequential protection relationship with Israel. This suggests that leverage depends not simply on the number or structural centrality of an actor's relationships, but also on the resources and credible guarantees transmitted through particular ties.

Third, the absence of positive effects in the network: In a context this fragmented and externally penetrated, every governance relationship involves trade-offs, conditionality, or structural costs. There is no patron relationship that advances Syrian peacebuilding without simultaneously advancing the patron's own strategic interests, and those interests are not aligned with national reconciliation.

3 Conclusion

Our analysis of peacebuilding in the absence of a strong central state has shown that peacebuilding is relational. Analysing attempts of Syrian peacebuilding post-Assad, we detected several consistent patterns: Peacebuilding outcomes appear to be strongly shaped by the depth and stability of external alliances rather than by internal regime or group capacity alone, although they are linked. Institutional adaptation is strongest where local and transitional authorities engage in inclusive, negotiated arrangements that combine security provision, dispute resolution, and basic services. Localities with fragmented or hostile external networks (e.g., the Eastern tribes) exhibit more reactive, security-first

measures of institutional adaptation, with limited long-term consolidation. The case of Syria hence challenges the assumption that peacebuilding naturally follows a trajectory of re-centralization after regime collapse. Instead, post-Assad governance is being reconstituted through multi-scalar bargains shaped by several factors including regional patrons, cross-border dynamics, external security guarantees, and localised legitimacy structures.

Additionally, asymmetric network positions strongly shape patterns of institutional adaptation. Ultimately, differences in network position help explain the distinct patterns of institutional adaptation observed across HTS areas, SDF zones, and Suwayda: HTS benefits from hierarchical ties to Turkey and a selective, cautious global recognition. SDF relies on horizontal, security-focused ties to the United States, tribes, and Iraq. Druze institutions rely on protective ties to Israel and the international community. These positionalities produce distinct incentives, constraints, and governance repertoires, explaining why peacebuilding outcomes are uneven, hybrid, and deeply contingent on regional power politics.

What emerges is an inherently asymmetric peacebuilding landscape, in which the prospects for local stability, and the foundations for longer-term peace, are shaped by how local governance arrangements interact with and adapt to the external networks in which they are embedded.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, our reliance on publicly available documentation means we necessarily capture formal changes whilst potentially missing informal arrangements or private negotiations that may be equally or more significant for governance outcomes (Woolley, 2000). Second, the difficulty of conducting direct field research across contested Syrian territory means our analysis depends on secondary sources and documentation produced by actors with their own political interests and biases (Weidmann, 2015; Davenport and Ball, 2002) We attempt to mitigate this through triangulation across multiple sources and explicit attention to the positionality of information producers, but gaps inevitably remain. Third, the rapidly evolving situation in Syria means that institutional configurations we documented may have already shifted significantly, underscoring that our analysis represents a snapshot of ongoing processes. Finally, whilst network analysis provides valuable tools for mapping relationships, it risks reifying what are often fluid, contested, and ambiguous connections, potentially imposing more structure and clarity than actually exists on the ground. By restricting nodes to institutional and governance actors, our analysis foregrounds governmental, armed, and external actors at the expense of the civil-society organisations, refugee and diaspora communities, and the translocal networks connecting them. These actors shape peacebuilding both directly, through service provision, and indirectly, through transnational flows of resources, information and legitimacy (Khoury and Siegel, 2026). We attempt to address this by treating network visualisations as heuristic, to be interpreted in conjunction with qualitative analysis rather than as definitive representations of social reality.

The analytical leverage provided by studying Syria's extreme fragmentation extends beyond the case itself. Countries emerging from protracted civil wars with significant regional involvement face similar challenges of negotiating governance and peacebuilding across fragmented authority structures, entrenched local power bases, and competing external patrons. Understanding how institutional adaptation unfolds in Syria's particularly acute case of fragmentation can thus illuminate dynamics likely present in other contexts where peacebuilding occurs through hybrid, networked arrangements rather than consolidated state structures (cf. Boege et al., 2009).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

NA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. To look for sources while building our adaptation events dataset, and to help with coding.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1938912/full#supplementary-material

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