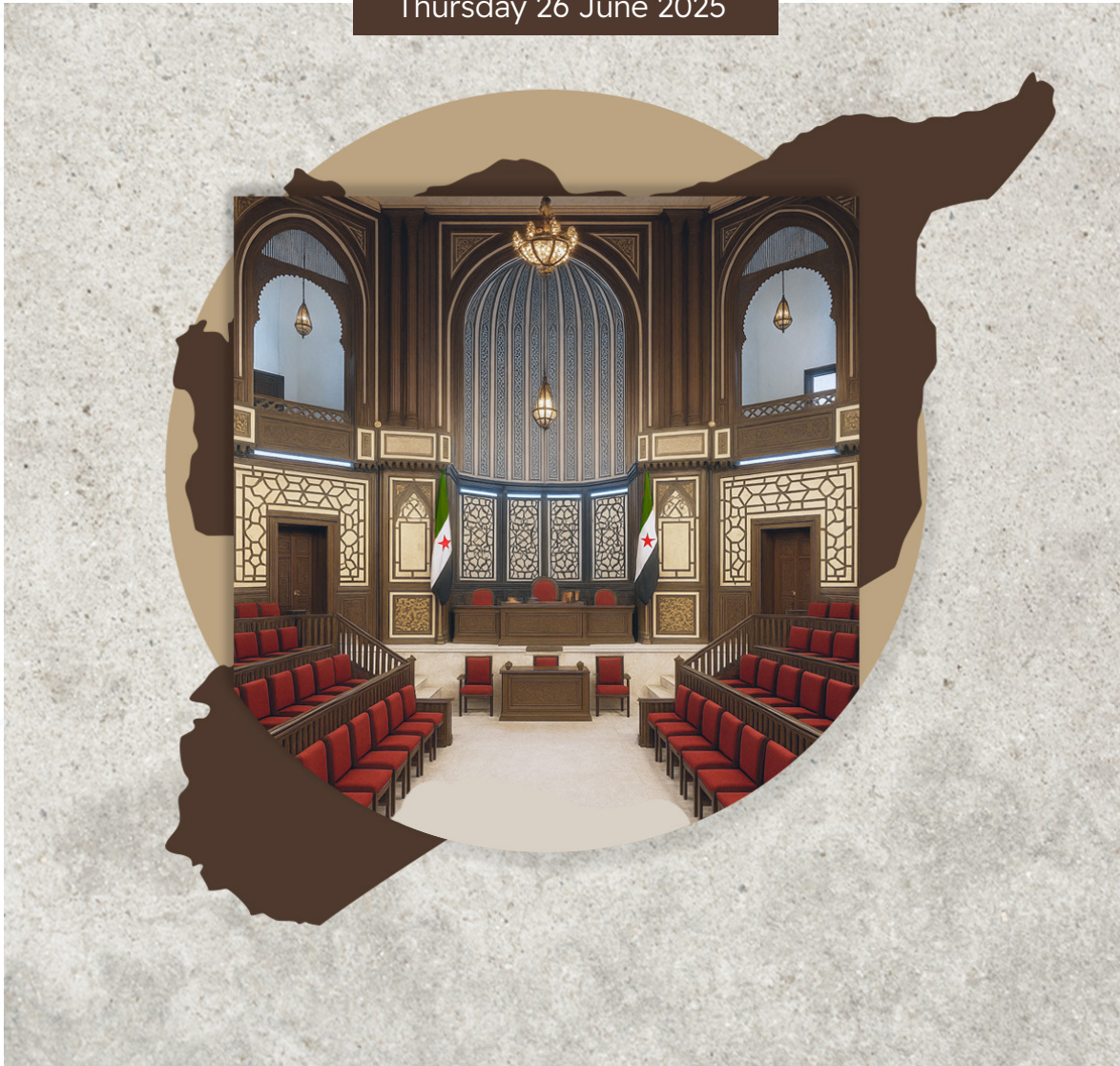


SNHR

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**A Legal Perspective on the Path to
Forming the Legislative Council During
the Political Transition in Syria**

Thursday 26 June 2025





The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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FIRST: THE POSITION OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY ON THE MAP OF SYRIAN POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Following the radical political transformation that Syria witnessed with the collapse of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, the country entered a period of extremely complex constitutional and institutional vacuum. The dissolution of the Baath Party, the dismantling of the security and military apparatus, and the abolition of the 2012 Constitution led to the absence of a governing legal framework, raising fears that the liberalization process would slide into chaos. In response to this reality, the new authorities issued the «Constitutional Declaration» on March 13, 2025, as a necessary step to establish clear legal and administrative foundations governing the transitional phase.

The declaration defined the nature of the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) and their powers during this phase. It also stipulated that legislative authority would be temporarily vested in the People's Assembly until a permanent constitution is adopted and parliamentary elections are held on its basis. The Syrian Network for Human Rights previously presented a human rights vision clarifying the best procedural mechanism for drafting a constitutional declaration within the framework of a political transition.

This phase represents a historic turning point, offering a rare opportunity to establish a parliamentary system capable of addressing the complexities of post-conflict governance and ensuring broad representation of diverse societal and political components, thus enhancing the chances of building sustainable peace. In this context, this human rights vision, prepared by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, aims to present a comprehensive vision for the formation of a Syrian legislative council that reflects these goals and aspirations.

This vision comes in the context of the Syrian Network for Human Rights' monitoring of the political transition in Syria. It aims to formulate a normative vision based on human rights principles regarding the mechanisms for forming a pluralistic and participatory legislative council. This vision builds on previous efforts presented by the Network, including its vision on the political process published last March, and another on the transitional justice process published in April. The Network hopes that the Syrian authorities and Syrian society will benefit from this effort to build a transitional process that respects the rights of the Syrian people.

The People's Assembly under the Assad regime:

Since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, the Syrian People's Assembly began to be emptied of its representative content, transforming it into a mere formal instrument that grants the regime's decisions a sham legal cover. The 1973 Constitution further consolidated this approach through Article 8, which enshrined the Ba'ath Party's leadership of the state and society, effectively eliminating any possibility of an independent parliament or genuine opposition.

Bashar al-Assad followed the same approach, with the People's Assembly remaining a tool subject to the executive authority, despite the repeal of Article 8 of the 2012 Constitution. This was a superficial amendment that did not lead to any fundamental change in the structure or authoritarian nature of the regime.

The periodic elections for the People's Assembly reflect the absolute dominance of the Ba'ath Party and its allies, who control the majority of seats. The electoral process is directly supervised by the security services, making it more of a political appointment than a free and fair election. The election monitoring report issued by the Syrian Network for Human Rights on July 24, 2024, indicated the involvement of a large number of Assembly members in gross human rights violations. This has stripped the Assembly of its legal and moral legitimacy, transforming it into one of the most prominent tools of repression rather than an institution of accountability and popular representation.

The People's Assembly has not exercised its constitutional duties, whether in legislation or oversight. Instead, it has been used to pass laws that serve the regime, including legislation that legitimizes human rights violations and the seizure of citizens' property. No security official or minister has been held accountable throughout its history, despite widespread documentation of violations amounting to crimes against humanity. On the contrary, the Assembly has repeatedly played a role in amending the constitution to ensure the continuation of hereditary rule, making it one of the main pillars of entrenching tyranny and building the regime's repressive structure.

Formation of the Transitional Legislative Council in Syria:

The formation of legislative councils during political transitions is a critical milestone in the process of rebuilding the state after conflict. It requires a delicate balance between the requirements of legitimacy and inclusiveness, on the one hand, and institutional effectiveness, on the other. The mechanism for forming these councils directly impacts the stability of the transitional phase and the chances of establishing sustainable democratic foundations. Transitional legislative councils are often formed within temporary governance arrangements, serving as an institutional bridge that transitions the country from armed conflict to a pluralistic system of government.

These arrangements must balance the need for immediate stability with ensuring genuine representation of the political forces emerging from or active in the conflict.

Despite the diversity of forms of transitional legislative bodies, transitional contexts require these institutions to perform two parallel tasks:

1. Responding immediately to urgent needs in managing state affairs.
2. Actively participating in formulating long-term constitutional arrangements.

These dual tasks pose real challenges to the mechanisms for forming councils, as they must combine the ability to manage immediate crises with the ability to ensure pluralistic legitimacy and broad representation of various components of society in the long term.

In the Syrian context, there is an urgent need to achieve a genuine balance between responding to urgent institutional needs and empowering the People's Assembly with powers that enable it to play its role in formulating future constitutional arrangements, thus consolidating a democratic system based on the rule of law and accountability.

However, the Constitutional Declaration, specifically Article 24, grants the president broad powers in forming the council. He directly appoints one-third of the members and oversees the appointment of the committee responsible for selecting the remaining two-thirds. This mechanism weakens the balance of power within the council and reinforces its subordination to the executive branch, for the following main reasons:

1. Legislative deficit and the transformation of parliament into a sham body:

Under Article 24, a parliament is formed without actual powers and is deprived of the required independence. This is compounded by the absence of effective oversight tools enjoyed by democratic parliaments, such as the formation of investigative committees, the withdrawal of confidence from ministers, and serious monitoring of budget implementation. Indeed, Article 30 limits its role to «posing questions to ministers,» emptying it of its oversight function and transforming the council into an entity without real institutional influence.

2. Unrestricted Executive Powers:

The relevant constitutional provisions grant the executive branch excessive powers, exceeding even what is customary in presidential systems. For example, it monopolizes the proposal of constitutional amendments (Article 50), without granting the parliament the right to initiate action. Article 41 also grants the president the authority to declare war and emergency situations with the approval of the National Security Council, whose members he appoints. Article 37 enshrines the president's final authority to ratify international treaties, even after they have been approved by parliament, creating an additional «executive veto» over the council's role in foreign policy.

SECOND: BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONAL PARLIAMENT IN SYRIA

To overcome the structural shortcomings in the formation of the Council, as stipulated in the Constitutional Declaration, the Syrian Network for Human Rights proposes adopting a set of principles drawn from international experiences in post-conflict countries, ensuring the formation of a parliament capable of managing the transitional phase, drafting the constitution, and consolidating democratic institutions.

Extended representation using the ternary representation mechanism:

The Syrian Network for Human Rights adopts a tripartite representation model that focuses on combining geographic, functional, and community representation. This model takes into account the multiple facets of democratic legitimacy and transcends the exclusive reliance on geographic constituencies. This model reflects the need for representation that reflects the complex Syrian reality during the transitional phase, ensuring genuine and broad participation by all components of society.

International comparisons confirm that multi-representation systems contribute to consolidating parliamentary legitimacy by providing opportunities for diverse groups to be represented, particularly in post-conflict countries, where the greatest challenge is achieving a true balance between diverse interests within society. This model contributes to building broad political and social consensus, supporting the stability of the transitional phase and enhancing opportunities for reconstruction.

a. Geography-based representation through regional councils:

Geography-based representation, implemented through local councils, is a tool for conveying Syria's geographic diversity to the national legislature and enables the integration of local and regional perspectives in public policy formulation. It also ensures a sustained relationship between representatives and their communities, enhancing responsiveness to their needs.

During transitional phases, this representation plays a dual role: it helps channel grievances and needs from the periphery to the center, and it ensures the equitable distribution of reconstruction and development projects. This model is increasingly important in Syria, given the significant disparities in the effects of the conflict across regions, and the resulting marginalization and geographic imbalance in the political and administrative structure.

b. Profession-based representation: professional unions and economic sectors:

Profession-based representation through professional unions, federations, and economic bodies responds to the fact that a large segment of Syrians express their aspirations through professional and economic identities, rather than geographical ones. This form of representation is a means of introducing significant technical expertise into legislative work and ensuring the participation of the business sector, professionals, and workers in formulating public policies.

This representation also contributes to supporting more realistic economic decisions and developing regular communication mechanisms between the state and society. It also enhances the contribution of economic actors to recovery and institutional reconstruction efforts, which is pivotal in the Syrian context.

c. Civil society-based representation: women's and youth organizations:

The involvement of civil society organizations, particularly women's and youth organizations, is crucial to correcting past imbalances in representation and giving these groups an effective role in policy formulation. Studies show that women's effective representation in transitional parliaments is associated with better outcomes in the areas of human rights and good governance.

This vision emphasizes the importance of ensuring women's representation of no less than 30% of the total number of parliamentary seats, while providing the necessary procedural guarantees that enable women to perform their roles effectively, beyond symbolic representation. Youth representation is also a strategic necessity for ensuring the sustainability of the democratic transition, as it contributes to injecting new energy into the legislative process and strengthens the entrenchment of a democratic culture among future generations.

Representation of civil society organizations enables parliament to access the voice of the community's grassroots and benefit from their specialized expertise in areas often overlooked by political elites. This enhances the legitimacy of new institutions and establishes broader and more balanced community participation in reconstruction and democracy-building.

Mechanisms for selecting members of the People's Assembly:

The mechanism for selecting members of the Legislative Council should be based on multiple tracks that combine the requirements of legitimacy with the criteria for competence, thus achieving practical feasibility and true independence from traditional centers of political influence.

a. Competency-based selection:

Adopting criteria based on merit rather than political loyalty represents a fundamental shift from the Assad regime's approach, which relied on absolute loyalty as a prerequisite for parliamentary positions. These criteria include academic qualifications, relevant professional experience, demonstrated leadership abilities, and a sound understanding of the legislative function and its mechanisms.

International experience demonstrates that transitional parliaments perform better when they include members with technical and institutional competencies and a commitment to democratic values. The presence of such cadres enhances the parliament's efficiency in performing its core functions of legislation, oversight, and representation during a critical phase that requires a delicate balance between speed and depth in decision-making.

b. Integrity and anti-corruption measures:

Integrity standards are no less important than competence, but rather complement it. These standards include rigorous scrutiny of candidates' personal and professional backgrounds, requiring transparent financial disclosure, and establishing clear rules for addressing conflicts of interest.

These measures contribute to restoring citizens' confidence in institutions and preventing the infiltration of corrupt interests into the parliamentary structure, thus establishing a political climate based on transparency and accountability.

These measures are particularly important in the Syrian context, as anyone implicated in gross human rights violations or corruption cases during the rule of the former regime should be barred from running for office or being appointed, in line with the principles of transitional justice emphasized by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in its vision issued last April.

To ensure that members are selected based on competence and integrity, this vision recommends holding consultative meetings bringing together local councils, civil society representatives, and community leaders to select candidates with popular acceptance and practical experience.

It is also advisable to allocate representative seats for vital professions and sectors, such as health, education, law, religious leaders, and the business sector. This will ensure qualitative representation that enriches legislative work with realistic and specialized expertise, while simultaneously strengthening the interactive relationship between the Council and its community.

Power sharing and decision-making mechanisms:

Institutional guarantees:

The next Syrian parliamentary system should include explicit and clear mechanisms for power-sharing to ensure balanced and effective governance. The Syrian Network for Human Rights emphasizes that consensual arrangements, such as proportional representation and the exchange of veto mechanisms, are among the most important means of ensuring balanced partnership among various political forces.

It is proposed to adopt a proportional representation system, such as the «DONAT» system or something similar, for the election of parliamentary leadership. This would ensure fair representation of political forces, prevent any party from monopolizing key legislative positions, and maintain the efficiency of parliamentary performance.

Conflict prevention mechanisms:

To prevent political disputes from turning into structural crises, specific mechanisms should be incorporated into the Council's internal regulations, such as the submission of formal objection memoranda regarding controversial draft laws. This allows time for extensive deliberations and responsible political negotiation and prevents hasty decisions that could threaten political and social stability.

The vision also proposes incorporating structured dialogue mechanisms, such as mandatory periods for broad consultation on major draft laws and the participation of civil society representatives in sessions of a sovereign or social nature. This will contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of legislation, broadening the base of national consensus, and building trust between the parliamentary institution and society.

Commitment to the transitional process:

The commitment of members of the transitional parliament to the transitional process is an indispensable political and moral obligation, ensuring they recognize the temporary nature of the country's current situation and work to pave the way for a stable and lasting democratic system. This commitment should include acceptance of fundamental constitutional principles, engagement in peaceful political competition, and support for the organization of free elections at the conclusion of the transitional period.

These requirements help protect transitional institutions from attempts to monopolize or obstruct the process by forces seeking to exploit the transitional period for their own interests or to extend it beyond its legitimate timeframe. These standards also establish a clear framework for expected parliamentary behavior and foster a culture of collaborative work within state institutions.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights proposes that the transitional parliament's term be limited to three years, after which general elections would be held. This would enhance clarity on the political horizon and prevent the temporary situation from becoming permanent.

Legitimacy and accountability:

Transitional parliaments typically face a legitimacy crisis as a result of their emergence through negotiated arrangements rather than direct elections. To address this problem, effective and clear accountability mechanisms must be adopted that bolster societal trust in the legislative institution.

The vision proposes adopting several tools in this framework, including:

- Issuing detailed periodic reports on Parliament's activities and deliberations.
- Committing to full transparency in decision-making mechanisms.
- Adopting formal procedures requiring Parliament to regularly consult with civil society.

It is also important to develop a comprehensive public communication strategy that clarifies the nature of parliament's duties, powers, and limitations. This will help manage public expectations and enhance public trust. Regular public forums, along with regular interaction with the media, can play a vital role in strengthening the relationship between MPs and their constituents and instilling a culture of social accountability.

THIRD: POWERS OF THE SYRIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

The Syrian Network for Human Rights warns of the dangers of the Legislative Council's subordination to the executive branch, given its serious repercussions for the structure of democratic governance. Accordingly, it emphasizes the need to establish clear powers for the Council, including:

- Overseeing the performance of the transitional government.
- Approving basic legislation.
- Approving the general budget.
- Supervising the constitution-drafting process.
- Establishing the legal framework for the upcoming elections.

To activate these powers, the Syrian Network for Human Rights proposes activating a package of institutional accountability mechanisms:

Parliamentary investigation committees:

The People's Assembly's power to form investigative committees by a simple majority represents a pivotal step toward strengthening its oversight of the executive branch. These committees are effective tools for holding officials accountable, investigating corruption and mismanagement, and enabling the collection of accurate information that contributes to the development of more effective policies and legislation.

Comparative experience shows that parliamentary investigative powers are a pillar of democratic systems, providing an independent oversight mechanism that complements the role of the judiciary and enhances institutional transparency, particularly in transitional contexts that require establishing trust in new institutions.

Adopting the simple majority principle helps protect this right from obstruction by narrow alliances within parliament, provided that internal controls are in place to ensure the seriousness of requests and prevent the use of this tool for political, vindictive, or propaganda purposes.

Vote of confidence procedures:

No-confidence mechanisms represent one of the most important tools for political accountability, enabling parliament to hold ministers accountable and monitor the performance of the executive branch. These procedures should be designed to strike a balance between protecting government stability and ensuring effective oversight.

This requires setting clear timelines, accurate voting percentages, and publicly announced procedures that allow the public to access deliberations and outcomes. We also recommend adopting a «constructive vote of no confidence,» which links the vote of no confidence to the presentation of a government alternative, ensuring institutional continuity and preventing an executive vacuum.

Parliamentary approval of senior appointments:

Requiring parliamentary approval for appointments to leadership positions contributes to controlling executive performance and prevents the executive branch from monopolizing sensitive positions based on political loyalty. This mechanism is an important tool for enhancing transparency and establishing a balance of powers.

Democratic standards also emphasize the importance of this legislative participation in strengthening citizens' confidence in appointees, ensuring their compliance with professional standards and public values, and reducing the likelihood of public office being politicized and transformed into a tool for partisan or personal influence.

Oversight of emergency powers:

Parliamentary oversight of the declaration and activation of states of emergency is one of the most important safeguards for protecting democracy during crises. This oversight should include mandatory parliamentary approval of the declaration, the setting of short, conditionally renewable time periods, and precise criteria for activating these measures.

International experience shows that the absence of these controls often leads to the misuse of emergency powers, turning them into a permanent cover for authoritarianism. In the Syrian context, which has suffered from the use of emergency powers as a tool of repressive rule, the need for strong parliamentary oversight to keep these exceptional powers within democratic and accountable boundaries is heightened.

FOURTH: CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUPPORT

The effectiveness of Syria's transitional parliament requires comprehensive and intensive capacity-building programs, especially given the profound deterioration of the institutional structure resulting from decades of authoritarian use of parliament as a tool to enforce regime policies. This has deprived the legislative institution of its true place in Syrian political and societal consciousness.

To address this reality, technical support should focus on developing legislative capacities, strengthening parliamentary oversight tools, and organizing committee work in a professional and systematic manner. The Syrian Network for Human Rights' vision emphasizes that international support should be directed toward building independent and effective local institutions, rather than translating into direct interference in parliament's work, in order to preserve Syrian ownership of the democratic transition process. This includes:

- Implementing specialized and ongoing training programs for parliament members and administrative staff.
- Supporting research and analysis units accompanying legislative work.
- Providing institutional tools that enable parliament to perform its duties efficiently and independently.

FIFTH: RECOMMENDATIONS BY SNHR

a. To the Syrian authorities in the transitional phase:

1. Ensuring the independence of the Legislative Council:

Implementing the principle of separation of powers, granting Parliament clear powers, including legislation, government accountability, and budget approval, while preventing any interference from the executive branch in its affairs.

2. Adopting an inclusive representative model:

Adopting a proportional representation system that reflects Syria's diversity, ensuring women's representation at no less than 30%, and allocating clear quotas for marginalized groups such as displaced persons, religious and ethnic minorities, and youth.

3. Establishing transparent mechanisms for selecting members:

Adopting public nomination mechanisms involving civil society, local councils, and unions, based on criteria of competence and integrity, free from quotas or exclusion.

4. Activating conflict prevention mechanisms within parliament:

Establishing mandatory consultation tools on controversial laws and formal dialogue platforms that address political divisions in an institutional and inclusive manner.

5. Launching national capacity-building programs:

Organizing training programs for parliamentarians and administrative staff and establishing legislative and research support units to enhance parliament's effectiveness and independence.

b. To the International Community:

1. Supporting legislative institutions without direct interference:

Providing technical and technological support to empower parliament, without imposing external agendas, while respecting Syrian sovereignty.

2. Providing support in the areas of drafting and oversight:

Designing training programs for parliament members and staff in the areas of legislation, committee management, and governance.

3. Monitoring guarantees of pluralism:

Monitoring the representation of marginalized groups and encouraging transparency in the selection of members.

4. Funding civil society:

Providing sustainable funding to support civil society organizations in raising awareness and political participation and building a culture of participatory democracy.

c. To Civil society organizations, unions, and community groups:

1. Active Participation in Parliamentary Formation:

Nominating competent and credible independent candidates and contributing to the establishment of fair and inclusive selection mechanisms.

2. Overseeing Parliamentary Performance:

Monitoring the performance of MPs and demanding their public accountability through civic and media initiatives that support transparency and enhance public trust.

3. Civic and Constitutional Education:

Launching extensive awareness campaigns on the roles of parliament and citizens' rights, with the aim of instilling civic and constitutional responsibility.

4. Building Civic Alliances:

Establishing strong civic networks that defend pluralism and enhance the representation of women, minorities, and local communities in decision-making.

d. To the Media and Academic Sector:

1. Supporting objective coverage of parliamentary work:

Allocating independent media coverage to monitor the formation and performance of parliament and analyze proposed laws, thus enhancing public awareness and transparency.

2. Launching political awareness initiatives:

Organizing academic and media workshops and debates that deepen public understanding of parliamentary culture and emphasize the importance of the legislative role in building a truly democratic state.

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No justice without accountability

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June , 2025

