



# What Would Federalism Mean for the New Syria?

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Since the December 2024 revolution that toppled the 53-year Assad dynasty and replaced it with a government dominated by Sunni Islamist forces, the new government has faced countless challenges in its transition to stable rule. One of these relates to the place of non-Sunni populations, particularly those concentrated in specific geographical regions within the country. At the time of writing, government forces are in the process of seizing territory that has been held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, Qasad) in the northeast of the country since the 2014-2015 anti-ISIS offensive. Clashes between government forces and Bedouin tribes on the one hand and Israeli-supported Druze militias in and around Suwayda on the other erupted in July 2025 and remain a kind of frozen conflict. In March 2025, attacks on government forces on the northwest coast led to a two-week offensive that resulted in the deaths of around 1,600 Alawites.

In this context, one of the predominant political demands of Syria's non-Sunni minorities (particularly those with significant territorial concentration, like the Druze, Kurds, and Alawites) has been for some form of decentralization or even federalism. This demand reflects the ongoing lack of trust between minorities and the new government (which has its origins in Sunni jihadism) and deeper ambiguities about the balance between Syrian national identity and substate sectarian or ethnic identities. For their part, Syrian Sunnis who are broadly supportive of or optimistic about the new regime tend to regard demands for federalism as equivalent to the dissolution or fracturing of the country.

This essay argues for the relevance of federalism as a viable model for the new Syria by refuting some common concerns about it and drawing some lessons from federalism in other modern Arab and Islamic states. There are many confusions and misconceptions about federalism among Syrians, including the ideas that the default norm in Islamic governance is for a unitary sovereign state, that federalism is tantamount to partitioning the state, that federalism compromises the sovereign powers of the state, or that federalism degrades national identity. None of these are implied by the concept or practice of federalism, for which there are many different models provided by modern states. Many modern Muslim states have successfully incorporated various models of federalism without compromising national unity. The concept of federalism should not be seen as anathema in the Syrian context nor as a shibboleth for state fragmentation.

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## Models of Islamic Governance and Decentralization

It is important to observe that the assumption that legitimate Islamic governance requires a centralized, unitary state with strong sovereignty is much more a feature of the modern, post-colonial Arab state than traditional Islamic governance. Modern Islamic constitutional theory does tend to imagine a unitary state (often inflating classical tropes about a single “imam” being the default preference in Islamic law as well as in general over-emphasizing the concept of sovereignty), but this was not the norm in pre-modern Islamic governance or even legal theory. It would be anachronistic to speak of federalism by name in the Islamic constitutional tradition, but it is obvious that many of the themes of regional governance, devolution, and limited central authority have been more characteristic of Islamic governance throughout history than the modern, centralized, hierarchical, sovereign state. A few brief points suffice for present purposes.

Even going back to the canonical juridical treatise on Islamic governance, Abu Hasan al-Mawardi's (d. 1058) *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya* (*The Ordinances of Government*), Islamic law acknowledged the right of the Caliph to make appointments of *general jurisdiction* in specific areas, like governors of provinces and towns, as well as a path to legitimacy for those who acquired their authority not by prior appointment by the Caliph but through their own seizure of power in the provinces (referred to as “rulership by force” (*imarat al-istila*)).

However, more relevant for modern concerns is the way that the Ottoman Empire formalized the delegation and decentralization of power in unprecedented ways for an Islamic polity. Three dimensions of this bear noting. First, there were various degrees of incorporation into the Ottoman state. Some regions were characterized by a suzerain-vassal relationship

whereby the Ottoman ruler conveyed certain markers of legitimacy and received tribute, symbolic loyalty and deference in matters of security and relations with other powers, but otherwise retained local autonomy. Some regions in the Balkans and Black Sea areas (Wallachia, Moldavia, Crimea) and North Africa (modern Tunisia and the Algerian coasts) are examples of this (although the list of such vassal states throughout 600 years of Ottoman rule is too long to list). Second, the Ottomans had a very elaborate administrative structure from eyalets (later reorganized as vilayets) at the largest down through smaller sancaks, kazas, and nahiyes. While these were created by the sultan at his discretion, governors of eyalets (from 1864, vilayets) had substantial autonomy in governing their provinces once financial and security obligations to the state had been met. An official “Vilayet Law” promulgated in 1864 specified the specific responsibilities of the governor (*wali*) of the vilayet and their councils, leaving governors a vast scope for autonomy. Third, the famous Ottoman Millet system allowed for substantial non-territorial autonomy for non-Muslim religious communities, giving them authority over certain internal religious and social matters in exchange for taxation, loyalty and obedience to laws pertaining to public order.

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In short, without adopting the specific concept of “federalism,” pre-modern Islamic governance normalized certain features that bear some comparison to federalism: limited central bureaucratic authority over the entire territory and population of a state, explicit or de facto acknowledgment of the autonomy of regional rulers, and the recognition of minorities to some self-government and autonomy.

## On the Concept of Federalism

It is important to remember that there are various underlying justifications for federalism as well as forms of federal arrangements. In some federal systems (the United States, Germany, Canada), federal units are seen as geographic-administrative designations, although there may be some historical foundation for the boundaries and identities of certain regions. More commonly, federalism is based on the recognition of distinct constitutive ethnic or national groups united into a single federal state (the former Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union, currently Ethiopia, Nepal). Federal states can also differ on whether the state itself is seen as constituted or formed by the substate units (such that those units or peoples retain the sovereign right of exit) or whether the substate units are seen as formed by the central state with the latter retaining constituent power.

Many variations on these themes are imaginable: for example, the United Kingdom is technically constituted by various Acts of Union (Wales in 1535 and 1542, Scotland in 1707, Ireland in 1801) although it remains a unitary state that has nonetheless devolved significant powers to parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. There are also states in which only part of the territory is federated or devolved or in which there are various forms of asymmetrical federalism where different units have different statuses and powers. Thus, two important questions are not determined by the concept of federalism itself: whether federalism means that the state itself is constituted by voluntary acts of association by more primary entities and the basis on which federal units are defined or identified.

Similarly, federal states differ widely on the powers held by the federal government as opposed to federal units. To simplify: there are federal states in which all powers are held by default by the constitutive units except those expressly delegated to the central government (think of the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment and Art. 1 Section 8 of the United States Constitution; or Article 30 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany) and federal states in which the substate units have specific enumerated powers devolved to them by the federal government. Classically weak federal states include Switzerland and Bosnia, with more powers held in the units and a central executive composed of a council rather than a single head of state. At some point, without certain core sovereign powers related to defense, foreign policy, or the power to compel lower units, states might be seen as looser confederations rather than sovereign federal states.

At the other extreme, there are strong federal states in which the central government holds default powers and expressly designates specific, enumerated powers to the substate units. Canada and India are examples of this. However, it is a virtually universal feature of federal states (as opposed to confederations) that the central government holds the key sovereign powers related to defense, taxation, foreign policy and relations with other states, control over borders and immigration, and juridical supremacy in cases of conflict over federal and substate unit laws or judicial judgments.

However, there is a clear distinction between such federal states in which the central government holds un-devolved powers and other forms of administrative decentralization. States can devolve certain administrative functions to local and regional units without those units having substantial authority to draft policy or legislation autonomously from the central government. Also, the shape and extent of decentralized regional, local, or municipal authority is typically entirely at the will and discretion of the centralized authority, whereas in a federal system the division of power is typically codified in a constitution which neither a substate unit nor the central government can alter or abolish unilaterally.

## Which Model for Syria?

Several Muslim-majority states operate under federal systems today, including Malaysia, Pakistan, the UAE, and perhaps most germane to post-Assad Syria, Iraq. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution assigns to federal authorities the responsibility to “preserve the unity, integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Iraq” (Article 109) and enumerates certain matters where the federal government enjoys exclusive authority, most predictably in foreign policy, national security, fiscal and customs policy, citizenship, state finances, and water resources (Art. 110). Beyond this, “all powers not stipulated in the exclusive powers of the federal government belong to the authorities of the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region. Regarding other powers shared between the federal government and the regional government, priority shall be given to the law of the regions and governorates not organized in a region in case of dispute” (Art. 115).

Particularly relevant for Syria are two points. First, as noted above, some federal systems are asymmetrical: the entire territory is not organized into the same kinds of substate units. In the case of Iraq, one region (Kurdistan) is recognized as having special legislative autonomy, whereas the rest of the country is organized into governorates (*muhafazat*). Second, these distinctions are not fixed at the point of constitution making once and for all but are left open to future democratic self-determination: “One or more governorates shall have the right to organize into a region based on a request to be voted on in a referendum” (Art. 119).

This model maps onto Syria for several reasons. Syria is at present divided into fourteen governorates (*muhafazat*), which are further sub-divided into 65 districts (*manatiq*), including the city of Damascus. The districts are further divided into 281 subdistricts (*nawahi*). Out of the fourteen governorates, most are not

demanding decentralization or federalism. The clearest cases for federal recognition are the Latakia and Tartus governorates (both roughly 68% Alawite), the Suwayda governorate (over 87% Druze), and some of the districts in the al-Hasakah, Aleppo and Raqqa governorates (no single governorate has a clear Kurdish majority, and there remains the issue of full Kurdish citizenship in Syria).

These populations are alienated by or hostile to the new regime to various degrees. They are also reconciled to governance by the state to various extents. For the most part surrendering their weapons after December 2024, Alawites are essentially entirely under the control of the state. The Druze in and around Suwayda maintain militias and, more importantly, Israeli sponsorship. While Kurdish control over areas in the northeast has largely collapsed, they have neither been disarmed nor integrated into the national army (despite agreements to do so). Various forms of federalism and decentralization should not be seen as capitulation by the new government but rather as a path toward establishing long-term stability in these regions.

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The Latakia and Tartus governorates combined and the Suwayda governorate are obvious candidates for a certain form of asymmetrical federalism (as in the Iraqi model). The primary

concern of the local populations is security, followed by the way in which the ideological orientation of the new government will be manifested in educational policies and curriculum, public morality, public sector employment, and other areas in which conservative Sunni morality may clash with the sensibilities of the local populations. (It should be noted that this need not be seen in purely sectarian or religious terms; there may be secular or liberal-minded Sunnis anxious about the direction of the new government as well). For their part, the government has reasonable concerns about national security and areas of the country being staging grounds for militias or foreign governments. The coastal area in particular is of obvious importance to national security and sovereign control over the coast and naval bases.

With a strong enough will from the central government to induce Alawites, Druze and others to integrate into the new state, various forms of federalism and decentralization are a powerful tool for preserving what matters for a stable and sovereign state, especially in the areas of security, foreign policy, and national finances. Beyond these core sovereign imperatives, the devolution of such matters as local policing, education, language rights, public morality, land use, and cultural protection do not represent threats to state authority or national integration.

Such issues could be devolved not merely unilaterally and administratively but to new regional assemblies or parliaments, akin to the Kurdistan Regional Parliament in Iraq. Such devolution has a few advantages. It can channel minority protest into electoral and representative politics rather than violence, riots, or resignation. Such assemblies could also be laboratories for representative and participatory politics more broadly in Syria. Devolution can also reduce governance and legitimacy costs on the government, on the assumption that close regulation of the communal religious and cultural lives of non-Sunni minorities is not a high priority for the new government. Importantly, regional devolution does not threaten Sunni or other populations in these areas. They remain protected by the state and are afforded the same representation and participation in hypothetical regional assemblies.

Kurdish areas do not necessarily lend themselves to devolution along the lines of existing governorates. This does not negate the possibilities offered by federalism. One possibility is the redrawing of governorate boundaries. Another is the use of districts (*manatiq*) as the site of devolution. In addition to the powers

and competencies discussed above, the Kurdish areas would also have further interests in language rights in education and public institutions. While it is hard to imagine this at present given the security policies of neighboring states, the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland also provides a model, potentially attractive to the Kurds, of certain non-sovereign “cross-border bodies” that allow for cultural, economic, and ecological institutions that operate across state borders, not violating the sovereignty of the relevant states, but allowing for the sense of some political unity on the part of ethnic nations spread across multiple states.

The constitution adopted in Syria in early 2025 was an expressly provisional one, drafted by a small, appointed committee, promising a future more inclusive constituent process. As the new Syria struggles with stability, security, economic rebuilding, and national integration, the question of federalism or decentralization should not be a taboo or red line for the inevitable future constitution-drafting process.

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#### Cover Photo

Syria's interim president Ahmad Al-Sharaa, center, signs a temporary constitution for the country in Damascus, Syria, Thursday March 13, 2025. At left foreign minister Asaad Hassan al-Shiban.(AP Photo/Omar Albam)

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