



**Kaunas University of Technology**  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities

# **Narrative Policy Framework of Syria's Transitional Governance in the Context of Legitimacy Crisis**

Master's Final Degree Project

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**Kaunas, 2026**



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Public Policy and Security (6211JX044)

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## **Narrative Policy Framework of Syria's Transitional Governance in the Context of Legitimacy Crisis**

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### **Summary**

Syria continues to be one of the most complex and deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. The power dynamic in the country changed by the end of 2024, when the Sunni Islamist militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa overthrew the decades-long Bashar al-Assad regime. The 'surprise offensive' attracted attention from international actors and the media, whose coverage gradually shifted from narratives about the group's extremist past towards discourses of legitimacy that positioned the group and its leader as the main power in Syria. The legitimacy of transitional governments is one of the most controversial and debated topics. This raises continuous discussions in international arena, as the validity can significantly influence diplomatic recognition and aid. The research focuses on the legitimacy crisis in Syria's transitional governance due to the involvement of the controversial group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. It aims to analyse how the media create and frame narratives across different phases of Syria's transitional governance. To achieve this, the research establishes four objectives: 1. To investigate how the political transition emerges from conflict dynamics and to define the main stages of the Syrian transition; 2. To review theories of political transition, legitimacy, framing, and agenda-setting in the context of the legitimacy crisis; 3. To identify leading narrative elements toward Syrian transitional governance, as portrayed in selected media outlets, using the Narrative Policy Framework; 4. To compare and evaluate whether shifts in media narratives correspond with changes in political developments reflected by the international community. The theoretical part is grounded in normative and discursive legitimacy, framing, and agenda-setting theories, employing a qualitative research design. The empirical part applies the Narrative Policy Framework, which allows for the systematic content analysis of narrative elements such as setting, plot, characters, and the moral of the story. News reports from two outlets, BBC News and Al Jazeera, are coded using Maxqda software. Later, the narrative circulation typology allows to investigate whether international political discourse corresponds to media narratives on the legitimacy of Syria's new governance. The findings suggest that political transition unfolds in four stages: Deadlock, Violent trigger, Initial transition, and Post-Settlement Transition. The analysis concludes that the primary attempts to frame legitimacy in Syria emerged even before the official establishment of the new government, marked by the signing of a new constitutional declaration. Media narratives gradually shifted from delegitimizing Assad and associating HTS with terrorism in Deadlock to attempts to legitimize the group in later stages. The analysis of other stages revealed that BBC News frames the legitimacy of new Syrian authorities as a conditional and reversible process, whereas Al Jazeera frames legitimacy as a process, progressing together with governance developments. Overall, the findings demonstrate close alignment between media narratives and international political discourse, highlighting the strong connection between media discourse and political strategies.

Vainoriūtė, Dominyka. Naratyvinės politikos modelio taikymas analizuojant Sirijos pereinamąją valdyseną legitimumo krizės kontekste. Magistro studijų baigiamasis projektas / vadovė prof. dr. Aistė Balžekienė; Kauno technologijos universitetas, Socialinių, humanitarinių mokslų ir menų fakultetas.

Studijų kryptis ir sritis (studijų krypties grupė): 02S (J02).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Sirija, Sirijos pilietinis karas, Hay'at tahrir al-Sham, Ahmed al-Sharaa, Sirijos pereinamoji vyriausybė.

Kaunas, 2026, 92 p.

## Santrauka

Jau daugiau nei dešimtmetį Sirija išlieka vienu kompleksiškiausiu ir mirtingiausiu 21 amžiaus konfliktu visame pasaulyje. 2024 metų pabaigoje, sunitų islamistų grupuotė, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham vadovaujama Ahmedo al-Sharaa pertvarkė galių dinamiką Sirijoje nuversdama ilgametį Sirijos prezidentą Basharą al-Assadą. Vadinamasis "netikėtas puolimas" sulaukė didelio tarptautinių aktorių ir žiniasklaidos dėmesio, kuris ilgainiui pakrypo nuo naratyvų apie ekstremistinę organizacijos praeitį, iki legitimumo, įgalinant ekstremistinę grupuotę ir jos vadą kaip pagrindinę politinę jėgą, atsakingą už sėkmingą Sirijos pereinamąjį laikotarpį. Pereinamųjų vyriausybių legitimumas politiniuose diskursuose vertinamas dviprasmiškai, o jų teisėtumas, darantis įtaką diplomatiniam pripažinimui ir tarptautinei paramai kelia daugybės klausimų tarptautinėje erdvėje. Šio mokslinio darbo tyrimo objektas yra Sirijos pereinamosios valdžios legitimumo krizė, kilusi dėl Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham įsitraukimo. Tyrime siekiama išanalizuoti, kaip žiniasklaida formuoja ir įrėmina Sirijos pereinamosios valdžios naratyvus, skirtingais pereinamosios valdysenos etapais. Tikslui pasiekti pasitelkiami šie uždaviniai: 1. Iširti, kaip politinis perėjimas kyla iš konflikto dinamikos ir apibrėžti pagrindinius perėjimo etapus. 2. Apžvelgti legitimumo, rėminimo ir darbotvarkės nustatymo teorijas legitimumo krizės kontekste. 3. Identifikuoti pagrindinius naratyvus apie Sirijos pereinamąją vyriausybę, vaizduojamą pasirinktuose žiniasklaidos priemonėse naudojant naratyvinės politikos modelį. 4. Palyginti ir įvertinti ar pokyčiai žiniasklaidos naratyvuose atitinka pokyčius politiniame diskurse suformuotame tarptautinės bendruomenės. Teorinė tyrimo dalis grindžiama normatyvinio ir diskursyvaus legitimumo, rėminimo bei darbotvarkės formavimo teorijomis. Tyrimas atliekamas taikant kokybinę analizę. Empirinėje dalyje naudojamas Naratyvinės Politikos Modelis, leidžiantis sistemingai atlikti turinio analizę, siekiant atskleisti vyraujančius naratyvinius elementus, įskaitant aplinką, veikėjus, siužetą ir moralą. Tyrime analizuojamos BBC News ir Al Jazeera publikacijos, pasitelkiant Maxqda programinę įrangą kodavimui atlikti. Vėliau pristatoma naratyvinės cirkuliacijos modelio aplikacija, leidžianti nustatyti, ar tarptautinis politinis diskursas atitinka medijos kuriamus naratyvus apie Sirijos vyriausybės legitimumą.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, jog politinis perėjimas suskirstytas į keturis vystymosi etapus: Aklavietė (Deadlock), įnirtingas stimulus (Violent trigger), pradinis perėjimas (Initial transition) ir perėjimas po susitarimo (Post-settlement transition). Nustatyta, kad pradinis perėjimas Sirijoje prasidėjo dar prieš oficialų naujos valdžios įtvirtinimą pasirašant naują, laikinąją konstituciją. Žiniasklaidos naratyvai palaipsniui keitėsi nuo Assado delegitimizavimo ir HTS siejimo su terorizmu iki grupuotės legitimizavimo. Deadlock (aklavietė) laikotarpis pasižymėjo Assado režimo delegitimizavimu, tuo tarpu kiti laikotarpiai atskleidė pagrindinį skirtumą tarp žiniasklaidos šaltinių. Kadangi BBC News naujųjų Sirijos valdžios legitimumą rėmino, kaip nuolat stebimą ir nuo sąlygų priklausantį, bei

galutinai nenusistovėjusį procesą, tuo tarpu Al Jazeera legitimumą konstravo, kaip palapsniui įtvirtinamą elementą, kuris įsitvirtina eigoje. Taip pat nustatyta, jog žiniasklaidos skleidžiami naratyvai iš esmės atitinka tarptautinės bendruomenės skleidžiamą politinį diskursą, taip atskleidžiant glaudų ryšį tarp medijų diskurso ir politinių strategijų.

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## **List of abbreviations and terms**

### **Abbreviations:**

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation;

EU - European Union;

HTS - Hay'at tahrir al-Sham;

IS – Islamic State;

NAS - Network Agenda Setting

NPF - Narrative Policy Framework

SDF- Syrian Democratic Forces

SSG – Syrian Salvation Government

SNA - Syrian National Army

UK - United Kingdom;

UN – United Nations;

US- United States.

## Introduction

The contemporary world is surrounded by multiple crises, from natural disasters to technological dangers, wars, and political chaos. For more than a decade, the Middle East continues to be at the very bottom of the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Within this region, Syria is characterized as the longest, deadliest, and most complex conflict in recent history. The Syrian civil war, which began as part of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, with Syrians requiring democratic reforms, quickly escalated to a full-scale armed conflict. In the following years, the World was shocked by the extreme brutality of the Bashar al-Assad regime, when thousands of Syrians were attacked with chemical weapons or received other tortures (Baker, 2024). Since 2011, armed actions and huge sanctions led to a mass displacement of millions of people both internally and externally, with around 6 million refugees abroad and 7,2 million displaced within Syria, where 90 % of the population lives below the poverty line (UNDP, 2025). Such social and economic collapse, intensified by sectarian divisions, created a fertile environment for various rebel groups, within estimation of over 1000 insurgent groups operating in Syria, only after two years of conflict outbreak (Lund, 2013).

On the top of this, extremist groups, such as Islamic State, Ahrar al-Sham, or Jabhat al-Nusra, which later rebranded to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, are further intensifying the conflict with their visions of alternative governance. The groups gain public support by exploiting sectarian tensions, by forcing them to obey to strict religious distortions, which are enabled through violence. In this way, extremists expanded their military capacities, seized huge cities, and established their governance systems, making peace even further from reach. After 2017, Hay'at tahrir al-Sham (HTS) consolidated its power on most of Idlib Governorate and a few other cities, becoming the *de facto* ruler and establishing its own governance structure under the Syrian Salvation Government. Despite this, the group continued to face accusations of harsh human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Ultimately, after years of instability, this Islamic insurgent group emerged as the most powerful actor capable of leading the Bashar al-Assad regime to collapse in December 2024. The group's evolution from extremist fighters to rulers raised serious questions over the legitimacy of authority in Syria, thus attracting attention from the media and political actors.

**Relevance.** The quickly escalating 'surprise offensive' pushed country into chaos, which experts refer to as a 'power vacuum', where actors compete for influence (Brennan, 2024). The most powerful actor, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which is formerly classified as a terrorist entity, now leads a central role in the Syrian transitional government, under its leader Ahmad al-Sharaa. This highlights the dilemma of legitimacy and international recognition. HTS's former ties to Al-Qaeda, al-Nusra front, commitment to extremist ideology, and human rights abuses challenge the understanding of what should be considered legitimate governance (Krause, 2024). The group's succession in Syria attracted international attention from Western countries, which for decades engaged with Syria through sanctions, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic means. However, even the first steps of the newly constructed government, such as appointing HTS members to the highest posts, including foreign fighters to the newly formed Syrian National Army, or assigning relatives to most influential posts, received huge criticism from the experts (Drevon & Hawach, 2025; Margolin, 2025; Oweis, 2025). Such controversial plans, aimed at the consolidation of the president's power and pursuit of global recognition, strongly contradict Western expectations of acceptable governance, complicating diplomatic dialogue and public discourse of Syria as a state in political transition (Barth, 2025).

The chronology of events suggests that the Syrian transition unfolded in three stages. Before the first stage of the transition, the conflict was marked by an extremely long period of deadlock where Bashar al-Assad's regime was unable to recapture Idlib Governorate, while HTS inefficiently tried to advance towards Damascus. Such a stalemate persisted for over a decade until HTS launched a sudden, large-scale offensive, for which the regime was unprepared, thereby breaking the deadlock and initiating the transition. Eventually, this marked the beginning of the first stage of the transition, when HTS began capturing major cities such as Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus, and culminated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2024, when Assad fled to Russia (Gebeily & Azhari, 2024; Michaelson, 2024). The second stage of the transition occurred with the announcement of a new president and the establishment of new governing institutions, with HTS being *de facto* in rule (Adar et al., 2025). The third stage is established with Ahmad al-Sharaa signing the Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic on March 13, 2025, and thus creating the legal foundations of the new *de jure* governing system (Gritten, 2025).

The governance issue extends to academic debates on how to approach legitimacy in transitional contexts. Debates on recognition note that once an armed non-state actor receives an offensive label, for example, 'terrorist' or 'extremist', such marking becomes too 'sticky' to get rid of, thus influencing how the public perceives a certain actor. This could, in the long run, affect political discourse, international dialogue, and possible engagement in the future. (Pfeifer et al. 2022). In this context, Syria becomes a significant case, allowing to access whether past labels continue to influence perceptions during different transitional periods. News media that have the power to shape international perceptions during transitional periods allow to determine whether international discourse continues to use such 'adhesive labelling' to HTS, portraying them as extremists or employs new interpretations. Narratives created by journalists do not merely report events on the issues, but rather actively shape actors and topics in particular narratives through framing strategies, at the same time prioritizing certain issues, while overshadowing others through the strategies of agenda setting (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Happer & Philo, 2013). Research on these processes is crucial at this time, as previous studies largely focused on security and migration issues during the previous Assad era, thus leaving media framing of the current transitional leadership of HTS unexplored. The study aims to analyse how the Syrian transition amid a legitimacy crisis is interpreted and communicated in Western media narratives through framing and agenda-setting lenses.

**Novelty.** There are very few studies that focus on media perceptions of HTS. While those accessible examine the period before the Syria's transition. For instance, recent study established inconsistencies in media framing of the rebel group. As some outlets refer to the group as 'rebels' or 'Islamist factions', while others refer to them as 'jihadists' (Medya News, 2024). Despite variation in the organization's terminology, a consistent trend occurs across media narratives towards Syria, where most of the emphasis is on security and migration issues, whereas HTS's political role or legitimacy dilemma remains unexplored (Ahmad, 2025). For instance, Popovic and Welfens (2024) presents the 2015 refugee influx to Europe, and find that the situation around the borders by EU actors was mainly framed through the security perspective, where refugees were narrated as the main issue of the crisis. While the root causes, including the war or persecution of certain minorities, was presented inconsistently. El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2024), further strengthens this idea, as it was discovered that similar to EU actors, American media narrates Syrian refugees primarily through the angle of the crisis, rather than explaining the broader dynamic of the war. This suggests that migrant and security issues appear to be dominant in media narratives, while other causes tend to be sidelined.

Nonetheless, existing research remains limited to the Assad period, leaving media framing during the newest political transformation unexplored. Most political transitions involve changes in leadership, political priorities, and ideologies. Therefore, the analysis of media narratives in this period could strengthen the academic area by providing key narrative patterns of the most salient issues. The research could also provide an understanding of whether the narratives on migrants, terrorism, and security also dominate in transitional contexts. Balmas and Sheaffer (2017), argues that the media actively narrates different issues, functioning as one of the most influential sources for the dissemination of information. Their research on foreign news coverage of seven leaders of Western democracies, analysing the thirty-year period, suggests that personalization of leaders is one of the key narrative focus. This implies that a change in political leadership could be the trigger of a shift in media narratives. Because the new leaders present different authority and seek different priorities, thus influencing how issues and these actors are presented in the news. In the Syrian context, this could mean that Syrian transitional governance, with the current leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the former Al-Qaeda commander, could itself be the trigger for sharp changes in media reporting.

A number of studies have demonstrated that the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is an effective tool for policy analysis, including its application to media narrative analysis. Yet, there are few studies applying this method for the crisis context. One such study is a recent research by Benitez (2025), which applied NPF to see the populist administrative changes in the United States and Mexico. Findings suggest that media narratives differ in terms of ideological perspective. The media systematically frames actors by classifying them as heroes, villains, or victims. This allows the media to shape the public's perceptions of the legitimacy of different actors. Similarly, Apriliyanti et al. (2022) used NPF to study dominant narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Their findings suggest that media and political actors narrate events by framing stakeholders as heroes, villains, or victims, thus suggesting the audience's possible legitimacy and overall perception towards a certain actor. Smellie and Boswell (2025) presents a modified approach, which adds a certain typology to analyse how the political discourse corresponds to shifts in media narratives. The research evaluates whether the political discourse embraces, adapts, rejects or ignores the shifts in media narratives towards the 2015 European migration crisis. Their findings revealed that media and politics are mutually interlinked. Highlighting that narrative influence depends on time, context, and issue prominence. In such a way, this thesis extends this approach by applying it to the new type of crisis – legitimacy crisis in Syria's transitional governance. Specifically, applying the narrative comparison model to examine the correlation between media framing and changes in the transitional phase. Agenda-setting and framing theories further complement this approach by demonstrating how the media shape perceptions through issue selection and narrative construction.

This study is unique as it aims to analyse media narratives with the Narrative Policy Framework, which allows for systemic investigation of how Syria's transitional governance is framed, by classifying main narrative actors as heroes, villains, or victims, analysing the setting, plot, and moral of the story. The model is supplemented with an analysis of legitimacy narratives and an examination of the relationship between the shifts in political discourse and media narrative developments. This research is also among the first to apply the NPF model for the transitional context analysis.

**Research problem.** The legitimacy of transitional governance is one of the most controversial topics, which influences continuous academic and political debates in the international arena, as it can significantly affect diplomatic recognition and international aid. The division gap in understanding

the legitimacy in transitional contexts is particularly evident in the Syrian case, where understanding of how media narratives construct and contest the legitimacy of newly established Syrian transitional governance remains limited.

### **Research questions:**

1. How media narratives frame the transitional governance of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham during different stages of Syria's political transition?
2. How changes in international political discourse regarding legitimacy relate to changes in BBC News and Al Jazeera narratives about Syria's transitional governance?

**Research object.** The legitimacy crisis in Syria's transitional governance due to the involvement of the controversial group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

**Research aim.** To analyse how media create and frame narratives in different phases of Syria's transitional governance.

### **Objectives:**

1. To investigate how political transition emerges from conflict dynamics and define the main stages of the Syrian transition.
2. To review theories of legitimacy, framing, and agenda-setting in the context of a legitimacy crisis.
3. To identify leading narrative elements towards Syrian transitional governance, portrayed in selected media outlets using the Narrative Policy Framework.
4. To compare and evaluate whether shifts in media narratives correspond to changes in political developments reflected by the international community.

**Research method.** The study adopts a qualitative research method, using primary data sources. The study consists of two main parts: Theoretical and Empirical. The theoretical part combines normative and discursive legitimacy with framing and agenda-setting theories. The empirical part applies the Narrative Policy Framework to analyse narrative elements: setting, plot, characters, and the moral of the story. While legitimacy-based values are used to reflect issue salience. The final part of the empirical analysis adopts a narrative circulation typology to compare outlet reporting and international political discourse. News reports from two outlets, BBC News and Al Jazeera, are analysed using Maxqda coding software, with code relations browser, profile and document comparison chart, quantizing, crosstab, code matrix, and visualizing intersection results in MaxMaps.

### **Structure of the project.**

- Introduction – 5 pages.
- Theoretical part – 15 pages.
- Methodology – 7 pages.
- Results – 41 pages
- Conclusions – 3 pages
- List of references and information sources- 6
- List of sampled articles- 8

For linguistic clarity, the research uses language-editing tools: Grammarly and Gemini.

## **1. Construction of legitimacy during political transitions**

Political transition reflects periods of uncertainty during which governance structures, authority, and legitimacy are redefined. Such a process becomes extremely challenging in the context of ongoing conflict, for instance, in Syria, where the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime and the rise of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham blurred the lines between war, peace, and reconstruction. This complex situation requires a multidimensional approach, beginning with conflict and transition stages, moving on to normative legitimacy, focusing on lawful principles of authority, and finally, legitimacy produced through language and narrative framing. In this way, the first subsection connects theoretical insights from transitional and legitimacy theories, giving special attention to the discursive approach to legitimacy. Thus, establishing the understanding on how values, outcomes and meanings are constructed withing public discourse. Later the discourse influences how legitimacy should be perceived and evaluated during transitional periods. The second subsections moves to present framing and agenda-setting theories, to explain how media narratives highlight certain aspects of legitimacy or governance in portraying Syria's transition, thereby examining how legitimacy and governance are communicated, contested, or reinforced for wide audiences.

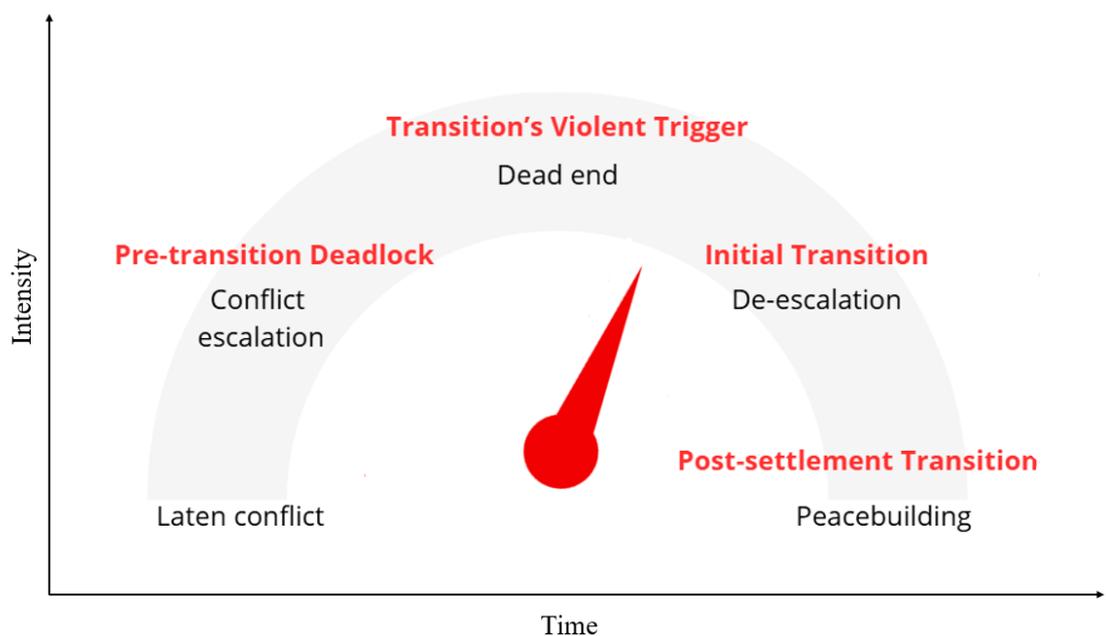
### **1.1. Transitional government. From Deadlock to Post-Settlement.**

The process of transition is understood to begin after disruptions of the normal functioning of the system, either by crisis, conflict, or war. Especially, conditions created by war, such as a weakened governance system, economic disruptions, or armed groups, are said to drive the transition. Extensive research on conflict dynamics suggests that the period of transition emerges from the way the conflict ends. Collier et al., (2008) argue that transitions only begin after the war ends, as the post-conflict phase 'inherits' the conditions that were created by the conflict itself. This means that, after the war, there is a specific transitional period, during which governance structures are weakened, the economy has reached its lowest point and the legitimacy of the possible new governance is limited or unclear. Such aftermath, advanced by huge instability, is said to determine how likely the fighting can resurge and what are the possible strategies for the future governance. Therefore, according to such thinking, all types of transition, including political, social, and economic, can only take place after the active phase of the war. Maoz (as cited in Kreutz, 2010) strengthens this by noting that: "*decisive outcomes and imposed settlements tend to yield longer periods of ... stability than tied disputes.*" Meaning that the way conflict ends, whether it is a decisive victory, negotiated settlement, or stalemate, directly affects the future trajectory, legitimacy, and stability of the political transition. With this perspective it could be assumed that legitimacy is delayed until the transition achieves stability. Afterwards authority establishment signals the successful period of transition. Thus, suggesting the legitimacy to be fragile and easily reversible.

Unlike in the traditional understanding that transition begins only after the conflict ends, Petrini (2021) argues that in contemporary conflicts, transition can emerge even while the violence persists, as there is no quick path from war to peace, meaning that active conflict and transition overlap. Various forms of transition, including political, economic, or social, start much earlier than the peace is achieved. Transition is argued to be not merely a reconstruction, but a highly complex and multifaceted political process that requires comprehensive analysis from different angles, including processes, authority transfer, phasing, and end state. Armstrong & Chura-Beaver (2010) offer key dimensions of transition:

- Transition as a Process - structured proceeding of leadership and operating mechanisms, ensuring that short-term goals turn into long-term goals.
- Transition as Authority Transfer - emphasizes the legal aspect of transition, where legitimacy is transferred from external to local actors.
- Transition as Phasing - treats transition as a gradual event, which can appear in multiple areas, including politics, economy, society, and military sector.
- Transition as End State - outcome event, which links previous steps to the goal of transition.

This perspective implies that transitions do not occur in linear patterns, but rather unfold within different stages of complex conflict dynamics. Suggesting that, authority can be gradually legitimized, where its legitimacy is constructed during the course of transition, rather than postponed till the complete stabilization of the conflict. Figure 1 presents the stages of the conflict, with the vertical axis indicating intensity to illustrate escalation, peak, and resolution of violent actions, and the horizontal axis indicating progression.



**Fig. 1.** Adapted Conflict Stages (Created by the author based on conflict evolution suggested by Brahm 2003, the text in red font proposed by the author)

At the bottom of the curve, latent conflict, which over a certain period of time, intensifies to conflict escalation. The highest peak, named Dead end, illustrates the period when conflicting parties continue conflict as the costs of continuation still outweigh the perceived benefits of victory. After some period of time, the curve begins to descend through the process of de-escalation and negotiation, leading to dispute settlement and, ultimately, post-conflict peacebuilding.

The curve has been adjusted using red font letters to indicate where the transition emerges. Even before the actual attempts to frame legitimacy, period of Deadlock presents background information that might be beneficial in explaining why certain actors were legitimized and delegitimized in later stages. In the Syrian case, due to HTS's rise and especially the long weakening of the Assad regime, the conflict stands outside the traditional theory of ripeness, which emphasizes mutual perception of suffering and leads to negotiated solutions (Zartman, 2000). In fact, for more than a decade, Syria remained in a stalemate, as the Assad regime was unable to recapture large areas of Idlib governorate, nor were the rebels able to advance to the key city of Damascus. Fragmented actors, endless clashes

between different factions and multiple parties, including huge ethnical and sectarian divisions, were the reasons that kept this war in a 'Deadlock' position (United Nations, 2024).

A sudden transition occurred when HTS launched an offensive, violently speeding up the way out of stalemate. Transition's Violent Trigger, which is placed at the peak of the hurting stalemate, represents the critical marking point when conflict reaches the peak of 'Deadlock'. This phase reflects the culmination where forceful actions overthrew the possibilities of seeking negotiations. At this point, transition is seen not just as a military one, but also political, as rebels instantly announced a new leader of the country, took control over institutions, and established their positions in future governance, thus marking a true regime change. Thus, the stalemate acted like a process, where the long Deadlock and exhaustion created the conditions for a sudden action, which ended the stalemate and started the *de facto* transition. To reflect this shift, Figure 1 presents level indicator marking the threshold when focus shifts from violence towards new governance attempts. Later, the transition named Initial Transition occurred in the downward slope of the curve. This reflects the active phase when the transition started to be operationalized. After successfully passing through the Violent Trigger phase, the transition moves from fighting to win, to building prospects for future peace. It should be mentioned that this phase closely aligns with the dimensions of Transition as a Process and Authority Transfer suggested by Armstrong & Chura-Beaver (2010). Such process, which is characterised by fragile ceasefires and the first attempts to form and present political bodies, portrays a significant shift from war narratives to peacebuilding, with newly established, temporary structures of governance.

The final stage of transition, named Post-Settlement Transition, represents the long-term conditions, closely aligning with what Armstrong & Chura-Beaver term *Transition as Phasing and Transition as End State*, where the intensity of violence decreases, and new rules start to be formed and implemented. The goal of such a transition is to complete the transformation by achieving both domestic and international legitimacy, consolidating power, and establishing a stable governance system capable of sustaining long-term peace. In the Syrian case, the beginning of the Post-Settlement Phase can be attributed to the period when the interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's signed the Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic on March 13, 2025 (Gritten, 2025). The declaration, which functions as a formal legal instrument, established political consolidation during the Initial Transition phase, cancelled the al-Assad rule, and determined the foundational elements of future Syria. This curve illustrates that in contemporary conflicts, transitional contexts emerge way before the conflict ends, namely at the point where conflict dynamics shift from making war to turning for peace and state building. Such a perspective notes that the political transition lies at the heart of conflict resolution, even when active fighting continues, political authority and legitimacy begin to change before the initial or final settlement.

### **1.2.1 Legitimizing transition**

Legitimacy is often understood as an element achieved through legal practises, but it is also said to be shaped by social discourse. For this reason, the following subsection examines normative legitimacy, which focuses on the moral and ethical justifications of lawful governance, and discursive legitimacy, addressing public communication and debate in defining legitimacy. Together, these concepts provide insight into how political actors are evaluated and perceived, especially in contexts with highly contested authorities. As legitimacy explains why actors are accepted as credible or

lawful, it provides a valuable foundation before moving to how such acceptance is constructed and communicated through the media.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, the way legitimacy is understood depends on the perspective from which it is examined (Blatter, 2018). The simplest way to approach legitimacy is to consider the different definitions of the term. For instance, the Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) defines it as the value of being lawful and rational, and of behaving in accordance with regulations. Oxford learners (n.d.) highlight the necessity of “fair and acceptable reasons”, while Princeton (Hurd, n.d.) focuses on the authority and obedience relationship, where legitimacy revolves around the idea that an institution or a ruler has the right to govern. Similarly, Oxford Reference (n.d.) stresses that legitimacy is not only about ‘acceptability of the ruler to members’, but also one of the most concerning areas in politics. Finally, Britannica adds that legitimacy has two dimensions, normative and empirical, where normative is grounded in legal principles, norms, or ethical standards, and empirical, where acceptance of the governed is the central focus, regardless of formal legality.

Transitional contexts are especially fragile, in which the legitimacy of governance is constantly contested. This is especially relevant, as this thesis examines the legitimacy crisis of Syria’s transitional government due to the involvement of the highly controversial group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. As discussed shortly before, HTS aims to escape from ‘adhesive’ labelling of terrorism and extremism, which continues to shape domestic and international perceptions of its role. Although the group rebranded itself through new governance positions, there are still concerns over its ideological past, emergence from an al-Qaeda branch, and contested authority from experts. Such factors portray how legitimacy is not merely a matter of formal justification but is also actively negotiated through discourse. Therefore, the following subsections on normative and discursive legitimacy provide a perspective on how the authority of HTS is perceived and challenged.

**Conceptualizing Legitimacy.** Normative legitimacy focuses on philosophical and moral standards which aim to explain the validity of authority. For centuries, thinkers have aimed to answer the question of legitimacy by developing different theories and concepts. Classical theorists such as Hobbes argued that legitimacy is framed in terms of order, liberty, and protection. In *Leviathan* (1651), it is established that every individual must give up his personal freedom to the ruler, which then would have the power of all the man, and thus represent the collective will of the whole society. It is emphasized that the ruler's actions are always considered legitimate, as people have already agreed to grant him all their power, regardless of whether sovereignty is achieved through force or by agreement. In contrast, Locke (1690) puts emphasis on the consent of the governed and the protection of their natural rights of liberty, protection of life and property. It is argued that governments are formed through mutual agreements, and they ought to safeguard these rights. For this reason, authority lasts as long as it continues to ensure and protect these rights. If the government harms its citizens, people have the right to withdraw their consent to be ruled and form a new one. Similarly, Rousseau (1762) rejects the idea that sovereignty can be achieved through force, arguing that legitimacy must derive from collective agreement. Such an agreement, called the social contract, unites individuals into one, where the rights of individuals, such as freedom and protection of individual rights, are ensured through the concept of ‘general will of the people’. That is the collective agreement aligning individuals’ rights with the common good.

Building on these classic theorists, Lipset (1959) expanded the concept of legitimacy, linking it to the effectiveness of a political system, where legitimacy refers to the community’s acknowledgement of

an existing political institution as the most appropriate option for their context, and effectiveness is the sufficient capacity to meet the needs of that society. Lipset highlights that crises of legitimacy occur during social or political transitions, when previously dominant groups lose influence, and thus new structures are introduced to replace them. In such an event, legitimacy is portrayed as the most essential element for stability, as any governing body risks collapse if acceptance among key social groups is not secured. Here again, highlighting the role of effectiveness in legitimacy, as in order to keep legitimacy, one must ensure the effectiveness of the system to meet the public demands. In such a way, this perspective connects normative legitimacy to modern day democracies, where the existence of the political power depends not just on moral justifications but also on institutional effectiveness.

Easton (1975) further develops his idea of effectiveness by dividing legitimacy into two forms of support. Specific support is performance-based and closely aligns with Lipset's idea of institutional effectiveness. While diffuse support is depicted as the main factor stabilizing the legitimacy, because it is formed as a moral belief in the rightfulness of the political system. Therefore, here the commitment is continuous, even if some short-term failures or challenges occur. Thus, effectiveness in the long run strengthens diffuse support, as consistent institutional performance helps citizens to internalize the legitimacy of the system, leading to the stabilization of legitimacy. Once the public evaluates the system as morally right, short-term failures are less likely to cause governance disruptions, thereby reducing the risk of legitimacy crises. Habermas (1984) expands this discussion by noting that even well-functioning systems can still experience a legitimacy deficit when citizens' expectations outgrow the state's capacity. In such an event, if the government is considered no longer rightful or morally justifiable, a 'legitimation crisis' eventually occurs, as citizens no longer feel motivated to obey or participate. Meaning that institutional effectiveness alone cannot preserve moral or normative belief in authority.

Extending the discussion on normative legitimacy, Weber (1978) connects the themes already presented in earlier philosophical thought, such as obedience, domination, and authority. Whereas, earlier theorists examined such concepts from philosophical side, analysing the moral question of why people tend to obey. Weber approaches these topics from other side by questioning them sociologically, and aiming to explain how people actually obey in practice. The author presents the concept of domination, which according to him is a central element for understanding why individuals obey. The author aligns legitimacy with subjective acceptance of authority, which is defined as the probability that orders will be obeyed, since political systems require a belief in their rightfulness and free will to comply. Particularly, this belief is considered the element transforming mere power into legitimate power.

Thereafter, Weber introduces a classification connecting legitimacy within the broader forms of authority governing obedience. According to him, three ideal types of authority:

- Legal authority is defined as legitimacy reflecting a system of formal rules and laws that are generally accepted as binding within a society, having a shared belief in the legality and appropriateness of the existing system.
- Traditional authority is portrayed as a model of political rule shaped by traditions, habits and established practices. Here people tend to obey only to a ruler because of established belief in tradition, rather than formal written laws as in legal authority, where obedience is tied to a legal system as a whole.

- Charismatic authority is based on extraordinary qualities of the leader, where citizens obey believing in only the leader's capabilities or uniqueness, rather than considering laws or traditions.

Such authority is said to be revolutionary and unstable, as new rulers tend to move away from old traditions or regulations, often resulting in instability, as it lacks formal rules or standard procedures. For this reason, Weber suggests that charismatic authority must undergo a process of 'routinization', that is, when such authority employs elements of traditional, legal, or both to transform personal charisma into a stable form of rule. Overall, this suggests that legitimacy is not just a legal or moral concern, but at the same time a social process closely linked to shared beliefs, customs, and social perceptions about the right to rule. This understanding provides basis for analysing how authority is established, challenge or maintained in different political settings.

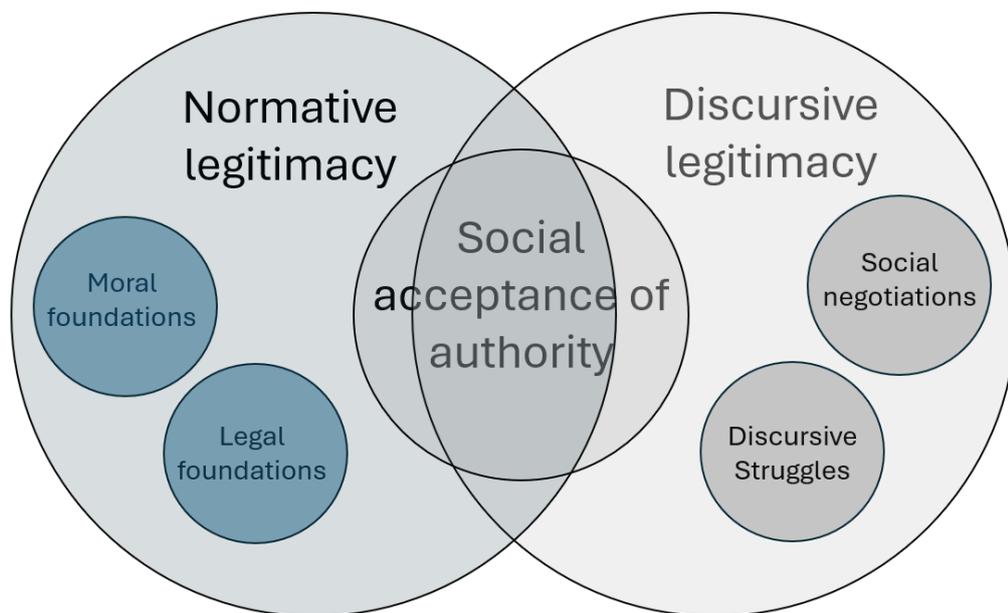
### **1.2.2 Legitimacy produced through language**

While normative legitimacy focuses on laws, rules, and moral principles deciding what should be legitimate, additionally, it is important to understand how legitimacy is communicated in practice. Therefore, the concept of discursive legitimacy becomes the central element of analysis, highlighting that legitimacy is much more than legal or moral principles, but also an outcome of communication, constructed through language, narratives, and discourse. Discursive legitimacy aims to analyse how media or actors shape narratives to make something seem right, justified, or contrary, inappropriate. Van Leeuwen (2007) introduced one of the most influential frameworks for the analysis of how legitimacy is constructed through discourse. He identifies four main stages through which actors justify authority, power, or their decisions: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Among these, authorization and moral evaluation are of particular significance, as they provide a foundational theoretical basis for analysing how legitimacy is constructed in discourse. Authorization is the first of these stages, involving legitimation based on authority of power and having several forms of influence. For instance, personal authority where obedience is based on the positions of power, expert authority where submission is trusted to professionals, and role model authority, which relies on figures with impeccable manners. Impersonal and traditional authority models relate most closely to normative legitimacy, grounding justification on rules and shared norms. While authority of conformity refers to the appeal to what most people tend to do.

As Leeuwen (2007) presents, the second strategy of legitimation is moral evaluation, which appeals to moral values, rather than formal rules or authority. It functions by connecting actions, decisions, or policies to a shared moral narrative about what is 'good/bad', or 'right/wrong', employing evaluative language such as 'healthy', 'natural', 'normal', 'useful'. Moral evaluation is said to function through evaluation, abstraction, and comparison modes. Evaluation involves a direct moral judgement using defining adjectives such as 'beneficial', 'dangerous', or 'rightful', to express moral opinion. Such a mode helps portray 'change' as a natural process, thereby framing it as unavoidable and therefore unquestionable, thereby masking the moral reasoning behind it. Abstraction mode turns concrete action into a moral idea, which feels justified without the need for a detailed explanation. This mode highly connects the actions to positive outcomes like 'independence' or 'freedom'. Finally, comparison mode links current practices to past actions that already have either positive or negative moral values, to transfer the desired value to the narration being discussed. The author highlights that such comparisons can either legitimize or de-legitimize actions by linking them to something that is morally seen as 'right' or 'wrong'.

Building on this typology and the idea that language shapes the construction of legitimacy, Reyes (2011) adds that discursive legitimation is always influenced by ideologies. For instance, actors frame their actions as reasonable for broader public interests (moral evaluation), which are supported by experts (authorization), while competing voices are portrayed as morally wrong and thus illegitimate. The author expresses that legitimacy becomes the most questionable during a crisis, because usual rules, moral appeals, and visions of the future are mixed up. Building on this insight, Vaara (2014) identifies discursive struggle as another important element of legitimacy. It is said to become active only in times of crisis, when actors compete for institutional authority. Such a struggle involves protagonists, which seek to legitimize decisions, and antagonists, which seek to challenge and delegitimize them. These two sides rely on political and moral narratives by employing ‘expert authority’. Such authority is said to strengthen the claims, provide ‘moralization’ on the issue, create shared values, and ‘rationalize’ the issue. This leads to the idea that legitimacy is not a fixed but a constantly negotiable element in public discourse, allowing actors to influence understanding of whether authority should be legitimized, delegitimized, or even re-legitimized. Reys (2011) complements this view by noting that such a process always develops within a ‘discursive ecosystem’, the endless loop of different discourses, such as legal, moral, or media, influencing one another. This leads to the notion that legitimacy is a social construct, not limited to legal procedures, but formed by social negotiations.

Ultimately, legitimacy cannot be fully understood by looking at only one dimension of its interpretation. Since normative legitimacy suggests what makes authority ‘right’, while discursive legitimacy goes further by clarifying how such ‘right’ is communicated, established, or challenged. Figure 3 below illustrates how deeply connected these dimensions are in a transitional governance context, where crisis and continuous negotiations are inevitable.



**Fig. 2.** The Interconnected Dimensions of Legitimacy in Transitional Governance (Created by the author)

It can be seen that moral and legal foundations gain significance only when they are clearly expressed and debated through discourse. At the same time, discursive process relies on shared moral or legal principles to give structure and legitimacy. The middle circle, named social acceptance of authority, illustrates such a circular relationship, where rules are empowered through public reasoning, and in

reverse, public reasoning is guided by these rules. Collectively, they form a common picture in which legitimacy is grounded in principles and shaped through ongoing public debates. As Langvatn (2024) emphasizes, the legitimacy of political power goes even beyond adherence to institutional rules, making it clearly a multifaceted concept. For the reason that continuous social justification, which is made through public reason of those rules and norms, is crucial for effectively functioning governance.

With this logic, legitimacy should be understood as a two-step process, where it emerges from legally based principles, with authority following rules, and second, from public discourse and shared reasoning among citizens. Hence, in a transitional context, legitimacy functions as a developing and evolving process that is shaped by frameworks and active public participation. Such circular relationship ensures that authority is not just based on formal standards but constantly reaffirmed through public engagement.

### **1.3 Framing the news media**

Building on legitimacy concepts, Section 1.2 explores media theories, beginning with framing, which helps explain how meaning is created, and then moving on to agenda-setting, which explains how media prioritizes certain issues or actors, thereby influencing which issues the audience perceives as important. Such an order reflects the concern of the thesis, that is, the (de)legitimization of political actors. For this reason, the analysis begins with legitimacy theory and then moves on to framing, which helps to reveal how legitimacy is constructed through meaning and representation, while agenda setting shows how the salience of these frames influences the audience's perception towards actors. Such a combination of theories allows for a structured analysis of how transitional political actors, like those in Syria, are represented either to reinforce or challenge their legitimacy.

Framing theory offers a lens to explore how communication forms the perceptions of reality. It aims to uncover how different techniques are used to influence thinking and decision-making. The theory is rooted in Goffman's (1974) book, explains framing as a scheme by which people understand events, giving special attention to some details, while downsizing others. These interpretations are the guiding principles on how one perceives reality, based on what is important and in what context it is interpreted. The primary objective of the framing is to analyse how perceived reality is communicated, rather than what is communicated. Entman (1993) explains that framing requires the selection of certain perceptions of reality, which would be more prominent than others, to signalize how the issue should be approach and discussed. Such strategy also suggests the power dynamic of the competing actors, suggesting which actors are dominant in the political discourse. The selection of one narrative that dominated the coverage, lets the media to decide which issues are more salient to discuss, and which matters should be avoided. However, such an approach risks overshadowing diverse perspectives, as Entman notes, that once a frame becomes dominant in the media, other angles are pushed away, thus leaving no opportunity for even more accurate narratives to be seen as worthy. Additionally, framing theory is closely tied to the psychological phenomenon of cognitive bias, which examines deviations from logic and rationality. Research by Tversky & Kahneman (1981) discovered that even slight changes in how choices are framed can produce shifts in preferences, thus showing that reasoning is not only shaped by the information it receives, but also by the way this information is framed.

***Interpreting news frame content.*** One of the central studies on news framing typologies was conducted by Semetko & Valkenburg (2000), systematized and further developed the five most popular types of news framing. These include conflict, human interest, responsibility, morality, and economic consequences. To begin with, conflict type is said to catch public attention by focusing on disagreements between individuals, groups, or institutions. Conflict frames fall into two dimensions, where the first focuses on journalistic intervention in news framing and the second, on the type of substantiveness. Editorial insights are said to reflect how actively journalists frame news coverage, instead of presenting completely factual information. Bartholomé et al. (2017) argues that non-interventionist journalism reports news with descriptive tone, which allows to keep political disagreements factual. Whereas interventionist journalism interprets events by providing commentary and evaluating actors or actions. This type is said to form accusations, increase anger or suppose legitimacy. This is especially significant in the research context, as continuous exposure to certainly framed narratives can shape the perception of political issues by focusing on the dominant political discourses. Which for most of the time are reinforced by their frequency in the news media.

The level of public knowledge on certain issues adds another layer, as the less the audience is familiar with the matter, the more likely they will internalize news as factual interpretations. While experience in a certain subject increases resilience to interventionist journalism strategies (Happer & Philo, 2013). Overall, these dimensions suggest that the media is not limited to reporting on issues, but has the power to construct narratives. Thus shaping how audiences interpret the significance of the problem, and the consequences it raises. On the other hand, economic consequences frame issues as the reason for potential economic hardship for the country, nation, or individuals. Frames emphasize potential financial or social risks that are associated with political events, influencing public perceptions by portraying the potential gains or losses of a certain issue, even though the outcomes are questionable or indirect. It is highlighted that repeated media on economic consequences can shape audience knowledge and, in the long run, legitimize certain policy choices (Hameleers & Boukes, 2021; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Collectively, these two types of framing suggest that media uses both immediate contradictions and long-term consequences of political events, framing how the audience should think about issues given the potential stakes involved.

Moving on, the responsibility frame focuses on how media attributes responsibility for the crisis to different actors, ranging from individuals to overall governance systems or ideologies. Responsibility framing covers various angles of accountability, including the object that is to blame for the issue, how intentional this ‘villain’ is, and how the audience should feel about it. It also shapes audience behaviour, as emotional reactions to the framing of the accused are said to directly influence potential actions. A specific individual or group that has a clear intent makes the audience feel anger, thus leading to active participation through protests or criticism. While abstract systems such as ideologies tend to make the audience feel worthless to intervene, leading to inaction (Scheve et al., 2016). This seems to suggest that ‘who gets criticized’ in a certain narrative influences ‘whom the public sees as legitimate’. For instance, if the guilt is attributed to individual, public might see him as personally responsible for the cause and thus immoral. Similarly, the blame on a certain group might depict them as dangerous and trustworthy. In contrast, when the media attaches blame to the whole system or some circumstances, then the actors who are discussed in parallel, but are not accused of causing the issue, appear only as victims of context that are less guilty. Pfeifer et al. (2022) complements this with the idea of adhesive labelling, noting that once such labelling is employed, it remains permanently in the public memory, thus limiting future engagement. These marks are socially

constructed through power hierarchies, meaning that labels are attached by the most powerful actors, such as the government or the media, with the probability of misrepresentation of the actor long after the initial labelling.

Alongside these frames, the human interest frame elevates the emotional angle, which allows for catching attention by manipulating exaggerated feelings, to be the core focus of issue formation. The news on political issues, especially the ones that are happening far away in unfamiliar contexts, requires straightforward narratives to keep public attention. Human interest framing technique portrays policies that might seem abstract as actual and emotionally engaging by focusing on the experiences of the real people (Beyer & Figenschou, 2014). At the same time, it guides responsibility attribution, meaning that for the audience, personalized stories tend to shape the issue as the responsibility of the government, institution, or systemic problem. In the context of international or complex crisis reports, human interest framing allows journalists to translate distant political events to emotionally appealing and thus comprehensible narratives. The use of simple individual cases to illustrate the consequences of governance decisions lets news outlets connect with the audience emotionally, avoiding indifference to complex matters, such as Syria's transition (Boukes et al., 2015). However, the potential risk of emotional overshadowing of the deeper background of the issue might distort the perceptions of political legitimacy. Especially, in the case of Syria, where emotional framing of the leader either as 'brave individual' or as 'rebranded authoritarian' may push attention from governance realities, thus masking the underlying problems, such as persistence of extremist ideology, the risks of resurgence of conflict or extremist groups, or social fragmentation.

Finally, morality framing is said to reinforce the normative legitimacy discussed above. As the framing of actors or actions as morally right/wrong or legitimate/illegitimate strengthens the evaluation of the actor to be considered normatively legitimate. This is based on shared beliefs, norms, or values, such as human rights, democracy, and transparency. Such framing describes events through the lens of moral judgment, which leads to a stronger influence on perceptions when compared to the influence of empirical evidence. The effectiveness of moral frames depends on the media's ability to attract the audience's underlying values. Frames that closely align with the audience's moral beliefs are said to appear as more effective. Thus, having the power to guide the attitudes toward actors, their actions, or policies, that in turn can reinforce or challenge legitimacy.

In addition, the effectiveness of moral framing is said to vary across different audiences. Because subpopulations prioritize different values over others. Therefore, journalists aim to carefully select what narratives should be employed to achieve specific values, thus manipulating their effectiveness in shaping perceptions of actors or policies (Severson & Coleman, 2015). This means that news framing is a twofold process, which begins with shared values within selected society, continues with media's construction of narratives that resonate with audience values, which in turn shapes audience's perceptions and understanding not just of actors or their actions, but also on broader issues that audience might be unaware of, guiding on how to interpret such issues based on shared moral values. In such a way, morality framing functions to communicate what the vast majority believes is right and to guide audience perceptions, making this type of framing especially useful in shaping how vulnerable aspects such as authority or responsibility are understood in complex political contexts.

***Framing by the context.*** One of the most widespread typologies of framing proposed by Iyengar (1991) classifies media news as of an episodic or thematic nature. Episodic narratives circle around a certain issue by focusing on individual cases, leading the audience to attribute responsibility to

individuals. While thematic news tends to portray a broad context, presenting a timeline and background of the problem, shifting responsibility from individuals to governments or the overall system (Benjamin, 2007). These types are said to be content-dependent, as identity and issue setting influence how the story ought to be framed. For instance, media might portray actors differently depending on whether they are perceived as in-group ‘good us’ narrative and framed as pro thematic or episodic, or as out-group members ‘them’ whose actions are considered ‘evil’, thus framed as con thematic or episodic. Episodically framed narratives engage emotionally, provoking immediate reactions such as fear, anger, or sympathy, whereas thematic appeal to cognitive reasoning, rather than sole emotions. Due to this, news outlets strategically choose thematic framing to encourage discussion on systemic issues or policy implications, while episodic framing is left for emotional engagement (Aarøe, 2011; Feezell et al., 2021).

The type of content being reported, whether it be humanitarian crisis, armed clashes, or political negotiations, determines the type of framing it should receive. It also influences the effect of framing, as Iyengar (1996) indicates that the strength of framing varies across issues. For instance, terrorism and poverty topics influence the strongest effects where episodic coverage motivates the audience to put the blame on individuals, while thematic coverage shifts this responsibility to society. Such shift is explained by the high visibility, moral and emotional appeals of these issues. At the same time, crime and racial inequality produce mixed effects, mainly because of existing stereotypes or social factors. While issues related to unemployment face minimal framing effects due to attributions to societal factors. However, framing effects are issue specific, meaning that there is very limited transfer to related issues, except for thematic framing that might encourage more consistent framing across related issues.

While content and context framing types are discussed separately, in practice they work together to shape how audiences understand political issues, as content framings such as responsibility or morality are enabled by episodic or thematic stories. For instance, a news article employing episodic framing by focusing on one individual portrayed as either a victim or a leader might, at the same time, apply moral frame labelling to that actor as a winner or a loser, thereby producing an emotional response in the audience. This reaction is said to turn attitudes about the issue into moral convictions that are not just casual opinions but deeply rooted moral beliefs on what is right or wrong. However, it is important to mention that the framing effect depends on whether the issue is new and rarely debated, or, on the contrary, if the issue is often discussed, as episodic frames have a small effect on strong opinions (Ciuk & Rottman, 2020).

To better illustrate the relationship between episodic and moral framing, research on US presidential campaigns shows that terrorism was often framed episodically highlighting leaders, specific attacks and suffering victims, while morality perspective characterized actions or positions as ethically good or evil. The concept of terrorism was mostly framed through the narrative of a moral test for the nation, rather than a security threat, thus focusing on moral duty and courage. In this way encouraging audience to support their military actions as not just merely strategic, but ethically binding, because dissent is framed as moral weakness. This proves that strained topics as terrorism tend to be appealed as concrete moral connotations through concrete episodes, to make abstract geopolitical issues understandable and important, through encouragements to adopt moral convictions about appropriate responses (Spielvogel, 2004).

Continuing with responsibility framing, as discussed in the previous section, Iyengar (1996) initially discovered that episodic framing leads audiences to assign responsibility to individuals. By contrast, thematically framed stories, which tend to focus on a broader background, including ideology or system analysis, historical timeline, or statistical trends, mostly rely on responsibility framing, highlighting government or institutional responsibility. However, more recent studies challenge the perspective that episodic framing leads to individual blame. Ostfeld & Mutz (2014) argue that the effect of episodically framed reports depends on the audience's connection with the person in the story. Race, class, ethnicity, or even a similar background is said to be the factor increasing empathy for the case and thus leading to higher support for policies, and vice versa, a shortage of connection to the exemplar leads to a decrease in support for policies and an increase in blame of the individual. Boukes (2021) supports this idea by discovering that in different settings than usual, as in his example of an economic crisis, episodic framing can reduce the blaming of individuals, while thematic shows no statistically significant effect on who people tend to blame. These findings suggest that responsibility framing is not solely determined by either episodic or thematic classifications but is highly mediated by identity-based connections between the subject of the story and the audience. Especially empathy-based relationship that leads to greater policy support appear to be one of the most powerful tools, overshadowing episodically driven individual blame.

#### **1.4 Setting the agenda for news**

The agenda-setting theory developed in McCombs & Shaw (1972), research on the US presidential campaign, demonstrated a strong correlation between the issues the media emphasized most and those prioritized by voters. It is emphasized that the agenda-setting strategy can help the media to shape which issues should receive public attention by highlighting or downplaying certain narratives. Authors argue that the repetition and selection of certain topics allow the media to shape public perception of political reality, as most people rely on media information as their main source of political discourse. The famous sentence: *“The media not only can be successful in telling us what to think about, they also can be successful in telling us how to think about it”* (McCombs, 2006), eventually became an incentive to examine agenda setting theory from two levels, where the first level on what to think about focus on issue salience, and the second level on how to think about it, examines attribute salience (McCombs, 2006).

Later research highlights that the effect of agenda setting is context dependent, where timing, setting, and the issue itself influence public attention. The concept of spike momentum, presented as one of the most important factors in increasing awareness, reveals that instant increases of media attention towards specific issues strengthen the agenda-setting effect, while continuously circulating topics tend to lose agenda-setting power, as in the long run they become to be seen as routine. This is particularly important in protracted conflicts, such as Syria, where only major events, such as territorial shifts or leadership changes, can evoke media salience and re-engage public attention. Even in today's information-rich digital media environment, mainstream media continues to pose significant agenda-setting power, shaping collective public attention and political discourse (Geiß, 2019).

***Levels of media influence.*** The foundational work by McCombs & Shaw (1972) laid the foundation for understanding the first level-agenda-setting, relationship between emphasis on media issue and matters of public importance. Salience is presented as the main factor determining which and how issues are going to be perceived by audience. While the issue prominence lets to prioritize which

issue the public portrays as important, yet without telling them how to think about it, as the more prominent the issue is, the more likely it will receive public attention that eventually influence policy priorities. Therefore, the first level agenda-setting analysis aims to track the changes in salience and factors that influence this change, thus helping to understand how public attention and policy priorities shift quickly in accordance with media transformations (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Such analysis includes an examination of repeated exposure and emotional engagement, as these lead to a heightened importance and urgency of the topic for audiences. In this way, the media functions as a mechanism that not only raises public awareness, but also encourages actions, extending far beyond mere information to become a highly motivating factor driving developments (Brown & Deegan, 1998). In addition, in his later research, McCombs acknowledged that the impact of first level agenda setting varies on the level of direct experience to the cause. Obtrusive and unobtrusive typology explains that audiences are more likely to be influenced by the issues they have direct experience with, while media exposure still plays a stronger role for fresh and unknown topics.

On the other hand, second-level agenda-setting analysis moves closer to framing, aiming to understand how these issues should be perceived through certain frames or narratives. At this level, journalists emphasize certain attributions of the actor to shape public perception. For instance, in the long run, the press might make individuals think about some politician as either being corrupt or honest, based on the characteristics they emphasized earlier. Image building, gatekeeping, creation of stereotypes, and status assignment are concepts that appeared as the developments of agenda-setting theory. As McCombs argues, gatekeeping allows media to determine which information reaches the audience, deciding the timing, frequency, and form of the information. Stereotyping then allows the media to emphasize certain characteristics of an actor, group, or issue to once again influence the beliefs of the audience. Assignment of status determines how media attention can lend importance or even legitimacy to certain actors, events, or other issues. While image building refers to the media's power to construct the identity of an actor, group, or issue, shaping how the public should perceive it. In the longer run, this process helps the media to portray some aspects more salient, making the audience think or judge something based on the media's produced image, without even realizing it. This process is called priming, and it operates at both levels of agenda-setting. In the first level, it focuses on the object, meaning the overall actor, such as the government or a candidate, while in the second level, it focuses on attributes or characteristics of that object, highlighting features such as honesty, trust, violence, and competence. (Bryant & Beth Oliver, 2008) Therefore, public opinions are shaped in three ways: by beginning with forming the opinions, second, by priming judgments about those actors based on emphasized issues, and finally by influencing perceptions through highlighted characteristics (McCombs, 2006).

After many decades from the foundational work of the Chapel Hill study, which presented the first level agenda setting focusing on the influence of the media coverage on the salience of issues for the public, to the second level agenda setting focusing on the transfer of characteristics of issues and objects from media coverage to public perception. More recently, Guo et al., 2012 presented the third level agenda setting, known as Network Agenda Setting (NAS), that brings analysis to the next level, as it aims to explain how different ideas are linked in the minds of the audience. Authors concluded that people's minds are not linear, conversely, they are similar to network where ideas are connected in complex ways, rather than just ranked in orders. Consequently, the media can influence how these ideas are linked in the audience's minds, as people tend to associate separate events when they are mentioned together. As in their example, if the news on the 9/11 attacks and the Iraqi War always

mentions these events together, people eventually start to associate them in their ‘mental network’, even if they have never thought about this before. This shows that the NAS model combines objects and attributes in media coverage, thus setting not only which elements are salient, but also how these elements are interconnected in a ‘mental network’. However, the rise of social media algorithms changes how these connections are presented. In the era of rapid digitalization, traditional news media are trying their best to keep up with the logic of social media platforms. Roese (2018) argues that the old mission of the journalists to be the ‘gatekeepers’ has been switched to algorithms, which now filter and rank the visibility according to engagement. In this way, media outlets tend to adjust their writing and issue selection to fit these algorithms, thus resulting in emotional resonance over the depth of the issue. Such development could suggest a growing tendency towards episodic, rather than thematic framing, as stories evoking immediate reactions are more likely to receive ‘clicks’ and thus be amplified by algorithms. Therefore, in the long run, this trend risks reinforcing simplified narratives at the expenses of the information rich setting. As a result, agenda setting might no longer reflect journalistic or editorial strategy but be a highly technologically and commercially used mechanism to highlight specific topics.

Overall, the previous sub-sections explored two dimensions, beginning from legitimacy in transitional contexts, and moving to the role of media in shaping public perceptions through framing and agenda-setting theories. The synthesis of these concepts provides valuable insights to understand the complex transitional period after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Within this perspective, legitimacy is perceived as a constantly contested and negotiated process, not just in times of peace, but also in post-conflict settings, where the media has the central role to select and frame actors, events, or policies in different ways, aiming to shape how the audience should perceive authority, responsibility, or morality. Especially, framing techniques, such as responsibility, conflict, morality, economic consequences, or human interests, have the ability to effectively highlight or downplay certain attributes, to influence what should be perceived as legitimate or illegitimate. The episodic or thematic framing in reporting further strengthens these effects, either through individual storytelling where responsibility is assigned to individuals or wider background stories where responsibility falls on structural or systemic failures.

Agenda setting complements framing, by giving special attention to the salience of actors or issues. Repeated attention to particular events leads the audience to consider certain events more important than others, at the same time guiding understanding of how these issues should be interpreted. This suggests that empathy, repeated exposure, and value-aligned framing can reinforce or challenge the validity of political actors. Transitional context can further intensify this, as audience with limited knowledge towards particular issue might be vulnerable and more inclined to trust the dominant narratives. Overall, agenda-setting and framing provide a mechanism through which legitimacy is constructed and contested. In transitional contexts, such as Syria, where governance is highly fragmented and public trust is especially fragile, media can have a strong influence on both immediate perceptions and long-term reputational outcomes of events or actors.

## **2. Research methodology**

The project aims to analyse Syria's political transition through media perspectives, focusing on how legitimacy, authority, and transition are constructed in media narratives. The methodological approach is grounded in Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), allowing for systematic content analysis of storytelling in public discourse. Besides examination of media's texts framed by agenda-setting or media framing, NPF and its typology, enhances the study with a detailed system to explore how the press contributes to the legitimisation or delegitimization of political actors or actions, influencing the understanding of public attitudes towards complex political processes, and defining legitimised issues and solutions through storytelling. This section specifies the research design, data collection, coding, limitations and analytical processes engaged in this project.

### **2.1. Potentials of Narrative Policy Framework**

As discussed in the previous section, narrative is one of the most powerful tools to guide public opinion, shape understanding of legitimacy, authority, or responsibility, and construct how the public should interpret complex, unknown events. Media framing and agenda setting established that the way a certain narrative is depicted, either downsizing or highlighting certain issues, affects how actors or actions are evaluated and thus perceived by wide audiences. Following this, the Narrative Policy Framework puts narrative at the centre of analysis on how stories turn into political meaning, and in the long run has influence on policy decisions (Shanahan et al. 2025). The framework is based on five core assumptions guiding the application (Shanahan et al., 2018) :

1. Social construction – policy narratives are socially constructed to influence interpretations.
2. Bounded relativity – influence of narratives is dependent on existing beliefs, values, and norms of the audience, having effect only within socially accepted boundaries.
3. Generalisable structure – the structure of narratives can be analysed across different contexts. While specific content is often context dependent, the main elements, such as plot, setting, moral, and characters, can be transferred to any policy issues, thus allowing for comparison across different areas.
4. Three levels of analysis – narratives interact at different levels, including individual (micro), group (meso), and cultural (macro), shaping how stories are circulated.
5. Homo narrans – human nature is to communicate and make understanding of the processes through storytelling, shaping how one should perceive reality (NPF Core Assumptions, n.d.).

Collectively, these assumptions suggest narratives to be understood as interpretations that are actively constructed to appeal to pre-existing social, cultural, or political beliefs. In this way, it leads audiences to understand political issues as framed by the media discourse. Additionally, it suggests that narratives follow structural patterns that circulate across different groups, leading to the presumption that storytelling is one of the most effective methods for making political realities understandable and resonant with audiences. In this way, the assumption named generalisable structure becomes the core assumption guiding the coding procedure. Although NPF developers identify five core assumptions, this research applies four, as the fifth, homo narrans assumption, focusing on narratives affecting individuals, falls outside of the scope of this project. Similarly, from the fourth assumption on the three levels of analysis, the research focuses only on the meso level, examining how selected news outlets construct and disseminate narratives on Syria's political transition, and the macro level, considering the broader background behind these framings, for instance, Western liberal

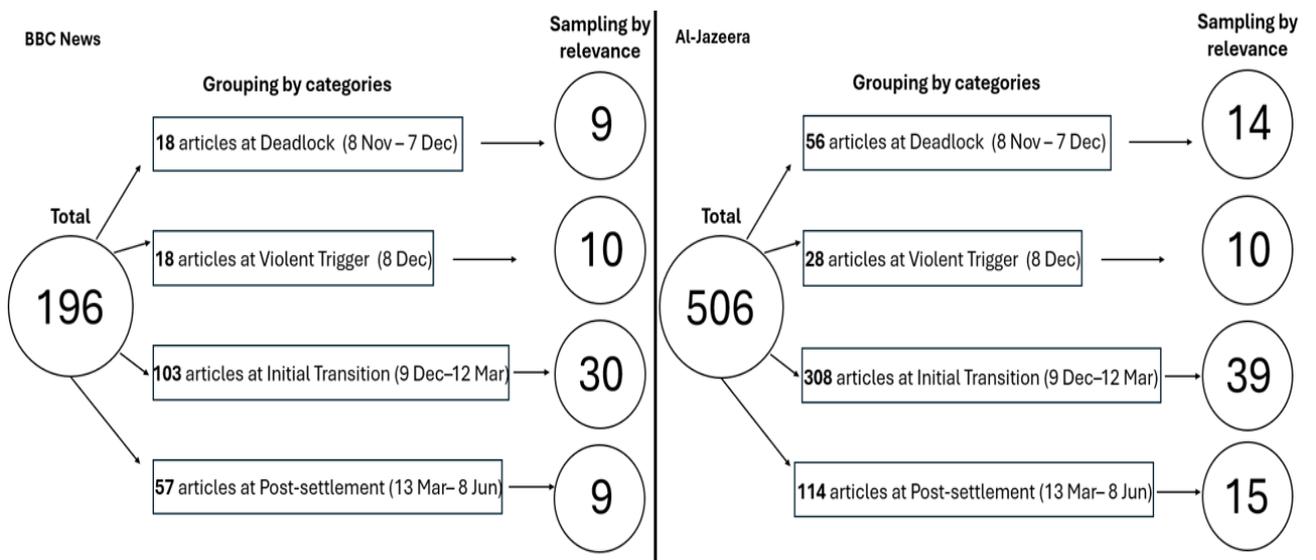
constructions of legitimacy or alternative Arab and Global South perceptions towards legitimate authority. While the micro-level analysis, focusing on the individual level, falls out of the scope. The application of these four assumptions to the Syrian transition case suggests that media narratives actively construct interpretations of legitimacy, shaped by existing cultural values and political expectations. Narrative patterns such as characterization of actors as either heroes or villains and later circulation across different groups of interactions further emphasize storytelling as the key tool to analyse how media portray distant political events.

## **2.2 Selecting and sampling the articles**

To analyse how the media constructed narratives around the Syrian political transition, this study examines articles published in BBC News and Al-Jazeera. BBC News is selected for its global scope, reaching not only European and American audiences but also readers in Canada, India, Australia, and many other countries. Its broadcasting is characterized as globally trusted and widely cited reporting, with a deep-rooted reputation and extensive global reach, attracting 434 million observers in one month, indicating a huge global influence. Outlet commits to spread impartial information, but its editorial or commentary perspectives have attracted criticism for its biased reporting on specific conflicts, including the Syrian civil war. For instance, Nahlawi (2017) conducted content analysis of the BBC's coverage of Syrian conflict dynamics and found that coverage significantly emphasized the role of the rebel and extremist groups, leaving the Assad regime's and Russia's role with limited reporting, thus potentially misinterpreting the audience's understanding of Syria's conflict dynamics. In addition to this, public opinion surveys indicate that the audience evaluates the BBC's impartiality sceptically, suggesting that the BBC News actively constructs narratives, thus challenging the validity of claims to spread neutral information (Politics.co.uk, n.d). Despite these, the BBC is said to be committed to 'tell the truth', meaning that their reporting might be influenced by their own agenda, which is still shaped by values and norms (Grimsdale in the Guardian, 2025).

By contrast, Al Jazeera's broadcasting is said to reflect positions inherited by its founder, and report the Qatar Emir and Qatar's stance towards international intervention in Syria, raising debates in the Arab world. Some observers argued that in the Syrian case, Al Jazeera's reporting could have reflected the interests of Qatari foreign policy (Bloomberg, 2012). The criticism might be fuelled by the fact that the Qatari government partly funds Al Jazeera, which claims to provide independent editorial, but some of the criticism towards its impartiality might be influenced by government affiliation. (Influence Watch, n.d.). It is important to mention that Al Jazeera's branch, Al Jazeera English, is said to be a distinct editorial branch having a different scope and emphasis from the Arabic version, at the same time targeting English-speaking communities, and thus adopting Western journalistic norms. The English branch maintains a high reach globally, having 430 million viewers in more than 150 countries. It seeks to provide a complementary perspective with strong influence in the Middle East region, thus promising to reflect different perspectives as noted in their motto: "*The Opinion and the Other Opinion*" (Rodsevich, 2025; Telhami, 2013). Comparative studies aim to confirm the distinction between Al Jazeera English and Al Jazeera Arabic, saying it operates within different audience expectations, norms, and perspectives. (Maziad, 2018). For the reason that Al Jazeera and BBC remain to be one of the most read news outlets, and as both present different perspectives, where Al Jazeera reflects the Global South viewpoint and BBC reflects Western values, this research selects BBC News and Al Jazeera English as appropriate sources to analyse media narratives from diverging perspectives.

For the analysis of narratives surrounding the Syrian political transition, a total of 196 articles of BBC News were identified under the keyword ‘Syria’ on the BBC News.com website. Figure 4 below illustrates the data sampling process beginning from the BBC News sampling (left), where 196 articles were grouped by four categories, reflecting different periods of Syria’s transition, and sampled to the final 58 articles. Moving to Al Jazeera, the sampling reduction follows the same logic discussed above. Here, the initial number of articles is larger, starting from 506 articles found on the Aljazeera.com website, under the topic named ‘Syria’. After grouping by category and applying the relevance sampling discussed below, a final set of 78 articles was selected for analysis. At the early stage, articles were grouped into four categories, according to previously discussed phases of transition stages in Syria: Deadlock, Violent Trigger, Initial Transition, and Post-settlement Transition. 58 BBC News articles and 78 Al Jazeera articles are examined, focusing on the period between the 8th of November 2024 and the 8th of June 2025. The selected period reflects changes in Syrian conflict dynamics, as in November 2024, Syrian rebels approached Aleppo, re-entering the city for the first time after almost ten years of unsuccessful attempts. (ACLED, 2025). The analysis concludes when reporting on Syria’s transition shifts its focus from legitimacy construction towards refugee return and personal wartime stories.



**Fig. 3.** Data sampling of BBC News and Al Jazeera coverage by conflict periods (Created by the author)

To ensure relevance of the narratives, research employs purposive sampling strategy, aimed to ensure selection of articles that are directly relevant to political transitions, including only the material that is discussing: rebel/insurgent advancement, international involvement in negotiations, regime change, elections, future of Assad, peace processes, administrative changes, governance structures or portrayals of political actors (HTS, Ahmad al-Sharaa, Bashar al-Assad). And excluding articles solely reporting: daily military clashes, battlefield reports, humanitarian-related issues (asylum policies or migrant situation in other countries), having no political interpretation, personalised individual stories without broader political context, or duplicated versions of the same update. It is important to mention that research selects only articles containing written material, excluding all reports conveyed in video reporting or podcasts. Additionally, the sampling procedure reduced the number of selected articles by including only reported news articles and excluding analytical stories, such as expert explainers or documentaries. Namely, for the selection of BBC coverage, only articles under the BBC News

reporting were selected. Leaving content under the BBC in Depth, BBC Political Correspondent, or BBC Middle East Correspondent outside of the scope, as these formats are based on interpretive analysis and expert comments. Similarly, for Al Jazeera, Explainers, Opinion, Inside Story, NewsFeed, Between Us, and video documentaries are excluded, for their interpretation and personal storytelling, rather than reporting on events surrounding the legitimacy situation in Syria. Crucially, live reports that were used by both outlets to track short updates and battlefield dynamics were excluded, as they link to previously published articles that were already selected through the sampling procedure.

### 2.3 Narrative Coding

After sampling, the research applies qualitative narrative coding, which follows the traditional Narrative Policy Framework structure, developed by Jones & McBeth (2010). A deductive codebook was developed by their proposed four narrative components:

- Character – key actors in the narrative, characterized as hero, villain or victim.
- Plot – the sequence of events and relationships that connect the setting and characters.
- Setting – the area in which the narrative unfolds and can shape the issue.
- Moral – policy solution presented as a guiding principle derived from the narrative.

Later, the inductive coding technique, based on the theoretical part, fulfils the analysis. The entire codebook with inductive and deductive codes is presented in Table 1 below. The unit of analysis is the entire article, whereas paragraph-level analysis is used to identify narrative elements. Each article was coded manually using Maxqda software to identify how actors were constructed, what context framed interactions, how the sequence of events was linked, and what solutions were suggested. The research employs these data analysis methods: code relations browser, profile and document comparison chart, quantizing, crosstab, code matrix, and visualizing intersection results in maxmaps. To ensure consistency, coding was conducted in two phases, beginning with initial coding, conducted by constant comparison across both outlets. Afterwards, the coded material was grouped according to the four transition stages, assigning the publication date.

**Table 1.** Codebook for the BBC and Al Jazeera coding procedure (Created by the author)

Category	Sub-category	Definition	Theoretical background
Actor perspective towards Syrian dynamics	United Nations	Perspective of the actor, from which important developments are conveyed	-
	United States		
	European Union		
Actor characterization	Bashar al-Assad	Mentions of the key actors in Syrian conflict, whose framing might suggest important analytical insights	-
	Syrian government		
	Ahmed al-Sharaa		
	Hay'at tahrir al-Sham		
Actor/Character	Hero	Actor portrayed positively, protecting others, solving problems.	Based on 3 <sup>rd</sup> assumption of the NPF generalizable structure and the meso level of analysis from 4 <sup>th</sup> assumption on the three levels of analysis.
	Villain	Actor portrayed negatively, often tied to violence acts against victims	
	Victim	Actors portrayed as suffering. Often tied to suffering from villain	

Category	Sub-category	Definition	Theoretical background
Setting	-	Context or environment where the narrative takes place	Based on 3 <sup>rd</sup> assumption of the NPF generalizable structure and the meso level of analysis from 4 <sup>th</sup> assumption on the three levels of analysis.
Plot	-	The sequence of events that connect the character and the setting	
Moral of the story	-	Guiding principle or solution suggested by the narrative	
Policy implication	Conflict	Focus on ongoing or potential conflict	Based on news framing typologies developed by Semetko & Valkenburg (2000), guiding understanding of how news media frame certain news to be superior to others, reinforcing some angles of the story.
	Human interest	Focus on human or social impact	
	Responsibility	Focus on the accountability of actors or actions	
	Morality	Focus on the ethical evaluation of actors or actions	
	Economic consequences	Focus on financial effect. Most often negative.	
Associative linking	Actor to actor	Connection between different actors	The third level of agenda setting proposed by Guo et al. (2012) argues that thinking of individuals functions as a network ,which can be shaped by media, which links together distant actions to actors, actors to actors, or events to events.
	Actor to event	Connection between actor and event	
	Event to event	Connection between distinct events	
	Event to place	Connection between events and actual places	Added to test whether articles offer connections between certain events and their locations, as observed after reading the articles.
Suggested legitimacy	Normative	Appeals to legal norms or expectations guiding legitimization	Based on classical and modern theorists' insights on why actors are perceived as lawful, trustworthy, or credible.
	Discursive	Appeals to public justifications over legitimization	Based on the principles established in section 1.1.4 Legitimacy produced through language.
Legitimation strategy	Authorization	Legitimization by referencing authority	Van Leeuwen (2007) notes that legitimation strategies show how discourse can make certain actions or actors seem legitimate using authorization, rationalization or moral assumptions.
	Moral evaluation	Judging actors or their actions as morally right or wrong	
	Rationalization	Justifying actors or actions based on logic, facts, or outcomes.	
Invoked authority	Legal	Authority based on formal rules and laws.	Weber (1978) identification of three types of authority that guide how and why people tend to obey leaders.
	Traditional	Authority based on beliefs or established practices.	
	Charismatic	Authority based on personal traits.	

Category	Sub-category	Definition	Theoretical background
Legitimacy values	Democratic legitimacy	Appeals to democratic principles, e.g., rule of law, human rights	NPF assumptions: 2 <sup>nd</sup> bounded relativity and 4 <sup>th</sup> three levels of analysis, especially the macro level. Establishing that the media strategically selects what values and principles to present, based on social limits.
	Religious legitimacy	Appeals to freedom of religion and religious minorities	
	Order-based legitimacy	Appeals to stability, security, order, and the normal functioning of institutions	
Ethical values	Humanitarian values	Concerns regarding human rights	
	Accountability	Appeals on actors being held responsible for their actions	
	Justice	Impartiality on law	
Cultural values	Global liberal values	Democratic elections, equality, liberty, right governing principles, and transparent elections.	
	Regional solidarity	Solidarity built on shared regional identity.	
	Resistance over domination	Resistance narratives over dominations, e.g., oppressive control, anti-Western domination, other influence.	
Outcome values	Stability/security	Stable order, peace	
	Economic	Prosperity, trade, economic development	
	Social	Healthcare, education, employment, integration.	

To ensure analytical consistency, the coding follows certain measures across the entire procedure. First, deductive codebook, based on instructions provided by Shanahan et al. (2017) are established, explaining that, certain character (Hero, Villain, Victim) should be coded once per article, coding should be done by the chosen unit of analysis, which in this case is paragraph-level, which can only have one dominant plot per excerpt. Second, coding was applied by constant comparison between outlets to refine inductive codes. Afterwards, the coded elements were analysed in an overview of coded segments, where result extraction appeared in clear stages, using several functions in Maxqda:

1. Setting- world cloud, and word frequencies.
2. Plot and its intersections- code relations browser, quantizing, code map and later sent to maxmaps for detailed analysis.
3. Character- compare cases and groups, word explorer, similarity analysis for documents and quantizing.
4. Moral of the story- world explorer, word frequencies and compare cases and groups.
5. Legitimacy values- profile comparison chart, code relations browser, code matrix browser, and similarity analysis for documents.

The sequence of analysis procedure suggests that examination of codes was grouped into categories. The plot intersection analysis examined all the possible intersections, except for actor, character, and setting. Other codes, including associative linking, policy implication, moral of the story, and all the outcome values were analysed together as plot intersections, to track how events, actions, values and

outcomes from the narratives. Whereas, legitimacy-related codes, including invoked authority, suggested legitimacy, legitimation strategies, and legitimacy values which most often were scattered across the article and rather constructed implicitly, were analysed as a grouped category. Such strategy allowed to capture broader patterns of legitimacy, rather than overshadow with plot.

The research is subject to the following limitations: 1. The analysis is limited to two international media outlets, which even though allow for comparative analysis, but might not capture all the diverse media narratives on Syria's political transition. 2. The selected time period might reflect initial dynamics, as in the long-term governance progress might be seen as more consolidated, leading the media to develop different narratives towards legitimacy.

### 3. Comparative narrative framing of Syria's transitional governance

The chapter presents empirical findings from the analysis of BBC News and Al Jazeera's construction of narratives on Syria's political transition. The chapter is organized into three parts. All three subsections examine and compare narratives of both outlets simultaneously, following the Narrative Policy Framework. Codes generated with the Maxqda software are organized under four categories of NPF:

1. Setting – context, in which the story takes place (including location, institutional setting, and other conditions shaping narrative).
2. Plot – a sequence of events that connects the actor and the event.
3. Characterization – actors involved in the narrative, which can be categorized into hero (problem solvers), villain (harm causers), and victim (affected).
4. Moral of the story – implied message or solution to the problem, explaining what should be done to solve certain issues.

Each NPF element is grouped according to the intersection of codes it appears next to. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 are analysed for every transition period: Deadlock phase (8 Nov – 7 Dec 2024); Transition's violent trigger (8 Dec 2024); Initial transition (9 Dec 2024 – 12 Mar 2025), and Post-settlement transition (13 Mar – 8 Jun 2025). While the section 3.3 follows Smellie and Boswell's (2025) comparative typology approach, which allows linking narrative patterns to broader political developments in questioning transitional legitimacy. The final section 3.4, Narrative Synthesis, presents the storyline progression and the dominant narrative components used to frame the legitimacy of Syria's transitional government.

#### 3.1 Framing political transition across different phases

The following section presents an analysis of how BBC News and Al Jazeera constructed narratives across different stages of transition. Beginning with the Deadlock phase (8th Nov – 7th Dec 2024), a month reflecting constant clashes between different actors. The second phase, transition's violent trigger (8th Dec 2024), focuses on a surprise offensive that resulted in the overthrow of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. The third period, named the initial transition (9th of Dec 2024 - 12th of Mar 2025), presents the first attempts by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, to legitimize their governance locally and globally. Finally, the post-settlement transition (13th Mar – 8th Jun), marked by the signing of the Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, demonstrates a shift in narratives toward new governance.

##### 3.1.1 Deadlock phase

**Setting.** The deadlock phase is characterized by high uncertainty, in which multiple armed actors compete for territory. The setting primarily centres around north-western Syria, where constant clashes between rebel factions, including HTS with its rebel coalitions, Kurdish-led forces, Turkish-backed factions, and Syrian government troops, are taking place. The major settings mentioned in both outlets include specific cities where the territorial shifts are taking place, such as Aleppo, Damascus, Idlib, Deraa, Hama, Homs, and overall Syria. Single mentions of other environments, such as interviews, organizations, border crossings, or other conflict zones, are also identified, yet the number is too small to have significance. Both outlets frame setting with *actor-to-actor*, *actor-to-event*, or *event-to-event* linking, which is supplemented by *human interest* or *conflict* narratives,

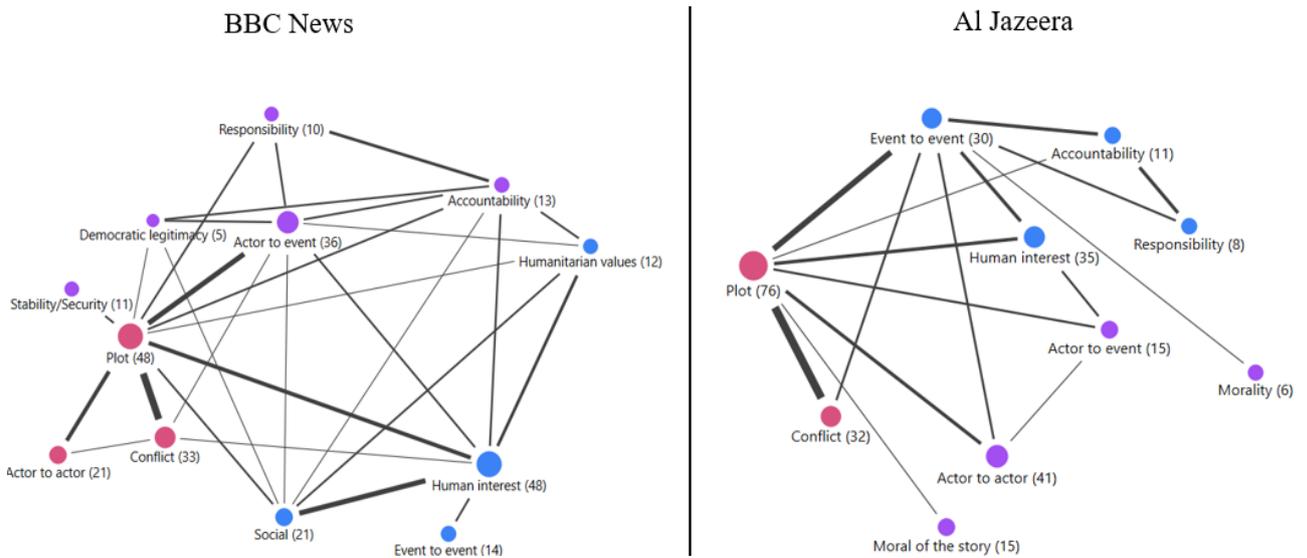
allowing media to connect main actors/events to the plot, thus suggesting *characterization* roles. For instance, BBC follows tendency to situate territorial advancement through conflict and human interest frames, where each linking is followed by civilian casualties “...in the north, the main rebel offensive has reached the outskirts... of Homs. The Syrian military and its Russian allies are fighting back... killing 20 civilians...” (BBC News, 2024t, December 7). By comparison, even though Al Jazeera occasionally reports humanitarian consequences, yet most of the time, such a narrative is replaced with descriptive event framing, focusing on which actors are responsible for certain actions “HTS fighters also attacked al-Nayrab airport east of Aleppo, where pro-Iranian fighters have outposts.” (Al Jazeera, 2024, November 28).

Moreover, as these citations illustrate, Al Jazeera shows a tendency to provide more detailed settings, presenting exact locations, including smaller towns, minority territories, or other precise locations, but not specifying the time frame. While the BBC presents a broader picture, where the setting is limited to a major city near which the event takes place, it highlights the exact time period when the event took place. The main difference between the two outlets lies in how they frame the perspective on why the rebels were successful in capturing territories. BBC portrays a quickly deteriorating situation of the Assad government through the narrative of the weakened support of regime allies, Russia and Iran, that are engaged in other conflicts, and thus provides insufficient support for the regime. “...it came at a time when the government’s allies were preoccupied with other conflicts.” (Gritten, 2024, December 4 ). While Al Jazeera focuses on the capabilities and the reasons why the group was successful in capturing major cities, “...rebel groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as well as Turkiye-backed opposition fighters, are pressing south towards Hama city...” (Al Jazeera, 2024b, December 3).

The overall situation in the country is framed as a chaotic setting with huge displacement, whose “...figures swell to 1.5 million.” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 6). Thus, making Syrians one of the most externally and internally displaced nations, “with thousands more people reported displaced in the latest fighting.” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 1). Destroyed infrastructure and competing interests between actors result in the massive killings of civilians, framing the Syrian situation as a setting with no dominant power.

**Plot intersections.** The Narrative Policy Framework suggests plot to be the central element connecting setting, character, moral values, and other narratives. Figure 4 below confirms this assumption. As the figure illustrates, the line width represents frequency of co-occurrence, while the different colours reflect clusters, in which codes are used in the same narrative logic. The plot codes co-occur most frequently with conflict, actor-event, actor-actor, event-event, and human interest codes. Both outlets centre the plot on a conflict narrative, with the biggest attention paid to battle trajectories, humanitarian losses, actor-to-event, actor-to-actor (BBC News), or event-to-event (Al Jazeera) linkages. Starting from the 8th of November 2024, BBC News presents a large-scale rebel offensive, framed as the most challenging issue for the Bashar al-Assad regime, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. The group's actions are repeatedly described as surprising, sudden, and major offensives to emphasize the high issue's salience. Rebels are reported to “have launched a major offensive in north-western Syria, capturing territory...for the first time in years.” (BBC News, 2024, November 28). With BBC reporters noting that the capture of major cities was met with “no significant resistance.” (BBC News, 2024, November 30). These narratives suggest an unexpected

and sudden shift after years of stable Assad military dominance across the country, setting rebel versus Assad military clashes at the centre of the BBC reporting agenda for the deadlock period.



**Fig. 4.** Intersection between Plot and other non-actor codes in BBC News and Al Jazeera (Deadlock phase) (Retrieved by the author from Maxqda software)

Table 2 further establishes the prominence of the dominant plot code intersections in BBC News reporting, by showing their frequency of co-occurrence with the plot code at the Deadlock stage. To ensure the comparability across both outlets, the analysis identifies the 10 % of co-occurrence frequencies that are marked in pink colour. The figure aims to suggest how strong each of the element is connected to the plot or its development, thus shaping the storyline of the reporting. Conflict appears as the dominant element of the plot development. The framing perspective would explain the dominance of the conflict narrative as an interventionist strategy. Which according to Bartholomé et al. (2017) could be employed to indicate attention towards certain events, values, or risks. Thus, meaning that here, the conflict narrative is used to reflect disruptions of the normal functioning of the state, which indirectly suggests the absence of legitimacy.

**Table 2.** Dominant plot code intersections (Deadlock) (Created by the author)

**BBC News:**

Code System	Discursive	Conflict	Human interest	Responsibility	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Democratic legitimacy	Accountability	Humanitarian values	Stability-security
Plot	2	19	11	5	11	14	3	6	3	4

**Al Jazeera:**

Code System	Moral of the story	Conflict	Human interest	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Event to event	Accountability
Plot	3	20	9	7	5	14	3

The intersections between codes illustrated in Table 3 below are used to illustrate how the dominant narrative patterns during the Deadlock period appear. It is important to mention that intersections are layered, resulting in co-occurrences of multiple codes. This suggests that dominant narratives emerge through multiple combinations of closely related codes. The most frequent intersection emerges through actor-to-event linking, which allows linking actors to specific outcomes of the conflict or attributing suffering and impact on humanity. Another intersection emerging from plot and actor to

event linking is responsibility, which, as framing theory suggests, links concrete actors to events, thus reinforcing discussions about emerging or decreasing legitimacy. For most of the time, the BBC attributes responsibility to actors who are connected to the suffering of civilians. Most notably, government forces, including the Syrian Army, military, or troops, are framed as the main actors causing hardship for civilians. Notably, rebel advancement to Hama, which is portrayed as a symbolic city, due to the 1982 killings of protesters, which Assad’s father ordered to execute. In such a way, bringing historical perspective and linking *past events to current events* against the regime.

**Table 3.** Plot code intersections in BBC reporting (Deadlock) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Actor to event x conflict	<i>“The rebel factions have a history of division and internecine fighting.”</i> (BBC News, 2024t, December 7).
Actor to actor x human interest x responsibility	<i>“...civilians were not being harassed by the rebels”</i> (BBC News, 2024, December 3).
Actor to actor x human interest x responsibility	<i>“...government forces have notably failed to provide any such defence in cities...”</i> (BBC News, 2024u, December 3).
Actor to actor x actor to event	<i>“More than half a million people have been killed in the civil war that erupted after the government cracked down on pro-democracy protests in 2011”</i> (BBC News, 2024, November 30).
Actor to event	<i>“fear what they view as a jihadist force taking over their towns and cities.”</i> (BBC News, 2024, December 6).

As rebels approach major cities, the BBC, in addition to historical narratives, widens its framing tactics by incorporating more personalized, human-interest elements. Reports present Syrians to be in a limbo situation, as armed factions rapidly approach cities, while the current government is unable to protect them. BBC highlights that such a situation illustrates government inaction and the true *“weakness of the Syrian military”* (BBC News, 2024t, December 7). The excerpts from this period focus on killings and the displacement of civilians, which is always accompanied by the actor responsible for the action. The most common narrative comes from highly criticized past actions of Assad, when he crushed pro-democracy protests. As Iyengar (1996) noted, episodically constructed framing, which focuses on individual suffering might evoke emotional reasoning through a conflict-driven plot. Which accompanied by civilian suffering, implicitly reinforce the delegitimization of the regime.

Compared to Al Jazeera, which relies on thematic framing, where rebels’ actions are linked to current events of civilians fleeing their homes, service disruptions, and heightened fear of what might be the *unknown* plans of the HTS. It could be observed that Al Jazeera situated suffering as a broader structural issue, thus suggesting slightly more cautious legitimacy indication. Table 4 below presents code intersections of Al Jazeera’s reporting. Similar to BBC reporting on unclear future and fear among civilians under former jihadist authorities, Al Jazeera puts efforts to mitigate the unclear situation by interviewing local Syrians who are optimistic about what is coming next. Despite this, HTS leader, at this stage of transition, mostly named by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, is linked to its rebranding attempts to change jihadist ideology. Here, a clear linking between actors emerges, as Al Jazeera, as well as BBC News, reminds readers of previous HTS’s and its leader ties

to al-Qaeda and al-Nusrah front, which gradually rebranded into the Islamist militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, as it is seen now. Even though the group is often presented as protecting minority communities, capturing cities with no revenge and liberating cities from brutal rule, yet the extremist past does not slip away even when they are presented for the heroic actions they conducted.

**Table 4.** Plot code intersections in Al Jazeera reporting (Deadlock) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Actor to event x human interest	<i>“beyond the confusion and fear, there is also a sense of anticipation among some residents of Aleppo who had lived for years under government control.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 1).
Event to Event x Actor to actor x responsibility	<i>“The war between al-Assad and his allies... Russia and Iran...and armed opposition forces seeking his overthrow has killed an estimated half-million people during the past 13 years.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 4).
Event to event x conflict	<i>“132 fighters and soldiers were killed during the clashes on Wednesday, following an operation launched by HTS, which controls a large area of northwestern Syria.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024, November 28)
Conflict x actor to actor	<i>“Moscow and Tehran supported al-Assad in crushing the opposition.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024w, December 7)
Actor to actor x actor to event	<i>“Formerly known as al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, HTS later changed its name several times and distanced itself from al-Qaeda.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024, November 30).

As the table suggests, other actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces, Russia, Iran, the Syrian National Army, and Kurdish-led factions are also referenced as actors, further complicating already complex *events*, while trying to gain the best possible from the situation. Counteractions of the government and allied international actors result in high salience, where Russian airstrikes cause huge humanitarian losses and destroy infrastructure. Russia and Iran are closely linked as stabilizers of the Assad regime, that for years helped to regain lost territories. But as the conflict develops, both outlets increase reporting on the background reasons that diminished cooperation. As 8<sup>th</sup> December 2024 approaches, news reports increasingly turn from sole battles to reactions of international actors. For instance, the United States urges its nationals to leave Syria, while Turkey and Russia seek diplomatic engagement, whereas Iran urges its commanders to evacuate.

Another essential point that bonds quickly deteriorating situation to actors could be explained by, the third-level agenda-setting, that explains news stories through a ‘network’ of links between actors and events, that acts as the backbone of narrative construction (Guo et al., 2012). As Table 5 (BBC News) and Table 6 (Al Jazeera) illustrate, such linking organizes how the plot develops, highlights which actors are assigned to certain events, how individual events are incorporated into a broader story, and what impact these actors or events have. The tables include citations from one article of each outlet, to function as representative example of broader dominant narrative strategies, identified through coding procedure of deadlock phase. Both media broadcasters use linking techniques to indicate how events should be interpreted, once again bringing back the main idea of agenda setting, that the media aims to shape how the audience should think about an issue, rather than simply presenting news

(McCombs, 2006). In this way, characterization, values, and evaluations emerge as subtle extensions of the plot. Where, gradually, actor-event linkage assigns roles of heroes, villains, and victims depending on the construction of associations. For instance, as seen in Table 6 below, the BBC’s plot is driven by actor framing, where the main actors are presented as the driving factors of certain outcomes. Rebel advancement, regime perspective, and human suffering are framed through actor-to-actor or actor-to-event linking. This suggests that the BBC aims to spread the message on who is responsible for the issue.

**Table 5.** Sequence of BBC reporting (Created by the author citing BBC News, 2024, November 28).

BBC’s citation in “ <i>Syria rebels launch major offensive in north-west and gain territory</i> ”	Coding sequence
<i>Rebel forces have launched a major offensive in north-western Syria, capturing territory from President Bashar al-Assad’s forces...</i>	Description of plot through actor to event, actor to actor and conflict codes.
<i>Syrian military said its forces were confronting...</i>	Contradictory perspective through actor to event linking.
<i>More than half a million people have been killed in the civil war that erupted after the government cracked down violently on peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2011...</i>	Actor to event linking to show human suffering (human interest) and assign responsibility.
<i>...controlled by HTS, but Turkish-backed [factions]...and Turkish forces are also based there.</i>	Actor to actor.
<i>Last month, the UN special envoy for Syria warned that the wars in Gaza and Lebanon appeared to be “catalysing conflict in north-west Syria in a dangerous manner”.</i>	Presents perspective of international actor through conflict and event to place linking.

Similarly to the BBC, Al Jazeera employs *conflict*, *human interest*, and associative linking as strategies to convey its message. However, they employ *event-to-event* linking as the main narrative structure, meaning that stories are conveyed through territorial shifts, clashes, and advancements, rather than explanations of which actors initiate certain actions. With such a strategy, each advancement is linked to the past, present, and possible future developments, reflecting a broader method of constructing the narrative through an *event-to-event* chain. This suggests that Al Jazeera focuses on reports on battleground dynamics, aiming to answer how the conflict landscape is changing.

**Table 6.** Sequence of Al Jazeera reporting (Created by the author citing Al Jazeera, 2024, December 1)

Al Jazeera’s citation in “ <i>Syria opposition fighters push towards Hama as gov’t forces launch assault</i> ”	Coding sequence
<i>Syrian opposition fighters say they are pushing towards the northern city of Hama after taking control of nearby Aleppo in a <u>lightning offensive</u>...</i>	Plot presented through event to event, actor to event and conflict frames.
<i>...fighting marks the most significant turn in years in the Syrian war, which began with popular uprisings across the country in 2011...</i>	The plot continues with historical background connecting present to past events through conflict trajectory.
<i>...the front lines had largely been stagnant with an array of rebel groups largely contained to a small portion of Idlib province...</i>	Plot progression is reinforced through broader setting trajectory.
<i>...opposition forces have since claimed several strategic victories...</i>	Narratives continue with actor to event linkage.

<b>Al Jazeera’s citation in “Syria opposition fighters push towards Hama as gov’t forces launch assault”</b>	<b>Coding sequence</b>
<i>Formerly known as al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, HTS has distanced itself from the group while becoming the strongest opposition movement in northwestern Syria...</i>	Actor to actor linking is used as preparatory element before presenting actions performed by actor.
<i>It is still considered a “terrorist” organisation by the United States, Syria and Russia.</i>	Accountability is presented from an international perspective.

Overall, the plot presented by both outlets, culminates in a chaotic environment, with swiftly escalating tensions, breaking alliances, and uncertainties among civilians. The key distinction in the nature of reporting corresponds to Iyengar (1991) distinction between episodic and thematic framing. BBC’s framing could be categorized as episodic, as the key focus is on concrete events, clear timing, and clear actor responsibility for the suffering of civilians. As Iyengar argues such repeated linking enforced through moral evaluation and accountability, encourages individual responsibility for the event, which in this case reinforces delegitimization of Assad regime, through repeated association between government forces and harm on population. By the contrast, Al Jazeera’s reporting is thematic, where events are placed within broader conflict dynamics, historical events, and regional dynamics. Event-event linking allows to present how the conflict evolves over time, thus approaching the issue of legitimacy as contested structurally rather than attributed to sole actors or factors. It can be stated, that the plot in Deadlock phase allows to establish responsibility, accountability and actor roles before any attempts to initiate legitimacy narratives.

**Characterization.** The deadlock period is supplemented by clear actor characterization, in which villain and victim portrayals overlap with moral and accountability codes. Table 7 presents BBC’s characterization.

**Table 7.** Characterization of actors in BBC News reporting. (Deadlock) (Created by the author)

<b>BBC New’s citation</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Al Jazeera’s citation</b>
<i>“The Syrian military and its Russian allies are fighting back, with air strikes killing 20 civilians”</i> (BBC News, 2024t, December 7).	Villain-Russia/Syrian government forces	<i>“Joint Syrian-Russian strikes hit residential areas in Idlib city, causing destruction and killing several civilians.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 2).
<i>“More than half a million people have been killed ...after Assad’s government cracked down violently on...protests”</i> (BBC News, 2024, December 5).	Victim-Syrians	
	Villain-Assad/Syrian government	-
<i>“At least 372 people have been killed since rebels launched a surprise offensive”</i> (BBC News, 2024, December 1).	Villain-Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham	-
<i>“UN...alarmed by the impact of the escalating hostilities on civilians.”</i> (BBC News, 2024, 30).	Hero-UN	-

The Assad, its government and its military forces are steadily portrayed as the central villain of the story, followed by moral historical narrative, when in 2011, Assad forces *“killed more than half a million citizens attending protests towards democratic change”* (Al Jazeera, 2024x, December 7). Such depiction is reinforced through moral implications, such as government failure to protect its

citizens and accountability for suffering and mass killings of civilians. Another clear villain picture emerges from actor to actor linking, where Assad's closest ally, Russia is blamed for joint actions "*Syrian government and allied Russian forces actions resulted in killings of dozens of Syrians*" (BBC News, 2024, December 3). It is important to mention that, for a few times, rebel forces were also portrayed as villains, because of their offensive that resulted in killings of innocent civilians, but such a storyline is less dominant. In contrast, Syrian civilians are depicted as the only victims who live in constant fear, dire conditions, and are forced to flee their homes. The reporting depicts Syrians to be in a constant limbo situation, where there is nobody, they can certainly trust. In this way, no clear hero that could protect civilians emerges, except for the United Nations, whose role is less prominent, but is still presented as the leading actor calling for de-escalation and protection for Syrians. Additionally, it is important to mention that a few times, insurgent forces were coded as heroes, but this reflects their capabilities of ending the regime, which is considered "*this has never happened before*", rather than moral linking to a hero (BBC News, 2024, November 30).

Similar actor characterization appears in Al Jazeera's reporting, where the main evil is also portrayed as a double villain through actor-to-actor linking. Russia and Syria are presented as the main villains responsible for civilian casualties. Table 5 above represented that, in the Deadlock period, similar to BBC reporting, villain characterization does not receive direct moral evaluations of the events the actor committed. Similar to the victim role, where civilians are present only through direct causality reporting, without any emotion-involving phrases. It is important to mention that some of the victim narratives are not accompanied by any concrete villain, that is accountable for civilian deaths. Instead, event-to-event linking accompanies the characterization of the villain as the sole perpetrator of the cause: "*renewed fighting had displaced at least 370,000 people.*" (Dujarric in Al Jazeera, 2024, December 6). Moreover, it is notable that the hero role is not attributed to any actor. In contrast to BBC reporting, here the United Nations is mentioned just a few times to convey the message of a quickly deteriorating situation, rather than advocating for stabilization of the situation: "*The United Nations has expressed alarm over spiraling violence in Syria as opposition groups continue to battle pro-government forces...*" (Al Jazeera, 2024b, December 3). A few times, HTS is also portrayed as a hero for "*helping displaced civilians to return to their homes*", but the number is too small to have significance (Al Jazeera, 2024, November 30). Thus, leaving Deadlock period without any clear hero that could stabilize the situation, rescue or at least encourage to save the people.

**Moral of the story.** The moral of the story mostly emerges from the messages of the external actors. For BBC News, the sole actor conveying the moral of the narrative is the United Nations approach, which is framed through the hero's perspective for advocating for the Syrian case. The moral of the story conveys the urgent need for de-escalation, protection of human rights, a ceasefire, and accountability for unresolved conflict that has lasted for more than two decades. The moral of the story is mostly followed by catastrophic social outcome values, highlighting that if the situation is not addressed, "*...we will see deepening of the crisis*". (BBC News, 2024, December 4). The reporter's insights convey a similar message, employing the same tactics of presenting an abstract solution and providing catastrophic outcome value with a humanitarian tragedy, "*Syria could plunge into...calamitous state*", or a more actor-oriented outcome of the reemergence of a power vacuum in the country (BBC News, 2024u, December 7). Another recurring pattern is the UN's urging for unspecified actors to take actions "*influential international actors to do their part*" (BBC News, 2024, December 5). For most of the time such urges are followed by the mentions of Russia, Iran and Turkey which are framed as the actors who has to bear the responsibility of deciding which option is more

suitable, “*a Syria with Assad or without*” (BBC News, 2024, December 6). Analytically, such a pattern of BBC reporting is named as hypothetical future legitimation, when future dangers are urged to be met with instant responses through if/then narrative construction. Where unresolved past and present events might be the triggers of future events, if consequence hazards such as human suffering or power vacuum are not addressed. Reyes (2011) notes that such a strategy might allow reporters to avoid direct legitimization of certain actors, transferring attention towards hypothetical future scenarios that are used to portray certain political expectations or even external interventions as natural tools to achieve positive future outcomes.

At the same time, Al Jazeera conveys the moral of the story through multiple actors, including the UN, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which are actively involved in the discourse, rather than just being mentioned for context, as in BBC reporting. Beginning with the UN perspective, the moral of the story comes from the need to find a political solution that satisfies all involved parties, “*a serious political process, involving the Syrian parties and the key international players...*” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 4). While Iran is used to present external influence in the Syrian conflict, “*we hope to reach a common understanding that will bring stability to the region...*” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 2). At the same time, Russia also highlights external influence, namely their impact on Syria, evoking a legitimacy narrative “*...dialogue between the government and legitimate opposition.*” (Al Jazeera Staff, 2024, December 7). Whereas, Turkey urges for inclusion of rebel forces as the main condition to of successful political solution, “*reconcile with opposition forces and include them in any political solution to end the conflict.*” (Al Jazeera, December 4). Overall, the pattern of both outlets reflects van Leeuwen's (2007) mythopoesis legitimation, through what he calls cautionary tales. Rather than starting to legitimize any authority that could bring peace to the country, both outlets focus on negative future scenarios. The repeated demands for humanitarian values and stability aim to function as a narrative warning of what would occur if values conveyed through the moral of the story, including de-escalation and inclusivity, are left behind. In this logic, legitimacy, even though not attributed to a certain actor, is still indirectly framed around the adherence to expectations of acceptable political transition. Meaning that legitimacy is constructed discursively and cannot be achieved by just asserting power. It is indirectly framed as a future oriented goal that can be earned through close alignment with acceptable political norms that are conveyed by international actors through moral of the story.

### **3.1.2 Transition's violent trigger**

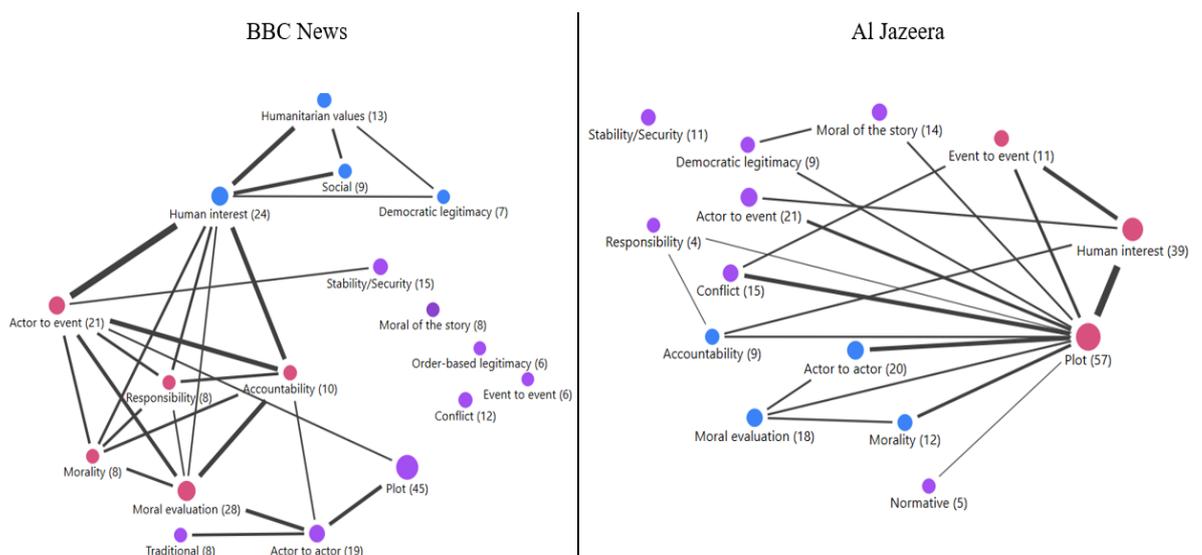
**Setting.** By the transition's violent trigger period, both outlets continue to focus on geographical or institutional setting, where the main event of toppling the Assad regime takes place or is discussed. The conflict takes place across several locations of Syrian territory. The most often mentioned cities are Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. In both outlets' reporting, mentions of Damascus outweigh mentions of Aleppo. It might be linked to symbolic reasons, as the country's capital is seen as the most important city reflecting sovereignty and the “*end of the Assad 50 years decade regime*” (BBC News, 2024b, December 8). The reason why Aleppo and Hama were downsized in mentions could be that these cities were already seized and mentioned only as a gateway towards the capital, meaning that news coverage tends to focus on future battles, rather than stuck on reporting an outdated clash. For instance, Al Jazeera links Aleppo to the mentions of Damascus, to create a sequence of events that led to the long-awaited outcome “*...lightning advance from Aleppo to Damascus has stunned many around the world and ousted al-Assad.*” (Al-Abbas, 2024a, December 8). Similarly, BBC

highlights Aleppo as the city which challenged the capabilities of rebel forces. *“In Syria's second city of Aleppo, the first urban area seized by HTS in its lightning advance, its fighters have been trying to prove they are fit to rule.”* (Doucet, 2024g, December 8).

In addition to key cities, BBC News mentions core Syrian infrastructure sites, such as al-Tanf military base, a few airports around the capital, and military and other logistic lots. These locations are often linked to involvement of external actors, such as Russia, Iran, Kurds, or Turkish-backed factions, thus signalling huge fragmentation of territorial control in Syria. More international actors emerge by presenting plots in institutional settings. For instance, mentions of Doha forum or White House, often include historical perspectives on the Syrian civil war and international involvement in the conflict. Whereas social media or reports on celebrations across the streets in Syria, with people *“celebrating in the streets welcoming the rebel fighters”* creates a new linking between actor, event, and place (BBC News, 2024r, December 8).

Slightly different background settings are evident in al Jazeera’s stories, which focus on near settings, such as border crossings, rather than conferences happening far away from Syria *“Joyous celebrations erupted in Damascus and other parts of the country, including along the border with neighbouring Lebanon, with many displaced Syrians deciding to return home.”* (Al Jazeera, 2024i, December 8). The outlet frequently employs different prisons, for instance, *“notorious Mezzeh Prison”* or *“Aleppo Central Prison recount lives of torture and abuse under the al-Assad regime.”* (al-Abbas, 2024a, December 8). Framed through morality codes, aimed at highlighting the human suffering attributed to the brutalities of the former regime. The release of prisoners symbolizes the fall of the regime and the possible new power that achieved such an outcome. Such a tactic of Al Jazeera, grounded in past repressions and framed through personal storytelling, reinforces the victim portrayal through an emotional setting. This is different from the BBC tactic, which is more focused on institutional and broader geopolitical framing.

**Plot intersections.** After the Deadlock phase, the period of Transition’s violent trigger signals a rapid escalation in news reporting. As demonstrated in Figure 5, below, BBC’s plot codes (left) occur along with actor-to-actor and actor-to-event codes.



**Fig. 5.** Intersection between Plot and other non-actor codes in BBC News and Al Jazeera (Violent trigger) (Retrieved by the author from Maxqda software)

Plots in Al Jazeera (right) directly interlink with human interest, conflict, actor-to-event, actor-to-actor, event-to-event, responsibility, morality, and accountability codes. As evident in the figure above, a significantly different narrative construction than in the Deadlock phase is seen in this transition’s violent trigger period. In BBC News, the plot is connected only to the actor to the event and the actor to the actor codes. While other evaluative measures, such as moral of the story or democratic legitimacy, are left without direct linking to the plot. The most important difference is the framing of conflict, which is left aside, signalling that in this phase, BBC’s strategy shifted from narrative description towards solely factual and descriptive battleground chronology. By contrast, as Figure 6 shows, Al Jazeera continues to describe plot through human interest, conflict, actor-to-actor, and actor-to-event codes. This suggests that tactic continuation allows Al Jazeera to produce an integrated and value-driven narrative structure. It is important to emphasize that a clear narrative shift emerges in BBC’s framing, when the strategy to organise plot through battles and human interest used in the Deadlock phase, shifts in Transition’s violent trigger, with the emergence of an interpretive, rather than factual narrative construction. However, such a shift is not evident in Al Jazeera’s strategies.

Table 8 below, further establishes the prominence of the dominant plot code intersections in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting, by showing their frequency of co-occurrence with the plot code at the Transition’s violent trigger stage. The figure aims to suggest how strong each of the element is connected to the plot or its development, thus shaping the storyline of the reporting. Actor to actor appears to be the dominant intersection in BBC’s reporting, while human interest co-occurs most frequently in Al Jazeera’s reporting. Other frequent codes are actor to actor, actor to event and event.

**Table 8.** Dominant plot code intersections (Violent trigger) (Created by the author)

**BBC News:**

Code System	Moral of the story	Moral evaluation	Conflict	Human interest	Morality	Actor to actor	Actor to event
Plot	3	3	2	2	4	10	7

**Al Jazeera:**

Code System	Moral of the story	Moral evaluation	Conflict	Human interest	Morality	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Event to event	Democratic legitimacy	Accountability
Plot	5	6	12	21	7	11	10	10	4	5

Apart from these modifications in plot intersections, the overall focus of BBC News on plot shifts from humanitarian issues towards rapid regime collapse and an unknown future under HTS rule. BBC focuses on analysis of conflict perspective, providing a detailed sequence of events on how HTS started from taking “Aleppo...almost without resistance. Then Hama...Homs...the capital” (BBC News, 2024b, December 8). Most of the plots use word intensifiers, such as in a matter of hours, sweeping or just over a week. Compared to the Deadlock phase, the Violent trigger employs more evaluative narrative structure in BBC News reporting. As Table 9 below demonstrates, plot intersections are dominated by actor-to-event and actor-to-actor linking, which is always followed by human interest, stability/security, responsibility, and morality codes. As these intersections show actor-to-actor and actor-to-event associations, shift focus from stabilization of external actors, towards reasons why closest regime allies, Russia and Iran, are no longer able or willing to protect the regime, quickly leading to the capture of major cities. Weakening of regime is narrated through actor to event linking, where the closest regime ally, Russia, is preoccupied with war in Ukraine. At

the same time, Iran is weakened by Israel actions against Hezbollah. At the core of this situation, the BBC puts the United States, which is said to be the key actor weakening the regime. In addition to this, the BBC guesses the possibility that Assad might have left the country and sought asylum in Moscow, yet with no credible confirmations of the event. Such a narrative is supplemented by reminders of his regime's brutalities affecting the Syrian population.

**Table 9.** Plot code intersections in BBC reporting. (Violent trigger) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Actor to event x actor to actor x stability/security	<i>"...extraordinary shift in Syria's control as a result of US strategy which has fundamentally weakened the roles of Russia and Iran in the region, helping precipitate Assad's demise."</i> (BBC News, 2024c, December 8).
Actor to event x human interest	<i>"...dictator who used chemical weapons against him own people."</i> (BBC News, 2024x, December 8).
Actor to event x human interest x morality x accountability	<i>"Assad will forever be remembered as the man who violently repressed peaceful protesters...which led to a civil war... people were killed..."</i> (BBC News, 2024b, December 8).
Actor to event x accountability x morality	<i>"Efforts by HTS towards legitimacy have also been tarnished by alleged human rights abuses."</i> (BBC News, 2024v, December 8).

The main difference from the Deadlock period is reflected in the BBC's attention on HTS and its leader's attempts to move away from jihadist ideology. Here, the rebel leader is still referred to by his nom de guerre, but the mentions of his past with al-Qaeda have tripled (4 mentions in Deadlock; 13 mentions in Violent Trigger). A new layer to this narrative is added by referencing that HTS is still designated a terrorist entity by the UN, US, EU, and others. Such storytelling is most often followed by individual stories of human interest, reflecting prospects of the future after the Assad regime and fears of the HTS leadership. It should be highlighted, that final collapse of the regime signalled the marking point when BBC News started questioning the legitimacy of Ahmed al-Sharaa and HTS through personalized stories, though it was met with opinions that it is not worth to question the future yet, as people and experts note *"we're just getting started with HTS, who have led a bloodless coup"* (BBC News, 2024g, December 8). Meaning that it is too early to start discussions on legitimacy, because Syrians now want to celebrate the breakthrough from the brutal regime, rather than solve complex legitimacy issues. Such a perspective suggests legitimacy to be the last narrative, coming only after the reports of daily clashes, Assad's brutality, displaced people, and celebrations in the streets.

On the other hand, Al Jazeera employs a highly historical and evaluative narrative structure, where present events are interpreted through possible conflict trajectories and moral responsibility framing. Table 10 shows that plot intersections are dominated by event-to-event linking, which co-occurs with actor-to-actor, human interest, responsibility, moral evaluation, and accountability codes. This reflects that the broadcaster aims to explain not only the sudden rebel offensive, but the long sequence of events that led to the final event of the end of Assad's rule. As discussed in the Deadlock phase, event-to-event linking forms the backbone of al Jazeera's plot construction, which continues to be the case in the Violent trigger. This broadcaster presents the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime as a continuous sequence of events that continue to evolve from 2011

**Table 10.** Plot code intersections in Al Jazeera reporting (Violent trigger) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Event to event x human interest x responsibility	<i>“The Syrian war started as a largely unarmed uprising against al-Assad in March 2011, which eventually became an all-out war that dragged in foreign powers, killed hundreds of thousands of people and turned millions into refugees across the world.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024j, December 8).
Event to event x human interest x responsibility	<i>“The Syrian war started as a largely unarmed uprising against al-Assad in March 2011, but morphed into a full-blown war that dragged in foreign powers, killed hundreds of thousands of people and turned millions into refugees.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024ad, December 8).
Actor to actor x moral evaluation	<i>“...his rule closely resembled his father’s 30 years of authoritarian governance.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024z, December 8).
Actor to actor x moral evaluation x accountability x morality	<i>“HTS is still considered a “terrorist” group by the United States, the European Union and Turkiye, and has been accused by human rights groups of committing abuses in Idlib, where it has governed much of the province since 2017.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024f, December 8).

In such a way, the main narrative of this period becomes a historical perspective, which frames the current transition as a culmination of the decades long al-Assad regime rule. Rebel offensive is intensified with lightning-quick, stunning, rapid, or all-out war, thus portraying a dramatic endpoint from a rather stable Deadlock period. Human interest follows almost every plot narrative, varying from deaths, displacement, celebrations or fears of the nearest future. Whereas the actor-to-actor link, enforced through moral evaluation, portrays Assad as an authoritarian figure, which in most of the articles receives negative moral evaluation codes. The most common word intensifiers appearing with Assad regime are brutal, abhorrent, tyrant, thus evoking audience to condemn and delegitimize regime.

**Characterization.** Transition’s Violent trigger presents simplified actor characterization, with one clear villain, and continued victimization of Syrians. As the Table 11 below suggests, Al Jazeera and BBC News' characterisation of actors into villain, victim, and hero shows a key finding - there is no clear hero, unlike in other transition phases.

**Table 11.** Characterization of actors in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting (Violent trigger) (Created by the author)

Code	BBC News citation	Al Jazeera citation
Villain- Assad	<i>“The Syrian people have suffered under Assad's barbaric regime for too long and we welcome his departure.”</i> (Keir in BBC News, 2024x, December 8).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“For Syrians, [al-Assad] will always be remembered as the president who exhibited poor leadership, destroyed his country, and displaced his own people.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024z, December 8).</li> <li>• Or through an international actor perspective (US): <i>“The fall of the regime is a fundamental act of justice... historic opportunity for the long-suffering people of Syria to build a better future for their proud country...”</i> (Biden in Al Jazeera 2024i, December 8).</li> </ul>
Victim- Syrians		

It is observed that the Bashar al-Assad, his government, and military forces are portrayed as the sole villains, referencing past repressions and military weakness. While Syrian civilians are framed as the main victims, suffering from displacement and insecurity after a rapid sequence of events. Even though in some articles HTS is presented as a liberation force, reminders of their jihadist past destroy

their attempts to characterize the group as heroes. Unlike in the Deadlock period, no international actor is presented as a hero, due to fragmented ideas and the absence of concrete actions. This suggests that Transition’s violent trigger is characterized as a crisis without any stabilizing force that could solve the complex situation

**Moral of the story.** Transition’s violent trigger phase continues to convey the moral of the story through the international actor perspective, rather than focusing on the newly announced leaders. Moral of the story transforms from functioning as a warning narrative with clear if/then scenarios towards establishing even more normative principles on how legitimacy should function, including future projections of “*a new Syria with a new system, democratic system.*” (Chikhou in BBC News, 2024x, December 8). The key reporting strategy shifts from possible catastrophic scenarios to moral evaluations on how successful political transition should be achieved or look like. Table 12 below represents how the moral of the story functions across both broadcasters.

**Table 12.** Moral of the story in BBC News an Al Jazeera reporting (Violent trigger) (Created by the author)

Actor	BBC News example	Al Jazeera example
United Kingdom	“ <i>a political solution along the lines of UN resolution, and we're working with our allies</i> ” (Rayner in BBC News, 2024x, December 8).	-
United Nations	“ <i>...urgent political talks to implement a Security Council resolution that seeks a negotiated transition between the Syrian government and opposition.</i> ” (UN envoy in Syria in BBC News, 2024q, December 8).	“ <i>...stable and inclusive transitional arrangements...There must be a collective effort to secure peace and dignity for all.</i> ” (Pedersen in Al Jazeera, 2024h, December 8).
Turkey	-	“ <i>The principle of inclusiveness must never be compromised. There must never be a desire for revenge.</i> ” (Fidan in Al Jazeera, 2024ad, December 8).
European Union	-	“ <i>The process of rebuilding Syria will be long and complicated and all parties must be ready to engage constructively.</i> ” (Kallas in Al Jazeera, 2024i, December 8).

The table suggests that BBC News proceed to convey their moral of the story mainly through the United Nations perspective, which encourages “*inclusive political process.*” (Pedersen in BBC News, 2024g, December 8). The UK’s position strengthens the need for urgent political solutions right after the end of the Assad era to ensure “*orderly transition of power with free and fair elections.*” (Davey in BBC News, 2024x, December 8). This suggests that the broadcaster presents the moral of the story as an appeal towards future directions of Syria, rather than evaluative judgments intended to downplay or exalt certain actors or actions. This explains why the moral of the story was disconnected from other codes in the analysis of plot intersections of BBC News. Meaning that the moral of the story is separate from plot development, but it still goes close to the appeals towards order-based legitimacy, stability, and security. This suggests that BBC News frames the moral of the story as a guideline, where successful transition and legitimacy appear from external actors that set the normative standards that are closely aligned with order-based legitimacy, thus suggesting these elements to be the sole factors ensuring successful transition.

Similarly, Al Jazeera employs an international actor's perspective to show the urgency to solve the Syrian issue. In contrast to the BBC, this broadcaster employs the perspective of the EU and Turkey, which strengthens the moral of the story expressed by experts from various fields, who often conclude their opinion with policy solutions, "...we can build on that further towards establishing a democratic state." (Abdulghani in Al Jazeera, 2024z, December 8). The moral or normative policy solutions are inserted into the plot development to shape how audiences should interpret the causes and consequences of issues. The recurring patterns in Al Jazeera's formation of the moral of the story include appeals towards inclusiveness, responsibility of the international community, and stability to ensure that "*Syrian people should be helped to realise their 'legitimate aspirations ... [to] restore a unified Syria*" (Pedersen in Al Jazeera, 2024h, December 8). Similar to the BBC, here, transition is indirectly linked to procedural norms established by the international community that would gradually lead towards a successful post-conflict future. But Al Jazeera frames the transition as a process without complete adherence to these norms.

The main difference between outlet reporting is that BBC News approaches legitimacy as an element that could only appear through complete adherence to governance norms that are suggested by the international community, whereas Al Jazeera indirectly suggests legitimacy to arise gradually during the process of governance formation. Altogether, the moral of the story shifts across both broadcasters from warnings framed in discursive if/then reporting towards establishing normative expectations on orderly political transition. Where legitimacy is not attributed to specific actors but is acquired by following externally formed norms of post-conflict resolution.

### 3.1.3 Initial transition

**Setting.** Compared to settings in previous sections, which were distributed across the entire country, here the setting becomes more concentrated on a few key locations. Damascus, a city receiving most attention from both broadcasters, is presented as a symbolic place associated with the regime's survival, often framed through historical narratives. Al Jazeera presents capital as a symbol of discursive legitimacy. Where key meetings, important agreements, and early governance formations are presented to take place in the key city, Damascus, thus signalling new authority and suggesting legitimacy towards HTS and its leader, "*The comments from al-Sharaa came as the new government in Damascus...*" (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 29). In contrast, other cities which in deadlock or violent trigger period were referenced the most, at this stage appear less frequently, signaling that cities are still crucial as a reminder of offensive trajectory from Idlib to, Homs and finally Damascus, but are no longer important for further agenda setting.

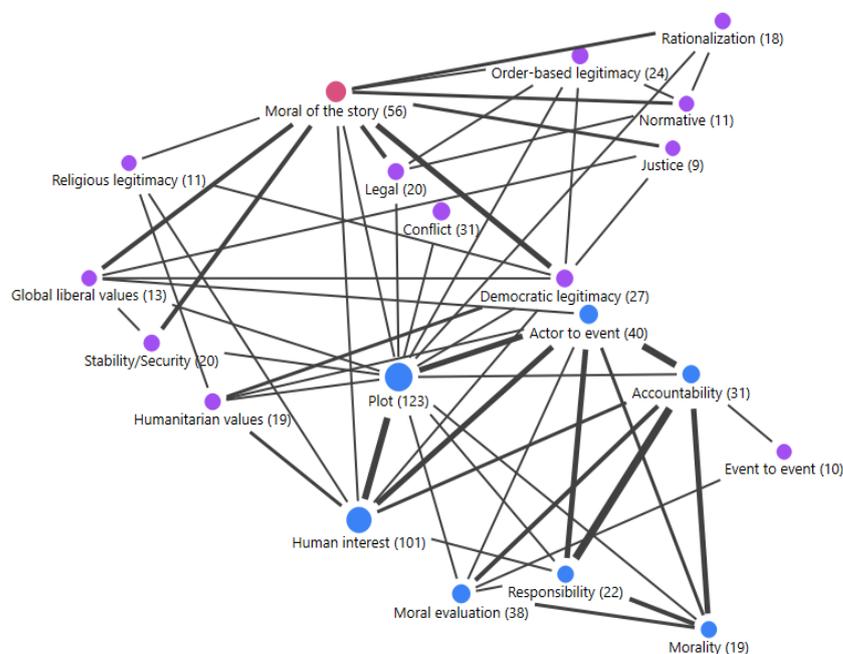
Beyond capital, BBC includes strategic locations, such as Hmeimim air base, naval base in Tartous, or Golan heights to remind of the country's fragmentation with involvement of external actors, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Al Jazeera, however, focuses on different settings, except for a recurring pattern on 'Israeli-occupied Golan Heights', which gradually becomes one of the dominant narratives in this section. Israel's actions, new expansions, and militarization of the UN buffer zone are conveyed through condemnation from regional actors, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran, which "*...decried Israel's seizure of land in Syria...*" (Al Jazeera, 2024k, December 9). The situation allows for the positioning of HTS's leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, through the discursive legitimacy angle. Where al-Sharaa is indirectly portrayed as responsible actor, aiming to solve the situation through diplomatic means, rather than start new military operations "*The priority at this stage is reconstruction and stability...*" (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 15). BBC News, by contrast, describe the Golan Heights as

‘occupied’ and later ‘annexed’ land, only through contextual analysis, rather than broader legitimacy framing.

Furthermore, in the Initial transition phase, BBC starts to emphasize the importance of reporting Saydnaya prison, which is used to illustrate freedom from the Assad regime, symbolize the end of brutal oppression, and uncover the executions employed by the Syrian government. Al Jazeera, which in the previous period already reported human suffering in prisons framed through a moral angle, here starts to suggest HTS’s attempts to signalize normative legitimacy, through the behaviour that is used by legitimate government institutions. *“The ministers also visited Sednaya Prison...”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, January 3). Finally, as in the previous transition phase, here, celebrations in the streets, interviews from Damascus residents, or references to Syrians living abroad, receive even more attention from the BBC.

However, high uncertainty towards future governance of HTS and its leader is illustrated in interviews from Syrians and minorities, which, as the BBC notes, *“do not believe him.”* (BBC News, 2024, December 19). This setting highlights civilian vulnerability and careful future visions, conveyed through personal storytelling. That is fulfilled by the concerns of the international community, which expresses the reasons to be insecure about it: *“We have all seen in other parts of history where we think there is a turning point - it turns out not necessarily to be the better future that we hope for.”* (BBC News, 2024z, December 9). Al Jazeera, instead of this, expresses visions of the future and freedom through al-Sharaa's speeches. *“We have to preserve national unity and domestic peace. We can live together.”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, March 9). Speeches in mosques, squares, and television signalize attempts to legitimize himself through a narrative of a unified leader that is capable of ensuring stability, peace, and preventing new conflict, thus invoking order-based legitimacy. Thus, such settings might suppose that BBC portrays Initial transition as uncertain, but at some times hopeful from civilian perspective. By the contrast, Al Jazeera moves to report on emerging governance, where legitimacy could emerge straight from progressing leadership.

**Plot.** The initial transition phase begins with the elimination of symbols associated with Assad’s governance, beginning with the removal of Assad dynasty monuments, the hunt for regime loyalists, and finalizing in discussions towards new legitimate and accountable governance. Figure 6 below represents plot code and other non-actor codes' intersections in a segment, presenting the main framing strategies used by BBC News reporters. As evident, news reporting shifts its focus from reporting on ‘surprise offensive’ and influence of foreign actors, to discussions on how to *“fill the power vacuum in a legitimate and legal way.”* (al-Sharaa in BBC News, 2025k, January 31). The main focus point becomes legitimacy and democratic values needed for a stable and secure governing system. This indicates the clear shift when BBC News started to focus on the legitimacy as the highest salience issue, which downsized the framing of human interest and conflict. In such a way, BBC reporting changes its reporting through emotional angle to evaluations of normative, legal and institutional principles that are required to guide the newly established Syrian government. Discursive legitimacy approach would explain this as a shift from conflict towards legitimacy testing, where the new authorities begin to be evaluated through normative legitimacy principles, rather than continue to report through the emotional angle.



**Fig. 6.** Intersection between Plot and other non-actor codes in BBC News (Initial transition) (Retrieved by the author from Maxqda software)

Table 13 further establishes the prominence of the dominant plot code intersections in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting by showing their frequency of co-occurrence with the plot code at the Initial transition stage. The figure aims to suggest how strongly each of the elements is connected to the plot or its development, thus shaping the storyline of the reporting. Human interest appears to be the dominant intersection in both broadcaster’s reporting, while actor-to-actor, actor-to-event, conflict, and stability-security appear as secondary narratives. Such shift from conflict oriented storylines towards legitimacy signalling, could theoretically suggest that increased mentions of human interest could be used to evoke emotional reasoning. Which as Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) notes directs expectations on how and what the new governance should protect. In such a way, human interest can indirectly suggest legitimacy or the expectations for legitimate governance.

**Table 13.** Dominant plot code intersections (Initial transition) (Created by the author)

BBC News:

Moral evaluation	Rationalization	Legal	Conflict	Human interest	Responsibility	Morality	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Democratic legitimacy	Order-based legitimacy	Accountability	Humanitarian values	Global liberal values	Stability/ Security
5	3	3	5	17	4	3	7	12	3	4	5	4	3	4

Al Jazeera:

Code System	Moral of the story	Discursive	Moral evaluation	Conflict	Human interest	Responsibility	Morality	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Event to event	Democratic legitimacy	Order-based legitimacy	Accountability	Humanitarian values	Stability - Security	Economic	Social
Plot	23	9	16	29	44	17	13	40	33	14	13	8	16	15	27	12	9

Similarly, as in previous transition stages, BBC’s plot code closely intervenes with *human interest* code, but it is apparent only as a contextual information in reporting Assad regime brutalities or expressing the urgent need to seek for “*inclusive, non-sectarian government*” suggesting that the change in governance directly affects suffering among Syrian citizens. (BBC News, 2024, December 20). The most common words coded under *human interest* are ‘*refugees*’, ‘*displacement*’, ‘*suffering*’, ‘*killings*’, ‘*executions*’ and ‘*minorities*’. Linkage of *actor to event*, connects *human interest*, and democratic expectations, such as *humanitarian values* and *responsibility*, through *accountability* to the new leader Ahmed-al-Sharaa, which is challenged to address these issues. Democratic legitimacy

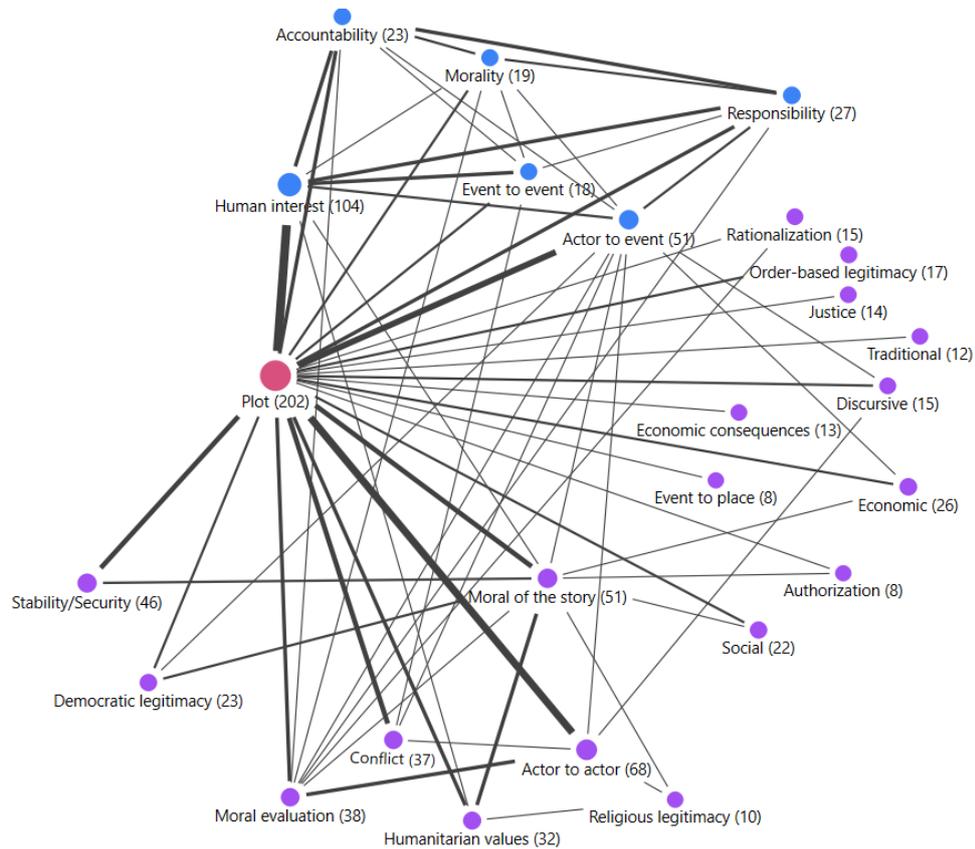
appears next to appeals towards *stable* and *secure* Syria, where internal and external displacement is managed, and secure environment is guaranteed to all groups among Syria. This lets to link together *democratic legitimacy*, *stability/security* and *social outcome values*, where legitimacy is discussed through public discourse, in which *moral*, *legal* and *social impact values* become key standards for future governance. Unlike in the Deadlock or Violent trigger stages, here, BBC’s plot integrates *legitimacy* and *democratic values*, that are shaped through the need of *accountability* and *legal system*. The new governing authority in Syria is *rationalized* through *moral of the story*, which is again highly shaped by *democratic values* and *human interest*. Such shift is illustrated by the plot and other non-actor codes in the Table 14 below.

**Table 14.** Plot code intersections in BBC reporting. (Initial transition) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Actor to event x accountability x justice	“ <i>Seek of justice while avoiding retaliatory strikes</i> ” (al-Sharaa in BBC News, 2025k, January 31)
Democratic legitimacy x humanitarian values	“ <i>Syria must have a "credible and inclusive" transition.</i> ” (BBC News, 2024, December 16).
Democratic legitimacy x normative legitimacy	“ <i>...run legitimate elections.</i> ” (al-Sharaa in BBC News, 2024, December 29)
Actor to event x humanitarian values	“ <i>His group have promised to protect the rights and freedoms of minorities...</i> ” (BBC News, 2024, December 29).
Actor to event x accountability	“ <i>[al-Sharaa] said any of the ousted regime's senior officials found to have been involved in torturing political prisoners would be named.</i> ” (BBC News, 2024l, December 13)
Actor to event x event to event x economic values x rationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “<i>... hopes of lifting sanctions on Syria and taking HTS off the terrorist list depended on its behaviour.</i>” (Pedersen in BBC News, 2024, December 18).</li> <li>• “<i>Washington is effectively laying down a set of conditions before it would consider delisting the group... ease the path towards sanctions relief... that Damascus desperately needs.</i>” (BBC News, 2024, December 20).</li> </ul>

In comparison to previous stages, plot in Initial Transition differs from its shift from battleground narratives, towards legitimacy construction with legally driven governance. BBC News construct Ahmed al-Sharaa as the centre of the narrative with actor to event linking. However, it is important to mention, that the whole plot strategy, is not to present al-Sharaa as a charismatic leader, even though few excerpts suggest that, but rather to refer to him as a speaker for legal commitments or as someone being tested or even challenges by international actors. As illustrative citations suggest, BBC emphasize leader’s *responsibility to protect* civilians, together with minorities, which is reflected through speeches, but with certain examples highlights that, his words sometimes do not match with actions “*apparent move to formalise the positions of some prominent foreign fighters may give [Syrians] further pause for thought.*” (BBC News, 2024, December 31). Yet, direct and indirect urges to meet the human interest continues to dominate the plot. But not it is included into broader moral tones of justifying the need for legitimate elections, accountable and legal governance. While smaller part of human interest narrative reminds of regime brutalities, thus enabling the need to “*make sure this is different*” referring to the new governance of Hay’at tahrir al-Sham (BBC News, 2024z, December 9). The speeches of international actors including US, UN, UK, and EU are presented to strengthen the need for HTS and its leader to prove they moved from jihadist ideology, as only in such event Syria can expect lift of sanctions.

While al Jazeera’s plot intersections present different structure with wider network of connections. Plot intersects not only with human interest, actor to actor linking or responsibility as in BBC’s reporting, but also with rationalization, discursive legitimacy, moral evaluation, event to event and event to place linking. The Figure 7 below, presents plot code and other non-actor codes intersections in a segment, showing the key framing strategies used by Al Jazeera reporters.



**Fig. 7.** Intersection between Plot and other non-actor codes in Al Jazeera (Initial transition) (Retrieved by the author from Maxqda software)

On the other hand, the plot in al Jazeera’s reporting portrays fragile stability situation in Syria, which is challenged by Israel airstrikes, attacks of Assad remnants, assaults on minorities and conflicts between SDF and HTS, constantly contesting the new governance. The overall narrative circles around transition, that emerges during continuous instability and requires “*response to the aspirations of the Syrian people to establish international relations that bring peace and stability.*” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 21). To achieve this, governance actions are needed, that by al Jazeera are *rationalized* to explain why certain policies are taken by the new government. For instance, the deal to integrate SDF into SNA rationalizes al-Sharaa as the person who was able to achieve “*...one of the most major developments since the fall of longtime President Bashar al-Assad...*” (Al Jazeera, 2025d, March 10). Or opposite, *moral evaluation* on why the decision of Western states to require positive developments of HTS even before lifting sanctions is wrong “*very unfair to link the lifting of sanctions imposed during the al-Assad regime on to the formation of a “perfect government”*” (Al Jazeera, 2025, February 25). Such strategy of Al-Jazeera, which is aimed to portray HTS led

governance as willing to adjust to international requirements, thus helping to portray the group and its leader not just as discursively legitimate authority, but also as the one seeking to adapt to the principles of normative legitimacy. To better illustrate how these elements shape Al Jazeera’s narrative construction, Table 15 below shows plot the most common plot intersections. The table exemplifies how Al Jazeera constructs the plot based on HTS and al-Sharaa governance focused narrative, which highlights the instability as the main factor urging to seek for justice and legitimate political decisions, that should be grounded on accountability.

**Table 15.** Plot code intersections in Al Jazeera reporting (Initial transition) (Created by the author)

Code intersection	Example
Actor to event x responsibility x discursive legitimacy	<i>“al-Sharaa urged his countrymen to unite and pledged to establish a transitional justice body...”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, February 25).
Actor to event x justice x accountability	<i>“...security forces would cooperate...to uncover the circumstances of the events, verify the facts and ensure justice for the wronged.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025c, March 10)
Event to event x democratic legitimacy x discursive legitimacy	<i>“[Eight diplomats from Arab League countries] support a peaceful transition process.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2024s, December 14).
Actor to actor x discursive legitimacy x global liberal values	<i>“The United States reaffirms its support for a political transition that demonstrates credible, non-sectarian governance...”</i> (Rubio in Al Jazeera, 2024, March 12).
Actor to event x normative legitimacy x legal (invoked authority) x responsibility	<i>“Al-Sharaa was also authorised to form a temporary legislative council for the transitional phase.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025b, January 29)
Actor to event x discursive legitimacy x economic (outcome values) x rationalization	<i>“...new Syrian administration has sought to gain regional and international legitimacy and to have damaging Western sanctions on Syria removed.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, February 2)

As the table suggests, Al Jazeera focus on Al-Sharaa’s speeches, thus reflecting him as a leader that acts responsibly ensuring that *“...the rights of all Syrians will be protected, as will the rule of law.”* (Al Jazeera, 2024s, December 14). Such narrative strategy might invoke charismatic authority, which as Weber (1978) suggested attracts audiences through leader’s art of speech, rather than legal foundations. In such a way, *actor to event* linkage lets the plot to move news focus from reporting on fragmented power, and to set the new agenda aimed at construction of new institutions, policies, restore of stability and addressing human needs. In such a way, broadcaster’s narratives move directly towards democratic legitimacy. Where the most attention is given to transparent and credible governance, inclusivity and representation of all interested parties, suggesting normative legitimacy. Economic values are most often evident in the settings where ease of Western sanctions and attempts of international actors to *“to help lift economic sanctions imposed on Syria”, are rationalized as the key instrument necessary for stability.*” (Al Jazeera, 2025, February 2). Overall, these intersections suggest that Al Jazeera’s plot construction emphasizes the political process, which is shaped by clear rules of Western leaders expected from HTS and its leader in return for ease of sanctions and continuation of political dialogue. Where, Ahmed al-Sharaa is presented as actively seeking for legitimacy through both, discursive legitimacy through charismatic speeches and seek for international recognition, and normative, by ensuring *“...inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government formed through a transparent process.”* (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 15).

**Characterization.** The Initial transition phase shifts characterization based on conflict narrated dynamics, towards governance based roles “*Al-Sharaa’s office also said it was forming an independent committee to investigate the clashes and killings carried out by both sides.*” (Al Jazeera, 2025c, March 10). Both outlets continue to name Bashar al-Assad as the main figure, responsible for his past actions, at the same time framing what values are the most important for future governance. Victim role also continues to be attributed to civilians and displaced persons. The new victim role is assigned to Syrian minorities. This role becomes as a criterion of legitimacy evaluation, as proper representation of minorities is urged to be represented, letting to evaluate legitimacy of new authorities. It is important to mention that no clear hero characterization appears in both outlets. Even though Ahmad al-Sharaa and his group HTS are increasingly positioned as a central governing actors responsible for future of Syria. Table 16 below presents BBC’s and Al Jazeera’s characterization in the Initial phase.

**Table 16.** Characterization of actors in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting (Initial transition) (Created by the author)

Code	BBC News citation	Al Jazeera citation
Villain - remnants of the Assad regime	“...attempts by remnants of the former regime and their foreign backers to incite new strife and drag our country into a civil war...” (Sharaa in BBC News, 2025, March 9).	“...attempts by the remnants of the toppled regime and foreign parties behind them to create renewed sedition and pull our country into civil war” (Sharaa in Al Jazeera, 2025c, March 10).
Villain - Assad	“In 2011, Assad brutally crushed a peaceful pro-democracy uprising, sparking a devastating civil war in which more than half a million people have been killed and 12 million others forced to flee their homes.” (BBC News, 2024j, December 10).	“devastating war that erupted in 2011 after peaceful anti-government protests were met with a brutal security crackdown. Tens of thousands of Syrians were killed...” (Al Jazeera, 2025, March 9).
Victim - Syrians		
Victim – Religious and ethnic minorities	“The presence of foreign fighters, Islamist extremists, or even regime supporters who have interest in causing insecurity and attacking minorities...” (BBC News, 2024, December 24).	“minority religious groups, who fear that the former rebels now in control could seek to impose a conservative form of government.” (Al Jazeera, 2024, December 25).

**Moral of the story.** The initial transition phase is characterized by clear future-oriented goals needed to achieve by the new Syrian authorities to succeed their legitimacy attempts. Inclusivity, protection of minorities, accountability and transformation of armed authorities to legally based governance bodies are the dominant narratives across both outlets. The main differences appear in the source which conveys the moral of the story, as BBC News continues to focus on international actor perspectives, namely United nations and Western governments including United States. For instance, right after the active conflict phase, US and UK urges the new government to seek for “*transparent and inclusive*” governance, which would gradually allow to recognize HTS and its leader legitimacy as credible as “*long as it emerged from a credible, inclusive process that respected minorities.*” (BBC News, 2024d, December 12; BBC News, 2024j, December 10). United States continues to urge for all parties to “*refrain from actions which could destabilise the country*” and asks to seek for “*credible and inclusive political transition*” (UN in BBC News, 2025, March 9). Such urges are often followed with warnings to abstain from recurring violence and urging for international community to “*ensure that...breaking international law and other serious human rights violations must be investigated.*” (BBC News, 2024l, December 13). Thus in such a way, BBC moralises that legitimacy is something

that must be achieved through the complete compliance of internationally recognized legal standards, order-based practices and clear threshold criteria.

In contrast, Al Jazeera's moral of the story is characterized by a moral process-oriented narrative, which is expressed by a variety of actors, including the European Union, the United Nations, Arab states, as well as the Syrian transitional government. One of the most important moral of the story expressed by actors is the need to form governance that is "*truly inclusive, not [just] lip service.*" (al-Nahhas in Al Jazeera, 2025, March 9). In this way, inclusivity, together with democratic legitimacy, is used together in narratives around the lifting of economic sanctions. For instance, EU officials note that economic relief is going to receive some conditions, including inclusive governance with respected women rights, minorities and most important, no signs of radicalisation. Yet these morals are met defensive statements from Syrian political experts, which argue sanctions are misleading as it is "*very unfair to punish the entire country because of a failure to produce a perfect government on the first try.*" (al-Nahhas in Al Jazeera, 2025, February 25).

The outlet also focuses on doubts towards new governance, but compared to BBC, here uncertainties come from expert opinion, rather than ordinary citizens. Which most of the time are followed up with speeches of Ahmed al-Sharaa, which aims to prove that experts are wrong "*[Sharaa] urged his countrymen to unite and pledged to establish a transitional justice body, as he welcomed participants of a national dialogue...*" (al-Sharaa in Al Jazeera, 2025, February 25). In general, it could be argued that the moral of the story reflected in BBC News links close to Beetham's (1991) positioning of legitimacy as a rule-based aspect, where authority can be recognized if it closely aligns with legal criteria, following the external authorization of new governance. By contrast, Al Jazeera complies with Easton's (1975) understanding that legitimacy is a process-based, which might initially face partial compliance and gradually evolve during governance formation. Thus, suggesting BBC News to approach transitional legitimacy through authorization and Al Jazeera as gradual legitimation through practice and process.

### 3.1.4 Post-settlement transition

**Setting.** The post-settlement stage moves from referencing locations symbolic to the fall of Assad regime, to setting which reflects fragmented Syria "*Instability has plagued Syria...drawing in government forces and non-state armed factions.*" (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 9). The capital, Damascus, continues to be the central focus point, demonstrating transitional authority and the challenges they face. The narratives mention mosques, residential neighbourhoods and government institutions that are used to illustrate rising tensions over fears of emerging sectarian violence "*Deadly clashes between Islamist armed factions, security forces and fighters from the Druze religious minority are sign of the continuing fragility of the security situation...*" (BBC News, 2025, May 1).

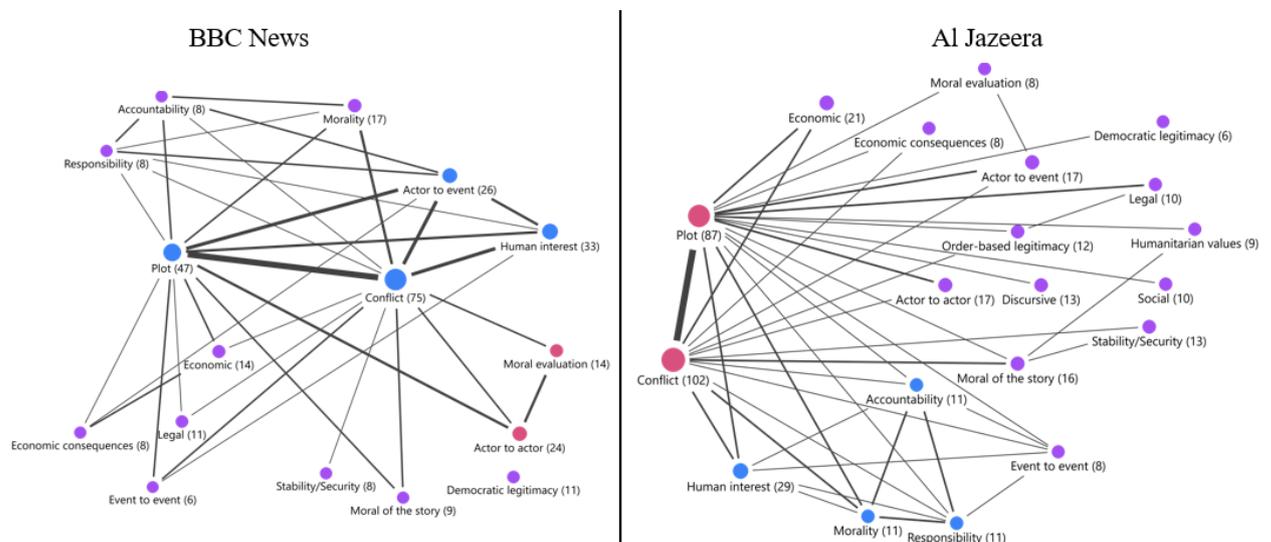
The setting is broadened by clashes between Assad loyalists, new security forces, fighters from Druze minority, Israel and other armed groups that challenge the new government. Cities in southern Syria, such as Deera, Suweida or Jaramana receive the most attention as being the 'hot spots' of renewed fighting in Syria. The events in these cities motivate the discussions of the *accountability* and *responsibility* of the new governance to avoid escalation of conflict and protection of civilians "*Sharaa has pledged to hold the perpetrators to account and ordered the formation of a committee aimed at preserving civil peace.*" (BBC News, 2025, March 14). Yet, his words and actions are often met with critique of doing not enough to stop the violence "*Trust [in the new government] began to*

*decrease after the events on the coast.*” (Jarbou in Al Jazeera, 2025, May 9). Thus, creating chaotic narrative, full of differing opinions and disappointed civilians.

In detail portrayed clashes, seem to overshadow the importance of the sign of constitutional declaration. From the total number of 9 analysed BBC’s articles, only 1 article focuses on the temporary constitution and elements forming the nearest future of Syria. Similar to BBC, 2 of total 15 analysed Al Jazeera’s articles, highlight the importance of the declaration. Both outlets, present constitution as formal transition from the Assad era towards the new *Syria* “*where we replace oppression with justice.*” (al-Sharaa in BBC News, 2025, March 14). Yet it does not shape the dominant narrative, as the setting is dominated with the repeated discussions of conflict affected zones in the south of Syria.

The conflict setting often occurs with mentions of Israel actions and interest in Syria. This creates differences between outlets reporting, as in its setting, BBC News includes Israel as a clear actor, responsible for the alarming security situation, often discussing the nature of its attacks and the overall consequences for stability in the region. As an example, BBC presents Israeli airstrikes conducted near the presidential palace as “*a clear message that it would not allow the deployment of forces south of Damascus or any threat to the Druze community.*” (Netanyahu in BBC News, 2025, June 4). In such a way, highlighting Israel’s role which undermines the new government’s attempts to stabilize the situation. At the same time, Al Jazeera portrays the actions of Israel through a broader setting context, where clear civilian casualties and strikes make reporting more straightforward, and thus trustworthy “*including a strike that landed just 500 metres (1,640 feet) from the presidential palace....*” (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 7). Additionally, the outlet also provides Syrian government perspective, which accuse Israel of “*dangerous escalation*” (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 2).

**Plot.** The post-settlement phase represents a step back towards conflict, where both outlets intersect plot mainly with *responsibility, morality, accountability* and *economic outcomes*, where the *conflict escalation* and *human interest* become the key discussed issues. The figure 8 below, represents how plot intersects with other non-actor codes in the post-settlement period, visualizing a clear shift from previous period, which for some time focused on different issues other than conflict and humanitarian losses.



**Fig. 8.** Intersection between Plot and other non-actor codes at Post-settlement in BBC News and Al Jazeera (Post-settlement) (Retrieved by the author from Maxqda software)

BBC’s stories narrate plot within escalation of conflict, human interest and responsibility “*With so many forces...the goal of unifying and stabilising the country - despite some successes so far - remains hugely challenging.*” (BBC News, 2025, May 1). While Al Jazeera continues to discuss broader dynamics of democratic legitimacy, sanctions or economic prosperity, humanitarian values and the moral of the story “*...reintegrate Syria into the global economy... into a country trying to recover from more than 50 years of dynastic family rule, as well as a nearly 14-year-long war.*” (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 16). Yet, at the same time emphasizing the deepening of the struggle to unite Syria, when threats of external and internal divisions outweigh the joy of the sign of the Constitutional Declaration. Despite that, both broadcasters convey the narrative of fragile transition in Syria, which is highly contested by the sectarian clashes, Israel military presence and high demands from international actors. The BBC portrays this period in Syria as “*slide back into conflict.*” (BBC News, 2025, May 1). While Al Jazeera emphasizes the government’s efforts to stabilise the country but says the situation “*undermined efforts to build a new Syria at peace with itself and the region.*” (Pedersen in Al Jazeera, 2025, April 3). The Table (X) below, presents most common narratives through code intersections, suggesting how Post-settlement period is narrated in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting.

Table 17 below, further establishes the prominence of the dominant plot code intersections in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting by showing their frequency of co-occurrence with the plot code at the Initial transition stage. The figure aims to suggest how strongly each of the elements is connected to the plot or its development, thus shaping the storyline of the reporting. The resurgence of the conflict influences BBC News and Al Jazeera to step back towards reporting clashes. Actor to event appears to be the second dominant intersection after conflict in BBC’s reporting, while economic outcome values, for the first time in Al Jazeera’s reporting becomes the high issue salience.

**Table 17.** Dominant plot code intersections (Post-settlement) (Created by the author)

BBC News:

Code System	Moral of the story	Legal	Conflict	Human interest	Responsibility	Morality	Economic consequences	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Event to event	Accountability	Economic
Plot	4	3	23	10	3	4	3	9	12	5	4	5

Al Jazeera:

Code system	Conflict	Human interest	Responsibility	Morality	Economic consequences	Actor to actor	Actor to event	Event to event	Democratic legitimacy	Order-based legitimacy	Accountability	Humanitarian values	Economic
Plot	47	12	7	8	5	9	11	7	5	7	7	6	14

As the Table 17 above and Table 18 below suggests, both outlets emphasize conflict escalation as the main driver of Post-settlement transition. Conflict dominated narratives produce different perspectives suggesting legitimacy, where responsibility and future visions mark the differences between outlet framings. Because the BBC News puts conflict, human interest and responsibility with clear attributions of who is responsible for the outcome. Here, responsibility is assigned to either the new Syrian government bodies including al-Sharaa and HTS, or external actors, such as Israel, Turkey or other regional players that are responsible for the unrest in transitional Syria. Economic values that are another dominant narrative, are also framed through conflict-driven plots, thus showing that the functioning of the government is restricted and shaped by instability.

**Table 18.** Plot code intersections in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting (Post-settlement) (Created by the author)

<b>BBC News codes</b>	<b>Example</b>
Conflict x actor to event	<i>"...at least 101 people have been killed...that included 71 members of the Druze community..."</i> (BBC News, 2025, May 1).
Actor to event x global liberal values x economic consequences	<i>"Trump's rationale was that other countries wanted to help Sharaa's administration and send aid but were afraid of the sanctions."</i> (Rubio in BBC News, 2025, May 20).
Actor to actor x conflict x responsibility	<i>"A growing confrontation between Israel and Turkey over influence in Syria is posing a serious challenge for Syria's fragile new government."</i> (BBC News, 2025, April 4).
Actor to event x responsibility x accountability	<i>"We consider the president of Syria directly responsible for any threat and fire toward the State of Israel."</i> (Katz in BBC News, 2025, June 4).
Actor to event x actor to actor x charismatic x moral evaluation	<i>"Sharaa, praised by his friends as pragmatic, has already signalled that he understands the importance of building a working relationship with his neighbour, even though Israel continues to bomb..."</i> (BBC News, 2025, May 14).
<b>Al Jazeera codes</b>	<b>Example</b>
Economic (outcome) x rationalization	<i>"Lifting sanctions on Syria represents a fundamental turning point."</i> (Qushji in Al Jazeera, 2025, May 16).
Actor to actor x order-based legitimacy	<i>"intense negotiations have been taking place between the Syrian Druze community and the government... calming down of tensions."</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 2).
Actor to event x rationalization x stability/security (outcome values)	<i>"The government, led by interim President al-Sharaa, also wants to transition away from the system that gave al-Assad loyalists privileged access..."</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025e, May 16)
Actor to event x economic (outcome values) x global liberal values	<i>"US and EU agreed to lift sanctions to allow the civil war-hit country to recover and rebuild."</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 24)
Event to event x moral evaluation	<i>"...dismantlement of the [Rukban camp], a tragic and sorrowful chapter of displacement stories created by the bygone regime's war machine comes to a close."</i> (al-Mustafa in Al Jazeera, 2025, June 7)

By contrast, even though Al Jazeera also highlights huge possibility of renewed conflict and impact on civilians, its stories are linked to rationalization, order based legitimacy or moral evaluation. Al Jazeera's reporting positions instability as a part of ongoing political transformation, rather than as a failure. Actor to event or event to event linking is used to present negotiations, transformations or new achievements of Syrian Government that mark the key difference from BBC News, which despite short mentions of positive outcomes reached by al-Sharaa and his government, are downsized by reminders of new government failures *"...the mass killings of hundreds of civilians from Assad's minority Alawite sect in the western coastal region in March...hardened fears among minority communities."* (BBC News, 2025, May 14). Suggesting that BBC constructs Post-settlement transition as contested period, where legitimacy becomes testified and questioned by internal and external factors. Whereas Al Jazeera, presents legitimacy of the new government through repeated stabilisation efforts, international recognition and positive attempts to recover economy that are integrated into the plot development. Thus, framing legitimacy as emerging through expected outcomes, rather than moral evaluations or attributions to accountability or responsibility. In this way,

implying that in this phase of transition, legitimacy is presented as incomplete, but possible through conflict resolution.

**Characterization.** The Post-settlement transition moves away from future governance plans towards external threats, the need to urgently protect minorities and the overall Syria from possible recurrence of conflict. This is particularly evident in the characterization of actors. As Table 19 illustrates, both outlets continue to employ all narrative characters, hero, villain and victim, which in this period is distinguished into two distinct victims, Syrians and Druze religious minority. The characterization appears to be similar across broadcasters reporting. The character surrounding narratives began to be presented more straightforward and security oriented.

**Table 19.** Characterization of actors in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting. (Post-settlement) (Created by the author)

Code	BBC News	Al Jazeera
Hero - new Syrian Government	<i>“new government has been pushing for an end to sanctions since Assad was overthrown.”</i> (BBC News, 2025, May 14).	<i>“Syrian authorities since the outbreak of violence last month, calling the attacks against the Druze a genocidal campaign.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 9).
Victim - Druze minority	<i>“at least 101 people have been killed this week in mainly Druze suburb...”</i> (BBC News, 2025, May 1).	
Villain - Israel	<i>“[Israel’s] unjustified escalation is a deliberate attempt to destabilise Syria and exacerbate the suffering of its people.”</i> (BBC News, 2025, April 3).	<i>“...civilians were killed today as a result of an Israeli aggression.”</i> (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 2).
Victim - Syrians		

Both outlets portray Israel as the main and only external villain, that is framed as the most challenging actor to al-Sharaa governance and overall Syria’s stability. BBC News highlights Israel’s violations of Syria’s sovereignty, using speeches of Syrian officials that ask for *“international community to exert pressure on Israel to cease its aggression.”* (al-Shaibani in BBC News, 2025, April 3). Whereas, Al Jazeera employs mainly Turkish perspective that undermines Israeli’s actions calling them *“the greatest threat to regional security”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, April 3). In this way, Israel’s demonization reinforces a narrative where external threat significantly threatens the post-conflict period. Victim construction is presented similarly, where the strongest emphasis is put on the humanitarian consequences, that are directly tied to actions of Israel. Another victim role is Druze minority, which for BBC’s reporting, during the Post-Settlement phases becomes one of the main evaluative risks, whose management is framed to reflect the new government’s will to act according to external expectations. While Al Jazeera’s reporting on Syrian minorities reflects broader societal fragmentation. The hero role attributed to the new Syrian government, appears in both outlets. From BBC perspective, heroic role is assigned after the actor takes responsibility and attempts to stabilize the country. It is important to mention, that when the actions of the new authorities are portrayed as insufficient, the actor is not portrayed as villain. Al Jazeera frames new authorities as protectors, that are challenged by constant risks, which in the long run has to be managed.

**Moral of the story.** In the post-settlement phase, both outlets centre around the idea that transition remains fragile and despite the recent signing of the Constitutional declaration, clashes between various actors, at any moment, can push *“Syria to slide back into conflict.”* (BBC News, 2025, May 1). Both outlets seem to step back towards the mythopoesis tactic of presenting the moral of the story

through if/then narratives. However, at this period, a slight shift from moral warning against the continuation of war towards moral warnings to secure a systematic transition is observed across both outlets. The if/then narrative is now structured around the newly established governance performance, where if the main conditions expressed by international actors are not met, then renewed instability and escalation might occur. For instance, both broadcasters highlight that if the new governance adopts appropriate policies, refrains from violent actions, and works towards inclusivity, then stability, prosperity and peace will prevail. BBC conveys it through the legal conditionality manner “[government] moves towards restoring the rule of law... this development potentially fills an important legal vacuum” (BBC News, 2025, March 14). Building on Easton’s (1975) distinction between specific and diffuse legitimacy support discussed in theoretical part 1.2.1, BBC News frames legitimacy through specific support, as recognition is said to depend on legal compliance, adherence to international legal norms, diplomatic expectations and external support as the key factors that could sustain the legitimacy of the new government, even in the case of renewed violence. The United Nations continues to be the main actor through which international norms and expectations are conveyed. The if/then narrative here, is less direct, but it is still evident when reporting the risk of renewed violence and instability.

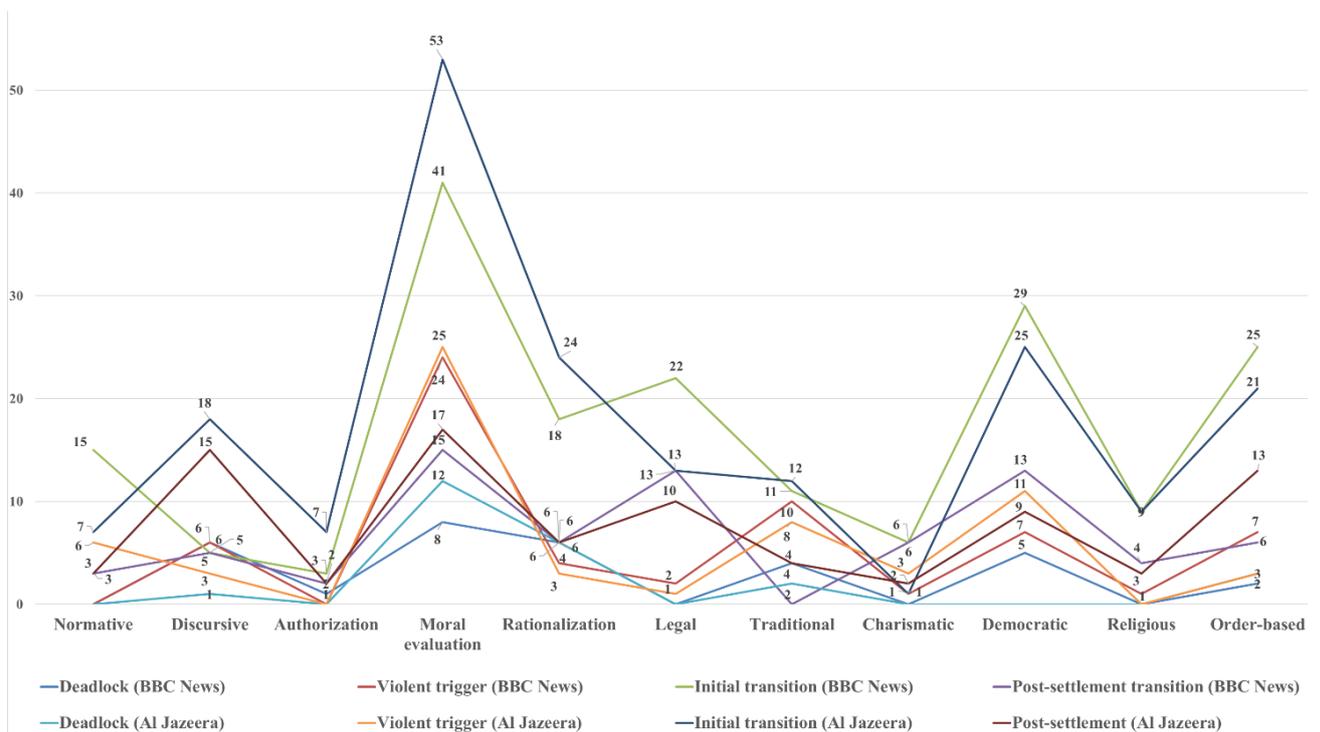
In contrast Al Jazeera aligns its moral of the story with diffuse support, where as Easton (1975) notes legitimacy is a moral belief that emerges through a gradual process, and it can overcome short-term failures. For instance, Al Jazeera employs economic conditionality lens, where economic recovery and diplomatic engagement is demonstrated as outcomes that are dependent on the will of new authorities to follow policy suggestions presented by the wide international community “Lifting economic sanctions on Syria is a first step toward restructuring the economy, but it requires reform policies focused on sustainable development and global economic integration to ensure a real and productive recovery.” (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 16). Thus, suggesting a clear link between change and rewards, where unchanged behaviour could lead to the risk of instability. But, to counterpart these, Al Jazeera presents positions of Syrian officials that challenge these conditions, arguing that legitimacy is not an instant factor, but rather as a reward gradually emerging through institutional processes. Arguing that if most of the rewards will be on hold, then the new governance might be unable “reduce humanitarian and economic struggles in the country”(Al Jazeera, 2025, May 24). Such counter-narratives allow to move attention from the things the new government has not yet fulfilled to the understanding that certain things have to come at the right time. As a result, the moral of the story operates between cautious warnings of incomplete legitimation and appeals for understanding and patience, thus presenting legitimacy as contested and reversible if/then element. Overall, the moral of the story moves from attempts to legitimize political change towards moral appeals to secure sustainability. Both outlets reintroduce mythopoesis in a governance narrative form, rather than continuing to present humanitarian suffering warnings.

### **3.2 Framing of legitimacy issue salience**

To track how legitimacy narratives evolved through different phases of BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting, this section applies analysis of issue salience. Which helps to evaluate legitimacy-related topics by their prominence and elaboration in every transition phase, drawing from the agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs & Shaw (1972). There are three levels of issue salience, allowing for tracking the importance of reporting legitimacy:

1. High - Legitimacy appears as a central topic, which may appear in headlines, be referenced repeatedly, or appear in detailed discussions.
2. Medium - Legitimacy is presented as a second, background topic, which is mentioned a few times, but is not a central element of the narrative.
3. Low - Legitimacy is abstract or receives single mentions.

The distribution of legitimacy-linked codes across outlets and transition stages is derived from the profile comparison chart in Maxqda software, which lets to track changes of legitimacy salience. It is visualized in the Figure 9, below, which demonstrates how the salience of legitimacy values changes over transition phases.



**Fig. 9.** Salience of legitimacy values across BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting (Created by the author)

The following Table 20 below represents issue salience and the most common legitimacy narratives in every transition stage across both outlets. Overall, issue salience appears to be similar between sources. A shift from low to high issue salience in Initial transition suggests legitimacy to become significant after attentions from the rebel offensive turns to HTS and its leader’s attempts to govern Syria. While a step back towards medium issue salience corresponds to resurgence of armed actions in the Post-settlement transition. The difference between Al Jazeera and BBC News issue salience in the Violent trigger and Initial transition, suggests that BBC refers to legitimacy through evaluation by constantly providing moral evaluations about the new governance, where the key narrative is circles around norm-based reporting, which aims to analyse how, when and if this government can continue to be legitimate. While Al Jazeera tends to employ the strategy of normalization, where the new authorities begin to be treated as a given, new political development which will continue to exist. This explains why Al Jazeera continues to report on the protection of minorities, and failure to

completely secure peace, as normalization of some issues is said to redirect criticism from legitimizing power, towards debating on how that power governs (Libicki, 2020).

**Table 20.** Dominant narratives and issue salience of legitimacy in BBC News and Al Jazeera (Created by the author)

Transition stage	BBC News legitimacy salience	Al Jazeera's legitimacy salience	Dominant BBC News legitimacy narratives	Dominant Al Jazeera legitimacy narratives
Deadlock (8 Nov-7 Dec)	Low	Low	Implicit legitimacy dependent on conflict dynamics; Assad's delegitimization.	
Violent trigger (8 Dec)	Medium	Low-medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional and moral legitimacy values are based on aspirations for freedom and liberation.</li> <li>Delegitimization of the previous regime outweighs legitimization of the new authorities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legitimacy is framed as the element coming naturally with emergence of authorities.</li> <li>Moral judgments gradually for normalization of HTS.</li> </ul>
Initial transition (9 Dec-12 Mar)	High	Medium-High	Order-based legitimacy that receives clear conditions to be internalized.	Normalization and rationalizations explains the governance decisions.
Post-settlement (13 Mar-8 Jun)	High	Medium	Legitimacy is open question, which is constantly measured by the performance of authorities in protecting minorities and ensuring security. Failures downsize the validity.	Legitimacy is no longer the dominant narrative, as most of the government's actions are portrayed as a challenge to stabilization, rather than to authority's validity.

**Deadlock.** Across both outlets, legitimacy is categorized as a low-salience issue, which is undermined by clashes between rebel fighters and the Assad regime. Refers to legitimacy are most of the time implicit and are often used to delegitimize the Bashar al-Assad regime, rather than legitimize any authority. BBC News emphasizes democratic legitimacy, framing Assad's actions as illegitimate through negative moral evaluation "*Assad's government cracked down violently on peaceful pro-democracy protests.*" (BBC News, 2024, December 4). A remarkably similar delegitimizing strategy is used by Al Jazeera, which also uses negative moral evaluation, but it does not explicitly name Assad. It rather uses *event-to-event* linking, naming the origins of the conflict as morally wrong "*Syria's war, which began after a brutal crackdown on a popular uprising in 2011.*" (Al Jazeera, 2024b, December 3). In such a way, Al Jazeera implicitly suggests the regime to be illegitimate, without making the legitimacy problem the central focus of the narrative.

A few times, weak hints of legitimacy appeared in both outlets' reporting, which discussed the ability of HTS to manage Syria, though the mentions are insufficient compared to suggestions of legitimacy in other periods. Therefore, legitimacy in the Deadlock period remains at a low salience level. In BBC News, signs of legitimacy appeared through rationalization, focusing on the group's past achievements and governance under the Syrian Salvation Government "*regarded as one of the most effective and deadly of the groups fighting the Assad government and was already the dominant force in Idlib.*" (BBC News, 2024, December 1). Apart evaluation of the actor, which is based on the results it achieved, BBC does not evoke normative or democratic appeals towards legitimacy. Al Jazeera

uses a similar strategy, which frames HTS through rationalization and discursive legitimation, rather than normative appeals. It reports that “*HTS has rebranded itself in recent years and portrays itself as a more moderate group...[becoming] the most powerful rebel group in northwestern Syria.*” (Al Jazeera, 2024, November 28). In such a way, both broadcasters include such short moral evaluations that function as an explanation of why HTS is capable of achieving certain events, rather than guessing why or how legitimate it should be. Therefore, the Deadlock period characterizes legitimacy as a low-salience issue, which is implicit and subject to conflict dynamics, and is instead used as a delegitimizing strategy.

***Transition’s violent trigger.*** Sudden state collapse and fear among civilians characterize legitimacy in this period, to shift from low to medium (BBC News) or to low-medium (Al Jazeera) issue salience. Signs of legitimacy do not yet suggest legal governing principles but rather appear as an emotional form of past experiences, where freedom, dignity, peace, and celebrations act as moral and democratic legitimacy values for civilians. BBC, for instance, employs a civilian perspective to capture the public perceptions towards the rebel offensive “*For the very first time, there is a true feeling of freedom.*” (BBC News, 2024p, December 8). Whereas Al Jazeera, even though focus on human interest, mainly expresses it through speeches of government officials, international actors, or expert opinions, rather than reporting regime brutalities from personal experiences “*For Syrians, [al-Assad] will always be remembered as the president who exhibited poor leadership, destroyed his country, and displaced his own people.*” (Kabalan in Al Jazeera, 2024z, December 8).

In the meantime, an unclear future under new authorities that are evaluated through a moral judgment angle appears in both outlets’ reporting. BBC reminds jihadist ideology as the main concerning issue “*...the regime is gone, we don't know the outcome of the alternative government....an offshoot of al-Qaeda.*” (BBC News, 2024r, December 8). Whereas Al Jazeera uses moral evaluation to judge HTS actions in their governed territories, at the same time framing it as a terrorist organization which, “*by the United States, the European Union and Turkiye...has been accused by human rights groups of committing abuses in Idlib.*” (Al Jazeera, 2024f, December 8). Despite these, positive moral evaluations are also seen in both reporters’ insights, which, compared to negative evaluations, receive way less justifying contextual information. For instance, the BBC reports that “*There have been early signs of an orchestrated transition of power that largely avoids violence .*” (BBC News, 2024p, December 8). And Al Jazeera remarks that “*HTS was saying the right things*”. (Al Jazeera, 2024ae, December 8). Thus, providing no follow-up as proof of changed behaviour or concrete results that would help the audience to rationalize the actor.

While HTS is portrayed through a rather suspicious angle, yet no clear signs of its delegitimization is evident. Whereas, compared to Bashar al-Assad, who, together with his father, is accused of brutal repressions, based on personal experiences of Syrians, constantly receives narratives based on negative moral evaluations used to delegitimize the authority “*... ruled the country for 29 years - and very much like his son, with an iron fist.*” (BBC News, 2024b, December 8). In such a way, constructing the legitimacy through a negative prism, where reminders of years of repression urge the need for orderly and democratically based governance. Such dual framing suggests legitimacy to be primarily formed through the complete rejection of the former Assad regime, rather than the rationalization of the new one. Expert voices presented in the BBC suggest that the legitimacy of HTS should be postponed for some time, as “*For now, it is good to simply appreciate the truly*

*historical collapse of one of the most brutal regimes of the past decades.*” (BBC News, 2024g, December 8).

**Initial transition.** The period where legitimacy shifts from emotional to formal and institutional appeals, leading to categorization of legitimacy as a high (BBC News) and medium-high (Al Jazeera) issue salience across media outlets. Reporting aligns with conflict dynamics, where HTS changes its status from being a dominant military power towards becoming the *de facto* governance in Syria. This shift rapidly initiates media to change their narrative to evaluate the new authorities and move away from delegitimizing the previous regime. In the early months of the Initial transition, both outlets emphasize order-based legitimacy, with references to governance procedures, the establishment of required institutions, and the timing to reconstruct Syria. For instance, BBC reports future plans of the new governance, but does not evaluate, justify or judge them, leaving room for audience’s own interpretation towards legitimacy of governance actions “[Sharaa] said Syria needed to rebuild its legal system and would have to hold a comprehensive population census to run legitimate elections and that drafting a constitution could take up to three years...” (BBC News, 2024, December 29).

Al Sharaa’s plans are most often conveyed by using excerpts from his speeches, highlighting his determination to build a better Syria for Syrians, and evoking charismatic authority through such phrases: “*The future is ours*”, “*...committed to build better future ...for all Syrians*”, “*Syria...suits to build itself on its own*” (BBC News, 2024h, December 9; BBC News, 2025, March 11; BBC News, 2025, February 25). BBC reports his speeches that are themselves signalling Sharaa’s aims to be portrayed as a legitimate leader not only discursively, but also normatively “*fill the power vacuum in a legitimate and legal way.*” (Al-Sharaa in BBC News, 2025k, January 31). Whereas, Al Jazeera also bases its framing on order-based legitimacy but puts more effort into justifying al-Sharaa’s decisions towards the formation of the new order. Thus, employing a rationalization strategy of legitimation, which, as Van Leeuwen (2007) suggests, shapes the audience’s perception by presenting the actor or their actions based on logic. This is evident in this reporting, which presents action initiated by the actor and followed by a clear logic on why a certain action is needed “*elections would likely be held after four years because a new census is to be conducted to specify the numbers of eligible voters in the country.*” (Sharaa in Al Jazeera, 2024, December 29).

Another important element is democratic legitimacy, which gains prominence in both outlets through the narratives of unity, rule of law, freedom, and most importantly, the protection of minorities. In BBC News’ reporting, these narratives closely intersect with religious legitimacy values. Such intersections appear after the reporting on the clashes between religious minorities and rebel forces that were met with urgent international calls to protect minorities “[Sharaa] is saying some of the right things about the protection of minorities...” (McFadden in BBC News, 2024z, December 9). Thus, narrating legitimacy as conditional and based on democratic principles that must be demonstrated by the new governance, in the near future. A similar framing strategy is presented in Al Jazeera’s reporting, which also links democratic legitimacy with unity, the rule of law, and the importance of protecting and including minorities in all aspects of new governance.

**Post-settlement transition.** The last phase brings legitimacy back to be categorized as a medium salience issue for Al Jazeera outlets. Legitimacy continues to be discussed and visible, but it no longer acts as the main narrative employed by reporters. While BBC News continues to emphasize legitimacy as a high-salience issue, where every governance mistake receives clear signs of

threatened legitimacy. In contrast to previous stages, here legitimation strategies appear to coexist all at once, where some of the strategies even contradict each other. For instance, order-based and legal legitimation strategies that appear through the mentions of al-Sharaa as interim president and congratulations on the new constitutional declaration appear together with discussions on legal framework and doubts on elections time. Suggesting legitimacy in this period to appear as fragmented, and mixed-up, rather than clear, and dominant narrative.

The key difference between outlet narrative construction is how the legitimacy is treated. In Al Jazeera's storyline, legitimacy is observed to become included in broader narratives of the al-Sharaa government's performance. But it is no longer debated whether Ahmed al-Sharaa or his newly formed government is legitimate. This goes closely with the agenda-setting theory, which notes that an issue loses prominence when it becomes routinized. But it also marks that in such an event, the issue receives evaluative depth. This is particularly the case in this phase, as mentions of constitutional declaration, five-year transition, refers to interim President appear as ordinary procedures that every authority possesses. And in comparison, to BBC framing, these are no longer framed as conditional elements, but rather as elements that are normal procedures following the establishment of authority. This idea is expressed by positive outcome values, that highlight that the Syria is already in the process of Post-Settlement "*Syria is on a path to recovery and development*" (Al Jazeera, 2025e, May 16). Additionally, the resurgence of conflict is portrayed as a challenge to governance, rather as a failed legitimacy test. Meaning that the key issue moves from questioning legitimacy towards discussing governance performance.

On the other hand, BBC News, frames legitimacy through legal and conditional narratives, where new governance has to continue to adhere to international expectations to secure its authority. This broadcaster starts to evaluate and question how legitimacy is maintained through certain actions, including the protection of minorities, foreign relations, and economic stabilization, where uncertainty, external validation and certain conditions follow every government step. While legitimacy narratives appear only framed with the if/then narrative. Therefore, the biggest dilemma continues to be the decision whether the new government should be legitimized "*if we engage them, it may work out, it may not work out*" (BBC News, 2025, May 20). But, the re-emergence of the conflict raises new doubts, as instability is directly tied to al-Sharaa's responsibility, questioning its credibility. Thus, suggesting that unlike Al Jazeera, which portrayed legitimacy as a given and thus receives medium-salience level, this broadcaster never routinizes legitimacy of the new government bodies, and instead frames it through compliance and external approval narratives, thus making its legitimacy framing as a high-salience issue.

### **3.3 Relationship between International political discourse and media narratives**

The section presents how media narratives respond to political developments initiated by international dynamics, suggesting changes in legitimacy. After identifying how BBC News and Al-Jazeera narrate Syrian transition using the Narrative Policy Framework, research turns to Smellie & Boswell (2025) typology of narrative circulation, to analyse how media narratives respond to change of legitimacy signals. While originally, authors focus on how political actors respond to dominant media narratives, this study employs the typology to analyse reverse relationship on how media narratives respond to changes of political legitimacy during different stages of Syria's political transition. Authors argue that narratives in the media can have four different stances towards the developments of political discourse, that adapted to legitimacy issue means:

1. Embrace – media reporting aligns with legitimacy signal expressed by international actors.
2. Adapt – media adapts to international perspectives towards legitimacy but adds modifications/conditions.
3. Reject – narratives towards legitimacy expressed by political developments are opposed.
4. Ignore - legitimacy signals suggested by the political discourse are not considered.

To analyse media’s stance towards legitimacy of Syria’s transitional governance, first it is needed to establish objective signals of legitimacy, suggested by the political events taking place during transition. These signals are grouped into four categories of transition discussed earlier: Deadlock, Violent trigger, Initial transition, Post-settlement. As illustrated in the Table 21 below, each of the four stages is based on concrete political gestures reflected by international community, which are then used to analyse whether media narratives embraced, adapted, rejected or ignored these developments of legitimacy.

**Table 21.** Discursive alignment between political developments and BBC News and Al Jazeera media narratives in reporting legitimacy (Created by the author)

Transition stage	Dominant legitimacy signal in political discourse	Representative event	BBC News narrative typology	Al Jazeera narrative typology
Deadlock	No legitimacy	UN, EU, US maintains HTS terrorist entity	Embrace	Embrace
Violent trigger	Legitimacy fragmentation	Consensus between major powers disappears: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some start to discuss possible dialogue</li> <li>• Some remain disengaged</li> </ul>	Adapt (the critique)	Adapt
Initial transition	Negotiations for legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanction relief</li> <li>• High-level diplomatic meetings</li> </ul>	Adapt	Embrace
Post-settlement transition	Full political recognition leading to legitimacy of Syria’s new governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign leaders meet Ahmad al-Sharaa</li> <li>• Syria is reintegrated to diplomacy</li> </ul>	Adapt	Embrace

These developments are identified based on statements and actions that were covered by both outlets. While media outlet analysis is based on insights from previous sections on narrative patterns and legitimacy salience. Overall, these narratives created by international community allows to understand how media narratives frames legitimacy of the Syrian governance outside of isolated patterns. The further section is organised based on the progression of typology elements observed through different conflict phases: embrace, adapt, adapt/embrace. Reject and ignore type is not discussed as media showed no opposing or denying patterns towards political developments.

**Embrace the ‘no legitimacy’.** The first transition’s period, Deadlock, appears to categorize media’s position towards political developments of legitimacy as embracing. During this phase, political events suggested no recognition of legitimacy signal, as at this time, EU, US, UN and many other countries continued to keep HTS as a terrorist entity, denying any possible political engagement. It is reminded by citing US perspective which highlights that there can be no support for the group as “*Washington considers HTS to be a “terrorist” group.*” (Al Jazeera, 2024v, December 3). Signaling no negotiable legitimacy to appear at the international level. In line with this, BBC News

and Al Jazeera do not integrate legitimacy into their narrative construction, rather briefly presenting it as a background matter. As analysis of NPF and issue salience of Deadlock period suggested that, legitimacy remained overshadowed by quickly changing battleground dynamics, humanitarian interest and territorial shifts. At the same time emphasizing the delegitimization of the Assad regime, showing consistencies with political developments, as from the very first days of Deadlock period, international actors expressed clear stance towards Assad regime. Even though a few references to HTS's military or governance capabilities were observed in both outlets, they still were framed through effectiveness and rationalization, rather than normative legitimacy angle. According to Smellie and Boswell (2025), such pattern clearly reflects the strategy of embracing, as narratives of the media nor ignored, rejected or adapted their narratives towards legitimacy, but aligned with the prevailing international stance towards the group and previous regime, treating legitimacy as an issue of future transition phases. This suggests that media have not rejected legitimation, but instead shifted its reporting to mirror the lack of diplomatic signals expressed by international political discourse.

***Adapt the fragmentation.*** The second media response to political developments emerges after the collapse of Assad regime, in the Transition's violent trigger phase. Demonstrating fragmentations of the international actors towards legitimacy, as some states opened diplomatic space for possible dialogue with HTS saying that *"It would be rather ridiculous, actually, if we're unable to engage with the new leadership in Syria because of a proscription dating back 12 years."* (Sawers in BBC News, 2024x, December 8). While others, namely, US noted: *"Syria is not our fight"* (Trump in BBC News, 2024s, December 8). In such a way, political discourse shifts away from delegitimization of previous regime, towards assessment of the new possible government. International actors nor instantly recognize, nor categorically reject it, but widely engage in the political debates of the new authorities. Both broadcasters, adapt their narratives to present perceptions towards legitimacy, where in most of the articles HTS is rationalized and morally evaluated for its military capabilities and ideology. However, the main difference appears on an adaptive stance, as BBC News adapts their legitimacy narratives through the normative critique expressed by international actors. For instance, in most of the BBC's reporting the new leader receives criticism for its past or incomplete promises to move away from the jihadist ideology *"Al-Jolani has for years endeavoured to shift the perception of his organisation from one to be feared for its ideological zealotry"* (BBC News, 2024v, December 8). Whereas, civilian concerns expressed by BBC *"we don't know the outcome of the alternative government...an offshoot of al-Qaeda."*, signal that the outlet is neither rejecting or embracing legitimacy, it instead adapts to political uncertainty, by framing legitimacy as dependent on future developments (BBC News, 2024r, December 8). Here, legitimacy is adapted to cautious international perceptions that give arguments on why the possible legitimacy should be conditional and future-oriented. In contrast, Al Jazeera adapts to fragmented political discourse, including positive and negative moral evaluations of the new leadership, where in some of the articles HTS is highlighted to be *"still considered a "terrorist" group"* (Al Jazeera, 2024f, December 8). But in some reports, al-Sharaa is mentioned to be *"as a supporter of pluralism and equality"* (Al Jazeera, 2024ae, December 8). Their narrative seems blurrier as for most of the time, reporter employs broad historical background, which hardens to track if the adaptation presents division in international political discourse, or if the adaptation aims to presents its insights on the positive or negative evaluation of the new authority. For instance, HTS moral evaluation and accountability is presented only after detailed analysis on the battleground dynamics and conflict trajectories that led the rebel groups to overthrow the regime. While refers to HTS legitimacy are not marked in such detailed explanations

*“Al-Julani and HTS have sought to change that perception, focusing on a message of unity since their offensive began.”* (Al Jazeera, 2024f, December 8). Thus, reinforcing legitimacy as possible but not proved, similar to what the political discourse is saying *“a lot of uncertainties lie ahead”* (Al Jazeera, 2024g, December 8). Overall, even though legitimacy is addressed and debated, it still remains constructed through the elaboration of the narratives on the former regime, rather than detailed examinations or endorsement of possible legitimacy of the new leader. The adaptive approach reflects media attempts to prepare for possible future engagement with HTS. Where BBC’s storyline seems to present highly debated legitimacy, while Al Jazeera pauses on its evaluations, thus leaving this issue for subsequent phases.

***Adapted conditionality versus embraced normalization.*** Clear negotiations for legitimacy began during the Initial Transition phase, when multiple states including US, EU, Canada, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and others, began calling for lift of sanctions *“for Syria really to be successful, we need to see a delisting, and sanctions lifted.”* (Pedersen in BBC News, 2024, December 18). And finally decided to lift of some sanctions *“The European Union has lifted select sanctions on Syria as part of an effort to support democratic development.”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, February 24). Signs of the new governance approvals were also even in the high-level official meetings with al-Sharaa *de facto* governance, that expressed the acknowledgement of his power under certain conditions *“...we made clear Europe will support [Syria] but Europe will not be a financier of Islamist structures.”* (Baerbock in Al Jazeera, 2025, January 3). Thus, suggesting legitimacy to be dependent on the future behaviour of new rulers. Al Jazeera, whose legitimacy issue salience appears to be medium to high, embraces this idea, as its narrative logic moves from two-side debates, towards clear indications that it now treats the new Syrian leadership as interim authority, whose legitimacy has to be based on governance performance and institutional practices in the future. Whereas, BBC News, whose legitimacy level is at high issue salience, adapts this discourse, by continuing to keep legitimacy dependent on compliance with legal and democratic standards. This explains why the issue salience of Initial transition by BBC News was marked as a high-issue salience, and Al Jazeera’s as medium to high. As the previous sections have established, Al Jazeera corresponds to first attempts of international actors to acknowledge the new authorities by treating it as the ‘new normal’, thus moving the legitimacy to the background of its governance process. By the contrast, BBC accepts the same international discourse, but it assigns a higher issue salience, as the legitimacy is constantly portrayed to require close monitoring and legal conditions.

In contrast to Initial Transition phase, the Post-Settlement Transition is characterized by the full political recognition in the political discourse, when the foreign heads of state such as Trump, Macron or Erdogan meet with the interim president of Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa, and thus reintegrates Syria with its new governance into regional diplomatic relations. Normalization of relations between countries and possible future engagement is expressed through moral evaluation phrases such as *“he has got the potential.”*, *“[Sharra is taking] meaningful steps”*, or the repeated famous Trump comments towards al-Sharaa *“young, attractive guy. Tough guy. Strong past. Very strong past. Fighter.”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 16; Al Jazeera, 2025, May 24; Trump in BBC News, 2025, May 14). Al Jazeera embraces this perspective, by narrating the new Syrian government as established authority. Its reporting avoids using if/then narrative, by reporting achievements or mistakes made by the new authorities as a process of institutional consolidation, where al-Sharaa is said to *“project a reassuring image”* (Al Jazeera, 2025, May 7). On the other hand, BBC News, tends to adapt to the recognition of the new authorities reflected by the international political discourse. Even though

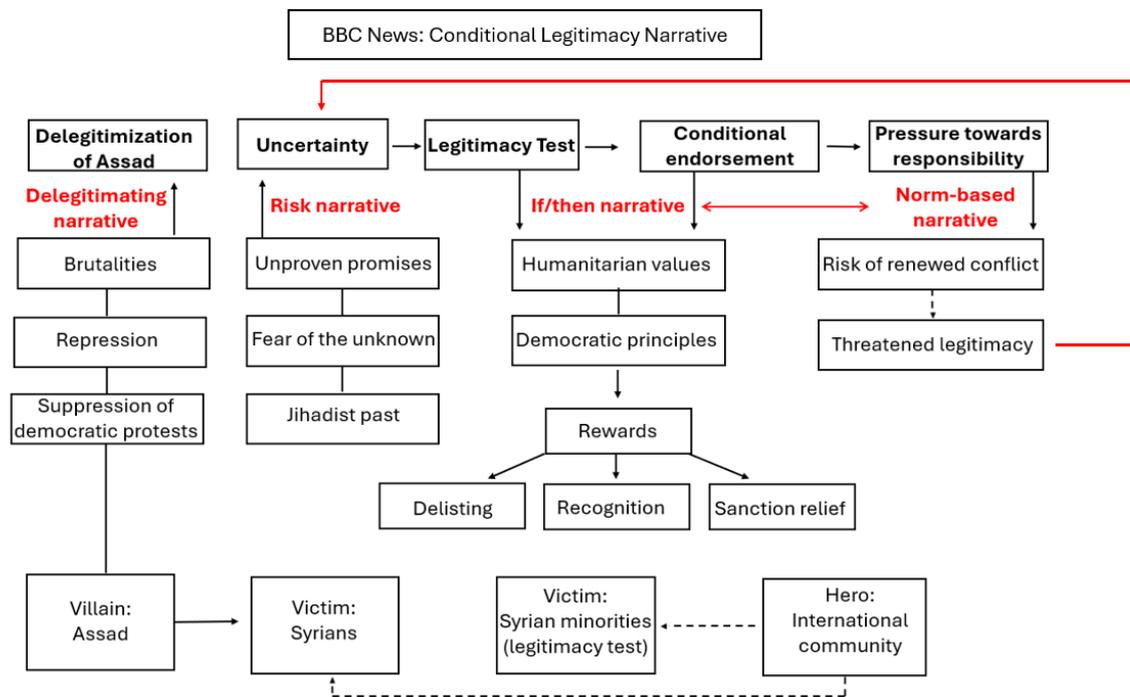
renewed conflict moves legitimacy salience from high to medium level, BBC continues to repeatedly discuss evaluative criteria including minority protection, legal frameworks, democratic principles and humanitarian values. Therefore, legitimacy continues to be the open question in BBC reporting that transfers to distant future. Overall, it is important to emphasize that despite BBC attempts to adapt to international political discourse on the legitimacy of the group, it never settled the outcome towards the issue but rather continued to test and constantly question HTS and its leader ability to govern Syria. Whereas, Al Jazeera fully embraced HTS's and its leader legitimacy, by admiring the routinization narrative.

### 3.4 Narrative Synthesis

The last section aims to synthesize BBC News and Al Jazeera narrative patterns identified during the analysis. Findings, that were established in the previous sections, here are used to determine broader narrative picture, thus explaining the logic behind each outlet reporting. Across transition phases, BBC News and Al Jazeera focused on similar themes, where for many times the same international actors were urging for uniform outcomes. Yet, the perspective behind narrative construction suggests fundamentally different narrative strategy. This can be best explained through the theoretical understanding towards political transition discussed in the section 1.1. Which presents two diverging lenses towards understanding when the transition begins, where Collier et al. (2008) and Maoz (cited in Kreutz, 2010) conceptualizes transition to emerge only after the violence ends and stability occurs, with legitimacy appearing as conditional and reversible, while Armstrong & Chura-Beaver (2010) and Petrini (2021) introduce legitimacy as a gradual process, progressively emerging through the course of governance, noting that it can develop even during the ongoing violence. The findings suggests that BBC News' narratives align with the post-conflict perspective, as its reporting on legitimacy, presents it as conditional and reversible process, that is dependent on the ability to protect minorities, form inclusive governance, ensure human rights and most important adhere to the expectations of the most influential international actors. By contrast, Al Jazeera aligns with the process-based perspective, where legitimacy is allowed to develop in the continuous governance performance, even while instability and armed actions prevail. To better illustrate this, two schematic figures are presented in the section below, providing synthesis of broad overarching narrative logic of the reporting.

To begin with the BBC News reporting on Syria's transition, Figure 10 below, presents outlets' narrative logic as Conditional Legitimacy Narrative, in which legitimacy is continuously reassessed, tested and challenged. The text in bold reflects narrative progression, while the red one narrative logics. The non-bold text boxes represent narrative components used to develop narrative logic. The narrative sequences move from the left side to the right side, at the same time reflecting how the portrayal of Syria's political transition shifted over time. At the beginning of this sequencing, BBC begins its storyline on Syria's transition from narrative of delegitimizing the Assad regime, which is evoked through references to regime brutalities and suppression on democratic protests. Thus, providing moral justifications for the need to change the regime and evoking natural characterization of actors, where the Bashar al-Assad is the brutal villain, while oppressed Syrians are the main victims. However, the delegitimization does not automatically suggest legitimation to any new authority, leaving the audience to interpret themselves. To mask broadcaster's standpoint towards the validity of new emerging power, outlet employs risk and uncertainty narrative, as HTS's jihadist past

and unproven promises puts legitimacy on hold, where human interest is presented as the key risk, that the legitimate authority should first address.

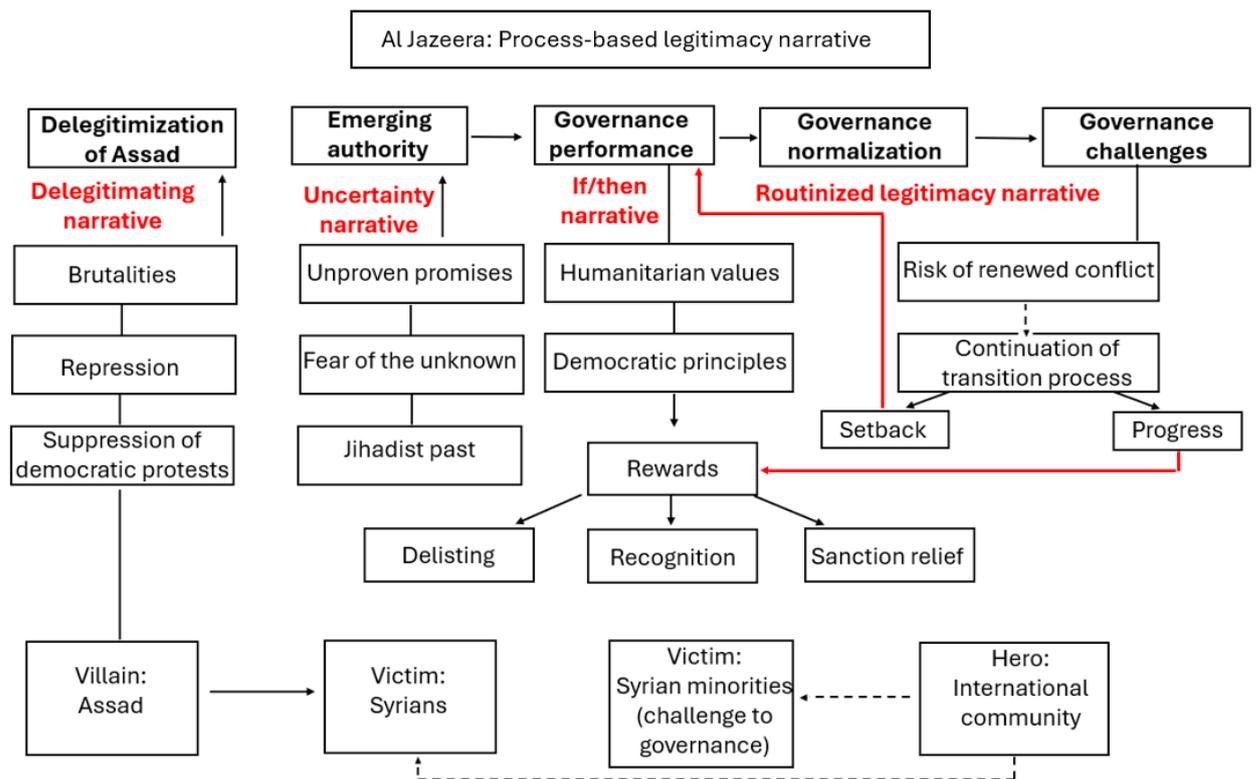


**Fig. 10.** Narrative progression in BBC News reporting (Created by the author)

Building on this, BBC News develops legitimacy test strategy, which is narrated through the if/then conditionality. Such tactic was also observed at the Deadlock and Transition’s Violent Trigger period, but at that time, it was mainly used as an abstract framing of warnings and hypothetical scenarios, where ‘if’ was used to talk about the possibility that HTS can come to power, and ‘then’ was used to guess what consequences it might have. But here, when new governance structures begin to emerge, if/then narrative becomes institutionalized. Meaning that now, the legitimacy can be measured through actual governance outcomes, including accountability, responsibility for civilian protection, and adherence to democratic practises and principles. During the second part of the Initial Transition, the if/then narrative is supplement with the concrete rewards, including diplomatic recognition and sanction relief. In Figure 10 above, these rewards function under the conditional endorsement, meaning that recognition, delisting or sanction relief does not confirm legitimacy, but function as conditional endorsement which can always be paused if the governance does not meet the norm-based behaviour. This narrative extends till the end of the analysis period, where at few articles approval is evident, but it is still noted that the process of transition is vulnerable, especially having in mind the risk of renewed conflict, that is used to demonstrate the failures in governance and minority protection. As the red connecting arrow in Figure 10 above illustrates, BBC News’ narrative towards the legitimacy of the new authorities stuck in a loop. As HTS actions, that are evaluated as not complying to norm-based behaviour, sends back the question of legitimacy towards a stage of uncertainty, where all other subsequent stages, including legitimacy test and conditional endorsement has to be went through again. Within this narrative structure, Syrians and Syrian minorities are framed as the test victims, whose protection signals if the new governance has fulfilled the international

expectations of the international community, whose role is to encourage protection and monitor governing, thus reflecting heroic role during the entire narrative construction.

On the other hand, Al Jazeera’s legitimacy narrative construction is established to be based on process, where the new leadership is normalized through the course of reporting. The Figure 11 below, presents how Al Jazeera framed its storyline on Syria’s political transition. The overall narrative logic is named to be Process-Based Legitimacy Narrative, where legitimacy is presented to develop gradually, by the course of governance performance and international discourse. The narrative sequence is presented from left to right, thus reflecting how dominant narratives evolved across different transition phases. The text in bold the narrative progression, while the red one narrative logics. The first column mirrors BBC News strategy, as both outlets instantly delegitimized the Assad regime in the Deadlock. While other columns present differing progression (bold text) and narrative logic (red text), but the narrative components (non-bold text) seem to appear the same. In fact, these components are functioning differently between these outlets almost across all phases, except for the Deadlock, where Assad brutalities are also used to delegitimize the regime, while portraying Syrians as victims of decades long suppression.



**Fig. 11.** Narrative progression in Al Jazeera reporting (Created by the author)

Instantly after the collapse of the Assad regime, Al Jazeera presented the new dominant power, as the new emerging authority, that received uncertainty framing. Unlike in BBC’s where uncertainty was the dominant narrative strategy that operated the progression. While here, uncertainty is framing that develops the emerging authority stage. This is illustrated by the Al Jazeera’s acknowledgements of the HTS’s jihadist past and fears of the unknown plans and governance strategy, thus functioning as a background information, rather than attention towards the risk as in BBC’s reporting. After

overcoming this stage, Al Jazeera's reporting begins to shift towards evaluations of the governance performance. Here, similar to BBC, if/then narrative emerges, yet it functions as explanation of performance and certain policy outcomes, where some of the decisions are evaluated as having negative or insufficient outcome, while others receive positive evaluations, that are said to transfer to positive outcomes for Syrians. It is important to mention, that unlike BBC News, Al Jazeera does not evaluate the existence of authority, but rather suggests which humanitarian values, democratic principles or inclusivity principles should be adjusted. As the transition develops, the new governance becomes normalized, which is framed through the routinization of legitimacy, as Al Jazeera presents diplomatic engagement, economic reconstruction and international cooperation as a part of normal activities, that every legitimate state engages in. Here, the legitimacy is no longer the issue, but rather background element developing together with the governance performance. Finally, the re-emergence of armed action in Syria result in government challenges that by Al Jazeera once again are addressed through the routinization of legitimacy. Meaning that, sectarian tensions, humanitarian losses and threat of conflict escalation are framed as challenges to governance capacity, rather than to its legitimacy as in BBC's reporting. As Figure 11 above presents, the government's setback in managing the challenges, including the renewed conflict, leads back to governance performance which if evaluated negative (the red arrow leading from setback to governance performance) has to adjust its governing strategy. Whereas the successful management of challenges (the red arrow leading from progress to rewards) is framed to lead to desired rewards, once again evoking the if/then narrative.

Together, these two narrative strategies of BBC News and Al Jazeera appear to be similar in the issue emphasis and narrative components, but the framing on how political legitimacy emerges during transition differs. BBC News emphasized the legitimacy as conditional and reversible if the new governance does not keep their promises, with validation coming from international actors. By contrast, Al Jazeera looks at legitimacy from progressive performance angle, where the government can and makes mistakes, that are portrayed to be adjusted to meet the expectations. While both outlets present similar actors, risks, and outcome values, the narrative logics suggests different reporting on Syria's political transition. As in BBC's is overwhelmed with conditional endorsement, while Al Jazeera treats legitimacy as a given element that one way or another will develop in the course of governance practise.

## Conclusions

1. The research identified two key theoretical lenses towards contemporary political transitions. The first, mid-conflict perspective argues that, in contemporary conflicts, political transition unfolds gradually, whereas the second, post-conflict approach views the transition as a process emerging after the conflict has stabilized and violence no longer persists. This demonstrates that, in modern-day conflicts characterized by high complexity, unexpected outcomes, and prolonged public grievances, the transition process overlaps with continued instability. The research identified four key stages of Syria's political transition: Deadlock, Violent trigger, Initial transition, and Post-settlement transition. The deadlock phase reflected with the delegitimization of the previous regime and constant reminders of failure to protect civilians, evolved to the Violent trigger phase, characterized by high uncertainties, which in the Initial transition phase sparked the need to assess the performance of the transitional government. While the Post-settlement stage returned to conflict, thus shifting hypothetical governance legitimacy testing to actual assessment. The findings indicate that factual transition emerges prior to legally established principles that form the new governance. Supposing that the transition does not end when the conflict stabilizes or, in the Syrian case, when the regime ends, instead it continues to be debated, negotiated, and reversible. Indicating the key distinction between the legitimacy of the transition and the legitimacy of its leading authorities. The empirical part revealed that political transition is a complex, multi-layered process, which can be guided by the government without full legitimacy. Meaning that transition continues to unfold even without complete stability and immediate validity of its implementers.
2. The combination of legitimacy, framing, and agenda-setting theories indicated that legitimacy crises occurring in transitional contexts cannot be examined through a single theoretical angle. As normative legitimacy establishes universal evaluation standards, such as the protection of citizens, impartiality on law or legally based governing principles, that are necessary for authority to be recognized, while discursive legitimacy explains the importance of moral evaluation and discourse that can serve as a justification or accusation strategy, especially in moments of shock or uncertainty. Framing theory further indicates how responsibility, morality, conflict, or human interest shape the perceptions of legitimacy. While the levels of issue salience presented by agenda-setting theory allow us to identify which, when, and how certain elements, including legitimacy, dominate the narrative, downsizing any other storylines. Taken together, these approaches indicate the discourse of politics and media, which is directed towards the legitimacy of the political process or certain authorities, to significantly supplement the legal conditions established to validate governance.
3. Analysis of BBC News and Al Jazeera revealed that Syria's transitional governance was covered through evolving narrative elements. Reporting gradually shifted from a conflict-centred approach towards evaluations of legitimacy. The application of the Narrative Policy Framework indicated that setting, characterization, plot, and moral evaluation are the guiding elements in analysing media outlets' reporting on the legitimacy of Hay'at tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Primarily, both broadcasters associated HTS with terrorism, civilian suffering, and a violent past, signalling no legitimacy for the group and instead delegitimizing the previous regime. However, as the transition progressed, framing shifted towards positioning HTS

and its leader as a political actor operating within institutional settings, meeting with world leaders, and, most importantly, constructing dialogue with the international community in line with the expectations of the new Syrian government. Such a shift appears in actor characterization, through changes in how these actors are framed. The initial description as ‘rebel offensive’ later changed to ‘Syrian authorities’, ‘*de facto* government’, and finally to ‘interim president’, implying that the media discursively transitioned their framing of HTS from a security threat, towards a governing actor operating in the political arena. The shifts are also evident in plot construction, where the group’s actions and speeches were integrated into broader narratives of dialogue, thus framing their accountability, responsibility, and will to gain authority in the global arena. The key difference between outlet reporting lies in its approach towards transition. BBC News treats Syria’s political transition as a security issue, where every government mistake evokes negative moral evaluation, suggesting that the transition might have consequences. In this way, legitimacy is portrayed as a conditional, ongoing, and highly complex process, rather than simply an inherent element of the new authorities. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera approaches Syria’s transition through a process angle, where in the long run, the new leaders will overcome challenges. Overall, the analysis suggests that both BBC News and Al Jazeera gradually rationalized Hay’at tahrir al-Sham and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, as political leaders, operating in the global arena.

4. The analysis of the narrative circulation typology identified that shifts in BBC News and Al Jazeera reporting correspond to changes in political discourse and legitimacy signals expressed by international actors. The analysis suggested that media narratives evolved progressively from embracing the delegitimization of Assad and the absence of new, presumptive authority, to adapting to fragmented international perceptions towards new authorities. The Deadlock phase, characterised by similar reporting across both outlets, aligned with international consensus on emphasising HTS’s extremist past. While the Violent trigger highlighted BBC News and Al Jazeera attempt to adapt their narratives towards growing uncertainties through the framing of legitimacy as provisional, thus marking the end of consensus, as BBC News followed the criticism approach, while Al Jazeera continued to provide dual viewpoints towards the new government. Al Jazeera shifted its perspective towards the new Syrian governance as international actors initiated diplomatic meetings, sanction relief, and negotiations for the new democratic governance. At the same time, BBC News adapts to the actual possibility to evaluate, negotiate, and test the *de facto* governance. At the final stage, Post-settlement transition continued to display the differences between broadcaster reporting, where Al Jazeera completely embraced the international actors’ perspective on reopened political discourse with Syrian authorities, whereas BBC News adapted to the political developments by framing legitimacy as a process that has to be continuously tested, monitored, and reversed in the case of non-compliance with norm-based behaviour. Al Jazeera fully embraces political recognition of new actors, but frames the conditionality of governance legitimacy as a part of the expected routine of post-conflict transition, rather than a performance-based check as in BBC News reporting. Overall, the findings confirm that for most of the time, the media closely followed international legitimacy signals, shaping legitimacy as a conditional process embedded in normative and diplomatic negotiations of transitional governance. Yet BBC News never settled the legitimacy question, by constantly re-evaluating it through conditional language. Minority protection, democratic principles, and humanitarian interests emerged as benchmarks for assessing the credibility and competence of

transitional governance. Therefore, its legitimacy testing is indirectly embedded into the overall Syrian political transition narrative, thus supposing the transition to be incomplete. By contrast, Al Jazeera leaves the legitimacy issue behind its narrative structure during the Post-settlement phase, supposing it has settled together with the establishment of the new authorities, routinized, and finally included into the broader background of governance performance. Where the legitimacy develops during the process of transition, which at the end of the Post-settlement transition is assumed to be not fully completed. Overall, the research proposed a universal framework combining elements of NPF, issue salience, narrative circulation, and legitimacy theory, which might be applied to other contexts of contested legitimacy, thus contributing to research on legitimacy construction in conflict or post-conflict environment.

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