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MITIGATING IN-GROUP VIOLENCE AND CLAIMING REVOLUTIONARY LEGITIMACY: AN IDEOLOGICAL SQUARE ANALYSIS OF AHMAD AL-SHARAA'S DEBUT SPEECH AT THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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ABSTRACT

Ahmad Al-Sharaa's address to the 80th session of the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2025 was the first by a Syrian head of state at that forum since 1967, and it was delivered by a leader who took power through armed struggle. Studies of Al-Sharaa's discourse have not yet analyzed a speech he delivered to a multilateral forum. This qualitative study with descriptive quantification applies Van Dijk's ideological square to 75 propositional units transcribed from the original Arabic audio. Emphasize positive 'us' dominates the speech (65.3%), followed by emphasize negative 'them' (26.7%) and de-emphasize negative 'us' (8.0%). The mitigation of in-group wrongdoing is placed between the criminalization of the old regime and the glorification of the new Syria, and it is realized through *qaṣr*, total negation, nominalization, and vague referents. The old regime is named as the agent of violence or remains recoverable, and its unnamed foreign supporters are marked by strongly negative lexis. In contrast, the agents of in-group violence are left unrecoverable, and their acts are softened. A Qur'anic *iqtibās* anchors the claim to victory in sacred authority. The units that mitigate in-group violence also carry the claim to revolutionary legitimacy, which the speech reconciles with restorative nationalism by dividing the past into a distant past to be recovered and a recent past to be ended. The findings suggest that the use of in-group mitigation may vary with the speaker's legitimacy position, a proposition that comparative research can test.

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INTRODUCTION

The offensive led by *Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām* (HTS) from 27 November 2024 reached Damascus on 8 December 2024 and ended 54 years of Assad dynastic rule in Syria. Within twelve days, the offensive reopened the contest for influence over Syria among Iran, Israel, Turkey, the Gulf states, Russia, and the United States (Hall, 2025; Hokayem, 2025; Balanche, 2025). HTS arrived in Damascus after a long trajectory from al-Qaeda affiliation to local governance in Idlib, and then to national authority (Keser & Fakhoury, 2025; Lefèvre, 2026). Studies of armed groups show that the struggle for international legitimacy can turn the stigma attached to groups once labeled terrorist into acceptance as political actors (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Lacher, 2025; Lefèvre, 2026). After Ahmad Al-Sharaa, the HTS leader, was appointed as transitional president in January 2025, international recognition was gained through an authoritative discourse that presented the appearance of institutional reform as reinforcing the legitimacy of his appointment (Hokayem, 2025; Keller, 2026; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025).

The legitimacy Al-Sharaa gained abroad has run alongside a domestic crisis that tests the credibility of the new government. The killings of Alawite civilians on the coast in March 2025 and the violence against the Druze community in Suwayda in July 2025 made minority security a decisive test of sovereignty (Balanche, 2025; Jamal, 2026; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025). These events revived the sectarian repertoire formed through identity boundary-making during the war that began in 2011 (Chevée, 2022; Zeno, 2022; Habib, 2026). The transitional justice framework established in 2025 limits accountability for violations by the old regime, which critics link to victor's justice, while the families of the disappeared continue to voice their demands (Alahmad, 2025; Bernath, 2025; Nabożna & Bachmann, 2026). The contest over the national narrative extends to textbook narratives that the new authorities call *Ḥikāyat Sūriyā,* 'the story of Syria' (Chevée, 2022; Kielsgaard, 2026). The General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) gave Al-Sharaa a platform to reframe these issues before the international community (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Keller, 2026).

Critical discourse analyses of speeches at the UNGA General Debate show how leaders polarize the in-group and the out-group before a global audience (Kashif et al., 2023; Reflinaldi et al., 2024b; Altohami, 2024). Analyses of American and Iranian presidents reveal mirrored constructions of self and other (Altohami, 2024; Azatyan & Ebrahimi Jahromi, 2025). Arab speakers at the UN have been examined in terms of diplomatic strategy, conceptual metaphor, and national identity (Rumman & Hamdan, 2022; Tantish & Kaur, 2026; Reflinaldi et al., 2024b). Studies of Arab political discourse show how rulers reframed protest during the uprisings through metaphor and euphemism (Kesseiri, 2015; Maani et al., 2022) and how metaphor legitimizes diplomatic positions (Aqilah et al., 2026; Rumman & Hamdan, 2022). Arab leaders adjust their tone to suit the audience (Al-Hanaqtah et al., 2026; Haider et al., 2023), and the Gaza wars renewed the us-versus-them polarization (Abdo et al., 2026b; Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023). The debut speech of a transitional head of state whose government still seeks recognition has received little attention.

Since 2025, studies of Al-Sharaa's discourse have begun to appear, although they remain limited in data and analytical scope. Metaphor studies of his early speeches show how he builds a rupture with the Assad era, delegitimizes the old regime, and presents himself as a pragmatic, service-oriented leader (Al-Sabbagh, 2026; Tahat et al., 2026). His interviews with the BBC and Al Arabiya separate revolutionary legitimacy for

domestic listeners from a statesman-like commitment to international law for foreign audiences (Al-Sabbagh, 2026; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025). Studies of representation and reception find that global media portray him as a moderate figure, while online assessments of his speeches declined during the period of violence against minority groups (Abdo et al., 2026a; Habib, 2026). These studies focus on early speeches, interviews, news coverage, and online commentary (Al-Sabbagh, 2026; Habib, 2026; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025), and none of them examines a speech addressed to a multilateral forum.

This gap matters because the recognition that underpins the legitimacy of Al-Sharaa's discourse largely comes from international actors (Keller, 2026; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025; Hensell & Schlichte, 2025). It also matters for the ideological square itself. Studies of self and other representation in the speeches of Arab leaders have concentrated on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Kesseiri, 2015; Maani et al., 2022), and applications of the full model to Arabic speeches at the UN and to Arabic threat discourse did not record the de-emphasize negative 'us' strategy (Reflinaldi et al., 2024a, 2024b). Critical discourse analysis has long treated the mitigation of in-group wrongdoing as a resource of elite talk, realized through denial, disclaimers, and euphemism (Van Dijk, 1992; Cohen, 2001). How this mitigation is placed within a speech and realized through Arabic grammar and Qur'anic intertextuality remains unexamined, although agency grammar and the insertion of Qur'anic verses have each been shown to carry ideological load in political discourse (Al-Rikaby et al., 2021; Billig, 2008; Altahmazi et al., 2023; Van Leeuwen, 2008).

This study analyzes Al-Sharaa's speech at the 2025 UNGA through Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis, which examines how elite discourse enacts and legitimizes domination (Van Dijk, 2006). The ideological square organizes the analysis into four macro strategies that emphasize or de-emphasize the positive and negative properties of 'us' and 'them', each realized through a set of micro strategies (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). The interpretation draws on two concepts. Restorative nationalism refers to a national narrative that presents the present as the recovery of a lost past (Boym, 2001; Chevée, 2022). Revolutionary legitimacy refers to the claim that a seizure of power is justified by the overthrow of an unjust order (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Hudson, 1977). The study addresses two questions. First, what macro and micro strategies does Al-Sharaa use in his 2025 UNGA speech, and how are they realized through grammatical and intertextual resources? Second, what ideology is represented through the configuration of these strategies?

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative design with descriptive quantification and the sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis, which views elite discourse as a means of legitimizing domination (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013). The analytical framework is the ideological square, which comprises four macro strategies and the micro strategies that realize them through linguistic choices (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). The procedure builds on earlier analyses of hacktivist discourse and of King Salman's UNGA speeches, with refinements to the unit of analysis and the classification rules (Reflinaldi et al., 2024a, 2024b). The data are President Ahmad Al-Sharaa's speech at the General Debate of the 80th session of the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025; NPR, 2025). The original Arabic audio, about nine minutes long, was taken from the video *al-Khiṭāb al-kāmil lil-raʾīs al-Sūrī Aḥmad al-Sharʿ amāma al-*

Jamʿiyyah al-ʿĀmmah lil-Umam al-Muttaḥidah 'The full speech of Syrian President Ahmad Al-Sharaa before the United Nations General Assembly' on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIWUU4uS0OM) to ensure access to its grammatical and rhetorical realizations.

The video's automatic captions served only as an initial transcript, verified in four steps. First, timestamps, the President of the General Assembly's introduction, applause markers, and residual English were removed. Second, doubtful passages were checked against Arabic reproductions in Arab media and the UN News Arabic quotation (UN News, 2025), while the English official statement served only to check meaning (Syrian Arab Republic, 2025). Third, readings that remained uncertain were checked against the audio. Fourth, the spelling of *hamzah* and *tā' marbūṭah* and the punctuation were restored, and disfluencies were removed following a clean verbatim principle. Repetitions were kept because they can serve a rhetorical function and fall within the scope of the analysis. The verified transcript of about 960 words was then segmented into 75 propositional units, numbered in order of delivery with the prefix D. A unit is a main clause with its dependent clauses carrying one predication, and coordinated verbs that share one subject and one evaluation belong to a single unit.

The analysis was carried out in four stages. The first stage identified the micro strategies in each unit based on linguistic markers, using multilabel coding. The inventory of 26 micro strategies is the one applied in earlier ideological square studies of Arabic discourse (Reflinaldi et al., 2024a, 2024b), drawing on Van Dijk (1998, 2006). Each category was coded according to the definitions used in those studies, which also set the criteria for separating categories with overlapping boundaries. The second stage assigned each unit to a single macro strategy based on its dominant function (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). When functions competed, three rules applied in order. The target of evaluation in the main predicate first determined whether the unit concerned 'us' or 'them'. A unit that softened, diverted, or denied a negative act by the in-group was then coded as de-emphasize negative 'us'. Remaining competition was resolved in favor of the main clause. The rules apply to any unit that combines strategies of different macro functions.

Further rules concern group membership. Victimization of the in-group by an identified perpetrator was coded as emphasize negative 'them', because it criminalizes the perpetrator. Third parties that the speaker praises or thanks by name were coded as an extended in-group under emphasize-positive 'us' category, because speakers can widen group boundaries by explicitly aligning other actors with their own side (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). Parties presented as fellow victims were placed in the same extended in-group when the speaker aligns their suffering with that of the in-group. These decisions narrow the actors available as a positive out-group, a consequence taken up in the Discussion. *Iqtibās* was defined as the insertion of Qur'anic wording into the speaker's own discourse without a formula that marks it as a quotation, as distinct from explicit quotation, paraphrase, and theological lexicon without a specific verse (Dähne, 2001; Mansoor et al., 2026; Altahmazi et al., 2023).

The third stage computed frequencies, with macro percentages calculated per unit and micro percentages per instance. Percentages were rounded to one decimal place. The fourth stage linked the strategies to their grammatical and rhetorical realization. Constructions that affect the visibility of agents, including passives, nominalizations, and vague referents, were read in relation to the type of agent and to whether that agent can be recovered from the surrounding units (Billig, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2008). Rhetorical devices were interpreted with the categories of *balāghah* 'classical Arabic rhetoric',

which include restriction (*qaṣr*) and repetition (*takrār*) (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Al-Jurjānī, 1992). Ideological orientations were inferred from clusters of dominant micro strategies (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2006). Arabic data are given in ALA-LC transliteration with translation. The coding was cross-checked by the research team, and disputed units were resolved through discussion against the category definitions. The study reports no agreement coefficient, a limitation acknowledged in the Conclusion.

RESULT

The analysis of 75 units shows that Al-Sharaa's 2025 UNGA speech realizes three of the four macro strategies of the ideological square. Emphasize positive 'us' is the dominant strategy, with 49 units (65.3%). Emphasize negative 'them' appears in 20 units (26.7%), and de-emphasize negative 'us' in 6 units (8.0%). The distribution of macro strategies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of macro strategies in Al-Sharaa's 2025 UNGA speech

Macro strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Emphasize positive 'us'	49	65.3
Emphasize negative 'them'	20	26.7
De-emphasize negative 'us'	6	8.0
De-emphasize positive 'them'	0	0.0
Total	75	100.0

At the micro level, 173 micro strategy instances were found, spread across 22 Van Dijk categories. The four most frequent strategies are national self-glorification (19 instances; 11.0%), metaphor (17 instances; 9.8%), victimization (16 instances; 9.2%), and norm expression (13 instances; 7.5%). On average, each unit realizes 2.3 micro strategies, which indicates the rhetorical density of Al-Sharaa's speech. Four categories were not found, namely burden, counterfactuals, generalization, and irony. The distribution of micro strategies is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of micro strategy instances across macro strategies

Micro strategy	EPU	ENT	DNU	Total	%
National self-glorification	19	0	0	19	11.0
Metaphor	10	6	1	17	9.8
Victimization	9	7	0	16	9.2
Norm expression	13	0	0	13	7.5
Hyperbole	7	3	1	11	6.4
Polarization	6	4	0	10	5.8
Actor description	1	9	0	10	5.8
Vagueness	6	2	1	9	5.2
Lexicalization	3	4	1	8	4.6
Populism	5	1	2	8	4.6
Consensus	6	2	0	8	4.6
Euphemism	3	0	4	7	4.0
Evidentiality	5	1	0	6	3.5
Implication	0	5	0	5	2.9
Comparison	5	0	0	5	2.9

Micro strategy	EPU	ENT	DNU	Total	%
Number game	1	3	0	4	2.3
Presupposition	1	1	2	4	2.3
History as a lesson	3	0	0	3	1.7
Example/illustration	1	2	0	3	1.7
Authority	3	0	0	3	1.7
Categorization	2	0	0	2	1.2
Disclaimer	0	0	2	2	1.2
Total	109	50	14	173	100.0

Emphasize Positive 'Us'

Emphasize positive 'us' runs through most of the speech, especially its middle and final sections. Its in-group has three layers, namely the Syrian people and the new government, the supporting states named in the speech, and parties presented as fellow victims, especially the residents of Gaza. National self-glorification (19 instances), norm expression (13 instances), metaphor (10 instances), and victimization (9 instances) serve it most often, combining claims to glory, to compliance with norms, and to suffering. Examples are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Representative data of emphasize positive 'us'

Code	Data	Micro strategy
D.9	لقد جئتكم من دمشق، عاصمة التاريخ ومهد الحضارات *laqad jiʾtukum min Dimashq ʿāṣimat al-tārīkh wa-mahd al-ḥaḍārāt* I have come to you from Damascus, the capital of history and the cradle of civilizations	National self-glorification, metaphor
D.70	وأخص بالشكر كل من تركيا وقطر والمملكة العربية السعودية *wa-akhuṣṣu bi-al-shukr kull min Turkiyā wa-Qaṭar wa-al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Suʿūdiyyah* I especially thank Turkey, Qatar, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Actor description, categorization
D.34	انتصرنا لكم جميعًا أيها العالم *intaṣarnā lakum jamīʿan ayyuhā al-ʿālam* We won for all of you, O world	Consensus, hyperbole, national self-glorification
D.64	﴿وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا﴾ *wa-qul jāʾa al-ḥaqq wa-zahaqa al-bāṭil inna al-bāṭil kāna zahūqā* And say, the truth has come, and falsehood has vanished; indeed falsehood is bound to vanish	Authority, polarization (realization of *iqtibās*)

National self-glorification appears in 19 instances, all of which serve to emphasize positive 'us'. Glorification of the civilizational past appears in the opening *laqad jiʾtukum min Dimashq ʿāṣimat al-tārīkh wa-mahd al-ḥaḍārāt* 'I have come to you from Damascus, the capital of history and the cradle of civilizations' (D.9), which is extended into the

claim that Syria has been a *manārah yaqtadī bihā al-ʿālam* 'a beacon the world follows' (D.10). For the revolution, the people are described as *shaʿb ʿaẓīm ṣāgha al-majd ʿalá marr al-ʿuṣūr* 'a great people who forged glory across the ages' (D.66). In the present, glorification is built through the diachronic comparison *min balad yuṣaddir al-azamāt ilá furṣah tārīkhiyyah* 'from a country that exports crises to a historic opportunity' (D.38), reinforced by history as a lesson (3 instances) and comparison (5 instances). The contrast between past and present casts the old regime in a negative light without naming it, as in *ṣafḥat al-māḍī al-bāʾis* 'the bleak page of the past' (D.62).

Norm expression, with 13 instances, also serves to emphasize positive 'us' entirely. The norms chosen are those of international governance, including the rule of law, guaranteed rights, transitional justice, and the state monopoly on arms. The clause *taklufu ḥuqūq al-jamīʿ dūna istithnāʾ* 'guarantees the rights of all without exception' (D.60) answers international concern for the protection of minorities, although minorities are never named. Authority (3 instances) refers to the UN and international law, including the commitment to *ittifāq faḍḍ al-ishtibāk li-ʿām 1974* 'the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement' (D.49), while evidentiality (5 instances) rests on new institutions, including the fact-finding committee and the transitional justice body (D.42, D.53). Consensus (6 instances) extends the in-group to the audience through the parallelism *abnāʾinā wa-abnāʾikum* 'our children and your children' (D.35). In the closing section, *wa-akhuṣṣu bi-al-shukr* 'and I especially thank' names Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Arab and Islamic states, the United States, and the European Union (D.70), which places these states in an extended in-group.

Metaphor appears in 17 instances, ten of which serve emphasize positive 'us'. The most structural metaphor is *al-ḥikāyah* 'the story', which opens the speech through *inna al-ḥikāyah al-sūriyyah ḥikāyah tahīju fīhā al-mashāʿir* 'the Syrian story is a story that stirs the emotions' (D.1) and closes it through *faṣl jadīd min fuṣūlihā ʿunwānuhu al-salām wa-al-izdihār wa-al-tanmiyah* 'a new chapter of its chapters titled peace, prosperity, and development' (D.75). This circular framing places revolution, war, and transition in one unfinished storyline. In the middle section, *intaṣarnā* 'we have won' opens four consecutive units (D.32 to D.35), and the beneficiary of the victory moves from the wronged to the mothers of martyrs, the world, and the future of children. In this progression, the victory of an armed faction becomes universal. Six others serve to emphasize negative 'them', for example mazzaqa bilādanā ṭūlan wa-ʿarḍan 'tore our country apart in length and breadth' (D.19), and one serves to de-emphasize negative 'us', the verb *tuwwijat* 'was crowned' in the claim of a victory without revenge (D.30).

The clearest Qur'anic material in the speech is D.64, which inserts al-Isrāʾ 17:81 verbatim without a citation formula, so that *wa-qul jāʾa al-ḥaqq wa-zahaqa al-bāṭil* 'and say, the truth has come, and falsehood has vanished' is spoken in the speaker's own voice. The verse follows the reference to *ṣafḥat al-māḍī al-bāʾis* (D.62). Its opposition between *al-ḥaqq* 'the truth' and *al-bāṭil* 'falsehood' realizes polarization, while its sacred source realizes authority. The unit is coded as emphasize positive 'us' because its main predicate asserts the arrival of *al-ḥaqq*, which the surrounding units attach to the new Syria. At the same time, the vanishing of *al-bāṭil* follows as its consequence. The tradition reports that the Prophet recited the verse while striking down the idols around the Kaʿbah upon entering Mecca in victory (Al-Bukhārī, 2002; Ibn Kathīr, 1999). The speech does not mention Mecca, so any alignment with that event is an interpretive reading that depends on the listener's knowledge of the tradition.

Emphasize Negative 'Them'

Emphasize negative 'them' appears in 20 units, 15 of which are concentrated in the early part of the speech (D.4 to D.25). The main out-group is the Assad regime, referred to as *al-niẓām al-sābiq* 'the former regime' and never named after the ruling family. Israel, the second out-group, appears in three units in the middle of the speech, and the foreign supporters of the old regime form a third out-group with vague referents. The micro strategies that most often serve this strategy are actor description (9 instances), victimization (7 instances), metaphor (6 instances), and implication (5 instances). The concentration in the early part shows that the negativization of the out-group lays the foundation of the argument. The crimes of the old regime are established first so that the military operation in the following section appears as a legitimate response. Emphasize negative 'them' and de-emphasize negative 'us' occur in sequence, and the first supplies the presupposition for the second. Table 4 contains examples of data for this strategy.

Table 4. Representative data of emphasize negative 'them'

Code	Data	Micro strategy
D.11	غير أن سوريا ومنذ 60 عامًا وقعت تحت وطأة نظام ظالم غاشم *ghayra anna Sūriyā wa-mundhu 60 ʿāman waqaʿat taḥta waṭ'at niẓām ẓālim ghāshim* Yet for 60 years Syria has fallen under the weight of an unjust and tyrannical regime	Actor description, number game, lexicalization
D.16	لقد استخدم النظام السابق [...] أبشع أدوات التعذيب والقتل *laqad istakhdama al-niẓām al-sābiq [...] abshaʿ adawāt al-taʿdhīb wa-al-qatl* The former regime has used [...] the most heinous instruments of torture and killing	Actor description, hyperbole, example/illustration, lexicalization
D.22	لقد استُهدف الشعب الضعيف بالأسلحة الكيماوية بما يزيد عن 200 هجوم موثق *laqad ustuhdifa al-shaʿb al-ḍaʿīf bi-al-asliḥah al-kīmāwiyyah bi-mā yazīdu ʿan 200 hujūm muwaththaq* The weak people were targeted with chemical weapons in more than 200 documented attacks	Number game, evidentiality, victimization
D.20	واستقدم قوات أجنبية وميليشيات وعصابات من أصقاع الأرض *wa-istaqdama quwwāt ajnabiyyah wa-mīlīshiyāt wa-ʿiṣābāt min aṣqāʿ al-arḍ* And it brought in foreign forces, militias, and gangs from the far corners of the earth	Actor description, vagueness, lexicalization, metaphor

Actor description is the micro strategy most characteristic of emphasize negative 'them', because nine of its ten instances serve this macro strategy. The old regime is described through piled-up moral attributes, namely *niẓām ẓālim ghāshim* 'an unjust and tyrannical regime' (D.11), and through a series of active verbs that make the regime the grammatical subject, including *istakhdama* 'used', *athāra* 'ignited', *mazzaqa* 'tore apart',

and *istaqdama* 'brought in' (D.16 to D.20). Lexicalization (4 instances) intensifies this description through word choices like *ʿiṣābāt* 'gangs' for the regime's foreign allies (D.20) and *al-tankīl* 'torture' and *al-ightiṣāb* 'rape' in the list of the people's sufferings (D.15). Hyperbole appears in the superlative *absha*ʿ *adawāt al-taʿdhīb wa-al-qatl* 'the most heinous instruments of torture and killing' (D.16). The referent becomes vague in *quwwāt ajnabiyyah wa-mīlīshiyāt wa-ʿiṣābāt min aṣqāʿ al-arḍ* 'foreign forces, militias, and gangs from the far corners of the earth' (D.20).

Victimization appears in 16 instances, seven serving emphasize negative 'them' and nine serving emphasize positive 'us'. When the regime acts, the speech uses active sentences with an explicit subject, as in *laqad qatala al-niẓām al-sābiq naḥw milyūn insān* 'the former regime killed about one million people' (D.21). When the people are the focus, it shifts to the passive, as in D.15 and *laqad ustuhdifa al-shaʿb al-ḍaʿīf bi-al-asliḥah al-kīmāwiyyah* 'the weak people were targeted with chemical weapons' (D.22), where the regime remains a recoverable agent. Suffering also builds moral authority. The Syrian people are *min akthar al-shuʿūb allatī tashʿuru bi-ḥajm muʿānāt al-ḥarb* 'among the peoples who most feel the magnitude of the suffering of war' (D.72), and *laqad intaṣarnā li-ummahāt al-shuhadāʾ wa-al-mafqūdīn* 'we have won for the mothers of the martyrs and the missing' (D.33) grounds the victory claim in the victims' suffering. Victimization links the criminalization of the old regime to the glorification of the new Syria.

Israel is constructed differently from the former regime and with lower intensity, since it occupies three units against fifteen for the old regime. Its name occurs only as an adjective, in *al-tahdīdāt al-isrāʾīliyyah* 'the Israeli threats' (D.45) and *al-siyāsāt al-isrāʾīliyyah* 'the Israeli policies' (D.46), and the moral attributes applied to the old regime, for example *ẓālim* 'unjust', are absent. Its actions are framed as *muḥāwalah li-istighlāl al-marḥalah al-intiqāliyyah* 'an attempt to exploit the transitional period' (D.47), against which the speaker proposes *al-ḥiwār wa-al-diblūmāsiyyah* 'dialogue and diplomacy' (D.48), and the aggression suffered in Gaza (D.73) is left without a named perpetrator. The foreign supporters of the old regime, chiefly Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah (Hall, 2025; Hokayem, 2025), are also unnamed, but D.20 dissolves them into foreign forces, militias, and *ʿiṣābāt* 'gangs', a vague referent with strongly negative lexis. The out-group is graded. The old regime receives explicit naming and maximal negativity, its supporters vague reference with high negativity, and Israel explicit reference with muted negativity.

De-emphasize Negative 'Us'

De-emphasize negative 'us' appears in six units (D.26 to D.41), interspersed with emphasize positive 'us' units on the outcomes of the victory (D.27, D.31 to D.38) and one emphasize negative 'them' unit (D.40). The strategy is realized mainly through euphemism (4 instances), disclaimer (2 instances), populism (2 instances), and presupposition (2 instances). All of these units concern two events that could damage the image of the in-group, namely the military operation that brought down the Assad regime and the post-transition sectarian violence. Both events are mentioned, but in ways that divert, deny, or obscure the in-group's responsibility. The placement of the strategy shapes its function. The crimes of the old regime are established before it appears, and the achievements of the new government are presented after it. The mitigation of in-group wrongdoing thus sits between the criminalization of the out-

group and the glorification of the in-group, so that the part most open to challenge is flanked by the two dominant strategies. Examples are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Representative data of de-emphasize negative 'us'

Code	Data	Micro strategy
D.28	عمل عسكري كان ملؤه الرحمة والخير وتغليب العفو والتسامح *ʿamal ʿaskarī kāna mil'uhu al-raḥmah wa-al-khayr wa-taghlīb al-ʿafw wa-al-tasāmuḥ* A military operation filled with mercy and goodness that gave priority to forgiveness and tolerance	Euphemism, lexicalization
D.29	معركة عسكرية لم تتسبب بتهجير إنسان ولا قتل مدني *maʿrakah ʿaskariyyah lam tatasabbab bi-tahjīr insān wa-lā qatl madanī* A military battle that did not cause the displacement of a single person or the killing of a single civilian	Disclaimer, hyperbole
D.39	[...] دفع بأطراف لمحاولة إثارة النعرات الطائفية والاقتتالات البينية [...] *dafaʿa bi-aṭrāf li-muḥāwalat ithārat al-naʿarāt al-ṭā'ifiyyah wa-al-iqtitālāt al-bayniyyah* [...] driving some parties to try to stir up sectarian sentiment and internal strife	Vagueness, euphemism, presupposition
D.41	[...] ما يمنعه من استمرار حصول الكوارث [...] *mā yamnaʿuhu min istimrār ḥuṣūl al-kawārith* [...] which prevents it from the continued occurrence of disasters	Euphemism (nominalization), populism

The first path in mitigating in-group wrongdoing is agent diversion. The military operation led by the speaker's own armed faction is narrated with *al-shaʿb* 'the people' as its agent, through the restriction *fa-mā kāna amāma hādhā al-shaʿb siwá an yunaẓẓima ṣufūfahu wa-an yastaʿidda lil-muwājahah al-tārīkhiyyah al-kubrá* 'so this people had no choice but to organize its ranks and prepare for the greatest historic confrontation' (D.26). The preceding unit prepares this restriction by stating that the regime *anhá ayya lughah siyāsiyyah lil-ḥall raghma mā kāna yuʿraḍu ʿalayh* 'shut off every political language of resolution despite the offers made to it' (D.25). The two units form a complete argument in which the regime closed the political path and the military operation became the only path left to the people. The same populist framing continues in the emphasize positive 'us' unit on the outcome of the operation, *wa-istaʿāda al-shaʿb fīhā ḥaqqahu* 'and in it the people took back their right' (D.31). The armed faction that led the operation is never named.

The form of the restriction in D.26 signals what the speaker expects of the audience. It is built through negation and exception (*nafy* and *istithnāʾ*), with *siwá* in the function of *illā*, and it restricts what lay before the people to a single course of action. In classical theory, a restriction of this kind is *qaṣr ifrād* when it answers a hearer who assumes that several courses were open. Al-Jurjānī explains that *innamā* presents what the hearer does not dispute, whereas negation with exception is used for what the hearer denies or doubts (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Al-Jurjānī, 1992). The construction therefore anticipates an audience that doubts that armed struggle was the only option, and it

answers that doubt with the construction that al-Jurjānī reserves for contested claims. Content and form meet here, since the restriction denies that the people had more than one course and presents that denial as contested. Here a resource of *balāghah* directly realizes the presupposition on which the mitigation of in-group violence depends.

The second path is denial and euphemism, which frame the military operation as a moral act. The operation is called *ʿamal ʿaskarī khāṭif* 'a lightning military operation' in the account of the offensive and is described as *ʿamal ʿaskarī kāna milʾuhu al-raḥmah wa-al-khayr wa-taghlīb al-ʿafw wa-al-tasāmuḥ* 'a military operation filled with mercy and goodness that gave priority to forgiveness and tolerance' (D.28). Denial appears in the layered negation *lam tatasabbab bi-tahjīr insān wa-lā qatl madanī* 'did not cause the displacement of a single person or the killing of a single civilian' (D.29), reinforced by *naṣr lā thaʾr fīhi wa-lā ʿadāwāt* 'a victory without revenge and without hostility' (D.30). The total negation through *lam … wa-lā* and *lā … wa-lā* works as preemptive denial, which rejects an accusation before it is made. This study does not adjudicate the actual toll of the offensive. Whatever that toll, the absolute form rules out any casualty and leaves no room for accountability, so it functions as denial in form and as hyperbole in scope.

The third path concerns the violence after the fall of the regime, which the speaker acknowledges while obscuring its perpetrators. In *inna al-injāz al-sūrī al-farīd wa-al-takātuf al-shaʿbī al-ḥāṣil dafaʿa bi-aṭrāf li-muḥāwalat ithārat al-naʿarāt al-ṭāʾifiyyah wa-al-iqtitālāt al-bayniyyah* 'indeed the unique Syrian achievement and the popular solidarity that emerged have driven some parties to try to stir up sectarian sentiment and internal strife' (D.39), the perpetrator is blurred into *aṭrāf*, the violence is softened into internal strife, and the in-group's achievement becomes its cause. In D.41, the violence is nominalized into *istimrār ḥuṣūl al-kawārith* 'the continued occurrence of disasters' and loses its perpetrator. Reading these units as concealment of in-group agency rests on context, since the UN Commission of Inquiry found that the coastal violence of March 2025, which killed about 1,400 people, was committed by pro-former-government fighters and by members of the interim government's forces and affiliated factions (Balanche, 2025; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025). The promise of justice that follows (D.44) names no perpetrator.

Table 6 summarizes representative constructions of agency management. Recoverability alone does not separate the groups, since the foreign supporters of the old regime are also unrecoverable. Reference and evaluation separate them, because unnamed outsiders carry strongly negative lexis, whereas in-group violence is left unnamed and softened, with its cause attributed to others.

Table 6. Representative constructions of agency management

Construction	Unit	Agent concerned	Recoverable from the text	Evaluation of the act
Passive	D.15, D.22	Old regime	Yes, named in D.11 and D.16 to D.21	Strongly negative (killing, torture, chemical attacks)
Vague referent	D.20	Foreign supporters of the old regime	No	Strongly negative (*ʿiṣābāt* 'gangs')
Agent diversion	D.26	Speaker's armed faction, recast as *al-shaʿb*	No, the faction is never named	Positive (a historic confrontation)

Construction	Unit	Agent concerned	Recoverable from the text	Evaluation of the act
Vague referent	D.39	Perpetrators of post-transition violence	No	Softened (internal strife) and caused by the in-group's achievement
Nominalization	D.41	Perpetrators of post-transition violence	No	Neutralized (disasters)

DISCUSSION

The speech is built mainly through the emphasis of positive in-group properties, with the criminalization of the out-group as a second support and the mitigation of in-group wrongdoing as the least frequent strategy. However, it carries the most contestable claims. The dominance of positive self-presentation agrees with studies of heads of state at the same forum (Kashif et al., 2023; Reflinaldi et al., 2024b). The speech differs from them in two respects. De-emphasize negative 'us' is present and placed between the two dominant strategies, and de-emphasize positive 'them' is absent. The absence must be read with the decision to treat praised allies as an extended in-group, which rests on the speaker's own thanks (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006) but prevents the analysis from detecting whether the speaker plays down the contribution of outside actors, including Turkey (Hall, 2025; Hokayem, 2025). The early concentration of emphasize negative 'them' likewise rests partly on the rule that codes victimization by identified perpetrators under this strategy.

Comparison with earlier ideological square studies of Arabic discourse is restricted to the presence or absence of macro strategies, since the units and rules differ. Neither King Salman's UNGA speeches of 2020 and 2021 (Reflinaldi et al., 2024b) nor the threat discourse of the hacktivist group *Al-Hākirz Al-Muslimūn* (Reflinaldi et al., 2024a) realizes de-emphasize negative 'us'. Violence on the speaker's side cannot explain the contrast, since established states also face accusations about their wars and respond by denying them (Cohen, 2001; Van Dijk, 1992). The decisive difference is whether recognition is at stake. King Salman speaks for a state whose standing at the UN is not in question, and the hacktivist group seeks no recognition from those it threatens. Al-Sharaa, by contrast, still needs recognition from the community he addresses (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Keller, 2026; Hokayem, 2025). De-emphasize negative 'us' may therefore appear when the audience that confers legitimacy can still withhold it (Keller, 2026; Van Dijk, 2006). With one speech and six units, this remains a proposition to test.

The three paths of de-emphasize negative 'us' have counterparts in studies of the justification of violence. Diverting agency to the people and presupposing that the military path was the only option correspond to the hero-protector narrative, which presents violence as a moral necessity for protecting one's own group (Clément et al., 2017; Cohen, 2001). The absolute negation of civilian casualties takes the form of literal denial, the refusal to accept that a harmful event occurred, although its scope is hyperbolic and its factual accuracy lies beyond this study (Cohen, 2001; Van Dijk, 1992). Describing post-transition violence as internal strife caused by unnamed parties conceals agency through grammatical choice (Billig, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2008), while independent documentation attributes part of the 2025 killings to forces linked to the transitional authorities (Balanche, 2025; Independent International Commission of

Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025). The promise to prosecute perpetrators without identifying them is consistent with the critique that Syrian transitional justice limits accountability (Alahmad, 2025; Nabożna & Bachmann, 2026; Bernath, 2025).

These strategies address more than one audience. Speakers shape their style for addressees and for others present (Bell, 1984; Rahmi et al., 2026), and Arab leaders adjust tone to their audience (Al-Hanaqtah et al., 2026; Haider et al., 2023). Studies of Al-Sharaa's interviews have found that he maintains revolutionary legitimacy for domestic audiences and commitments to international law for foreign audiences (Al-Sabbagh, 2026; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025). The UNGA speech joins the two registers in one text. Norm expression and authority address the forum, while iqtibās, the anaphora of *intaṣarnā*, and the agency of *al-shaʿb* carry the revolutionary claim to Syrian and Arab listeners, who hear it in Arabic, whereas most delegations receive it through interpreters (Al-Hanaqtah et al., 2026; Shamaileh, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2026). The mitigation of in-group violence is where the audiences meet. It answers a forum that can still withhold recognition (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Keller, 2026), and it remains exposed before domestic listeners, whose online assessments of him declined during the violence against minorities (Habib, 2026; Jamal, 2026).

The out-group is temporal and selective. The old regime is confined to a closed past and criminalized explicitly, which reverses the position of Bashar Al-Assad, who in his 2011 speech presented himself positively and the protesters negatively (Kesseiri, 2015; Maani et al., 2022), and confirms that Al-Sharaa builds a rupture from the Assad era (Al-Sabbagh, 2026; Tahat et al., 2026). Israel is treated with restraint, unlike in the official statements of Hamas and the rhetoric of Arab leaders in the Gaza wars, which polarize Israel explicitly (Abdo et al., 2026b; Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023; Aqilah et al., 2026). One plausible reading links this restraint to a transitional government whose recognition depends on the United States and Western partners (Hokayem, 2025; Keller, 2026; Hall, 2025), although the present data cannot confirm the motive. The text shows that the speaker maintains confrontation with the old domestic enemy and tempers it toward external actors who affect his recognition (Hall, 2025; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025).

The strategies rest on Arabic resources. The passive (*mabnī lil-majhūl*) foregrounds people as victims, while nominalization and vague referents obscure the agents of in-group violence, and this deletion becomes visible only in relation to external sources (Billig, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2008). The repetition of *intaṣarnā* is a form of *takrār*, which classical rhetoric treats under *iṭnāb* as a means of amplification for emphasis (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Shamaileh, 2022). Qur'anic intertextuality, realized through iqtibās, needs no category outside Van Dijk's list. Inserted without a citation formula, the verse merges the speaker's voice with the sacred text and realizes authority and polarization (Van Leeuwen, 2008). This use of verses is rooted in the sermon and the rhetoric of the classical caliphate (Al-Rikaby et al., 2021; Dähne, 2001; Mansoor et al., 2026). The tradition associates al-Isrāʾ 17:81 with the conquest of Mecca (Al-Bukhārī, 2002; Ibn Kathīr, 1999), although the speech does not mention it. In a secular forum, the verse activates common ground for Muslim listeners without requiring theological assent from others (Altahmazi et al., 2023; Rahmi et al., 2026; Mansoor et al., 2026).

The story metaphor that opens and closes the speech parallels the *Ḥikāyat Sūriyā* narrative in the new government's revision of history textbooks (Chevée, 2022; Kielsgaard, 2026). On this basis, the speech represents two ideologies. Restorative nationalism presents the present as the recovery of a lost past, an orientation observed in Syrian national narratives (Boym, 2001; Chevée, 2022). It is realized through national

self-glorification, history as a lesson, diachronic comparison, and the story metaphor. Revolutionary legitimacy holds that the overthrow of an unjust order justifies the seizure of power (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025; Hudson, 1977). It is realized through polarization, authority built through iqtibās, populism, euphemism, and the denial of in-group violence. In this speech, the revolutionary claim rests on *naṣr* 'victory' and on the agency of *al-shaʿb* (D.26, D.31, D.32 to D.35), and its core units (D.26, D.28 to D.30) are the same units that mitigate in-group violence. Mitigation is therefore the means through which the claim to revolutionary legitimacy is made.

The two ideologies pull in opposite temporal directions. Restoration looks back to a past to be recovered, whereas revolution breaks with a past to be ended. The speech reconciles them by dividing the past in two. The civilizational past is the one to be recovered, as when Damascus is *ʿāṣimat al-tārīkh* and Syria a *manārah yaqtadī bihā al-ʿālam* (D.9, D.10). The recent past is the one to be ended, compressed into sixty years under a *niẓām ẓālim ghāshim* (D.11) and closed as *ṣafḥat al-māḍī al-bāʾis* (D.62). The diachronic comparison in D.38 joins the two movements, since Syria turns from an exporter of crises into a historic opportunity. Armed rupture with the recent past thus becomes the condition for recovering the distant one (Boym, 2001; Kielsgaard, 2026; Hudson, 1977). Dividing the past in this way explains how the speech can celebrate a seizure of power without presenting it as a break with Syrian history.

Theoretically, the study suggests that the ideological square can operate sequentially as well as distributionally, a claim that rests on a single speech and calls for comparison. The mitigation of in-group wrongdoing is placed between the criminalization of the out-group and the glorification of the in-group, so that the most contestable claims are framed by the two dominant strategies, even though emphasize positive 'us' also recurs within that section (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). The study also shows that *balāghah* helps explain how micro strategies are realized in Arabic. The choice of negation with exception in D.26 encodes the expectation of a doubting audience, and *takrār* in the victory claims both intensifies and extends them (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Al-Jurjānī, 1992). In practical terms, the distinction between recoverable and unrecoverable agents provides journalists and transitional justice advocates with a tool to test the transitional government's claims against the demands of victims' families (Bernath, 2025; Nabożna & Bachmann, 2026).

CONCLUSION

Al-Sharaa's 2025 UNGA speech is a legitimation text for a leader whose power emerged through armed struggle. The glorification of the in-group and the criminalization of the old regime form the main framework of the speech, and the mitigation of violence by the speaker's own side is placed between them, where it carries the claim to revolutionary legitimacy. The old regime is named or remains recoverable as agent; its unnamed supporters are marked by negative lexis; the people's suffering is foregrounded through the passive; and in-group violence loses its perpetrator through nominalization and vague referents. Delivered in Arabic, the speech joins this revolutionary register with the language of international norms, so that a single text carries two registers for two audiences. Restorative nationalism and revolutionary legitimacy meet by dividing the past, so that armed rupture with the recent past becomes the recovery of a distant one. The presence of in-group mitigation suggests that the distribution of ideological square strategies may vary with the speaker's legitimacy position.

This study has several limitations. It rests on a single debut speech, so it cannot distinguish stable patterns from those tied to Syria's return to the UN forum. The rule of one macro strategy per unit simplifies multifunctional units, and the coding, cross-checked within the team without an agreement coefficient, involves interpretation. The reading of in-group concealment relies on external documentation, and the analysis was conducted on the original Arabic delivery, although most delegations heard the speech through interpreters. Future research can compare this speech with Al-Sharaa's later UNGA addresses to test whether the mitigation of in-group wrongdoing shrinks as international recognition grows. A comparison of the Arabic delivery, the simultaneous interpretation, and the official English statement can trace the fate of *qaṣr*, the passive, and iqtibās in translation, and reception studies among Syrian minority communities would test the reach of these findings.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conception of the study. The first author designed the analytical framework, carried out the coding and analysis, and wrote the manuscript. The second author analyzed the grammatical and rhetorical realizations and revised the manuscript. The third and fourth authors verified the transcript, cross-checked the coding, and proofread the manuscript.

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