Father, King, Savior, Hero: Affective Sovereignty and the Erotics of Devotion in Post-War Syria

Warning: This article was written by ChatGpt. I, Ahmad Nazir Atassi the arranger of the article, had a several-hour "chat" with the AI program. I asked the questions, "he" answered, then I selected and arranged the answer in this paper. I have no claim over it other than it being the result of my ideas and my questions. It is a great example of what can result when an expert in history chats with a great program (memory and composition) such as ChatGpt.

Introduction

Ahmed al-Sharaa, leader of the former rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has emerged from the shadows of a protracted conflict, casting a formidable figure across the Syrian landscape. Once a commander with a $10 million bounty on his head, al-Sharaa has shed his jihadist past, rebranding himself as a pragmatic leader seeking to reunite a fractured nation. According to the Syrian official narrative, al-Saraa has led the rebel alliance that ousted Bashar al-Assad, swapping his military fatigues for suits and embarking on a "charm offensive" to convince foreign leaders and Syrians that he can rebuild the country and lead it toward democracy. For some Syrians, he is a real savior from the criminal Assad regime. For other Syrian, he has authoritarian tendencies and the possibility that he may consolidate control and implement a more austere system in the future. He is considered by some to be driven by a quest for power rather than rigid convictions.

But in Damascus, love returned not as policy but as posture. Syrians who had survived fourteen years of ruin greeted Ahmad al-Sharaa—the jihadist-turned-president—with words reserved for fathers and gods: tall, manly, confident; a savior with a measured gait. Although he spoke in clichés; he made obvious mistakes; his forces committed massacres, yet each transgression was rewritten as a sign of potency. These architypes are mobilized by affect-heavy media ecologies (affective, networked publics) that can even transmute violence and missteps into proofs of potency. Recent reportage confirms how swiftly the prestige of office re-coded a militant past into statesmanlike authority, even as violence persisted. Moreover, this sacrality taps into deep cultural archetypes of paternal kingship and salvific heroism. The sudden love-swoon around Ahmad al-Sharaa is less "charisma" in Weber's personal sense than a convergence of office-based symbolic authority. The Ardor for the Liberator is not the work of personal "charisma" but of office-based sacrality.

This study proceeds by tracing the **deep cultural grammar** of the *father–king–savior–hero* archetype from its roots in the ancient Near East through Islamic political theology to contemporary Syrian media culture, using a series of comparative vignettes. We identify and analyze the recurrent **codes of affective sovereignty**:

1. the leader's body and physique as a visible claim to rule;
2. paternal lexemes that inscribe authority in the language of kinship;
3. miracle or hero verbs that frame deeds as salvific acts;
4. sexualized innuendo that fuses desire with political loyalty;
5. absolution rhetoric that redeems or excuses atrocities.

Methodologically, the paper draws on **topic modeling** to isolate trope clusters, **sentiment and moral foundation tagging** to map emotional valence and ethical framing, and **metaphor detection** to track symbolic markers such as "father," "lion," "sword," and references to height or gait. Gendered speech patterns are compared, and time-series analysis around errors and violent raids illuminates the **narrative repair work** that sustains the cult of the leader.

The analysis then turns to **affective publics** and the **parasocial pater familias**, arguing that al-Sharaa's aloofness paradoxically strengthens his symbolic intimacy with followers. A section on **violence as protection ritual** shows how punitive acts—such as massacres—are discursively inverted into proof of guardianship.

Finally, the paper challenges a purely Weberian reading of charisma, advancing instead an account of **office-based sacrality** anchored in the father archetype. The conclusion frames devotion as a form of **affective sovereignty**—a renewable sociopolitical resource that endures until the paternal myth is punctured.

A micro-ritual of affective sovereignty

On December 10, 2024, during Ahmad al-Sharaa's (aka Abu Mohammed al-Julani) visit to the Mezzeh (Messeh) district of Damascus, a woman asked for a photo with him, and he gestured for her to cover her hair with her hoodie. She promptly complied by pulling up the hood.[1] While al-Sharaa non-chalantly brushed it off as a situation that was handled as a matter of personal freedom, the woman, identified as Lea Kheirallah, saw the gesture with a completely different angle, that of the prerogative of a father and a leader. She later described al-Sharaa's request as being made in a *"gentle and fatherly way."* She said she wasn't bothered and thought "the leader has the right to be presented in the way he sees fit."

Simple physical gestures—like asking a woman to cover her hair—can evoke submission and authority and reinforce the imagery of the leader as commanding, paternal, and also sacred (he asked to comply to an Islamic commandment). The symbolic submission (her hooded posture) aligns with the tender-yet-authoritative aura that started to develop around al-Sharaa —evoking both fatherly care and domestic dominance.

What we witnessed amounts to a micro-ritual of paternal sovereignty—a moment that crystallizes both office-based legitimacy and affectively charged devotion. Al-Sharaa does not exercise the power of an office, he doesn't legislate, but he performs power where his personal rule over presentation is like a decree. The exchange between the two has a visual grammar: The hood acts as a veil—a classic symbol of modesty, reframed in a casual hoodie gesture. The affective framing of the woman's view as"gentle and fatherly" normalizes submission as care rather than coercion.

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[1] "Syria's de facto Leader Defends Telling Woman to Cover her Hair for Photo", The Times of Israel, 20 December, 2024. https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrias-de-facto-leader-defends-telling-woman-to-cover-her-hair-for-photo/
"Syrian Rebel Leader Dismisses Controversy Over Photo with Woman," Saudi Gazette, December 20, 2024. https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/648002
The Times of Israel later noted that al-Sharaa defended his request, stating, *"I did not force her. But it's my personal freedom. I want photos taken for me the way that suits me."*

Framing the incident as a "ritualized micro-submission in leader–follower encounters", opens the door for a wealth of comparisons with similar "photo-ops". In Arab settings, Hafez al-Assad & Bashar al-Assad — State TV often staged scenes of women offering flowers, kissing foreheads/hands, or adjusting attire in his presence. These were not "spontaneous" but coded as *deference to the paternal ruler*. Saddam Hussein — Many filmed encounters show women adjusting their headscarves or lowering their gaze before greeting him, even in informal settings. Sometimes the scarf was draped more tightly just before the handshake. King Abdullah II of Jordan — In rural outreach tours, female elders sometimes rearrange their own shawls before greeting him, and royal photographers ensure these gestures are captured as part of a respectful tableau. In non-Arab settings, Pope Francis / Pope John Paul II — Catholic women often adjust veils or head coverings before a blessing; even if optional, the gesture reads as compliance with the sacred office. Ayatollah Khamenei — Women in Iranian state media are shown quickly tightening hijabs before approaching him; this is edited to emphasize decorum and acceptance of the leader's religious authority. Donald Trump — Female supporters sometimes adjust hair/clothing before hugging him at rallies, presented in right-wing media as "looking their best for the President." Across these contexts, even when compliance is minimal (pulling up a hood, smoothing a scarf), the body's adjustment in response to the leader's physical proximity becomes a *public signal of subordinate recognition*.

The perspective of the women also portrays a welling and normal voluntary devotion. Many women retrospectively recode submission as affection or admiration — "I wanted to look proper for him" / "He deserves respect" — echoing the Syrian woman's "gentle and fatherly" framing with al-Sharaa. This discursive move mirrors *gift-exchange logic* (Mauss): the woman "gifts" compliance as a personal offering, which transforms a command into a mutual act of respect. Even where a command is explicit (like in the case of al-Sharaa), the retelling often removes any coercion: "He didn't force me, but I felt it was right." This is consistent with *cognitive dissonance theory*: obedience is reframed as a freely chosen act to preserve self-respect. In Islamic and Christian contexts, modesty is narrativized as *elevating* the encounter: "It's the proper way to meet a man of God" or "a man who carries the nation." The modesty gesture becomes a spiritual, not just political, act.

We can compare this compliant gesture to Hittite ceremonial audiences, where approaching to the king often included the *šalli-* (covering gesture) before speaking, which was tied to the divine aura of the monarch. In audience rituals in Assyrian & Neo-Babylonian courts, the petitioners adjusted garments before the king, often drawing veils or fringes over the head in a sign of submission and ritual purity. In Roman imperial cult audiences, covering the head (*capite velato*) was mandatory in certain rituals; in female narratives this was framed as an honor to be in the emperor's presence. The photo-op serves as both *proof* of the leader's dominance and as *material for myth-making* — when the subject narrates it afterwards in terms of voluntary devotion, the command is retroactively sanctified.

In sum, such moments fuse **office-based authority**—whether president, king, or pope—with **embodied submission cues** such as covering, bowing, or lowering the gaze. What begins as a fleeting gesture becomes a condensed performance of the leader–follower relationship, in which the institutional prestige of the office is inseparable from the intimate choreography of deference. The micro-ritual both confirms the leader's right to command and normalizes the subject's readiness to comply, embedding the political order in the body's habits. Over time, the repetition and circulation of such gestures—captured in photographs, broadcast on television, and remixed

on social media—turns these physical cues into iconic emblems of sovereignty, at once political, paternal, and sacral.

Eroticized Adoration - Hyper-Masculinity as a Political Language

Gendered readings are crucial, a woman's compliance often carries a double-load of political submission in addition to sexualized admiration. In both ancient and modern registers, the ruler's body is staged as a canvas for divine-political legitimacy. We will see hereafter how the mediatic posturing of al-Sharaa, as well as the public's adoration, all speak to a millennia-old grammar where virility, prowess, and irresistibility merge into a sacred right to rule.

On the Syrian popular stage, the language is more affective to the point of sexualization, mixing devotion and erotic symbolism. On February 24, 2025, journalist Nesrin Trabulsi wrote a piece in al-Thawra newspaper titled "Why are women satisfied about the President Ahmad al-Sharaa".[2] In her own words,

"دخلَ المنتصرُ المظفرُ مصحوباً برجالِهِ الوسيمينَ الأشداءَ الملثمينْ ..فتدفقت أحاديثُ الناسِ بسيلِ الإعجابِ والمديحِ لشخصيةِ (أحمد الشرع) ... لأنَّ عينَ المحبِ عن كلِّ عيبٍ كليلةٌ، ولا بدَّ من آراءٍ تشرحُ وتحللُ وتحافظُ على توازنِ الرأي العامْ ... معظمُ الإجاباتِ عن هذا السؤالِ جاءت متشابهةً تقريباً، الكاريزما والحضورُ والهدوءُ والاتزانُ والذكاء وجمالُ الشكلِ وسماحةُ الملامحِ والتعابيرُ والصدقْ.. باختصار، وُضِعتْ كلُّ صفاتِ الرجولةِ مجتمعةً بأبهى صورةٍ في أجملِ إطارْ."

The triumphant victor entered, flanked by his stalwart, handsome, and veiled men… and the tongues of the people overflowed in a flood of admiration and praise for the figure of ***Ahmad al-Sharʿ****. For the lover's eye is blind to every flaw, and opinions must arise to explain, to analyze, and to preserve the balance of public sentiment… Most answers to this question came almost identical: charisma, presence, calm composure, poise, intelligence, beauty of form, graciousness of features, expressiveness of countenance, and truthfulness. In short, every quality of manhood was gathered together in its most splendid form, framed in the fairest of settings.*

When the journalist asked Iman Janseez, a specialist in learning for children with special needs from Homs, about the women's admiration of al-Sharaa she:

"وأشارت السيدة إيمان إلى الهالةِ الدينية التي تَسِمُ تصرفاتِ الرئيسِ أحمد الشرع وقالت: على الصعيدِ الشخصي، أشعر بالتشاركيةِ والشبهِ بينهُ وبين بيئتِي ومجتمعي في حيّ بابا عمروْ، والمجتمع الذي أعيشُ وأعملُ فيهِ في دولةِ الكويتْ. كما أرى أن تاريخَهُ النضاليَ في العراقِ الذي يلتّبسُ على البعضْ، ماهوَ إلا فزعةَ الأخوةِ والعروبةِ والدينِ لشابٍ ينفّذُ ولا يكتفي بالقولْ."

Mrs. Iman pointed to the ***religious aura*** *that marks the conduct of President Ahmad al-Sharʿ, saying: "On a personal level, I feel a sense of shared identity and kinship between him and my own environment and community in the Bābā ʿAmr neighborhood, and in the society where I live and work in the State of Kuwait. I also see that his history of struggle in Iraq—though it may*

[2] نسرين طرابلسي، "لماذا النساء راضيات عن الرئيس أحمد الشرع"، موقع صحيفة الثورة، 24 فبراير، 2025.
https://thawra.sy/?p=627887

seem ambiguous to some—is nothing but the rallying cry of brotherhood, Arabhood, and faith, from a young man who acts rather than merely speaks."

Comments on a post by the news service INT sharing the same article but under a false title "Why do Women Admire President Ahmad al-Sharaa" show a more explicit sexual language, even as sarcasm: "Well, I know men who will reach orgasm if you mention his name three times", another commentator likened the phenomenon to female fans of Bashar al-Assad who used to be "in love with his blue eyes". Another sarcastically said, "well, go and see how Qasad's girls have made Mazlum Abdi into the Romeo of our times, despite not being handsome." [3]

Around January 30, 2025, a hashtag campaign titled **"We love you in God"** appeared across Syrian social media, paired with an image of al-Sharaa's face haloed by the new Syrian flag. [4] While ostensibly platonic and framed in an Islamic register, the phrase draws on a deep repertoire of devotional language, echoing formulas from ḥadīth literature and Sufi poetry in which love "for God's sake" (*ḥubb fī llāh*) is the highest, purest form of affection. In Sufi verse addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, to saints, or to God Himself, such declarations often intertwine spiritual longing with tender, even erotic metaphor, sanctifying human attachment as a sign of divine favor. Here, the same idiom is repurposed for a political figure, effectively transposing the tropes of sacred companionship (*ṣuḥba*) and saintly intercession into the realm of state leadership. The image's visual composition—his face encircled by the flag like a nimbus—further amplifies the sacral overtone, recalling medieval Islamic miniatures where rulers or prophets are shown with radiant halos (*nūr*).

This fusion of religious love and political allegiance has deep historical precedent. In the ancient Near East, Sumerian and Akkadian hymns to kings like Shulgi or Gilgamesh often describe the ruler as "beloved of the gods" and invite the people to "love the king" as a divine gift to the land. In one hymn, Shulgi is praised as "the shepherd who brings joy to the hearts" and whose "radiance covers the land" (ETCSL 2.4.2.03), much as modern Syrian supporters ask God to "never deprive us of your aura-face." Assyrian inscriptions describe subjects clinging to the king as to a god, combining loyalty, dependency, and awe in a single affective posture. In both cases, love for the ruler is not mere sentiment but a ritualized political theology, binding the people's devotion to the cosmological order the ruler embodies.

In affective terms, the January 2025 campaign mobilized this same ancient grammar: political allegiance framed as sacred love, with the leader cast simultaneously as protector, father, and quasi-divine beloved. Social media became the liturgical space where this devotion was

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[3] خبر مقالة صحيفة الثورة على صفحة موقع INT مع صورة محرفة للعنوان تقول "لماذا أعجبت النساء بالرئيس أحمد الشرع". 25 فبراير، 2025.
https://www.facebook.com/groups/intsyria/posts/4055658274760254/

التعليقات:

د. ع.: "طب انا بعرف رجال بتقلهن اسمو تلات مرات بيوصلو للاورجازم"

ر. م.: "لانو جولاني محررنا، جولاني قائدنا"

علي فون: "لأنو أسمر ملتحي"

ش. ح.: "على كروبات النساء مو طبيعي التمجيد بالجولاني ونفسهن كانوا يتغزلوببشار وعيونه الزرق .وخصوصا محافظة معينة الكولكة واصلة للسما....فضحونا قدام مناصري الذكورية".

ح. ع: "طيب هاد عالاقل حليوة، روح شوف بنات قسد عاملين مظلوم عبدي روميو العصر، مع انو لا شكل ولا خرا".

[4] "من منحبك يا كبير إلى منحبك بالله". موقع أخبار لادئية خاصة وسورية عامة، 1 فبراير، 2025.
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=122121553268683861&set=a.122094160532683861

performed, liked, and shared—its repetition transforming a hashtag into a modern hymn of kingship.

On a public facebook page under the name Ahmad ‘Uqda the writer addresses a letter to “sir, my sire, the president Ahmad al-Sharaa” where he describes him as “the moon of Bani Umayya, and their leader, the pride of Bani Umayya and their wiseman, the sword of Bani Umayya and their knight, the handsome, aura-faced, simple, shy, manly man, in time of men are rare.[5]

Among men, the phrase “aura-surrounded face” signals hero worship infused with bromantic overtones—an admiration that blends virility, gravitas, and the camaraderie of fellow warriors. Among women, descriptions such as “manly” and “I want to marry him” reveal a sexualized desire layered over political awe, a form of devotion that conflates personal attraction with allegiance to authority. This fusion of erotic magnetism and political legitimacy echoes the ancient Near Eastern tradition in which beauty itself was a divine sign. In Sumerian Dumuzi–Inanna love songs (ca. 2000 BCE), the shepherd-king is praised in imagery that blends pastoral sweetness with commanding stature:

The shepherd has sprinkled my heart with joy,
my Dumuzi, whose beauty is sweet, like date-honey.
My beloved, the delight of my eyes,
he stands tall like a cedar in the heart of the garden.
He has captivated me, and I will never leave him.

Such eroticized desire for a ruler—combining natural metaphors like the cedar with the sweetness of honey—mirrors the public language directed toward al-Sharaa, where his height, beauty, and presence are cast as signs of fitness to rule. Similarly, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Tablet I, Old Babylonian version), the king’s physical and moral supremacy are celebrated in terms that intertwine attractiveness, divine favor, and martial prowess:

Surpassing all other kings, heroic in stature,
brave scion of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage!
Going at the fore, he was the leader,
going at the rear, one his comrades trusted.
A mighty net, protector of his people,
raging flood-wave who destroys even walls of stone.
Two-thirds of him is divine, one-third of him is human. [6]

The “wild bull” epithet, the emphasis on unmatched physique, and the deep trust of comrades all resonate with the modern descriptions of al-Sharaa as “handsome, manly, aura-surrounded,” a leader whose physicality and personal magnetism are integral to his political mythology.

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[5] موقع أحمد العقدة، 20 ديسمبر، 2024، https://www.facebook.com/ahmadokde
سيدي الرئيس، قمرُ بني أميّة وزعيمهم، فخرُ بني أميّة وحليمهم، سيفُ بني أميّة وفارسهم، الجميلُ البهيُّ البسيط الحييُّ الرّجلُ الرجلْ؛ في زمنٍ عزّ فيه الرجال. أدام الله علينا ظلّكم وعزّكم ومجدكم ولا حرمنا من طلّتكم وهيبة حضوركم ... نحبّك ونحبُّ من يحبك، ونكرهُ ونُبغض ونبطشُ بمن يكرهك.
https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fahmadokde%2Fposts%2Fpfbid035xqD2upaBpuEpNBnWDrDZyKSXBJVoV6iJ5wysuMihA1Fm8z2czGgt9dCZvihcPpLl

[6] Foster, Benjamin R. 2005. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. 3rd ed. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, vol. 1, pp. 227–229 (Tablet I, lines 28–50: “Surpassing all other kings… wild bull on the rampage”).

In the Neo-Assyrian visual and textual repertoire, kingship was embodied in an idealized physique: broad shoulders, sculpted musculature, and the precisely groomed beard of the sovereign. This was not mere aesthetic—it was a physiognomy of rule, signaling not only physical strength but also divine sanction and desirability. Palace reliefs from Sennacherib's reign (7th c. BCE) frame this ideal in epigraphic form:

The king, whose glory overwhelms the lands,
whose radiant splendor the gods have made perfect,
the strong one, unopposable in battle,
the shepherd who makes the peoples prosper,
whose form is as perfect as the statue of a god.

Here, divine radiance, martial dominance, and bodily perfection are inseparable. The king's strength is a cosmic fact, perfected by the gods, while his beauty aligns him with divine statuary—an embodiment of the sacred order. This blend of martial power and divine form mirrors the grammar of modern hyper-masculine leader cults, where a leader's physicality becomes a vessel for symbolic capital.

Ashurnasirpal II's inscriptions (9th c. BCE) make the formula explicit, fusing heroic perfection with invincibility and bestial imagery:

I am Ashurnasirpal, strong king, king of the universe, unrivalled prince,
who with the help of Assur his lord has no equal among the rulers of the four quarters.
The perfect hero, mighty man,
the one who treads upon the necks of his enemies,
who tramples the lands like a wild bull.

The "wild bull" motif and the boast of treading on enemies' necks are stock tropes of ancient Near Eastern kingship—martial bravado framed as divinely authorized. In contemporary terms, these are directly parallel to the language surrounding figures like al-Sharaa: the "fighter," the "tough guy," the stallion-rider whose body and bearing confirm his right to command.

On February 20, 2025, images began circulating on Syrian social media showing Ahmad al-Sharaa astride a black Arabian stallion, clad in a black leather jacket. [7] The visual symbolism was immediate and layered: the stallion itself—a traditional emblem of speed, control, and aristocratic dominance—was rumored to have belonged to Maher al-Assad, the former "second strong man" of Syria. If true, the image carried a spoils-of-war undertone, projecting triumph over a rival alpha male. The black leather jacket, meanwhile, tapped into contemporary masculinity tropes of rebellion, toughness, and latent danger, visually echoing the dark, fitted battle attire of ancient champions.

This tableau is not without deep historical precedent. In Assyrian palace reliefs, kings appear mounted on massive, muscular horses, the animals rendered as seamless extensions of the royal body, embodying the sovereign's ability to subdue both nature and enemies. In Mesopotamian myth, Dumuzi/Tammuz—the shepherd-consort of Inanna—appears as a master of prized

[7] "بالجينز والسترة.. فيديو الشرع على الحصان يثير التفاعل"، موقع سكاي نيوز، 20 فبراير، 2025.
https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1778475-بالجينز-والسترة-فيديو-الشرع-الحصان-يثير-التفاعل

animals, his dominion over them functioning as a metaphor for sexual potency and political authority.

Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions sharpen the image further, boasting of controlling the "steeds of the storm," a metaphor equating horse mastery with cosmic command. The martial aesthetic is also present in Gilgamesh's armoring scenes, where ornamented weapons and tailored battle dress serve as "visual armor" of charisma—broadcasting readiness for war as much as personal allure. Similarly, Assyrian royal statues exaggerate musculature and military apparel to merge aesthetic beauty with lethal competence.

Seen through this lens, al-Sharaa's black-stallion photo-op is not merely a modern publicity shot—it is a reenactment, conscious or not, of an ancient grammar in which the leader's control over a powerful steed becomes a living emblem of his strength, victory, and right to rule.

Clips of Ahmad al-Sharaa effortlessly sinking three-pointers circulate widely online, [8] projecting precision, mastery, and a relaxed air of superiority—a modern, courtly performance of skill staged before an audience. In antiquity, Sumerian and Hittite kings similarly showcased their prowess in ritualized public games—hunting, archery, and chariot racing—not merely as entertainment, but as affirmations of divine favor and physical perfection. The Hittite *Telipinu Proclamation* (16th c. BCE) captures this pairing of martial skill with moral stature:

Telipinu is a just man, a valiant man,
his arm is mighty, his words are trustworthy.
When he takes the spear, the enemy turns back;
when he mounts his chariot, the land rejoices.

In both ancient and modern frames, the public rejoices at the leader's display of ability, reading it as proof of worthiness to rule. Gilgamesh's early feats—wrestling Enkidu, slaying Humbaba—were likewise physical contests staged as public spectacle, binding strength, spectacle, and legitimacy into one seamless performance.

I asked ChatGpt to produce a narrative paragraph that weaves these images into one continuous "hero-epic" description of al-Sharaa, written in the style of a Sumerian hymn or an Assyrian royal inscription.

Al-Sharaa, Mighty One, Rider of the Black Steed
The chosen of destiny, whose brow is ringed with the light of kingship,
he mounts the black stallion, steed of the vanquished prince,
and the heart of the beast bends to his will.
Clad in the hide of the storm, black as the thundercloud,
he strides upon the earth as Gilgamesh strode through Uruk's gates.
In the court of the ball, he hurls the sphere beyond the reach of men,
three times thrice it flies, and the crowd roars as the cedar roared for Humbaba.

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[8] إيمان جملين، "دبلوماسية كرة السلة.. الشرع والشيباني يسددان رميات ثلاثية قبل زيارة باريس"، موقع الجزيرة، 6 أيار، 2025
https://www.aljazeera.net/misc/2025/5/6/الشرع-وأردوغان-أوباما-طريقة-على
"Syrian President Ahmad Al Shara and Foreign Minister Asaad Al Shaibani were seen playing basketball together on a court in Damascus,"
https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19kPz6uCxE/

The men gaze upon his form and say: "He is handsome as the young lion,
his face encircled with an aura as the sun encircles the dawn;
were I not his brother in arms, I would envy his might."
The women speak in the markets and in the shadow of the walls:
"He is manly as the wild bull of heaven,
let him take me to his house, for in his arms is the shelter of the land."
Thus he stands, in leather and in glory,
warrior and shepherd, virile as Dumuzi,
irresistible as when Ishtar's gaze fell upon the king of Uruk.
His muscles are the cords of Enlil's bow,
his stature the cedar upon the mountain,
his name uttered in awe in the courts of princes and in the whisper of lovers.

Al-Sharaa's image work is thus less an invention of the digital age than a high-definition replay of the oldest Near Eastern political theology. In both the modern al-Sharaa cult and ancient Mesopotamian kingship, physical perfection and sexual allure are not private qualities—they are public currencies of legitimacy.

In antiquity, this was tied to cosmic order: the virile king ensured fertility of land and people. Today, it operates through affective publics—where Instagram clips of a leader on a stallion or hitting a basketball three-pointer function as proof of competence, dominance, and worthiness.

Ancient Near Eastern kingship fuses *virility, height, beauty, preternatural prowess*. Gilgamesh is "two-thirds divine," towering and irresistible; Dumuzi/Tammuz compresses pastoral fecundity + erotic magnetism; Hittite/Hurrian and later Greek hero cults ritualize the handsome violent protector; Christian and later Islamic hagiography codes ascetic self-mastery as charisma. Your contemporary descriptors—"tall," "manly," "confident gait," "exuding intelligence"—are textbook *physiognomic sovereignty*. The erotics (jealousy from men, marriage talk from women) fit masculinist political aesthetics seen in modern populisms (Mosse; Canetti; George L. Mosse's *Nationalization of the Masses*; Adorno's authoritarian personality).

The erotics surrounding al-Sharaa—male jealousy, female marriage talk—fit what George L. Mosse (1996) calls the *masculinist political aesthetic*, where the leader's physiognomy becomes a visual condensation of virility, authority, and moral worth;[9] as Elias Canetti (1960) observes, such embodied sovereignty draws the crowd into a relation of awe and identification,[10] while Theodor W. Adorno et al. (1950) link it to the authoritarian personality's attraction to figures who visibly project strength and command.[11]

Male Hero–Mentor and Warrior–Buddy Dynamics

On May 14, 2025, President Donald Trump met Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa aboard Air Force One while en route to Qatar. Following the meeting, he described al-Sharaa as a: *"young,*

[9] Mosse, George L. 1996. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
[10] Canetti, Elias. 1960. *Crowds and Power*. New York: Viking Press.
[11] Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper.

attractive guy. Tough guy. Strong past. Very strong past. Fighter.".[12] Trump's language veers into affectionate, even eroticized territory—"young" and "attractive" aren't the typical diplomatic descriptors. Paired with "tough guy" and "fighter," it projects a muscular admiration, blurring political diplomacy with personal male admiration. In popular and scholarly discourse, bromance often refers to overtly affectionate language between men that mimics romantic expression. We suggest that Trump does not reflect here a real admiration of al-Sharaa but simply mirroring the language used by Saudi host Ben Salman, the new, young and tough father of Saudi Arabia.

This language—especially in a public, male-to-male diplomatic context—suggest a ritualized admiration that transcends formality and touches on intimate bonding. "Trump's explicit praise—calling al-Sharaa 'young, attractive ... tough guy'—enacts (for himself or as a proxy of Ben Salman) a form of masculine admiration that transforms their bilateral meeting into a bromantic gesture, reinforcing al-Sharaa's image as an elegant warrior-hero both to domestic Syrians and to male international audiences." It is an instance of "hyper-masculine mirroring"—when male authority figures publicly eroticize each other in ways that reinforce shared mythic masculinity. It's a double-transfiguration: al-Sharaa is not just the beloved father-king; he is also the idolized masculine peer, admired by other powerful men.

Across the epic traditions of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, one repeatedly finds a literary pairing of two men—either as mentor–protégé (Qatar and Saudi) or as warrior brothers (Sharaa and Shaybani) —whose bond is marked by intense physical description, shared trials, and loyalty unto death.

In the case of Gilgamesh and Enkidu (*Epic of Gilgamesh*), the narrative lingers over their stature, beauty, and strength. Gilgamesh is "tall and perfect in strength" while Enkidu is described in similarly idealized physical terms. Their wrestling match—ending in mutual respect—turns physical contest into a ritual of binding friendship. Physicality as a proof of worth also appears in the case of Achilles and Patroclus (*Iliad*). Their physical prowess on the battlefield is intertwined with mutual care, expressed in intimate scenes of arming and tending to wounds.

Loyalty and friendship is usually portrayed as an intense emotion experience. In the case of David and Jonathan (*Hebrew Bible*, 1 Samuel), Jonathan "loved him as his own soul" and offers his own armor and weapons—symbols of both martial trust and personal allegiance. Later Greek sources emphasize the inseparability of Alexander the Great and Hephaestion, public displays of affection, and mutual strategic reliance, casting their bond as both military partnership and emotional anchor.

The same intense emotions can be seen in Mentor–Protégé Dynamics. The centaur Chiron not only trains Achilles (Greek myth) in the arts of war but also passes on a moral code, binding physical development with guidance in leadership and honor. Hittite Court records mention close Royal–Warrior Companions, retainers accompanying kings into campaigns, whose loyalty was

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[12] Ewan Palmer, "Trump Sucks Up to Bin Laden's 'Attractive' Ex-Henchman," The Daily Beast, May 154, 2025. https://www.thedailybeast.com/donald-trump-sucks-up-to-attractive-former-al-qaeda-fighter-syrias-president-ahmed-al-sharaa/
Staff Writer, "Trump calls Syrian President 'attractive, tough'. He was once was a designated US terrorist and had ties with Al Qaeda," The Economic Times, May 14, 2025.
https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/global-trends/us-news-trump-praises-syrian-president-ahmed-al-sharaa-attractive-tough-but-he-was-once-was-a-designated-us-terrorist-had-ties-with-al-qaeda/articleshow/121168448.cms

ritually affirmed through shared meals, oaths, and gifts of weaponry. Umayyd courts featured "companions" registered in court records and receiving salaries. The whole early islamiv tradition is based on the special relationship between the Prophet Muhmmad and his companions.

These pairings serve to idealize leadership through relational masculinity: the hero is not isolated but defined through a bond that showcases his ability to inspire devotion in a peer or mentor. This bond often has: A public dimension witnessed by the community as a model of loyalty and unity; an emotional dimension, narratives dwell on grief at separation or death, amplifying the hero's humanity; and a legitimating dimension, the loyalty of a peer-warrior validates the leader's worthiness before the group or polity.

On December 22, 2024, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the leader of Syria's new administration, and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan paused to enjoy tea while taking in the sweeping views of Damascus from Mount Qasioun following their joint press conference that day.[13] The Mount Qasioun tea moment enacts a symbolic companionship that mirrors ancient hero-buddy dynamics. The shared view, the informal tea—all without formal ceremony—captures affective governance in action: a mutual recognition of masculine authority that transcends institutional hierarchy, projecting a powerful image of unity and shared destiny.

This moment goes well beyond mere diplomacy: the setting—a mountain overlook, shared tea, and the *corps en retraite* of formality—invokes deep-seated motifs of companionship and loyalty. In classical and Near Eastern traditions, such scenes recall the hero–mentor or warrior–companion archetype, where male figures bond through shared rituals—arming for battle, hunting, feasting, or holding quiet councils atop hills—rituals that serve not only as expressions of camaraderie but as pledges of mutual trust and honor. The camera's framing amplifies these associations, presenting Fidan and al-Sharaa not merely as officials but as equal partners in respect, their connection projected through gesture rather than decree. The casual intimacy of tea and a shared gaze over Damascus carries bromantic undertones, evoking the homo-social narratives of warriors bound by struggle and leadership. Even the choice of Mount Qasioun, a historic vantage and symbol of defense, layers the encounter with meaning: by ascending it together, they enacted a ritual of shared authority, visually and affectively merging governance into a mythic tableau rather than a mere diplomatic photo-op.

A social media post (on Instagram) captures the moment when President Ahmad al-Sharaa presented Qatar's Emir with a ceremonial robe made in Syria, symbolizing mutual respect and deepening bilateral ties.[14] The body movements are frivolous and carefree with mouth-wide smiles and laughter. Later, on April 15, 2025, al-Sharaa made his first official trip to Qatar. He was received at Hamad International Airport by the Emir and senior Qatari officials, then hosted at the Amiri Diwan for formal talks and a luncheon—staged as a display of cordial unity.[15]

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[13] Can Efesoy, "Turkish foreign minister, Syria's new leader take in Damascus views from Mount Qasioun," Anadolu Ajansi, 22 December, 2024. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-syrias-new-leader-take-in-damascus-views-from-mount-qasioun/3431774

[14] Gassan Awwad Instagram page, January 31, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFgnwzFoPxc/
"Al-Sharaa meets Emir of Qatar in Damascus," Enab Baladi, January 30, 2025. https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/01/al-sharaa-meets-emir-of-qatar-in-damascus/

[15] "Syria's Sharaa in Qatar to Deepen Bilateral Relations", Asharq al-Awsat, April 16, 2025.

We can interpret these encounters as deeply symbolic performances of male bonding and affective statecraft, where each gesture layers political alliance with the imagery of masculine fraternity. The gifting of robes to al-Sharaa, marking him as an "Emir," follows a longstanding tradition in which the bestowal of garments signals honor, respect, and alliance—echoing warrior–emperor exchanges in ancient Near Eastern rites. Reciprocal visits, with their capital city receptions and formal luncheons, stage a choreography of mutual recognition and solidarity, visually akin to brother-king tableaux that legitimize authority through peer acknowledgment. Even the use of fraternal language, such as references to the "depth of fraternal ties," frames these relationships in familial terms, reinforcing a narrative of male–male alliance and shared destiny. In this way, the rituals transcend routine diplomacy, crafting an image of masculine fraternity that underwrites authority both domestically and regionally.

On May 14 2025, in Riyadh's royal court, Ahmad al-Sharaa stood sandwiched between U.S. President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—not merely as a political actor but as a masculine peer among formidable men. The firm handshake with MBS and Trump's praise ("tough guy," "attractive," "young") evoke the hero-buddy aesthetics of ancient warrior epics—where the hero is confirmed not by lineage alone but by the visible-physical recognition of other heroic men. This triadic display becomes a ritual of masculine solidarity, reaffirming al-Sharaa's place within a pantheon of male authority forged through bodily presence and public affect.[16] The handshakes are firm and the smiles very welcoming. MBS has also showed masculine with Putin and Trump, fist bumping. A solid, formal grip between al-Sharaa and MBS—underscores trust, dominance, alliance.

The reported Bloudan encounter underscores your theme of informal ritualized bonding among male leaders. If a visual or meme were circulating, it would have been a potent artifact—blending camaraderie, masculinity, intimacy, and even humiliation or parody into the affective politics you explore. Without the image, the anecdote still illustrates micro-ritual of companionate leadership, framed in serene locale rather than formal statecraft.[17]

Parasocial devotion – The Father Motif

There is a marked increase in social media posts written as addresses to al-Sharaa. They all start with "Sir President". Some of them are full with supplication to God to protect the president and to keep as everlasting "your shade over us, your might and your glory", and also asking God to "never deprive us of your aura-face, your gravitas-filled presence". Support of the president in his up-coming visit to Paris is expressed in devotional terms: "We are your people, we are your kinsmen, your support, you back, your soldiers, your sword, your wrath, your might, force and strength. We love you and love whoever loves you, and we hate and abhore and smite whoever hates you. May God keep you as our emir, president, support, sheikh, leader, teacher, inspiration,

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https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5132936-syrias-sharaa-qatar-deepen-bilateral-relations

[16] Zeke Miller, Jon Gambrell and Aamer Madhani , "Trump meets with Syria's interim president, a first between the nations' leaders in 25 years," AP News, May 14, 2025.
https://apnews.com/article/trump-syria-saudi-arabia-sharaa-assad-sanctions-bb208f25cfedecd6446fd1626012c0fb

[17] "Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani spent the evening in Bloudan, in the Damascus countryside." Levant24, on X, August 2, 2025.
https://x.com/Levant_24_/status/1951753400049111068

commander and military support conqueror of Syria, God willing, until the day of judgement".[18] Others address complains about his soldiers and officials. More erudite ones, address criticism in a very subdued tone as if supplicating or submitting a softly scornful complaint that tacitly acknowledges power.

The leader is perceived and interpreted through the enduring father schema, embodying the roles of protector, punisher, and provider.

The repeated opening—"Sir President"—functions as far more than a polite salutation; in Arabic political discourse, it resonates with older formulae such as *ya sayyid*, *ya malik*, *ya amir*, long used for patrons, rulers, and even God in devotional supplications. The language that follows reinforces this quasi-sacral register: supplicatory phrases like "May God protect you… keep your shade over us… never deprive us of your aura-face" draw directly on Qur'anic and classical Islamic *duʿāʾ* traditions addressed to God, saints, or prophets. Kinship metaphors—"We are your people, your kinsmen… your soldiers, your sword"—cast citizens not as political equals but as members of the ruler's household, the ultimate patriarchal structure. This affective framing reaches its peak in declarations of total loyalty—"We love you… hate and smite whoever hates you"—which echo the devotional exclusivity of monotheistic worship, where fidelity to the deity entails enmity toward His enemies. Even complaint operates within this paternal-theological grammar: mild criticisms are couched as deferential pleas, mirroring the tone of a child appealing to a revered father or a supplicant addressing a god-king.

The proliferation of "Sir President" posts on Syrian social media constitutes a modern form of royal petition, structurally akin to the ancient Near Eastern practice of addressing the king as both father and god. Supplicants invoke God to "preserve your shade," "never deprive us of your aura-face," and to keep the president's "gravitas-filled presence" until the Day of Judgment—phrases directly parallel to Sumerian and Akkadian hymns in which the ruler is "father of the city," "shepherd of the people," and radiates divine *melammu* (aura).

The conflation of ruler and deity is a longstanding Near Eastern trope, in which the king is often cast as the literal "father" of his people and addressed in prayer-like petitions. In Sumerian hymns, rulers are celebrated as "shepherd-fathers"—"You are the father who begot your city, the shepherd who guards his people" and "Shulgi… whose radiant splendor (*melammu*) the gods

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[18] موقع أحمد العقدة، 20 ديسمبر، 2024، https://www.facebook.com/ahmadokde
من أحمد العقدة إلى أحمد الشرع (الرسالة التاسعة)
الموضوع: كلنا أحمد الشرع
سيدي الرئيس،
... أدام الله علينا ظلّكم وعزّكم ومجدكم ولا حرمنا من طلّتكم وهيبة حضوركم ... هذا العام، لم يحتفل السوريون في السادس من أيار، بل احتفلنا في السابع منه، يومَ طَلَعَ قمر بني أمية في باريس، كان عرساً وطنياً عفوياً جديداً، وليلةً أُخرى للذكرى والتاريخ، سيدي الرئيس.
سبحان من وهبكَ القبول في القلوب والأفئدة والعقول، سبحانَ من أوجدكَ فاتحاً جديداً للشام بعد صوم دهرٍ، سبحانَ الله الحليم الحكيم القويّ الأمين، سبحان الخلّاق العليم
... بعد الضربة الاسرائيلية القريبة من القصر، تجمع السوريون بشكل عفوي في الساحات ... صار #كلنا_أحمد_الشرع خبزنا اليومي وبقي رائجاً لمدة أسبوع يتكرر في قوائم الأكثر تفاعلا كل يوم... أولستَ القائل: ما يهمني هو أن يصدقني شعبي فقط؟ ونحنُ نُصدّقكَ ونَصدُقكَ القول إن شاء الله، وننصرك، نحن شعبكَ وأهلكَ وسندكَ وظهركَ وجندك وسيفك وغضبك وجبروتك وقوتك وبأسك
نحبّك ونحبُّ من يحبك، ونكرهُ ونُبغض ونبطشُ بمن يكرهك.
دُمتَ لنا أميراً ورئيساً وسنداً وشيخاً وزعيماً ومُعلماً وملهماً وقائداً ومدداً وفاتحاً للشام بإذن الله إلى يوم القيامة
https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fahmadokde%2Fposts%2Fpfbid035xqD2upaBpuEpNBnWDrDZyKSXBJVoV6iJ5wysuMihA1Fm8z2czGgt9dCZvihcPpLl

have perfected, whose aura covers the land" (Shulgi Hymn B, ca. 2100 BCE)—and as "the king who brings life to the land." [19]

Supplications to kings mirror prayers to gods, invoking blessings such as "May your kingship endure forever, like the heavens; may your days be without number, like the stars" (Ur III royal blessing formula). [20] In Akkadian and Babylonian royal inscriptions, Hammurabi declares himself "shepherd of the people, father of the land, who brings them abundance and shelter" (Prologue to the Laws of Hammurabi, 18th c. BCE) [21], while Old Babylonian petitions proclaim, "The king's friends are my friends, his enemies my enemies; I stand with my lord as with my god" (Mari archives, ca. 18th c. BCE). [22] Here the king's *ṣalmu*—a divinely given aura or radiance, cognate with the later Arabic *ṣanam* ("idol")—bears striking resemblance to the "aura-face" language found in contemporary Syrian political devotion. In the Neo-Assyrian period, Esarhaddon called himself "father to my people, whose shelter is like the shade of a great tree," while petitionary inscriptions to the Assyrian king read like prayers to the god Assur. [23] In Egypt, pharaohs were styled as both "father and mother" of the land, sustaining their subjects as a god sustains creation; vassals addressed them in letters with cosmic epithets such as "O my lord, my god, my sun", "If it pleases the king, may my lord hear his servant's words…" Amarna letters, vassal to Pharaoh, ca. 14th c. BCE.[24] The biblical tradition inherits this fusion of political and divine roles: Isaiah 9:6 grants the Davidic king titles like "Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," and certain Psalms address the king in language otherwise reserved for God, acknowledging him as the deity's earthly stand-in.

The metaphoric overlap of "shade," "aura," "father," "shepherd," and "love/hate" loyalty is no accident but part of a millennia-old political theology of paternal sovereignty. As documented by the Melammu Project—which traces the continuity, transformation, and diffusion of Mesopotamian and Ancient Near Eastern culture from the third millennium BCE through the ancient world into Islamic times—these motifs show remarkable functional continuity: in both modern and ancient contexts, petitions fuse political loyalty with divine blessing and paternal care, constraining dissent to ritualized, deferential complaint. Psychosocially, the subordinate or citizen's self-concept in both settings is cast as childlike and dependent, anchored in the ruler's capacity to provide not only physical protection but also a sense of cosmic security.

In Arabic political idiom there is a long precedent for paternal framings of rulership, visible in both formal and vernacular registers. The classical term raʿī (shepherd) and its collective raʿāyā

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[19] Hallo, William W., and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds. 2003. *The Context of Scripture, Vol. 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 583–584 (Shulgi B, lines 1–15: "You are the father who begot your city…" and divine radiance lines).

[20] Bottéro, Jean, Samuel Noah Kramer, and Thorkild Jacobsen. 1992. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 244 (royal blessing: "May your kingship endure forever, like the heavens…").

[21] Roth, Martha T., ed. 1997. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: Scholars Press, pp. 76–77 (Prologue, lines 1–49: "I am Hammurabi… shepherd of the people, father of the land…").

[22] Lafont, Bertrand. 2001. "The Army of the King of Mari." In *A History of Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, edited by J. N. Postgate. Leiden: Brill, pp. 210–211 (letter ARM 26/1: loyalty formula: "Your friends are my friends, your enemies my enemies…").

[23] Luckenbill, Daniel David. 1927. *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 200 (§519: "Father to my people, whose shelter is like the shade of a great tree").

[24] Moran, William L. 1992. *The Amarna Letters*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 112–113 (EA 288: "If it pleases the king, my lord, may he hear his servant's words…").

(flock) were widely used in pre-modern Islamic political theory to denote the ruler as caretaker and protector of his subjects, a metaphor with Qurʾanic resonance (cf. Q 6:165; Q 16:71) and deep roots in Near Eastern kingship.[25]

The metaphor raʿī (shepherd) and raʿāyā (flock) is already central in Prophetic hadith: "Every one of you is a shepherd (*raʿī*), and every one of you will be asked about his flock (*raʿāyā*)" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 893; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 1829). This hadith framed political authority as custodianship, making the ruler answerable before God for his people's welfare (Crone and Hinds 1986, 25–28).[26] Abbasid caliphs adopted the shepherd metaphor in official discourse: Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) is recorded in chronicles as saying: "The ruler is the shepherd of his subjects, set over them by God to care for them." (Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, vol. 29, p. 67).[27] In *mirrors for princes* literature (e.g., al-Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya*), raʿī/raʿāyā becomes the default metaphor for ruler–subject relations, emphasizing protection, provision, and discipline (al-Māwardī 1996, 16–17).[28] In the Mamluk chancery manuals of al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418), the sultan is addressed as "shepherd of the flock of Islam" (*raʿī raʿāyā al-islām*), an honorific formula inserted in official letters (al-Qalqashandī 1913–20, vol. 6, 92).[29]

Ottoman Turkish and Arabic bureaucratic correspondence continued the formula, often in the phrase ḥāmi al-raʿiyya ("protector of the flock") and raʿī al-mamlaka ("shepherd of the realm") (İnalcık 1973, 41–42).[30] The colloquial bābā dawla ("the father-state") appears in late Ottoman Levantine speech as both a deferential and ironic term for the state apparatus. In Syrian oral histories, older generations recall referring to the Ottoman governor or later the French Mandate authority as *bābā dawla*—a paternal figure who could protect, punish, or provide (Salamandra 2004, 67).[31] The term fuses familial intimacy ("bābā") with the institutional might of the state ("dawla"), effectively reproducing the *raʿī/raʿāyā* structure in a colloquial key (Migdal 1988, 31–33). [32]

These idioms not only signal the ruler's responsibility for material welfare and moral order, but also normalize the citizen's position as dependent child within a household-state structure—a dynamic directly continuous with the deferential, devotional language found in contemporary Syrian social media petitions to al-Sharaa.

Psycho-socially, such devotion emerges from prolonged insecurity. As Freud, Fromm, and Lacan each note, under chronic threat citizens often regress into the role of children before a powerful

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[25] Khadduri, Majid. 1955. *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Lambton, Ann K. S. 1981. "Quis Custodiet Custodes: Some Reflections on the Persian Theory of Government." *Studia Islamica* 64: 135–155.
[26] Crone, Patricia, and Martin Hinds. 1986. *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[27] Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr. 1985–2007. *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. Edited by M. J. de Goeje et al. Beirut: Dār al-Turāth.
[28] al-Māwardī, Abū al-Ḥasan. 1996. *Al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya wa-l-wilāyāt al-dīniyya*. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth.
[29] al-Qalqashandī, Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī. 1913–20. *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣināʿat al-inshāʾ*. 14 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya.
[30] İnalcık, Halil. 1973. *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
[31] Salamandra, Christa. 2004. *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
[32] Migdal, Joel S. 1988. *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

father who can "carry us in his arms" (regressive transfer). In this rhetorical and emotional frame, the leader becomes the paternal deity of the polity—the source of life, protection, and vengeance—whose authority is simultaneously political and sacred. Freud illuminates the emotional ambivalence at play, where love and fear intertwine in both devotion and cautious complaint. Fromm clarifies the motivational structure, showing how prolonged instability heightens the desire for paternal authority. Lacan identifies the structural role of this figure, explaining how the paternal presence functions as a symbolic anchor for social reality, making acts of supplication not mere personal flattery but a reaffirmation of participation in the political order.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud develops the myth of the "primal horde," in which a dominant father monopolizes women and wields absolute power over the sons, who both fear his retaliation and admire his potency. [33] In the myth's resolution, the sons kill the father, then internalize his authority through the totem, binding themselves to the prohibitions he embodied. Politically, citizens' petitions to an all-powerful ruler ("Sir President") repeat this structure of ambivalence—"please protect us" (love) and "do not harm us" (fear). The father-figure's protection is inseparable from his capacity to punish. In Syrian social media discourse, supplicants ask al-Sharaa to "keep your shade over us" and "never deprive us of your aura-face," while couching even grievances in deferential terms—echoing the ancient tension toward the primal father.

In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Erich Fromm argues that in situations of uncertainty and social fragmentation, individuals often seek authoritarian submission as a refuge from the anxiety of freedom. [34] Freedom brings responsibility, and in times of prolonged instability, the psychic cost of autonomous decision-making can feel unbearable. This is the logic of regressive transfer: in unstable contexts, citizens psychologically retreat from the adult role of self-governing subjects to the dependent role of children seeking protection. In the Syrian case, after fourteen years of war, the longing for stability makes the paternal figure of the president compelling, even if his record is marked by violence. The rhetoric—"We are your people, your sword… we love you and hate whoever hates you"—functions as a defense mechanism, reducing political complexity to the reassuring simplicity of loyalty to one man.

Jacques Lacan reinterprets Freud's paternal function as symbolic rather than merely biological. In his seminars—especially *The Psychoses*—the "Name-of-the-Father" (*Nom-du-Père*) is the signifier that installs the subject into the Symbolic Order: the domain of law, language, and social structure. [35] Here, the father is not just the man who rules, but the function he embodies: law-giver, organizer of reality, source of legitimacy. Supplication ("Sir President… may God preserve you") thus reaffirms the petitioner's place within that symbolic order, recognizing the leader as both embodiment of the law and mediator of divine will. Even subdued criticism is

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[33] Freud, Sigmund. 1950 [1913]. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton. See esp. pp. 141–144 on the ambivalence toward the father and the internalization of his authority.

[34] Fromm, Erich. 1969 [1941]. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. See pp. 133–165 on the authoritarian personality and the surrender of autonomy under anxiety.

[35] Lacan, Jacques. 1993 [1955–56]. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg. New York: W. W. Norton. See pp. 230–245 for discussion of the "Name-of-the-Father" as the structuring principle of symbolic authority.

ritualized—structured to acknowledge the father's place as guarantor of order before venturing a grievance.

Prolonged civil war in Syria has created ideal conditions for such regression, in which the leader is imagined as a father who "carries us in his arms," fulfilling both emotional functions of love and protection and authoritarian functions of command and discipline. In both ancient and modern contexts, petitions of this kind affirm dependency by casting the subject as child and the ruler as parent or god; reinforce total loyalty by making love for the leader inseparable from enmity toward his enemies; sacralize political authority by framing the leader's presence and aura as divine blessings whose loss would constitute cosmic deprivation; and permit only constrained complaint, voiced within the idiom of reverence and obedience, thereby preserving the paternal image.

The rhetorical patterns in the "Sir President" posts can be read as a modern enactment of a millennia-old grammar of paternal sovereignty, illuminated by Freud, Fromm, and Lacan. In Freud's terms, the citizen's simultaneous praise and cautious complaint reproduce the ambivalence toward the primal father—protector and threat—long seen in ancient hymns where kings are both the source of shelter and the enforcer of discipline. Fromm's account of the "escape from freedom" helps explain why prolonged insecurity, such as Syria's fourteen years of war, intensifies the longing to dissolve political agency into complete identification with a singular, omnipotent figure, much as Old Babylonian subjects pledged to Hammurabi "as father of the land" and enemy to their enemies. Lacan's "Name-of-the-Father" clarifies how this devotion is not merely emotional but structurally symbolic: in publicly recognizing the leader as emir, president, sheikh, commander, and teacher, petitioners reaffirm their place in the social order he embodies, mirroring Assyrian proclamations that the king's commands "the land obeys." The blend of divine epithets, kinship metaphors, and loyalty oaths in both Syrian social media and ancient Near Eastern petitions reveals a continuous political theology in which the ruler's authority is sacralized, his aura both radiance and law, and supplication becomes the citizen's ritual means of securing protection, favor, and inclusion within the paternal order.

In psychoanalytic terms, the paternal figure's power resides not only in his physical presence but also in the psychic space he occupies. In the Syrian case, this paternal transference is amplified by the dynamics of contemporary media circulation. The leader's appearances are rare and aloof, but in the digital sphere scarcity heightens desire: each image, speech clip, or casual gesture becomes disproportionately charged with meaning. As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) notes in her work on affective publics, digital platforms foster collectives that cohere through shared feeling rather than shared ideology; the community is bound by the circulation of affect, not by a coherent political program.[36] In this environment, even "neutral clichés" uttered by the leader are re-posted, memefied, and remixed until they become sacralized mantras—condensed signifiers of paternal authority and divine-like constancy. Meme-ification thus functions as a modern ritual of repetition, akin to the formulaic praise-lines in ancient Near Eastern hymns, which relied on rhythmic recurrence to embed the ruler's image and virtues in collective consciousness. The "parasocial father" that emerges is not simply a man but a curated presence: an omnipresent yet physically distant protector whose symbolic aura (*melammu*, or in Arabic *hayba*) is continually renewed through the networked labor of his devotees. In this sense, the digital sphere extends the

[36] Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

psychoanalytic father into a distributed, always-accessible figure—carried in the pocket, reposted in the feed, and re-inscribed in the ritualized language of loyalty, much as temple inscriptions once re-inscribed the king's role as shepherd, warrior, and god's representative.

Sacred kingship & the hero-savior bundle

Neo-Umayyad Nostalgia: Al-Sharaa's rise has been framed by Sunni populist currents as ushering in a "golden age," even a neo-Umayyad revival. One piece describes how: "Promising a new golden age, neo-Umayyadism resonates with a broad spectrum of Syria's Sunni Arabs…".[37] al-Sharaa is seen by many as "obsessed by the notion of creating a Sunni entity"—suggesting structural or symbolic alignment with Umayyad statecraft or ideology.[38]

These usages—Umayyad analogy and savior-language—signal the deployment of historical grandeur to sanctify al-Sharaa's authority. Mixing salvation with divine kingship is an old near eastern theme. Sumerian and Akkadian Hymns often invoke rulers as divine or semi-divine saviors. For instance: Shulgi of Ur is praised as the "father who begot the city" and "shepherd who guards his people"—a protector endowed with cosmic responsibility and divine favor

Assyrian kings call upon their divine role—"my commands the land obeys"; they are avengers and protectors who guarantee cosmic and social order.

In Islamic-Mesopotamian contexts, the mahdi-figure (messianic deliverer) occasionally combines ascetic piety with world-transforming force. Though al-Sharaa is not explicitly called a *Mahdi*, the savior-hero bundle—redeeming war-torn Syria, promising unity and protection—echoes the structure of messianic expectation. For now, al-Sharaa is being compared to Mu'awiya, but a comparison to al-Sufiyani may take some time. He is Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Khālid ibn Yazīd ibn Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān, better known as Abū al-ʿUmayṭir al-Sufyānī. "He was an Umayyad rebel against Abbasid rule in Syria during the Fourth Muslim Civil War and a self-proclaimed messiah who, in 811, attempted to restore the Umayyad Caliphate, which had been toppled by the Abbasids in 750."[39] Based on this rebel Shi'ism built an eschatological figure also known as al-Sufyani. The clain that he is a tyrannical claimant rising in Syria before the appearance of the Mahdi. Both Sunni and Shia hadith sources describe him as a brutal ruler who will spread corruption across the Levant, ultimately meeting a dramatic end (e.g., being swallowed by the earth near Bayda).[40] It is possible that the Iranian heavy investment in messianism, and the figure of al-Sufyani, during its intervention in the Syrian war made cleaning up and resurrecting the first al-Sufyani as a savior more difficult.

While no direct analogies have emerged in Sunni or Shia commentary comparing al-Sharaa to al-Sufyani, his portrayal as Syria's savior echoes a broader, ancient paradigm: the leader as divinely sanctioned protector and restorer. This connects seamlessly with the hero-deity motifs of

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[37] Malik al-Abdeh, "'Make Syria Great Again': how Sunni populism is reshaping post-war Syria," Al-Majalla, May16, 2025.
https://en.majalla.com/node/325607/politics/make-syria-great-again-how-sunni-populism-reshaping-post-war-syria
[38] Staff writer, "The New Umayyads: Syria's leaders is turning nostalgia into strategy," Syria in Transition, April 23, 2025.
https://www.syriaintransition.com/thenewumayyads
[39] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_al-Umaytir_al-Sufyani
[40] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufyani

Mesopotamian kingship, the notion of ascetic charisma, and sacral political allegiance foundational to Near Eastern—and Islamic—monarchical cultures.

However, there are modern journalistic usages that align him with the "savior-hero bundle." For instance, one op-ed is titled *"The Classical Saviour of Syria"*, framing al-Sharaa as a redemptive figure in a time of crisis.[41]

Later Islamic traditions bless mystic leaders (saints, imams) with karāmāt (miraculous acts), blending religious charisma with corporeal authority. In ancient contrast: The king might perform temple rituals, oversee sacred construction, or issue divine decrees—actions narratively framed as miraculous or sacrificial, bridging politics and the sacred. ANE texts describe *ritual enthronements* or *coronation hymns*—the king receives divine kingship (often through objects like the rod, ring, or horned cap), and subjects affirm loyalty as if recommitting to cosmic order.

This is mirrored by the early Islamic institution of bayʿa (oath of allegiance) which sacralizes political submission. It is worth noting here that the mujahidin of Hya'at Tahrir al-Sham take an oath of allegiance, or bay'a, to their emir. It is a strong bond of loyalty that is religiously sanctioned (bay'a to emair and bay'a to caliph) which sacralizes loyalty to the ruler as if to a divine mandate. Al-Sharaa himself (as the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra) took a bay'a to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda.[42]

From the temple courts of Ur to the chancery halls of medieval Europe, the act of pledging loyalty to a ruler has often been framed as a sacred duty rather than a mere political transaction. In the Islamic bayʿa, as in the medieval European oath of fealty, allegiance was ritually enacted in public, often before holy texts or relics, and couched in pious language that bound the subject not only to the ruler but also to God. Medieval vassals knelt before their lords, hands enclosed within the lord's, swearing on the Gospels "as they would to God Himself",[43] a gesture that transformed loyalty into an act of devotion. The political theology underpinning these rituals cast the ruler as God's anointed—*Christus Domini* in Latin, *khalīfat Allāh* in Arabic—so that obedience was obedience to divine order. Ancient Near Eastern coronation hymns to kings like Shulgi or Esarhaddon worked within the same logic, proclaiming the ruler as "father to the people" and "shepherd who guards his flock" under divine mandate. The contemporary Syrian invocations of "Sir President"—with vows of eternal loyalty, love for his friends, and hatred for his enemies—operate within this transhistorical grammar of sacralized obedience, where the leader's authority is sanctified and allegiance becomes a public performance of piety.

While there's no documented tradition of formal public bayʿa to al-Sharaa, it's likely that such practices are being discursively substituted in digital spaces—i.e., social media posts with devout, oath-like phrasing function as informal rituals emulating bayʿa.

The comparison of al-Sharaa to the Umayyads and the portrayal of him as Syria's 'classical savior' leverage historical mythos to consolidate legitimacy. This mirrors ancient Near Eastern political theology in which kings were depicted as divinely appointed shepherds—saviors of cities, embodiments of divine radiance, and custodians of order. In both the early Islamic ritual of *bayʿa* and the coronation hymns to rulers like Shulgi or Assyrian monarchs, sovereignty is

[41] Manzar Zaidi, "The Classical Saviour of Syria," The Geopolitics, December 15, 2025. https://thegeopolitics.com/the-classical-saviour-of-syria/
[42] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmed_al-Sharaa
[43] Orderic Vitalis. 1969. *The Ecclesiastical History*, edited by Marjorie Chibnall. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

sanctified through sacralized obedience—a dynamic echoed today in al-Sharaa's presentation as both savior-figure and divine heir to a mythical golden age.

Violence as sacrament of protection

When leaders are seen as saviors, as protective fathers, as divine rulers, even their acts of violence are reinterpreted as justifiable, righteous anger, restoration of order. In both ancient and modern contexts, performative transgression—the act of violence reframed as a proof of authenticity and guardianship—serves a political purpose, transforming atrocity into symbolic protection. For example, al-Sharaa's march toward Latakia, stated as a response to an "unforgivable attack" on Syrian statehood, was framed as a cleanup rather than a massacre. Though at least 1,500 Alawite civilians were killed—many by allied factions under his command—Sharaa's speech cast the violence as fighting remnants of the regime, saving unity through crucible violence.[44]

We can compare this to the bond of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, whose wrestling transitions from conflict to companionship and joint moral violence. Their homoerotic-tinged camaraderie becomes a legitimating force: strength shared between equals justifies their battles as necessary, even righteous.

In the regional vernacular, punitive raids or sectarian violence are routinely recast as "protecting the house"—in-group violence justified as defense. This mirrors René Girard's mimetic scapegoat theory, in which the Father-King stabilizes collective identity by directing communal frustration onto an "other."[45] In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard lays out how human communities resolve internal tensions by projecting violence onto a scapegoat—either an individual or an out-group—whose elimination or punishment restores social order. "The community experiences a strange relief in turning upon the surrogate victim, and this relief is interpreted as the restoration of order… The victim's death or expulsion reconciles the antagonists and ends the cycle of vengeance."*(Girard 1977, 83)*

The Assyrian king Sennacherib portrays enemy city as the surrogate victim; its destruction is narrated as restoring peace to the king's own realm: "I destroyed, devastated, and burned with fire forty-six of his strong cities… I carried off 200,150 people, young and old, male and female… to bring peace to Assyria."[46]

In a time of crisis, this violence binds the group together by reaffirming "who we are" and who the enemy is. Violence is reframed as rescue. "The community comes to regard the elimination of the victim as a legitimate and necessary action… In mythic terms, the slayer is no longer a criminal but a savior who has rescued the group from the plague of violence." *(Girard 1977, 102)*

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[44] Maggie Michael, "Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command led to Damascus," Reuters, June 30, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/investigations/syrian-forces-massacred-1500-alawites-chain-command-led-damascus-2025-06-30/

[45] Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[46] Luckenbill, Daniel David. 1924. *The Annals of Sennacherib*. University of Chicago Press.

Ashurnasirpal II frames mass killing not as brutality but as the heroic salvation of the realm from further conflict: “I felled with the sword 800 of their combat troops… I impaled them on stakes around their city. I made a pillar of heads before their gate… I brought peace and submission to the lands.”[47]

The *sacralized exemption* of the Father-King, legitimizes acts that would be crimes for anyone else. “The ruler, priest, or hero assumes the role of the one who can kill without being guilty; he is invested with the responsibility for violence so that others may be preserved from it.” *(Girard 1977, 289)*

Esarhaddon reframes killing as an act done on behalf of the gods to safeguard the community thus removing guilt: “The great gods placed me in the kingship; they entrusted to me the peoples of the lands… Whomever I strike down is the enemy of Assur and Ishtar; my hand is their hand.”[48]

In many authoritarian populisms (e.g., Hitler, Trump), transgressive acts—breaking diplomatic norms, unleashing force—are cast as proof of the leader’s decisiveness and loyalty to “the people.” They harness violence as a badge of authenticity, reinforcing their compelling masculinity and protector-image.

In many modern authoritarian movements, transgressive force becomes performative legitimacy—broken rules, spectacle executions, harsh crackdowns are reframed as signs of strength, courage, and loyalty to the in-group. Al-Sharaa’s coastal campaign exemplifies this: the mass killing of Alawite civilians, cast as punishment for regime remnants, was rhetorically reframed as salvaging unity (Reuters investigation found nearly 1,500 killed, coordinated by forces linked to the new regime).

Office sacrality routinizes and launders a jihadist past into “statesman.” This helps explain why gaffes and atrocities are reinterpreted as strength or strategic necessity (identity-protective cognition; motivated reasoning).

Where does charisma come from

Treat “the president/liberator” as a *role with reserves of symbolic capital* (Bourdieu) that adheres to the body occupying it. In Bourdieu’s terms, symbolic capital is the prestige, honor, and recognition that accrues within a given *field* (agreed upon norms, such as a government) and is convertible into other forms of capital (economic, political, cultural). It is collectively recognized value, and like any capital, it exists only in the eyes of those who acknowledge it.[49]

The role of *president* or *liberator* is institutionally consecrated: it is embedded in political and cultural structures that have historically accumulated symbolic capital. This capital doesn’t originate solely from the officeholder’s actions but from the *office itself*—a repository of

[47] Grayson, A. Kirk. 1991. *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858–745 BC)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
[48] Borger, Rykle. 1956. *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*. Graz: Weidmann.
[49] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood.

historical legitimacy, national myths, and the collective memory of past liberations or state-foundations.

When a person occupies the role, the symbolic capital "sticks" to their body.[50] Public perception fuses the embodied individual with the symbolic weight of the office. Even if the leader is personally undistinguished or politically inept, the accumulated symbolic capital of "the president" overlays their persona, producing deference, awe, or love. As an example. monarchical coronation in medieval Europe considets crown as an object of consecrated symbolic capital that transfers authority to whomever it touches.[51] This is heightened in cases like al-Sharaa, where the *liberator* label activates a mythic-heroic script already circulating in the national imagination (cf. the figure of the *mujāhid*, the anti-colonial hero, or the messianic savior).

Symbolic capital, once embodied, becomes an emotional asset. It generates trust and legitimacy even in the absence of concrete achievements. It predisposes the public to reinterpret failures or abuses as misunderstood or necessary. This "credit" can be withdrawn over time, but initially it is extraordinarily resilient to contradictory evidence—explaining why massacres or political blunders may not erode popular adoration.

The sudden love-swoon around Ahmad al-Sharaa is less "charisma" in Weber's personal sense than a convergence of office-based symbolic authority. The Ardor for the Liberator is not the work of personal "charisma" but of office-based sacrality.

The sudden love swoon around Ahmad al-Sharaa is less an instance of *charisma* in Weber's narrow, personal sense—where devotion flows from the leader's unique and extraordinary qualities—than a convergence of office-based symbolic authority. In Weber's tripartite typology, *charismatic authority* rests on the perception of personal gifts (*Gnadengaben*), "devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person".[52] Here, however, the devotion appears to draw from a pre-existing reservoir of sacrality embedded in the role of "President" and "Liberator." In Bourdieu's terms, this is symbolic capital accumulated by the *position* over historical time: the presidential role in the Syrian national imagination carries the prestige of statehood, sovereignty, and the paternal "guardian of the nation" archetype. When al-Sharaa stepped into that role—particularly under the narrative of a *liberator* delivering the country from Assad's long rule—this symbolic capital adhered to his person, producing immediate reverence without requiring demonstrable personal achievements.

What appears as charisma is, in fact, the embodiment of an already sacralized office—an authority consecrated much like the anointing of kings in medieval Europe or the investiture rituals of ancient Near Eastern rulers, which sanctified the officeholder and insulated him from criticism. Sumerian and Akkadian royal hymns reflect this logic: in the *Hymn to Shulgi A*, the ruler declares, "The great gods have chosen me in their hearts; I am the shepherd who brings peace to his land";[53] in the *Royal Hymn to Ishbi-Erra*, the king is called "the protective shade

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[50] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[51] Kantorowicz, Ernst H. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
[52] Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[53] ETCSL (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature). 2.4.2.01 *Shulgi A*. Oxford University.

over the people" and "father who watches over the black-headed ones"; [54] and in Esarhaddon's inscriptions, the Assyrian monarch proclaims, "The great gods placed me in the kingship; they entrusted to me the peoples of the lands… Whomever I strike down is the enemy of Assur and Ishtar; my hand is their hand." [55]

These formulae show that the office itself is a sacred vessel—the man becomes divine through his enthronement, inheriting the accumulated symbolic capital of all who came before him. In Syria's present, as in Mesopotamia's past, the adoration for the "Liberator" is best understood not as the product of a magnetic personality, but as the activation of deep political-theological scripts—*raʿī/raʿāyā* (shepherd/flock), *bābā dawla* (state father), and the savior-king—where the occupant is transfigured by the role.

Conclusion: Sovereign Devotion as a System of Coupled Flows

The sudden and enduring adoration for Ahmad al-Sharaa is best understood not as the spontaneous eruption of personal "charisma," but as the systemic convergence of symbolic, affective, normative, and coordinative flows circulating between the leader and the populace. Within a systemic framework, five subsystems interlock to sustain this devotion:

1. Symbolic-Communicative Flow – circulating images, ritualized epithets, and corporeal tropes (the confident gait, the "aura-face," the black stallion) render him legible in deep cultural codes as king, father, and savior.
2. Affective-Expressive Flow – collective awe, eroticized admiration, gratitude, and relief bind emotional energy to the leader, creating attachment and dependency akin to regressive paternal transfer in prolonged insecurity.
3. Normative-Regulative Flow – the titles "liberator," "president," "custodian" function as licenses to command and coerce, embedding authority in historically sacralized offices.
4. Role-Enactment Flow – the ascribed identity pairing (him = Father/King/Savior/Hero; people = Children/Saved) institutionalizes deference through supplicatory address, blessings, and pledges (*bayʿa*) that mirror ancient royal oaths.
5. Action-Coordination Flow – reinterpretation networks (party channels, clerics, influencers) neutralize dissonance by reframing errors and atrocities as protective acts, producing error immunity that sustains legitimacy.

These flows are not linear but form a reinforcing feedback loop. The symbolic capital of the office seeds initial devotion; devotion amplifies tolerance for coercion; coercion, narratively sacralized, strengthens the paternal myth. Over time, this positive feedback risks reaching a *lock-in threshold*,[56] where the system self-perpetuates regardless of the leader's actual performance

[54] ETCSL 2.5.6.3 *Royal Hymn to Ishbi-Erra*. Oxford University.
[55] Borger, Rykle. 1956. *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*. Graz: Weidmann.

[56] Mobus, George E., and Michael C. Kalton. 2015. *Principles of Systems Science*. New York: Springer.

(perpetuating the Assad cycle). The result is a political-theological configuration as old as the Shulgi hymns and the Assyrian annals, yet mediated today by meme culture and parasocial intimacy, producing a 21st-century "Father-King" who is as much a product of systemic flows as of any individual talent.

While the devotion to Ahmad al-Sharaa currently operates as a self-reinforcing system of symbolic, affective, normative, role-based, and coordinative flows, such configurations are not indestructible. Systems theory teaches that positive feedback loops persist only while their reinforcing conditions remain intact; disruption can occur if a counter-flow overwhelms or severs key linkages.

Two principal rupture points threaten this "Father-King" structure:

1. Scandals that strike at the paternal image – If the role's emotional core is paternal care, then betrayals of that care can trigger rapid affective collapse. Such breaches include visible neglect of suffering populations, acts interpreted as personal cowardice or impotence, or moments of public ridicule that puncture the aura of dignity. In psychoanalytic terms, these are blows to the *Name-of-the-Father* as guarantor of protection and symbolic order. Once the father is shown as failing in his primal role, emotional attachment may invert into resentment. Historical parallels include Gamal Abdel Nasser's sudden loss of prestige after the June 1967 defeat by Israel; his image as *raʿī* ("shepherd") and protector of Arab dignity was shaken so badly that only an emotional, almost choreographed wave of popular re-endorsement kept him in power.
2. Ruptures in the office's sacrality – Since much of the devotion is anchored in the symbolic capital of the office, a crisis that delegitimizes the role itself can break the spell. This might occur through international humiliation (e.g., visible subordination to foreign powers, loss of territory, treaty seen as surrender) or internal elite defection (e.g., high-ranking clerics, military commanders, or regime insiders publicly breaking allegiance). In such cases, the office ceases to function as a sacred vessel; without the role's consecrated aura, the embodied charisma evaporates. For Saddam Hussein, the crushing defeat of 1991 and the televised retreat from Kuwait were reframed domestically as tactical withdrawals, but the aura of invincibility was permanently damaged—creating space for later elite defections. In Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, the NATO-backed rebel advance in 2011 did not just threaten his life; it stripped the office of "Leader of the Revolution" of its revolutionary sacrality, turning his bombastic performances into ridicule fodder.

Historically, both types of rupture are well attested: in the *Weidner Chronicle* (Akkadian, 1st millennium BCE), kings are condemned for "failing to care for the gods' people," leading to divine abandonment;[57] medieval chronicles record monarchs losing their *anointed* status after battlefield humiliation or aristocratic revolt;[58] medieval Islamic chronicles likewise narrate ruler falls in paternal idioms: the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Faraj lost legitimacy when famine and Timur's invasion made him seem unable to "protect the flock;" modern populist leaders have

[57] Grayson, A. Kirk. 1975. *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*. Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin.
Glassner, Jean-Jacques. 2004. *Mesopotamian Chronicles*. Edited by Benjamin R. Foster. Writings from the Ancient World 19. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 134–137, under the heading *Chronicle of Esagila* (Weidner Chronicle).
[58] Kantorowicz 1957.

seen legitimacy collapse overnight when scandals reframed them as either *bad fathers* or *false kings*.

In the Syrian case, the resilience of the al-Sharaa devotion is contingent, not inevitable. The same feedback loops that now sanctify him could, under the right shocks, reverse—turning the symbolic communicative flow from praise to satire, the affective-expressive flow from attachment to disillusionment, and the normative-regulative flow from obedience to repudiation. Once ruptures accumulate—whether through humiliation, elite fracture, or paternal betrayal—the sacred office ceases to be a vessel for symbolic capital, and the "Father-King" system can collapse with surprising speed.