

Can the People's Assembly Hold the Government Accountable? Lessons from Syria's First Ministerial Hearings

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When Syria's education and energy ministers appeared before the People's Assembly, its members had a rare opportunity to press the government on issues shaping daily life across the country. The hearings went beyond education and energy policy. They tested whether MPs could turn public frustration into meaningful pressure on the government. More broadly, they raised a question about Parliament's role in holding those in power to account: could these hearings help establish scrutiny as a regular part of political life, rather than an occasional response to public discontent?

In both sessions, ministers pointed to the challenges of post-war reconstruction to explain current shortcomings while promising improvements ahead. But Parliament's role must extend beyond giving voice to public grievances: MPs must be able to question how decisions are made, challenge the government's justifications, and hold ministers to their promises. Without this scrutiny, state-building risks becoming a process driven by government priorities rather than citizens' needs.

Giving Local Grievances a Voice

The hearings made clear that MPs were willing and able to bring local grievances into the national political debate. For example, in the energy hearing, Fajr Fawzi al-Ahmad spoke for Deir ez-Zor, Ahmad Mahmoud al-Khalaf Shlash raised concerns affecting Raqqa, and Gabriel Kourieh focused on Qamishli and Hasakah. Their interventions, alongside those of other MPs, brought attention to how electricity shortages and rising energy costs were affecting communities across Syria, and how they were unevenly felt.

The education hearing showed the same willingness. The Education Committee compiled questions from constituents, committees and regional delegations and sent them to the minister in advance. MPs from Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Latakia, Tartus, Quneitra, Homs and Idlib raised issues specific to their areas, including towns without secondary schools. Several MPs described being contacted constantly; one said that on dismissed teachers, "hardly a day passes without us being asked about it, either by phone or through social media". Their accounts were concrete: classrooms in Raqqa with 80 students, some sitting on the floor; schools in Qamishli vacated by displaced families with "no windows, no doors, no desks"; and residents of one Deir ez-Zor town who restored 13 of 24 schools at their own expense.

MP Kourieh's questions showed this tension clearly. He highlighted the situation in

Qamishli and Hasakah, where some communities were receiving no more than two hours of electricity. Households already relying on generators or solar power had also been affected by the latest price increase. Many, he said, had “cancelled their subscriptions and chose bread,” preferring “to live in darkness rather than lose their bread.” The energy minister responded that the ministry was working to complete transmission lines “from the dams towards Hasakah, and from Hasakah to Deir ez-Zor,” but warned that the work “needs time.”

The exchange gave Kourieh an opportunity to press the government on its plans and bring the experiences of communities in Qamishli and Hasakah directly before the minister. But it also highlighted the limits of this form of questioning. When MPs focus primarily on securing projects or services, ministers can respond by pointing to future investment without explaining how resources are allocated, when improvements are expected, or what support is available to households in the meantime. This leaves a broader question about parliamentary scrutiny: whether MPs are able to move beyond demands for government action and examine the reasoning and processes that shape its decisions at the ministerial level.

The education hearing followed a similar pattern. Turko said the ministry restores schools “wherever we get the chance”, through the government, local communities and international organisations, and pointed to an emergency budget approved the previous week for the newly integrated eastern region following the dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces and to caravans requested as a temporary solution for small villages. He said rebuilding is guided by Decree 59, which sets return priorities including schools, clinics and infrastructure, so schools in areas where camp residents are returning come first. These were practical answers, but they did not explain how the ministry weighs competing needs elsewhere, or when particular communities can expect improvement.

The hearings also raised broader questions about employment and representation in local government. A related concern emerged when Al-Shlash challenged government appointments in Raqqa, arguing that energy sector managers were being appointed from outside the governorate, even though “Raqqa is full of specialists,” including people who know “the poles, transformers, connection units, and streets more than anyone else.” His intervention brought an important issue into the open: whether qualified people from Raqqa were being given a fair opportunity to manage services in their own governorate.

Al-Bashir responded by pointing to the absence of legislation requiring

managers to come from the governorate they serve: “if there is legislation from you, I will comply with the legislation.” This addressed the legal position, but not how candidates are selected or whether the process is open and merit-based.

Questions about who gets public posts were just as prominent in the education hearing. MPs asked when dismissed teachers would be made permanent and whether their years out of service would count. One MP called for “revolutionary legitimacy” to return dismissed teachers without waiting for legislation, another rejected, “from a revolutionary standpoint”, the return of teachers who had been seconded to military and security institutions, and a third asked why school principals who had been active Baath Party members had not been replaced. As in the Raqqa exchange, these interventions advocated outcomes for particular groups. Each offered a ground for vetting, but none asked how cases would be assessed or who would decide, even though Turko had described a vetting process, in which about 22,000 registrants were checked and around 14,000 reinstated, that gave them something concrete to test.

From Raising Concerns to Challenging Decisions

Some MPs used the session not only to challenge the government’s policies, but to propose alternatives. MP Nawar Najmeh argued that the government had chosen the easiest option by raising fuel prices. He warned that higher fuel costs would drive inflation, which he described as “a tax paid by the poor to the rich,” and argued that wealthier groups should instead bear more of the burden through higher taxation.

Najmeh’s intervention was significant because it went beyond opposing the tariff increase: he raised a broader question on who should bear the cost of economic recovery. This was effective because it questioned the assumptions underlying the new policy, particularly how its costs should be distributed across society. However, proposing an alternative policy is not, in itself, the same as pressing the government to explain why a particular policy was chosen over another.

Al-Bashir acknowledged that the increase would have harmful effects, but described it as an “unavoidable evil,” arguing that the losses had become too large for the government to absorb.

Yet the minister's response did not address whether higher taxation of wealthier groups had been considered as an alternative. Najmeh therefore raised a different model for sharing the burden, but the exchange did not establish whether that alternative had been assessed by the government.

MP Abdulrazzaq Saad Awad focused more directly on affordability and the position of vulnerable households. He urged the minister to consider the most vulnerable groups and proposed that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour should have a representative on the pricing committee. His intervention shifted the issue from whether prices had to rise to whether the needs of low-income households were considered when those decisions were made. The minister accepted the proposal, calling it "a good suggestion," and said he would seek to appoint a permanent representative from Social Affairs so that the committee could take account of vulnerable groups. This was more concrete than a general promise of future support. It offered, at least in principle, a mechanism for incorporating social concerns more explicitly into pricing decisions.

The education hearing revealed a similar pattern. One MP pointed to inconsistent figures: an April ministry report had said that 448 schools had been restored, while the figure given at the hearing was close to 4,000. Turko did not directly reconcile the two numbers or clarify whether the figures covered the same period or used the same definition of restoration. On children out of school, he put the figure at "around 2 million" but acknowledged: "we don't have precise statistics; we haven't conducted a survey because the numbers are constantly changing". Although it was important for MPs to press for accurate reporting, it remained unclear how the ministry was obtaining these figures.

Other challenges centred on who had the authority to make decisions and who should hold them accountable. When the Assembly's Culture, Heritage and Cultural Diversity Committee proposed Turkish and Syriac as optional second languages, the minister argued that this was a sovereign matter for the Supreme Council for Education. Another MP countered that if the issue was sovereign, the legislature should decide it. Turko described the February 2025 mass transfer of more than 15,000 contracts, from the directorates where teachers were contracted to their home areas, as illegal. He also argued that the wider social consequences were for the government as a whole to resolve, not his ministry alone. Like Awad's proposal on the pricing committee, these

exchanges went beyond the decisions themselves to question who had the power to make them, who was responsible for their consequences, and how they could be held to account.

Taken together, these exchanges suggest MPs are most effective when they ask not just what the government should do, but why it chose one course over another, who decided, and who answers for the result.

Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight: Lessons Learned

Parliament is not only a place for MPs to raise their constituents' concerns. It is also a forum for testing government decisions, challenging policies and demanding clear explanations from ministers. The energy and education hearings showed that the impact of parliamentary questioning depends not only on the issues raised, but on how questions are framed, what evidence ministers provide and whether Parliament follows up on their responses. Strengthening these practices would help the Assembly turn concerns into more effective scrutiny of government performance.

- 1. MPs should focus on one clear question at a time, with specific requests for answers or evidence.** During the energy hearing, when members exceeded their allotted time, the Speaker introduced a one-minute limit on microphones. Some continued speaking after their microphones were switched off, disputed the Speaker's rulings or rushed through several points before their time ended. This often left ministers able to address some issues while leaving others unanswered. The education hearing faced similar problems. The Speaker repeatedly asked MPs to stop repeating questions and keep to two minutes, but several interventions ran well over time. After three hours, he called a break, remarking that "we agreed on a format and broke it." These exchanges show the importance of enforcing reasonable speaking limits and keeping questions focused, so that ministers can be pressed for clear answers on specific issues.
- 2. Questions should require ministers to explain and justify decisions, rather than simply respond to public frustration.** MP Mohammad Basil Muhyiddin Helm, for example, raised the difficulties households faced in paying electricity bills and called on the Minister to stop the tariff increase. The Minister could respond by pointing to the financial

pressures facing the energy sector. A more probing question would have asked whether the Government had assessed the cost of delaying the increase and what that would mean for household affordability. This would have required the Government to explain the evidence behind its decision, rather than answering a concern about household affordability with a concern about the sector's finances. The education hearing showed the same contrast. Some interventions required the ministry to account for a figure or decision, as when an MP questioned the school-restoration numbers. Other interventions, such as concerns over women in education, invited the minister to rebut a view rather than explain a decision or produce evidence. MPs should therefore frame questions to establish why decisions were taken, what evidence supports them and how their consequences have been assessed.

2. **Parliament should press for information that allows government performance to be independently assessed.** Marwan Ahmad al-Nazhan called for regular public updates on energy production, imports, losses and progress towards government targets. Hanan al-Balkhi similarly asked how subsidised fuel would be distributed fairly and protected from entering the black market. Both questions raised a broader concern: whether Parliament and the public have enough information to assess the Government's performance. In response, the Minister referred to existing coordination committees and a proposed system of named lists for subsidized fuel recipients but did not commit to publishing the relevant information. MPs could follow up by asking the Ministry to publish regular information on the energy sector's finances and performance, alongside clear eligibility criteria and figures showing how subsidised fuel is distributed. They could also request a publication timetable and regular updates to Parliament on progress. Without this information, it is difficult to determine whether government commitments are being delivered, or whether public resources are reaching their intended recipients.
3. **Ministerial commitments should be recorded and systematically followed up.** The education hearing showed what this could look like in practice. MPs asked the ministry to publish regular updates on its plans and progress, while Turko set out timelines for several commitments: opening a recruitment competition for Aleppo, Daraa and Rural

Damascus within days, reinstating a qualifying exam for baccalaureate candidates that year, and introducing quality and accreditation scores for every school the following year. Other reforms, including the Teachers' Affairs Law and the law on permanent status for dismissed teachers, remained with the Presidency's drafting committee or the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, without a timetable. These commitments give Parliament a basis for checking progress, but only if they are recorded and revisited. MPs should return to promised deadlines in subsequent hearings, request evidence of progress and seek explanations for delays. Where reforms remain with other institutions, they should establish where proposals stand and what action is needed next. The Education Committee's Deputy Chair said the session would not be the last, but the start of a process. Subsequent sessions would be a place to assess the impact of what was presented.