

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	2252
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	UK Home Office
Titel:	Country Policy and Information Note Syria: Criticism of the government
Udgivet:	April 2026
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. juni 2026



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Syria: Criticism of the government

Version 1.0

April 2026

Executive summary

In November–December 2024, an Islamist rebel group called Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa, launched a military offensive which culminated in the toppling of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Since the fall of Al-Assad, Al-Sharaa has been the leader of Syria, and figures affiliated with HTS have been appointed to key positions of power in his government.

Under this new government, space for freedom of expression, including criticism of the authorities, has expanded significantly, but there are limits. These limits are not clearly defined, and Syrians remain unsure of the government's red lines when it comes to sensitive issues such as sectarian tensions and human rights violations against religious and ethnic minorities.

At the time of writing, no organised political opposition groups have emerged in government-controlled areas. There is also no legal basis for the formation of political parties, although the government intends to pass a law to change this.

In general, individuals who criticise or oppose the government, and individuals who criticised or opposed HTS before the fall of the Al-Assad regime, are unlikely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise.

There have been cases of the authorities arresting and detaining journalists and activists who posted critical content on social media. However, they were generally released soon afterwards. The arrests occurred on a selective and inconsistent basis, and available information does not indicate that the government is pursuing a systematic policy of targeting and detaining critics.

Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to obtain protection. They are also unlikely to be able to internally relocate to escape the risk they face.

Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

All cases must be considered on their individual facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate they face persecution or serious harm.

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Assessment

Section updated: 16 March 2026

About the assessment

This section considers the evidence relevant to this note – that is the [country information](#), refugee/human rights laws and policies, and applicable caselaw – and provides an assessment of **whether, in general**:

- a person faces a real risk of persecution/serious harm from the state because they criticise the government
- the state (or quasi state bodies) can provide effective protection
- internal relocation is possible to avoid persecution/serious harm
- a claim, if refused, is likely or not to be certified as ‘clearly unfounded’ under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Decision makers **must**, however, consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case’s specific facts.

This CPIN has been developed with assistance from Artificial Intelligence (AI). Where AI has been used, it has been reviewed by a human editor.

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1. Material facts, credibility and other checks/referrals

1.1 Credibility

- 1.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 1.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 1.1.3 Decision makers must also consider making an international biometric data-sharing check, when one has not already been undertaken (see [Biometric data-sharing process \(Migration 5 biometric data-sharing process\)](#)).
- 1.1.4 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person’s claimed place of origin, decision makers should consider language analysis testing, where available (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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1.2 Exclusion

- 1.2.1 Under the Al-Assad regime, human rights violations were systematic and widespread. Civilians also suffered human rights abuses at the hands of other actors during the civil war.
- 1.2.2 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons to apply one (or more) of the exclusion clauses. Each case must be considered on its individual facts.
- 1.2.3 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).
- 1.2.4 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

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2. Convention reason(s)

- 2.1.1 Actual or imputed political opinion.
- 2.1.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.
- 2.1.3 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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3. Risk

- 3.1.1 In general, a person who criticises or opposes the government is unlikely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise. This includes journalists, activists, and protesters who publicly express critical views of the government and the security forces. It also includes those who criticised or opposed HTS before the fall of the Al-Assad regime.
- 3.1.2 In December 2024, an Islamist group called Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) led

a rebel offensive that resulted in the overthrow of Bashar Al-Assad's regime. HTS leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa became President of Syria in January 2025, and other figures affiliated with HTS were appointed to key positions of power in the new government (for more information on events leading to the fall of Al-Assad, see the CPIN [Syria: Returnees after fall of Al-Assad regime](#)).

- 3.1.3 In March 2025, the new government published a Constitutional Declaration which guarantees freedom of expression and a free press. However, it also includes a provision that these freedoms can be restricted for reasons of 'national security, territorial integrity, public safety, the protection of public order and the prevention of crime, or the protection of public health or morals'. While comparable limitations exist in many democracies, including the UK, human rights organisations have raised concerns about the vagueness of this part of the Constitutional Declaration, the absence of clearly defined limits on freedom of expression, and the lack of robust judicial oversight. Another limitation on free speech is a clause in the constitution that criminalises 'denying, praising, justifying or downplaying' the Al-Assad regime's crimes. In addition to the constitution, the government says it has suspended previous Assad-era laws that restricted media freedom (see [Legal context](#)).
- 3.1.4 The interim constitution establishes a highly centralised presidential system, with no prime minister and limited institutional oversight. The president appoints all ministers, has a major role in the selection of members of parliament, can propose laws directly, and can declare a state of emergency for up to three months, among other things. Power is concentrated in the president and a small circle of key ministers, all of whom are associated with HTS (see [Political system](#) and [Affiliation of key figures in government](#)).
- 3.1.5 As of March 2026, there are no officially registered political parties in Syria because there is still no law governing political parties. The interim constitution guarantees the right to form political parties, with the limitation that they must be formed on a national basis and not on a regional, ethnic or sectarian basis. It is unclear when the political parties law will come into force (see [Political parties](#)).
- 3.1.6 CPIT was unable to find information about any organised opposition groups seeking to challenge or replace Al-Sharaa's government. During violence in Suweida in July 2025 (see the CPIN [Syria: Religious minorities](#) for further information), activists launched the Syrian Centenary Initiative (SCI), which one source described as an emerging opposition to Al-Sharaa's rule. However, available information suggests that the SCI does not aim to replace the government but rather to push it to adopt a more inclusive and democratic approach. CPIT was unable to find any information about the SCI's activity since July 2025 (see [Political opposition](#)).
- 3.1.7 After the fall of the Al-Assad regime, the space for freedom of expression increased dramatically. Political discussions took place openly, civil society organisations (CSOs) held meetings freely, journalists were able to travel around the country and report without restrictions, and there was space to criticise the new government. However, sources indicate that this openness, which characterised the first few weeks after the fall of the regime, subsequently decreased. While the government does tolerate some

criticism, sources describe a high level of uncertainty around the red lines for free speech, particularly concerning religious and political topics (see also 3.1.10 and 3.1.13). The lack of clear boundaries regarding freedom of expression has led people to exercise caution and self-censorship (see [Comparison with Al-Assad regime](#) and [Limits on free speech](#)).

- 3.1.8 CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have significantly more freedom to operate than they did under the Al-Assad regime. Amnesty International described the ‘blossoming of civic space’ as one of the greatest achievements of the new Syria. However, CSOs still face challenges and restrictions. For example, anyone wishing to hold a public event must obtain permission from the authorities, and CSOs report that the criteria for approval are unclear, leading to seemingly arbitrary decisions on which events can and cannot go ahead. In addition, a law that allowed the Al-Assad regime to exercise tight control over CSOs remains in place. The government has said that it plans to repeal the law but has instructed CSOs to adhere to it for the time being. Sources indicate that CSOs working on political and human rights issues face greater challenges and restrictions than non-political CSOs (see [Civil society organisations \(CSOs\) and non-governmental organisations \(NGOs\)](#), [Demonstrations and public events](#), and [Other relevant laws](#)).
- 3.1.9 Sources describe a newfound artistic freedom, with artists able to create freely in a way that would have been unthinkable under the Al-Assad regime. Sources mentioned one example of overtly political art: the Malas Brothers, who write and perform satirical plays. While they have generally been able to perform freely, the government suspended one of their shows after they posted on social media criticising the security forces’ attacks on Alawites and Druze. The Ministry of Culture claimed the suspension was down to a misunderstanding, but brothers insist they were censored. The authorities have reportedly removed content contradicting Islamic principles from translations of foreign books about philosophy and politics (see [Arts and culture](#)).
- 3.1.10 Press freedom has increased significantly since the fall of the Al-Assad regime, with journalists able to travel and report with far fewer restrictions. However, some journalists have faced administrative and bureaucratic obstacles such as difficulties obtaining reporting permits. Sources provide differing assessments of the government’s level of tolerance for critical media coverage. Some indicate that journalists are generally free to criticise the government, while others state that there is some space for criticism but that the limits remain unclear. This uncertainty has led journalists to exercise caution and practice self-censorship to a certain extent (see [Overview of press freedom](#) and [Media regulations and restrictions on reporting](#)).
- 3.1.11 The government reportedly gives preferential treatment to supportive media outlets, for example by granting them better access to government information or interviews with government figures. According to available information, the authorities do not directly tell journalists not to publish certain things, but they have imposed indirect restrictions such as denying access to certain areas. In particular, in the aftermath of the March 2025 violence against Alawites (see the CPIN [Syria: Alawites and actual or perceived Assadists](#)), many journalists who wanted to enter affected areas were not granted permits. Security forces arrested some journalists who

reported from those areas without permits and forced them to delete their footage (see [Overview of press freedom](#) and [Media regulations and restrictions on reporting](#)).

- 3.1.12 There is very little information available about the government's treatment of political opposition groups. The lack of information is likely due to the fact that there are no organised opposition groups or political parties in government-controlled areas (see paragraph 3.1.5). The government dismissed the demands of the Syrian Centenary Initiative, which some sources describe as a form of political opposition, and reportedly launched smear campaigns against its members. CSOs indicate that political activities and events are subject to greater restrictions than civic ones. For example, a CSO reported that it did not obtain approval to hold a conference in Homs on political participation. It remains unclear how the government would respond to an organised political opposition posing a genuine threat to its rule because this kind of opposition does not exist at the time of writing (see [Political opponents](#)).
- 3.1.13 The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's (ACLED) database indicates that hundreds of 'protest events' (defined as public demonstrations involving three or more participants) have taken place in government-controlled areas of Syria since the fall of the Al-Assad regime. Some of these protests involved criticism of the authorities, particularly regarding issues such as the cost of living, salaries, pensions and public sector redundancies. There are a small number of reports of security forces intervening in protests, as described in the following paragraph (see [Demonstrations and public events](#)).
- 3.1.14 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that government forces used violence against peaceful protesters on several occasions. However, no major international media outlet or human rights organisation confirmed these reports. The most severe incident reported by SOHR was in December 2025, when it stated that government forces violently assaulted and arrested Alawite protesters in coastal areas. The government, meanwhile, said it arrested supporters of the Al-Assad regime who had targeted its forces or who were planning criminal acts. CPIT was unable to confirm either version of events. In December 2024, security forces arrested 9 women at a demonstration against the detention of men accused of belonging to Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (see paragraph 3.1.19 for further information on the treatment of Hizb ut-Tahrir members). One of the arrested women, who was pregnant at the time, said she was released 13 days later (see [Protesters](#)).
- 3.1.15 Sources reported several cases of arrest, detention and harassment of journalists and activists who criticised the government on social media. There have also been cases of security forces detaining relatives of individuals who had been summoned for criticising the government on social media in order to pressure them to hand themselves in. The authorities appear to monitor online activity to some extent, but available information does not indicate a systematic government policy of surveillance aimed at suppressing criticism. Incidents of arrest and detention have generally been inconsistent and selective. However, a significant number of reported arrests resulted from social media posts about sensitive topics, particularly the government's treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, which suggests

that individuals who comment on these topics are at greater risk of arrest. In addition, some sources indicate that critics belonging to religious and ethnic minorities may be at greater risk than those from a Sunni Arab background (see [Journalists and activists](#), [Limits on free speech](#) and [Critics belonging to religious and ethnic minorities](#)).

- 3.1.16 The authorities generally released detained journalists and activists after holding them for brief periods, usually lasting between several hours and several days. In some cases, their release came after public outcry or media campaigns forced senior officials to intervene. In a small number of cases, activists were held for weeks without access to a lawyer. There is one reported case of severe mistreatment during detention, involving the allegation that undisciplined security personnel tortured a detained activist and threatened to kill him if he spoke out about the treatment he received (see [Journalists and activists](#)).
- 3.1.17 Sources indicate that journalists and activists critical of the government may face online harassment from pro-government social media users. Similarly, SOHR claimed it was the victim of a government-orchestrated smear campaign, but CPIT was unable to confirm this (see [Journalists and activists](#)).
- 3.1.18 There is very little information available about the government's treatment of or attitude towards critics and opponents outside Syria. Several sources indicated that the government monitors social media posts published by individuals both inside and outside Syria but provided no further details. According to other sources, however, the government does not have the capacity to systematically monitor social media (see [Critics in other countries/sur place activities](#)).
- 3.1.19 Sources indicate that HTS cracked down heavily on critics and activists in its territory in Idlib before the fall of the Al-Assad regime, but there is very little information available about the new government's treatment of or attitude towards such people. The only relevant information is that the government has not released members of Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir who were detained by HTS. These individuals have not been allowed to access a lawyer and have not been brought before a judge despite being detained for years. One source indicated that other opponents of HTS (i.e. other than Hizb ut-Tahrir members) also remain in detention but did not provide any examples. Considering the high level of international scrutiny towards Syria's new government and the substantial increase in press freedom, it is reasonable to expect that systematic targeting of former opponents would be reported by media outlets or human rights organisations. CPIT was unable to find any such reporting (see [Treatment of former opponents of HTS](#)).
- 3.1.20 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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4. Protection

- 4.1.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to obtain protection.
- 4.1.2 For further guidance on assessing state protection, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

5. Internal relocation

- 5.1.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to internally relocate to escape that risk.
- 5.1.2 For further guidance on internal relocation and factors to consider, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

6. Certification

- 6.1.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 6.1.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

Country information

About the country information

This section contains publicly available or disclosable country of origin information (COI) which has been gathered, collated and analysed in line with the [research methodology](#). It provides the evidence base for the assessment which, as stated in the [About the assessment](#), is the guide to the current objective conditions.

The structure and content follow a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to the scope of this note.

This document is intended to be comprehensive but not exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned this does not mean that the event did or did not take place or that the person or organisation does or does not exist.

The COI included was published or made publicly available on or before **18 February 2026**. Any event taking place or report published after this date will not be included.

Decision makers must use relevant COI as the evidential basis for decisions.

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7. Legal context

7.1 Constitutional and legal protections relating to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of information

7.1.1 The new Syrian government suspended the previous constitution in January 2025¹ and published a document entitled 'The Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic (referred to as the 'Interim Constitution' in some sources) in March 2025. The document stated:

'Article 13 – Expression, privacy, movement

1. The State guarantees freedom of opinion, expression, information, publication and the press. ...

'Article 14 – Political participation, assembly

1. The State shall protect the right to political participation and the formation of parties on national foundations according to a new law.
2. The state guarantees the work of associations and unions. ...

'Article 23 – Limitations

'The state shall protect the rights and freedoms set forth in this Chapter, and they shall be exercised in accordance with the law. Their exercise may be subject to limitations that constitute necessary measures for national security, territorial integrity, public safety, the protection of public order and the prevention of crime, or the protection of public health or morals.'²

7.1.2 BBC Monitoring's 'Media Guide' for Syria, updated in February 2026, stated:

'Freedom of opinion, expression and the press have been explicitly guaranteed by [Article 13 of] the constitutional declaration guiding the five-

¹ Al Jazeera, [Syria's Baath party dissolved: What happens next?](#), 30 January 2025

² Constitution.net, [Constitutional Declaration...](#) (unofficial automated translation), 13 March 2025

year transition period.

‘But the declaration also forbids “denying, praising, justifying or downplaying [the Assad authorities’] crimes”. It says freedoms are not absolute and that the boundaries of permissible speech remain open to interpretation.

‘In a September 2025 interview, President Sharaa said that while no authority can silence people, media regulations were needed to prevent sectarian incitement and to protect citizens. He added that such rules should be few and clear.

‘Sharaa said it was the responsibility of the information ministry and parliament to establish media and political regulatory frameworks.

‘Information Minister Hamza al-Mostafa said in July 2025 that many Assad-era laws restricting media freedom had been suspended, particularly provisions on “undermining the prestige of the state” or “weakening nationalism,” which had been used to charge dissidents.

‘He said the ministry was drafting new legislation, beginning with a “detailed code of ethics”, in consultation with media professionals. The code will eventually become law.

‘He said the authorities had adopted the concept of “responsible journalism” which holds that freedom must be balanced with the demands of the transitional period. “Responsible journalism” should prioritise the realities of the transition while supporting the government’s efforts.’³ For further information on the code of ethics, which was published in February 2026, see [Media regulations and restrictions on reporting](#).

- 7.1.3 In July 2025, ETANA, an ‘independent organisation’ which ‘serves as a civil and diplomatic service for Syrians who want to live with freedom, dignity and justice’⁴, published a report entitled ‘Study: Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria’s Transition at 6 Months’ (the July 2025 ETANA report). The report stated:

‘Previous papers from ETANA in addition to reporting from Human Rights Watch have flagged problematic language in the interim constitution that conditions media freedoms on undefined principles of “morality” and “national unity.” Such provisions grant discretionary power to the executive, particularly in the absence of judicial independence or institutional safeguards. Without concrete legal instruments or oversight mechanisms to uphold press freedom, the protections outlined in Article 13 remain largely theoretical.’⁵

- 7.1.4 In September 2025, Fadel Abdulghany, executive director of ‘independent human rights organization’⁶ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) published a paper ‘which presents a critical reading of the Syrian Constitutional Declaration’⁷. It stated:

‘... [A]rticle [23] allows for broad restrictions to be imposed on fundamental rights and liberties on the basis of nebulous grounds, such as “national

³ BBC Monitoring, [Media Guide: Syria](#), updated 4 February 2026 (available upon request)

⁴ ETANA, [About us](#), no date

⁵ ETANA, [STUDY: Between Symbolism and Substance...](#) (page 27), July 2025

⁶ SNHR, [About us](#), no date

⁷ SNHR, [The Syrian Constitutional Declaration between...](#), 20 September 2025

security, territorial integrity, public safety, the protection of public order and the prevention of crime, or the protection of public health or morals,” while neither clearly defining the criteria of necessity and proportionality nor establishing clear mechanisms for judicial review ... Regarding rights and freedoms, Article 23 of the constitutional declaration in its current form lacks necessary safeguards, using vague terms such as “national security”, “public order”, and “public morals”, which allows for arbitrary interpretations that could be used to curtail fundamental freedoms.’⁸

7.1.5 The same source also stated:

‘... [T]he constitutional declaration contains no explicit reference to fundamental concepts and principles that one would expect in a document intended to guide democratic transition. Most notably, it does not mention popular sovereignty, a principle that formed the cornerstone of previous Syrian constitutions and is a key foundation of modern democratic theory ... In addition, the word “democracy” is found nowhere in the declaration’s text, raising questions about the genuineness of the commitment to democratic principles. This linguistic omission is coupled with a clear disregard for many basic democratic rights, such as the right to assemble and demonstrate peacefully, the right to strike and form independent labour unions, the right to access government information, and the right to effective political participation through genuine elections. Absent these rights, a truly democratic system cannot exist. The declaration further ignores the need to establish participatory mechanisms that ensure real popular participation in drafting the country’s permanent constitution, whether civic education programmes, broad popular consultations, or public referendums.’⁹

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7.2 Other relevant laws

7.2.1 In February 2026, German state-owned international broadcaster¹⁰ Deutsche Welle (DW) published an article entitled ‘How an Assad-era law is threatening Syrian civil society’ (the February 2026 DW article) which stated:

‘Bashar Assad may be gone from Syria, but one of the more damaging laws that existed throughout his family’s rule over the country lives on.

‘Law No. 93 of 1958, or the law on associations and private institutions, was used for decades by the Assad regime ... to control civil society organizations that might be critical of it, whether they were human rights monitors, charities or women’s rights groups.

‘The law allowed the state to simply dissolve organizations for loosely defined reasons, such as disturbing “public order or morals” or deciding there was “no need” for their services, without any judicial oversight or any way to appeal.

‘The law also gave the government control over an organization’s political participation, events it wanted to hold, its joining of international associations, its registration, board members and employees, and even its funding, especially money from abroad.

⁸ SNHR, [The Syrian Constitutional Declaration between ...](#) (pages 8 – 10), 20 September 2025

⁹ SNHR, [The Syrian Constitutional Declaration between ...](#) (page 9), 20 September 2025

¹⁰ DW, [Who We Are](#), no date

‘The regime was ousted at the end of 2024. But – despite the new, interim Syrian government’s stated plan to repeal it – Law No. 93 is still in effect. Late last year, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor announced that for the time being, Syrian civil society organizations should adhere to it.

‘There are thought to be over 2,000 different civil society organizations working in Syria today, and many have called for the law to be repealed and for new rules to be formulated.

“Laws designed to control, restrict and securitize civil society do not become benign simply because the political leadership changes,” said Amna Guellali, research director at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, or CIHRS, ... “Their continued presence on the books creates a standing legal toolset that can be activated at any time.”

‘The CIHRS reached out to the Syrian government recommending the law be repealed, but said they had no response. A query from DW asking when the law might be repealed also went unanswered.’¹¹

- 7.2.2 CPIT was unable to find any additional information to indicate that the government had repealed Law No. 93 at the time of writing (see [Bibliography](#)).

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8. Political context

8.1 Political system

- 8.1.1 In July 2025, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) published a COI report on Syria (the July 2025 EUAA report) which stated, citing various sources:

‘The Constitutional Declaration establishes a strong presidential system without a prime minister, granting the president sweeping powers with minimal oversight. The president appoints all ministers, vice presidents, and judges of the Higher Constitutional Court, and selects all members of parliament, one third by direct appointment and the rest selected by a “high committee” he forms. The president can also issue executive orders, propose laws, declare states of emergency for up to three months (with approval from a National Security Council he appoints), and serves as head of the armed forces.

‘On 13 March [2025], several sources reported the establishment of a National Security Council tasked with overseeing Syria’s national security affairs and political policies. The council is chaired by President Ahmad al-Sharaa and includes the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Defence, and intelligence chief, along with three other seats. The council’s duties and operational mechanisms will be defined by directives issued directly by the president.

‘... On 29 March [2025], the interim President announced the formation of a transitional government composed of 23 ministers from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Alawite, Christian, Druze, and Kurdish representatives. One woman was appointed to the post of Minister of Social Affairs and Labour.

¹¹ DW, [How an Assad-era law is threatening Syrian civil society](#), 5 February 2026

‘... The Constitutional Declaration asserts judicial independence but does not include specific safeguards to ensure it. Article 47 permits the president to appoint all seven members of the Higher Constitutional Court without parliamentary or external oversight. Human Rights Watch assessed that, in the absence of mechanisms to guarantee judicial independence or establish an independent body for overseeing judicial appointments, promotions, discipline, and removals, the judiciary’s ability to hold the president accountable may be constrained.’¹²

- 8.1.2 In December 2025, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a US-based ‘bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to advancing practical ideas to address the world’s greatest challenges’¹³, published an article entitled ‘Syria’s Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad’s Fall’ (the December 2025 CSIS article) which stated:

‘... [P]ower in the new transition government is centered in the presidency and certain key ministries. A small circle at the top of government wields a huge amount of power. In particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has emerged as a key locus of power. MOFA has placed its representatives in every ministry as well as in governorates and districts across the country, prompting one observer’s concern that an embryonic successor to the Ba’ath party is forming. Although government officials speak of their plan to establish a more inclusive political system, civil society activists described the National Dialogue Conference held in February 2025 and parliamentary elections as a “farce.”’¹⁴

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8.2 Affiliation of key figures in government

- 8.2.1 The July 2025 EUAA report stated, citing various sources:

‘Prominent HTS [Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham] figures have been appointed to the positions of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence (MoD) Ministry of Interior (Mol) and head of the General Intelligence Directorate.

‘... The government is dominated by ministers associated with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). It also includes technocrats, civil society leaders and ministers who served in the Assad government before 2011. None of the ministers from ethno-religious minorities are affiliated with any known political faction, prompting criticism that their inclusion is tokenistic and lacks genuine political representation. The Kurdish and Druze appointees in the government are not affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) nor represent the Druze spiritual leadership or Sweida’s armed factions.’¹⁵

- 8.2.2 The December 2025 CSIS article stated:

‘The rapid collapse of the Assad regime at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) prompted the influx of HTS’s Idlib-based bureaucrats. Thousands of Idlibi local government workers descended on Damascus, taking up positions across various ministries. They have formed their own

¹² EUAA, [Syria: Country Focus](#) (pages 16 – 17), 7 July 2025

¹³ CSIS, [About CSIS](#), no date

¹⁴ CSIS, [Syria’s Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad’s Fall](#), 4 December 2025

¹⁵ EUAA, [Syria: Country Focus](#) (pages 16 – 17), 7 July 2025

power center within the transition government. In this emerging system, power accrues to some without formal titles or portfolios, leading many to describe it as a “shadow government.” In some ministries, real authority resides with these “shadow” elements. For example, Syria’s economic restructuring is reportedly run by a secret committee made up of individuals operating under pseudonyms, rather than those with formal positions.’¹⁶

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8.3 Political parties

8.3.1 In May 2025, Syrian non-profit media organisation¹⁷ Enab Baladi published an article entitled ‘Syria awaits a political parties law’ which stated:

‘The era of the Arab Socialist Baath Party ended after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime on December 8, 2024. On January 29 [2025], the General Command announced the dissolution of the ruling Baath Party in Syria under the previous regime, along with the parties of the National Progressive Front and related organizations, institutions, and committees, prohibiting their reformation under any other name and returning all their assets to the Syrian state.

‘... [T]he constitution stipulates a provision ensuring the right to form parties on national bases, according to a new law [which had not come into effect at the time of writing].

‘The specific law governing the work of political parties cannot be issued without a legislative council, thus priority now lies in forming a temporary legislative council to issue laws.

‘The constitutional declaration established one rule for parties: they must not be formed on regional, ethnic, or sectarian bases, but rather on a national basis. The special law for parties will take this principle into account.

‘The law specific to parties will detail the procedures, mechanisms for submitting parties, licensing conditions, and internal regulations. The constitutional declaration only lays down a general principle, and the law will provide detailed regulations.

‘... According to [journalist and political researcher Firas] Allawi, the new party law will annul all previous parties and require their re-licensing in accordance with what is issued by the legislative council.’¹⁸

8.3.2 An Al Jazeera article published in October 2025 indicated that there was still no law on political parties, meaning that it was not possible for parties to register and operate¹⁹.

8.3.3 According to the December 2025 CSIS article, ‘[t]he government has given no indication of when it will legalize political parties’²⁰.

8.3.4 Using the sources consulted, CPIT was unable to find information indicating that the law on political parties had been passed at the time of writing (see [Bibliography](#)).

¹⁶ CSIS, [Syria’s Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad’s Fall](#), 4 December 2025

¹⁷ Enab Baladi, [About](#), no date

¹⁸ Enab Baladi, [Syria awaits a political parties law](#), 19 May 2025

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, [Political parties in Syria: Legal...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 21 October 2025

²⁰ CSIS, [Syria’s Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad’s Fall](#), 4 December 2025

8.4 October 2025 parliamentary elections

- 8.4.1 In October 2025, ‘independent, non-partisan, non-profit think tank’²¹ the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) published an article about the first parliamentary election of post-Assad Syria which stated:

‘On Sunday, 5 October [2025], a new parliament was elected in the “new Syria” led for nearly a year by President Ahmed Al Sharaa, the first since the end of the Assad family’s long-standing rule, marking a historic moment for the country. However, not all Syrians of voting age were able to cast their ballots: only a restricted group, selected by the authorities in consultation with local communities, was allowed to take part. A hybrid, indirect voting system was used to elect the 210 members of the People’s Assembly. Of these, 140 seats were open to election, while the remaining 70 will be directly appointed by President Al Sharaa.

‘In the end, 119 MP’s [sic] were elected, as voting could not be held in two regions – the area still partially controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the north-east and the mainly Druze region of Suwayda – due to security conditions. The electorate that chose the 119 members consisted of approximately 6,000 voters gathered in “electoral colleges,” whose names were reviewed by local electoral subcommittees and by the Higher Committee [sic] for the People’s Assembly Elections (the latter appointed by Al Sharaa).

‘On Sunday [5 October 2025], members of the electoral colleges voted across 49 electoral districts in 11 governorates, selecting from more than 1,500 candidates – all of whom were themselves members of the colleges and had submitted their candidacies on 27-28 September [2025]. None of these candidates belonged to any political party, as parties were dissolved earlier this year, and are expected to be formed in the upcoming stage. Although each candidate presented an individual political platform, what mattered most were their ties to local communities, as well as “revolutionary” legitimacy. Thus, the new deputies have no formal political affiliation; only six are women, and very few represent the country’s ethnic and religious minorities. In theory, when appointing the remaining 70 deputies, Al Sharaa is expected to address these imbalances and include figures from underrepresented segments of the population.

‘The new parliament will perform ordinary legislative duties, ratify international treaties, and approve the state’s general budget.’²²

- 8.4.2 According to an article published by pan-Arab news outlet²³ Asharq Al-Awsat, the remaining seats for the People’s Assembly had not yet been filled as of February 2026, and the People’s Assembly had not yet held its first session²⁴.

8.5 Political opposition

²¹ ISPI, [About the Institute](#), no date

²² ISPI, [Syria’s First Post-Assad Parliament: Political Restructuring in...](#), 9 October 2025

²³ Asharq Al-Awsat, [About Asharq Al-Awsat](#), no date

²⁴ Asharq Al-Awsat, [Spokesperson of the...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 11 February 2026

- 8.5.1 In October 2025, the EUAA published a response to a COI query on Syria (the October 2025 EUAA COI response). Citing an August 2025 article published by The Economist, it stated: ‘In July 2025, during the violence in Sweida, activists launched the Syrian Centenary Initiative [also called Syrian Centennial Initiative in some sources²⁵], seen as an emerging opposition to Sharaa’s government. It called for a ceasefire and revisions to the March Constitutional Declaration to allow political parties and strengthen civil society protections. The founders include former prisoners of the Assad era.’²⁶
- 8.5.2 An August 2025 article published by The Syrian Observer, an online news service that covers Syria²⁷, described the Syrian Centenary Initiative as ‘the first coordinated political resistance to his [Ahmad Al Sharaa’s] rule.’²⁸
- 8.5.3 In August 2025, Welat TV, a ‘multidimensional platform for Syrian and Kurdish issues’ based in Erbil, Iraq²⁹, published an article based on a TV interview with one of the organisers of the Syrian Centenary Initiative. The article stated:
- ‘Journalist and media coordinator of the “Syrian Centennial” initiative, Hazem Dakel, affirmed that Syria is going through a deep crisis that requires a comprehensive national project and transparent institutions to manage the next phase. He emphasized that the initiative aims to be a unifying national voice that excludes no Syrians.
- ‘In an interview with “Welat TV” on Tuesday, July 29, 2025, Dakel said, “The events in Suwayda have revealed the depth of the crisis Syrians are experiencing,” adding that “there is a state of shock and widespread anger inside Syria,” which requires a radical solution to the current situation.
- “People’s trust in the interim administration has declined due to its crisis management and unilateral decision-making,” Dakel said, adding that “governing alone has become a danger to the unity of the country,” which requires “a change in the political approach that is not limited to a change in faces and positions.”
- ‘... “The Syrian Centennial initiative is an independent, participatory, Civil Initiative that emerged after the country is slipping into a dangerous situation,” he said, explaining that “the goals of the initiative are to halt the collapse, propose a national road map and open the door to negotiation between Syrians instead of drowning deeper in blood and division.”
- ‘Dakel stated that “the initiative seeks understanding with the authorities, not confrontation or escalation,” noting that “the new administration needs reflection and a stand with Syrians to improve the situation.”’³⁰
- 8.5.4 Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT was unable to find further information about political opposition groups in government-controlled areas. For information about the political situation of the de facto autonomous region in Suweida governorate, see the CPIN [Syria: Religious](#)

²⁵ Enab Baladi, [Political Participation...A Necessity for the...](#), 28 July 2025

²⁶ EUAA, [COI Query: Syria – Major human rights, security, and...](#) (page 28), 1 October 2025

²⁷ The Syrian Observer, [About us](#), no date

²⁸ The Syrian Observer, [The Economist: Sharaa’s Response to Opposition...](#), 22 August 2025

²⁹ Welat TV, [The vision of ‘Welat TV’ Media Foundation](#), 13 October 2024

³⁰ Welat TV, [The ‘Syrian Centennial Initiative’ Seeks to Halt...](#), 30 July 2025

9. Freedom of expression and civil liberties

9.1 Comparison with Al-Assad regime

9.1.1 In May 2025, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a COI report on Syria (the May 2025 Netherlands MFA report) which stated, citing various sources: ‘After the fall of the Assad regime, there was more openness and room for public criticism. Political discussions took place in public, which had previously been impossible. Civil society organisations were generally able to hold meetings without permission from higher authorities. It was possible to criticise the interim administration and the transitional government (for example, out of dissatisfaction with the pace of economic recovery).’³¹

9.1.2 In December 2025, the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) published a COI report entitled ‘Syria: Situation of Certain Groups’ (the December 2025 DIS report). Citing interviews with NGOs, the report stated:

‘After the fall of the former government, freedom of expression in Syria initially expanded, with people openly criticising the new authorities. However, this openness has gradually declined. Generally, criticising the interim government is possible, and many complaints or concerns can be expressed in the public domain without direct repercussions. However, the overall space for free expression has become increasingly constrained, though it remains less restricted than under the former government.’³² For details about the constraints on free expression, see paragraph 9.2.2.

9.1.3 The December 2025 CSIS article stated:

‘In mid-November [2025], we [the authors] spent a few days in Damascus and its environs, meeting with a broad range of stakeholders, including Syrian transition government officials and representatives from Syrian civil society groups, stabilization and humanitarian organizations, the United Nations and the Gulf, and Syrian journalists and investors. The Syrians we met included some who stayed in Damascus throughout the conflict, some who moved to the capital from Idlib after Assad’s ouster, and others who returned from neighboring countries and the wider diaspora.

‘... Returning to Damascus for the first time since 2011, we were struck by an overwhelming freedom of expression, without fear of repercussions or a sense that the mukhabarat (secret police) were lurking everywhere. Everyone we met spoke openly about their hopes and disappointments in the current government.’³³

9.2 Limits on free speech

9.2.1 The May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated, citing various sources: ‘It ... remained unclear where the red lines lay with regard to the possibilities for criticising the transitional government. After many years of repression, some

³¹ Netherlands MFA, [General Country of Origin Information...](#) (page 107), 7 August 2023

³² DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 10), 11 December 2025

³³ CSIS, [Syria's Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad's Fall](#), 4 December 2025

people were cautious and remained wary of testing the boundaries. According to one source, people felt that they were still in a phase of exploration.³⁴

9.2.2 The December 2025 DIS report stated, citing interviews with various sources:

‘After the fall of the former government, freedom of expression in Syria briefly expanded but has since narrowed under the interim authorities. Criticism is tolerated to a degree, yet uncertainty about ‘red lines’ fuels fear and self-censorship, especially regarding political or religious issues. Arrests and harassment of activists, journalists, and online critics occur selectively, varying by region and background.

‘... A Syrian human rights organisation stated that the lack of clear boundaries on freedom of speech has created uncertainty, fear, and self-censorship. Individuals often remain silent out of fear of arrest, torture, or disappearance.

‘Syrians have gradually discovered which issues are “red lines” for the interim authorities, especially those related to the Defence, Interior, or Foreign Affairs ministries.

‘... Under the interim government, which is influenced by Salafist ideology, public criticism of leaders is regarded as divisive (fitna).

‘... Certain sensitive issues may lead to repercussions if addressed publicly. People who raise concerns about abuses against Alawites or Druze risk arrest, abduction, torture, or even death. A Syrian human rights organisation state that it has become dangerous to describe events on the coast or in Suweida as “massacres”; such incidents are expected to be referred to as crimes by “unidentified actors”, while praising government efforts to find those responsible. However, according to activist Nada Aswad, there have been cases of individuals inside Syria who have criticised the authorities without being arrested, and some well-known Syrians have described coastal events as massacres without facing repercussions.’³⁵

The source did not provide examples of individuals facing arrest, abduction, torture or death after raising concerns about abuses against Alawites or Druze. Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT found several reports of arrests (see [Government response to criticism and opposition](#)) but was unable to find any reports of abduction, torture or death of individuals who criticised the government’s treatment of Alawites or Druze.

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9.3 Civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

9.3.1 In December 2025, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published an article entitled ‘Syria: One Year Since Assad’s Fall’ which stated:

‘Interim Syrian authorities have shown greater openness to engagement with international and independent humanitarian organizations, as well as allowing civil society to operate more independently. However,

³⁴ Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (page 107), 31 May 2025

³⁵ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (pages 1, 10, 11), 11 December 2025

humanitarians and civil society activists have told Human Rights Watch that their ability to work is not without restrictions. Civil society cited difficulty in getting approvals for registration, harassment, and threats. Aid workers said the government required aid delivery through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and cited bureaucratic delays.³⁶

- 9.3.2 In December 2025, Amnesty International published an article entitled ‘Syria: A year after Assad’s fall, the rights of survivors and families must guide transition’ which stated:

‘One of the greatest achievements of the past year is the blossoming of civic space inside many parts of Syria, including areas controlled by the former government, with Syrian civil society groups organizing themselves into registered NGOs or informal associations.

‘However, civil society organizations reported that challenges remain, including the authorities requesting prior approvals to host public events, as well as the lack of clarity and consistency in the process for obtaining approvals, including across governorates.’³⁷

- 9.3.3 In December 2025, an independent, progressive think tank³⁸ called the Arab Reform Initiative published an article entitled ‘Syria’s Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition’. The article stated:

‘Some civic actors, particularly those with a long history of operating in former opposition-held areas in northwest Syria, have gained greater access and cooperation from local authorities. At the same time, others remain vulnerable to arbitrary restrictions, opaque procedures, prolonged approval processes, and abrupt policy reversals. As a result, civic space varies widely across regions, sectors, and types of activity.

‘Multiple factors shape these variations, including the nature of the work being done, the local security environment, administrative processes, risk tolerance among civic actors, and the attitudes of local officials. These elements rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they interact in complex ways, creating a civic landscape that is dynamic, contested, and often contradictory. The uncertainty caused by this fluid environment disproportionately affects the most vulnerable civic groups – especially those whose political or human rights positions diverge from those of the transitional authorities – intensifying their concerns about the absence of legal protection.’³⁹

- 9.3.4 In December 2025, the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), which provides ‘free safety and security services to NGOs’⁴⁰, published an article about its work in Syria since the fall of the Al-Assad regime which stated:

‘Many NGOs have experienced significant changes to their operations over the last year. Since December 2024, many NGOs have merged offices, removing firewalls that had become a hallmark of the Syria response where

³⁶ HRW, [Syria: One Year Since Assad’s Fall](#), 8 December 2025

³⁷ Amnesty International, [Syria: A year after Assad’s fall, the rights of...](#), 8 December 2025

³⁸ Arab Reform Initiative, [Who we are](#), no date

³⁹ Arab Reform Initiative, [Syria’s Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: ...](#), 4 December 2025

⁴⁰ INSO, [What we do](#), no date

NGOs were operating across multiple areas of control and allowing greater collaboration and contact between various regions of Syria.

‘For some NGOs, this shift allowed NGOs to establish programmes within Syria for the first time.

‘... Alongside the improved access within Syria, NGOs have also seen a change in their ability to enter and get staff into the country. “The improvement in the visa processes also allowed us to move staff from Lebanon and Jordan to Syria after the fall of the regime” adds Fuad Deputy Country Director for Humanitarian Access and Security for Premier Urgence Internationale.

‘... Changes to the approval process for NGO projects since December 8th, 2024, has created additional uncertainty for many NGOs, impacting aid delivery. The introduction of new requirements alongside a lack of clarity on the various roles of different ministries and bodies has sometimes created delays and concern among NGOs.’⁴¹

9.3.5 The December 2025 CSIS article stated: ‘A diverse group of civil society groups meets regularly for lively discussions in a “salon” at Beit Farhi, a nineteenth-century home of a prominent Damascene Sephardic Jewish family in the old city.’⁴²

9.3.6 The February 2026 DW article stated:

‘So far, though, the law [Law No. 93 – see [Other relevant laws](#)] appears to have been applied rather randomly, Hiba Ezzideen, head of Syria-based organization Equity and Empowerment which focuses on women's rights, told DW.

‘That’s confirmed by the dozens of interviews the CIHRS did with civil society actors for their report. They told the CIHRS that sometimes the law is used, other times decisions are simply made orally, usually with little explanation. For example, one group told the CIHRS, an event on transitional justice in the Syrian capital, Damascus, was canceled unexpectedly but then similar events were allowed to go ahead later.

‘The Syria Campaign, a UK-based rights organization, has heard similar stories – for example, where local authorities have required they be involved in who gets hired by civil society organizations.

“‘We’ve also had reports about restrictions on meetings, especially by political movements,” the organization’s executive director, Razan Rashidi, said, “although we can’t say it’s been a pattern for all meetings of such nature.”

‘As a result of all the confusion, there’s a question that keeps coming up: Are these obstructions deliberate policy by Syria’s interim government, a possible sign the country is heading back toward authoritarianism?

“We want to have hope, we want to believe this isn’t deliberate,” said the founder of a Syrian human rights monitor, speaking to DW off-the-record because they’re still trying to register in Syria. “We know that the state doesn’t have full control of everything. But it seems unnecessarily

⁴¹ INSO, [Syria in Transition: How INSO is Supporting NGOs...](#), 9 December 2025

⁴² CSIS, [Syria’s Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad’s Fall](#), 4 December 2025

complicated...”

“It’s true there is complexity and bureaucracy. They [the government] should be more transparent and this law does need to be changed,” said Fadel Abdul Ghany, head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, or SNHR, which has been reliably documenting abuses on all sides since the beginning of Syria’s civil war. “But that happens everywhere. We also faced difficulties registering our organization and were unable to open a bank account in France,” he explained.

‘SNHR is now registered in Syria, works freely and is able to be critical of the state, Abdul Ghany said. And he pointed out that it was important to consider context.

“Syria is still devastated from conflict and look at what we inherited from the Assad regime – corruption, lack of funding, lack of experience, destroyed institutions,” he told DW. “I’ve met with ministers, I’ve visited the ministries and they all say they want reform. But it’s not easy.”

‘Guellali at the CIHRS believes the current problems are due to a combination of factors.

“On one hand, capacity constraints are real,” she said. “The interim government is facing challenges ... But structural and political factors can’t be ignored. The deliberate retention of restrictive Assad-era legislation – including Law No. 93 – raises legitimate concerns about political will. Transitional authorities committed to democratic inclusion typically prioritize early legal reforms that enable civic participation and protect associational freedoms.”

‘Women’s rights activist Ezzideen agreed. “What we are most likely seeing is the result of multiple factors and it’s important not to jump to conclusions about intentions,” she told DW. “But that doesn’t negate the need to address those challenges clearly and systematically.”

“Civil society, whether in exile or inside the country, plays a vital role in keeping the struggle for freedom, justice and inclusivity in Syria alive,” said Rashidi from The Syria Campaign. Despite the criticisms about rules and lack of reform, she noted that “since the fall of the Assad regime, many civil society actors, including victims’ groups, were able to officially open offices in Syria – that’s like a dream come true.”⁴³

9.3.7 An article published by The Syrian Observer in February 2026 indicated that authorities did not grant permission to the Syrian Political Feminist Movement to hold a conference in Damascus. The article stated:

‘Maznah Dreid, a member of the Syrian Political Feminist Movement, told the UN Security Council in New York on Friday [13 February 2025] that the movement was forced to relocate its seventh general conference to Beirut after failing to obtain official approval in Damascus. She said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not grant the required authorization.

‘... [T]he movement said it had submitted all necessary requests but received no approval, describing this as a denial of its right to engage in

⁴³ DW, [How an Assad-era law is threatening Syrian civil society](#), 5 February 2026

political activity inside its own country.⁴⁴

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9.4 Demonstrations and public events

9.4.1 ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data) is a US-based non-profit that describes itself as an ‘independent, impartial global monitor that collects, analyses, and maps data on conflict and protest’⁴⁵. ACLED’s database recorded 907 ‘protest events’ in Syria between 1 January and 31 December 2025⁴⁶. ACLED’s methodology defines ‘protest events’ as ‘an in-person public demonstration of three or more participants in which the participants do not engage in violence, though violence may be used against them’⁴⁷. The vast majority of these protests took place in government-controlled areas. It should be noted that the data includes all protests, not just those involving criticism of the authorities. For example, a significant proportion of the protests related to support for Palestine and/or opposition to Israel.

9.4.2 The May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated, citing various sources: ‘Demonstrations took place almost daily in the transitional government’s area of control. These demonstrations were directed against a variety of issues, including irregular salary payments and pension benefits, mass redundancies in the public sector and the constitutional declaration, as well as for a transition to a secular democratic state. In most cases, the transitional government permitted these demonstrations and did not intervene.’⁴⁸

9.4.3 The October 2025 EUAA COI response stated, citing various sources: ‘Few protests have been reported in areas under the control of the transitional government. In March 2025, in Damascus, pro-government demonstrators clashed with activists mourning civilians killed in the coastal violence, prompting security forces to intervene and disperse the gathering. In mid-July 2025, civil activists protesting in Damascus to demand an end to the violence in Sweida were reportedly attacked by other civilians, while security forces failed to intervene to protect them.’⁴⁹

The significant difference in the numbers of protests reported by the EUAA and ACLED is likely to be the result of the different methodologies and purposes of these two sources. ACLED defines a ‘protest event’ as a public demonstration involving three or more participants (see paragraph 9.4.1) and aims to provide comprehensive quantitative data about the total number of events, including small protests only reported by local media outlets and social media⁵⁰. The EUAA report does not explicitly define the number of people who need to be present for an event to be considered a ‘protest’ but appears to focus on major demonstrations, particularly those related to sensitive topics such as the government’s treatment of religious and ethnic minorities.

⁴⁴ The Syrian Observer, [After Its Conference Was Barred in Damascus, the...](#), 18 February 2026

⁴⁵ ACLED, [About ACLED](#), no date

⁴⁶ ACLED, [Data Export Tool](#) (exported data available upon request), accessed 27 February 2026

⁴⁷ ACLED, [ACLED Codebook](#) (Protests), no date

⁴⁸ Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (pages 108 – 9), 31 May 2025

⁴⁹ EUAA, [COI Query: Syria – Major human rights, security, and...](#) (page 29), 1 October 2025

⁵⁰ ACLED, [ACLED Codebook](#) (ACLED events; Sources and Information Sourcing), no date

9.4.4 Citing an interview with a Syrian NGO, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

‘In addition to limits on freedom of expression, civil liberties – such as forming associations and organising events – also remain restricted in Syria. Civil society organisations are formally permitted to operate, but their work takes place under strict supervision. Local authorities act as gatekeepers, deciding which topics can be discussed, which events can be held, and who may participate. Almost every public activity, such as meetings and cultural events, requires prior approval. Topics related to transitional justice, accountability, or human rights are considered politically sensitive and may only be addressed if approved by the authorities. One human rights NGO interviewed for this report stated that it had experienced such restrictions and interference’⁵¹.

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9.5 Arts and culture

9.5.1 In March 2025, ‘independent, nonprofit media and training organization’⁵² Syria Direct published an article which stated:

‘Down a winding, stone-gray alleyway in Damascus’s ancient city center, a small door opens to a large, sunny atrium. Inside, nearly 200 Syrian artists gather: musicians, actors, dancers, singers and even a clown.

‘... In post-Assad Syria, many artists are experiencing a kind of artistic freedom they have never known. New galleries are opening, with artists displaying works banned or restricted under the former regime for the first time.

‘For decades, the Assad regime tightly controlled Damascus’s vibrant cultural hub, particularly concerned with art deemed even remotely political. Cultural events required complicated permissions and bypassing these procedures was dangerous.

‘The artists’ gathering, held on February 6 [2025], was organised by Ettijahat, a Syrian cultural organization founded in exile. It was the first in-person event Ettijahat was able to organize in the Syrian capital in 13 years, Ettijahat’s director, Abdullah al-Kafri, told Syria Direct. “Today, merely a few months after the fall of the regime in Syria, the need for cultural and artistic entities is more crucial than ever,” he says.

‘On February 24 [2025], a day before the Syrian National Dialogue Conference – held to pave the way for a new constitution and form a new government – its preparatory committee held a separate session on arts and culture, inviting around 40 Syrian artists and actors to raise their concerns.

‘The meeting was “fruitful,” Syrian director Rasha Sharbatji told the Syria TV channel in an interview, with many participants “raising questions, amid a clear desire from everyone to contribute to bringing about real change.”

‘... Momtaz Shoaib, 48, said he had decided to test the waters, and display his sculptures in a gallery. “The situation [after the regime’s fall] pushed me to assert that we are here. We want to establish our presence before any

⁵¹ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (pages 10 – 11), 11 December 2025

⁵² Syria Direct, [About Us](#), no date

other force tries to take this away from us,” he told Syria Direct.

‘Shoaib...said the exhibition was “bold”, but “by taking this step, which involves a level of risk, it could open the way for other [artists].” So far, the exhibition has not received any negative reaction from the society or new authorities, the gallery’s manager ... told Syria Direct.’⁵³

- 9.5.2 In December 2025, London-based ‘progressive, non-partisan’ news outlet⁵⁴ The New Arab published an article entitled “‘Syria has regained its voice’: One year after Assad’s fall, public life and creativity flourish after a decade of fear’ which stated:

‘Artists whose work was once censored or banned are now stepping into the public eye. Theatres that once operated under the cover of night are drawing larger audiences, staging bold satirical plays on corruption, security forces, war, and authority – performances that would have been considered reckless before liberation.

‘Independent film festivals are also making a comeback, screening stories of detainees, survivors, refugees, and the women who endured the conflict’s heaviest toll.

‘The first summer after liberation saw the cities and squares of Damascus, Homs, and Hama come alive with festivals and celebrations that had been absent for years.

‘... Families, children, students, and vendors filled the square, their presence a celebration in itself. [50-year-old Hama resident] Youssef noted that for the first time since the war began, the stage was lit at night, local bands performed openly, and poets recited without a list of “permitted and prohibited” words.’⁵⁵

- 9.5.3 In February 2026, PEN International, an organisation that ‘promotes literature and freedom of expression’⁵⁶, published an article entitled ‘Syria: One year on, a transition marked by bloody repression sparks grave concern for the country’s future’ which stated:

‘In August 2025, a theatrical production by prominent twin stage actors, the Malas Brothers, was suspended in the coastal city of Tartus, following their criticism of the transitional government’s attacks against Alawi and Druze communities on social media. Although the transitional government’s Ministry of Culture claimed the suspension was a misunderstanding and that the ministry respects artistic freedoms, the twin artists state they were censored.’⁵⁷

- 9.5.4 In December 2025, Turkish state-owned news outlet⁵⁸ Anadolu Agency published an article entitled ‘Breathing free: A year after Assad, Syrians test newfound freedoms’ (the December 2025 Anadolu Agency article) which stated:

‘The wave of freedom has also reached Syria’s cultural and artistic spheres,

⁵³ Syria Direct, [Syrian artists fight for a ‘free space of creation’ post-Assad](#), 6 March 2025

⁵⁴ The New Arab, [About Us](#), no date

⁵⁵ The New Arab, [‘Syria has regained its voice’: One year after...’](#), 8 December 2025

⁵⁶ PEN International, [Frequently asked questions](#), no date

⁵⁷ PEN International, [Syria: One year on, a transition marked by bloody...’](#), 9 February 2026

⁵⁸ Anadolu Agency, [About Us](#), no date

where suppressed voices are reemerging after decades of restrictions.

‘Abir Nahhas, a Syrian novelist and head of the Homs branch of the Arab Writers’ Union in Syria, told Anadolu that literature has always held up a mirror to a nation’s identity.

‘She said writers can now speak clearly about justice, amnesty and accountability, insisting that literature must provide “genuine literary observation” of what happened during the Syrian uprising – tracing the roots of conflict and portraying a recovering society through balanced characters.

‘According to Nahhas, Syria’s cultural circles “buzz with events” today – a revival she sees as a chance to “reorder the Syrian cultural house.”

‘She recalls being invited to a cultural festival at Damascus’s national library – formerly al-Assad Library – as both a strange and joyful experience, marking a return to spaces once denied to cultural figures under the Baath regime.

‘Visual artist Rama al-Dakkak expressed a similar sense of transformation.’⁵⁹

9.5.5 Citing an interview with an international NGO, the December 2025 DIS report stated: ‘In cultural fields, censorship has been applied; for example, the Ministry of Culture has edited translated works by foreign authors in philosophy and political science, removing content that contradicts Islamic principles.’⁶⁰

9.5.6 In February 2026, Reuters published an article about a book fair in Damascus which stated:

‘Held for the first time since Bashar al-Assad was ousted, this year’s Damascus International Book Fair reflects deep changes in Syria since its nominally secular order was overthrown by Islamist rebels led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa.

‘In addition to once forbidden Islamist texts, there are titles by secular critics of the ousted government and a section dedicated to Kurdish culture and language, which was banned under Assad’s Baathist state but recently recognised as a national tongue by Sharaa.

“In the new Syria, it’s a fair where no book is banned,” said Zuhair al-Barri, the event coordinator, adding that the country had been in “intellectual and cultural darkness” under Assad.

‘All books are permitted, he said, except for those that are at odds with “civil peace and social cohesion”, that “violate the values and customs of Syrian society”, or that glorify the Assad regime.

‘Veteran rights campaigner Haitham Maleh, whose memoirs were on sale, said the Baathist state had suppressed thought and writing, allowing only books that supported their viewpoint.

“This exhibition represents the beginning of an openness to ideas and global thought,” said Maleh, who was jailed by Assad.

‘It was, he said, “a step forward”.’⁶¹

⁵⁹ Anadolu Agency, [Breathing free: A year after Assad, Syrians test...](#), 5 December 2025

⁶⁰ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 10), 11 December 2025

⁶¹ Reuters, [At Damascus book fair, Islamist ...](#) (accessed via Al-Monitor website), 12 February 2026

10. Media environment

10.1 Overview of press freedom

10.1.1 Citing various sources, the May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated:

‘During the reporting period [27 November 2024 – 30 April 2025], the implications of the takeover for the media landscape in Syria remained unclear. According to one source, the freedom of movement and rules for journalists changed weekly. According to another source, journalists were given a great deal of freedom in the first chaotic weeks after the takeover in Syria, as little had been regulated by the interim administration at that time. At that time, foreign journalists could enter Syria without much difficulty and report and film unhindered in many places. After a few weeks, international media had to request prior permission from the Ministry of Information, and it became more difficult to obtain visas and travel to Syria. Journalists also had to register with the Ministry of Information. Furthermore, they had to request permission from this ministry to attend large gatherings, such as the National Dialogue Conference.’⁶²

10.1.2 In May 2025, Freedom House, a US-based NGO that monitors freedom and democracy throughout the world⁶³, published a report covering events in Syria in 2024 which stated:

‘After the Assad regime was overthrown in December 2024, at least one detained journalist was released. Previously exiled Syrian journalists and foreign reporters were increasingly able to report in Syria that month, including in areas formerly held by the regime. Several news stories focused on journalists’ newfound ability to access information about and report on regime crimes, such as those that took place at the notorious Sednaya prison complex.’⁶⁴

10.1.3 The July 2025 ETANA report stated:

‘Despite formal guarantees, access to the media space remains uneven and heavily mediated by political considerations. Independent journalists and outlets report multiple barriers, including visa denials, surveillance, reported regional access restrictions, particularly in coastal areas, with cases of informal intimidation extending to smear campaigns. These patterns have contributed to fear and self-censorship.

‘In parallel, state-aligned influencers and well-funded external outlets such as Al Jazeera, Syria TV, and Al Araby enjoy privileged access to government briefings and high-visibility platforms. Several citizen journalists previously aligned with governance structures in Idlib have been absorbed into formal media institutions. While some present as independent voices, questions persist around professional standards and impartiality, with many amplifying narratives aligned with the interim authorities. This has contributed to growing concerns about media pluralism and the risk of loyalty-based information systems.

‘... Repressive [government] tactics also appear to be returning. On 6

⁶² Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (page 109), 31 May 2025

⁶³ Freedom House, [About Us](#), no date

⁶⁴ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2025: Syria](#) (section D1), 26 February 2026

February 2025, the interim authorities dissolved the General Conference of the Journalists' Union and replaced it with a temporary council appointed by the government, in what Syria Untold saw as a step toward institutionalising loyalty and limiting media autonomy. These actions suggest that censorship is no longer an emergency measure, but part of a broader strategy of monopolising meaning-making and aligning public perception with the new interim authorities.'⁶⁵

10.1.4 Citing interviews with various sources, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

'Journalists face restricted access to official sources; they are not allowed to contact public officials directly and must submit questions through the Ministry of Information, which may decide what information can be released.

'There is no formal censorship or direct restrictions on journalists. According to Enab Baladi, in practice, there is some space to report and even to criticise senior officials, including the head of state [President Ahmad Al Sharaa]. Moreover, media outlets continue to operate and maintain their editorial lines, focusing particularly on infrastructure, economic, and service-delivery issues.

'However, uncertainty about what may be tolerated has led journalists to exercise self-censorship, avoiding language that could be perceived as provocative by the authorities or by extremist actors, particularly among those from minority communities who often refrain from expressing views that might expose them to reprisals.

'In response to this environment, some outlets employ strategies that allow for more cautious reporting. According to Enab Baladi, sensitive topics are typically contextualised through analytical writing, and direct accusations are avoided. For example, when Enab Baladi reported on the waves of violence in the coastal region in March 2025, descriptions such as "massacre" were attributed to eyewitnesses or experts rather than the media outlet itself.

'According to Enab Baladi, although a degree of media freedom exists, its future remains uncertain. It is unclear whether this current media environment reflects a deliberate policy of tolerance or rather stems from the interim authorities' limited capacity to control information, as their institutions and security apparatus are still weak and fragmented. It is uncertain whether greater governmental capacity would result in increased restrictions or a more structured approach to limiting media freedom.'⁶⁶

10.1.5 In December 2025, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an 'independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide'⁶⁷, published an article entitled 'A year after Assad's fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also new risks' (the December 2025 CPJ article) which stated:

'CPJ's interviews with 20 journalists and press groups found conditions have dramatically improved. All media outlets are able to travel and report freely, including coverage critical of the government, though the foundations of

⁶⁵ ETANA, [STUDY: Between Symbolism and Substance...](#) (page 27), July 2025

⁶⁶ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (pages 13 – 14), 11 December 2025

⁶⁷ CPJ, [What We Do](#), no date

genuine press freedom are not yet secure.

“The first and most important difference is freedom of movement, which is the basis of any journalistic work,” said the digital NoonPost’s reporter Hamza Abbas.

‘Interviewees’ opinions were heavily influenced by their politics, religion, and location, and their outlets’ coverage of Syria’s patchwork of competing authorities and communities.

‘The country remains fractured as President Ahmed al-Sharaa’s government seeks to integrate multiple groups seeking regional autonomy, from the northeastern Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) [sic – the correct name is the Syrian Democratic Forces⁶⁸] and the coastal Alawites to the southern Israeli-backed Druze.’

‘... Latakia-based freelancer Kamal Shahin, who contributes to the online outlet Syria Untold, said the media has experienced a sharp shift in the last year.

“There is no censorship at this moment or limits,” said Shahin, a veteran investigative journalist who recently reported on the new government’s failure to provide security.

‘Although relieved to be free from the repression of the al-Assad era, Shanin was cautious, warning that the new system “does not contain democratic factors that allow us to bet on the future.”’⁶⁹

10.1.6 The same source also stated:

‘Ali Eid, editor-in-chief of the independent news site Enab Baladi and director of the investigative platform Syria Indicator, agreed there were “encouraging developments,” such as government censors no longer reviewing journalists’ content pre-publication.

“I am working freely. There is no red line, no one blocked us from reporting, no one asked us to not write harshly,” he said, ...’⁷⁰

10.1.7 Citing CPJ, an article published in July 2025 by The New Arab stated:

‘Responding to a question about whether it knew of other journalists who had been detained [other than Noor Suleiman – see paragraph 11.4.14], CPJ said it has not documented any other systematic or widespread campaign of arrests targeting journalists by the new Syrian government.

“However, there have been a few isolated incidents involving assaults or detentions by security personnel, which, in most cases, Syrian authorities have responded to and resolved promptly,” it said.’⁷¹

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10.2 Media regulations and restrictions on reporting

10.2.1 The May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated, citing various sources:

‘On 7 February 2025, the Ministry of Information published a notice on its Facebook page warning Syrian media channels not to publish interviews or

⁶⁸ BBC News, [Syrian government reaches deal with Kurdish-led forces](#), 30 January 2026

⁶⁹ CPJ, [A year after Assad’s fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

⁷⁰ CPJ, [A year after Assad’s fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

⁷¹ The New Arab, [Journalist freed in Syria after brief detention as...](#), 1 July 2025

statements from people associated with the former Assad regime. The interim administration also took measures against journalists who had worked under Assad. On 13 December 2024, the interim administration announced that media personnel who had contributed to Assad's crimes would be prosecuted. Furthermore, the interim administration dissolved the Syrian Journalists' Union on 6 February 2025. According to one source, media channels operating under Assad had to post drafts of all new stories in an online chat so that a government official [from the new government] could approve them.⁷²

- 10.2.2 In May 2025, Syria Untold, an 'independent and non-profit outlet [aiming] to tell Syrian stories that are otherwise pushed to the margins'⁷³, published an article entitled 'Press in Transition in Syria: Constitutional Promises Amid a Climate of Crisis' which stated:

'... [In] the aftermath of the massacres in the coastal region in March 2025...both international and Syrian reporters were barred from entering the area. Those who circumvented the bureaucracy and entered without permission were arrested and forced to delete their footage by General Security officials under the interim government's Ministry of Information. A worrying tendency is the detention and harassment of journalists. An independent freelance journalist who spent four days documenting the aftermath in Latakia in late March [2025] told me that he was arrested, detained for five hours, and released only after being forced to delete his footage. "We cannot build a country like this", he recounted telling the officials.'⁷⁴

- 10.2.3 In June 2025, 'independent digital media platform' Daraj, whose 'goal is to offer Arabic speakers an alternative kind of journalism, free from political funding and influence'⁷⁵, published an article entitled 'Journalism in Post-Assad Syria: Freedom, Chaos and Renewed Restrictions' (the June 2026 Daraj article). The article, translated from Arabic by a member of CPIT, stated:

"Sometimes the authorities insist on a General Security escort under the pretext of 'security reasons'. As a result, people hesitate to speak to us freely, and at times we're prevented from speaking to certain people," a French journalist covering Syria told Daraj ... She preferred not to reveal her name, explaining that she fears that publicly identifying herself might jeopardise her ability to enter the country again or continue reporting.

'The same sentiment is echoed by Samer (a pseudonym), a Syrian journalist who described feeling unsettled by the close monitoring carried out by the government's security services ...

'... [These journalists'] reluctance to speak openly indicates a growing sense of caution and mistrust...

'... Samer, who works with an international media organisation, faces difficulties related to the periodic permit required by the Ministry of Information. The permit lasts only two weeks, does not grant access to all

⁷² Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (pages 109 – 110), 31 May 2025

⁷³ Syria Untold, [About Syria Untold](#), no date

⁷⁴ Syria Untold, [Press in Transition in Syria: Constitutional Promises Amid...](#), 2 May 2025

⁷⁵ Daraj, [Who we are](#), no date

areas of Syria, requires exhausting bureaucratic procedures, and is limited to public places, wasting journalists' time and effort.

'Rama (a pseudonym), an independent journalist, explained: "To obtain the permit, I have to tell them exactly where I'm going and why. Some topics – especially those related to ministries or government bodies – the authorities prefer you not to cover, especially if you're an independent journalist. Permit requests are often rejected, or we're required to go to a specific place instead of the one we want to go to. Sometimes they insist on knowing everything I've done and even ask me to send them my interviews."

'... [Government institutions] schedule interviews and appointments only after requesting very precise details [from journalists].

'... Another restriction is the need to obtain a separate permit for each governorate. For example, when Samer wanted to work in Homs or Suweida to follow up on recent sectarian killings, he was told to contact the local media offices there and was bombarded with questions: Why? Who will you work with? How many days will you stay? What is the goal? Samer said: "This isn't just vetting – it's drowning us in details to confuse us."

'Some journalists believe this is a deliberate strategy aimed at obstructing their work, while others think the government still lacks the proper tools to deal effectively with the press.

'According to both Samer and Rama, these bureaucratic procedures act as an indirect method of restriction, but they often turn into direct restriction. Samer explained: "There are two levels: First, some ministries don't allow interviews at all. Second, after the massacres on the coast, and even after the roads were reopened, no permits were granted to work in governorates such as Tartus and Latakia, or even in small towns like Jabal Baniyas." He added: "Security forces would follow us around. They wouldn't explicitly say 'don't work,' but they would give veiled signals such as: 'Don't go to this particular street because the situation is unstable.'"

'He continued: "They told us 'Don't go to that area because supporters of Al-Assad are there.' Someone would show up every half hour to ask us 'What are you doing here?', which created an atmosphere of constant tension and insecurity. In many cases, they asked us to avoid certain neighbourhoods or streets."

'Maria (a pseudonym for a French journalist working in Syria) said: "... Since January [2025], the Foreign Ministry has refused to grant accreditation to journalists wishing to travel to the coast without giving reasons ... The Foreign Ministry informed us that traveling to a city without official accreditation could later result in the denial of a new visa, which did in fact happen to many [journalists] after the wave of violence.

'... Maria [said]: "It seems that the authorities – through the Ministry of Information – review what we publish and then base their treatment of us on its content. However, no one has stopped me from publishing.

'... Both Rama and Maria agreed that foreign journalists receive comparatively better treatment ... By contrast, Syrian journalists feel vulnerable to harassment simply because they are Syrian. Rama recounted an incident in Homs: "I was accompanying Italian journalists as an interpreter. We tried to enter Alawite neighbourhoods that were closed off for

security reasons by walking through Sunni neighbourhoods to avoid checkpoints. A local official stopped us and began questioning us aggressively because he thought we were Syrians. I had to pretend to be an Italian Syrian who didn't speak Arabic, using my colleague's passport. Once they believed me, they treated me completely differently.'⁷⁶

- 10.2.4 The December 2025 CPJ article stated: 'Omar Haj Ahmed, the information ministry's director general of press affairs, ... dismissed as inaccurate complaints reported to CPJ about the issuance of temporary, rather than permanent, media licenses and allegations that journalists seeking press cards underwent invasive background checks, saying his ministry would soon start issuing cards with "no security vetting."⁷⁷
- 10.2.5 The same source also stated: 'Anas Idrees, a journalist since Syria's 2011 revolution and now a reporter for Istanbul-based Syria TV, told CPJ that "a very big change" had taken place as the new authorities do not interfere with reporting unless "a journalist incites violence." The Homs-based journalist has stopped using a pseudonym because he feels safer under the new government.'⁷⁸
- 10.2.6 BBC Monitoring's 'Media Guide' for Syria, updated in February 2026, stated: 'Given the political upheaval, it is unclear how and which media regulation laws and mechanisms are being applied. The new authorities have said they intend to reverse some of the restrictive Assad-era regulations, which were tightened following the 2011 uprising. However, it is unclear how the media will be regulated in practice, given the HTS's history of media restrictions in areas it controls.'⁷⁹
- 10.2.7 In February 2026, The Syrian Observer reported:
- 'Syria's Ministry of Information on Saturday [14 February 2026] unveiled the Professional and Ethical Code of Conduct for the media sector, introducing what officials described as a comprehensive framework for regulating journalism and content creation ...
- 'Speaking at the ceremony, Ali Eid, representative of the National Independent Committee for the Professional and Ethical Code of Conduct for Journalists and Content Creators, stressed that the document is intended as more than a symbolic declaration.
- "The code embodies a clear commitment and the beginning of a serious attempt to protect freedom," Eid said, calling for "free, accurate, and fair media that respects humanity and restores society's trust."
- 'He underscored that the code is designed as a self-regulatory tool rather than a substitute for legislation. "Self-regulation represents the highest form of freedom protection," he noted. "Freedom without standards descends into chaos. True independence in media work requires responsibility and professionalism."
- '... Minister of Information Hamza Al-Mustafa announced that the code is one of the region's most extensive media initiatives, the product of

⁷⁶ Daraj, [Journalism in Post-Assad Syria: Freedom, Chaos and...](#), 2 June 2025

⁷⁷ CPJ, [A year after Assad's fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

⁷⁸ CPJ, [A year after Assad's fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

⁷⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Media Guide: Syria](#), updated 4 February 2026 (available upon request)

contributions from more than one thousand journalists over fifteen months.

“This is a starting point, not a passing document,” Al-Mustafa said, confirming that the code applies to all Syrian journalists. He also revealed plans for an annual conference where journalists will review and update the code in response to rapid changes in the media landscape.

‘... He warned that media activity without clear standards “will inevitably descend into chaos,” arguing that ethical and professional reference points have become a necessity amid accelerating technological change.

‘... The launch has also sparked criticism. Journalists and social media users voiced objections, arguing that professional codes of conduct should be drafted by independent syndicates rather than government bodies.

‘Satirist Muhammad Al-Salloum, who received an invitation to the event despite their critical stance, wrote on Facebook: “Every code of conduct issued by the authorities is rejected. Professional codes are the work of syndicates, not the work of the authorities – a real syndicate, not the Ba’ath Party syndicate that pleases you and that you follow.”

‘... The code takes effect in 2026, though the Ministry of Information has yet to announce implementation mechanisms or oversight procedures.’⁸⁰

10.2.8 In February 2026, ‘independent Syrian news agency’⁸¹ North Press Agency reported:

‘The Syrian Journalists Association rejected on Saturday an announcement by Syria’s Ministry of Information about launching what it described as a “professional code of conduct” on February 15, saying the move contradicts legal and professional standards during the transitional phase.

‘... The group considered the ministry’s attempt to impose a “code of conduct” from the executive authority as a circumvention of both the spirit and the text of the constitutional declaration. It warned that such a move would reproduce forms of administrative oversight that contradict Syrians’ aspirations for a free and responsible media environment.

‘The association said that democratic transition requires a clear separation between the executive role of the government and the professional role of independent unions. It added that setting professional and ethical standards for journalistic work is “a purely union matter” to be handled by bodies representing journalists, foremost among them the Syrian Journalists Association and the Syrian Journalists Union.

‘It warned that interference by the Ministry of Information in this field would undermine the principle of professional self-regulation and open the door to politicizing ethical standards and using them as tools of administrative control.

‘The association also cautioned against turning the Ministry of Information into an “ethical watchdog” over journalists, saying such a role would effectively restore systems of censorship and undermine the prospects of building a free investigative media capable of monitoring the executive

⁸⁰ The Syrian Observer, [Syria Launches Professional Code...](#), 16 February 2026

⁸¹ North Press Agency, [About us](#), no date

authority.’⁸²

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10.3 State media

10.3.1 The July 2025 ETANA report stated:

‘The launch of the official Syria TV channel [a state-owned channel also known as Al-Ikhbariyah Al-Suriyah – see paragraph 10.3.2] was met with widespread criticism among Syrians, particularly regarding its quality, editorial freedom, and hiring practices. The selection of staff has been seen as highly selective, with many experienced journalists excluded, while the channel’s messaging remains rigid and tightly controlled. This has come as a major disappointment and shock to journalists and media activists both inside and outside the country, who had hoped for a more open and professional media landscape in the post-Assad era.’⁸³

10.3.2 BBC Monitoring’s ‘Media Guide’ for Syria, updated in February 2026, stated:

‘State-run outlets, whose operations were disrupted by the transition, have re-emerged with fresh branding and promises of a new orientation.

‘The TV news channel Al-Ikhbariyah al-Suriyah relaunched in May 2025, having been off the air for months, offering a glimpse into the new leadership’s image-making. Female presenters now appear both veiled and unveiled, projecting a carefully calibrated balance, while male colleagues often sport beards in line with the new rulers’ pious aesthetic. But the channel avoids overt religious programming.

‘The state news agency Sana relaunched in August 2025 with new branding, vowing to move on from its Assad-era role as a propaganda mouthpiece. Sana’s director, Ziad Mahameed, a former official in the HTS media team, pledged a shift from an Assad-era model in which “journalists waited for instructions, to field reporters checking facts and reporting professionally”.’⁸⁴

10.3.3 The same source also stated:

‘Online platforms and social media have become central to the new authority’s rebranding efforts, serving both as news sources and as channels for messaging. A network of influencers and loyalists, who have large followings on social media, has been mobilised to amplify the government’s narrative, supported by a dedicated department within the information ministry which assists influencers and content creators.

‘... The Reuters Institute report [published in March 2025] said the interim authorities gave preferential treatment to pro-government social media influencers and citizen journalists, with whom they had worked in the north-west, under HTS rule.’⁸⁵

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11. Government response to criticism and opposition

11.1 General treatment of critics

⁸² North Press Agency, [Journalists association rejects...](#), 7 February 2026

⁸³ ETANA, [STUDY: Between Symbolism and Substance...](#) (page 27), July 2025

⁸⁴ BBC Monitoring, [Media Guide: Syria](#), updated 4 February 2026 (available upon request)

⁸⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Media Guide: Syria](#), updated 4 February 2026 (available upon request)

11.1.1 The April 2025 edition of SNHR's monthly report on arrests and detentions in Syria stated:

'... [W]e recorded arrests of individuals over their voicing criticism of the current transitional government on social media, with these arrests being concentrated in [r]ural Hama governorate. The Ministry of Interior's General Security also arrested civilians to pressure their fugitive relatives into surrendering themselves, with these cases being concentrated in Hama governorate [see paragraph 11.1.5 for further information].'⁸⁶ The source did not say how many individuals were arrested, nor did it provide details about their treatment by the authorities.

11.1.2 The July 2025 EUAA report stated, citing various sources: 'There is very limited information on the treatment of individuals opposing or perceived to be opposing the new government. [In an online interview with the EUAA in June 2025], SJAC [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre⁸⁷] indicated that it has not observed any targeting by the interim government based on journalistic activities, activism, or membership in political parties.'⁸⁸

11.1.3 The December 2025 CSIS article cited the following examples to demonstrate the striking change in freedom of expression compared to the situation under the Al-Assad regime:

'At a conference for Syrian influencers, one content creator responded to a call from a government official for influencers to show Syria's progress by saying it was not his job to "beat the drum for the government" but to show the real Syria and its challenges. Walking through Souq Hamidiyeh in Damascus one evening, a Syrian friend berated black-clad security forces wielding big guns who had blocked the path to a famous historical site, given the presence of a high-level official. "Why are you blocking the way? We didn't get rid of one dictator to have another one," he told them. They politely rebuffed his complaint, and we went on our way to dinner. In Assad's Syria, all these individuals would likely have been arrested, perhaps never to be seen again.'⁸⁹

11.1.4 Citing various sources, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

'Individuals who voice criticism of the authorities may face repercussions. Arrests have been reported, including arrests by entities linked to the Ministry of Interior and the Internal Security Command, especially in Hama. In some cases, individuals – especially activists – have been temporarily detained at security checkpoints in Homs Governorate and released after brief questioning.

'... Individuals who voice strong criticism of the new Syrian authorities are often subjected to online harassment or publicly accused of treason by those seen as supporters of the interim government. Influential people may use their connections to pressure or intimidate critics. In some cases, coordinated smear campaigns have been directed against individuals, human rights organisation and activists who have expressed criticism.'⁹⁰ The source did not provide further details about these smear campaigns nor

⁸⁶ SNHR, [SNHR's Monthly Report on Arrests/Detentions in Syria](#), 3 May 2025

⁸⁷ SJAC, [About](#), no date

⁸⁸ EUAA, [Syria: Country Focus](#) (pages 36 – 37), 7 July 2025

⁸⁹ CSIS, [Syria's Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad's Fall](#), 4 December 2025

⁹⁰ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 11), 11 December 2025

specify whether the government was involved in them.

11.1.5 Citing various sources, the same source stated:

‘According to sources, no systematic policy exists to target critics; instead targeting appears selective and inconsistent, depending on local conditions and the discretion of individual officials. As a result, tolerance towards criticism varies by region. In Damascus, people may discuss social issues as long as they avoid political questions, whereas in Idlib, restrictions on free speech are significantly tighter and criticism is more likely to lead to arrest or intimidation. In Aleppo and Damascus, officials operate under stronger oversight, while Rural Damascus remains marked by arbitrary behaviour and weak control by the authorities.

‘... Security forces have reportedly exerted pressure on citizens by arresting relatives of individuals wanted for criticising the government, particularly in Hama Governorate [see paragraph 11.1.1]. However, according to SNHR, relatives of critics have not been targeted in a systematic or consistent manner.’⁹¹

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11.2 Political opponents

11.2.1 Citing an August 2025 article published by The Economist, the October 2025 EUAA COI response stated:

‘The government has dismissed the Syrian Centenary Initiative’s demands, reportedly launching smear campaigns against its members instead. Activist Hazem Dakhil noted they are falsely accused of plotting to replace al-Sharaa with a military council or minority rule. Civil-society groups say the transitional government equates criticism with treason, refusing dialogue, while documented cases of Alawite women disappearing from coastal areas have been met with outright denials. No further information regarding the treatment of members or supporters of the Syrian Centenary Initiative was found during the constraints of this query.’⁹² For further information about the Syrian Centenary Initiative, see the section [Political opposition](#).

11.2.2 The October 2025 EUAA COI response also stated: ‘An Etana Syria analysis of the first six months of post-Assad governance noted fewer reports of politically motivated arrests under the transitional government following the restructuring of the MoI [Ministry of Interior], particularly in areas under centralised transitional control.’⁹³

11.2.3 In November 2025, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), an ‘independent regional human rights organization...aiming to spread and deeply root the culture of human rights in Arab societies’⁹⁴, published a research paper that aimed to present ‘the challenges of Syrian civil society navigating the transitional process following the fall of the Assad regime’⁹⁵. The paper, which was based on interviews with 30 ‘Syrian civil society actors’ conducted between May and October 2025, stated:

⁹¹ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 12), 11 December 2025

⁹² EUAA, [COI Query: Syria – Major human rights, security, and...](#) (page 28), 1 October 2025

⁹³ EUAA, [COI Query: Syria – Major human rights, security, and...](#) (page 28), 1 October 2025

⁹⁴ CIHRS, [About us](#), no date

⁹⁵ CIHRS, [‘We can’t sit back and wait’: Syria’s transition through...](#) (page 8), 3 November 2025

‘Interviewees noted that political activities or those with a political undertone are facing more significant restrictions than civic activities. Hwajeh, founder of Equal Citizenship Center, recalls a dialogue session of thirty-five political and civic parties which resulted in the Syrian Equal Citizenship Alliance (Tamasok). After the end of the conference, the authorities contacted the organizers to inform them that they cannot form such a coalition because there is no law for political participation.

‘Another interviewee, Tawfek Osman from Tartous, shares that as Tayar Daleel [a “youth-led civil political movement”⁹⁶], they could not acquire approval to hold a conference in Homs on political participation.⁹⁷

- 11.2.4 CPIT was unable to find any further information about the government’s treatment of political opponents in the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)).

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11.3 Protesters

- 11.3.1 The May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated:

‘In most cases [of demonstrations], the transitional government permitted these demonstrations and did not intervene. In some cases, security forces did intervene. For example, on 21 December 2024, they reportedly arrested around ten women in the north-west who had demonstrated in Aleppo for the release of Abu Shuayb Al-Masri, among other detainees. Al-Masri and several others had been detained in Idlib on charges of having ties to [rival Islamist group] Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation).⁹⁸ One of the arrested women told Syria Direct: “The authorities detained me and eight women who were with me. I was released 13 days later ... I was pregnant with my daughter ...”⁹⁹ For further information see [New government’s treatment of former opponents of HTS](#).

- 11.3.2 On 16 June 2025, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an ‘independent and impartial UK-based human rights organisation’ which ‘monitors, documents and publishes the daily developments within Syria to provide an objective understanding of the situation inside the country’¹⁰⁰, reported:

‘A number of relatives of detainees staged a peaceful sit-in in front of Kafr Soussah prison in the capital, Damascus, demanding the release of their loved ones and calling for disclosure of their fate, amid continued ambiguity surrounding their legal and humanitarian conditions.

‘According to information obtained by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, forces affiliated with the “General Security” dispersed the sit-in by force. Security members assaulted several protesters, including women, with beatings and verbal abuse, causing panic and tension in the area.¹⁰¹

CPIT was unable to find confirmation of this report by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation.

⁹⁶ CIHRS, [‘We can’t sit back and wait’: Syria’s transition through...](#) (page 82), 3 November 2025

⁹⁷ CIHRS, [‘We can’t sit back and wait’: Syria’s transition through...](#) (page 54), 3 November 2025

⁹⁸ Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (pages 108 – 9), 31 May 2025

⁹⁹ Syria Direct, [The exceptions: Prisoners of conscience languish in Idlib...](#), 14 August 2025

¹⁰⁰ SOHR, [About Us](#), no date

¹⁰¹ SOHR, [Assaulting women: Security forces disperse sit-in protest...](#), 16 June 2025

- 11.3.3 During a teachers' strike in coastal areas in October 2025, SOHR reported that 'several teachers have told SOHR activists that they have received direct threats to be discharged in the case that they continued their strike'¹⁰². CPIT was unable to find confirmation of this report by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation.
- 11.3.4 During clashes between government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Aleppo in October 2025, Syria Direct reported that 'government forces deployed tear gas to disperse protesters denouncing the closure of roads into the [SDF-controlled] neighborhoods [of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah]'¹⁰³.
- 11.3.5 The December 2025 Anadolu Agency article stated:
- "If you sell one official's car for a hundred thousand dollars ... you could pay our salaries."
- 'With those sharp words, a teacher in Idlib stood up during a meeting with the local Education Directorate and confronted officials directly – a moment that spread rapidly across Syrian social media as teachers protested low wages.
- 'For Syrians, the frustration needed little explanation. A barrel of heating oil now costs around \$110 [82.27 GBP¹⁰⁴] and a liter of petrol \$50 [37.40 GBP¹⁰⁵, while teachers make between \$120 [89.76¹⁰⁶] and \$150 [112.20 GBP¹⁰⁷] a month.'¹⁰⁸
- 11.3.6 On 25 November 2025, SOHR reported:
- 'Peaceful protests continue in different areas in Latakia province, where a large number of residents are gathering in Al-Azhari and Al-Emarah roundabouts.
- '... Reliable SOHR sources have reported that a large number of troops of general security forces have been deployed in the area of Al-Azhari, Al-Zera'a and Al-Thawrah roundabouts and Al-Hamam square in Latakia, where they blocked main roads such as Jableh bridge and bypass, attempting to encircle the protesters.
- 'The security forces also opened fire to disperse the protesters, along with blocking some alleys inhabited by Alawite civilians, along with heavy deployment of security forces.
- 'Also, Al-Zahraa square in Homs city experienced alarming tension, where security forces arrested several peaceful protestors who participated in the sit-in protest, along with beating the arrested protests in full view of the protestors and passers-by.
- 'This coincides with considerable repression by security forces that used tear gas and extreme violence to disperse the protesters.
- 'Moreover, members of general security forces opened fire indiscriminately

¹⁰² SOHR, [Amid growing tension in Syrian coast: Teachers and activists...](#), 12 October 2025

¹⁰³ Syria Direct, [In Aleppo's Kurdish neighborhoods, another setback...](#), 9 October 2025

¹⁰⁴ Xe.com, [1 USD to GBP – Convert US Dollars to British Pounds](#), accessed 4 March 2026

¹⁰⁵ Xe.com, [1 USD to GBP – Convert US Dollars to British Pounds](#), accessed 4 March 2026

¹⁰⁶ Xe.com, [1 USD to GBP – Convert US Dollars to British Pounds](#), accessed 4 March 2026

¹⁰⁷ Xe.com, [1 USD to GBP – Convert US Dollars to British Pounds](#), accessed 4 March 2026

¹⁰⁸ Anadolu Agency, [Breathing free: A year after Assad, Syrians test...](#), 5 December 2025

on the protestors and ran over some others, which caused considerable chaos and panic in Al-Zahraa square.¹⁰⁹

SOHR's claim that security forces fired at, ran over, and used 'extreme violence' against protesters was not confirmed by any international media outlet or human rights organisation.

11.3.7 On 28 December 2025, SOHR reported:

'SOHR activists have reported that peaceful demonstrators [were] assaulted in Latakia city and the cities of Jableh and Homs by supporters of the transitional government, members of general security forces and groups of the affiliated "civil peace" committees, attempting to prevent them from gathering and demonstrating.

'In Al-Zeraa roundabout in Latakia city, members of general security forces physically assaulted several protestors and prevented media activists from filming and documents the events and violations.

'While in Al-Qosour neighbourhood in Baniyas city, members of auxiliary forces in security uniforms assaulted young men who tried to reach places where demonstrations have been staged.

'Also, in Al-Zahraa neighbourhood in Homs, security forces brutally beat demonstrators and arrested others.'¹¹⁰

11.3.8 In a separate report about the events of the 28 December, SOHR stated:

'General Security forces brought military armored vehicles to one of the gathering points of peaceful protesters in the vicinity of Al-Azhari Roundabout in Lattakia. They also used water cannons from fire trucks against protesters in Jablah. Meanwhile, General Security forces carried out staged clashes, pretending to attack "remnants of the former regime," in an attempt to create a pretext to assault unarmed protesters, attack them, disperse them and suppress and derail the demonstrations.'¹¹¹

These two SOHR reports about security forces using violence against peaceful protesters were not confirmed by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation. DW Arabic and fact-checking platform¹¹² Verify-Sy acknowledged claims that government forces used violence against protesters but were unable to confirm these claims^{113 114}.

While sources such as Al Jazeera reported that violence broke out during the demonstrations¹¹⁵, it remains unclear what happened and who was responsible. DW Arabic, Verify-Sy and a Saudi Arabia-owned, London-based news outlet¹¹⁶ called Al Majalla indicated that there were conflicting narratives about the events of that day. For example, in contrast to SOHR's reports cited above, the government blamed 'remnants' of the Assad regime

¹⁰⁹ SOHR, [Extreme violence: Syrian authorities open fire on peaceful...](#), 25 November 2025

¹¹⁰ SOHR, [One seriously: Protestors injured in Jableh in attack by...](#), 28 December 2025

¹¹¹ SOHR, [Lattakia: General Security Forces send armored vehicles...](#), 28 December 2025

¹¹² Verify-Sy, [The Story of Verify-Sy](#) (translated by member of CPIT), no date

¹¹³ DW, [The Observatory: People killed in ...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 28 December 2025

¹¹⁴ Verify-Sy, [Disinformation in the context...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 25 November 2025

¹¹⁵ Al Jazeera, [Deadly protests and clashes in Syria – what happened...](#), 29 December 2025

¹¹⁶ Al Majalla, [About Al Majalla](#), no date

for the violence and accused them of attacking its forces^{117 118}. The Al Majalla article indicated that the violence was between rival groups of protesters and that security forces failed to use effective crowd-control tactics to contain this violence¹¹⁹.

- 11.3.9 SOHR reported that security forces arrested peaceful protesters, activists and religious figures involved in the 28 December demonstrations in Latakia, Tartus, Homs and Hama governorates^{120 121 122 123 124 125}. State media, meanwhile, reported that security forces arrested 21 ‘former [Assad] regime remnants who are involved in criminal acts, sectarian incitement and targeting internal security forces’¹²⁶. Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT was unable to find information confirming either SOHR’s or the government’s narrative.

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11.4 Journalists and activists

a. General treatment by the state

- 11.4.1 The October 2025 EUAA COI response stated: ‘According to a report by the Economist, journalists exposing state security crimes face online harassment from pro-government trolls, and some have been arbitrarily arrested and released only after public pressure. No further information on the treatment of journalists critical of the transitional government was found under the constraints of this query.’¹²⁷

- 11.4.2 Citing various sources, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

‘Some sources stated that the authorities do not appear to have the capacity for systematic monitoring and instead tend to follow broad trends or react to high-profile cases. However, according to other sources, monitoring of online activity continues in a manner similar to practices under the former government. Security bodies still track social media posts both inside and outside the country and make use of informal networks of informants.

‘This environment of surveillance reinforces ongoing fear and contributes to widespread self-censorship. Several individuals have been arrested after criticising government actions online, including journalists and activists who commented on the coastal military operation earlier in the year.’¹²⁸

- 11.4.3 Citing various sources, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

‘... [S]ome journalists and activists have been arrested after criticising the government. According to sources, incidents of detention or harassment have occurred but appear to be isolated rather than systematic. Some

¹¹⁷ Al Majalla, [Alawite protests return. But this time, they turn deadly](#), 2 January 2026

¹¹⁸ DW, [The Observatory: People killed in ...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 28 December 2025

¹¹⁹ Al Majalla, [Alawite protests return. But this time, they turn deadly](#), 2 January 2026

¹²⁰ SOHR, [On the pretext of ‘prosecuting former regime remnants’: Alawite...](#), 7 January 2026

¹²¹ SOHR, [Imitating former regime: General security arrests...](#), 30 December 2025

¹²² SOHR, [To exert pressure on protesters: Al-Sheikh Ali Halahl, the head of...](#), 29 December 2025

¹²³ SOHR, [For ‘participating in latest protests’: Six civilians arrests by...](#), 29 December 2025

¹²⁴ SOHR, [Systematic arrests in Latakia: Security forces arrest four...](#), 31 December 2025

¹²⁵ SOHR, [Following peaceful demonstrations: Government forces...](#), 28 December 2025

¹²⁶ France 24, [Syria arrests suspects, imposes curfew in Latakia after...](#), 31 December 2025

¹²⁷ EUAA, [COI Query: Syria – Major human rights, security, and...](#) (page 28), 1 October 2025

¹²⁸ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 12), 11 December 2025

detentions of journalists are attributed to the low professional standards of local security actors rather than to a coordinated policy. For instance, two Kurdish journalists were briefly detained, questioned, and released without being subjected to violence. The incident was reportedly linked to their Kurdish background and the officers' lack of awareness that individuals from Kobane are Syrian citizens.

'Syria Direct stated that there are no confirmed cases of journalists killed or kidnapped because of their profession. For example, in Rural Damascus, a media worker who had returned from displacement in northern Syria was found killed after being kidnapped; the crime was determined to have personal or financial motives rather than political ones.

'Likewise, those who previously worked for the former government's state media have not faced kidnappings or targeted killings. At most, there have been verbal confrontations – such as heated exchanges between journalists who worked for the former government and those who opposed it – during a media workshop in Damascus.'¹²⁹

11.4.4 The December 2025 CPJ report stated:

'The country remains fractured as President Ahmed al-Sharaa's government seeks to integrate multiple groups seeking regional autonomy, from the northeastern Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) [sic – the correct name is the Syrian Democratic Forces¹³⁰] and the coastal Alawites to the southern Israeli-backed Druze.

'Most media killings, injuries, detentions, and assaults since al-Assad's ouster on December 8, 2024, stem from these political divisions, with violations often carried out by regional militias, rather than government forces, CPJ's reporting found.'¹³¹

11.4.5 The same source also stated:

'[A journalist called] Idrees was also pleased by the government's response when he was threatened in September [2025] by a member of the security forces who warned him on Facebook, "Don't play with fire" after the journalist commented on an attack on a Christian family. "I raised my voice... went to the governor's office, and spoke openly," he said, adding that officials working for Al Qusayr city's governor "assigned a lawyer and filed a complaint" for him, and the officer involved "was immediately detained."¹³²

11.4.6 The December 2025 Anadolu Agency article stated:

'Under Assad, social media was a minefield. Posts critical of the regime could trigger interrogation, harassment or imprisonment, and online spaces were tightly monitored and often weaponized for propaganda.

'But today, Syrians are engaging on them in real time – often with humor and bluntness – and getting responses that hint at a fundamentally changed political climate.

'Communications Minister Abdul Salam Heikal became the subject of a viral joke when a user posted his photo and wrote: "Your bald head looks like a

¹²⁹ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 13), 11 December 2025

¹³⁰ BBC News, [Syrian government reaches deal with Kurdish-led forces](#), 30 January 2026

¹³¹ CPJ, [A year after Assad's fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

¹³² CPJ, [A year after Assad's fall, Syrian journalists enjoy freedom but also...](#), 5 December 2025

rabbi's cap ... Get a hair transplant, we don't need them saying we have a Zionist minister."

'Heikal replied: "Don't think badly of me, my brother ... This is a satellite internet receiver dish."

'Similarly, Mohammed Nidal al-Shaar, the minister of economy and industry, responded to a Facebook follower who labeled him a "failure" with a humble plea: "Help me to succeed."'¹³³

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b. Specific examples of arrest, detention and harassment

11.4.7 SOHR reported several incidents involving the arrest of harassment of journalists by government forces. CPIT was unable to find confirmation of these incidents by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation. Below is a list of the incidents reported by SOHR:

- On 28 May 2025, SOHR reported:
'Security forces arrested a media and social activist in Al-Nabak city in Qalamoun area in Rif Dimashq following posts he shared on his account, highlighting violations by gunmen and administrative corruption in the city. The whereabouts and fate of the activist remain unknown. According to SOHR sources, the activist is known for stances criticizing corruption and violations by security forces in the region. Following the arrest of the activist, the city experienced a state of tension, while tens of residents staged a sit-in protest in the city centre, amid chanting slogans condemning the arbitrary arrest of the activist and calling for his immediate release.'¹³⁴
- On 3 July 2025, SOHR reported:
'The journalist "Mohamed Dakiny" was subjected to direct threats and verbal abuse by a member of Aleppo City Council's press, while he was documenting the site of sabotaging Sa'ad Allah Al-Jabry Statue in the city. In a video copy obtained by SOHR, the journalist was humiliated after filming the events in Sa'ad Allah Al-Jabry Square in Aleppo, and he was demanded to delete the footage by another journalist and members of the General Security.'¹³⁵ The source did not specify what it meant by 'humiliated'.
- On 1 September 2025, SOHR reported: 'The criminal investigations branch in Damascus has issued a criminal summons for a journalist called "Ali Kanaan," as he reported, due to his ongoing criticism of the work of the media directorate in Al-Quneitra province. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights obtained a copy of the summons.'¹³⁶
- On 2 September 2025, SOHR reported:
'The media activist and journalist "Eilaf Yassin" from Al-Raqqa province, was subjected to an arrest attempt by the General Security Service, while she was in the hall of an hotel in the capital Damascus, with no official

¹³³ Anadolu Agency, [Breathing free: A year after Assad, Syrians test...](#), 5 December 2025

¹³⁴ SOHR, [Following arbitrary arrest of media activist: Residents stage protests...](#), 28 May 2025

¹³⁵ SOHR, [Press freedom in danger: 'Shabiha' and abusive language...](#), 3 July 2025

¹³⁶ SOHR, [Over ongoing criticism of media directorate in Al-Quneitra: ...](#), 1 September 2025

judicial notice. This comes after she criticized figures close to the current authority on social media. Meanwhile, “Eilaf Yassin” issued a statement to public opinion in a live broadcast on her personal Facebook page, confirming that the General Security arrived to the hotel following a complaint issued by the Cybercrimes Department after meeting the journalist “Moussa Al-Omar” [i.e., Moussa Al-Omar filed a complaint against her with the government’s Cybercrimes Department], where she denounced the acts against freedom of journalism and activists.¹³⁷

- On 23 November 2025, SOHR reported: ‘The media activist Ali Mohamed Al-Arab remains detained [by] Security services in Deir Ezzor for ten days, with no official announcements regarding the charges pressed against him.’¹³⁸
- On 18 February 2026, SOHR reported: ‘The General Security Directorate in Tartus province has released journalist Haiytham Youssef after detaining him for more than ten days for filming protests organized by teachers in the city.’¹³⁹

11.4.8 On 1 May 2025, North Press Agency reported:

‘The Syrian Ministry of Information confirmed Thursday [1 May 2025] that two Kurdish journalists working for Iraq-based Channel 8 were mistakenly detained by a security agency while covering ongoing unrest in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, a suburb southwest of Damascus [for details of the unrest see the CPIN [Syria: Religious minorities](#)].

‘The journalists, reporter Akram Saleh and cameraman Judy Haj Ali, had been reported missing by their outlet and press unions after contact with them was lost on Wednesday evening amid continued clashes in the area.

‘The Ministry, via a statement by Director of Public Relations Ali al-Rifai, described the detention as “erroneous,” attributing it to a misunderstanding by local security forces operating under heightened alert due to the volatile situation in the region. “Upon learning of the detention, the Ministry intervened immediately to coordinate with the relevant agencies and secure their release,” al-Rifai wrote in a post on Facebook.

‘The pair were released hours later, and appeared with Minister of Information and ministry officials in a photo released to state media, aiming to signal resolution and transparency.

‘... While the Ministry’s quick action averted a prolonged crisis, rights groups remain skeptical. “Even if resolved, this incident underscores the risks journalists continue to face in Syria – particularly those reporting from restive regions,” said a representative from the Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network in a phone call with North Press.’¹⁴⁰

11.4.9 The May 2025 Netherlands MFA report stated: ‘According to various sources, on 5 April 2025, security forces stopped a bus carrying approximately twenty civil society activists from the province of Suweida at a checkpoint near the Al-Wa’er suburb of the city of Homs. They had

¹³⁷ SOHR, [After criticizing prominent figures: Female journalist...](#), 2 September 2025

¹³⁸ SOHR, [Since more than a week: Journalist ‘Ali Mohamed Al-Arab’ arbitrarily...](#), 23 November 2025

¹³⁹ SOHR, [After more than ten days of detention in Tartus: Journalist...](#), 18 February 2026

¹⁴⁰ North Press Agency, [Syrian Ministry Confirms Mistaken Detention of...](#), 1 May 2025

reportedly been on their way to a meeting in the SDF-controlled city of Raqqa. These activists were released on 6 April 2025. The following day, they visited the governor in Suweida to share their experiences.’¹⁴¹

11.4.10 On 24 June 2025, the SNHR reported:

‘On Sunday, June 22, 2025, members of the Internal Security Forces of the transitional government arrested civilian Mazen Arja, a civil society activist and agricultural engineer, after summoning him to the western Idlib police station.

‘According to information obtained by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, officers from the Western District Police Department in Idlib city arrested engineer Mazen after they served him a written notice on June 20, 2025, to report to them. The arrest stemmed from a video he posted on his Facebook account criticizing a local decision to build a mosque inside a public park in Idlib.’¹⁴²

Arabic-language sources indicated that Mazen Araja was released on 7 September 2025 after 63 days of detention^{143 144 145 146}. Some sources stated that he was released several days after his initial arrest in June, only to be arrested again in early July, this time on charges of ‘contempt of the judiciary’¹⁴⁷. This was reportedly because he angrily complained during his visit to the court in Idlib to collect his personal belongings. According to a Syrian news site¹⁴⁸ called Shaam Times, Araja claimed that, as a condition for his release, he was forced to sign a pledge not to criticise the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Justice and was threatened with legal action if he went against this pledge¹⁴⁹.

Other than the SNHR report cited above, CPIT was unable to find any reporting about Mazen Araja’s arrest, detention and release in any English-language source, including international media outlets and human rights organisations.

11.4.11 On its page about journalist Hassan Zaza, CPJ stated:

‘Security forces arrested Syrian Kurdish journalist Hassan Zaza on June 27, 2025, and held him incommunicado for nearly a week before releasing him on July 3 [2025].

‘Zaza, editor-in-chief of the Kurdish news platform Noos Social and a prominent member of the Free Media Union, was taken from his home in Damascus and held in an undisclosed location.

‘During Zaza’s detention, Syria’s Ministry of Information confirmed the arrest but claimed it was “related to security concerns and not his journalistic work.” Ministry spokesperson Mohammad Al-Saleh told CPJ by messaging app that the case was under investigation and Zaza would be released “if nothing

¹⁴¹ Netherlands MFA, [Country of Origin Information Report on Syria](#) (pages 107 – 8), 31 May 2025

¹⁴² SNHR, [Members of the Internal Security Forces arrested...](#), 24 June 2025

¹⁴³ North Press Agency, [My arrest turned...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 8 September 2025

¹⁴⁴ Syria TV, [After 63 days of detention: Mazen...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 7 September 2025

¹⁴⁵ Syrian Snack, [My arrest turned...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 7 September 2025

¹⁴⁶ Syria.news, [Civil activist Mazen...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 9 July 2025

¹⁴⁷ Syria.news, [Civil activist Mazen...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 9 July 2025

¹⁴⁸ Shaam Times, [Who we are](#), no date

¹⁴⁹ Shaam Times, [Activist released after...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 22 September 2025

was found.” He was freed six days later without any formal charges.

‘Zaza, who returned to Damascus from Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria after the December 2024 fall of President Bashar al-Assad, is also the Syrian representative to the International Federation of Arab Journalists. He previously worked with Ronahi TV, a Kurdish outlet linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is banned in Turkey.

‘... Zaza has not publicly commented on his detention.’¹⁵⁰

11.4.12 In August 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders (SRHRD) published a letter to the Syrian government expressing concern about the alleged mistreatment of a women’s rights defender by the authorities in Idlib (the August 2025 UN SRHRD letter). The Special Rapporteur originally sent the letter on 26 May 2025, leaving a 60-day period for the Syrian government to reply before making the letter public. At the time of publishing this CPIN, no reply had been issued. Summarising the allegations against the Idlib authorities, the letter stated:

‘On 23 April 2025, the governor of Idlib filed a complaint against Ms. Al-Hajji and asked the public prosecutor to file a lawsuit against her for insulting the Islamic veil and for spreading false information about the presence of a slave market in Idlib.

‘On 24 April 2025, the Idlib police shut down Equity and Empowerment’s [Ms. Al-Hajji’s NGO] office in Kafr Yahmoul without official explanation, its only centre in the region. The office remained closed by the time of writing this communication, and the Idlib authorities have verbally informed the organisation that it was not allowed to operate any longer.

‘On 13 May 2025, two police officers visited her family home in Idlib demanding her presence to face charges against her by the governor of Idlib. They were told that she was in Türkiye. The police did not present an official document. Ms. Al-Hajji is currently wanted on charges of spreading false information about the presence of female slaves and a slave market in Idlib, and of insulting the full-face covering worn by women. She risks arrest and detention should she return to attend her hearing in court, a date for which has not been set so far.’¹⁵¹ For further details, see the CPIN [Syria: Women](#).

11.4.13 On 1 July 2025, The New Arab reported:

‘A Lebanese news outlet says its correspondent, detained in southern Syria on Tuesday [1 July 2025], has been released, while another journalist remains in custody amid growing concern over media repression in the country.

‘Almodon, a Beirut-based outlet owned by Fadaat Media, reported that its reporter, Abdallah al-Hassan, also known as Nour al-Hassan, was arrested in Quneitra governorate under “vague accusations”. Initially, authorities cited his media work, before later accusing him of collaborating with Israel. Syrian government sources denied those claims, dismissing suggestions of links to Israel as “rumours”.

‘Hassan, who has covered Israeli military activity in Quneitra, was arrested

¹⁵⁰ CPJ, [Hassan Zaza](#), no date

¹⁵¹ UN SRHRD, [Syria: targeting and online defamation...](#), 19 August 2025

despite holding a media permit allowing him to film in the area. Almodon reported that he had been working as a fixer for visiting French and German media teams when complaints were lodged with local authorities.

'The outlet said the foreign journalists were filming military installations on both the Syrian and Israeli sides of the border using Hassan's permit, but without their own authorisation. Syrian General Security summoned Hassan for questioning before detaining him.

'Almodon said it contacted Syrian officials, including Information Minister Hamza Mustafa, who reportedly expressed willingness to assist. The minister promised that Hassan would be released once procedures were completed, a commitment that was fulfilled hours later.

'The arrest followed an incident at the Water Resources Directorate in Quneitra, where Hassan was filming with the permission of its head, Bassam al-Shamali. A Syrian intelligence officer questioned him about his work, then claimed Hassan's permit did not authorise filming at government sites, despite it stating otherwise.

'Later that evening, a security patrol reportedly visited Hassan's home, instructing him to report to the Political Affairs Directorate. He complied the following morning, whereupon his phone was confiscated and he was detained.

'... The New York-based NGO Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) told The New Arab that Hassan's arrest "appears to have stemmed from confusion over his role supporting foreign media crews in Al Quneitra, rather than from his own reporting activities."¹⁵²

11.4.14 On 30 July 2025, The New Arab reported:

'Syrian journalist and activist Noor Suleiman was released late on Tuesday [29 July 2025] after being detained by the political security branch in Mezzeh, Damascus, in a case that sparked a wave of public criticism and demands for her release from activists and journalists.

'Suleiman, a member of the Syrian Democratic Alliance and identified by supporters as an Alawite journalist, was arrested on Saturday [26 July 2025] following two consecutive raids on her home.

'She had reportedly filmed the first raid and was summoned to the security branch to delete the footage. When she appeared at the branch with her mother, she was detained without any formal charges.

'Suleiman had previously criticised the Syrian government and denounced the violence on the Syrian coast and the alleged violations in the city of Suweida in a series of Facebook posts.

'Minister of Information Hamza Mustafa said on X that he had contacted Interior Minister Anas Khattab and secured her release on bail guaranteed by the Ministry of Information.

'He stressed that her detention was "not related" to her journalistic work and stated that the case would likely be closed soon.

'The minister also reiterated the government's stated commitment to press

¹⁵² The New Arab, [Journalist freed in Syria after brief detention as...](#), 1 July 2025

freedoms and warned against hate speech and sectarian incitement, urging Syrian media to engage in “constructive journalism” appropriate for the country's transitional phase.

‘... Researcher and activist Farah Youssef was among those who confirmed Suleiman’s arrest. She said Suleiman's family had initially avoided media escalation, but the prolonged silence and lack of transparency forced them to go public and hold Syria’s leading politicians, including President Ahmad al-Sharaa, “accountable” for her safety.’¹⁵³

11.4.15 In an article about the same case, Syria’s official state news agency¹⁵⁴ SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency) stated:

‘Damascus Public Attorney, Judge Hussam Khattab, affirmed that release of journalist Nour Suleiman will not affect the course of the case field [sic] against her, and that the legal procedures will be taken against her through the judiciary.

“Journalist Nour Suleiman published on her page phrases and posts inciting sectarianism, racism and hatred”, Judge Khattab told SANA Wednesday, adding “She was summoned by Public Security without a judicial warrant, which is an illegal procedure, therefore, she was released to ensure justice and freedoms”.¹⁵⁵

11.4.16 On 6 August 2025, The Syrian Observer published an article entitled ‘From Germany to Deir ez-Zor: The Untold Story of Activist Kandi Al-Adai Before His Assassination’ which stated: ‘In the weeks leading up to his murder, Adai clashed with local security forces after intervening in the detention of a female journalist from Latakia, reportedly from an Alawite background. During the confrontation, he was physically assaulted and briefly arrested, then released under threats to remain silent. Images shared with [his friend Abdul Qadir] Dakhoul showed visible bruises and injuries sustained in the incident.’¹⁵⁶

11.4.17 In a separate report about Al-Adai published on 10 August 2025, SOHR stated:

‘He had been arrested for nearly 20 days by members of the General Security forces, then he was released without any official statement clarifying the reasons for his detention or release. Sources indicated that his arrest came shortly after he shared critical posts on social media platforms addressing the current situation.

‘... [T]he father of “Kindi Al-Adai” appeared in a video footage, talking about the circumstances of the death of his son, blaming the current authorities for the incident. The father explained that his son was beaten and tortured by undisciplined security members who threatened to kill him in the case that he disclosed the violations against him during his detention.’¹⁵⁷

Neither SOHR nor The Syrian Observer indicated who was responsible for Al-Adai’s murder.

¹⁵³ The New Arab, [Syrian journalist Noor Suleiman released after...](#), 30 July 2025

¹⁵⁴ SANA, [Home](#), no date

¹⁵⁵ SANA, [Damascus Judiciary affirms legal measures against Noor...](#), 19 August 2025

¹⁵⁶ The Syrian Observer, [From Germany to Deir ez-Zor: The Untold...](#), 6 August 2025

¹⁵⁷ SOHR, [Kindi Al-Adai's father discloses new details about...](#), 10 August 2025

11.4.18 On 16 December 2025, The Syrian Observer reported:

‘On Monday 15 December 2025, the Solicitor General in Damascus ordered the release of Syrian journalist Iyad Sharbaji, following a 24-hour detention in the capital. His arrest stemmed from a complaint accusing him of inciting sectarian strife.

‘Sharbaji ... noted that the prosecutor had dismissed the charges as baseless and without merit. According to Sharbaji, the detention might have been extended by another day had he not presented compelling arguments and evidence during a one-hour confrontation with the Solicitor General. He also remarked that the legal framework governing such proceedings remains largely unchanged from the era of Bashar al-Assad.

‘Syrian security forces detained Sharbaji on Sunday 14 December [2025], after he appeared for questioning at the Criminal Security Department in Damascus. The arrest followed a lawsuit filed by lawyer Rashid Abdul Jalil, who accused Sharbaji – alongside actor Jalal Shamout – of defamation, slander, inciting sectarian tensions, and threatening national unity, according to information obtained by Enab Baladi.

‘The lawsuit was triggered by Sharbaji’s publication of a video that the complainant claimed constituted a direct and explicit attack on a segment of the Syrian population, particularly the generation that came of age in Idlib Governorate during the years of the revolution. [Specifically, he described the generation that was raised in Idlib under HTS rule as having “grown up in a Sunni sectarian environment where they saw everyone around them as enemies” ¹⁵⁸.]

‘Sharbaji firmly denied these allegations. He clarified that his remarks were not directed at Idlib or its residents, but rather at a generation raised there – comprising individuals from various Syrian provinces – who matured in extraordinary circumstances. His comments, he argued, were intended to prompt discussion on the long-term effects of that environment.

‘... Iyad Sharbaji, who resides in the United States, is known for his opposition to the former Syrian government and his criticisms of religiously framed state structures. He recently returned to Syria to mark the first anniversary of the country’s liberation. Just days prior to his detention, he appeared on Syria TV’s On the Table programme, where he praised the emerging space for freedom of expression.’¹⁵⁹

11.4.19 In an article published on 12 December 2025, the Syrian Center Against Violence and Hatred (SCAVH), whose ‘mission is to expose ... [hate speech], analyze its roots, dismantle its tools, and defend a public space that is free and safe for all’¹⁶⁰, reported:

‘In Latakia, Syrian authorities arrested the journalist-activist Azazil Deeb one day after protests on the Syrian coast demanding an end to violations [against the Alawite community]. Deeb’s case did not become a widely discussed topic in Syria because his family refrained from publishing information about his arrest out of fear.

¹⁵⁸ Euronews Arabic, [‘Al-Assad’s laws still...’](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 15 December 2025

¹⁵⁹ The Syrian Observer, [Damascus Solicitor General Orders Release of...](#), 16 December 2025

¹⁶⁰ SCAVH, [About](#), no date

‘Two sources familiar with the case – one close to the family and the other from a security agency – confirmed that Deeb has been detained by security forces since 27 November 2025 ... Deeb has not been able to appoint a lawyer despite having been in detention for nearly 18 days.

‘Deeb has also not been brought before a judge to examine the charges brought against him. According to the source, the accusations related to social media videos and posts about matters of public concern.

‘Deeb is a well-known activist in Latakia whose public presence has grown in 2025. He posts news and videos on his social media, some of which are related to civil peace.’¹⁶¹

SCAVH did not specify whether Deeb was arrested for criticising the government. Another source, the Syrian National Observatory of Human Rights Violations (SNOHRV), reported that his Facebook post criticised the rise in electricity prices after a recent decision by the ‘Al-Jolani authority’ [i.e. the government led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa aka. Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani]¹⁶².

CPIT was unable to find reporting on this case by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation.

11.4.20 The SCAVH article also stated:

‘Separately, authorities also arrested Dr. Samer Issa due to a Facebook comment about a matter of public concern. A source in the Latakia Health Directorate, who asked not to be named, said ... that he was arrested while he was at work treating patients, and that the Latakia Health Directorate played a negative role and actively pushed for his arrest.

‘A security source familiar with the case, who asked not to be named, said that Issa was arrested, interrogated, and charged. At a later stage, his family was allowed to appoint a lawyer for him and the lawyer was able to meet him at the place where he was detained.

‘However, Issa has not been brought before a judge despite more than 10 days having passed since his arrest. According to the security source, he will be brought before a judge soon.

‘The Center for Combating Violence and Hatred was able to view the charges brought against Dr Issa. They are charges under which any judge would order his release immediately. This raises the question of why procedures have been stalled and why his appearance before a judge has been delayed.’¹⁶³

SCAVH did not specify whether Dr Issa was arrested for criticising the government.

CPIT was unable to find reporting on this case by any major international media outlet or human rights organisation.

11.4.21 On 31 December 2025, SOHR reported that the Syrian government launched ‘the most severe smear and digital suppression campaign ever against SOHR’. The report stated:

‘The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) monitors with deep

¹⁶¹ SCAVH, [Arrest of doctor, activist and ...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 16 December 2025

¹⁶² SNOHRV, [Arrest of paediatrician...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 11 December 2025

¹⁶³ SCAVH, [Arrest of doctor, activist and ...](#) (translated by member of CPIT), 16 December 2025

regret and anger the intense escalation of systematic media campaigns and misleading defamation recently launched by Syrian state institutions, namely the Presidential Media Office, the Ministry of Information and several media platforms.

‘Those efforts aim to defame SOHR, undermine its role in defending human rights and highlighting humanitarian causes and cast doubt on both the credibility of its reports and materials and the integrity of its staff.

‘... We reaffirm that the systematic campaigns, including threats and digital attacks, led by the Presidential Media Office, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Information and supporting pages and accounts can never deter us from continuing to defend the rights of all Syrians and exerting all possible efforts to ward off the sedition among the different constituents of the Syrian society.’¹⁶⁴

CPIT was unable to find further details about this alleged smear campaign nor confirmation of it by any major international news outlet or human rights organisation.

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11.5 Critics belonging to religious and ethnic minorities

11.5.1 The June 2025 Daraj article stated:

‘Despite repeated statements by government officials claiming that they are combating sectarianism, Rama said she has repeatedly been asked the question “Where are you from?” – a question she believes is intended less to learn about her hometown and more to determine her sect.

‘She said: “This question wasn’t asked so directly in the past. Now, I feel the aim is not to get to know me, but to find out my sect. Sometimes I have to conceal certain details or even change where I’m from, because I know it can affect how willing the person is to cooperate with me.’¹⁶⁵

11.5.2 Citing an interview with an international organisation, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

‘An international organisation stated that the degree of tolerance shown by the authorities also varies depending on the identity and background of the critics – it is not applied equally across groups. Sunni Arabs generally enjoy greater tolerance and may express limited criticism without facing consequences. In contrast, minorities – such as Druze, Kurds and Alawites – face harsher risks and may be accused of disloyalty or of acting on behalf of foreign actors. For example, a Druze individual criticising the government may be labelled an Israeli collaborator.’¹⁶⁶

11.5.3 For further information about Druze, see the CPIN [Syria: Religious minorities](#). For further information about Alawites, see the CPIN [Syria: Alawites and actual or perceived Assadists](#). For further information about Kurds, see the CPIN [Syria: Kurds and Kurdish areas](#). For reports of security forces arresting Alawite protesters and activists, see the sections [Protesters](#) and [Journalists and activists](#).

¹⁶⁴ SOHR, [Statement to the international community, media and...](#), 31 December 2025

¹⁶⁵ Daraj, [Journalism in Post-Assad Syria: Freedom, Chaos and...](#), 2 June 2025

¹⁶⁶ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (page 12), 11 December 2025

11.6 Critics in other countries/sur place activities

11.6.1 Citing various sources, the December 2025 DIS report stated:

‘Individuals living abroad generally have greater space to criticise the authorities. However, the situation of such critics remains unclear. While prominent commentators and activists outside Syria continue to speak openly without apparent repercussions, this may be largely because they are physically beyond the government’s reach. Sources interviewed by the DIS were not aware of any case of such Syrians returning to Syria. Therefore, it remains uncertain what consequences public criticism from abroad may have for those who eventually choose to return.

‘... [According to some sources], security bodies...track social media posts both inside and outside the country and make use of informal networks of informants.’¹⁶⁷ The report did not specify whether the networks of informants operate outside of Syria or only inside the country.

11.6.2 CPIT was unable to find further information about the government’s treatment of critics and opponents living outside Syria in the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)).

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12. Treatment of former opponents of HTS

12.1 Background on HTS

12.1.1 Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) was a militant Islamist group led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, who is now President of Syria. HTS led the rebel offensive that toppled Bashar Al-Assad in December 2024¹⁶⁸. Before that, HTS was the dominant faction in Idlib, where it established a local administration called the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in 2017¹⁶⁹. For further information on the history of HTS prior to December 2024, including its predecessors, affiliated groups, and opponents, see the following sources:

- BBC News, [Who are the rebels in Syria?](#), 30 November 2024
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 3 August 2023
- The Conversation, [What is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham? And how did the Islamist group evolve into a key player in Syria’s civil war?](#), 2 December 2024
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#), no date
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 20 December 2024

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12.2 HTS’s treatment of opponents before December 2024

12.2.1 In April 2025, The Washington Institute, a US-based think tank that aims to

¹⁶⁷ DIS, [Syria: Situation of Certain Groups](#) (pages 12 – 13), 11 December 2025

¹⁶⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#), no date

¹⁶⁹ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 20 December 2024

‘advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East’¹⁷⁰ published an article entitled ‘Allowing Political Opposition in the New Syria’ which stated:

‘During the period of HTS control of Idlib, hundreds of Syrian activists were arrested or assassinated – such as the well-known activist Raed Fares from Kafr Nabl, who was killed in 2018 and whose death has been attributed to HTS, although no group ever claimed his assassination. Humanitarian organizations were pressured until they were expelled, and residents were stifled under harsh Sharia rulings, often imprisoned on fabricated charges in the infamous Al-Iqab prison, reminiscent of Assad’s detention centers.

‘HTS crackdowns likewise targeted the area dubbed the “Square of the Revolution” – an area spanning between the M4 highway, southern Idlib countryside, and northern Hama countryside, stretching from Morek to Saraqib and from the Al-Ghab plain to Qal’at al-Madiq. This area had been targeted both by Turkish-backed forces and HTS because its people refused to comply with agendas that conflicted with their beliefs. As a result, HTS worked to subjugate and intimidate the region to gain control by dismantling the Free Syrian Army and local factions, suppressing protests and activists, and banning the raising of the green revolution flag. Eventually, the area was emptied, and its residents were forcibly displaced.

‘Internal purges within HTS under the so-called “Agent File” also led to the elimination of 300 individuals, including military, administrative, and security personnel, whom Sharaa (then Jolani) suspected of plotting a coup under the command of Abu Maria al-Qahtani. In the same “Agent File,” a grave was discovered by HTS security personnel containing a body killed in Jolani’s prison, which became a key reason for protests. These began in Sarmada and spread to Idlib and other locations, culminating in a major protest in Hazano demanding the downfall of Jolani and HTS. All of this shattered HTS’s stature in the eyes of many of the locals.

‘The protests against HTS subsided about two months prior to their decision to launch an offensive against the Assad regime, after communication began between some HTS figures and prominent local leaders and personalities who had been maintaining the protests. These negotiations were held under the pretext of preparing for a battle to reclaim nearby towns and villages, and it became apparent that HTS had significantly changed its behavior and dealings with the local community and its leaders, making concerted efforts to reconcile differences and seek cooperation on civil and military matters. This seemed to be an attempt to gain popular support for its upcoming battle against the regime, but how they will approach opposition in the new Syria remains an open question given their past actions during the period that they controlled Idlib.’¹⁷¹

12.2.2 In August 2025, Syria Direct published an article entitled ‘The exceptions: Prisoners of conscience languish in Idlib prisons’ (the August 2025 Syria Direct article) which stated:

‘Between 2015 and 2024, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) documented the arbitrary detention of a large number of people by HTS in its areas of influence, Ayman Hoda Menem, the director of

¹⁷⁰ The Washington Institute, [Our Mission & History](#), no date

¹⁷¹ The Washington Institute, [Allowing Political Opposition in the New Syria](#), 17 April 2025

SCM's legal office, told Syria Direct. Some were detained after photographing anti-HTS demonstrations or sit-ins by families of detainees, while others expressed critical opinions of the group on social media or were accused of dealing with "hostile" parties such as the US-led international coalition, he explained.

'... Abdulqader Toubal has had no word of his son, Ahmad Toubal, since December 12, 2016. Ahmad has been "forcibly disappeared, while Assad's criminals are free," Toubal told Syria Direct, appealing to Syrian authorities for any information about his son's fate.

'Ahmad was a commander in the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) 51st Brigade when he had a disagreement with a security commander from Jabhat al-Nusra (the precursor of HTS) who demanded food baskets Ahmad planned to distribute in the southern Idlib town of Maarat al-Numan. He did not comply, and "disappeared" after finishing the distribution, said his father, who now supports his son's three children.

'... Three former detainees in HTS prisons Syria Direct spoke to said they were charged with incitement against HTS and were only released after signing a pledge not to participate in new protests, under threat of harsher penalties. Hizb al-Tahrir detainees, who refused to sign such a pledge, remained in detention.

'They said they were subjected to serious violations, including torture from the moment of arrest and being held in cramped solitary cells or overcrowded dormitories, which caused chronic illnesses for some. None underwent real trials.

'... In recent years, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) identified at least 46 permanent detention centers affiliated with HTS in northwestern Syria, according to a 2022 report. At the time, it estimated there were 2,327 forcibly disappeared people held in these centers, most of whom were subjected to some form of torture. It also found at least 116 temporary detention centers where investigations and interrogations were conducted.¹⁷²

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12.3 New government's treatment of former opponents of HTS

12.3.1 The August 2025 Syria Direct article stated:

'While Damascus hails the emptying of Assad regime prisons, detainees arrested for opposing Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continue to languish in Idlib prisons.

'... "Your prisons have been dissolved," Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa proclaimed during his speech at the launch ceremony of the country's new, post-Assad visual identity on July 3 [2025]. But even as he hailed the "victory of the revolution" and the emptying of the former regime's prisons, prisoners of conscience continued to languish in northwestern Syria – held in the prisons of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the faction al-Sharaa led in Idlib.

'Fatima al-Abboud knows those prisons well. Two weeks before al-Sharaa's speech, she made her way to Idlib's Harem Central Prison to visit her

¹⁷² Syria Direct, [The exceptions: Prisoners of conscience languish in Idlib...](#), 14 August 2025

husband, 41-year-old Abdulrazzaq Masri, who has been held for nearly a year. Masri is accused of belonging to the international Islamist political party Hizb al-Tahrir, which opposes HTS, and is among dozens of prisoners of conscience held in its prisons under a variety of charges.

‘... Hizb al-Tahrir, as a transnational party that aims to bring about an Islamic caliphate by non-military means, “opposes any ruling authority, and its activities could pose security risks more than ideological ones,” Syrian researcher Orabi Orabi told Syria Direct. Still, “the party’s detainees must be released, while limiting their activities,” he said.

‘Regardless of the broad controversy surrounding the party, including among Syrians, “so long as its members present an idea or political vision and express their views by peaceful means, they are prisoners of conscience,” lawyer Ghazwan Koronfol, who lives in Turkey, said.

‘... Abdo al-Dalli, a member of Hizb al-Tahrir’s media office, confirmed that Masri is one of 38 men detained for belonging to the party. The group includes men held since mid-2023, arrested during dawn raids on their homes or in police interceptions involving gunfire, he said. One is the head of the party’s media office, Ahmad al-Haj Abdulwahhab, who was previously detained by the Assad regime in Saydnaya, the notorious military prison outside Damascus.

‘Al-Dalli stressed that the party members are “prisoners of conscience” who have been “forbidden from hiring a lawyer, and have not been brought before an investigating judge.” HTS prisons in Idlib “are not subject to human rights oversight, and medical and food services for detainees are very poor,” he added.

‘The detainees were arrested under the category of a “sultani sentence” or “emiri detention,” a form of “arbitrary arrest known by this name in Idlib,” al-Dalli said. “No clear charges were brought against them, but they had called for mobilizing fronts against the Assad regime.”

‘... With the fall of the Assad regime, and the absence of any real legal, administrative or military status for HTS – which was formally dissolved in January [2025] – “its detention centers are illegal and must be closed immediately and all detainees released,” Menem of SCM said. Any criminal cases should be “referred to the Public Prosecution Office, which alone has the authority to decide on detention,” he added.

‘... Activists have denounced the continued detention of dozens of people in Idlib for previously rejecting HTS policies, while releasing those accused of crimes in the name of preserving civil peace.’¹⁷³

- 12.3.2 Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT was unable to find further information about the government’s treatment of, or attitude towards, individuals who criticised or opposed HTS prior to the fall of the Al-Assad regime in December 2024.

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¹⁷³ Syria Direct, [The exceptions: Prisoners of conscience languish in Idlib...](#), 14 August 2025

Research methodology

The country of origin information (COI) in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual](#), 2024. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources

Commentary may be provided on source(s) and information to help readers understand the meaning and limits of the COI.

Wherever possible, multiple sourcing is used and the COI compared to ensure that it is accurate and balanced, and provides a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote.

Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

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Terms of Reference

The 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) provides a broad outline of the issues relevant to the scope of this note and forms the basis for the [country information](#).

The following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- legal context
- political context
 - summary of political situation and system
 - main recent political events
- opposition groups – size, structure, aims and activities
- treatment of groups by state actors
 - legal status – law to exercise freedoms of association, assembly and expression, including registration, operation of political parties and participation in elections
 - political groups:
 - ability to register as a political party or organisation with the government; set up offices; hold meetings, demonstrations, campaign and publish/broadcast aims in media
 - ability to participate in elections and presence in legislature
 - pressure, intimidation or arrest by the government
 - journalists:
 - freedom to report on different topics
 - pressure, intimidation or arrest by the government
 - activists:
 - freedom to advocate for different causes
 - pressure, intimidation or arrest by the government
 - protesters:
 - freedom to hold demonstrations
 - pressure, intimidation or arrest by the government
 - civil society groups and non-governmental organisations
 - freedom to operate
 - pressure, intimidation or arrest by the government

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Version control and feedback

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **8 April 2026**

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – End of section

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Changes from last version of this note

First version of this note.

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Feedback to the Home Office

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. If you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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