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SYRIA'S EXPANDING BUT FRAGILE CIVIC SPACE: OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS IN THE POST-ASSAD TRANSITION

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Cover photo: Drone shot shows the Damascus International Fair, the first edition held after the fall of Bashar al-Assad - Syria, September 2025

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Executive Summary

The fall of the Assad regime triggered a marked expansion in civic space in Syria. Associations are registering with fewer obstacles, public gatherings have returned, and criticism of officials circulates more freely. Debate is part of daily life again, and people can question authority without the fear that once defined public behavior. Although the legal basis for these changes is still incomplete, the change represents a clear shift from decades of tight control and has enabled civic activity on a scale not seen in years.

Yet progress is uneven and fragile. Access to information remains limited, participation in public affairs varies widely, and political parties are still suspended. Much of the new openness depends on political will rather than enforceable rights. Outdated laws still apply, and local authorities retain broad discretion. Civic space is wider in practice, but it lacks the structural safeguards needed to ensure that these gains endure.

Syria's civic environment is also not developing evenly across topics. Humanitarian work usually proceeds with little interference because it meets urgent needs and helps maintain stability. Political initiatives face much tighter oversight. Efforts related to reform, participation, accountability, or constitutional issues often meet higher barriers, stricter requirements, and attempts to reshape their content. In some cases, approvals are denied altogether, shutting down discussion before it begins.

Geography further shapes civic opportunity. Safer areas, such as Damascus, allow more open engagement. Regions marked by fear, instability, or sectarian tension, including the coast, remain subdued. Local authorities differ in how they regulate civic activity: some use rigid controls, others permit informal practice, and some tighten restrictions as they consolidate power. The movement of activists across regions reinforces these contrasts, making geography a defining factor in how civic space expands or contracts.

Openness has also shifted over time. The first months after the change in power were widely seen as a period of unusual openness, with a permissive atmosphere that allowed civic activity to flourish. As authorities reasserted control, oversight tightened, and approvals grew harder to obtain, especially for initiatives that did not fit official priorities or the roles envisioned for civic actors. Rising polarization and informal intimidation further narrowed the space, prompting self-censorship and fear. By mid-2025, growing mistrust and stricter controls pushed many activities into private or low-profile settings.

Personalities also shape civic space. With unclear rules and overlapping mandates, outcomes often depend on individual officials. Some enforce old regulations rigidly, slowing or blocking activities, while others allow events to proceed informally. Well-connected or politically aligned organizers usually face fewer obstacles, while lesser-known groups encounter delays, cancellations, and tighter scrutiny. In this discretionary system, civic actors

must decide whether to test limits or avoid them. The result is a fluid, uneven environment that leaves more critical or rights-focused groups especially exposed to unpredictable restrictions.

Risk tolerance also shapes how civic actors navigate the transition. Those willing to test limits see legal ambiguity as an opportunity to expand space, using the moment to push boundaries. More cautious groups rely on formal procedures, over-complying when rules are unclear and steering clear of anything that might draw scrutiny. These choices often reflect differences in networks, resources, and perceived protection. The result is a mixed landscape shaped by both caution and boldness, where progress depends as much on personal risk appetite as on formal rules.

Safeguarding and expanding civic space requires coordinated action across authorities, civic actors, and international partners. Authorities should halt enforcement of repressive laws, strengthen constitutional protections, modernize legislation governing civic life, and harmonize procedures nationwide. Civic actors should build coalitions, work with reform-minded officials, take the lead on legal reform, deepen civic education, and document violations. International partners must prioritize civic freedoms through their diplomacy, support institutional reform, offer flexible long-term funding, and integrate civic space into transition monitoring. Strengthening these foundations is essential to transform fragile openings into durable rights and prevent a slide back into controlled participation.

Civic space cannot be treated as conditional. It requires strong legal foundations and consistent institutional support. Without these, public participation remains exposed to shifting political moods and personal discretion. Syria now faces a critical choice between returning to controlled engagement or embracing a genuinely open civic environment that supports diverse voices and democratic renewal. The decision will shape the credibility of the transition and the country's long-term stability. Missing this moment would close off the very space Syrians need to rebuild their future on their own terms.

Introduction

The ousting of the Baath regime in December 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Syria's political and civic trajectory, ending more than five decades of authoritarian rule. Under Assad's rule, civic space was highly constrained. While the rights to association, expression, and assembly were legally recognized, they were systematically undermined in practice. Security agencies and bureaucratic gatekeepers controlled who could act, when, and under what conditions.¹ Public life was tightly regulated and channeled through state-sanctioned avenues, while independent activism faced obstruction, intimidation, or outright repression.²

Since the regime's collapse, Syria has experienced a visible and wide-ranging civic opening. In cities previously under regime control – particularly Damascus – citizens have begun reclaiming public squares, organizing demonstrations, convening community forums, and forming new associations. Civil society groups have reportedly found it easier to register; public criticism of officials has resurfaced; and transitional leaders have started promoting principles such as transparency and participation – concepts largely absent during the Assad era.³ For the first time in decades, public space is functioning as a site for civic debate and collective action, rather than as a tool of state control.

However, this opening has unfolded unevenly

and remains fragile. Although the March 2025 Constitutional Declaration affirms freedoms of association, expression, and participation, these guarantees are weakened by Article 23, which allows for broad restrictions on ambiguous grounds such as public order, morality, or national security.⁴ Repressive legal frameworks, inherited patterns of control, and fragmented administrative authority remain in place, leaving civil society governed by a patchwork of outdated laws and improvised rules.⁵ The absence of new rights-based laws for both civil society groups and political parties has produced a fragile and fractured civic and political space, raising concerns about the potential emergence of repressive legal frameworks in the future.

This fluidity presents both risks and opportunities. 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

1 Human Rights Watch, 'No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria', 16 October 2007, <https://shorturl.at/e7rkB>.

2 Omar Hallaj and Hassan Masri, 'Redefining Civic Boundaries: Exploring New Regulations and Challenges for NGO Registration in Post-Assad Syria', 8 April 2025, <https://www.lugarit.com/publications/publication-redefining-ngo-roles-in-post-assad-syria>.

3 Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, 'Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic H.E. Asaad Hassan al-Shibani at the 108th Session of the Executive Council (EC-108/4)', 6 March 2025, <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2025/03/ec10804%28e%29.pdf>.

4 Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights', 25 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights>.

5 Omar et al, 'Redefining Civic Boundaries'.

diverge from those of the transitional authorities – intensifying their concerns about the absence of legal protection.⁶

This report explores how civic space is taking shape during Syria's transition. It examines the emerging openings across key pillars of civic life: freedom of association, peaceful assembly, expression, access to information, and participation in public affairs. The report also unpacks the complex web of factors shaping this varied civic landscape. By tracing these dynamics, it helps map the boundaries of what is possible, what is tolerated, and what remains off limits. Finally, it outlines what is needed to transform these openings into lasting, rights-based guarantees.

The analysis is based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted in person by the author across Syria between January and November 2025. Interviewees included Syrian civil society actors, activists, analysts, and government officials. The interviewees were assured of anonymity to allow them to talk freely and mitigate the risks involved for them in sharing their experiences.

At its core, this report argues that Syria's civic landscape is defined by both progress and fragility. Civic actors are more active and visible than at any point in recent memory, yet their ability to operate remains uneven, conditional, and easily disrupted. Without legal reform, institutional restructuring, and enforceable constitutional safeguards, the gains achieved since the regime's collapse risk being reversed.

The stakes are critical. As Syria's transitional authorities rewrite the rules of public life, the choices made now will shape the character of the country's future civic and political order. If Syria's transition is to be credible, inclusive, and lasting, civic space must not be a temporary opening or a tolerated exception – it must be protected, institutionalized, and made irreversible.

⁶ Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, February 2025.

1. Civic Space during the Assad Regime

Syria's closed civic space under Assad was not an incidental casualty of war; it was a system of rule. The state fused law, the state of emergency, security practice, and patronage to convert rights into conditional permissions. On paper, the constitution and statutes referenced freedom of association, assembly, expression, and participation. In practice, the security services and ministerial gatekeepers defined when, how, and by whom those rights could be exercised.⁷ The effect was structural: civic life was canalized into instrumentalized, state-managed channels, while independent organization, mobilization, and scrutiny were either deterred or punished.

Freedom of Association

The right to association formed the cornerstone of Assad's system of control. The governing statute – Law 93 of 1958 on Associations and Private Institutions, later amended by Decree 224 of 1969 – was not designed to enable civil society but to discipline it. It codified discretionary registration, broad administrative tutelage, and the state's power to merge, suspend, or dissolve organizations at will.⁸ In practice, this meant the administration could decide who was allowed to exist, what activities were permissible, and with whom organizations could connect, both domestically and abroad.⁹

Foreign links were particularly sensitive. Affiliations, partnerships, or funding from outside Syria required prior notification and explicit approval, creating a built-in loyalty filter. No association could "join, participate, or merge" with any external body without notifying the competent authority, and registration requests could be denied on open-ended grounds such as "threats to public order" or "contradiction

⁷ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2024: Syria Country Report', February 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2024>.

⁸ Omar et al, 'Redefining Civic Boundaries'.

⁹ Muhammad Al-Sukari, 'Syrian Organizations and Associations: Building a National Strategy from the Legacy of Tyranny', 28 February 2025, <https://shorturl.at/GgCBP>

with national interests.”¹⁰ This was not an enabling framework but a form of command-and-control corporatism.

In the lived reality, that framework produced a two-tier civil society. Approved charities, religious groups, professional syndicates, and officially sanctioned “social” NGOs were tolerated so long as they avoided politics and aligned with state priorities, often acting as auxiliary arms of the regime’s social policy. By contrast, independent rights-based NGOs and groups found it almost impossible to register legally. Many operated informally under constant risk of imprisonment, while others were forced into exile.¹¹ In later years, this system of control was further consolidated through the growing influence of Asma al-Assad and the Syria Trust for Development, which became a central vehicle for channeling regime-approved civil society activities and sidelining independent initiatives.¹²

What emerged was not a framework for civic empowerment but an architecture of control – where association, charity, and even humanitarian relief were permitted only if they served regime priorities, and where the threat of bureaucratic suffocation or outright starvation was never far from reach.¹³

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The right to peaceful assembly in Syria was, at best, nominal. Though formally recognized in the constitution, it was heavily restricted in practice. Public gatherings required prior approval, which was routinely denied, and unauthorized demonstrations were often met with violent dispersal. The state viewed assembly not as a right to be protected, but as a threat to be contained.¹⁴

10 International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, ‘Associations and Private Insinuations Law and Amendments’, March 1992, https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Syria_93-1958-En.pdf.

11 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, February 2025.

12 Haid Haid, ‘Principled Aid in Syria: A Framework for International Agencies’, July 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/07/principled-aid-syria>.

13 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, February 2025.

14 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, April 2025.

This approach was reaffirmed in April 2011, as mass protests spread, when the government issued Legislative Decree 54/2011 on the “regulation of the right to peaceful demonstration.” While the title suggested reform, the substance reinforced the status quo: prior authorization remained mandatory, and authorities retained broad discretion to ban or disperse protests.

Rights organizations and legal scholars dismissed the law as superficial – an attempt to deflect international scrutiny while preserving the state’s ability to suppress dissent.¹⁵ In practice, peaceful protest continued to be treated as a security threat, not a civic right.

The Syrian uprising made this contradiction brutally clear. From spring 2011 onward, security forces fired on demonstrators, conducted mass arrests, and imposed sieges that deprived entire communities of basic services. Human rights organizations documented crimes against humanity on a near-weekly basis in the early months of the peaceful movement.¹⁶

The lifting of the decades-old Emergency Law in April 2011 did little to curb the powers of the security apparatus. Other restrictive laws – and a culture of de facto impunity – filled the gap. Legislative Decree 54, combined with vague “public order” provisions and the unchecked authority of intelligence services, created a pervasive chilling effect that reached far beyond the streets. Even cultural events, community meetings, and educational workshops could be shut down on security grounds, with organizers facing surveillance, detention, reputational attacks – or worse.¹⁷

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression in Syria was systematically suppressed through a dense network of overlapping laws and a security apparatus that equated dissent with subversion. Independent journalism was nearly non-existent, and criticism of the regime triggered

15 Nael Georges, ‘The Syrian Regime’s Legal “Reforms” (I): The Ruse of the Right to Protest’, The Legal Agenda, 16 December 2013, <https://urli.info/1jsNT>.

16 Human Rights Watch, ‘We’ve Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces’, 1 June 2011, <https://urli.info/1eEK9>.

17 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, February 2025.

arrest, surveillance, harassment, or forced exile.¹⁸

The 2011 Media Law (Decree 108), introduced amid early demands for reform, appeared to signal a shift toward greater pluralism. In practice, however, it reinforced the regime's grip on the press. The law upheld licensing monopolies, imposed broad content restrictions, and criminalized criticism of public institutions. It was widely viewed as a form of managed liberalization that preserved the regime's veto power over the boundaries of public discourse.¹⁹

As Syrians increasingly turned to digital platforms to express dissent, the state responded by expanding its legal and surveillance infrastructure. Law 20/2022 on cybercrime, introduced more than a decade into the conflict, relied on vague charges such as "false news" and "undermining national unity," giving prosecutors and security agencies wide latitude to target online speech. The law also required telecom providers to retain user data and granted investigators sweeping powers to monitor communications and extract digital evidence.²⁰ These measures further blurred legal boundaries and heightened the risks for journalists, activists, and ordinary users alike.

The cumulative effect of these repressive frameworks pushed Syria to the bottom of global press freedom rankings. In 2024, Reporters Without Borders ranked it 179 out of 180 countries – underscoring the extent to which freedom of expression remained not just suppressed, but actively criminalized.²¹ Speech, in all its forms, operated under a cloud of surveillance, censorship, and fear.

Right to Access Information

The right to access information – the public's ability to obtain data held by the state – was virtually absent from Syria's legal and institutional framework. Unlike many countries, Syria never enacted a dedicated freedom of information

18 Human Rights Watch, 'A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Assad's First Ten Years in Power', 16 July 2010, <https://urli.info/1jsNX>.

19 Naomi Hunt, 'New Syria media law entrenches state control', International Press Institute, 1 September 2011, <https://ipi.media/new-syria-media-law-entrenches-state-control/>.

20 Syrians For Truth and Justice, 'Syria: Cybercrime Law is an Additional Tool for Suppressing Freedom of Expression', 14 June 2022, <https://urli.info/1jsO0>.

21 Reporters Without Borders, "Syria", January 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/country/syria>.

(FOI) law. There was no independent oversight body, no statutory obligation for disclosure, and no clear public entitlement to request or receive government-held data.²² This absence stood in clear violation of international norms. The UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment 34 makes explicit that Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights includes the right to access information held by public authorities – a standard Syria ratified but never implemented.²³

In practice, access to information was governed by informal relationships, personal loyalty, and bureaucratic discretion. Patronage, rather than rights, determined what could be known. Ministries and state institutions operated under a culture of opacity, where even basic data – on public budgets, social spending, or infrastructure – was rarely published or publicly debated. This opacity was structural, not accidental. It shielded the regime from accountability, enabled corruption, and severely limited citizens' ability to monitor or challenge public policy.²⁴

The impact extended beyond governance into the humanitarian sphere. Aid agencies and UN bodies often faced restrictions on data collection, movement, and reporting. Requests for information were frequently delayed, denied, or rerouted through security services.²⁵ In effect, the state's refusal to institutionalize transparency created a severe accountability vacuum, undermining efforts at oversight and public participation.

Right to Participation in Public Affairs

Participation in public affairs was systematically hollowed out. Although the legal and institutional framework projected an appearance of inclusion, political life was tightly controlled and carefully choreographed to preserve regime dominance.

Elections were held regularly, but they served as

22 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, February 2025.

23 United Nations, 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights', July 2011, <https://docs.un.org/en/ccpr/c/gc/34>.

24 Haid Haid, Zaki Mahshi and Lina Khatib, 'Assessing Control and Power Dynamics in Syria', Chatham House, 13 November 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/assessing-control-and-power-dynamics-syria>.

25 Haid, (Principled Aid in Syria).

tightly managed exercises to legitimize the status quo rather than provide genuine political choice. The ruling Baath party and its allies in the National Progressive Front monopolized the political landscape, while opposition parties were banned, co-opted, or suppressed. Independent candidates were subject to rigorous security vetting, and those deemed disloyal were systematically excluded, harassed, or repressed.²⁶

This centralized model extended beyond national elections to local governance. Officials were often appointed by the Baath party or security agencies, and local councils functioned more as extensions of the regime than as representative institutions. Citizens who attempted to participate in policymaking or advocacy were met with suspicion, obstruction, or outright criminalization.²⁷

Rather than enabling public engagement, the system was built to control and contain it. Participation was tolerated only when it aligned with regime interests or served as a performance of legitimacy. The result was a civic space in which political rights existed in form but not in substance. Citizens were offered a tightly scripted version of participation, while being denied any meaningful influence over public affairs.

Overall, restrictions on these five pillars – association, assembly, expression, information, participation – reinforced each other to close civic space. Association rules prevented independent organization; assembly controls prevented mobilization; speech laws suppressed persuasion and critique; secrecy blocked scrutiny; and managed participation sealed the political arena. The superstructure that made it all work was the security sector. The legal and practical impunity enjoyed by the intelligence services, rooted in statutes that shielded officers from prosecution except through internal authorization from the security services themselves.²⁸

While the war further militarized society and tightened state control, isolated pockets of civic activity emerged – mostly through hyper-local,

informal initiatives carried out in private settings. These efforts operated under constant threat of detention, and were tolerated only when they aligned with regime interests or remained apolitical in nature.²⁹

Civic Engagement in Areas that Fell Outside Regime Control

In contrast to the restrictive environment under Assad, the early years of the Syrian revolution saw the emergence of vibrant civic spaces in territories outside regime control. The collapse of state institutions created a vacuum that grassroots actors swiftly moved to fill. Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), established at the onset of the uprising, laid the foundation for decentralized civic action. Their efforts evolved into local councils, volunteer networks, independent media outlets, and nascent civil society organizations. Though diverse in form – ranging from traditional communal structures to horizontal, democratic models – these initiatives collectively showcased the potential for alternative governance rooted in local agency and citizen participation.³⁰

During this early period, civic freedoms flourished in ways previously unimaginable. Without state oversight, freedom of association expanded rapidly. Activists formed organizations across a range of sectors, from humanitarian relief and education to rights advocacy and local governance. Peaceful assembly became a routine part of civic life, as protests, town halls, and cultural events occurred openly, serving as both expressions of resistance and platforms for community building. Citizen journalists and grassroots media outlets thrived, documenting developments on the ground, exposing abuses, and creating space for political debate. CSOs practiced participatory governance in support of local councils and created channels to consult communities to reflect local priorities. Collectively, these developments marked a profound departure from Syria's centralized, top-down political model, giving

26 Haid Haid, 'The illusion of legitimacy: unveiling Syria's sham elections', Chatham House, 16 July 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/illusion-legitimacy-unveiling-syrias-sham-elections>.

27 Haid et al, 'Assessing Control and Power'.

28 Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Rein in Security Services', 21 April 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/21/syria-rein-security-services>.

29 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, January 2025.

30 Joseph Daher, 'Syrian Civil Society in Conflict and Post-Conflict Setting', AUB, 5 December 2018, <https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/server/api/core/bitstreams/bb0f1776-a56c-48a8-a9e7-28a815f7bbaa/content>.

citizens a meaningful role in shaping public life.³¹

However, many of these early gains gradually eroded as armed groups and defacto authorities consolidated control across various areas. Civil society actors faced growing pressure to conform to dominant political or military agendas, and independent organizations encountered increasing restrictions. The space for peaceful assembly and free expression shrank, particularly in areas controlled by hardline factions. Access to information and participation in public affairs also declined, undermined by intensifying militarization, persistent insecurity, and the absence of legal protections for civic engagement. That said, levels of tolerance and repression varied considerably between territories, shaped by the identity of the ruling faction, local power dynamics, and the extent of community resistance.³²

In parallel, the Syrian diaspora developed its own civic infrastructure. Exiled activists, professionals, and technocrats established humanitarian NGOs, rights-monitoring organizations, media platforms, and advocacy networks abroad. Although physically distant from Syria, these groups maintained strong ties with local actors and played a vital role in documenting violations, delivering aid, facilitating access to information, and supporting civic initiatives on the ground.³³

The legacy of civic experimentation, both inside Syria and across the diaspora, continues to leave a profound mark on the country's transitional landscape. Born out of necessity during a time of collapse and resistance, these initiatives preserved civic life amid violence, repression, and fragmentation. Today, they are not only sustaining engagement but actively shaping efforts to defend and expand civic space, advocate for rights, and influence the direction of Syria's fragile and uncertain transition.³⁴

2. Shift in Civic Space in the Transition

The fall of the Assad regime has brought noticeable changes to civic space – visible both in daily practice and in the political discourse of the transitional authorities. Associations are registering in greater numbers, facing fewer bureaucratic obstacles. Peaceful assemblies have reappeared in public squares and, in many cases, have been supported rather than suppressed. Open criticism of policy decisions now circulates more freely. Officials now speak more openly about transparency and participation than at any point in recent decades.³⁵ These shifts represent a significant departure from the restrictive civic environment that defined the Assad era.

However, this opening has not unfolded evenly across all aspects of civic life. While freedom of expression has expanded considerably, progress in securing access to information has lagged. Similarly, participation in public affairs remains limited, hindered by the absence of meaningful engagement channels and legal barriers to forming political parties. Moreover, these gains remain insecure. Although the Constitutional Declaration incorporates international human rights treaties (Article 12) and guarantees freedoms of association, expression, and participation, these commitments are significantly weakened by Article 23. This provision allows for broad restrictions in the name of "national security," "public order," or "public morals," without clear standards of necessity or proportionality, and without oversight from an independent judiciary. In this context, civic freedoms rely more on political will than on enforceable rights.³⁶

The persistence of outdated legal frameworks further complicates the landscape. In the absence of a functioning legislature, legacy laws – governing associations, media, and cybercrime – remain in effect. These are often applied inconsistently and at

31 Rana Khalaf, Oula Ramadan and Friederike Stolleis, 'Activism in Difficult Times Civil Society Groups in Syria', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 19 August 2014, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/11162.pdf>.

32 Joseph, 'Syrian Civil Society'.

33 Nora Ragab and Amer Katbeh, 'Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe', Arab Reform Initiative, 5 December 2018, <https://urli.info/1jsOd>.

34 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, January 2025.

35 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, April 2025.

36 Fadel Abdulghany, 'The Syrian Constitutional Declaration between Requirements for Stability and Principles of Good Governance', Rowaq Arabi, 16 September 2025, <https://urli.info/1jsOf>.

the discretion of local officials, creating a patchwork legal environment. The result is a hybrid civic space: while new opportunities for engagement exist, they are precarious – promising, but far from guaranteed. If left unaddressed, this system risks solidifying into a more sophisticated form of civil society control. But if guided carefully, it could form the basis for lasting, enforceable civic freedoms.

This chapter explores how these dynamics are playing out across the core dimensions of civic life – association, peaceful assembly, expression, access to information, and participation in public affairs. It highlights where progress has been made, where vulnerabilities persist, and what is needed to transform openings into durable rights.

Freedom of Association

The transition in Syria has significantly reshaped the landscape for associations. Although transitional authorities required all existing associations to re-register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL) – a step that drew criticism from many Syrian organizations – the process has become far easier and more accessible than it was under the former regime.³⁷ Unlike the situation then, registration is now faster and more flexible and often completed within weeks rather than months or years. The removal of security agencies from the registration process has further eased registration and day-to-day operations for civic groups.³⁸ Open-source data indicates that nearly 2,500 organizations had registered by June 2025.³⁹ Notably, this includes human rights organizations, a development that would have been virtually impossible under the previous system.

MoSAL's introduction of conditional approvals has also allowed organizations to begin operating while finalizing paperwork. However, this provisional status is limited to six months; if the required documents are not submitted within that period, the organization will not be permitted to continue operating. This pragmatic measure has enabled local initiatives to

37 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, April 2025.

38 Omar et al, 'Redefining Civic Boundaries'.

39 Omer Alaa Eldin, 'Civil society strengthens its presence in Syria', Enab Baladi, 24 June 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/06/civil-society-strengthens-its-presence-in-syria/>.

re-emerge, diaspora-based organizations to return, and new NGOs to establish themselves.⁴⁰ The scope of activities has likewise expanded: associations can now register across multiple sectors and provinces, well beyond the narrow confines of the old system.⁴¹ Notably, MoSAL has been working on institutionalizing reform by launching consultations with civil society actors on a new NGO law. Although these dialogues are at an early stage, they suggest a willingness to move toward a more enabling environment.⁴²

Despite recent progress, significant concerns remain. Old laws – most notably Law No. 93 of 1958 – are still formally in effect.⁴³ While many of these laws were initially suspended in practice, some have gradually begun to be re-enforced, raising alarm among NGOs operating in Syria.⁴⁴ The latest example involves a circular issued on 1 October 2025 by the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, requiring nongovernmental organizations to obtain prior approval before receiving any foreign funding or joining international bodies.⁴⁵ The decree, which cites Law No. 93 of 1958, prompted 31 NGOs working in Syria to sign a joint statement opposing the move.⁴⁶ They argued that enforcing the law would recreate a hostile environment for civil society. The statement warned that such measures could restrict civil liberties and serve as a pretext to silence critical or opposition voices.

The implementation of these outdated laws has also created practical obstacles for groups seeking to register. Many have reported delays due to complex bureaucratic procedures and challenges in fulfilling registration requirements, including obtaining city council approvals and opening bank accounts. Similar concerns were raised about the

40 Author interview with government official, Damascus, April 2025.

41 Author interview with government official, Damascus, February 2025.

42 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, June 2025.

43 Syrian Lawyer Club, 'Law on Associations and Private Institutions and Its Amendments' July 1993, <https://url.info/1eEKG>.

44 Author interview with NGO representative, Aleppo, October 2025.

45 Syria TV, 'Social Affairs Warns Unregistered Associations', 2 October 2025, <https://www.syria.tv/331309>.

46 Syrians for Truth and Justice, 'Joint Position Paper on the Letter of the Minister of Social Affairs', 22 October 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/ar/ورقة-موقف-مشتركة- حول-كتاب- وزيرة-الشؤون/>.

requirement for official approval prior to any public activity. This not only causes delays but can result in event cancellations when approval is denied. Some interviewees noted that this mechanism is sometimes used to block initiatives that do not align with the views of the transitional authorities – a concern explored in detail in the following section.⁴⁷

Interviewees also expressed frustration with the temporary licenses issued to CSOs upon registration. These six-month permits must be renewed once they expire, which has made long-term planning and securing multi-year funding difficult.⁴⁸ However, officials have indicated that these are being increasingly converted into permanent permits once all conditions are met.⁴⁹ The selective enforcement of these laws has created a legal grey zone, leaving NGOs vulnerable to arbitrary interpretation and inconsistent practices across regions.

These challenges are compounded by overlapping institutional mandates. CSOs must obtain approval not only from MoSAL, but also from a range of other bodies – such as the Higher Aid Commission (HAC), the Directorate of Political Affairs (DPA), governors, and administrative directorates. This duplication not only delays implementation but often leads to conflicting decisions. When one body approves an activity, and another rejects it, the decision of the authority with the most influence in the local area typically prevails.⁵⁰

In terms of mandate, governors oversee their respective provinces, while directorates are confined to specific sectors such as health or education. The HAC primarily focuses on humanitarian operations, whereas the DPA is responsible for political and cultural activities. Notably, many CSOs report that the DPA exerts disproportionate influence over civic life, effectively carrying forward rigid political vetting practices into the transitional phase – a trend explored in greater detail in the following section.⁵¹ The result is a fragmented regulatory environment, where associations must navigate a patchwork of rules, selective enforcement, and bureaucratic discretion that varies from one region

or institution to another.⁵²

Finally, uncertainty looms over the future legal framework. It is not yet clear whether forthcoming legislation will dismantle outdated restrictions and guarantee genuine civic freedoms, or instead entrench a more polished form of “managed” civil society.⁵³ Despite these risks, the current environment for assembly and association remains more open than at any point in Syria’s recent history – an opportunity that, if consolidated through reform, could form a foundation for democratic participation.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Peaceful assembly has emerged as one of the clearest markers of Syria’s shifting civic space. The fall of the Assad regime opened the door for Syrians to reclaim public life through protest, dialogue, and civic action – forms of expression that had been tightly controlled for decades. Streets once dominated by secret police are now being used for political engagement, from Umayyad Square in Damascus to al-Karama in Sweida.⁵⁴

Citizens across political, religious, and ideological lines have managed to gather to demand justice, question policies, and call for reform. What was once impossible is now part of everyday civic life. Forums, sit-ins, and vigils have become more common and relatively easy to organize.⁵⁵ Many activists describe the early few months of the transition as a rare moment of openness. Public events increasingly feature voices critical of both the former regime and transitional authorities, a level of dissent previously confined to private or exile spaces. These activities have generally not faced repression.⁵⁶

However, this progress remains fragile. The legal foundation for assembly is incomplete. Law No. 93 of 1958 – the restrictive Associations Law – remains in force, and no modern replacement has been enacted. As a result, civil society groups and protest organizers operate under ambiguous legal conditions, uncertain

47 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, October 2025.

48 Omar et al, ‘Redefining Civic Boundaries’.

49 Author interview with government official, Damascus, June 2025.

50 Omar et al, ‘Redefining Civic Boundaries’.

51 Ibid.

52 Author interview with analyst, Damascus, July 2025.

53 Author interview with civil society representative, Aleppo, October 2025.

54 Author interview with civil society representative, Sweida, April 2025.

55 Author interview with civil activist, Aleppo, April 2025.

56 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, February 2025.

whether today's freedoms will last.⁵⁷

Organizing public events still requires navigating a complex approval process. What should be a matter of notification to the authorities often involves formal authorization. While some authorities have adopted a more permissive stance, enforcement is uneven. In one city, an event may proceed freely; in another, it might be delayed, reshaped, or discouraged altogether. This reflects both the transitional nature of the state and the discretionary power retained by local officials.⁵⁸

Restrictions are often imposed in the name of "public order" or "national unity," yet the criteria vary widely.⁵⁹ Without a clear legal framework, the right to assemble depends more on political context than on enforceable protections. While assemblies are more accepted, they remain unofficial and vulnerable to reversal. The rights to protest, organize marches, or convene large gatherings still lack codified guarantees.⁶⁰

While the authorities do not appear to have directly dispersed any protests during the transition, concerns have emerged over their failure to protect certain demonstrations – particularly those seen as politically unaligned. This issue is examined in greater detail in the following section.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression has been among the most visible areas of change during the transition. Authorities have pledged to support a "free press" and emphasized free speech as a break with decades of censorship and repression. Article 13 of the Constitutional Declaration explicitly guarantees this right. Yet freedom of expression remains an area where behavioral change has outpaced structural reform.

Since the fall of the regime, Syrians have been able to speak more openly – including when criticizing the transitional authorities – without the pervasive fear of persecution that once stifled dissent. Public

57 Omar et al, 'Redefining Civic Boundaries'.

58 Author interview with NGO representative, Homs, February 2025.

59 Abdul Salam Faye, 'Syria Cancels Participation in Paris Meetings in Protest Against the Hasakah Conference' Anadolu English, 9 August 2025, <http://v.aa.com.tr/3654748>

60 Author interview with analyst, Damascus, July 2025.

spaces, once tightly controlled, have become arenas for uncensored dialogue. Citizens feel more confident expressing their views, scrutinizing the actions of those in power, and demanding reforms. Writers, journalists, and activists now publish openly critical work on governance, corruption, and security practices, steadily testing the limits of this new space for expression.⁶¹

This ability to speak and write freely represents one of the most meaningful gains of the transition, giving Syrians a voice in shaping their political future and reinforcing the central role of free expression in democratic life. At the same time, criminal provisions against peaceful expression remain on the books, even if they have not been enforced. Their continued existence raises concerns about the fragility of these new freedoms. As long as Decree 108/2011 and Law 20/2022 remain enforceable, openness depends less on legal guarantees than on the discretion of those in power.⁶²

Right to Access Information

Transitional authorities have consistently presented transparency and access to information as central to the new political order. The March 2025 Constitutional Declaration formally enshrines this, committing the state to the "effective and transparent use of public resources" and guaranteeing access to information as part of a rights-based transition.⁶³ Yet, these commitments remain largely aspirational. Without implementing legislation or institutional mechanisms, the principles are not translated into everyday governance.

To date, no comprehensive legal framework or public platform has been created to ensure direct access to state-held information. There is no independent information commissioner, no appeals process for denied requests, and no unified open-data portal through which citizens can review administrative, legal, or financial decisions. Despite the rhetoric of transparency, sectors such as security, public finance, and the judiciary remain opaque, with

61 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, October 2025.

62 Reporters Without Borders, 'RSF calls on Syria's new authorities to adopt seven priority measures in line with their promises to safeguard press freedom', 7 January 2025, <https://rsf.org/s/94877>.

63 Constitution Net, 'Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic', 13 March 2025, <https://url.info/1js0m>.

disclosure dependent more on the discretion of individual officials than on enforceable rights.⁶⁴ This recreates the same culture of opacity that defined state practice under the former regime.

Instead of institutionalized disclosure systems, authorities have leaned heavily on Facebook pages, Telegram channels, WhatsApp group chats, spokesperson statements, and selective engagement with media-aligned influencers to communicate information. These channels are irregular, politically curated, and reactive. In some cases, significant economic or administrative decisions – including subsidy adjustments and public-sector restructuring – first appeared through social-media leaks or informal messaging before any official announcement. As a result, local communities often learn of policy changes through hearsay, screenshots, and rumors rather than authoritative documentation.⁶⁵ In a post-conflict setting where trust is already fragile, this fragmented information environment allows misinformation to circulate quickly and can be exploited to inflame tensions or manipulate public sentiment.

Journalists, researchers, and civil society actors face similar obstacles. Requests for information on public budgets, procurement, appointments, and judicial procedures frequently meet delays, partial disclosure, or outright refusal. With no clear procedures outlining what must be proactively published and how refusals can be challenged, access to information depends on informal channels and personal networks – precisely the dynamic the transition claims to dismantle.⁶⁶

In Syria's transitional context, access to information is not a technical matter; it is foundational to political credibility. Public trust in institutions is already fragile after decades of authoritarian governance and conflict. Without consistent transparency on budgets, decision-making, and reform processes, claims of institutional break from the past risk appearing superficial. Reliance on selective disclosure not only undermines confidence but also deepens inequality of access, benefiting those with proximity to power or digital literacy while marginalizing rural communities, displaced people, and minority groups.⁶⁷

Right to Participation in Public Affairs

Transitional authorities have repeatedly emphasized the right to political participation, pledging inclusive representation and transparent elections as markers of a break from authoritarian rule. This commitment is also grounded in the Constitutional Declaration: Article 14 guarantees political participation, affirming that citizens have the right to take part in public affairs through free elections and to organize politically in a pluralistic system, following the issuing of a new law.⁶⁸ These commitments were framed as guarantees of universal suffrage, pluralism, and citizen empowerment.

In practice, however, delivery has lagged behind promises. The suspension and dissolution of all political parties during the transition removed even the limited pluralism that previously existed. No new parties' law was introduced to regulate the formation of political movements, establish rules for competition, or protect the right to organize. This legal vacuum produced a political standstill. Syrians who sought to run for office, form political groups, or articulate policy alternatives were left without credible, protected channels through which to participate.⁶⁹

Participation has instead been largely confined to consultative processes managed by transitional authorities and the committees appointed by them. These consultations, however, were often perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Concerns were repeatedly raised over the national conference and the drafting of the Constitutional Declaration, particularly regarding how consultations were conducted and whose voices were prioritized. Although presented as inclusive, the process was widely viewed as top-down rather than genuinely deliberative.⁷⁰ Similarly, the formation of the legislative body drew comparable criticism, with the selection process described as opaque and lacking transparency, and with persistent concerns over who

64 Ibid.

65 Author interview with civil activist, Tartus, April 2025.

66 Author interview with journalist, Aleppo, June 2025.

67 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, October 2025.

⁶⁸ Constitution Net, 'Constitutional Declaration'.

69 Author interview with analyst, Daraa, October 2025.

was included and who was excluded.⁷¹

By contrast, more meaningful participation appears to be taking place within local governance structures. After Assad's fall in December 2024, communities quickly moved to fill the governance vacuum, establishing local councils, family councils, and civic committees to deliver services, mediate disputes, and maintain order. These grassroots initiatives created rare openings for citizen involvement in decisions over services, security, and even justice. Yet participation remained uneven, with opportunities to engage varying sharply from one locality to another, often depending on the profile and influence of the individuals involved or their extended families.⁷² Some observers see this as part of a deeper structural issue. They noted that authorities are willing to engage with individuals when their participation is framed through personal, familial, or tribal affiliations. However, they appear reluctant to engage with actors as representatives of organized political entities.

Taken together, the post-Assad transition has opened civic space on a scale not seen in Syria for decades. Rights that were once tightly restricted – particularly association, assembly, and expression – are now being exercised with far greater freedom, even if the legal guarantees underpinning them remain incomplete. The changes are visible: organizations have re-formed, protests have returned to public squares, debate has re-entered everyday life, and citizens are able to question those in power without the pervasive fear that once defined public interaction.

However, this opening has not unfolded evenly across all dimensions of civic life. The right to access information has advanced far less than other areas, leaving communities dependent on informal channels and vulnerable to misinformation, rumor, and discretionary decision-making. Participation in public affairs shows similar variation: in some areas, local councils and civic committees have provided meaningful avenues for engagement, while elsewhere political participation remains largely

consultative, symbolic, or dependent on personal networks rather than protected rights.

Moreover, the gains observed remain fragile. Much of the progress rests on shifting political will rather than consolidated legal guarantees. Outdated laws remain in force, regulatory frameworks vary by region, and key decisions continue to rely on the discretion of local authorities. The result is a civic space that is open in principle but uneven in practice, and therefore vulnerable to reversal without deeper institutional reform.

These variations reflect the broader nature of the transition itself: a moment in which new norms are emerging alongside the remnants of old governance structures, and where institutional change is underway but far from complete. These dynamics have produced a civic environment that is *possible but precarious*: one where new forms of engagement are emerging, but where the limits of what is permissible remain elastic, negotiable, and subject to reversal.

3. Understanding Variations in Syria's Civic Space

Just as civic life varies across different domains, the space for civic engagement has developed unevenly within each sphere. The result is a civic landscape that is dynamic, contested, and often inconsistent. Research points to a web of overlapping factors that shape this variation: the nature of the activity, the topic covered, its geographic setting, security conditions, bureaucratic demands, the risk appetite of those involved, and the personalities of officials or organizers (including their identity). These variables rarely operate in isolation; rather, they overlap, producing environments in which civic activities may be enabled in one setting and restricted in another.

This unevenness appears to have deepened over time. The immediate months following the change in power were widely described as a period of openness, marked by informal permissions and a permissive civic atmosphere. Since then, however, a gradual tightening of oversight has taken hold, with restrictions – including outright rejections –

71 The Day After, 'An Analytical Reading of the Formation of the People's Assembly', October 2025, <https://urli.info/1jsOr>.

72 Gregory Waters, 'Local Governance in Post-Assad Syria: A Hybrid State Model for the Future?', Carnegie, 15 July 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/local-governance-in-post-assad-syria-a-hybrid-state-model-for-the-future?lang=en>.

becoming more common than before, especially for activities that do not align with the authorities' priorities or views.

The substance of an activity has been a significantly determining factor. Initiatives related to humanitarian assistance and essential services are generally encouraged, reflecting both urgent need and broad political consensus. By contrast, activities focused on political participation, accountability, or community mobilization are more likely to attract scrutiny and, in some cases, direct obstruction. Geography further compounds these disparities. Some areas, such as Damascus, have experienced active and visible civic engagement, while others, including Hama and coastal regions, remain constrained by restrictive local authorities, insecurity, or social tensions.

Personalities also play a crucial role. In the absence of clear legal standards and consistent procedures, enforcement often hinges on the discretion of individual officials and the willingness of civic actors themselves to test or avoid boundaries. Overlapping mandates and ambiguous lines of authority enable some actors to negotiate space, while leaving others vulnerable to unpredictable restrictions. In practice, this fluid environment especially increases the vulnerabilities of civic groups whose political or human rights positions differ from those of the transitional authorities.

This section examines these variables in turn, illustrating how each shapes the contours of civic space in Syria's transition – and how, taken together, they define what is possible, what is tolerated, and what remains off limits.

Nature of Activity

The substance of a civic initiative often determines how much space it is given. Humanitarian actions generally proceed unhindered, while anything seen as political faces closer scrutiny.

This difference reflects the urgency and consensus around humanitarian needs. Volunteer-driven campaigns – street cleanups, infrastructure repair, food and medical aid – are rarely disrupted. Authorities often see them as filling gaps left by weak and underfunded state institutions. These actions not only receive tacit approval but are sometimes

actively encouraged for their stabilizing effect.⁷³

In contrast, civic activities that engage with political themes – such as participation, party formation, or constitutional reform – are subject to much closer scrutiny. While such events are not typically banned outright, the political affairs Directorate – primarily responsible for regulating political activities in the public sphere – may impose barriers that discourage organizers or press them to reframe their activities.⁷⁴ Interviewees identified several topics flagged as particularly sensitive, including constitutional debates, political reform, party organization, and civic accountability, all of which may face approval difficulties.

In some instances, authorities have denied approval altogether. For example, one organization sought to host a public discussion in Damascus on the Constitutional Declaration and its implications for the March agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The request was rejected on the grounds that the subject was "too sensitive." The officer in charge stipulated that such an event could only proceed if a government representative were present to ensure the issue was handled appropriately. Without this approval, the organizers were unable to secure a venue, effectively blocking the discussion from taking place.⁷⁵

Interference in political activities is even more evident in other contexts. At Latakia University, the administration issued a directive requiring prior written approval for all political gatherings. The order followed an initiative by medical students to display photographs of classmates killed in recent violence in the coastal region. Though meant as a gesture of remembrance, the display was treated as political dissent.⁷⁶ By pre-emptively restricting even symbolic acts, the university effectively shut down space for collective mourning and public dialogue. Students argued that obliging organizers to seek approval, rather than simply notify the administration, reflected a broader intent to control the content of campus

73 Author interview with NGO representative, Hama, February 2025.

74 Author interview with civil society representative, Lattakia, April 2025.

75 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, June 2025.

76 Saed al-Haj Ali, 'A Student Sit-In Ends with an Administrative Circular That Sparks Controversy at Latakia University' al-Hal, 11 September 2025, <https://7al.net/?p=381338>.

activities. In their view, the policy was less about ensuring safety or order and more about determining which forms of expression would be permitted and which would be silenced.⁷⁷

Elsewhere, authorities responded to political activities with even greater severity. In Idlib, local authorities threatened legal action against women who staged a silent protest outside the Health Directorate, carrying a banner that read: “Syrian blood is forbidden to spill by another Syrian.” Organized during a period of heightened tension following violence in Sweida, the protest was intended as a peaceful call for unity. Rather than addressing the message, the Health Directorate publicly condemned the action and announced plans to pursue legal charges for holding an unapproved gathering.⁷⁸ The response drew sharp criticism from civil society groups – not only for criminalizing peaceful expression but also for exceeding the Directorate’s institutional authority.⁷⁹ The lack of any response or clarification from higher transitional bodies was widely interpreted as tacit approval, or at best, troubling indifference to institutional overreach.⁸⁰

Taken together, these examples highlight the disparity in how humanitarian and political activities are treated. The absence of a clear, publicly endorsed framework for protecting peaceful political engagement leaves civic actors vulnerable to arbitrary decisions by local authorities.

A Differentiated Geography of Civic Space

Civic space has also developed unevenly across the country, shaped less by formal laws than by a complex interplay of local security conditions, bureaucratic oversight, and activist networks. These dynamics help explain why some areas witnessed bursts of active civic engagement, while others remained fragmented, constrained, or entirely silent.

Security is a decisive factor. Before violence erupted

77 Author interview with civil activist, Lattakia, October 2025.

78 Hadia al-Mansour, ‘Women’s Protest Outside the Idlib Health Directorate Sparks Controversy’, al-Araby al-Jadid, 17 July 2025, <https://edgs.co/bp7w5>.

79 Author interview with civil society representative, Idlib, October 2025.

80 Author interview with civil activist, Idlib, October 2025.

in July, Sweida had one of the most vibrant and open civic spaces in the country. The city’s de facto autonomy, bolstered by protection from local armed groups, shielded civic life from interference – including from transitional authorities in Damascus. This relative safety allowed a culture of activism to take root, with residents organizing events freely in both public and private spaces. Karama Square, in particular, became a symbol of open civic engagement.⁸¹

In stark contrast, Homs was paralyzed by sectarian tensions and a wave of kidnappings and revenge killings. While some public activity continued – such as gatherings in Clock Square – fear and instability severely limited broader participation. One 23-year-old activist from Homs recalled:

“At the beginning of the liberation, I was the only one from my area who dared to go to a different neighborhood to participate in civic activities. Back then, I moved freely, thinking people’s fears were exaggerated. But as security incidents increased – kidnappings, murders, revenge killings – I began to fear going out after 4 pm. This has limited my ability, and that of many others, to take part in civic activities.”⁸²

Bureaucratic control – or its absence – also shaped the contours of civic space. In northwest Syria, particularly in Idlib, older systems of oversight set up by the Salvation Government continued even after the fall of the regime. Local authorities maintained rigid procedures requiring event registration, prior approvals, and detailed disclosures, including agendas, attendee lists, and funding sources. This regulatory apparatus allowed them to tightly control which civic activities could take place.

One activist explained: “Local authorities in Idlib still apply the same control and restrictive measures as before. For example, women’s rights groups cannot openly organize gender-related activities. An event on marital rape would not be tolerated, even in private. Civic actors often have to reframe such discussions under broader, less controversial themes like ‘women’s participation in public life’ to avoid backlash.”⁸³

Damascus, by contrast, presented a different picture.

81 Author interview with civil activist, Sweida, April 2025.

82 Author interview with civil activist, Homs, February 2025.

83 Author interview with civil activist, Idlib, July 2025.

The collapse of the regime created a legal vacuum that left civic space largely unregulated, at least initially. In addition, transitional authorities, eager to present the capital as a model of post-regime stability and reform, adopted a more flexible approach than they did in other areas.

One interviewee described the approach in these words: “Since entering Damascus, the transitional authorities wanted to present it as a success model for their ruling. As such, they were not strict in enforcing regulations on civic activities. Even when they were unhappy with events that took place without approval, they didn’t stop them. Instead, they reached out afterward to express their discontent and emphasized that it shouldn’t happen again. In this way, they tried to gradually enforce procedures without direct confrontation.”⁸⁴ This non-confrontational approach gave civic actors more room to operate – at least in the short term.

The flow of civic actors into and across regions further shaped local civic dynamics. Damascus saw an influx of activists from other parts of Syria and from abroad, creating a level of energy and momentum not replicated elsewhere. Public spaces buzzed with debate, discussion, and organizing. Activists described this as a moment of unprecedented openness.⁸⁵ By contrast, Syria’s coastal areas remained largely dormant. Deep-rooted fears and mutual suspicion – both within communities and toward the authorities – have stifled civic life even before restrictions began to formally tighten.

As one interviewee put it: “People were afraid of going to the coastal areas due to fear of violence. That region was a completely unknown territory, especially for those who lived outside government-held areas, limiting the outside-driven civic activities seen elsewhere. The locals were also suspicious of the transitional authorities and reluctant to engage in any new civic initiatives. Even before restrictions began to formally tighten, these dynamics were enough to keep civic space quiet.”⁸⁶

Taken together, these patterns reveal how Syria’s civic space has been shaped far more by local dynamics than national policies. Each region followed its own path. Geography didn’t just define opportunity – it

set the boundaries of what was possible, what was feared, and what was punished. Precisely put, Syria’s civic landscape remains as fractured and localized as the political order itself.

Increased Restrictions Over Time

Civic space has shifted over time – initially marked by openness in the early months of the transition, followed by a steady tightening of control. These changes were not driven by new laws, but by political shifts, growing insecurity, rising polarization, and the authorities’ increasing consolidation of power.

The immediate aftermath of regime change was widely seen as a “golden period.” During this time, civic expression flourished across the country. People gathered freely without permits, organizing demonstrations, sit-ins, debates, and cultural events. Activities took place in cafés, schools, and even private homes, often without prior approval. As one participant recalled, “It wasn’t just that you could hold events – it was that no one really stopped you. It felt like the city belonged to everyone.”⁸⁷

This openness reflected a moment when state institutions were weak, oversight was minimal, and enthusiasm for participation ran high. People from across the political spectrum – secular, Islamist, and unaffiliated – found space to engage. “You could hear secular chants one day and Islamist slogans the next,” one interviewee noted. “There was acceptance from all sides. That kind of coexistence, even if short-lived, was rare and raw.”⁸⁸

By March, however, the space began to narrow. Transitional authorities started reasserting control. Public venues that once operated on informal approvals now require official documentation. “At first, a verbal okay from an official was enough,” said one organizer. “Then suddenly you needed letters – stamped, signed – it got bureaucratic fast.”⁸⁹ Organizers were soon asked to submit detailed agendas, participant lists, and even the CVs of speakers and trainers, adding layers of scrutiny. Without formal permits, securing venues has become

87 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, June 2025.

88 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, February 2025.

89 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, June 2025.

84 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, July 2025.

85 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, April 2025.

86 Author interview with NGO representative, Lattakia, June 2025.

increasingly difficult.⁹⁰

This bureaucratic creep was accompanied by a growing social backlash. Self-appointed enforcers – what some interviewees described as a “shabiha mentality” – began harassing or attacking those seen as dissenters.⁹¹ One incident in early March illustrated this shift: during a peaceful protest in Damascus held in solidarity with victims of violence in the coastal region, demonstrators were attacked by unidentified men.⁹² The slogans had focused on accountability and human rights, not direct opposition to the authorities, yet the protest was violently disrupted. Police eventually intervened by firing into the air to disperse the crowd, but the damage was done.⁹³

This kind of mob censorship – carried out by individuals aligned with or supportive of the authorities – had a chilling effect. Activists expressed concern that even legally approved events were no longer safe. “It wasn’t just about permits anymore,” said one. “It was about whether you could hold an event without being attacked.”⁹⁴

After the violent clashes in Sweida in July, conditions deteriorated further. Both formal restrictions and informal pressures intensified. Topics such as political reform, international involvement, and government accountability became increasingly sensitive – even in closed-door settings. This led to stricter enforcement of bureaucratic approval processes and a noticeable increase in the rejection of applications, particularly for organizers without a well-established relationship with the transitional authorities.⁹⁵

Several interviewees also voiced concern about how the authorities perceive the role of civil society. Officials, they explained, tend to view civil society organizations as filling gaps in state capacity rather than as independent actors. As a result, when CSOs address issues the state considers part of its own

90 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, June 2025

91 Author interview with analyst, Damascus, October 2025.

92 Jelnar al-Ali, ‘Security Forces Disperse Silent Vigil in Damascus Mourning Victims of Syria’s Coast After Clashes’, al-Araby al-Jadid, 9 March 2025, <https://shorturl.at/SUbyp>.

93 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, June 2025.

94 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, June 2025.

95 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, October 2025.

agenda – such as decentralization or security sector reform – they encounter far less tolerance and greater scrutiny.

The head of a Syrian organization described these changes: “Many of the topics we were able to work on in the past – governance, reconciliation, civic peace – have become much harder to get approvals for. One approval we received was even revoked a couple of weeks after it was granted, just after we had begun implementing the project. The cancellation came at the request of the Directorate of Political Affairs in the province, but was communicated to us by the Directorate of Social Affairs. We were bluntly told that the government is working on these issues and that we should focus on something else.”⁹⁶

Social polarization also deepened further after the violent clashes in Sweida. Debates turned toxic, and communities fractured over how to interpret the events there and beyond. Accusations of betrayal, sectarianism, or foreign allegiance fueled mistrust and stifled open discussion.⁹⁷

One incident underscored the growing danger. During a protest condemning the killing of Syrian civilians, demonstrators were attacked by a group of unidentified men who beat and dispersed them.⁹⁸ Protesters had informed the local police station the day before, yet no officers were deployed to ensure their safety. Although the names of the attackers were submitted and legal complaints filed, none of the perpetrators were detained – raising serious concerns about the authorities’ willingness to act.⁹⁹

As fear of informal reprisals spread, trust eroded, and self-censorship took hold. One participant described the emotional aftermath: “I experienced similar violence in 2011 from the regime’s shabiha, but this time I was completely paralyzed. It was a mix of shock and betrayal. It made me question who I could trust, who we were doing this for, and who my enemies really are. I still don’t have answers. That confusion is why I’ve stopped participating in similar activities.”

96 Author interview with civil society representative, Tartus, October 2025.

97 Author interview with journalist, Damascus, October 2025.

98 Syrian Network For Human Rights, ‘Calls for the Syrian Government to Prosecute Attackers of Civil Activists During a Peaceful Protest Outside the People’s Assembly in Damascus,’ 20 July 2025, <https://shorturl.at/QWxtM>.

99 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, October 2025.

While many activists withdrew from public life, others shifted their activities to private homes or low-profile venues. Even closed-door workshops became more discreet – especially when the topic risked provoking backlash from supporters of the transitional authorities. Events were no longer publicized, and invitations were restricted to trusted circles.¹⁰⁰

The early promise of a pluralistic civic revival has slowly eroded – replaced by overregulation, mistrust, and fear. As the political climate hardened, psychological barriers grew. What had once been open became hidden. What had been celebrated became cautious. Organizers now debated not only *what* to do, but *whether* they could do it at all – and if so, how far behind closed doors they needed to go just to stay safe.

Risk Tolerance

Civic engagement has also hinged on the risk tolerance of those involved, shaping how individuals navigate a shifting legal landscape and the often inconsistent restrictions that come with it.

Some actors choose to work strictly through formal channels, even when those routes come with delays, interference, or outright rejection. Others operate with greater risk, testing boundaries to make full use of available civic space – or to expand it.

As one interviewee put it: “*The civic space available is not clear, so some people take it upon themselves to explore and expand the boundaries, while others are more comfortable doing what they’re told – regardless of the desire or potential to do more.*”¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, risk-averse actors tend to seek official approval for their activities and operate within the boundaries set by transitional authorities. Even when those boundaries are vague or inconsistently applied, they typically default to over-compliance. This approach reflects a strong preference to avoid problems or confrontation with the authorities.

As another interviewee explained: “*Some civic actors are simply risk-averse. That’s the lens through which they see everything. They don’t care about knowing what spaces exist or trying to expand them. They find*

comfort in operating within safe spaces. And when the boundaries of what’s allowed are unclear – as they are now – they prefer to ask for permission rather than forgiveness.”¹⁰²

The degree of risk tolerance largely depends on the profile of those involved and the level of protection they believe they enjoy. Organizations with strong external connections or backing from prominent families and figures tend to take greater risks. In contrast, smaller, lesser-known groups with limited social capital are often far more cautious.

Several interviewees cited examples of organizers who applied for event approvals but were blocked from moving forward. In most cases, civic actors opted not to continue without official authorization.¹⁰³ One notable case involved a closed workshop on transitional justice in Syria, planned for February 2025 by a coalition of civil society and human rights organizations. Despite meeting all procedural requirements, the event was abruptly canceled by the authorities without explanation.¹⁰⁴ Incidents like this have reinforced a belief among some actors that seeking permission can backfire, triggering scrutiny, disruption, or cancellation.

In contrast, civic actors with a higher tolerance for risk often operate outside formal frameworks. Some know the system well enough to exploit its inconsistencies. Others push the boundaries intentionally – as an act of civil resistance aimed at expanding civic space and shaping new norms. For these individuals, the uncertainty around what is allowed is not a constraint, but an opportunity.¹⁰⁵

One activist captured this mindset: “*Some groups made it harder for themselves by asking for approval when they didn’t need to. Meanwhile, I and many others I know have held events similar to those that were rejected or not approved. We managed to do that because we didn’t ask for permission. It’s our duty to push for and create the civic space we want. Especially now, during the transition, while the rules are still being written.*”¹⁰⁶

102 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, July 2025.

103 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, June 2025.

104 Arab News, ‘Syria Rights Groups Slam Government Over Justice Workshop Ban’, 1 March 2025, <https://arab.news/y9sea>.

105 Author interview with civil activist, Damascus, October 2025.

106 Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, April 2025.

100 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, October 2025.

101 Author interview with analyst, Damascus, June 2025.

Others have adopted a hybrid approach: they follow formal procedures but are not bound by them. Instead of waiting for approval, they notify the authorities of their plans and proceed unless explicitly stopped. A clear example of this was the Syrian Women's Political Movement conference, which brought together over 200 women in Damascus in January 2025. The organizers had reportedly submitted a request to host the event at the Al-Sham Hotel but never received a formal reply. Uncertain whether the delay was due to bureaucracy or resistance, they debated how to proceed.

As one organizer recalled: *"There was a lot of debate about what to do. I, along with many others, felt that we had fulfilled our responsibility by notifying the authorities. But that didn't mean we would cancel if we didn't get the green light. Yes, there was a risk the authorities might intervene. But if they did, that would have spoken volumes. In the end, they didn't interfere. Going forward with it was absolutely the right call. The event wouldn't have happened otherwise."*¹⁰⁷

Not all high-risk actions take place in public. Many civic actors choose to operate discreetly in private spaces – especially when official approval is unlikely or impossible. This approach helps reduce the risk of shutdowns or confrontations, particularly since venue owners now refuse to host unauthorized events out of fear of government retaliation.¹⁰⁸

These varied approaches to civic engagement reflect more than operational choices – they mirror the uncertainty of the transition itself. They also highlight how differences in risk appetite have produced a patchwork of engagement styles, from quiet caution to open defiance, each helping to shape the civic landscape in its own way.

Identity of the People

Civic space also varied depending on who was involved – both on the side of the authorities and the organizers. In the absence of a clear framework, overlapping mandates and vague boundaries created room for some to operate while restricting others.

Enforcement often hinged more on individual

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with NGO representative, Damascus, June 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with NGO representative, Homs, June 2025.

personalities than official policy. Some officials were strict and “played by the book,” making it even harder to navigate an already convoluted bureaucracy. In addition to discouraging venue owners from hosting events without prior clearance, approval was reportedly required even for gatherings inside NGO offices – effectively deterring spontaneous civic activity.¹⁰⁹

Others took a more flexible approach, allowing events to proceed informally, especially in semi-public or cultural spaces. As one civic actor explained: *"The challenges we faced weren't because the authorities were trying to restrict us, but because the rules weren't clear. People just kept getting bounced from one office to another, trying to figure out what was allowed. If you were lucky, you dealt with officials who weren't too rigid about the old rules."*¹¹⁰

In this environment, some civic actors faced constant red tape – requests stalled, permissions delayed, events canceled – while others, more skilled at navigating the system, moved forward with fewer obstacles. *"We ran six reading sessions of the Constitutional Declaration,"* one organizer recalled. *"Not because we had formal approval, but because we knew who not to ask."*¹¹¹

Disparities in what officials at the national and local levels consider acceptable have also constrained civic space in certain areas. A recent example involved a stand-up comedy group that received national approval for a tour but was blocked from performing in Hama governorate. The organizers noted that performances in other governorates were not canceled, indicating the decision came from local authorities in Hama.¹¹²

The identity of the organizers also shaped the space they were given. Political background and personal relationships often influenced how authorities responded. Organizers perceived as aligned with the revolution or the transitional authorities have reportedly been granted more leeway than those

¹⁰⁹ Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, June 2025.

¹¹⁰ Author interview with civil activist, Hama, April 2025.

¹¹¹ Author interview with NGO representative, Aleppo, June 2025.

¹¹² Ultra Syria, 'Cancellation of "Syria" Troupe Performances in Hama Reignites Debate Over Freedom of Expression', 20 October 2025, <https://shorturl.at/JCQBK>.

from regime-held areas.¹¹³

"What mattered was who was organizing the activity," one interviewee said. *"If a group was seen as anti-Assad and it was known to the authorities, they were often allowed more space. If they came from regime areas, there was more scrutiny, and suspicion limited their ability to convene."*¹¹⁴

Informal relationships were often just as influential as political positions. Organizers with ties to key officials frequently moved forward with unofficial approval, bypassing formal procedures. In contrast, those lacking such connections faced repeated delays, bureaucratic obstacles, or outright rejections.

"Fear, relationships, and reputation all played a role," one civic leader noted. Some events went ahead simply because officials trusted the organizers. In other cases, lesser-known groups were denied permission – especially if the topic was politically sensitive.¹¹⁵

Established connections appeared especially important in regions considered politically delicate, such as the coastal areas. A director of a Europe-based Syrian organization shared their experience from October 2025:

*"After long delays in securing approvals for a project, we visited the official in charge to ask about the cause. After much back-and-forth, we were bluntly told that, although we've been working inside Syria for over 10 years, we are not known to the authorities. They said we need to build trust before being allowed to engage with politically sensitive issues."*¹¹⁶

Ultimately, civic space has not been defined by formal rules but rather shaped by perceptions of acceptability and individual discretion. In this context, uncertainty has functioned both as a barrier and a backdoor.

In sum, this evolving terrain reveals just how uneven and contingent civic space in Syria remains. The

ability to organize or speak out hinges not only on the nature of the activity, but also on where it occurs, who leads it, how it's framed, and the level of risk those involved are willing to bear. What is accepted in one context may be blocked in another. While opportunities exist, they remain precarious – dependent on shifting alliances, personal discretion, and the persistence of those willing to test the limits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Syria's civic space stands at a pivotal crossroads. The collapse of the Assad regime has opened long-shuttered doors to freedom of expression, assembly, and association – rights that were once systematically denied or tightly controlled. While these gains mark a shift from the authoritarian past, they remain fragile, uneven, and highly contingent. In the absence of clear legal or institutional frameworks, what is possible in one area, for one actor, at one moment, may be impossible in another.

This fluidity brings both opportunity and risk. On one hand, it enables pockets of civic innovation and public engagement unimaginable under the previous regime. On the other hand, it leaves civic actors vulnerable to arbitrary restrictions, selective enforcement, and sudden reversal. History shows that transitions do not guarantee freedom. In fact, civic space often contracts in the aftermath – through power consolidation, diminished pluralism, or a reversion to security-first governance.

The challenge is not only to observe the opening, but to anchor it – to make it real, durable, and inclusive through meaningful legal and institutional reforms. Syrian civic actors, transitional authorities, and the international community each bear responsibility to ensure that civic space is not treated as a temporary concession, but as a foundational pillar of an inclusive recovery. If this moment is not met with decisive action, Syria risks repeating the familiar arc: from brief opening to sustained rollback.

113 Author interview with analyst, Damascus, October 2025.

114 Author interview with civil activist, Homs, April 2025.

115 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, October 2025.

116 Author interview with civil society representative, Tartus, October 2025.

1. Recommendations for Syrian Transitional Authorities

The transitional authorities bear the primary responsibility for securing and institutionalizing the gains in civic space. Reforms must be credible, legally grounded, and capable of transforming short-term openings into enduring civic rights. With the formation of the legislative body now in its final stages, the authorities must act swiftly to enact the reforms required to strengthen civic space and consolidate recent gains before the momentum for meaningful change begins to fade.

- **Suspend the enforcement of repressive legacy laws:** The continued use of laws such as Law 93/1958 (Associations), Decree 108/2011 (Media), Decree 54/2011 (Assembly), and Law 20/2022 (Cybercrime) enables selective enforcement and broad personal interpretation by officials. This allows peaceful expression, association, and protest to be restricted at will. Declaring a formal suspension of these laws would help reduce arbitrary restrictions and minimize bureaucratic delays.
- **Amend Article 23 of the Constitutional Declaration:** This provision currently allows broad restrictions on civic rights using vague terms like “public morals” and “national security.” It should be revised in accordance with the Siracusa Principles to ensure that any limitations are lawful, necessary, proportionate, and subject to independent judicial oversight.
- **Adopt a modern civil society law:** A new framework should recognize registration as a right, not a privilege; eliminate prior approval for foreign funding; and limit state intervention to narrowly defined and legitimate purposes. Civil society must be meaningfully engaged in the drafting process to ensure the law reflects practical needs and democratic values.
- **Enact a law on peaceful assembly:** Current laws treat protest as an activity requiring prior authorization. A revised law should establish that prior notification, not permission, is sufficient for public activities, and should include explicit protections against the use of force on peaceful demonstrators. Any restrictions should be narrowly defined and applied only in exceptional circumstances.
- **Introduce a right-to-information law:** Transparency is a cornerstone of democratic accountability. A new law should guarantee public access to state-held information, define clear and narrow exemptions, assign oversight to an independent information commissioner, and establish a formal appeals process for denied requests.
- **End prior approval for foreign funding:** The existing approval process creates uncertainty and deters collaboration with international partners. Replacing it with a transparent post-funding reporting system focused on financial accountability – not political control – would preserve oversight without obstructing civic activity.
- **Centralize and standardize civic regulation:** Oversight of registration, permits, and public events should be unified under the Ministry of Social Affairs and its directorates. This would eliminate overlapping mandates, reduce arbitrary decisions, and ensure consistent application across all regions. Local officials should be trained to apply these procedures fairly and transparently.
- **Legalize political organizing and party formation:** A credible political transition requires the right to organize, campaign, and contest elections. New legislation should protect this right under objective, non-discriminatory criteria and permit political activity without undue restriction.
- **Institutionalize civil society consultation:** Civil society should be embedded into governance processes – not consulted sporadically. This can be achieved through advisory councils, participatory hearings, and joint committees, especially on key areas such as transitional justice, constitutional reform, and local governance.
- **Protect protest and dissent:** Authorities must go beyond permitting civic engagement – they must protect it. Law enforcement should prevent and respond to violence against

peaceful assemblies, investigate threats against activists, and make public commitments to uphold civic freedoms in all regions.

2. For Syrian Civic Actors

Syrian civic actors have a vital role in shaping and defending civic space. Their efforts must go beyond resilience and toward active influence over legal, institutional, and cultural reform.

- **Build coalitions and regional networks:** Coordinate across sectors and geographies to overcome fragmentation, strengthen collective advocacy, and resist divide-and-rule strategies. Broad-based alliances can increase leverage and ensure national relevance.
- **Engage constructively with reform-minded officials:** Not all officials are adversarial. Identifying allies within institutions – and working with them strategically – can open pathways for internal reform and unlock incremental but meaningful change.
- **Lead the legal reform agenda:** Civic actors must not only respond to legal developments – they should shape them. By drafting proposals, participating in consultations, and monitoring implementation, civil society can ensure that reforms are grounded in lived experience and aligned with community priorities.
- **Invest in civic education:** Promoting democratic culture requires long-term investment in public awareness. Embedding civic values in schools, community centers, and religious institutions can foster participation, tolerance, and accountability from the ground up.
- **Promote legal literacy:** Empower organizations and individuals to understand their rights and obligations under the law. Offer legal training, user-friendly guides, and rapid-response legal support to help civic actors navigate shifting legal environments and defend against unlawful restrictions.
- **Document restrictions on civic space:** Develop structured monitoring systems to record violations, track patterns, and report regressions targeting civic actors. Reliable documentation enhances advocacy, supports accountability

efforts, and helps protect civic space in the face of future threats.

3. For the International Community

The international community plays a critical role in ensuring that Syria's civic space is not only preserved but strengthened. Support must extend beyond funding to shaping the structural, legal, and political conditions that enable meaningful civic participation.

- **Make civic space a diplomatic priority:** Ensure that the protection and expansion of civic rights remains central to all diplomatic engagement with transitional authorities. Civic space should be treated as a primary indicator of democratic progress – not a peripheral issue.
- **Support legal and institutional reform:** Provide sustained technical assistance for reforming constitutional, administrative, and civic laws. Press for the repeal of repressive legislation and back the development of inclusive, rights-based legal frameworks that align with international standards.
- **Ensure funding is accessible, flexible, and sustainable:** Move beyond short-term, project-based grants. Prioritize core funding, multi-year commitments, and streamlined reporting processes. Special attention should be given to supporting emerging and grassroots organizations, which often face the greatest barriers to access.
- **Integrate civic space into transition monitoring:** Civic openness must be included in all assessments of political transition, alongside metrics such as elections, security, and economic stabilization. Regular monitoring can help identify early warning signs of regression and guide targeted international responses.

Civic space is not a privilege to be granted when convenient. It is a fundamental right that must be protected, institutionalized, and integrated into the core of governance. Without clear legal frameworks and sustained institutional commitment, participation remains fragile – vulnerable to shifting rules, individual discretion, and political agendas.

Syria now faces a defining choice. One path leads back to managed participation, tightly controlled and conditional. The other opens the way to genuine civic freedom – pluralistic, unpredictable, and essential for democratic renewal. This decision will shape not only the direction of Syria's political recovery but also its legitimacy and long-term resilience. If this opportunity is missed, it will not merely delay progress; it will close the space essential for Syrians to reclaim and rebuild their future on their own terms.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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