



2.2.2. Freedom of expression, civic space and criticism of the authorities

Following the fall of Assad, the civic space has significantly expanded.[286](#) Civil society groups have been able to register (more than 650 NGOs did so in the first half of 2025) and operate publicly.[287](#) However, challenges remain, as the transitional government retained Assad-era Law 93, which imposes restrictions on civil society activities and foreign funding.[288](#) In addition, hosting public events including meetings and cultural events[289](#) requires obtaining prior approval from the authorities, through procedures described as unclear.[290](#) Issues concerning transitional justice, accountability, or human rights are reportedly regarded as politically sensitive and may only be discussed subject to approval by the authorities.[291](#) For instance, humanitarian initiatives are generally allowed to proceed unhindered, but political matters such as constitutional debates, political reform and party organisation face closer scrutiny and might face barriers from the authorities. For example, debates on the Constitutional Declaration and its implications for the relationship with SDF have been being denied and political gatherings at Latakia University were subjected to prior approval.[292](#) At times, the government through the Political Affairs Directory has refused granting approval to activists and civil society to organise public or private activities which do not align with its views or are considered areas reserved exclusively for the state.[293](#)

According to Haid Haid, openness to civic activity varied significantly by location: relatively safer areas such as Damascus allowed for more open participation, while regions affected by instability, or sectarian tensions, particularly Homs and the coastal areas, remained more restricted. Local authorities reportedly applied differing approaches to regulating civic activity, ranging from strict controls to more informal or permissive practices, with some tightening restrictions as they consolidated power.[294](#)

Freedom of expression initially improved in the first months following the fall of the Assad government, with increased public criticism of the new authorities; however, this openness reportedly declined over time[295](#) particularly from March 2025 onwards and after the July 2025 violence in Sweida, where formal and informal restrictions on civic activities increased.[296](#)

Public dissent was further discouraged by prevailing religious interpretations associated with the authorities' Salafist-influenced ideology, which frame public criticism of leaders as socially divisive ('*fitna*'), thereby promoting private rather than public expressions of criticism.[297](#) According to an international organisation interviewed by DIS, Sunni Arabs reportedly have greater latitude to criticise the government publicly, including through social media, often without facing consequences. In contrast, members of minority communities, including Druze,

Kurds, Alawites, and Christians, were reported to face higher risks when expressing criticism, as they may be accused of disloyalty, collaboration with external actors, or separatism. For example, sources noted that Druze individuals criticising the authorities risk being labelled as collaborators with Israel.²⁹⁸ Bassam Alahmad similarly assessed that criticism voiced by individuals perceived as supportive of the government is more likely to be accepted, whereas similar criticism coming from members of minority communities may be viewed differently. In addition, while criticism relating to issues such as electricity prices or ministerial performance may be tolerated, topics such as the events in Sweida or criticism of President Ahmed al-Sharaa are generally regarded as more sensitive.²⁹⁹

As far as sources interviewed by the Netherlands MFA indicate, no arrest campaigns targeting critics were reported in areas under the control of the transitional government.³⁰⁰ Likewise, no cases were reported of civilians being arrested by the authorities solely for expressing criticism,³⁰¹ whether from abroad or within Syria,³⁰² or through online platforms.³⁰³ There were a few reported incidents in which individuals were allegedly detained for criticising the government but the circumstances are unclear, the security actors not consistently providing information on who is being detained, the reasons for detention, or its duration. In some cases, individuals were reportedly detained for social media posts critical of the government or alleged violations committed by the government, while in others, detentions may have been linked to personal disputes, including instances where connections were allegedly used to facilitate arrests as a form of intimidation. Overall, these cases remain difficult to independently verify, and further investigation is required to clarify the underlying patterns.³⁰⁴

Individuals expressing criticism online were frequently subjected to online threats and intimidation by pro-government supporters. While these threats largely remained online, many people feared that they could come under attack by pro-government supporters.³⁰⁵

Regarding former critics of HTS, Haid Haid stated that HTS leadership appears to have sought to reconcile with various actors, including former adversaries. There have generally been no reports of targeted attacks or systematic pursuit of individuals critical of the group. However, there is limited transparency and information regarding the status of detainees held in former HTS-run detention facilities. According to the source, some HTS critics living abroad have reportedly refrained from returning to Syria due to fears of possible repercussions from the authorities.³⁰⁶

One frequently cited case concerns the reported arrest of American Islamist journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in December 2025, allegedly in connection with his criticism of HTS.³⁰⁷ A prominent figure among the Syrian opposition during the conflict, Kareem was previously arrested by HTS in 2020 for six months for 'inciting' against the group. After the fall of Assad, he criticised the transitional government for straying away from Islamic principles, not granting citizenship to foreign opposition fighters, and the decision to join the anti-ISIL coalition.³⁰⁸ Limited information is available regarding the circumstances, charges, or current status of this case.³⁰⁹

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