

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
21 Rue El-Hijaz, 1002 Tunis Belvédère, Tunisia
abdeltawab@cihrs.org

His Excellency, Assad Al-Shaibani
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic
Prime Minister's Complex, 17 April Street
Damascus, Syria

22 September 2025

RE: Invitation to respond to research findings on the role of civil society in Syria's transition

Your excellency,

Please accept my regards on behalf of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, an independent regional human rights organization established in 1994, aiming to spread the culture of human rights in Arab societies. CIHRS enjoys special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

We are preparing a report on the challenges and opportunities facing civil society during Syria's transitional process, and we would like to share our preliminary findings with you. We highly value your perspective and invite any comments, input, or an official response to the report's conclusions, to ensure a balanced and comprehensive report.

Our report emphasizes that active and meaningful participation of civil society is critical for stability, reconciliation, and sustainable recovery. It identifies key challenges facing civil society organizations in Syria's transition, while also outlining opportunities to strengthen their engagement. Although the transitional government has taken steps to expand civic space, interviewees largely viewed these opportunities as fragile, due to continued concerns over exclusionary governance and outdated legislation.

Based on 28 interviews with civil society organizations and activists from inside Syria and the diaspora, the report identified the following:

- **Governance:** interviewees expressed concern that decision-making is highly centralized in the hands of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates, especially with those involved in grave human rights violations, and shared frustration over the appointment of unqualified individuals across state institutions, particularly the judiciary sector and government-mandated commissions.
- **The legal framework** was identified as a key obstacle for civic space, particularly, the current registration requirements (the temporary nature of licenses and long bureaucratic procedures), approval requirement prior to any activity and the overly restrictive provisions of Law No. 93. All interviewees considered the adoption of a legislation aligned with international law standards as a top priority.

- **Security concerns:** Ongoing instability, sectarian tensions, checkpoint harassment, and kidnappings, especially targeting minorities has restricted free and safe civic space. Interviewees also reported limited government follow-up, despite them sharing documentations on human rights violations with governmental bodies, reinforcing a sense of impunity and lack of serious accountability efforts.
- **The government's engagement with civil society** was largely perceived as selective, symbolic, and limited to organizations closely aligned with government officials.

The report recommends that the Syrian government strengthens the participation of civil society, by:

- Holding a new national dialogue, one that is inclusive of all Syrian communities and that produces tangible and concrete next steps.
- Ratifying the Rome Statute, repeal outdated association laws and adopting modern legislation aligned with international human rights standards.
- Simplifying registration through a notification system which presumes organizations legal until proven otherwise, while ensuring that state authorities do not interfere in their management structures or activities.
- Developing transitional justice policies with civil society and victims, while cooperating with international mechanisms.
- Forming advisory committees and participatory platform for civil society commentary and suggestions on draft legislation and policies, from the earliest stages of planning, and ensuring their active collaboration in the implementation of resulting mechanisms.

In order to include the Syrian government's perspective, we seek your response to the following questions:

- What measures is the government taking to promote the participation of civil society, victim groups and independent experts in the transitional period?
- How does the government ensure meaningful collaboration and coordination with civil society?
- what progress has been made to update laws on associations and how will it align with international human rights standards?
- How does the government address concerns about the monopolization of decision-making power in the hands of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and its affiliates.
- According to what criteria is the ministry of social affairs evaluating registration applications and renewals?

We plan to publish the report on 27 October 2025 and would be grateful to receive your response before 9 October 2025. We remain at your disposal for any additional clarifications or commentary.

Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

Sincerely,
Ziad ABDELTAWAB
Executive Director