



# Authoritarianism, Crisis, and Shrinking Civic Space

## The Persistent Challenges Faced by Syrian Civil Society

### Introduction

Syrian civil society has experienced unprecedented challenges and transformations in the past two decades: from grappling with a regime that has consistently suppressed it and obstructed its development and growth, to a conflict that has fragmented it and forced it to evolve.

Despite these obstacles, Syrian civil society has played an important role in Syria and continues to do so. The importance of civil society in Syria became particularly apparent following the chemical attacks that occurred multiple times throughout the Syrian conflict. Civil society organizations played a crucial role in documenting and reporting on these atrocities, providing aid to affected communities, and advocating for justice and accountability. Once more, the significance of civil society in Syria became notably evident following the two high-magnitude earthquakes that struck Syria and Turkey on 6 February 2023, resulting in the tragic loss of over 50,000 lives. These earthquakes struck many of the areas inhabited by refugees and internally displaced persons, areas previously impacted by the war's destruction and consequent displacement. Syrians already suffering from a scarcity of services, a failing economy, and crumbling infrastructure due to war, were once again thrown into crisis, with the United Nations unable to effectively deliver aid to many affected regions. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, Syrian civil society stepped in and provided assistance to many earthquake victims – those injured and those displaced - in both regime-controlled and opposition-controlled areas of the country, or across the border to displaced Syrians in Turkey.

It is precisely because of the many challenges that Syrian civil society confronts, as well as the vital role it plays that Femena seeks to amplify the voices of civil society actors and believes that they must be supported in their important work.

## Background on Civic Space in Syria

[The Syrian Regime has consistently obstructed the establishment of a genuine, independent, and effective civil society movement.](#) The regime's enmity with civil society runs deep, predating the 2011 uprising. Using the pretext of security, the government even banned the use of the term "civil society," substituting it with the more neutral term "community work" in media and within the country.

To get around government restrictions, historically, human rights groups, individual activists and intellectuals established formal and informal organizations, working groups, and forums to address critical issues facing the country, including women's rights.

[Women's groups called for reform of the law and advocated for equality,](#) specifically calling for amendments to discriminatory legal provisions in the Personal Status Laws. They sought to combat violence against women by campaigning against laws that provided leniency in cases of Killing in the name of honor. They also demanded that the nationality law be amended to grant women the right to pass citizenship to their children.

For a short period following the death of Hafez Al Assad in June 2000, political space in Syria opened. [During this brief window of time – referred to as the "Damascus Spring" – there was a burst of civil society activity.](#) Diverse groups of activists and intellectuals came together in forums, many informal, with the aim to invigorate civic life and civic participation, as well as to promote culture, art and politics in a drive towards progress, reform, and democratic development.

However, in 2001, the regime responded to this movement with severe repression. Some activists were arrested and charged with security crimes such as inciting sectarian strife, association with foreign groups, espionage, and undermining the state. Some were referred to State Security Court and received prison sentences and some faced other restrictions, including travel bans.

Despite this, Syrian women's groups persisted in their advocacy work. One of the biggest challenges independent feminist organizations in Syria have faced is the state's attempts to co-opt the movement. [It has done so through the General Union of Syrian Women, a quasi-state entity that has aimed to present a positive image of Syrian women and the state's policy on women. In truth, its critics assert that it has not supported women in any real manner.](#) In claiming to represent Syrian women and the women's movement, the GUSW has hindered the growth and development of independent, grassroots women's groups. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor actively suppressed any independent civic activity, and only [approved of groups affiliated with or overseen by the President's wife, Asma al-Assad.](#)

The state's primary objective was to create a false perception of active civil organizations within Syria in order to present a favorable image to the international community. However, even the few organizations that managed to obtain registration faced relentless attacks and interference. Many were ultimately dissolved through decisions of the security forces, further limiting any space for genuine civil society engagement, and stifling the voices of those advocating for human rights and social progress.

## Impact of 2011 Uprising on Civil Society

With the eruption of popular protests in Syria in 2011, a newfound sense of hope emerged for the development of a more inclusive, active, and progressive civil society. Syrian groups from diverse geographical locations came together to establish numerous civil, voluntary, and solidarity initiatives that aimed to address the rapidly changing conditions within the country.

However, as the uprising transformed into an armed civil conflict, the priorities of many civil society organizations in Syria shifted from political activism to humanitarian support. While many organizations remained committed to fostering conversations/initiatives around political activism, they developed programs to compensate for the collapse of state services in many areas and the dire humanitarian needs of refugee communities, internally displaced populations, and local communities affected by the conflict.





These grassroots efforts demonstrated the resilience and determination of the Syrian people to build a more compassionate and supportive society amidst extremely challenging circumstances.

The [conflict in Syria](#) has led to large-scale displacement – nearly half of the population has been displaced, with a quarter now residing outside the country. Like many Syrians affected by the conflict, the circumstances of siege, as well as the [targeting and persecution that persisted throughout the conflict](#), forced many civil society activists to flee Syria.

With the large numbers of Syrians fleeing to neighboring countries, Syrian civil society groups were established in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Civil society groups are also operating in places like Egypt, and more broadly in the diaspora, across Europe, North America, and Australia.

Consequently, civil society organizations now have to operate in parallel within and outside Syria. They have had to show remarkable innovation and adaptability despite being exposed to immense burnout as they are part of the community, enduring atrocities, and constantly needing to establish civil spaces abroad to implement projects both inside and outside Syria if permitted. These organizations engage in a range of activities, including advocacy, humanitarian aid, such as healthcare, psychosocial support, education, and more, as well as awareness campaigns targeting Syrians both within the country and in the diaspora.

Furthermore, they participate in the political and peace processes abroad through platforms like [the Civil Society Support Room](#), a UN Initiative of the Special Envoy on Syria, the [Constitutional Committee](#) and a range of UN and INGO-led efforts focused on dialogue, human rights and humanitarian support for Syrians. This involvement not only fosters their communication with international actors but also enables them to contribute to breakthroughs in the political process, peacebuilding, and the shaping of Syria’s future.

On the other hand, organizations operating in areas under regime control encounter [persistent harassment and persecution aimed at undermining their work](#). The regime continues its attempts to co-opt them

and bring them within the fold of groups controlled and supervised by various state entities. Obviously, this creates enormous challenges for these groups in their efforts to be inclusive and representative of the Syrian people. It has a profound impact on their credibility and undermines their effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian public.

Since the uprising and conflict, Syrian civil society organizations have actively engaged in mobilization and advocacy efforts, specifically addressing the rights of Syrians, and conveying their demands to United Nations institutions and international parliaments. These organizations have dedicated their efforts to developing expertise in defending human rights, particularly through accountability mechanisms for human rights violations, addressing international crimes such as mass atrocities, and advocating for justice in cases of civilian casualties. Additionally, civil society has played a crucial role in documenting these violations and events, applying pressure on governments and international bodies to act, and working towards establishing the necessary foundations for transitional justice in Syria. [Their litigation efforts have culminated in notable arrest warrants and the 'al-Khatib' trial](#), which marks the first trial worldwide on state torture in Syria. While these initiatives by no means constitute comprehensive justice for Syrians, they came into existence largely due to the efforts of Syrian civil society and represent significant strides in the long road to justice.

During this same period, however, civil society—both inside and outside the country—has faced numerous challenges, including security risks, financial and legal constraints, difficulties in operating and accessing resources, inadequate monitoring and oversight, as well as corruption and internal divisions within organizations. These divisions stem from various overlapping factors, exacerbated by the turbulence in the country. Specifically, the pervasive effects of trauma and accumulated suffering, resource scarcity, power struggles, and political differences have all contributed to these challenges.

### **New Waves of Repression**

More recently, as the regime has regained control over many parts of the country, it has rededicated itself to systematically impeding and reversing the efforts and all the gains made previously by civil society. Security officers have commonly conveyed their shift in focus with statements such as, “We were too busy before to monitor you, but now we have time for you,” thus delivering the message that while their previous priority was reclaiming control over lost territories, [since regaining control, they can now resume and intensify their intimidation and harassment of civic actors](#). Using those same time-tested tactics, the regime has once again restricted and shut down the space that had previously opened for civil society activism.

Toward this end, the Syrian regime implemented a new set of laws pertaining to civil work licenses, but these were limited to unions and entities under the regime’s control and within the framework of government-controlled NGOs. (Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 2022)

In 2022, the regime also [launched an extensive campaign to cancel registrations and impose travel bans on activists engaged in civil society groups](#), both inside the country and in the diaspora. These campaigns were accompanied by widespread arrests and accusations such as collaboration with Western countries, espionage, and engaging in foreign currency transactions. Lengthy prison sentences, including death sentences, were handed down to instill fear and to intimidate the activists and defenders operating within these institutions. Other strategies that were employed included defamation campaigns and violations of privacy, especially targeting feminists, women human rights defenders, and LGBTQI+ communities.

### **Aftermath of 2023 Earthquakes**

The earthquakes that struck southeastern Turkey and northwestern Syria were catastrophic. According to UN reports, [even prior to the earthquake, a substantial portion of Syria’s population needed humanitarian assistance due to conditions brought about by prolonged conflict](#). The earthquakes exacerbated an already





dire situation: under harsh winter weather, the earthquake wreaked havoc on neighborhoods, leaving them uninhabitable. Shelters were even more overcrowded, lacking essential facilities for women, children, the elderly, the chronically ill, and people with disabilities. The situation was aggravated and made worse by the heightened risk of disease transmission. The lack of shelter left women and children increasingly vulnerable to harassment, violence, and exploitation. Preliminary estimates indicated that approximately 5 million Syrians required shelter and non-food assistance. (UNHCR, 2023)

The aftermath of the earthquake highlighted the crucial role played by Syrian civil society and relief organizations, who, despite their own precarious position, responded to the needs of those impacted. Even though many civil society members were themselves affected personally – losing homes, family members or friends – they mobilized to help those in need, with food and aid distribution and with finding shelter. Their efforts were particularly significant considering the United Nations' inability to effectively deliver rescue and humanitarian aid to many affected regions.

### **Femena's Assessment of Diverse Grassroots Initiatives Operating and Based Inside Syria**

To get a better understanding of the situation of civil society groups, Femena conducted an assessment with a variety of grassroots initiatives – both formal and informal – operating and based within Syria in regime controlled areas. Not all of them are specifically feminist organizations, though they do concern themselves with gender-related issues.

In designing this assessment, Femena also took into consideration Syria's diversity, as it is one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East, including ethnic, religious, and geographical diversity. More specifically, Femena took into consideration the different geographic regions of Syria and their specific needs and issues:

- **The east and northeast** comprise a quarter of the country, which remains divided among the US-backed Kurdish groups, Turkey, and Syrian government troops. This area is relatively isolated, lacking infrastructure investments and essential services such as health and education. The security situation is precarious due to the presence of multiple militias, troops, and terrorist groups in the area. Many families in this region need both humanitarian and legal assistance. [According to a Human Rights Watch report published in 2022](#), regional authorities in Northeastern Syria currently detain over 60,000 individuals, including men, women, and children, in degrading, arbitrary, inhuman, and life-threatening conditions.
- **The south** is experiencing ongoing tensions between pro- and anti-government forces, [particularly in the Daraa governorate, following the widespread rejection of the Syrian presidential election results in May 2021](#). This led to a series of indiscriminate attacks at the end of 2021, resulting in the displacement of thousands to neighboring areas. The remaining population suffers from severe shortages in fuel, electricity, healthcare, education, and food. Sweida, another governorate in the south, where there is limited government control and where political and religious leaders hold influence, was relatively calm until protests erupted there in August of 2023.
- **The central region** varies in terms of local power dynamics and access to economic opportunities. Some cities, like Homs, saw large-scale destruction during the conflict, and are now undergoing reconstruction. Additionally, in this region, a significant number of young men either fled the country, or were forcibly disappeared, arrested, or killed. However, in the central region, various development programs addressing gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and other issues, have been implemented, in addition to health programs, including Covid-19 awareness and vaccination campaigns. Like other regions, obstacles persist: activists and human rights defenders have to take measures, such as working under different names, to protect themselves from prosecution and arrest. Nevertheless, many of them face accusations of terrorism and collaboration with external entities, including Israel and Western countries.
- **The coastal region** has received a significant number [of internally displaced persons throughout the conflict](#). This region remained under regime control throughout the conflict and the strong presence of intelligence and security branches places significant constraints on activists. [The thousands of displaced individuals](#) who have established businesses and trade in this region compete with the local population, which can lead to tension. Families in the countryside of the Syrian coast have suffered significant losses of male members due to the conflict, [forcing women to seek opportunities to support their families](#).

The members of the grassroots initiatives Femena interviewed indicated that they were engaged in the following sectors/issues:

**Peacebuilding:** These initiatives create safe spaces for dialogue, self-expression, and community responsiveness. For example, one national peacebuilding organization successfully mobilized and educated young peacebuilders on the principles of peace, democracy, and human rights. Additionally, local networks of teachers have emerged to support individuals deprived of education and to advocate for improved educational curricula integrating peace education as a core component of their peacebuilding endeavors.

**Human Rights:** In non-regime-controlled areas, civil society networks and individuals focus on human rights violations related to detention, forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and property seizures. A considerable number of organizations and networks have dedicated their efforts to empowering

marginalized groups, such as internally displaced people, rural women, former fighters, and youth addressing a wide range of topics. These organizations provide humanitarian, health, legal, and psychosocial services tailored to the specific needs of each area.

**Women's Rights:** The efforts of women's rights organizations encompass a broad range of activities, including the creation of safe spaces, economic empowerment initiatives, and tailored psychosocial support services. Many organizations have implemented legal literacy programs aimed at educating women about their rights and preventing violence. They also strive to establish local protection councils to create safe and supportive environments for women experiencing violence.

**Humanitarian Response:** These organizations and initiatives have been at the forefront of responding to the February 6 earthquake. Some have assisted injured persons; others have helped those who have lost their homes and families. Despite facing their own difficulties and losses, these organizations stepped up their operations soon after the earthquake.



Source: The Day After



## Priority Areas and Needs

Considering the circumstances under which the Syrian civil society is operating, Femena's assessment identified the following areas as priority needs for civil society initiatives it interviewed:

- **Advocacy and support:** Civil society organizations providing relief and humanitarian services including to earthquake-affected areas urgently need the space to be able to operate and need support in exerting pressure on the Syrian government to allow them to do so. Some of the activities to be undertaken include: the formation of damage assessment teams, securing shelters and temporary housing, and implementing sustainable programs to aid those in need of humanitarian support including those affected by the earthquake. It is crucial for civil society organizations to collaborate and establish accountability mechanisms to ensure a fair and appropriate response, as well as the equitable distribution of donations during times of crisis. Additionally, the response should consider gender considerations and the rights of individuals with disabilities and the elderly. Moreover, civil society organizations need assistance in pressuring the Syrian and Turkish governments to facilitate the issuance of the necessary documentation for those impacted by the earthquake. It is also essential that access and communication in all regions is facilitated to enable efficient response and recovery efforts in times of crisis.
- **Training and strengthening capacity:** Syrian civil society has faced significant challenges in accessing supportive dialogue spaces, training opportunities, and specialized capacity-strengthening programs due to years of siege and isolation imposed by both the international community and by the Syrian government and security forces. This has resulted in limited access to resources and knowledge, which are essential for professional development and growth. Moreover, the difficult conditions, food insecurity, and lack of electricity and Internet connectivity further hinder communication with the international community and engagement with regional and international capacity-strengthening programs. Consequently, it is crucial for Syrian civil society to obtain the appropriate training and capacity-strengthening efforts needed to address the challenges they face. Those engaged in Syrian civil society and in particular women human rights defenders need programs addressing their wellness and self-care needs, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict, tensions and government repression, targeting activists.
- **Connecting with the international community:** After thirteen years of conflict, civil society organizations in Syria need supportive and sustainable channels of communication with the international community. It is crucial to accurately portray the current situation, highlight the plight of Syrians, and demand accountability for all responsible parties involved in the violations that occurred throughout the conflict, and since, including violations that contributed to significant loss of life as a result of the earthquake. Existing communications channels are insufficient and fail to provide comprehensive protection for civil society. As a result, there is a pressing need for international protection mechanisms to safeguard the representatives and members of civil society organizations.
- **Flexible and sustained funding:** The de-prioritization of Syria as a country is concerning. Amidst the emergence of numerous global crises in recent years, funding allocated to Syria has significantly decreased. It's crucial to recognize that despite Syria's diminished prominence on the international agenda, violations and needs persist. Core funding, rather than restricted and



project-specific funding, enables civil society actors to more effectively address their priorities and respond to ongoing needs.

## Recommendations

The sustainability and continued development of Syrian civil society is critical. In line with this imperative, Femena presents the following recommendations to the international community:

- Facilitate and provide immediate support and humanitarian assistance to Syria's civil society, enabling them to effectively respond to the needs of affected communities, including earthquake survivors who still need support.
- The international community, including the UN, governments, donors, private foundations, and INGOs, should evaluate their financial support and protection mechanisms for civil society within Syria, with a view to ensuring the resilience, growth and increased impact of the sector.
- Create adaptable and flexible funding opportunities specifically targeted towards supporting civil society initiatives within Syria, allowing for greater innovation, sustainability, and responsiveness to changing circumstances.
- International actors, especially those with ties to the Syrian government, should continue to press the Syrian authorities to allow for the free and unfettered operation of civil society groups, including those providing humanitarian support, engaged in peace building and in the promotion of rights, without fear of persecution.
- Break the isolation of Syrian civil society and the women's movement by ensuring that the perspectives and demands of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are heard and prioritized by the United Nations, and governments including the United States and the European Union.
- Foster safe and secure opportunities for information, knowledge sharing and online collaboration between Syrian civil society inside Syria and in the diaspora, in order to maximize impact.
- Raise awareness among international actors and women's organizations to ensure that Syrian civil society and WHRDs receive enhanced support, recognition, and resources necessary for their important work.



X FemenaNet

Instagram FemenaNet

Facebook FemenaNet

Website <https://Femena.net>

Femena supports women human rights defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). Femena is particularly focused on contexts where civil society space is limited or closed and aims to raise awareness about the impact of shrinking civic space on women and progressive feminist movements.

Femena's country and regional briefs provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and movements.