



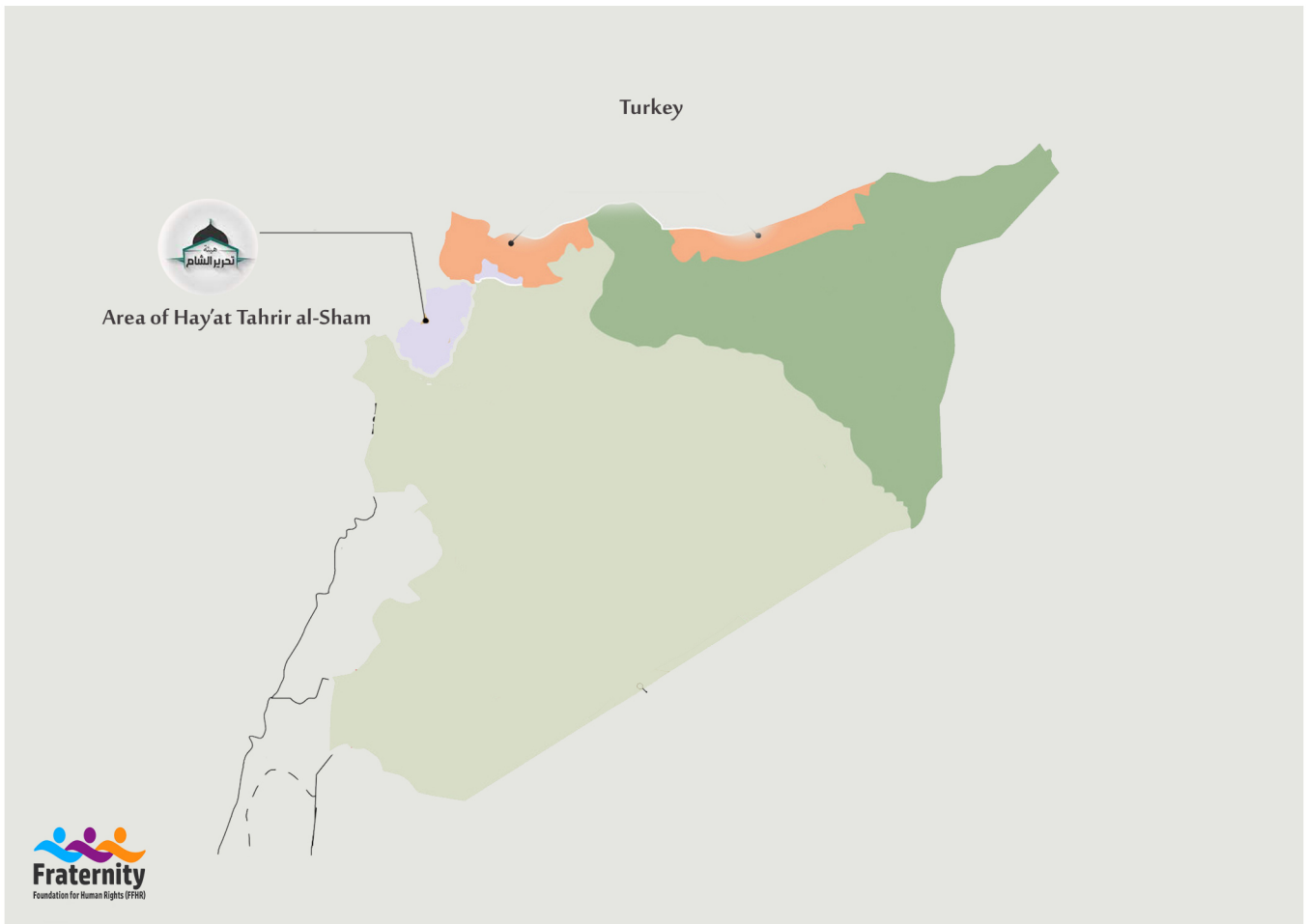
Back to the Square One of Repression

**Area of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Its Government,
Known as the Syrian Salvation Government**

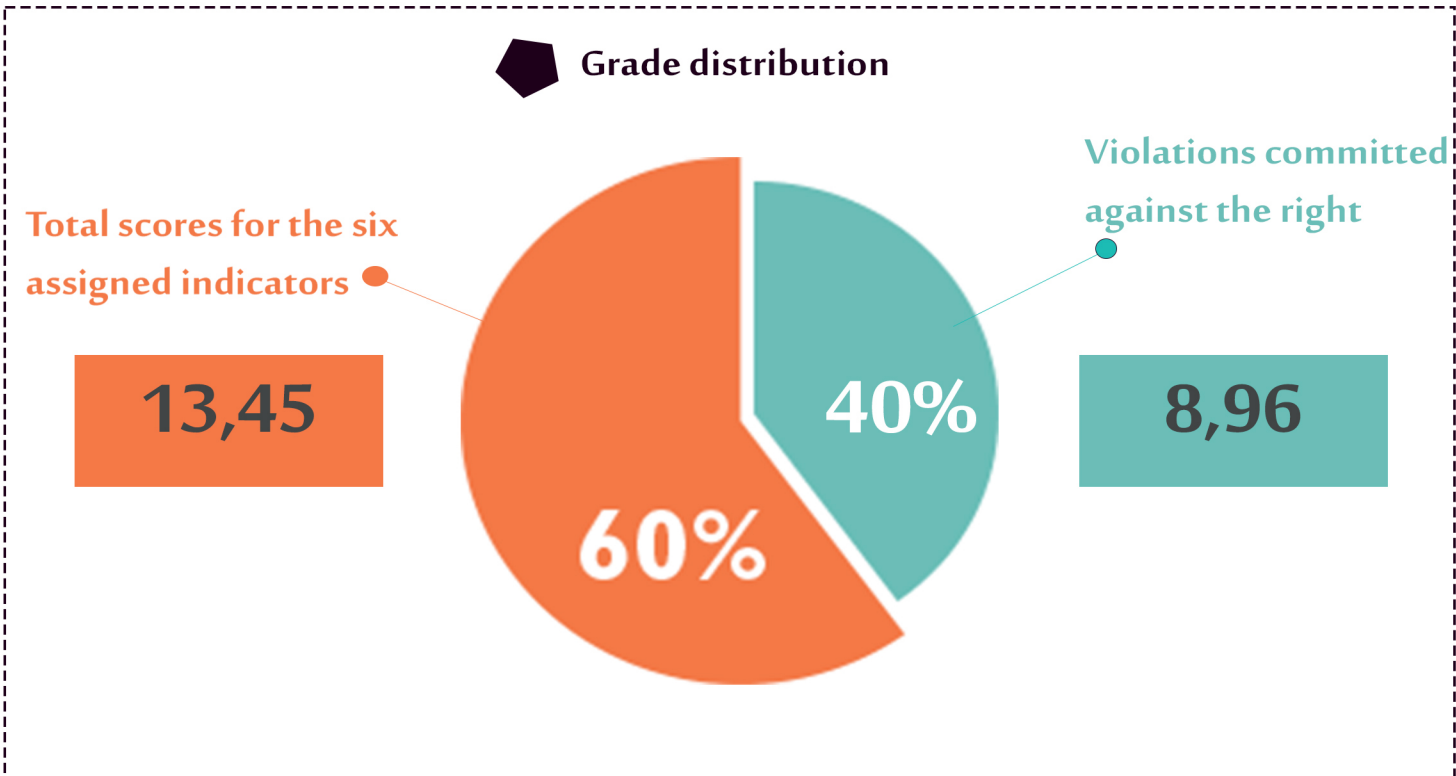
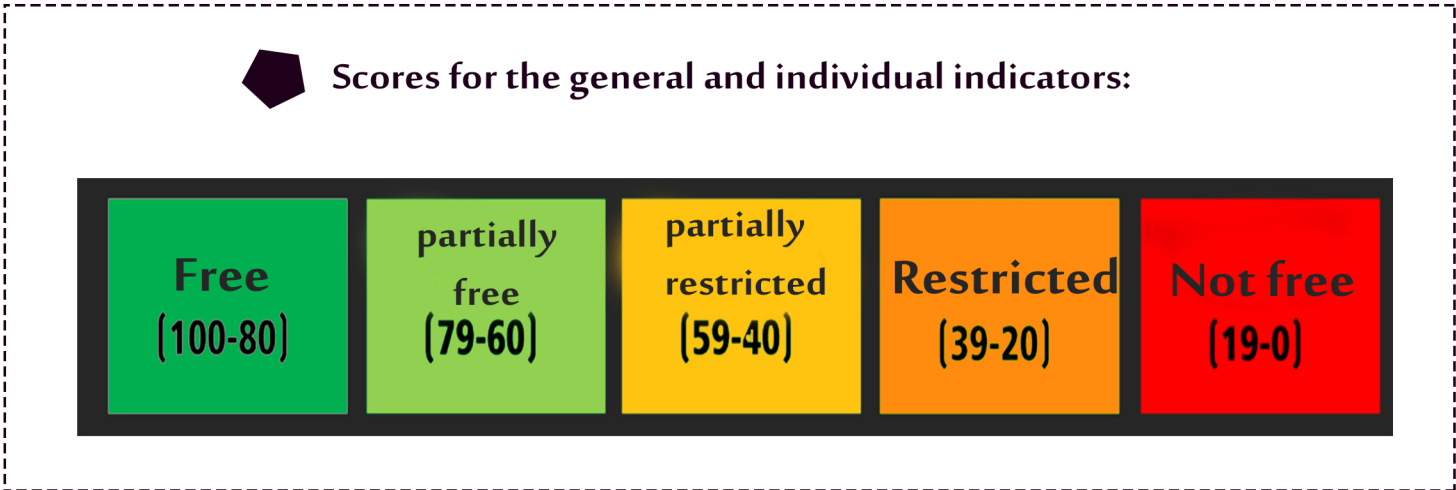
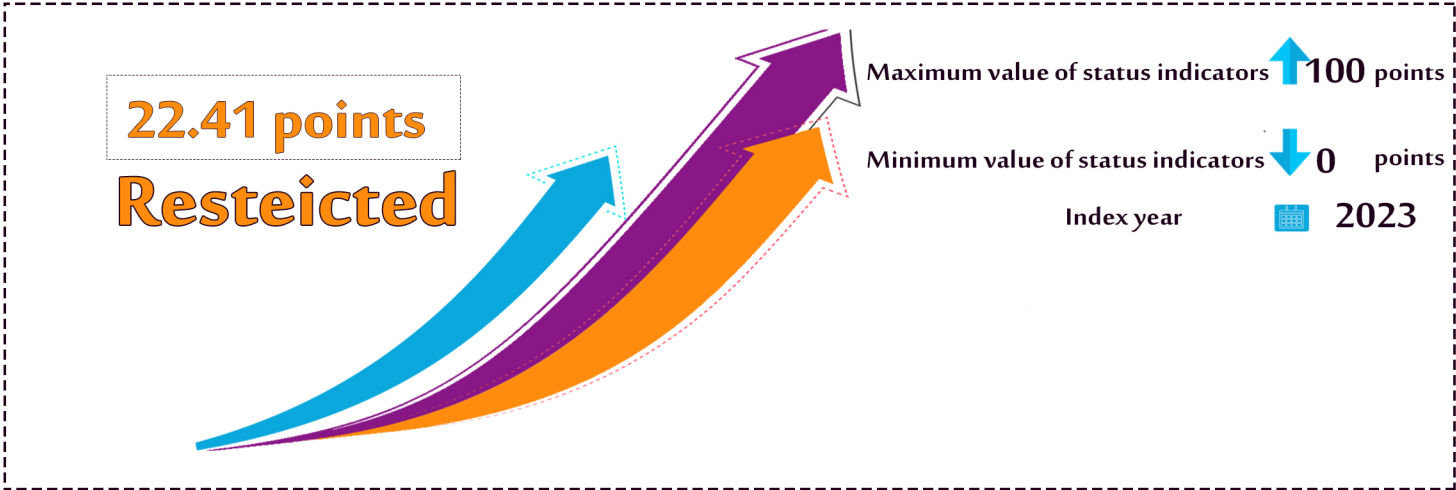
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This report covers the year 2023, focusing on the state of the right to freedom of association in the areas controlled by HTS, primarily in six cities and towns (Atma, Idlib, Maarrat Misrin, Qah, Harem, Salqin). The analysis relies on indicators of the right to freedom of association as defined by Fraternity for Human Rights, based on 30 field interviews with organizations and associations operating in the area. By comparing these indicators with international standards on the right to association, and after analysing the administrative procedures imposed by the Syrian Salvation Government (affiliated with HTS), the state of this right is categorized as “restricted,” and the civil space is generally considered not free. The area covered by the report scored 22.41 points on the freedom of association scale, with 13.45 percentage points for specialized indicators and 8.96 percentage points for violations indicators.



General Information on the Indicators for the Right



1. The ruling authority of the region and its specific procedures for regulating the work of civil society organizations:

Jabhat Fath al-Sham, previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra, announced its establishment of “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” in a statement issued on January 28, 2017, under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) includes, in addition to Jabhat Fath al-Sham, groups such as the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (one of the prominent opposition factions in Aleppo), Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna (based in Homs), and Liwa al-Haqq (active in the cities of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama). HTS militarily controls vast areas of Idlib and western Aleppo’s countryside. Turkey played a major role in dealing with HTS to achieve stability in the region by establishing Turkish military observation posts along the lines of contact between HTS-controlled areas and Russian and Syrian government forces through agreements between Turkey and Russia under the framework of de-escalation zones.

On November 2, 2017, to impose full administrative control, HTS established the “Syrian Salvation Government,” comprising 11 ministries under the leadership of Mohammed Sheikh at the time. The ministries include Interior, Justice, Religious Endowments, Higher Education, Education, Health, Agriculture, Economy, Social Affairs and Displaced Persons, Housing and Reconstruction, and Local Administration. The Ministry of Development was tasked with overseeing the affairs of associations, granting permissions and licenses, and fully monitoring the NGO sector.

The ideological tendencies of the Syrian Salvation Government first emerged when the “Founding Committee” announced in 2018 an official flag for the “liberated areas,” replacing the three stars of the Syrian revolution’s flag with the Islamic declaration of faith (the shahada). Its close connection with HTS became evident when HTS forces intervened to suppress protests opposing the government’s formation, thus acting as a civilian arm for both HTS’s military and administrative structures. Additionally, key figures from Jabhat al-Nusra assumed leadership positions in the government, and later, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani began attending meetings and inaugurating projects as the “leadership of the liberated areas.”

After HTS consolidated its control over the Idlib region and its surroundings, a new General Shura Council was elected in March 2019. The council consisted of 107 members who then elected a president for the council. Prior to the elections, the High Election Committee, formed by the General Conference, set conditions and standards for candidacy, dividing Idlib into administrative regions and specifying the number of members for each region. The elections appeared to be largely formal, with many regions pre-selecting the names of successful candidates, most of whom were close to HTS.

2. Authorities responsible for the NGO sector and its freedom of operation:

The NGO sector in the region falls under the Ministry of Development of the Syrian Salvation Government, which is responsible for monitoring the affairs of organizations, associations, and volunteer groups. However, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for granting approvals and monitoring training and rehabilitation centers affiliated with non-profit organizations and private entities, subject to specific fees, procedures, and mandatory conditions. According to an official circular, any center failing to meet these conditions will be closed. Centers seeking licenses must submit their activities and training schedules, including educational materials, to the ministry for supervision. Any center violating these directives will face closure, be barred from operating, and incur significant fines

3. Authorities responsible for organizing and protecting peaceful assemblies:

The Ministry of Interior of the Syrian Salvation Government, affiliated with HTS, is responsible for maintaining security and order in the region. The General Security Administration and the Special Tasks Unit are tasked with suppressing protests against HTS. Practically, there is no law regulating the right to protest in the region; only demonstrations in Favor of HTS and local authorities are allowed. These are typically held in the al-Sabaa Bahrat square in Idlib city, while anti-government protests are routinely suppressed, as previously mentioned.

2. Violations:

- **Prohibition of working without registration:**

A member of a civil society organization in Idlib reported that on August 28, 2023, police raided the office of a pending NGO, broke the door, entered by force, searched the office without proper legal documentation, and then sealed the office with a new lock to prevent the organization from using it. The reason given was the organization's failure to obtain registration.

In another incident, on May 27, 2023, security forces at a checkpoint in Maarrat Misrin stopped a vehicle carrying a team from an NGO heading to one of the displaced persons' camps to provide assistance.

The vehicle was seized, and team members were detained due to the absence of an official permit from the authorities. Several organizations mentioned difficulties in registering, citing bureaucratic and burdensome procedures, in addition to financial costs that hinder their ability to work under the current regulations, which are inconsistent with international standards for the right to freedom of association.

- **Detention of members for mixed-gender transport:** In the Maarrat Misrin incident, security forces stopped the team for another reason: male and female members were seated together in the same vehicle, which was deemed inappropriate according to Islamic customs and traditions.

- **Arbitrary approval of NGO activities:**

Although officially registered, organizations in HTS-controlled areas must submit a request for approval for each activity they plan. The NGO office selectively approves parts of the main project and arbitrarily rejects other parts, disrupting the main objectives of the project. An NGO worker stated:

"On July 17, 2023, we submitted a request for approval for our association, but our work was delayed under the pretext that some activities were not in line with societal norms."

- **Governmental control over humanitarian aid distribution:**

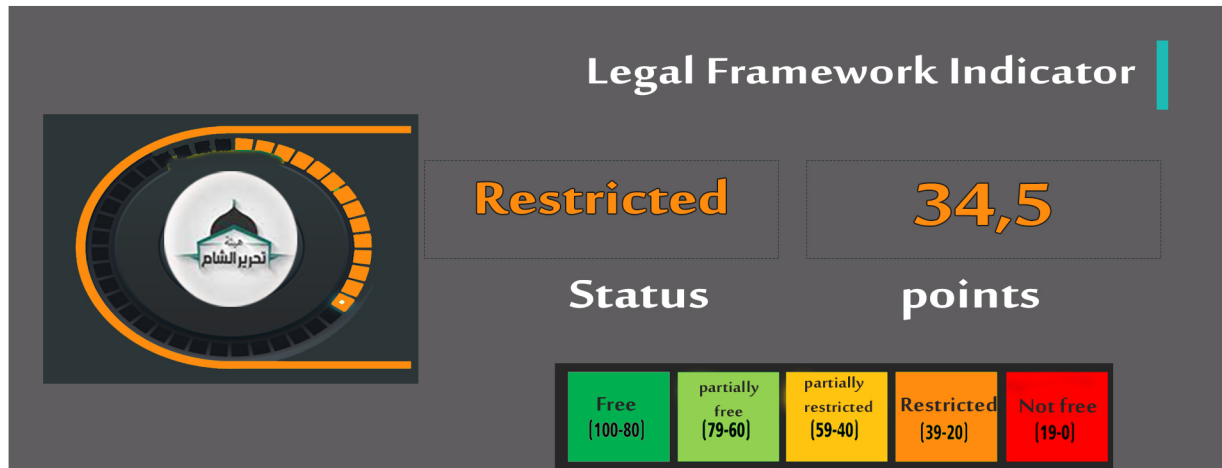
Local authorities often obstruct the work of humanitarian organizations to seize international aid provided through them, as the government, affiliated with a terrorist group, cannot deal directly with international or UN parties.

A volunteer team member providing aid to displaced persons stated that on May 14, 2023, their efforts were halted by local authorities while counting beneficiaries, aiming to pressure the association into handing over future aid. In another case, a member of a relief association in one of Idlib's camps reported that a government employee from the Ministry of Development stopped their food distribution, despite their obtaining the necessary approval. The employee demanded that the aid be transferred to a government warehouse for distribution. When the association refused, the employee verbally assaulted them, forcing the association to withdraw and halt the distribution.

Specialized Indicators:

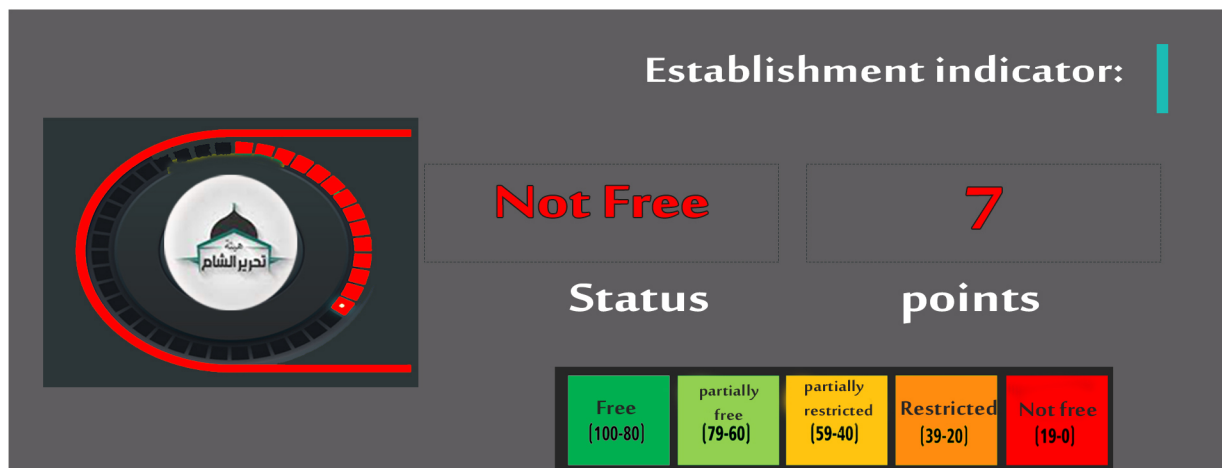
1. Legal framework indicator: (Restricted)

association are entirely absent in the laws and administrative procedures of the Syrian Salvation Government. However, civil society organizations interviewed expressed a degree of satisfaction with the practical procedures, though waiting periods sometimes exceed 90 days, which is an inappropriate measure for exercising this right. The indicator scored 34.5 points out of 100 on the freedom of association scale



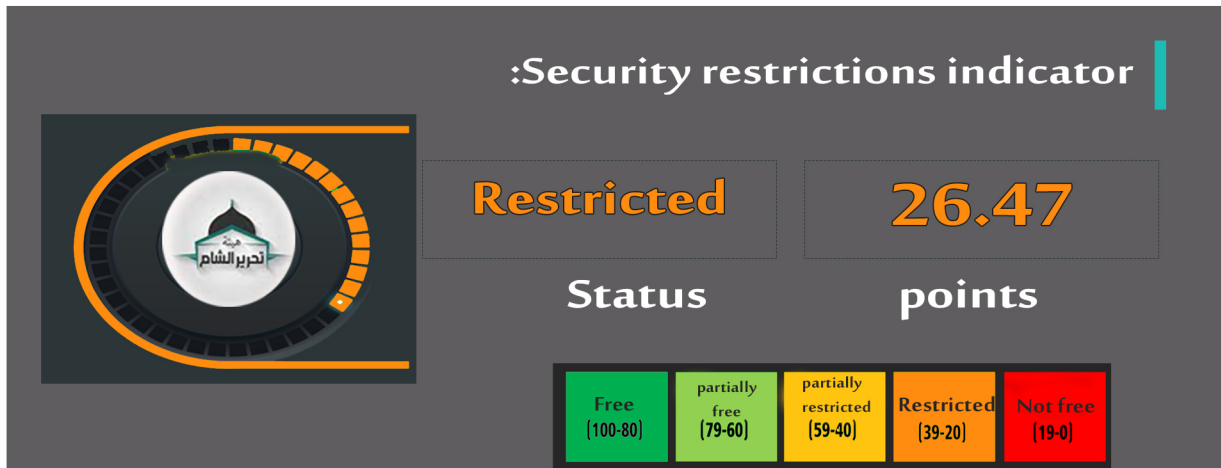
2. Establishment indicator: (Not Free)

There are no procedures for notification-based registration. The Syrian Salvation Government employs a system of application submission and waiting periods that often exceed 90 days. According to the legal measurement, this indicator scored 7 points out of 100



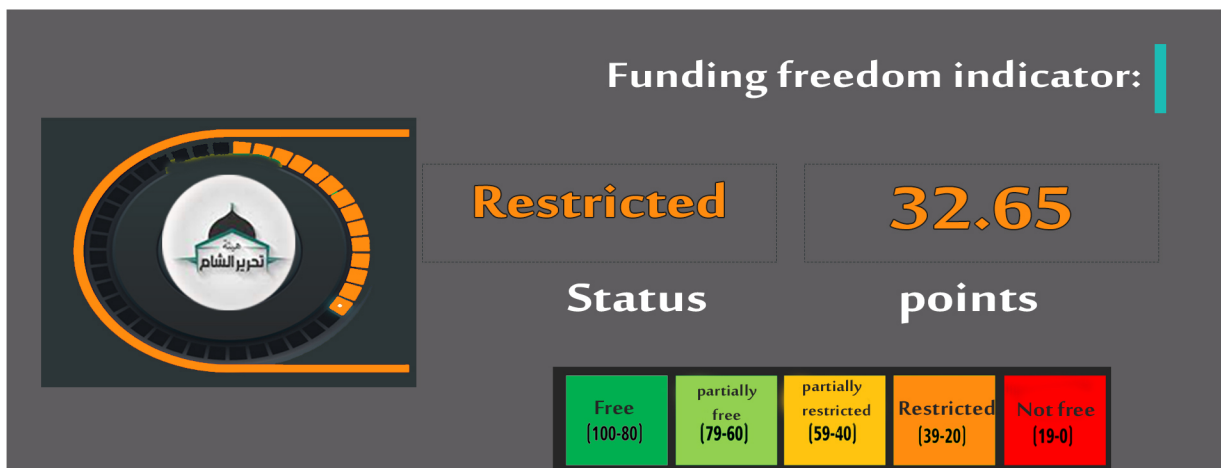
3. Security restrictions indicator: (Restricted)

The Syrian Salvation Government intervenes directly in the establishment process, and security forces are involved in rejecting or approving the members of NGO boards. NGOs also face media restrictions and are not allowed to engage with the public. This indicator scored 26.47 points out of 100.



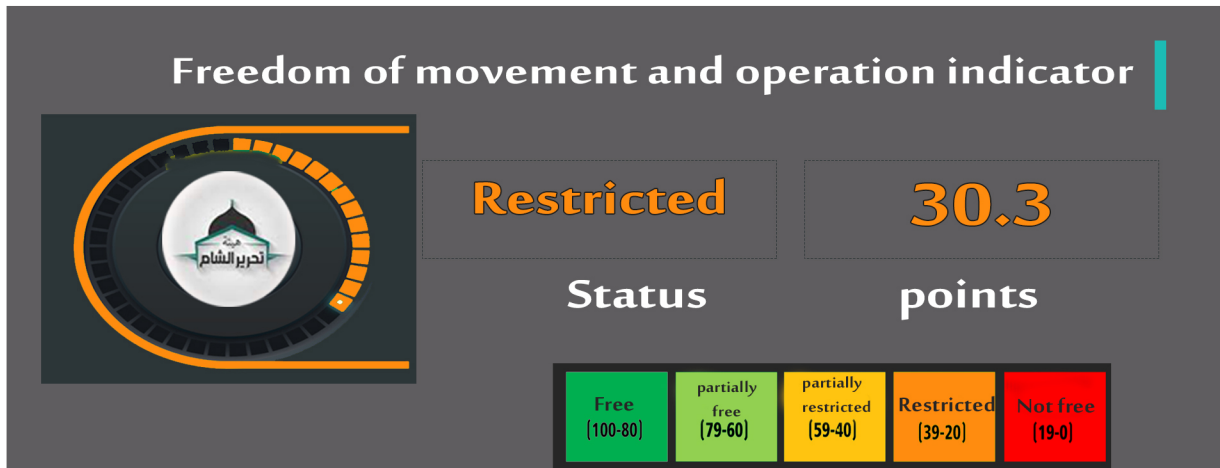
4. Funding freedom indicator: (Restricted)

There is freedom to receive both local and international funding, and organizations in the area are free to interact with international agencies and organizations. This indicator scored 32.65 points out of 100.



5. Freedom of movement and operation indicator: (Restricted)

There is significant difficulty in active civil participation in the area. The Syrian Salvation Government imposes a clear prohibition on the freedom of interaction between NGOs and political entities, including opposition groups. There are also challenges in allowing interaction between local NGOs and the targeted population. This indicator scored 30.3 points out of 100.



6. Freedom of expression indicator: (Not Free)

) The freedom of expression is entirely absent in areas controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government, and HTS and its military wing, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), oppress civil society organizations and associations completely, preventing them from expressing their opinions or criticizing the ruling authority's policies. These organizations and associations do not participate in policy-making or decision-making processes, which remain under the exclusive control of the ruling authority in the area. The indicator scored 10.71 points out of 100 on the scale for freedom of association.



1. General Outcome:

The Syrian Salvation Government imposes significant restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly. In practice, there are no laws or regulations that clearly guarantee or organize the right to protest. Peaceful protests are allowed only when they are in support of HTS or the local authorities. In contrast, protests criticizing or opposing the government or HTS are suppressed with force, as described earlier.

According to the analysis of interviews conducted with local activists and organizations, the state of the right to peaceful assembly is classified as “not free,” with the report documenting numerous instances of repression against peaceful gatherings. The region scored very low on international scales measuring this right, reflecting the severe restrictions and security interventions imposed by the authorities