

Syria: Testimonies Reveal the Continued Restriction of the Right to Movement Despite the Decision to Lift Travel Bans



STJ Recommends Urgent Measures To Ensure Freedom Of Movement, Including Expanding The Scope Of Decision No. 20/2025 To Cover All Travel Bans, Restricting The Power To Issue Such Bans To The Judiciary, Establishing A Transparent Appeal Mechanism, And Disseminating Instructions To Border Crossings





Syria: Testimonies Reveal the Continued Restriction of the Right to Movement Despite the Decision to Lift Travel Bans

STJ Recommends Urgent Measures to Ensure Freedom of Movement, Including Expanding the Scope of Decision No. 20/2025 to Cover All Travel Bans, Restricting the Power to Issue Such Bans to the Judiciary, Establishing a Transparent Appeal Mechanism, and Disseminating Instructions to Border Crossings



1. Introduction:

Following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of the new transitional government, the latter pledged to abolish the repressive security practices associated with the previous era, including policies restricting freedom of movement. In this context, the Minister of Interior issued [Decision No. 20](#) in March 2025, canceling more than five million travel ban notices, most of which had been issued by security agencies and bodies affiliated with the Ba'ath Party.

While the decision appeared significant in form, its practical implementation has remained limited, particularly with regard to politically targeted groups such as activists and dissidents who had been subjected to these bans for reasons lacking legal or judicial basis. Even months after the decision's issuance, a number of these individuals continue to face obstacles in traveling or obtaining passports due to their names remaining on what is known as travel ban lists.

The testimonies and sources relied upon in this report indicate that the problem lies not only in the slow implementation but also in the absence of any clear institutional mechanism ensuring the decision's inclusion of all concerned individuals and providing avenues for review or appeal. Furthermore, the continued reliance on temporary solutions, such as issuing one-time travel permits, reflects a discretionary mindset still governing the matter, one that contradicts the stated commitments to building a state based on the rule of law and institutions.

2. Travel Bans as a Tool of Political Punishment under the Assad Regimes:

For decades, the Syrian regime used travel ban notices as a direct tool to punish political dissidents and activists, without any legal justification or judicial basis.¹ These notices were issued by security agencies or passed through administrative bodies as purely bureaucratic measures, without the concerned person being officially notified or granted the opportunity to challenge them. The reasons behind issuing these ban notices ranged from political or human rights activism to mere suspicion or familial ties to an opposition figure, making freedom of movement in the country conditional on loyalty to the regime rather than governed by the rule of law.²

The regime's manipulation of emergency laws played a central role in institutionalizing travel bans as a systematic tool of repression, particularly from the early 2000s onward. Countless Syrians were shocked to discover they had been barred from leaving the country, not as a result of criminal charges, but simply for having participated in peaceful civic activities or after their release from arbitrary detention. These travel restrictions were frequently compounded by additional punitive measures, such as denial of passport renewals, refusal to issue essential civil documents, and, in some cases, the preemptive freezing of assets or arbitrary dismissal from public sector employment. Collectively, these actions formed part of a broader machinery of political retribution and administrative exclusion.³

¹ Human Rights Watch. [A Wasted Decade](#). 16 July 2010

² US Embassy. [Syria 2020 Human Rights Report](#). 3 May 2021

³ Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. [Travel Ban in Syria 2009](#). March 2009

Although the regime treated this practice as an internal security measure, it fundamentally constituted a blatant violation of one of the core civil rights: the right to freedom of movement. It also contradicts Syria's international obligations, particularly under [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which affirms in Article 12 that everyone shall have the right to leave any country, including their own.

3. The Continued Restriction of Movement Despite the Decision to Lift Travel Bans:

Despite the transitional government's decision to abolish travel bans, the testimonies documented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), as well as open-source materials, reveal that such restrictions persist, particularly against political dissidents whose names have not been removed from the security lists.

Defected officer (S.Sh.),⁴ who returned to Syria in March 2025 believing that all previous procedures had been automatically annulled, stated in his testimony to STJ:

"When I was stuck in Syria, the decision was of no help... the travel ban was still in place against me and many others."

Meanwhile, journalist Jamal al-Shoufi wrote in a Facebook [post](#) that travel ban files remain active for opposition members and revolutionaries:

"While ordinary security pursuit files were generally removed, on a case-by-case basis... these files still exist in the security records... my personal file still includes five travel bans and review notices dating between 2012 and 2020."

Al-Shoufi called for a new administrative decision to annul all security files issued by the former regime prior to 8 December 2024.

Similarly, human rights lawyer Anwar Majanni [shared](#) on Facebook his experience attempting to leave Syria recently. It turned out he was subject to a travel ban based on a letter from the Ministry of Justice. He wrote:

"People shouldn't be burdened with lifting travel bans, turning a visit to Syria into a maze of administrative and judicial reviews. We urge the authorities to issue a directive to border crossings not to obstruct departures on the basis of travel ban requests from ministries, given that such requests lack legal and constitutional validity."

Political writer and opposition figure Samira al-Masalma also discovered her name on travel ban lists when attempting to leave the country after her return in April. She [commented](#) on Facebook:

"A terrorist in the eyes of the regime, and a terrorist in the eyes of the new authority. No difference... I'm still banned from traveling and from obtaining a passport because I'm an opposition figure."

⁴ STJ withholds the names of witnesses in this report to protect their safety.

4. Gaps in the Decision and the Broad Interpretation of Exceptions:

The testimonies documented by STJ demonstrate that Ministerial Decision No. 20 of 2025, which cancels travel ban notices, has not been comprehensively implemented. Rather, it has been applied selectively, accompanied by vague interpretations that have significantly limited its practical impact. In March 2025, the Director of the Immigration and Passports Department, Walid Araabi, [stated](#) that the cancellation did not apply to **"judicial, security, or financial files still under review,"** without clarifying the nature of these files or the authorities empowered to resolve them.

Similarly, lawyer Adel Khalayan noted in a media [statement](#) that the decision does not cover individuals with judicial arrest warrants or those facing criminal charges. He emphasized that such individuals **"need special security approval to obtain a passport,"** asserting that they are **"often involved in crimes such as drug trafficking, fraud, or forgery."**

This unregulated expansion in interpreting the exceptions listed in the ministerial decision has effectively allowed travel bans to continue against many opposition figures, despite the absence of proven criminal charges or pending legal cases. This represents a clear violation of the principle of legitimate restriction, which requires that any limitation on rights and freedoms must be based on a clear and specific legal foundation, imposed by a competent authority through transparent procedures.⁵

In this context, a group of activists and dissidents from Daraa Governorate issued a public [appeal](#) in mid-May 2025, published on the "Daraa News Network" page, urging the Minister of Interior to issue a general amnesty covering all rulings issued by the Terrorism Court and Military Judiciary during the former regime's rule. The statement stressed that excluding this group from the travel ban removal decision had prevented them from obtaining passports or leaving the country which constituted a breach of the principle of equality before the law and institutionalizing discriminatory enforcement.

5. The Absence of Notification Rights: A Central Flaw in Implementing the Travel Ban Removal Decision:

One of the most critical shortcomings in the implementation of the ministerial decision to lift travel bans is the ongoing absence of a formal mechanism to inform affected individuals of their legal status. Without publicly accessible lists or clear administrative procedures enabling citizens to verify whether a travel ban remains in effect, many find themselves in a state of legal uncertainty. In the absence of reliable information, some assumed that the fall of the previous regime automatically nullified all associated restrictive measures.

Testimonies collected by STJ indicate that a number of returnees to Syria were unaware of travel bans against them and only discovered their status when attempting to leave the country, not upon entry. One opposition journalist (M.N.), who returned to Syria after the regime's fall in 2025, said:

"I returned to Syria a few weeks after the regime fell. I had no idea there was a travel ban. No one told me anything at the border. But when I tried to leave, after checking

⁵ [General Comment No. 27](#), Article 12 (Freedom of Movement), Human Rights Committee.

the security record, I was informed there were six pursuit notices against me, including a charge of employment evasion, which carried financial consequences. They told me: you can't leave."

Similarly, prominent political dissident Alice Mufarej said that border officials informed her upon entry about multiple summonses issued by different security agencies, but made no mention of a travel ban or the need to initiate procedures to lift it. She only learned of the bans later from acquaintances who had gone through similar experiences.

Others, like defected officer (S.Sh.), were aware of their previous travel ban status but believed it would be annulled by regime change. He said:

"I knew I had a travel ban and asked about it before returning. But I assumed the fall of the regime meant all those measures were canceled."

He added:

"I was not asked for anything upon entry, but when I tried to renew my passport, the ban appeared. I was told I'd need to go through a long process before I could leave the country."

These cases highlight the absence of even the most basic level of institutional transparency in implementing the decision, especially when it comes to informing individuals about their legal rights and providing accessible mechanisms for review or appeal. The country still lacks a centralized electronic database or oversight system that would allow citizens to check their legal status or contest travel bans. In a transitional context where institutions remain underdeveloped, this vacuum exacerbates the public's sense of legal uncertainty and reinforces reliance on informal mediation, rather than institutionalizing the rule of law.

6. Temporary Travel Permits: Individual Settlements for Ongoing Violations:

Testimonies gathered for this report show that, in several cases, authorities have resorted to issuing what is known as a "one-time travel permit" as a temporary workaround in lieu of formally lifting the travel ban. These permits –sometimes handwritten –are issued by unofficial or ambiguously authorized figures, including public prosecutors, border officers, or even individuals with unclear affiliations, making them an exceptional and extralegal measure. They are typically used when formal administrative procedures fail or when no competent authority is clearly responsible for adjudicating travel ban removals.

On 23 April 2025, Samira al-Masalma [reported](#) that despite her efforts, she was only able to obtain a passport accompanied by a one-time travel permit. She said:

"The case file includes no charges other than joining the revolution and opposing the Assad regime... Therefore, everything that blocks my freedom of travel, once or a hundred times, should be dropped, not just for me but for everyone in similar circumstances."

Likewise, Alice Mufarej stated she left the country after receiving an exceptional permit from a border official at the Masnaa crossing, without completing the formal procedures:

“A bearded man from the new border administration welcomed me. After reviewing my file, he said: you’re not allowed to leave... Then, after looking at the paperwork I had started for lifting the ban, he said: trust in God (implying she was free to go) and allowed me to pass.”

In a similar account, journalist (M.N.) said he waited for hours at the crossing trying to leave, until he was told to contact someone called “Hajji Abu Enad”:

“I didn’t know who he was or what his position was... After speaking to him, and following his instructions, I received a one-time permit and was able to leave.”

Defected officer (S.Sh.) also said he obtained a similar permit from the public prosecutor after repeated follow-ups:

“After some insistence, I was told the sheikh –the prosecutor– could help. I explained my situation to him. He wrote a note by hand, signed and stamped it, granting me a one-time exit.”

He confirmed that he used this paper –issued by someone “not authorized to grant such permits,” in his words– to cross the land border into Lebanon. As of this report’s publication, his name remains on the travel ban lists.

These accounts reveal the fragility of the legal and procedural framework governing freedom of movement. Restrictions are circumvented not through transparent legal mechanisms, but through informal arrangements and contacts. The system’s reliance on temporary, unauthorized permits reflects the absence of a functioning institutional apparatus for appeals and grievances, and underscores the persistence of arbitrary governance rather than the rule of law.

7. Legal Analysis and Recommendations:

The continued restriction of freedom of movement by the transitional government –particularly through maintaining travel bans issued by the former regime for political purposes and without judicial basis– constitutes a clear violation of binding legal standards, foremost among them:

- Article 13 of the [Constitutional Declaration](#) issued in March 2025, which guarantees citizens the right to move freely;
- Article 12 of [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\) of 1966](#), which affirms that everyone shall be free to leave any country, including his own. Syria is a [State Party](#) to this covenant, and under Article 12 of the Constitutional Declaration, rights enshrined in ratified international human rights treaties are an integral part of the Declaration itself.

The continued use of exceptional security measures –including travel bans previously used as political repression tools– also violates paragraph 3 of Article 48 of the Constitutional Declaration, which mandates the abolition of such practices, especially those relating to civil documentation.

This reality also poses a tangible barrier to the return of refugees, especially those returning to regularize their status or needing to leave again for professional or family obligations. As such, it undermines the commitments outlined in Article 8 of the Constitutional Declaration, which



obliges the state to remove obstacles to voluntary return in cooperation with relevant international bodies.

Finally, Ministerial Decision No. 20 of 2025 does not cover all travel ban cases. It is limited to those issued by the Armed Forces Command, the security agencies and their branches, the National Security Bureau, and the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command, while ignoring those issued by other entities.

Based on the above, this paper recommends that the transitional government take the following urgent measures to ensure respect for the right to freedom of movement and to end the arbitrary use of travel bans:

1. **Issue a new executive decision** reaffirming the provisions of Decision No. 20 of 2025 and expanding its scope to include all travel bans issued for political reasons, regardless of the issuing authority. This should include the formation of an independent committee responsible for overseeing implementation and receiving complaints from affected individuals.
2. **Prohibit administrative or security agencies from issuing travel bans**, and reserve this authority exclusively for the judiciary, with any travel restriction requiring clear criteria and full compliance with due process guarantees.⁶
3. **Issue binding directives to all land, air, and sea border crossings** instructing them not to restrict individuals' movement based on past travel bans, unless a final and enforceable judicial ruling exists, excluding decisions issued by bodies lacking judicial independence, such as the Terrorism Court and field military courts.
4. **Simplify and standardize administrative procedures for lifting travel bans**, and establish a centralized, transparent electronic platform through which citizens can check their legal status and submit requests to lift bans or file appeals.
5. **Ensure the effective implementation of Syria's international obligations** –especially those arising from its ratification of the ICCPR– by activating monitoring and accountability mechanisms and translating constitutional guarantees into concrete policies and enforceable legislation.

⁶ "Due process" is one of the fundamental principles of international human rights law. It encompasses a set of guarantees that must accompany any state action that interferes with individual rights. These include: the requirement that the action be based on a publicly accessible law, that the person concerned be notified, that they be granted the opportunity to defend themselves, and that they be able to challenge the action before an independent and impartial body. This principle is derived from several provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Article 14 (the right to a fair trial) and Article 12 (freedom of movement), and is elaborated in General Comment No. 27, issued in 1999 by the Human Rights Committee in relation to Article 12.





ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.