



The imperative of lifting US sanctions on Syria

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INTRODUCTION: A NEW DAWN FOR SYRIA AND THE CASE AGAINST OBSOLETE SANCTIONS

The dramatic fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a pivotal turning point in Syria's harrowing modern history. After nearly 14 years of brutal conflict, civil strife and devastating humanitarian catastrophe, the removal of the regime responsible for systematic human rights abuses, widespread destruction and regional destabilization presents an unprecedented opportunity for national reconciliation, reconstruction and the establishment of a new political order.

However, this nascent transition is immediately confronted by a significant obstacle inherited from the previous era: The extensive and complex web of sanctions imposed primarily by the US but also echoed by the EU and other international actors.

This study examines the pressing necessity for the US to comprehensively dismantle the sanctions architecture imposed upon Syria.

It argues that with the regime's collapse the foundational *raison d'être* for these measures – namely, to exert pressure on the Assad regime to cease its violence, engage in meaningful political dialogue under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and, ultimately, facilitate a democratic transition – has fundamentally ceased to exist.¹²

The continued imposition of these broad, economically crippling sanctions in the post-Assad era is not only rendered politically obsolete, but is also actively counterproductive. Persisting with them threatens to unjustly punish the Syrian populace, severely impede the monumental task of national reconstruction and socio-economic development, obstruct the effective provision of essential public services by the emerging interim authorities and ultimately undermine the very stability and democratic aspirations the sanctions initially purported to support.

The sanctions regime, developed over more than a decade and significantly intensified by measures such as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (Caesar Act), was designed to isolate the Assad government economically and diplomatically, targeting key sectors including energy, finance and



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construction, and individuals and entities deemed complicit in the regime's atrocities.³⁴ While the intent may have been to weaken the regime's capacity for violence, the practical application of these sanctions has had far-reaching and often devastating consequences for ordinary Syrians, exacerbating poverty, hindering access to vital goods such as medicine and food, and complicating the delivery of humanitarian aid.⁵⁶⁷

Maintaining these sanctions against a new Syrian leadership, represented by figures such as President Ahmad Al-Sharaa and a transitional government expressing commitment to reform and national unity, lacks political efficacy.⁸ It risks alienating potential partners in governance, fostering resentment among the population, and inadvertently strengthening spoilers or extremist elements who thrive in conditions of chaos and economic deprivation.

Furthermore, as some legal and policy analysts argue, continuing to enforce sanctions predicated on the actions of a defunct regime raises significant concerns regarding due process and fairness.⁹¹⁰ Punishing the Syrian people and their new representatives for the sins of the past regime seems both legally questionable

Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced the formation of a new government on March 29, reiterating his commitment to "building a strong and stable state." AFP

and morally untenable, particularly when the international community, including the US, has expressed a desire to support responsible governance during this critical transition.¹¹

This study will examine the specific arguments for lifting sanctions, analyzing the profound positive impacts their removal would have on Syria's economic revitalization,

including reconstruction efforts estimated to cost hundreds of billions of dollars¹², the improvement of development indicators and the restoration of basic services crucial for civilian well-being.

It will also dissect the political counter-productivity of maintaining the status quo, highlighting the risks of destabilization, the chilling effect on necessary foreign investment and the impediment to the safe and dignified return of millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons.¹³¹⁴ Finally, it will conclude by urging a swift and comprehensive policy shift from the US, building upon tentative initial steps such as General License 24¹⁵ and mirroring moves by partners including the EU¹⁶, to fully remove sanctions and support the Syrian people in the arduous but hopeful task of rebuilding their nation.



THE VANISHED RATIONALE: WHY ASSAD-ERA SANCTIONS ARE ILL-SUITED FOR POST- ASSAD SYRIA

The intricate framework of US sanctions against Syria, built through successive Executive Orders and legislation culminating in the formidable Caesar Act, was explicitly predicated on the behavior and nature of the Assad regime.¹⁷¹⁸ The stated objectives were manifold but consistently centered on compelling a fundamental change in the regime's conduct.

Key goals included halting the indiscriminate violence against civilians, including the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs; compelling adherence to international human rights norms; forcing engagement in a credible political transition process as outlined in UNSCR 2254; curbing support for terrorist organizations; and limiting malign Iranian influence within Syria.¹⁹²⁰ These sanctions were tools of coercion, designed to alter the cost-benefit analysis of a specific ruling elite and its associated networks.

With the fall of Bashar Assad and the dissolution of his regime's core structures in December 2024, the rationale for these measures has vanished.²¹²² The specific individuals and entities targeted for their direct role in violence, oppression, or corruption under Assad are either removed from power, have fled or are subject to new accountability

A medic assesses damage at the Adnan Kiwan hospital in Kansafrāh, southern Idlib province, after reported airstrikes by pro-regime forces. AFP

mechanisms potentially being established by the interim authorities. The entity responsible for the policies and actions that triggered the sanctions — the Assad regime itself — no longer governs Syria.

Continuing these measures transforms them from targeted tools against a culpable regime into a form of collective punishment against the Syrian population and a hindrance to the successor government. This reality is implicitly acknowledged even within US policy circles, which have stressed the need to support “responsible governance” in the transition period,²³²⁴ a goal fundamentally undermined by the continuation of crippling economic restrictions.

Furthermore, the argument regarding due process carries significant weight.²⁵²⁶ International sanctions, while a recognized tool of statecraft, are generally intended to be targeted and proportionate responses to specific threats or violations. Applying sanctions designed to punish the actions of the Assad regime to a new governing entity that ostensibly seeks to move beyond that legacy raises serious questions of fairness and legality. It risks creating a precedent where populations remain indefinitely penalized for the actions of previous, overthrown governments, hindering reconciliation and progress. While targeted sanctions against specific individuals from the former regime who may still pose a threat or need to face justice could arguably remain relevant,

the justification for sector-wide and financial sanctions that impact the entire economy and population has dissolved.

Some might argue that sanctions could be repurposed as leverage to ensure the new Syrian leadership adheres to democratic norms, human rights standards or specific US policy objectives.²⁷²⁸ However, this approach is fraught with peril. Firstly, it risks being perceived by the Syrian public and the new authorities as coercive interference, potentially fueling anti-Western sentiment and undermining the legitimacy of the interim government. Secondly, withholding sanctions relief is more likely to destabilize Syria than to guide it effectively.²⁹³⁰ A state struggling under sanctions is less capable of consolidating control, providing services, managing demobilization and resisting extremist influences — outcomes detrimental to both Syrian and Western interests.

The initial steps taken by the US Treasury, such as issuing General License 24 in January 2025 to allow limited transactions related to energy sales, public services and remittances,³¹³²³³³⁴ signal an understanding that some relief is necessary for basic functioning. However, these limited measures fall far short of addressing the fundamental disconnect between the obsolete rationale of the Assad-era sanctions and the realities of post-Assad Syria. A complete re-evaluation and lifting of the broad sanctions regime are required to align US policy with the dramatically altered political landscape.

UNLEASHING POTENTIAL: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF LIFTING SANCTIONS

The removal of US sanctions would act as a critical catalyst, unlocking Syria's potential for recovery and charting a path out of the economic abyss created by years of conflict and exacerbated by restrictive measures. The positive repercussions would be felt across multiple, interconnected domains, fundamentally improving the prospects for the nation and its people.

Facilitating monumental reconstruction:

The scale of destruction in Syria is staggering. Cities lie in ruins, critical infrastructure — including power plants, water treatment facilities, hospitals, schools and transportation networks — is decimated, and millions of homes have been destroyed or damaged. Credible estimates place the cost of rebuilding Syria somewhere between \$250 billion and \$400 billion³⁵, a sum far exceeding Syria's domestic capacity.



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US sanctions, particularly the Caesar Act, directly obstruct reconstruction by prohibiting foreign companies and governments from engaging in significant reconstruction activities, threatening them with severe secondary sanctions, including loss of access to the US financial system.³⁶³⁷ Lifting these sanctions is an essential precondition for any large-scale, internationally supported reconstruction effort.³⁸³⁹ It would allow for the legal importation of essential construction materials, heavy machinery and technological expertise currently restricted due to dual-use concerns or financial transaction prohibitions.

Furthermore, it would remove the primary deterrent for international contractors and investors, including those from Gulf nations who have expressed support but remain hesitant due to sanction risks.⁴⁰ While the EU's suspension of certain sanctions⁴¹⁴² and the US Treasury's General License 24,⁴³⁴⁴ represent tentative acknowledgments of the need, they are explicitly limited and preserve broad restrictions, particularly on "new investment," thereby failing to enable the comprehensive rebuilding Syria desperately requires.⁴⁵⁴⁶ Only a full lifting of sanctions can create the permissive environment needed to attract the massive investment required to physically rebuild the nation and provide a foundation for economic recovery and regional stability.⁴⁷⁴⁸

Catalyzing sustainable development:

Beyond immediate reconstruction, lifting sanctions is vital for long-term economic development and diversification.⁴⁹ The Syrian economy has been shattered, contracting by an estimated 84 percent between 2010 and 2023.⁵⁰ Sanctions have compounded the war's effects by isolating Syria from the global financial system⁵¹, hindering international trade (even in non-sanctioned goods due to over-compliance by banks and shippers), blocking access to technology and capital markets, and stifling entrepreneurship.⁵²

Removing sanctions would allow Syria to reintegrate into the global economy. This includes regaining access to the SWIFT international banking payments system, re-establishing banking relationships crucial for trade finance, and attracting the foreign direct investment needed to modernize industries and create jobs.⁵³

The interim government has signaled intentions to pursue a free-market economy, abolish cumbersome import/export controls, and potentially privatize inefficient state-owned enterprises.⁵⁴⁵⁵⁵⁶ These reforms, crucial for attracting investment and stimulating growth, cannot succeed under the shadow of



Previous: A woman bathes a child at a camp for displaced people near Sarmada, Idlib province. Before Assad's ouster, the UN reported that over 5 million people in the area lacked basic services like water, waste disposal, and sanitation. Next: US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Reports suggest Rubio supports lifting sanctions, advocating for selective cooperation and seeing strategic value in engaging Damascus. AFP



comprehensive US sanctions.⁵⁷⁵⁸ Lifting sanctions would empower the new government to implement its economic vision, fostering sectors such as agriculture (currently hampered by restrictions on importing seeds, fertilizers and equipment⁵⁹), light manufacturing and services, thereby improving livelihoods and reducing dependency on foreign aid.

Restoring essential services for

civilians: The ability of the interim Syrian government to provide basic public services to its citizens is severely compromised by the impact of sanctions.⁶⁰⁶¹ The healthcare sector is in ruins, with reports indicating more than half of hospitals are non-functional or only partially functional.⁶²⁶³ Access to essential medicines and medical equipment is frequently blocked or delayed due to complex licensing requirements, banking hurdles or suppliers' fear of violating sanctions.⁶⁴⁶⁵ Similarly, the water and sanitation infrastructure requires massive investment, but importing necessary purification chemicals, pumps and pipes is often difficult.⁶⁶

Electricity generation is crippled, affecting homes, businesses and critical facilities including hospitals, partly due to restrictions on importing spare parts and fuel.⁶⁷ While the US Treasury issued General License 24 in January 2025, authorizing certain transactions with governing institutions for public services (ministries of health, education, energy for humanitarian purposes) and payment of salaries⁶⁸⁶⁹⁷⁰, its impact remains limited.

Reports suggest that the complexity of the regulations, carve-outs (e.g., restrictions on new investment), and the general "chilling

effect" lead many international banks and companies to practise over-compliance, avoiding even permissible transactions.⁷¹⁷²⁷³ Humanitarian exemptions, while existing on paper, often prove bureaucratic, slow, and insufficient to meet the scale of needs, particularly for recovery and rebuilding activities that blur the line between humanitarian aid and development.⁷⁴⁷⁵ⁱ

Lifting the underlying sanctions regime would directly enable the interim government and international organizations to more effectively procure necessary goods, repair infrastructure, pay public sector workers reliably and, to ultimately improve the delivery of healthcare, education, clean water and electricity to a population that has endured immense suffering.⁷⁶⁷⁷ This is particularly critical for vulnerable groups, such as women and children, who often bear the brunt of service collapse.⁷⁸⁷⁹⁸⁰⁸¹⁸²

THE POLITICAL FALLACY: WHY MAINTAINING SANCTIONS IS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND DESTABILIZING

Beyond the compelling economic and humanitarian arguments, maintaining the Assad-era sanctions regime in the dramatically altered Syrian context is politically unwise and actively detrimental to US and regional interests. Continuing these measures against the new leadership under Ahmad Al-Sharaa is likely to be ineffective as a tool of influence and risks producing outcomes contrary to stated Western goals.

Fueling instability and undermining

governance: Syria stands at a precarious juncture. The collapse of the Assad regime,

while welcome, leaves a power vacuum and a deeply fractured society grappling with immense economic distress.⁸³ The interim government faces the daunting tasks of establishing security, initiating national reconciliation, managing the disarmament and reintegration and beginning the process of state-building. Maintaining broad economic sanctions actively undermines these efforts.⁸⁴⁸⁵

By choking off economic recovery and preventing investment, sanctions exacerbate poverty and unemployment, creating fertile ground for disillusionment, crime, banditry, acts of revenge and the potential resurgence of extremist groups or insurgencies who can exploit popular grievances and offer alternative sources of income or order.⁸⁶

A government unable to provide basic services or demonstrate economic progress due to external restrictions will struggle to gain legitimacy and consolidate control. Delaying reconstruction and withholding financial resources risks plunging Syria into prolonged chaos and state failure, potentially inviting greater interference from regional powers with competing agendas.⁸⁷⁸⁸

Some analysts explicitly warn that attempting to use sanctions relief as a bargaining chip for specific concessions

Below: Children play on a swing in front of destroyed buildings at the Yarmuk camp for Palestinian refugees in southern Damascus, after Assad's ouster. Next: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (R) welcomes Sharaa in Riyadh during his first foreign visit since Assad's ouster. AFP

from the new government may prove far more costly in the long run, potentially unraveling the fragile transition and undermining prospects for sustainable peace.⁸⁹⁹⁰ Stability in Syria is crucial for regional security, and sanctions, in this new context, act as a destabilizing force.

Deterring essential investment and partnerships: Economic recovery hinges on significant investment, not only for large-scale reconstruction, but also for revitalizing businesses and creating jobs. Both regional actors, particularly Gulf Arab states, and international businesses have expressed interest in Syria's potential, especially given the interim government's pro-market orientation.⁹¹⁹²⁹³ However, the continuation of US sanctions, especially the extraterritorial reach of the Caesar Act targeting reconstruction and energy sectors, acts as a powerful deterrent.⁹⁴⁹⁵⁹⁶

Fear of triggering US secondary sanctions — being cut off from the US dollar and financial system — makes even potential investors from allied nations extremely wary.⁹⁷⁹⁸ The interim government's economic reforms⁹⁹¹⁰⁰ will remain largely theoretical if foreign capital cannot flow into the country. Even the limited easing provided by General License 24 explicitly maintains prohibitions on most “new investment,” signaling that the US remains fundamentally opposed to the economic revitalization necessary for stability.¹⁰¹¹⁰² This not only hinders economic recovery, but also limits the West's ability to build constructive partnerships with the new Syrian authorities and shape the country's future trajectory through positive engagement and investment, potentially ceding influence to other global actors less concerned with democratic norms or human rights.

Obstructing the dignified return of refugees: The Syrian conflict created one of the largest refugee crises since the Second World War, with almost 13.4 million Syrians displaced either internally or in neighboring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and beyond.¹⁰³ The safe, voluntary and dignified return of these populations is a humanitarian imperative and essential for Syria's long-term social cohesion and economic recovery. However, refugees consistently cite the lack of security, destroyed infrastructure and absence of economic opportunities as primary barriers to returning.¹⁰⁴¹⁰⁵

By actively hindering reconstruction and stifling economic activity, US sanctions directly contribute to the conditions that prevent refugees from going home.¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷ People are unlikely to return to demolished





neighborhoods with no prospect of finding work, accessing healthcare, or sending their children to school.

While security is paramount, the economic dimension is inseparable. The UN's projection of 1.5 million refugee returns and 2 million IDP returns in 2025 is explicitly contingent on improved economic conditions.¹⁰⁸ Lifting sanctions is therefore a critical prerequisite for creating an environment conducive to large-scale returns.¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰ Delaying this process not only prolongs the suffering of displaced Syrians, but also maintains significant pressure on host countries, contributing to regional instability.

In essence, maintaining sanctions is akin to treating the symptoms (economic collapse, lack of services) while ignoring the changed diagnosis (the fall of the offending regime). It punishes the patient — the Syrian people — and obstructs the cure — reconstruction and development under a potentially more amenable government. It is a policy disconnected from the new reality, politically ineffective for achieving positive influence and dangerously counterproductive to the shared goals of stability, recovery and humanitarian relief.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE OPPORTUNITY — THE CASE FOR SWIFT AND COMPREHENSIVE SANCTIONS RELIEF

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 represented not just the end of a



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dark chapter but also a critical window of opportunity for Syria and the international community. However, this opportunity can be seized only if obsolete policies are discarded. The continuation of broad, indiscriminate US sanctions against Syria in the post-Assad era is no longer justifiable, politically effective or morally conscionable.

The original rationale — pressuring the Assad regime — has vanished with the regime itself.¹¹¹¹¹² Maintaining these measures now primarily inflicts further hardship on Syrian civilians who have already endured unimaginable suffering, in effect constituting a form of collective punishment.¹¹³¹¹⁴ The legal and ethical basis for enforcing sanctions tied to the crimes of a deposed government against a new administration and the general populace is highly questionable.¹¹⁵¹¹⁶

Conversely, lifting these sanctions holds the key to unlocking Syria's potential for recovery. It is an essential prerequisite for initiating the monumental task of reconstruction¹¹⁷¹¹⁸¹¹⁹, revitalizing the shattered economy through domestic reforms and foreign investment¹²⁰¹²¹¹²² and restoring essential public services like healthcare, water and electricity to tolerable levels.¹²³¹²⁴ Furthermore, removing the economic stranglehold is crucial for fostering political stability within Syria, preventing a descent into further chaos that could invite renewed conflict or extremism¹²⁵¹²⁶ and creating the necessary



conditions for the safe and dignified return of millions of refugees and IDPs.¹²⁷¹²⁸¹²⁹

Attempting to repurpose Assad-era sanctions as leverage against the new Syrian leadership under Al-Sharaa is a flawed strategy likely to backfire.¹³⁰¹³¹ It risks alienating the government and the populace, hindering the consolidation of a stable state and ultimately proving counterproductive to long-term US and regional interests. Positive engagement, coupled with support for reconstruction and development, offers a far more promising path toward influencing Syria's trajectory in a constructive direction.

The initial steps taken by the US Treasury through General License 24¹³²¹³³ and by the EU in suspending certain measures¹³⁴¹³⁵ are acknowledged but insufficient. They represent a tentative, piecemeal approach that fails to address the systemic impediments posed by the overarching sanctions architecture, particularly restrictions on reconstruction

Above: Shoppers browse for sweets at Damascus' Hamidiya covered market as Muslims prepare for the first post-Assad Eid al-Fitr. Next: People pose for a group picture celebrating the fall of Assad's five-decade rule in central Homs. AFP

and investment.¹³⁶¹³⁷¹³⁸ What is needed is a decisive and comprehensive policy shift.

The US government must act swiftly and decisively to lift the broad economic and sectoral sanctions imposed on Syria. This action should be coordinated with international allies to ensure a unified approach. While targeted measures against specific individuals demonstrably responsible for past atrocities or illicit activities might be maintained or adapted under strict criteria, the overarching regime that stifles the nation's recovery must be dismantled.

This is not merely an act of humanitarian goodwill, although the moral imperative is clear; it is a strategic necessity to support the emergence of a more stable, viable and potentially cooperative Syria from the ashes of conflict. The international community, led by the US, must pivot from punitive restriction to constructive enablement, empowering the Syrian people to rebuild their lives and their country.



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