



INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIGEST

Written By Victor Davis Hanson

Hoover Institution

Open



White House

WORLD NEWS / JUNE 23, 2025



Robert Weiner



Charles Rutledge


On This One, Trump is Right: Time to Lift Sanctions on Syria, but Cautiously



After 14 years of horrific civil war, the Syrian people deserve a chance to live up to the country’s great legacy, so long as it does not slide back into the brutal repression and support for terrorism that defined the Assad regime.

On this one issue, we agree with President Trump. On May 23—just nine days after Trump met with Syria’s interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa—the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control issued Syria General License 25, placing a 180-day pause on most U.S. sanctions against Syria. According to Trump, loosening sanctions will give Syria a “chance at greatness” and win a “victory for U.S. interests in Syria.”

ADVERTISING




Jabra Enhance™ Hearing Aids

Jabra Enhance - Sponsored [Learn More](#)

Hoover Institution

Written By Victor Davis Hanson

Open



The current government was formed on March 29 by the coalition of forces that overthrew former dictator Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. After his private meeting with Syria’s interim president, Trump praised al-Sharaa as a “young, attractive guy—tough guy” with a “strong past.” That remark was more than a little strange, given that al-Sharaa’s résumé includes ties to al-Qaeda via the affiliate Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group.

Considering Trump’s comment, along with his long history of cozying up to authoritarian figures, it would be understandable to assume this is yet another case of Trump being charmed by a foreign strongman. While that may be true, the reality is that conditions in Syria are improving. If the Trump administration plays this right—by tying sanctions relief to concrete expectations that prevent Syria from reverting to rogue-state behavior—it could secure a meaningful win for the United States, the region, and the Syrian people.



Trump waiting to greet Ahmed al-Sharaa while in Saudi Arabia. (Twitter)

Ending the Civil War

Perhaps the most notable achievement of the new government is its peace agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF, which largely represents Syria's Kurdish minority in the northeast, had long been a bitter adversary of both the Assad regime and the rebel factions that eventually coalesced into the current government.

Yet, despite that fraught history, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed an agreement in March that outlines the integration of the SDF into the newly formed Syrian state.

According to a source within the Syrian government, “significant progress has been made in forming the higher military and security committees on the government’s side,” while “committees from both sides are coordinating to swiftly resolve any security issues and prevent them from escalating.”

Though even a temporary pause in hostilities is an impressive accomplishment, it should be viewed with cautious optimism. The SDF may have signed a peace deal, but it remains well-armed, leaving the possibility of renewed conflict open. Moreover, the group continues to demand a decentralized Syrian state, a position the new government has thus far been

unwilling to accommodate. This may eventually be resolved, but pinning hopes on good intentions is not a serious foreign policy. The U.S. would be wise to make a finalized agreement with the SDF a condition for extending Syria's sanction relief. That would help ensure the resources unlocked through sanctions aren't stockpiled for another round of civil war.



Ahmed al-Sharaa greeting Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia.

Countering Religious Violence

Despite many cities experiencing levels of calm not seen in years, religiously motivated violence remains one of the most pressing challenges facing the new Syrian government. Many feared that a government led by a rebel commander might prove even more repressive than the Assad regime. Yet, al-Sharaa's government has so far shown surprising tolerance toward Syria's sizable religious minority populations. Christmas was even declared a national holiday for the first time in decades.

Violence between religious groups still occurs, but the government has consistently moved to de-escalate such tensions. When fighting erupted in Jaramana—a Druze town near Damascus—Druze leaders rejected Israel's offer of military aid, opting instead to coordinate directly with al-Sharaa to find a peaceful resolution. While the situation remains volatile, the government's approach marks a notable shift from past practices. These signs of progress should not be dismissed by the Trump administration.



Ahmed al-Sharaa greeting French President Emmanuel Macron while in Paris.

Regional Stability

More relevant to U.S. strategic interests, the new government's turn toward peace hasn't been limited to domestic affairs. Turkey, Syria's northern neighbor, long backed the rebel factions that now form the Syrian state. Both Ankara and Damascus have expressed interest in continuing that alliance, suggesting that Syria now has a powerful regional partner invested in its stability. Turkey's role as a NATO member and regional counterweight to Iran and Russia further strengthens the argument that supporting Syria's current government could help advance U.S. goals.

Syria's relationship with Israel is more complicated. On one hand, the new government has made gestures toward reconciliation, including meeting with members of Damascus's Jewish community and arresting two senior figures from Palestinian Islamic Jihad—a group that took part in the October 7 attack. On the other hand, Israel continues to occupy areas of southwestern Syria and regularly conducts airstrikes within Syrian territory without coordinating with the Syrian government.

Unsurprisingly, this has led to rising tensions. There are credible fears that Syria could use relief from sanctions to prepare for conflict with Israel. But so far, Syria is not acting as the aggressor. Sanctions relief shouldn't be denied simply because of Israeli provocations. Still, it should come with clear expectations for how Syria must respond to those provocations. This is the only way to ensure fairness while minimizing the risk of escalation.

However, it must be stressed that Israel's continued airstrikes within Syria risk destabilizing the government.

The American Sanction Strategy

The U.S. currently maintains comprehensive sanctions against Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Russia, and Syria, alongside targeted sanctions against dozens of other governments, organizations, and individuals. The point of these sanctions is to constrain adversaries and discourage hostile actions. Today, Syria is more aligned with American interests than at any time since the civil war began. Refusing sanctions relief on the grounds that Syria isn't moving fast enough would undermine the credibility of America's broader sanctions policy. If other nations observe that meeting U.S. demands yields no reward, the utility of sanctions as diplomatic leverage collapses.

To allow the six-month pause to expire without follow-up would be to inflict needless hardship on a country just emerging from a catastrophic 14-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and nearly 90% of the population in poverty. At the same time, lifting sanctions without conditions would represent blind faith in an untested government. Only with clear, public conditions for continued relief can Trump's move be justified.

The U.S. has a rare opportunity to help anchor peace in one of the most devastated corners of the Middle East. It shouldn't squander that chance.

If you're interested in writing for International Policy Digest - please send us an email via submissions@intpolicydigest.org

