

Opinion – Assad's Regime Has Fallen: Time to Lift Sanctions on Syria

Written by Mohammad Kanfash

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MOHAMMAD KANFASH, DEC 16 2024

This holiday season, Syria has more reason to celebrate than ever. An alliance of armed groups, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), brought an end to the Syrian regime in a bloodless campaign that lasted approximately 10 days. Ever since, Syrians from all walks of life, both at home and in exile, are rejoicing over the fall of the Assad dynasty. This monumental event seems like a gift from heaven, bringing hope, but also uncertainty and apprehension. The international community should seize this opportunity to support Syria's recovery. Alongside increasing humanitarian aid and supporting reconstruction efforts, lifting sanctions and sanctions relief are crucial at this juncture.

Amid the national euphoria, tempered by the grim images emerging from the tyrant's dungeons, the agony of the last 13 years is taking a backseat to optimism and celebration. However, the festive wave sweeping across the country does not change the harsh reality: Syria lies in ruins. The human suffering made Syria at one point one of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II. Since the conflict began, the country has witnessed unprecedented destruction of its infrastructure, human capital, and economy. While the Assad regime's tyranny and corrupt policies are largely to blame, internationally coordinated economic warfare in the form of sanctions has also played a significant role.

When the conflict began in 2011, Syria was hit with several rounds of (western) sanctions. By 2024, Syria had become the world's third most sanctioned country, following Russia and Iran. The US sanctions evolved into a total trade embargo, while the EU imposed unprecedented sanctions in the bloc's history at the time of their imposition. The Arab league and other entities and countries followed suit. These measures collectively formed one of the 'strictest and most complex collective regimes in recent history' or one of the 'most complicated and far-reaching sanctions regimes ever imposed.' Although the sanctions include humanitarian exemptions, these have had limited impact and have not achieved their intended goals. The situation has been further complicated by the presence of terrorist organizations in the country, which are subject to UNSC resolutions.

While the effectiveness of sanctions and their role in the regime's downfall will be debated for years, one thing is clear: sanctions have imposed significant costs and negative effects on civilians. As argued earlier, sanctions were a form of violence in the Syrian context. They have negatively impacted food security, agriculture, humanitarian response, and access to health care, medicine, and water, among others. During the COVID-19 outbreak and the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake, sanctions hindered the work of first responders and life-saving operations. Politically, sanctions debilitated the state coffers, empowered the kleptocratic clique around Assad while wreaking havoc on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and impoverishing ordinary Syrians.

Despite their harm, sanctions were justified as tools to minimize civilian harm and promote political transition. Policymakers argued that sanctions were a response to the Syrian government's repression of civilians during the uprising, a punishment for human rights abuses, and a means to deprive the government of resources to inflict violence. With the fall of the Assad family, these justifications no longer hold. While Assad and his clique must remain on sanction lists, sectoral sanctions targeting the Syrian banking and energy systems, as well as reconstruction efforts, among others, must be eased and lifted immediately. Failure to act on this can lead to dire consequences and delays could be detrimental to peace, stability, and the humanitarian situation in Syria with lots of lessons to learn

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from countries such as Colombia, Sudan and Afghanistan.

The first challenge in Syria post-Assad may arise soon when the country needs to import wheat to feed its people. Until recently, Russia provided Syria with the grain it needed, but this is no longer the case and although Ukraine has offered to fill in the void – lots of ambiguity remain on how this will materialize. Another challenge relates to importing fuel, which is needed to generate electricity, run bakeries and head classes in schools. Previously, Iran was Syria's fuel supplier, but that is no longer the case. Under the current sanction regimes, and as shown in previous research, it is virtually impossible to obtain these goods through international tenders, which highlight the need to end the complex web of sanctions, export controls, and other comprehensive legal and economic measures blankets that target the country, and which present an array of serious legal and policy impediments to engagement with post-Assad Syria if left unaddressed.

Opponents might argue that Syria's new rulers – HTS, a heavily sanctioned terrorist organization, are not to be trusted and that lifting / easing sanctions should be contingent on their cooperation with the internationally recognized opposition. There is merit to the argument and the author by no way harper any (secret) sympathy for the new rulers in Syria. HTS, a former al-Qaeda affiliate led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, better known as 'Abu Muhammad al-Julani,' were confined to the Idlib region in northwestern Syria until end of November, where group ruled through the HTS-controlled Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).

While HTS's past record and affiliations are a legitimate cause for concern, it should not be an excuse to maintain sanctions on Syria. Years ago, HTS renounced its links with al-Qaeda and destined itself from latter's mission focusing instead on Syria. Nowadays, HTS has taken a pragmatic approach, sending positive signals to both Syrians and the international community. Given its pivotal role in recent events and its dominance over other opposition groups, HTS has assumed the responsibility of forming a new government in Damascus.

A transitional government in a caretaker capacity headed by SSG Muhammad al-Bashir was recently appointed and is expected to last until a new government is established in March 2025. The group has issued amnesties to conscripted soldiers, asked state employees to return to work, and reached out to foreign entities, including embassies, the UN, and international humanitarian NGOs. Acts of revenge against former regime affiliates have been rare, and the group has maintained order across the country, with few exceptions. Their message has been clear: Syria belongs to all Syrians, and the plan is to establish an inclusive government. Former regime affiliates need only worry if they have blood on their hands. Only time will tell, but these steps have already allowed life in Syria to return to some degree of normalcy, with businesses, NGOs, and embassies (considering) reopening their doors.

Taking into consideration the positive signals from Damascus, a better approach would be to acknowledge concerns about Syria's new rulers, monitor their commitment to the inclusivity of the political processes and the Syrian people's aspirations, and act only if they deviate. It is unjust to keep Syrians imprisoned by sanctions due to fears of HTS. These are perilous and pivotal times for Syria's 16.7 million people, many of whom need humanitarian assistance – the highest number since the crisis began in 2011. Nothing, including sanctions, should hinder Syria's recovery and the political calculus of international actors should not stand in the way.

About the author:

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