



While the U.S. Lifts Sanctions on Syria It Continues Pressuring the Government in Damascus to Join the Abraham Accords

Last week, President Donald Trump signed an executive order formally terminating most U.S. sanctions against Syria, following through on a pledge to do so made back in mid-May. The action did not rescind sanctions imposed on ousted former despot Bashar al-Assad, his top aides, family members, and officials who had been determined to have committed egregious human rights abuses. Advocates had long been pushing for the removal of sanctions on Syria due to its crippling effect on the country's population, and these arguments only gained further traction following the overthrowing of the Assad regime back in early December of 2024. As such, the lifting of sanctions has been welcomed as a positive step forward which provides the Syrian transitional government an opportunity to stabilize the country and initiate much-needed reconstruction, as well as social, humanitarian, and economic recovery efforts. While this is undoubtedly the case, there are also questions, however, regarding the underlying nature of the move and what may be expected in return. Some analysts have alluded to what they see as a "carrot-and-stick" form of policy whereby the Trump administration may have implemented the sanctions removal as a means of pressuring the new government in Damascus to take certain actions such as potentially joining the Abraham Accords.

In making this case, various observers have pointed to the apparent willingness of Syrian officials to initiate Trump-desired moves in order to secure U.S. sanctions relief. In fact, during last week's announcement of the executive order to officially lift the sanctions, the White House even remarked that the Trump administration would continue to monitor Syria's progress on key priorities including, among others, "taking concrete steps toward normalizing ties with Israel." Syrian leaders also appear to have offered Trump other incentives to secure sanctions removal like the proposal to build a Trump tower in Syria's capital city of Damascus. To a significant number of experts and commentators, all of this signals that sanctions removal may have been a conditional move in which the new Syrian government was rewarded for its readiness to act in line with numerous interests of the Trump administration.

This perception aligns with reports that discussions could be taking place regarding a potential security agreement between Syria and Israel in the coming months, something that Trump officials seem keen on as a means of laying the foundation for possible future normalization. However, while there are suggestions that Syrian officials have shown openness to engaging with Israel, they have also indicated that joining the Abraham Accords would require certain conditions to be met – major points of contention of which are Israel's continued illegal occupation of the Golan Heights, its further recent land incursions, and numerous attacks against Syria since the fall of the Assad regime. The Trump administration's approach seems to be based on the idea of enticing Syria economically, but it does not account for the new Damascus government's weariness to join on to the Abraham Accords due to the lack of public support for this type of move and the fact that it would likely undermine its legitimacy among the population. Many Syrians are opposed to the idea under the current circumstances as a result of Israel's repeated violations, belligerence, and aggression in Syria and across the region as a whole, and therefore, there is a fear that normalization could plunge the country back into instability – a factor not lost on the new Syrian government.

While the motivations behind the move are questionable, the benefits of the lifting of sanctions are clear. Over the preceding decades, these debilitating punitive measures have resulted in major shortages of essential goods like food, electricity, fuel, and medical equipment. They have also hindered the ability of humanitarian agencies to receive funding and operate due to the ongoing restrictions regarding financial transactions, investment, and international trade. The sanctions have been directly linked to the severe economic hardship in the country, as an estimated 90% of the Syrian population faces food insecurity. It is hoped that the lifting of U.S. sanctions will alleviate this issue and increase the flow of goods into Syria, providing the country and its new government – which is currently navigating a delicate political transition – greater access to the global economy, aid, and international financial systems at this vital stage in time, in addition to helping it stabilize the nation and prevent descent into disorder. Furthermore, it should create opportunities for economic, societal, and humanitarian development, allowing Syria to attract the foreign investment needed in order to rebuild infrastructure devastated by years of conflict and oppression at the hands of the previous Assad regime.