

Who owns Syria?

by Karin Leukefeld,* Germany/Syria



Karin Leukefeld
(Picture ma)

Flags are waved again in Syria. Shots of joy ring out through the cities – dancing people laugh at the cameras of international media, waving flags and clapping their hands.¹ Syrians have waited more than

ten years for the sanctions against their country to be lifted, and now the moment has finally arrived.

Foreign policy à la Trump

During a visit to Saudi Arabia, US President *Donald Trump* promised² that the so-called “Caesar Act” would be repealed. Together with the unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the European Union, this act has been suffocating Syria and its economy. Saudi Crown Prince *Mohamed Bin Salman* and Turkish President *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* had asked him to do so, Trump said in the Saudi capital Riyadh on 13 May. Syria deserved a chance, he said, and the US sanctions – which had been in place for 49 years beyond the “Caesar Act” – would be lifted.

Shortly before his departure from Riyadh (to the Gulf emirate of Qatar) and in the presence of Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman and an interpreter, the US president met with *Ahmed al-Sharaa*, the interim “president” who took power after the fall of *Bashar al-Assad* in early December 2024. At a meeting with business leaders in Qatar the next day, Trump appeared impressed by the man.

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Douma. Distribution of food and bread. (Picture KI)

“I met the new leader of Syria. He has a strong background. I think he will be great, and we will see. He is a strong man, and I think he is good. Let's wait and see what happens. We will give him a chance by lifting the sanctions.”³

On the sidelines of the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Antalya, US Secretary of State *Marco Rubio* met with Syrian interim “Foreign Minister” *Asaad al-Shaibani* on 15 May, and both posed for the international cameras alongside Turkish Foreign Minister *Hakan Fidan*. Rubio and Al Shaibani discussed the details of how US sanctions should be lifted, according to media reports.⁴

Both agreed that Damascus and Washington should strengthen relations and build a strategic partnership.

All those involved seemed to have forgotten⁵ that both Al Sharaa and Al Shaibani have a jihadist past in Syria in the *Nusra Front*, the *Al Qaeda* representative in Syria. They and their organisations, including *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* – the Alliance for the Liberation of the Levant – are on international terror lists and subject to sanctions. The same applies to other members of the interim “government”. Neither Al Sharaa nor any other member of the interim “government” was elected in a democratic election process.

High expectations

The Syrian pound (SYP) made a huge leap, rising 27 per cent against the US dollar from 12,500 to 8,000 SYP.

Long queues of people formed outside the Syrian central bank to withdraw money. Expectations are high, although most of the population is probably unaware that the process of lifting the sanctions will take a long time.

The “Caesar sanctions” are a US law that must be lifted. Before this can happen, a corresponding application must go through a series of bureaucratic debates and decisions. Finally, the decision must be communicated to international banks and financial institutions, which in turn must lift clauses prohibiting transactions and investments with Syria.

“People think that when Donald Trump says the sanctions will be lifted, we’ll be living in paradise the next day. They think money will be hanging from the trees and everyone will immediately find work and be able to earn money,” JB sighs in a telephone conversation with the author.

His nephew is 21 and asked him what the lifting of US sanctions would mean. “I told him that everything was taken from us in the past without our consent. In the future, everything will be taken from us with our permission.” He just hopes that at least something will be left for them, for the ordinary people: “If Assad used to give us ten per cent, I would be satisfied if the new rulers gave us 15 per cent.”

Arab Gulf states

The announcement by the US president to lift sanctions was welcomed in the Arab Gulf states. According to observers, those present at the US-Saudi *Investment Forum* in Riyadh, where Trump spoke, responded to the announcement with cheers.⁶

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin *Abdulahman bin Jassim Al-Thani* told CNN⁷ that lifting sanctions against Syria was “a step in the right direction”.



Damascus, Abbassiyen Square. Petrol bottles and delivery vans for filling heating oil without safety precautions. (Picture kl)



Damascus, Abbassiyen Square. Potatoes and petrol. (Picture kl)

The United Arab Emirates’ Foreign Ministry said⁸ it supported Saudi Arabia and Syria and hoped that the US administration’s announcement would contribute to “economic recovery”, promote development and “bring stability” to Syria. The United Arab Emirates reaffirmed its determination to support “security and growth for Syria”.

For years, but at the latest since the devastating earthquake in February 2023, the Arab Gulf states have been trying to get the sanctions against Syria lifted because they can earn a lot of money by investing in the reconstruction of residential and industrial areas and in the extraction of Syria’s important raw materials.

However, neither the European Union nor the United States were prepared to lift their unilateral sanctions against Syria as long as Bashar al-Assad remained in the presidential palace. This did not change after the earthquake. The easing of sanctions promised at the time had no noticeable effect on the daily lives of the population or on the work of aid organisations. Now Bashar al-Assad is gone, and the West has entered a pact with the founders of the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda in Syria and Hay’at Tahrir al Sham, who are listed as terrorists.⁹ Turkey and the Arab Gulf states have been cooperating with them since the beginning of the Syrian war.¹⁰

According to the *World Bank* (WB), the Syrian economy has shrunk by 85 per cent between 2011 and 2023 because of war and sanctions. The cost of reconstruction is estimated at up to 400 billion US dollars. According to UN figures, more than 90 per cent of the population lives in poverty. Before the war, in 2010, Syria was ranked by the World Bank as the fifth strongest economy in the Arab world.

Israel left out

What is likely to be a major gain for the Arab Gulf states in Syria is a slap in the face for Israel, according to analysts in neighbouring Lebanon.¹¹

Trump has made a 180-degree turn in Middle East policy and is acting directly against Israel's demands to maintain sanctions against Syria. There is a very personal conflict between Trump and *Netanyahu*, according to veteran war correspondent *Mohammad Ballout* in an interview with the author. Netanyahu has direct contacts with political circles of the "deep state" in the US, with which Israel has often acted bypassing the official US administration. The relationship between *Barack Obama* and Benjamin Netanyahu was so bad that Netanyahu was unable to get an appointment at the White House for a long time. While Obama wanted to conclude an agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme, Netanyahu called for war against Iran. Finally, in 2015, Netanyahu managed to bypass the White House and visit Washington at the invitation of Congress. His speech there was met with standing ovations.¹²

Donald Trump, on the other hand, recently discovered that *Mike Waltz*, whom he had appointed as National Security Advisor, had made secret agreements with Benjamin Netanyahu about a war against Iran.¹³ Trump removed Waltz from his post and sent him to the UN Security Council as US Ambassador to the UN. Since then, there has been largely silence between Netanyahu and Trump.

In Syria, Trump wants to reduce US troops, while Netanyahu is using the immense arms deliveries from the US (and Germany) to open ever new fronts in the region. Immediately after the upheaval in Syria in early December 2023, Israel bombed military installations and positions in



Harasta. Bread is distributed to those in need. (Picture kl)

Syria hundreds of times, destroying the entire Syrian defence structure. Israeli troops crossed the buffer zone controlled by a UN mission on the Syrian Golan Heights and took up positions along the border from the Hermon Mountains in the north to the Yarmouk River in the south. Israel established military bases, occupied towns and offered itself as a military protector to the Kurds in the northeast and the Druze in southern Syria. Netanyahu demanded that the entire south of the country be demilitarised.

In doing so, Israel is putting itself in direct competition with Turkey, which also wants to expand its influence in Syria. Turkey has largely brought the city of Aleppo under its own control. With airstrikes, Israel prevented attempts to establish military bases in the centre of the country in the province of Homs. The US brokered two rounds of talks between Turkey and Israel – both close partners of the US – in the Azerbaijani capital Baku on the Caspian Sea. No result was achieved.

Trump's trip through the wealthy Arab Gulf states does not (currently) include a detour to Israel. By lifting sanctions against Syria, Trump is making significant concessions to the Arab Gulf states and their geopolitical goals. With immense financial investment and purchase agreements (for US arms), the Arab Gulf states have effectively bought their influence in Syria. In return, Trump gives them control over Syria.

Al Sharaa in difficulties

Whether interim "President" Al Sharaa can seize this opportunity remains to be seen. In a speech to the "great Syrian people", he praised the courage of the US administration.¹⁴ The "historic decision" will alleviate the suffering of the people,



Harasta Modest market life. (Picture kl)

help the country progress and bring security to the region, reported the Syrian news agency SANA.

Although Al Sharaa has achieved the lifting of US sanctions with the help of the Arab Gulf states and Turkey, his domestic position remains weak. He has been unable to ease tensions with the Alawites or the Druze, and the extreme jihadist and Salafist forces in the *Alliance for the Liberation of Syria* (HTS) were involved in both the massacres of Alawites in the coastal region and the murders of Druze in Sweida, Jaramana and Sehnaya. Video footage shows fighters from the General Security (HTS) with IS insignia on their uniforms marching through Sehnaya with the battle cry "Sunnis, Sunnis, down with the Alawites".

Economic recovery could potentially change the fighters' minds, but tangible progress will be a long time coming. The continuing poor supply situation is not conducive to reconciliation. In any case, no active efforts are being made to achieve this. There are no functioning government or effective government institutions. The new "regime's" persistent refusal to cooperate with all sections of society is aggravating social tensions.

Source: <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=133023>, 16 May 2025

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2025/5/14/syrians-celebrate-us-presidents-decision-to-remove-sanction>

² <https://www.zdfheute.de/politik/ausland/trump-syrien-sanktionen-aufhebung-saudi-arabien-100.html>

³ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=355722>



Douma. What future do the children have? (Picture kl)

⁴ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=355756>

⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/14/middleeast/syria-trump-meeting-analysis-intl>

⁶ https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1460267/what-will-the-lifting-.html?utm_source=olj&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=alertot

⁷ <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/15/05/2025/prime-minister-to-cnn-us-sanctions-lift-on-syria-is-right-step>

⁸ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2600696/middle-east>

⁹ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n08/seymour-m.-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-lin>

¹⁰ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/arms-airlift-to-syria-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid/>

¹¹ https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1460267/what-will-the-lifting-.html?utm_source=olj&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=alertot

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-Is0PL7jZg&feature=youtu.be>

¹³ <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-852460>

¹⁴ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=355650>