

The geopolitics of economic sanctions relief: U.S. strategic recalibration in a post-regime collapse scenario in Syria

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on US-Syria relations has mostly focused on strategic control and the effectiveness of sanctions under the Assad regime, leaving a theoretical gap regarding diplomatic adjustments during sudden power transitions. This study attempts to examine the strategic factors behind the US decision to lift the Caesar Act sanctions, especially after the collapse of the regime at the end of 2024. Using scenario-based qualitative analysis of diplomatic communications and this study interprets policy shifts through the lens of Structural Realism. This study shows that the rapid relocation of relations was not only driven by the lifting of international sanctions on Syria, but also by the structural imperative to fill the regional power vacuum left by the retreat of Russia and Iran. A deeper examination identifies a unique path, as economic relaxation serves to integrate the transitional government into the framework of Western security architecture, thereby counterbalancing rival hegemonies. This article concludes that in a post-conflict anarchic system, major powers use the issue of sanctions relief as a flexible state tool rather than to maintain rigid legal mechanisms, and that the sustainability of reconciliation depends on the transitional authority's ability to maintain internal legitimacy in the face of new security dilemmas.

Keywords:

United States – Syria relations; sanctions relief

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of international relations in the Middle East have undergone significant changes in line with geopolitical transformations that have fundamentally altered the regional order. In the contemporary global political landscape, relations between countries are no longer based solely on ideology or traditional alliances. Instead, these relations are forged due to the complexity of strategic interests, regional security dynamics, and shifts in

power involving both state and non-state actors (Katz, 2025). One of the recent changes in dynamics is the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime at the end of 2024, which can be interpreted as not only a matter of political change in Syria, but also one that is related to security stability in the Middle East. For more than ten years, the Syrian conflict has been deadlocked, influenced by Russia and Iran, while the West has been limited to containment efforts and economic sanctions (Rahmi & Hidayatullah, 2025). The fall of the Assad regime has transformed this stagnant situation into a power vacuum full of uncertainty, creating an algorithm for major countries to change their old policies.

This article attempts to examine a recent phenomenon in the Middle East, namely the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime -Assad regime on December 8, 2024, and how Syria's relationship with the United States will be affected after the Assad regime collapses, which marks the end of five decades of authoritarian rule by the Assad dynasty and also signals an opportunity for a reconfiguration of bilateral relations between the United States and Syria. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's leadership also ended the Syrian civil war that had been going on for almost 14 years since 2011, which began with peaceful protests by civilians demanding democratic reforms but turned into an international proxy war involving many actors, both regional and global (Seven, 2025). The collapse of the Assad government came as a surprise to the international community and Middle East analysts, given that the Assad government had previously appeared stable with full military support from Iran and Russia and control over two-thirds of Syria (Khavarinejad, 2025). Furthermore, the Assad government was destabilized by converging factors such as the weakening of Russian support due to its focus on the war in Ukraine, the weakening of Iranian and Hezbollah support due to their focus on the conflict with Israel, corruption and demoralization within the Syrian military, and Turkish interference with opposition groups (Asmar, 2024). The fall of the Assad regime has created a significant vacuum in the region, opening up opportunities for the reconfiguration of regional alliances and competition for influence among international actors with interests in Syria.

Before the fall of the Assad regime, US foreign policy toward Syria was relatively rigid because it was trapped within the framework of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which essentially focused on isolation and economic pressure to undermine the Assad government. Furthermore, with the emergence of an unexpected new government in Syria, the US policy of containment became obsolete, giving rise to a complex diplomatic dilemma. This situation created a dilemma for the US because the rules had already been established, while on the other hand there were new strategic opportunities that needed to be exploited (Alvy & Praja, 2024). For example, in this situation, humanitarian issues, especially the need to deal with the refugee crisis and repair infrastructure, became urgent reasons for the US to re-engage diplomatically. Not only based on these humanitarian issues, there are more pragmatic geopolitical considerations. The US itself needs to shift from a policy of pressure towards cooperation to prevent the new government from falling under the influence of Iran and Russia (Budiarsih, 2025). This shows a major change in US foreign policy, which previously relied on containment, demonstrating that foreign policy can change drastically when faced with a sudden regime transition.

To support this research, several previous studies are needed, including research conducted by Quliyev in 2024, which examined the relationship between Syria and the United States during the period from September 2001 to the 2011 Civil War, which worsened relations between the two countries (Aqil, 2024). A study written by Holland reveals the construction of Syrian society as the protagonist in the narrative of US foreign policy, which created a gap between Assad's political goals and military actions focused on 2011-2013 (Holland & Mathieu, 2023). An article written by Kardas and Aras in 2023 analyzes the

process of Syria's regional normalization into the Arab League in 2023, which describes the political unrest and fatigue that drove Assad's rehabilitation (Kardas, 2023). A review written by Alim in 2024 examines the United States' involvement in supporting the SDF forces, which Turkey views as a threat, as it is considered that a junior ally could oppose a senior ally (Alim, 2024).

Unlike previous studies that analyzed US policy through the lens of Assad regime control or regional rehabilitation, this study focuses on the post-Assad era. This study specifically examines how the United States navigated the power vacuum in Syria that suddenly collapsed at the end of 2024, arguing that the rapid shift by the US from a policy of isolation to engagement was a structural response to prevent the emergence of a new rival power hegemony, a dynamic that has not been covered in the existing literature. Thus, this study proposes a problem formulation that forms the basis of the research, namely, why did the US drastically shift from a policy of isolation to a new relationship after the collapse of Assad? This article argues that the changes in US policy were not driven by normative considerations of democracy, but rather by a structural response to the power vacuum left by Russia and Iran. Using structural realism analysis, this study shows that the US acted to prevent the emergence of old hegemony in the new government by embracing the transitional regime as a new security proxy. This study offers a new perspective by analyzing the phenomenon of bilateral relations in the context of a unique political transition in which the new Syrian government, led by non-state actors previously considered terrorists, takes a different approach by integrating foreign policy analysis based on economics, which specifically integrates the lifting of international sanctions by the US.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an explanatory literature review design to investigate changes in US foreign policy behind its decision to lift international sanctions on Syria, considering the need to fill the power vacuum left by rival countries, namely Russia and Iran. This study is based on Kenneth Waltz's structural realism framework, which emphasizes an anarchic international structure where there is no central authority regulating state behavior, and states can take actions relevant to their survival, especially to achieve security (Waltz, 1979). Data collection was conducted systematically by reviewing various secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government policy documents, international organization reports, and reliable news media (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The selection of sources focused on the period from 2011 to 2024 to capture the dynamics that occurred from the beginning of Assad's rule until the collapse of his government. Only sources that meet established academic or institutional credibility standards were included to ensure the reliability and relevance of the data. This process involves careful screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts, as well as tracking reference lists to ensure comprehensive coverage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

All data collection and analysis were conducted manually, without the aid of qualitative data analysis software. Thematic findings from various sources were synthesized to construct a coherent explanation of changes in US policy on foreign relations with Syria. To ensure validity and reliability, this study used triangulation between academic, government, industry, and media sources (Ratnaningtyas & Ramli, 2023). The use of credible sources, comprehensive documentation of all steps in data collection and analysis, and discussions with peers to review findings are integral to minimizing researcher bias and improving analytical accuracy. This approach is consistent with the standards of qualitative research by providing a transparent, systematic, and robust basis for explaining the changes that have occurred in US foreign policy in lifting international sanctions on Syria.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Fall of Bashar al-Assad's Regime

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime at the end of 2024 marked a fundamental change in the security architecture of the Middle East, signaling the end of the centralist authoritarian order that had been the foundation of the regional status quo for decades (Mochamad et al., 2025). From a structural realism perspective, the collapse of this regime was not merely a domestic political transition, but was also related to systemic disruptions that changed the distribution of regional power (Waltz, 1979). For more than a decade, the Assad government was considered the central hub of resistance, acting as a strategic counterweight to Western and Sunni Arab influence (Matar, 2019). The sudden political shift marked by the collapse of the Assad regime has created an acute vacuum, which, from a structural realism perspective, can be analogized to an anarchic condition where the state's monopoly on violence has collapsed, forcing all relevant actors to act independently to protect their interests.

This structural vacuum has triggered a rapid reconfiguration of alliances. As seen in the 10-day offensive led by the coalition under Ahmed al-Sharaa, the fall of the regime was accelerated by the decline in material support from its traditional sponsors, Russia and Iran, due to each country's involvement in two conflicts, namely the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel (Maher & Pieper, 2021; Geranmayeh, 2017). The Turkish-backed opposition took advantage of this situation by supporting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces, which managed to capture the strategic cities of Hama and Homs in a single day without significant resistance from government forces (Kardas, 2025). From a realist perspective, this signifies a shift from the previous bipolar confrontation, in which the regime sided with Russia and Iran against the opposition sided with Turkey and the West, to a dynamic multipolar competition. This has had a direct impact on the fragmentation of Syria into contested zones, transforming the country from a sovereign unit into a geopolitical buffer zone where external powers now compete to project their influence.

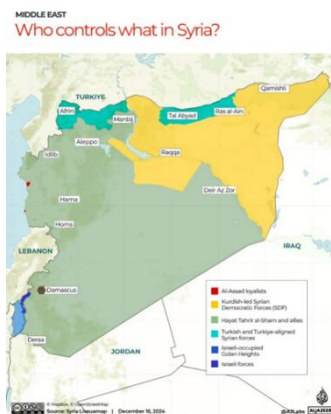


Figure 1. Map of civil war in Syria
Source: Aljazeera, 2024

After Assad's fall, Ahmad al-Shaara, formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, was appointed as the de facto leader of Syria and appointed as the transitional president of Syria on January 29, 2025. Sharaa is known as the leader of HTS, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda and is considered a terrorist organization by many countries. HTS has evolved from a transnational jihadist movement into an Islamic nationalist movement rooted in the Syrian context (Gritten, 2025). With experience in managing the city of Idlib since 2014 through a quasi-state structure, the Syrian Salvation Government has provided important lessons in

civil governance, albeit limited. With the experience possessed by this quasi-state authority, it has been implemented in most of Syria, maintaining the continuity of the state system without strictly applying Sharia law.

The transitional government led by al-Sharaa faced significant challenges in consolidating power and legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. On March 13, 2025, Al-Sharaa signed a Constitutional Declaration valid for five years, which ratified the constitutional framework for the transition period (Wedeen, 2025). These rules are only temporary in nature to maintain the previous rules, such as the requirement that the president be Muslim and Islamic law as the main source of legislation, while also taking into account the rights to freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and women's rights. This ratification is not without concerns regarding its legitimacy and capacity to accommodate the aspirations of the Syrian people after their long suffering (AlJazeera, 2025a). From the perspective of civil society and human rights, there has been criticism of the decision, which is based on control over parliament, the judiciary, and unilateral authority in forming a permanent constitutional drafting committee.

The transitional government faces the challenge of building an inclusive system of government that represents Syria's diversity, which is divided along sectarian, ethnic, and political lines. Tensions within the opposition and sectarian tensions are major obstacles to national cohesion among the various factions, including Sunnis, Druze, and Alawites, who have different visions for Syria's future. Although HTS has claimed its commitment to liberalization and inclusive national dialogue, there are concerns that the new leadership will be trapped in hyper-centralization of power due to fears of a potential coup. Critics also note that the composition of the interim cabinet formed on March 29, 2025, is dominated by Al-Sharaa's close associates, reflecting an authoritarian pattern similar to the past (ISPI, 2025).

Looking at the state of democracy in Syria under Assad's leadership from 2000 to 2024, Syria itself was ruled as a totalitarian state with a single-party system controlled by the Arab Socialist Baath Party, which had a hand in all aspects of political and social life. The 2012 constitution, which was implemented without opposition participation, gave great power to the presidency and controlled political party authorization, forming a totalitarian system (Akgüden & Atmaca, 2023). According to Freedom in the World in 2023, Syria received the lowest score of 1/100, equivalent to South Sudan, and was classified as one of the worst countries in the not free category. Meanwhile, in 2025, after the fall of the Assad regime, al-Sharaa's score increased only slightly to 5/100 and still remained among the worst and unfree countries, posing a challenge for the transitional government to raise the score in terms of democracy.

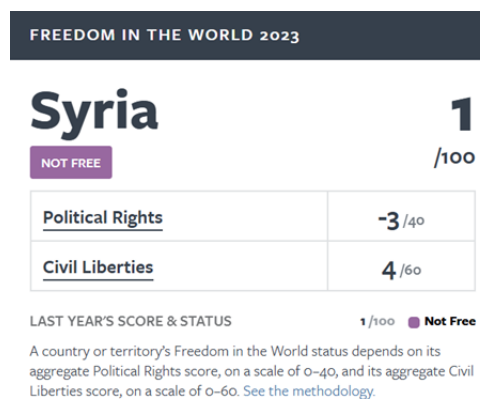


Figure 2. Democrazation under assad regime
Source: Fredoom House, 2025

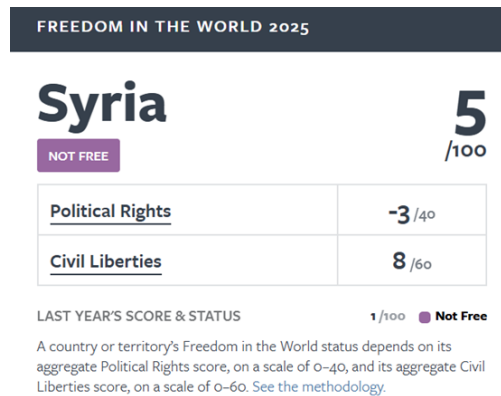


Figure 3. Democratization under al-sharaa regime
Source: Freedom House, 2025

The long-term prospects for democratization in Syria depend on the transitional government's ability to build cities inclusively, protect minority rights, implement transnational justice, and ensure broad participation in the drafting of the constitution. This can be achieved by avoiding a centralized authoritarian power structure and supporting genuine democratic transformation. The tension between political pragmatism to build international legitimacy and the rigid ideological commitment to Islam and the internal structure of HTS creates a contradiction that may not be sustainable. From the perspective of the international community, including the European Union, it remains cautious in legitimizing a government led by jihadist figures and conditions its involvement on a commitment to governance reform and human rights. The success of Syria's transition will depend on the ability of the new leadership to balance domestic demands for justice and inclusion with the need for stability and international support, while navigating a complex geopolitical landscape.

Relations between Russia, Iran, and Turkey After the Fall of the Assad Regime

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime on November 8, 2024 marked a major change in Middle East geopolitics, in terms of the shift in the strategic interests of regional and international actors towards Syria. Prior to the turmoil against the Assad regime, Iran and Russia were countries affiliated with Syria. This major change occurred in line with the weakening of Hezbollah's position due to the conflict with Israel, Russia's limitations in dealing with Ukraine, and increased domestic opposition exacerbated by the economic crisis. The fall of the Assad regime, which was carried out offensively within 10 days by a rebel coalition led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, leader of the Hay'at Tahrir al -Sham (HTS) organization, with support from Turkey, has resulted in a transformation in the positions of Iran, Russia, and Turkey that could alter the dynamics of the relationship that has existed since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 (Adar et al., 2025).

The fall of the Assad regime would be a huge loss for Iran, with repercussions extending beyond Syria. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Syria has been a key pillar of Iran's Axis of Resistance, connecting state and non-state actors that oppose the influence of the US and Israel. Iran has invested \$30-50 billion in Syria over more than a decade, reflecting its deep financial and military commitment to the stability of the Assad regime. The land route from Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, which can be interpreted as Iran's main route in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, is now cut off, which could disrupt the supply of weapons and logistics. The loss of this corridor affects Iran's strategic relationship with Hezbollah, which has suffered heavy losses as a result of the conflict with Israel (Karimi, 2025). The response given by the transitional president to the relationship between the two countries,

according to Ahmed al-Sharaa, who said that the presence of the Iranian military is a strategic threat and wants the Iranian military to be expelled from Syria, further evidenced by the looting of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, signifies the Syrian public's rejection of Iran's support for the Assad regime (Myre & Rizkallah, 2025). This forced Iran to respond defensively and redesign its regional strategy.

Other allies here include Russia and Syria, Russia's main ally in the Middle East, which has been a partner since the 2015 intervention to support the Assad regime. Syria has become an important platform for Russia to project its power, with the Khmeimim air base and the Tartus naval base as the only Russian military installations outside the former Soviet Union. For Russia, Tartus is a strategic route that provides access to the Mediterranean Sea, allowing Russia to connect with Africa and the Middle East (Chauhan, 2020). The war between Russia and Ukraine has divided Russia's focus and resources, leaving the Assad regime. Although there were initial reports stating that HTS would guarantee the security of Russian bases in January 2025, the new government canceled the agreement, allowing for the return of Russian military presence, and on February 2, 2025, the warship left Tartus (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2025). The loss of this strategic partner is a major setback for Russia, impacting its ability to maintain influence in the region and globally.

Although Russia was forced to leave its main bases in Tartus and Hmeimim, it continues to maintain a limited maritime presence off the coast of Russia. A review of the latest satellite imagery shows that Steregushchiy-class corvettes are still operating in Syrian waters, indicating that Russia has not completely left the region (Ulosoy, 2021). However, the loss of permanent base access for warships and spacecraft indicates a change in Russia's role in the Middle East, forcing Russia to rely on diplomacy to maintain its presence. The new government in Syria does not have the initiative to make concessions to Russia as Assad did previously. This loss is not only limited to Russia's impact on Syria, but also relates to the projection of power in Libya, Mali, and other African countries.

Unlike what happened with the two main allies, Turkey managed to take advantage of the situation after the fall of the Assad regime to strengthen its position in Syria, playing the role of supporter of the rebel coalition by providing logistical and diplomatic support and maintaining relations with HTS in Idlib (Özkan, 2019). Although HTS does not receive full support from Turkey, they use Turkey to exert strategic control over the direction of Syria's transitional government. Furthermore, if we analyze Turkey's main interests in supporting the transitional government, they are related to preventing the formation of an integrated Kurdish region, managing refugee issues, and establishing Turkey as a dominant force in Syrian politics and security (Setiawati & Naranta, 2022). With the reduction of aid from Russia and Iran, Turkey has now become the main actor in shaping Syria's future by providing economic, logistical, and security support to the new transitional government.

The relationship between Turkey and the new Syrian government depends on internal Syrian issues, particularly those related to the presence of the SDF in northeastern Syria and Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. The new regime is serious about its commitment to building an inclusive government, including for the Kurds. This contradicts Turkey's desire to eliminate the SDF and prevent the return of Kurdish forces to the Turkish border (Aftandilian, 2025). The agreement reached in March 2025 between the Syrian interim government and the SDF to integrate SDF members into the Syrian military aims to balance these forces. Turkey is further strengthened by the Kurdistan government's new commitment to the peace process with the PKK, which provides additional incentives for Turkey to support stability in Syria (Shalahuddin et al., 2025). In this context, Turkey maintains a strong diplomatic and military position in Idlib and northern Syria, while negotiating long-term security arrangements that benefit its interests.

The collapse of the Assad regime after 54 years has created major changes in the geopolitics of the Middle East. This has had an impact on Iran, which has lost its main strategic asset and faces divisions within the Axis of Resistance, which has been the foundation of its regional policy since 1979. Russia has lost its main strategic foothold in the economic sphere and as a center for launching its strategy in Africa. Turkey is taking advantage of the power vacuum to strengthen its position as a major actor in determining Syria's future. This recalculation also affects global dynamics, with US involvement through the lifting of sanctions and increased Israeli presence in southern Syria, creating a new and more complex order. The HTS transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa has now become a battleground for regional and international interests, with the final outcome still uncertain, depending on the new government's ability to manage external pressures and gain domestic legitimacy amid the fragmentation of the Syrian population.

Lifting of International Sanctions by the United States as a New Direction in Relations with the United States

On December 29, 1979, the United States designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, which marked the beginning of a phase of confrontation in bilateral relations. This decision was based on Syria's involvement in supporting the PLO and anti-Israel groups, as revealed in a 1980 CIA report (Departement of United State, 1979). This involvement led to Syria facing severe sanctions, including an economic embargo, a ban on aid from US allies, and restrictions on goods. These sanctions continued and were tightened in 1986 when the US withdrew its ambassador and imposed administrative sanctions after Syria was proven to be behind the bombing of an Israeli aircraft (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). According to former US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Syria was the worst state sponsor of terrorism in the world. Relations between the US and Syria improved in the 1990s, but tensions resurfaced after the 2003 Iraq War and Syria's intervention in Lebanon. Furthermore, after the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, the US initially saw Syria as a potential candidate for democratic reform (Lund, 2019). However, after Syria responded to public protests with violence, the US imposed sanctions on key officials, including Bashar al-Assad, which was seen as a major shift in US policy.

These international sanctions against Syria have had a significant impact on Syrian oil production, reducing production from 383,000 barrels per day to just 90,000 in 2023. These sanctions peaked in 2019 with the passing of the Syrian Civilian Protection Act, also known as the Caesar Act, which came into effect under Donald Trump's leadership (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2011). Essentially, these sanctions target third parties who wish to do business with the Syrian government or military, which could affect critical sectors such as energy, finance, and construction (Congress Covergment United State, 2019). This law can be revoked if certain conditions are met by the Syrian government, such as the release of civilians and political prisoners, and the provision of assistance to public facilities such as hospitals and schools.

The collapse of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024 opened the door for a change in US policy towards Syria. Furthermore, on May 13, 2025, President Donald Trump announced the lifting of sanctions against Syria during a visit to Saudi Arabia, citing the formation of a new government that was expected to stabilize the country and maintain peace (AlJazzera, 2025b). This announcement was made at the Saudi-US Investment Forum in Riyadh. The lifting of sanctions came after discussions with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, signaling the important role of Saudi Arabian diplomacy in this policy change (Khazen et al., 2025). On May 23, 2025, the US Department of the Treasury issued General License No. 25, which allows previously restricted

transactions, including those involving the Syrian government and certain entities. In addition, US government departments also temporarily lifted sanctions under the Caesar Act, as part of efforts to remove all sanctions against Syria within 180 days ([Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2025](#)). On June 30, 2025, the Donald Trump administration officially lifted sanctions on Syria through Executive Order 14312 of June 30, 2025, which officially took effect on June 1, 2025, removing all forms of sanctions that had been in place since 2004, with the exception of sanctions that remain in effect against Bashar al -Assad and his allies, as violators of human rights, distributors of Captagon, and affiliates of ISIS and al-Qaeda ([The White House, 2025](#)).

After the US lifted all international sanctions against Syria, there was a domino effect on America's allies, namely the European Union and the United Kingdom, which followed suit in order to support Syria's economic reconstruction. On May 27, 2025, the Council of the European Union adopted Council Regulation 1098/2025, which lifted the majority of sanctions against Syria and removed previous restrictions, as well as most EU-Syria trade sanctions ([Council of the EU and the European Council, 2025](#)). Furthermore, on February 24, 2025, the EU suspended several elements of sanctions, including investment bank, participation in oil and gas infrastructure projects, and restrictions on trade in gold and precious metals. In the banking sector, the EU also removed several banks whose assets had been frozen, such as Industrial Bank and Popular Credit Bank ([European Commission, 2025](#)). On the other hand, the EU also continues to impose targeted sanctions on exports of weapons and equipment that can be used for internal repression. The UK also lifted sanctions against key Syrian companies in March 2025 and introduced legislation to remove restrictions on the transportation, trade, energy, and finance sectors in April 2025. According to the EU and the UK, the lifting of sanctions depends on developments in Syria.

Research findings show a direct and deliberate link between the collapse of the Assad regime and the issuance of General License No. 25 by the Department of the Treasury in May 2025. Using the perspective of structural realism, it can be seen that the dismantling of the sanction architecture reflects classic balancing behavior for the US, which uses economic relaxation strategies not only as a humanitarian measure, but also as an important diplomatic incentive to ensure the loyalty of the transitional government. Furthermore, by providing direct access to global financial markets, the US can create strong incentives for the new leadership to collaborate with Western interests, which is relevant to the goal of reducing the risk of post-Assad Syria returning to the influence of rival powers or attempting to seek new relations with the West.

This is certainly very different from the previous period, where the control strategy aimed to weaken countries that had good relations with Russia, namely Syria, by drying up their resources. With the removal of these financial barriers, it serves to empower new partners that are crucial to regional balance in the Middle East. This change is in line with Waltz's theory, which states that states in the international system are anarchic, and that states will prioritize their survival over their old ideologies, such as quickly setting aside long-standing norms such as anti-terrorism, which conflicts with structural needs that require limiting the influence of rival states. In addition, the rapid alignment of the European Union (through Council Regulation 1098/2025) and the UK with Washington's new policy demonstrates a phenomenon of systemic bandwagoning. It can be interpreted that countries such as the US are aware of the change in hegemonic strategy and the need to stabilize regional security in Syria, linking their economic policies to strengthen the new US-led order, which clearly fills the void left by the retreat of the two rival axes of Russia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia's diplomacy toward the United States regarding Syria demonstrates a pragmatic approach that prioritizes regional stability and economic interests over

ideological or moral considerations. With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Saudi Arabia pragmatically lobbied the US to lift the sanctions imposed, which were considered a major obstacle to the country's reconstruction. President Trump's decision to lift sanctions and meet with Ahmed al-Sharaa in Riyadh in May 2025 was likely influenced by pressure from Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) to accelerate the normalization of relations with Syria (Quilliam, 2025). The Saudis linked Syria's sovereignty to the possibility of good relations between Syria and Israel, which was supported by the US as it opened up opportunities to contain Iran's influence in the region and strengthen Israel's security.

The lifting of international sanctions after Assad opens up opportunities for Syria's reconstruction, which is estimated to cost more than US\$400 billion. This readiness depends on the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa in facing major challenges related to inclusive government development, managing sectarian tensions, preventing the rise of extremist groups, and addressing the humanitarian crisis with 16.7 million people in need of assistance (Daher, 2025; Acaps, 2025). The regional landscape will become increasingly complex, with Turkey consolidating its influence in northern Syria, Israel stepping up military attacks, and competition among Gulf states for reconstruction investments. The success of Syria's transition also depends on sustained international economic assistance, accountability for war crimes, and the prevention of authoritarianism, with Saudi Arabia's role as an international lobbyist between Syria and the United States being key in shaping a new regional security and economic structure.

CONCLUSION

This study can be concluded that it aims to examine the underlying factors behind the rapid changes in US-Syria relations after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime at the end of 2024. We can see the main research question, the findings show that the US decision to remove the Caesar Act sanctions and normalize diplomatic relations was not solely due to humanitarian issues in Syria, but rather driven by a structural imperative to fill the regional power vacuum. Using a structural realism framework, this study concludes that the collapse of the Assad regime destroyed the long-standing axis between Russia, Iran, and Syria, thereby creating an environment that forced the US to shift from a strategy of control to a more pragmatic strategy. The lifting of sanctions is a geopolitical tool to integrate the transitional government into the Western security architecture, thereby preventing the post-Assad state from falling back into the same old regime or being reclaimed by rival hegemonies.

From a theoretical perspective, this article contributes to the realist literature on regime transition, which challenges the assumption that sanctions are a rigid legal structure. By turning this fact on its head, this study argues that sanctions are a flexible state tool that is quickly deconstructed when the distribution of power changes. In practical terms, this study implies that for the US, the stability of the transitional government now takes precedence over the pursuit of perfect democratization. This study acknowledges limitations related to the fluidity of post-transition data, as it is based on the long-term stability of al-Sharaa's transitional government. The analysis is limited to the phase of diplomatic reconfiguration between the US and Syria during the transitional government. For further research, the internal legitimacy mechanisms of the new government can be examined in greater depth, specifically how the integration of HTS elements into the state bureaucracy affects Syria's eligibility for international reconstruction funds. This is related to whether this diplomatic reconciliation is sustainable or only temporary.

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