

Trump's First Steps on Syria Were Good, But Now He Must Keep China from Taking Advantage

by [Grant Rumley \(/experts/grant-rumley\)](/experts/grant-rumley), [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Jun 9, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Grant Rumley \(/experts/grant-rumley\)](/experts/grant-rumley)

Grant Rumley is the Meisel-Goldberger Senior Fellow and Director of the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

Beijing specializes in exactly the type of infrastructure reconstruction assistance that Syria so urgently needs and may look to exploit any further delays or prohibitions stemming from U.S. export controls.

President Trump's [surprise announcement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations) that the United States would suspend sanctions on Syria and seek to normalize relations came as a welcome reprieve—not just to Damascus, but also to regional states like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which had consistently lobbied Washington to give the new Syria a chance at rebuilding itself with U.S. support. On May 23, the administration took another welcome step by [issuing \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0148\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0148) General License 25, part of the process of walking back Washington's myriad sanctions. Unless further steps are taken quickly, however, outside actors like China may be able to step in and rebuild Syria—reaping the resultant commercial and geopolitical gains in the process.

Lifting U.S. sanctions is an arduous task. Some of them stretch back decades, while others were issued during Syria's civil war. Some, like the [Caesar sanctions \(https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31\)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31), will ultimately require congressional approval to permanently dismantle. Europe and other U.S. partners still have to [untangle their own sanctions \(https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/20/world/europe/eu-syria-sanctions.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/20/world/europe/eu-syria-sanctions.html) as well. Yet even beyond these complex steps, achieving the president's vision will also require easing U.S. export

controls on the equipment and materials that Syria needs to rebuild its infrastructure.

Currently, the country faces heavy restrictions on importing such items if they come from the United States or are made with a certain percentage of American components. The most arduous restrictions stem from Syria's **1979 designation (<https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/>)** as a state sponsor of terrorism, which barred it from receiving U.S. foreign assistance, acquiring dual-use items, or fully accessing international financial markets. Similarly, the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act **prohibited (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/1828>)** the United States from issuing export licenses to Damascus for any items deemed dual-use. Other **restrictions (https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL33487/RL33487.174.pdf)** stem from the Export Administration Act (1979), the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (2000), and the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (2000). Although General License 25 **eased some (<https://www.dentons.com/en/insights/alerts/2025/june/3/us-eliminates-most-sanctions-on-syria>)** of the sanctions restrictions, it does not extend to the full export controls associated with these designations.

If these restrictions remain in place, the net effect is clear—entities seeking to rebuild infrastructure in multiple Syrian sectors (transportation, medical, telecommunications, etc.) will have to look elsewhere for suppliers. And this would open an opportunity for countries that specialize in such assistance—namely, China—to capitalize. Chinese overseas lending programs like the Belt and Road Initiative focus on exactly the type of infrastructure projects that the new Syria needs. And although General License 25 **restricts the purchase (<https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/934306/download?inline>)** of materials from Russia, Iran, and North Korea, it does not explicitly mention China.

Beijing has been **cautiously testing (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/curbing-chinas-influence-new-syrian-government>)** Damascus on this front for some time. Since early February, Chinese officials have engaged Syria's ministers of **agriculture (<https://t.me/MinistryOfAgricultureS/498>)** and **energy (https://x.com/mopmr_syria/status/1920121642358800556)** about potential infrastructure investments. Last month, twenty-two Chinese companies attended a **reconstruction conference (<https://t.me/MOPWAH/94>)** in Syria, second only to Turkey's delegation. And just days after Trump's sanctions announcement, Syria's General Authority for Land and Sea Ports **signed (<https://x.com/syrianborders/status/1925598488684806478?s=46&t=BvBu4yXvB3e-SbCtjXmPQQ>)** a memorandum of understanding with a Chinese firm granting it investment privileges in two towns, one in Homs province and the other in Rif Damascus.

If Washington and Europe want to halt this trend and tilt the new government away from unwelcome actors—both traditional Syrian partners like Russia and Iran and potential new partners in China—they must make sure their export controls as well as their sanctions are sufficiently relaxed. There is precedent for such decisions. In 2013, the United States **announced (<https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/all-articles/102-about-bis/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2013/540-syria-additional-items-eligible-for-export-reexport-under-license>)** a limited waiver for the 2003 Syria Accountability Act that allowed the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security to issue "licenses on a case-by-case basis" for exporting certain commodities and technology needed for reconstruction in various sectors, such as power, transportation, construction, water/sanitation, and agriculture. Of course, Syria was in the middle of a war at the time, so the waiver did not spur U.S. companies to dramatically increase their exports. Yet the items waived are consistent with Syria's needs today, and the precedent of lifting export controls without completely lifting sanctions has been set.

Even by itself, a decision to ease these controls would greatly incentivize actors to "buy American" when rebuilding Syria. But the Trump administration should take this a step further by ensuring that Chinese equipment and materials do not play a major part in Syria's redevelopment. Limiting Beijing's influence in the region was a key

theme during Trump's visit to the Middle East; at one point he [told reporters \(https://finance.yahoo.com/news/trump-says-willing-travel-china-230142864.html\)](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/trump-says-willing-travel-china-230142864.html) that the Gulf states “were going to China, and that was going to be their parent, [but] that’s not happening.” To capitalize on his post-trip momentum, the president should draw a red line for Syria’s Gulf and Turkish backers, demanding that they exclude Chinese components from their reconstruction projects.

The Trump administration is right to seize on this moment. A new Syria that aligns less with its traditional patrons and more with the West would be a boon to U.S. interests in the Middle East. But this shift will not be possible unless Washington eases its longstanding restrictions on exports to Syria. Failing that, Damascus and its regional backers will have little choice but to look elsewhere—and China may be first in line.

Grant Rumley is the Meisel-Goldberger Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East, and a former Middle East policy advisor at the Pentagon during the first Trump administration. Aaron Y. Zelin is the Institute's Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow and author of [The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Between the Promise of Democracy and Repeated Failures of Iraq's Electoral System](#)

Jun 6, 2025

◆
Haider al-Musawi

(/policy-analysis/between-promise-democracy-and-repeated-failures-iraqs-electoral-system)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[While Other Countries Push for a Palestinian State, Israel Is Increasing Its West Bank Presence](#)

Jun 6, 2025

◆
Neomi Neumann

(/policy-analysis/while-other-countries-push-palestinian-state-israel-increasing-its-west-bank)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Russia's Strategy Toward Post-Assad Syria](#)

Jun 5, 2025



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/russias-strategy-toward-post-assad-syria)

TOPICS

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Great Power Competition \(/policy-analysis/great-power-competition\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)