

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 20, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20451

The Honorable Scott Bessent
Secretary of Treasury
Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Rubio and Secretary Bessent:

We appreciate the views that Secretary Rubio shared during his confirmation hearing regarding significant opportunities and risks in Syria following the end of the Assad regime.¹ We agree that it is firmly in our national interest for Syrians to protect minority groups and to rebuild such that their country is not a haven for ISIS or a vehicle through which Iran can promote regional destabilization.

As the Departments of State and the Treasury work to develop Syria policy at this critical moment, we ask that you modify broad or outdated sanctions prohibitions that will undercut U.S. objectives if left in place. As Secretary Rubio noted, there is an opportunity to explore the removal of sanctions that were aimed at a regime that no longer exists, if doing so would advance positive outcomes.

Sanctions inertia would undercut Syria's path to stability. It could spur new migration or entrench reliance on the trafficking and export of illicit drugs like captagon. Moreover, impeding reconstruction would open the door once again to Iran and Russia. As Secretary Rubio argued in his confirmation hearing, Iran and Russia have been pushed out after supporting Assad's brutal rule, but they are pragmatic foreign policy operators who will exploit any U.S. failure to make the best of our opportunities. Syria's new authorities will be looking for reconstruction lifelines, and it is in our interest that they have options other than Iranian and Russian entities to which they can turn for financial connectivity and new investment.

We ask you to consider, for example, unwinding the exceedingly broad services and investment prohibitions that President Obama introduced alongside other measures in 2011.² These bans

¹ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Nomination Hearing," January 15, 2025, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-01-15-2025>.

² Executive Order 13582 prohibits, among other activities, (a) new investment in Syria by a United States person, wherever located; and (b) the exportation, reexportation, sale, or supply, directly or indirectly, from the United States, or by a United States person, wherever located, of any services to Syria. See Executive Order 13582, "Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions With Respect to Syria," August 17, 2011, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2011/08/22/2011-21505/blocking-property-of-the-government-of-syria-and-prohibiting-certain-transactions-with-respect-to>.

were originally imposed “to deepen the financial isolation of the Assad regime and further disrupt its ability to finance a campaign of violence against the Syrian people.”³ That regime and its campaign of violence have ended. But the services ban, for instance, continues to make our Syria sanctions program one of our most comprehensive programs globally. That prohibition on services, including financial services, has the effect of blocking trade with Syria through its impact on banking. Broad prohibitions like these can be unwound or narrowed without undoing measures such as counterterrorism sanctions.

We appreciate that your departments have started to adjust our sanctions through important yet incomplete initial steps. In January, Treasury issued a general license that allows some transactions with governing institutions in Syria. This built on preexisting authorizations already in place for those providing humanitarian assistance. But our sanctions still limit a wide range of private sector activities, impeding the economic exchange necessary for the scale of reconstruction that Syria needs. Reputable banks in countries that observe our sanctions prohibitions still avoid processing transactions that would support reconstruction because they cannot see a way past sanctions risk.

Given the serious risks of inaction, we urge you to consider unwinding or replacing outdated measures like the broad services and investment prohibitions and other restrictions that have country-wide impact. Near-term changes should minimize obstacles to meaningful private sector participation in at least the sectors covered in General License No. 22 of May 12, 2022, which licensed a range of activities in non-regime held areas of Syria.⁴ We ask that you adjust other prohibitions, including through waivers as appropriate, if doing so is necessary to make these changes useful in practice.

We also ask that you develop and communicate a roadmap describing specific actions Syrian authorities would need to take before seeing changes to any of the other numerous sanctions and export controls that the Administration may choose to keep in place. Emerging terrorist threats should be designated with targeted sanctions even as you consider a material support authorization to address any unintended effects on relief and reconstruction resulting from the State Department’s Foreign Terrorist Organization designation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.

We share Secretary Rubio’s concern that we may inadvertently walk away from a fleeting opportunity to promote stability in Syria. Updating our sanctions could allow additional private and public sector organizations to participate in reconstruction and humanitarian relief—expanding the pool of available resources and reducing reliance on taxpayer-funded support from donor countries. While inertia could strengthen hardline factions within Syria, updating U.S. sanctions could help the Syrian population and civil society access economic benefits, building up a constituency that could press for continued reform. The changes we propose could be

³ The White House, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” August 18, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Authorizing Activities in Certain Economic Sectors in Non-Regime Held Areas of Northeast and Northwest Syria,” May 12, 2022, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/923101/download?inline>.

reversed if necessary. But implementing them soon may be critical to avoid harm to U.S. interests and to help the Syrian people build a better future after enduring years of oppressive rule.

We thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator
Ranking Member
Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs



Joe Wilson
Member of Congress