

RETHINKING THE EUROPEAN APPROACH TOWARDS SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) 'is ready to play its part in Syria's reconstruction and reconciliation, as soon as a genuine political transition is firmly underway'¹. More than ten years into what continues to be described as the most devastating humanitarian crisis of our time, the EU still struggles to articulate a clear policy towards Syria. Throughout the conflict, European efforts have been hindered by the need to balance its member states' political and economic sensibilities, pressures exerted by foreign actors², and a failure to transpose its rhetoric into action. Today, as talks are being held about the reconstruction of Syria³, Europeans keep pursuing the unfeasible dream of implementing democracy through regime change, leaving the Syrian people with yet another policy approach ill-suited for their current realities—whilst war still lingers in Syria, the future of the country's leadership has already been decided in favour of the regime. With more than 70% of the country's territory controlled by al-Assad⁴, the 'genuine political transition' the EU demands is unlikely to occur. Instead, it should aim to create conditions that allow Syrian civil society to emerge by addressing the damages of war and restoring the country's heavily impacted social fabric. We argue that for the political transition to be made possible, the European 'more' of the 'more for more' approach needs to come first.

We begin with an overview of Syria's background, followed by an examination of the domestic conflict and the international response thereto. The second section provides a classification of the bilateral relations between the EU and Syria before and during the conflict. We then evaluate Europe's response against the face of current challenges in Syria. Our policy section articulates three major flaws in the EU's strategy, which inform our suggestions aimed at alleviating the suffering of a people who have lived through nothing but war for more than a decade.

¹ Josep Borrell, "Syria: We Will Continue to Do Our Part," EEAS | European External Action Service | European Commission, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/81970/syria-we-will-continue-do-our-part_en.

² Lorenzo Trombetta, "The EU and the Syrian Crisis as Viewed from the Middle East," *The International Spectator* 49, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): p. 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2014.937134>.

³ Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region' held on 30th June, 2020.

⁴ Lenka Klicperová and Markéta Kutilová, *Válka Je Mým Osudem* (Prague: Albatros Media, 2020) p. 247.

Key words: humanitarian crisis, Syrian civil war, European foreign policy, conflict policy, political transition, reconstruction, reconciliation.

OVERVIEW

The variety of religions, ethnicities and languages amongst Syria today stems largely from its multitude of rulers throughout history. Each left their own impact, notable to this day not only in Syria but also in Europe, where much of the cultural and religious tradition originates from the region. For instance, the ancient Assyrians preserved copies of books that would later prove foundational to the development of European literature⁵, while modern-day Assyrian communities are recognised for maintaining the linguistic legacy of Aramaic – the original language of the Bible. Before the Arabs brought Islam to the Levant, the Byzantines had ensured the spread of Christianity, strengthening its tradition worldwide. The region's ethnic and linguistic composition diversified most during the Ottoman rule, bringing the Assyrians and Arabs under one political entity along with the Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and Turkmen, who constitute the basis of Syria's contemporary demographics⁶. Religiously, the country is majority Sunni Muslim, with the remaining population composed of Shia Muslims (notably the Alawi subset of which the Assads are members), the largest Christian minority in the Middle East, the Druze, Yazidis and a small Jewish community⁷. Many of the aforementioned groups' historical sites were destroyed during the fighting, predominantly by the so-called Islamic State or Daesh, targeting both Muslim and non-Muslim heritage. All communities of the region have suffered incalculable losses.

The ethno-religious plurality is often said to account for the fragmented character of modern-day Syria but there is another reason related to the comparatively new idea of the 'Syrian nation'. Syria's identity only began forming in the early 20th century through a process initiated by the Sykes-Picot agreement⁸ rather than organic development, as until then it had always constituted a larger whole. The manner in which the lines were drawn deeply affected the dynamics of a region that had previously been divided along religious, ethnic and linguistic lines. Reinforced by a series of regimes suppressing religious and cultural freedoms, including both Assad generations, one could argue much of the fragmentation and subsequent sectarian fighting distinctive of the war in Syria dates back to post-WWI events.



The war in 2011 began as a peaceful anti-government protest in the city of Deraa, which was met with violent, lethal retaliation from regime forces. The unrest quickly spread across the whole nation and it was not long before the conflict gained a complicated sectarian dimension. A multitude of militias formed along ethno-religious and tribal lines, among them the fundamentalist Islamic State whose caliphate spread from northern Syria to Mosul in Iraq, attracting fighters from many foreign countries including EU member states. To ensure

⁵ One such literary piece is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose copies were discovered in the Library of Ashurbanipal by Austen Henry Layard in the 19th century.

⁶ John A. Shoup, *The History of Syria* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2018), p. 6.

⁷ Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria And The Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council On Foreign Relations, 1991), p. 222.

⁸ A secret treaty between the United Kingdom and France made in 1916 to weaken the Ottoman influence in the region and divide its fallen empire into colonial zones of influence after the First World War.

submission, the group employed indoctrination through the remarkably sophisticated use of internet propaganda and circulating publications, and used extreme violence against civilians and its opponents. Particularly appalling is the genocide of Yazidis, estimated 3,100 of whom were killed and 6,800 kidnapped⁹, the former figure representing almost exclusively men, the latter women held in sexual slavery. In wartime, sexual violence is frequently used as a weapon. In the case of Yazidi women, rape was used as a systemic instrument of ethnic cleansing¹⁰. Other rebel militias, sponsored by different foreign actors depending on their respective visions for the region¹¹, have been comparably brutal in their conduct, fighting the regime, Islamic State and each other. The regime fought back and, inflicting violence on civilians¹², targeted anti-government groups that would later form the Syrian Democratic Forces credited with driving the Islamic State out of its strongholds.



Initially condemning the regime's conduct, major regional and global powers were quick to pursue individual geopolitical interests on the battlefield, giving the so-called civil war a modern, proxy character. Russia and Iran prioritised their strategic interests, which were best served by al-Assad remaining in power. If the regime fell, Russia would likely lose its only Mediterranean port¹³ and influence in the region, while Iran's religious ties with the country would weaken¹⁴. Both countries responded militarily, either by sponsoring al-Assad directly or the Shia militias fighting alongside him¹⁵. The opposition forces and rebels fighting to overthrow the regime have received the diplomatic and logistic support of the major Western powers¹⁶ as well as the Gulf states and Turkey. Notable are the United States' attacks against Syrian government forces and its 2015 intervention to help, arm and train the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, militarily defeating the Islamists in 2019¹⁷. It has since, however, withdrawn from the region, creating a power vacuum utilized by the most controversial actor of the Syrian war, namely Turkey.

Only days after Trump's announcement of the American forces' withdrawal, Ankara launched the controversial Operation Peace Spring to 'resettle 2 million refugees and create a safe zone'.¹⁸ President Erdogan claimed this was threatened by 'Kurdish terrorist groups' like the YPG. Fearing the autonomous administration in north-eastern Syria might induce separatism among Turkey's own Kurdish minority, Erdogan has allegedly been clearing the region of

⁹ Valeria Cetorelli et al., "ISIS' Yazidi Genocide," *Foreign Affairs* (Foreign Affairs Magazine, June 8, 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-06-08/isis-yazidi-genocide>.

¹⁰ David Sverdlov, "Rape in War: Prosecuting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Boko Haram for Sexual Violence Against Women," *Cornell International Law Journal* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): p. 334, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol50/iss2/6/>.

¹¹ Most notably Al-Nusra allegedly supported by Qatar, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam supported by Turkey, and the Free Syrian Army initially supported by the United States, United Kingdom, France and a few other members of the EU and the Arab League.

¹² Airstrikes, bombings, use of chemical weapons. Estimated ca. 14,000 political prisoners were tortured to death in al-Assad's prisons according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

¹³ Henry Foy, "Russia to Invest \$500m in Syrian Port of Tartus," *Financial Times*, 2019, <https://ft.com/content/f52bdde6-20cc-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>.

¹⁴ Iran's strategy on the Sunni-majority Syria has long been to establish a Shia influence, and offset the domination of the Saudis.

¹⁵ Russia directly intervened in 2015. While the Russians claimed to have been directing airstrikes at ISIL sites, numerous sources say they were in fact targeting anti-Assad rebels and opposition strongholds. Notorious are the 2016 Russian bombings of Aleppo and the city's hospital, leaving hundreds of civilian casualties.

¹⁶ United States, United Kingdom, France, Netherlands.

¹⁷ The Battle of Baghouz.

¹⁸ Anadolu Agency, "Operation Peace Spring Starts in Syria: Erdogan," Anadolu Agency, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/operation-peace-spring/operation-peace-spring-starts-in-n-syria-erdogan/1607147>.

Kurds, displacing non-Muslim minorities and assaulting civilians. The planned 'safe zone' is, in fact, becoming a buffer operating under Turkey-established political structures¹⁹, ready to succumb under Ankara's administration. Besides violating international law by infringing upon Syria's sovereignty, Erdogan's own attempted social engineering has led to more regional tensions as majority-Sunni refugees are being resettled into an area they had not inhabited historically. The Turkey-backed militias overseeing the operation in Syria are said to include former Islamic State fighters. This becomes less shocking once the accusations of Erdogan's immediate family trading with the radical group are considered. At the current stage of the war, Turkey's proxies control over 10,000 km² of the border region²⁰ previously liberated by the Kurds who, along with other Syrian minorities, reportedly find themselves under their assaults. At the time of writing, the very same militias are being sent to support Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh²¹, the next source of fierce fighting in the Caucasus. Turkey's endeavours in Syria and now Azerbaijan show a fairly clear picture of the sort of geopolitical and military interests it wants to pursue, manifesting itself as no reliable partner to the EU. On the other hand, the degree to which Turkey's strategy might be attributed to the decision to fund the Kurds made by the US and the EU should be considered. Arguably, had the West negotiated an agreement with Turkey back in 2013 when Daesh became an issue instead of choosing to fund the Kurds and then withdraw from the region without brokering a deal between the two rivals, Turkey would not be in the position of having to choose between targeting the Kurds at their first chance and waiting for them to consolidate, causing resurgent Kurdish separatism in Turkey.



Having discussed the different responses of global powers in the face of the complicated mosaic of Syria's antagonised social groups and irreconcilable geopolitical interests of regional actors, we will now turn to how Europe fits into the picture and begin with a detailed examination of the kind of relations Europe and Syria maintained prior and during the war. Crafting a policy response to crises in foreign countries requires an understanding of their history, culture and ethno-religious dynamics. By addressing this, we hope to have set up a clearer lens through which the subsequent sections of this paper will look at and evaluate Europe's response to the war and the impact its policies have made so far.

EUROPE'S BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH SYRIA BEFORE THE WAR

Prior to the conflict, relations between the EU and Syria were defined by the 1977 EU-Syria Co-operation Agreement.²² The objective of the Agreement was to promote Syrian economic and social development through simplified trade and financial support. Without an expiration, it provided a stable framework for long-term commitments. This facilitated the implementation of investments with far-reaching benefits, like those in infrastructure and

¹⁹ Klicperová and Kutilová, 2020, p. 104.

²⁰ Turkey initially spoke of going 30 km deep into Syria. The estimate used in Klicperová and Kutilová, 2020, p. 235.

²¹ Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed region in Azerbaijan controlled by Armenian separatists. Turkey's involvement in the form of sending mercenaries previously operating under its command in Syria to fight alongside Azerbaijan have been confirmed by various press sources.

²² Commission of the European Communities, "EEC-SYRIA COOPERATION AGREEMENT," 1978, <http://aei.pitt.edu/12764/1/12764.pdf>.

power supplies. Given its flexibility, interdependent character and joint management, the Agreement could be continuously improved. It accounted for Syria's rapid GDP growth, rising from \$7.6 bln in 1977 to more than double the value only five years later²³.

Further economic integration was pursued through Syria's participation in the 2004 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership²⁴ (EuroMed), a key initiative leading to the European Neighbourhood Policy. Figures show that in the Southern Mediterranean, intraregional trade only makes up a small fraction²⁵ of the countries' total trade, one of the lowest levels of regional economic integration in the world. Euromed's objective is the establishment of a free trade area aimed at removing barriers to trade and investment between the Union and Southern Mediterranean countries as well as between S. Mediterranean countries themselves. Syria's use of EuroMed's framework led it to double its GDP between 2003 and 2007²⁶, and subsequently, reach both a higher level of human development and an increase in mean years of schooling, almost achieving universal primary enrolment and universal enrolment in lower secondary education in 2011.

Year	Average Years of Schooling	Human Development Index
2000	4.6	0.59
2005	5.8	0.63
2010	6.3	0.64

Moreover, within EuroMed's framework, bilateral Association Agreements are enforced in exchange for commitments to political, economic and human rights reforms in the participating countries²⁷. In exchange, said countries are offered tariff-free access to certain EU markets. Syria began negotiating a full association agreement in 2004²⁸. The Association Agreement would have granted the EU free access to Syrian exports on one hand, while on the other, Syria would have liberalised its imports regime for the Union's products. The final objective would have been eliminating all tariffs. Moreover, the Association Agreement would have contained, if compared to the Cooperation Agreement, more far-reaching and substantial provisions in several areas: non-proliferation, counter-terrorism, tariff dismantlement on agricultural products, sanitary measures, intellectual property rights and trade dispute. Finally, it would have introduced an Association Council to supervise the implementation of the Agreement, and an Association Committee to facilitate the dialogue between the European Parliament and the Syrian People's Assembly. In summary, the Association Agreement was conceived to tighten diplomatic and economic relations, bringing Syria closer to the European sphere of influence. This would have, in turn, constituted a preferential path to economic and

²³ World Bank, "Syrian Arab Republic | Data," data.worldbank.org, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/SY>.

²⁴ European Commission, "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership," Europa.eu, 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/euro-mediterranean-partnership/>.

²⁵ 5.9% in exports, 5.1% in imports.

²⁶ From \$21 bln to \$40 bln.

²⁷ Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia.

²⁸ Commission of the European Communities, "AVC 2004/0281," 2004, https://bilaterals.org/IMG/pdf/com2004_0808en01.pdf.

human development. However, the complexity of the region slowed down the negotiations to the point that the political turmoil of the 2010s eventually prevented the two parties from subscribing to the Agreement, pushing Syria backwards when compared with other countries participating in the EuroMed framework.

EUROPEAN RESPONSE TO THE WAR AND ITS IMPACT

Responding to the rapidly escalating crisis, the EU suspended all formal bilateral relations with Syria in 2011. It could justifiably no longer continue its efforts to support trade and economic integration of a country whose regime had made the use of violence against civilians its main power instrument. The Union has since chaired numerous conferences and attempted to broker negotiations between Syrian anti-government representatives and the regime aimed at '[finding] a political solution, to bring about a transition leading to a united, inclusive and democratic Syria'²⁹. Ending the war through a 'genuine' or 'meaningful and inclusive' transition has been the focal point of every strategy on Syria adopted by the Council since the 2015 UNSC Resolution 2254. The Resolution no longer demands the downfall of the regime, yet it does not define the desired 'transition' either³⁰. Regardless, none has occurred so far. With no military presence on the ground and intelligence relying solely on individual member states' analyses, Europe's role in the conflict remains limited to the use of sanctions and humanitarian aid provision.

Imposing sanctions against Syria in 2011, the EU reaffirmed its initial condemnation of the regime's conduct and undermined its legitimacy. By targeting the regime's elites and the businesses profiting off of the war economy, freezing Syrian assets and banning Syria's oil trade, the Union attempted to weaken the regime and leverage it into negotiating diplomatically. The first of the EU's attempts have been partially successful in constraining the regime's room for manoeuvres: exporting over 90% of its crude oil to European countries, the ban led to a decline in Syria's oil trade close to €5 bln (a figure representing 30% of the country's government revenues in 2010³¹) between 2011 and 2012. The same period saw a massive decrease in the aggregate European imports and exports, by 90% and 61% respectively³². While posing difficulties, the limitations manifested themselves mostly through the erosion of basic public services and suspension of public investments to finance the growing military and security needs rather than a behaviour change on behalf of the regime as intended. Though it could be argued that the inability to finance its partnerships has made it more difficult for the regime to secure support from its power circle³³, it remains difficult to estimate whether loyalty towards the regime has diminished as a direct result of the sanctions. The effect of the sanctions is slightly easier to isolate when it comes to Syria's

²⁹ High Representative Catherine Ashton quoted in: European Commission, "Towards a Comprehensive EU Approach to the Syrian Crisis: An EU Joint Communication," 2013, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137583.pdf.

³⁰ Omar Abdulaziz-Hallaj quoted in: European Council on Foreign Relations, "Syrian Voices: Where next for European Policy?," ECFR, March 11, 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syrian_voices_where_next_for_european_policy.

³¹ EIA, "Over 90% of Syrian Crude Oil Exports Go to European Countries," U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2001, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=3110>.

³² European Commission, "Trade in Goods with Syria," 2020, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_syria_en.pdf.

³³ Peter Seeberg, "Syria and the EU. The Crisis in Syria and the International Sanctions with a Focus on Syrian-EU Relations.," *Videnscenter Om Det Moderne Mellemøsten*, 2012. p. 11

strengthened economic ties with Russia and Iran. 'Turning East' to secure alternative supplies and diverting much of the country's trade to these markets, the search for new economic partners induced Syria's subordination to the Russian and Iranian vision for the country. EU sanctions on Syria have thus been ineffective in bringing about any form of political concession or put an end to the regime's continuous violation of its civilians' human rights.

With more than €17 bln in the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis³⁴, the EU remains the largest collective donor. In addition to humanitarian aid, the European Neighbourhood Instrument aims to develop community resilience and facilitate the reconstruction of the country's most affected regions. While Europe's main financing instrument's support is delivered through the UN, international and Syrian official agencies, the aid still fails to reach local organisations and individual activists. This is contradictory to European statements stressing the importance of the Syrian reconstruction being Syrian-led³⁵. Activists, both those in Syria and those operating from abroad, agree that for the EU to help create a credible civil agency it needs to engage with local actors and set up a framework for dispersed Syrians residing in Europe to contribute to the process. According to Omar Abdulaziz-Hallaj, a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, '[strengthening] new local leadership—inclusive of women—and enabling it to progressively ascend to the national level,' should be the core of Europe's support for the 'meaningful transition'.

While reaching a formal policy consensus on sanctions, the EU's response to having refugees at its gates was in no way unitary. While most countries cut their ties with Damascus, others like Romania and Bulgaria merely downgraded their partnerships. Normalising the regime's legitimacy, the Czechs have since the beginning of the conflict upheld their diplomatic relations. Hungary has recently upgraded them. The continued sanctions are another source of disagreements amongst EU member states. In recent years, Italy has publicly spoken of renewing oil trade with Syria, whilst France and Germany have adhered to the 'more for more' approach, i.e. political transition first, economic benefits second. On the bright side, the successful alignment of EU and US sanctions showed an example of effective transatlantic cooperation, strengthening bilateral relations rather than competing for trade links.

The crisis also brought to surface deep cultural and value-based differences, dividing the member states between those who welcomed refugees and those who closed their countries' borders. Xenophobia, intolerance and the spread of hoaxes have since polarised Europeans on the question, both between and within member states. In this case, the EU has failed to establish a framework to fight disinformation and raise public awareness about the war in Syria's and EU's role therein, neither has it made notable Union-wide efforts to educate its citizens about the cultural and ethno-religious background of people looking for protection there. This has shown the absence of unified action as well as the EU's limited ability to influence public opinion and address the rise of populist parties building their support on anti-migration and anti-Islamic narratives.

³⁴ Council of the EU, "Syria: Council Response to the Crisis," www.consilium.europa.eu, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/>.

³⁵ Borrell, 2020.

The EU's response to the Turkish offensive in Syria resembles the UK's and France's appeasement policy towards Germany prior to the Second World War. Uncertain where it stands between preserving military alliances and standing up for its core values, the Union-level condemnation of the invasion has not been followed by any appropriate diplomatic action. Here too, the national differences play their part as some member states justify Turkey's conduct by its right to self-defence and reject the suggested sanctions in the form of a ban on European arms exports to Turkey³⁶. Considering Turkey's geographic position, the size of its army with membership in NATO, and its threats to flood Europe with refugees in case the EU attempts to undermine its operations, addressing the Turkish issue requires the highest level of diplomatic acrobatics. Unwilling to risk weakened strategic partnership, the EU merely stands by as a humanitarian crisis continues, renouncing its values and responsibilities to the international community and its allies in the Syrian war. As it does so, its role in global policy-making diminishes.

SYRIA TODAY

Present-day Syria faces numerous social, political and economic challenges. The fighting has led to the destruction of infrastructure, housing and many of Syria's historical and cultural sites. So far, 0.6 million Syrians have lost their lives and 5.6 million of them had to flee their homes³⁷. For those who stayed, the cost of living has increased due to cuts in government subsidies and the country's massive inflation³⁸, so much so that over 83% of the population is living below the poverty line³⁹. Such level of economic deterioration fuelled the emergence of black markets and led to warlords securing control over local resources. Subsequently, civilians often had to rely on illegal practices or joining one of the armed groups out of a necessity to secure basic income. The financial crisis in Lebanon whose banks host many Syrians' money has only worsened the country's socio-economic situation. Prospects of Lebanon's financial sector improving are poor, particularly considering the slump it has suffered as a result of the recent explosion in Beirut.

The sectarian dimensions of the conflict have ruptured the fragile ethno-religious dynamics and fractured people's relationship to the state. The country's emerging civil society is either operating from exile or constrained to regional organisations struggling to gain recognition and funding. The massive erosion of the education sector obliterated all previous efforts to send children to schools and reach a higher level of literacy: compared to the 91% of primary school-aged children in schools in 2011, only 31% still attended one in 2015⁴⁰. Coupled with the lack of trained professionals, the prospect of ever forming a competent democratic opposition to the incumbent regime remains stagnant.

³⁶ The EU's first goal is to promote peace according to its official website.

³⁷ Council of the EU, 2020.

³⁸ Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, "The Role of the EU in the Syrian Conflict," 2016, p. 18, https://www.fes-europe.eu/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz_2016/FES_LSE_Syria_Turkmani_Haid_2016_02_23.pdf.

³⁹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "United Nations Calls for Sustained Support to Syrians and the Region Ahead of Brussels Conference," UNHCR, March 13, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/3/5c88e57d4/united-nations-calls-sustained-support-syrians-region-ahead-brussels-conference.html>.

⁴⁰ UNESCO, "Bridging Learning Gaps for Youth UNESCO Regional Education Response Strategy for the Syria Crisis (2016-2017)," 2016, http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/PCPD/pdf/UNESCO_Bridging_Learning_Gaps_for_Youth_Strategy_2016_20.pdf.

Syria is severely damaged by more than ten years of war economy and currency devaluation, opposing interests of regional and global powers and high level of corruption⁴¹ hindering effective transposition of international aid to public services covering the population's basic needs. The international sanctions continue to contract the economy and lower the chances of independent entrepreneurs and investors engaging with the country on business. As mentioned earlier, they make it harder for humanitarian organisations to receive funding and supplies⁴². Finally, the available funding pledged to Syria's reconstruction by numerous countries is likely to shrink with the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in Arab countries whose revenue has decreased due to the fall in the oil price⁴³.

POLICY EVALUATION

Having discussed what the European approach to the Syrian war has been hitherto, and addressed the multitude of issues and challenges the country now faces, let us briefly evaluate the European strategy on Syria before turning to specific policy recommendations. There are three main ways in which EU policy fails: (i) it is ill-suited for current challenges in Syria, (ii) it is inconsistent on the national level, and (iii) it lacks integrity in practical terms.

(i) A 'genuine political transition' towards democracy is simply not a prospect anymore, considering al-Assad's military gains as well as his government's devotion. For this reason, and because experience shows the regime is more likely to respond to military threats, the 'more for more' approach Europe continues to pursue does not affect developments in the country in real terms. Conditioning the renewal of its diplomatic relations and trade with Syria on an unreasonable political vision undermines the chance of a competent civil society emerging, for it lacks the basic economic conditions. While those who argue Damascus would interpret Europe's involvement as recognition of its legitimacy certainly make a valid point, we are suspicious of whether it bears any relevance under the current circumstances. The EU's involvement requires a degree of normalisation of its relations with al-Assad's regime to the extent that it does not impede the country's reconstruction whilst also showing the EU's value-position.

(ii) Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the EU's response has been undermined by the need to balance the political and economic sensibilities of its member states. Unable to reach a consensus on a number of issues, the war in Syria showed the absence of a *European narrative*: not only the kind limited to economic cooperation but also at the basic level of a value-based political union. The refugee crisis revealed Europe's further underestimation of ideological cleavages within and between its member states, and lack of effort to raise public awareness about the war, fight misinformation and shape the Europeans' public opinion to maintain core European values. Said absence of effort manifested through Europe-wide positive trends in voter support of populist parties campaigning for anti-migration laws.

⁴¹ Syria ranked 178 out of 180 states (third most corrupt) according to the Corruption Perceptions Index: Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index | Syria," Transparency.org, 2019, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/syria#>.

⁴² Francesco Giunelli and Paul Ivan, "The Effectiveness of EU Sanctions," *EPC Issue Paper*, no. 76 (November 2013): p. 15.

⁴³ Asseburg, 2020, p. 6.

(iii) The European crisis of values, as well as its issue of inconsistency, have impaired its ability to deal with actors like Turkey. This deeply harms the EU's capacity to act as a global power. With the US withdrawing from the region following a political course likely to survive the Trump administration, and the EU directing most of its attention on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of action is precisely what regional players like Turkey, Russia and Iran are counting on⁴⁴. What should be the main objective of the EU is getting actively involved to bring balance to the Middle East, offsetting its historical tradition of destabilising the region.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The EU should align its approach towards Syria with current perspectives and realities. This requires a thorough reconsideration of its 'more for more' approach: without basic economic needs covered, the kind of Syrian civil society able to assume leadership is unlikely to emerge. It should concentrate on creating conditions for the diverse ethno-religious groups of the Syrian society to live together in peace and support the reboot of the economy and basic public services by using the funds it pledged to dedicate to the reconstruction process at the Brussels IV Conference. This also serves European interests in: (i) stabilising Syria to the point that it no longer susceptible to violent conflict, refugee movements and terrorism, (ii) lifting the burden off the social security systems of EU member states by promoting the return of refugees and displaced Syrians to their home country, and (iii) building a consistent European act and reaffirming its values by seeing to the prosecutions of human rights violations, war crimes and use of internationally banned weapons as well as promoting transitional justice. It should do this by:
 - a. Stepping up such diplomatic activity that prioritises protecting civilians and basing decisions on citizens' needs. This requires dismantling sectoral sanctions to help the contracted economy benefit from potential investors and independent entrepreneurs, and distribute humanitarian aid more effectively.
 - b. Supporting the rebuilding of basic infrastructure in the whole of Syria, not only the opposition-held territory as this hinders the emergence of Syrian civil society and adds to the fragmentation of the country. In this sense, the EU should develop frameworks to reverse the erosion of public services vital for the kind of reconstruction Syria requires.
 - c. The EU should resume fostering and encouraging trade between Syria, itself and the neighbouring countries through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This requires the European Central Bank to cooperate closely with the Syrian Central Bank to stabilise the national currency and incentivise private businesses and entrepreneurs with the aim to offset the influence of warlords and bring everyday economic transactions and trading back to legal markets.
 - d. Avoiding the normalisation of relations with the Assad regime by certain member states as this undermines the EU's *moral* position with regards to the legitimacy of the Syrian government. In *practical* terms, however, achieving (a) to (c) requires normalisation to a certain degree for it is the regime who

⁴⁴ Marc Pierini, "New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean," Carnegie Europe, July 30, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/07/30/new-power-struggles-in-mediterranean-pub-82403>.

controls the institutions we suggest the EU should cooperate with more actively. The point is to find such a degree of balance that does not limit the EU's involvement but shows where it stands in terms of moral values.

2. The EU should strengthen and support the human capital available to Syria for when political circumstances finally allow for the return of displaced people and refugees currently residing in Syria's neighbouring countries and Europe by:
 - a. Putting effort and investment into training Syrian teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, administrators and other skilled workers, making effective use of the Syrian diaspora. Said training serves as a temporary solution to Europe's labour shortages too.
 - b. Setting practical and legal frameworks to facilitate direct cooperation with local organisations and civil activists. To recognise which of these are reliable, the EU should collect intelligence on the European level.
3. The EU should put considerably more effort into fighting disinformation to moderate divergences between individual member states' interests by working towards a well informed and educated public opinion on a European level. This requires strengthening the European humanitarian narrative by:
 - a. Launching social media campaigns to offset the spread of hoaxes, fake news and disinformation and fight online radicalisation by offering a counternarrative communicating the role of Europe's citizens in protecting human rights and peace promotion. For example, European Commission Representation in Slovakia issued a series of short videos in 2019, fighting some of the most polarising misconceptions about the European institutions which has been effective in incentivising more Slovak citizens to follow EU's activities and raise awareness further⁴⁵.
 - b. Promoting a European reform of civic education in schools to include digital literacy in their curricula or offer media training on recognising and responding to disinformation in the online domain. The renowned civic education system in Germany could be the starting point for an international policy transfer.
 - c. An alternative to (b) is promoting the said objectives through school project frameworks.
4. The EU should initiate the minimisation of foreign involvement of actors whose geopolitical interests and visions for Syria are irreconcilable. While we acknowledge the considerable military presence and political involvement of e.g. Russia and Iran is favoured by the Syrian regime, the EU could nevertheless balance the dynamics by providing al-Assad with the necessary economic incentives and upholding its activity in organising conferences as well as by actively engaging with academics, experts, and civil activists and working towards the reconciliation of Syria's antagonised social groups, decreasing the country's fragmentation and the likelihood of regional actors utilising it to their benefit. Once the prospect of a democratic transition is possible again, the EU, acting from the position of global policymaking, should be prepared to

⁴⁵ European Commission Representation in Slovakia, "Euromyty | Fámý a Mýty o EÚ," Euromyty, 2020, <http://euromyty.sk/>.

advocate for a political system that would minimise the ethno-religious tensions, such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

CONCLUSION

In the very same statement our paper opened with, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security, Josep Borrell, says 'the future of Syria must be Syrian-owned and Syrian-led'. The prospect thereof, according to Mr Borrell, depends on the successful implementation of the 2254 Resolution by the regime, '[not] for our benefit, not for their or their supporters' but for the benefit of all Syrians'. We want to softly argue that a Syrian-owned and -led reconstruction of the country lies very much in Europe's interest. Positioning itself as self-sacrificing and purely altruistic when there are clear social, political, economic and security benefits in Syria's recovery and Europe's involvement therein for both Syria and Europe seems two-faced. Acknowledging this and clarifying Europe's ambitions might bring about more unity among its member states and consolidate Europe's agency in the global policymaking arena.

What disturbs us greatly is the European crisis of values, and its inability to stand up for what it believes in: human dignity, freedom and the promotion of peace. Europe needs a narrative, and while many of us can push for it through various means, it is up to the leaders of the Union to make it true. One of us once met a Syrian woman, Ruba, during a placement in Iraqi Kurdistan where she came to look for work and a place to stay, dreaming of coming to Europe. To her mind, it was the perfect country to live in, and she did mean a country in the unitary sense of the word. In her eyes, it was a place where everything was possible and life was good, where democracy flourished and people of the most different backgrounds lived peacefully together. 'Not like in Syria,' she said many times. As Europeans, we wish we could look at our 'country' and see what she thought she saw. While keeping the reality in mind, we do have hope for and believe in Europe that could one day live up to the expectations of Ruba and many more like her.

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