

RETHINKING THE EUROPEAN APPROACH TO SYRIA: a reflection on the role of the EU so far and the one it may play in Syria's reconstruction.

by Luca Mariano Mariano and Barbora Tallová of King's College London (KCL)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | INTRODUCTION

The European Union '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 clear policies towards Syria. Throughout the conflict, its efforts have been hindered by the need to balance the member states' political and economic sensibilities, pressures exerted by foreign actors², and failure to transpose its rhetoric into action. Today, Europeans continue pursuing the unfeasible dream of implementing democracy through regime change, leaving the Syrians with yet another policy approach ill-suited for current realities—while war still lingers, Syria's leadership has already been decided in favour of the al-Assad regime. The EU should aim to create conditions that allow a Syrian civil society to emerge by addressing the damages of war and restoring the country's deteriorated 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.

PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Present-day Syria faces numerous social, political, and economic challenges. Conflict 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 homes³. For those who stayed, the cost of living has increased due to cuts in government subsidies and the country's massive inflation⁴, so much so that well over 75% of the population is now living below the poverty line⁵. The financial crisis in Lebanon, where many Syrians have traditionally kept their money, worsened the country's socio-economic situation.

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 Council of the EU, 2020.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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>.

The sectarian dimensions of the conflict have ruptured the fragile ethno-religious dynamics and fractured citizens' relationship to the state. The country's emerging civil society is either operating from exile or constrained to regional organisations struggling to gain funding and recognition. The erosion of the education sector obliterated all previous efforts to reach a higher level of literacy⁶ – coupled with the lack of trained professionals, the prospect of forming a competent democratic opposition to the incumbent regime remains obstructed.

Syria is severely damaged by over 10 years of war economy and currency devaluation, opposing interests of regional and global powers and high levels of corruption⁷ that have hindered the effective transposition of international aid to public services. The international sanctions continue to contract the economy, lower the chances of independent entrepreneurs and investors engaging with the country, and obstruct the ability of humanitarian organisations to receive funding and supplies⁸. 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 price⁹.

There are three main respects in which the European strategy on Syria fails. First, the 'more for more' approach is **ill-suited for current challenges in Syria**. Insisting on a 'genuine political transition' creates economic constraints for the kind of civil society capable of leading the country towards democratisation, particularly in the face of al-Assad's military gains and his government's devotion. Second, the EU's approach is **inconsistent on the national level** and shows little effort being put into raising awareness about the Syrian crisis, fighting disinformation and shaping public opinion in Europe. Third, it **lacks integrity** which has impaired the EU's ability to deal with actors like Turkey¹⁰ and harmed its capacity to act as a global power.

POLICY OPTIONS

1. The EU should align its approach towards Syria with current perspectives and realities. The EU should concentrate on creating conditions for the diverse ethno-religious groups of the Syrian society to live together in peace, and support the restart of the economy and basic public services by using the funds it pledged to dedicate to the reconstruction process at the Brussels IV Conference. 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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#>.

⁸ Francesco Giumelli and Paul Ivan, "The Effectiveness of EU Sanctions," *EPC Issue Paper*, no. 76 (November 2013): p. 15.

⁹ Asseburg, 2020, p. 6.

¹⁰ 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>.

The EU should promote the prosecution of war crimes, human rights violations and use of internationally banned weapons. Moreover, the EU should develop frameworks to reverse the erosion of public services vital for the kind of reconstruction Syria requires.

- b. 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.
 - c. 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) and (b) requires normalisation to a certain degree for it is the regime who controls the institutions we suggest the EU should cooperate with more actively.
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. Training Syrian teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, administrators and other skilled workers, making use of the Syrian diaspora.
 - b. Setting practical and legal frameworks to collect intelligence and facilitate direct cooperation with local organisations and civil activists.
 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 promotion¹¹.
 - 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 domain¹².
 - 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 balance the dynamics by providing

¹¹ To illustrate, European Commission Representation in Slovakia issued a series of short videos in 2019, fighting some of the most polarising misconceptions about the European institutions. European Commission Representation in Slovakia, "Euromyty | Fány a Mýty o EÚ," Euromyty, 2020, <http://euromyty.sk/>.

¹² The civic education system in Germany could be the starting point for an international policy transfer.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

In approaching the crisis in Syria, the EU should aim to make its requirements better aligned with the real prospects, work towards reaching consistent decisions by strengthening its humanitarian narrative, and emphasize its founding values when dealing with global and regional actors. The main objective of the EU should be to get actively involved to bring balance to the Middle East, offsetting its historical tradition of destabilising the region. This will require 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.

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, who dreamt of coming to Europe. She thought it was the perfect 'country' to live in, a place where everything was possible and life was good, where democracy flourished and people of 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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