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Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war has been among the most intractable crises for the EU. An interplay of multi-level domestic and regional fragmentation and multipolar competition has constrained the ability of the EU and its member states to impact events on the ground. Since 2011, the EU has tried to promote a political transition through a negotiated settlement. As the war has dragged on, pushing millions of Syrians to flee the country, the EU has stepped up humanitarian aid to the population and assistance to neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees. However, the resilience of the Assad regime, emboldened by the support of Russia and Iran, some disagreements between EU member states on how to break the stalemate and, more recently, the war in Ukraine, have limited the EU's agency. The EU should build consensus ground amongst the member states for investing more diplomatic capital in Syria, including via a conditional engagement of Turkey, Iran and Russia and the Astana process.

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Introduction

For about twelve years, the civil war in Syria has been an almost intractable challenge for the European Union, which has never found a way to shape events on the ground. Initially, the EU and its member states reacted to President Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown on protesters demanding greater freedoms with public condemnation and sanctions. As the conflict escalated and opposition forces to Assad multiplied and radicalised, more and more external powers, especially Russia, Iran and Turkey, were drawn in, resulting in a diminished EU political and diplomatic role.¹ Differences between member states further hampered EU action.² The refugee crisis caused by the conflict and its consequences for European countries added to the difficulties for the EU in shaping a political response and eventually made it to little more than a provider of humanitarian aid. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine, despite causing a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria, has further downgraded the Syrian crisis in the EU's list of priorities.

This report analyses how the EU and its member states have tried to mitigate the effects of fragmentation in and around Syria – and its interplay with geopolitical rivalries and intra-EU divisions – in order to make their policy towards Syria more joined up and ultimately, effective. Fragmentation is defined here as the dual process by which the state's capacity to set and enforce norms is weakened or contested and regional governance mechanisms struggle to function properly. Fragmentation thus can unfold at the sub-national, state and regional levels.³ Multipolar competition refers to rivalries between multiple players who espouse fundamentally incompatible views of global or regional orders.⁴ Finally, intra-EU contestation is understood as the difficulty of EU member states in finding common ground on foreign and security policy issues for reasons of domestic

¹ Dimitris Bouris and Anis Nacour, "The Ins and Outs of the EU's Shortcomings in Syria", in IEMed, *Euromed Survey: Changing Euro-Mediterranean Lenses*, 2018, p. 90-95, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=6877>.

² Claire A. Poinson, "Enquête – l'Union européenne en Syrie : peser ou juste payer ?", in *Un oeil sur la Syrie*, 20 April 2019, <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/syrie/?p=10482>.

³ Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639>.

⁴ Marianna Lovato et al., "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy. A Literature Review of the Implications of Intra-EU Contestation on Crises and Conflicts", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516>.

political expediency.⁵ After an analysis of fragmentation – by identifying at which level it dominates and how it interacts with multipolar competition and intra-EU contestation – this report analyses how these factors have constrained EU foreign and security policy (EUFSP) towards Syria. The paper ends with a few recommendations on how the EU and its member states can regain some room of manoeuvre to have greater impact on the ground.


1. Syria's place in regional politics before the civil war

Despite being a small state with limited resources, Syria has traditionally been at the centre of regional rivalries in the Middle East. In an influential 1965 book, *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale wrote that internal political developments in Syria cannot be understood if they are not placed into the wider politics of the region, an argument still valid today.⁶

Syria's support for Iran during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War, bringing Damascus and Tehran into an alliance that lasts to this day, was a major development in this regard. The alliance with Iran offered Syria an opportunity to overcome its isolation in the struggle against Israel, which had grown after Egypt had made peace with Israel in 1979. A main outcome of the Syrian-Iranian alliance was the creation of Hezbollah, the Shia armed group that controls southern Lebanon, which over time has become a major asset for both Damascus and Tehran. As the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union, an ally of Syria and its main military supplier, collapsed, Syrian autocratic president, Hafez al-Assad (father of the current president, Bashar), supported the US-led coalition that in 1991 liberated Kuwait from the forces of Hafez's Baathist rival, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In the following decade, the Assad regime witnessed the weakening of Iraq, as it continued to challenge Israeli control of the Golan Heights, which it had lost during the disastrous Six Days War of 1967. When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, he bequeathed to his son Bashar a Syria that was relatively safe in the region, and the Assad family's autocratic grip on power secure.

⁵ Assem Dandashly et al, "Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697>.

⁶ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria. A Study in Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958*, New ed., New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987.



The next major event that shaped Syria's approach to its neighbourhood was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which triggered dynamics of fragmentation along sectarian lines and growing interstate competition across the region for the following two decades. The collapse of Saddam's regime in Baghdad opened the gates of the Arab world to Iranian influence and gave rise to concerns amongst Sunni Arab states, especially Jordan and the Gulf countries, about the emergence of a "Shia crescent", uniting Iran, Iraq (where the Shia majority became the main political actor following the fall of Saddam, who relied on the Sunni minority), south Lebanon (thanks to Hezbollah), and Syria itself. Syria opposed the invasion and the subsequent occupation of Iraq by US forces and was blamed by the United States for supporting the militias fighting against US-led forces in the country. Syria paid the price of its anti-US stance by being forced in 2005 to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, where they had been stationed ostensibly in a peace-keeping capacity since 1990. Although still exerting an influence there *via* Hezbollah and its allies, Syria's regional status was weakened, whereby Damascus could not but anchor itself further in the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" against the US-centred regional order alongside Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamist armed groups. Syria did manage to improve relations with Turkey from 2007 onwards, but then the situation changed entirely in 2011, when protesters took to the streets demanding greater political freedoms. As President Assad brutally repressed all political dissent, the protests morphed into an uprising and eventually into a bloody, multifaceted and drawn-out civil war.

2. The context of EU foreign and security policy towards Syria

Since 2011 Syria has experienced profound state-level fragmentation. It has also become a hotbed of regional and international rivalries. This high level of fragmentation and interstate competition – two factors that have mutually reinforced one another – has significantly constrained the room for manoeuvre of EU institutions and member states, which have also at times struggled to reconcile their differences. The war in Ukraine, which has prompted a deterioration of the already dire humanitarian situation in Syria, has added another layer of complication for EU FSP.

2.1 The deepening fragmentation of Syria

The civil war in Syria is a multi-layered, multi-actor conflict involving regime troops, opposition groups, proxies, militias and shifting alliances. The main actors are Russian- and Iranian-supported regime forces (which also includes Iranian-directed and -trained foreign groups as well as Hezbollah fighters), Turkish-backed opposition forces in Idlib, Western-backed Kurds in the northeast and the weakened yet not completely wiped-out Islamic State (ISIS) in the east. William Harris, a Middle East expert, calls the war in Syria a “quicksilver war”, ever-changing and toxic.⁷

The beginning of the uprising in March 2011 brought the argument about the “struggle for Syria” to the fore. The anti-regime protests, which were initially peaceful, turned into an armed struggle when they were met with the regime’s harsh military response. Many army officers of different ranks defected and formed what would be called the Free Syrian Army – a loose union of different groups fighting against the regime. Politically, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, known shortly as the Syrian National Coalition, was formed in November 2012 in Doha as an umbrella cluster of various political groups. While the opposition was mainly supported by Sunni groups, the Alawite community, to which the Assads belongs, and the minority Christian communities are generally supportive of the regime. Yet, there were and still are important cross-sectarian alliances as well, like some prominent Damascene Sunni businessmen supporting the regime, which makes the application of a purely sectarian lens inaccurate. Indeed, the binary division between the regime and the Free Syrian Army did not last, as the opposition has fragmented over time and different groups have been supported by different external powers in a kaleidoscope of shifting alliances and cross rivalries.

Today, the Assad regime confronts three main domestic rivals. First are the extremist Salafist groups like the al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front and the more radical ISIS, which moved into Syria in 2013-14 and for a few years took control of

⁷ William Harris, *Quicksilver War. Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

an area centred on Raqqa, in eastern Syria, where it continues to operate to this day.⁸ Second are other Islamist opposition groups who have made the area of Idlib in northern Syria their safe haven, from which they challenge both the regime to their south and west and the Kurds to their east. Al-Nusra, after disavowing al-Qaeda and rebranding itself Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is now there. Third are the Kurdish groups located mainly in northeast Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defence Units (YPG). In 2015, the YPG merged with smaller Arab groups into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with the main goal of fighting against Salafist groups, especially ISIS. The SDF was supported by a US-led anti-ISIS coalition, but over time it engaged more with the Assad regime itself, eventually finding a sort of "pragmatic arrangement" according to which the regime would "transfer key security resources and economic infrastructure in northeastern Syria to the PYD in exchange for the PYD suppressing protests against the regime, steering clear of the revolution, and maintaining economic relations with the regime".⁹ Thus, even if ISIS is a much diminished force that no longer controls territory, the Kurds of the northeast and the Islamist in Idlib are both alternative centres of power, furthering domestic fragmentation.

2.2 Syria at the centre of regional competition

The fragmentation of Syria was as much the result of endogenous dynamics as it was of exogenous forces. Syria progressively became a hotbed for regional and international rivalries, with external powers supporting different sides in the conflict, worsening the Syrian conundrum. Iran¹⁰ and Hezbollah¹¹ have been the staunchest allies of the regime, and have fought in Assad's defence since the early stages of the war. Russia, which has been militarily involved since 2015, has been equally important for the regime's survival. Turkey and such Arab Gulf countries as Qatar,

⁸ Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader. Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 161-176.

⁹ Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen, "Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian Conflict", in *Clingendael CRU Reports*, April 2021, p. 22, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/the-yppgyd-during-the-syrian-conflict>.

¹⁰ Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Iran and the Syrian Civil War: To the Bitter End", in *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 113, (2020), p. 177-191, DOI 10.3917/come.113.0177.

¹¹ Murat Tinas and Özlem Tür, "Lebanon and the Syrian Civil War: Sectarian Perceptions and Positions", in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (29 December 2020), p. 321-338, DOI 10.1080/19448953.2020.1867803.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have backed the opposition – Turkey, in particular has over time become a gateway for multifaceted support, including recruitment, funding and weapons supply. The United States was supportive of the opposition initially, but since 2014 has mainly focused on combating ISIS through air support to the Kurdish SDF. The EU has also sided against the Syrian regime in light of its crackdown on dissent.

This complex picture of cross-rivalries and alliances did not come about immediately. Rather, it is the result of continuous adjustments made by foreign powers to the evolution of the war as well as to each other's action. When Assad responded with an iron fist to the protests, the initial international reaction was of widespread condemnation. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011, while the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime. Turkey aggressively pursued a policy of regime change in Damascus, opening its territory for the opposition to organise, both politically and militarily, and welcoming refugees escaping repression.¹² In 2012, the United State, France and Turkey sponsored the creation of a "Friends of Syria" group that involved a number of Western-aligned Arab countries as well as EU member states (and the EU itself).¹³ The goal was to give support to the Syrian National Coalition. As the regime fought back against the rebels, this attempt at peace-making through the exclusion of Assad was abandoned in favour a multilateral mediation endeavour under the aegis of the United Nations, called the Geneva process, which extended to China and Russia too. The Geneva process and a number of related activities became the main diplomatic venues in which the Syrian civil war was discussed, including with representatives from the warring factions.¹⁴ However, such initiatives did not produce appreciable results, as the Assad regime refused to make significant concessions.¹⁵

¹² Özlem Tür, "Turkey and the Syrian Crisis: Deepening Regional and Domestic Challenges", in *Orient*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2015), p. 23-28.

¹³ "Friends of Syria core group of countries" or "London 11": Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

¹⁴ Magnus Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, Strategies, and Obstacles, 2011–2016", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2016), p. 273-288, DOI 10.1080/13523260.2016.1192377.

¹⁵ Magnus Lundgren, *Mediation in Syria, 2016–19: A Tale of Two Processes*, 2 December 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3507785>.

President Assad could count on support from Iran and Hezbollah, who were quick to get involved in both advisory and military terms, while Russia provided it with political protection, especially by blocking (along with China) United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action against him.¹⁶ After the regime suffered a series of losses on the field, in September 2015 Russia opted for direct military intervention. Moscow's decision changed the course of the war, not just because it saved Assad but because it enabled the regime to gradually regain lost territories.¹⁷ The Battle for Aleppo in 2016, in which Russian air forces were deeply involved, became particularly important by increasing the extent of the regime's territorial control and turned the situation in favour of the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies, as well as Hezbollah and various militia cohorts.¹⁸ Opposition groups were pushed to the north, mainly to Idlib. When Assad announced a victory in Aleppo, it was a victory not only for the regime but also for Iran and Russia.

On the opposition side, an event of high symbolic value was the refusal by US President Barack Obama (2009–17), in summer 2013, to enforce a 'red-line' according to which the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would trigger a US military response.¹⁹ France and the United Kingdom, who had been ready to support a 'punitive operation' against Assad, bristled but backed down too. Adamantly opposed to direct intervention and sceptical that it could bring about regime change through supporting an increasingly fragmented and radicalised opposition, the Obama Administration gradually abandoned its policy of training and arming anti-Assad rebels. The government's resilience and the rise of ISIS contributed to shift the US and the EU focus on Syria towards the fight against terrorism. After ISIS established control over a large portion of Syrian and Iraqi territories in 2014, the US Administration rapidly put together a Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, composed of 83 members. Although the EU did not have a capacity of

¹⁶ Yasmine Nahlawi, "Overcoming Russian and Chinese Vetoes on Syria through Uniting for Peace", in *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring 2019), p. 111-143, DOI 10.1093/jcsl/kry032.

¹⁷ Alexander Winning and Christian Lowe, "Russia Warns Assad not to Snub Syria Ceasefire Plan", in *Reuters*, 18 February 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-idUKKCN0VR287>.

¹⁸ Moritz Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies", in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2019), p. 365-387, DOI 10.1080/09668136.2019.1575950.

¹⁹ Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited", in *Politico*, 19 July 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>.

its own to join the Coalition, member states took an active part in it. The role the EU member states played in the Coalition varied between leading the airstrikes against ISIS (France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark), giving air support (Italy, Germany, Poland) and providing training for local forces.²⁰ The US-led coalition had a natural interlocutor in the Iraqi government in the fight against ISIS in Iraq, but Syria presented a more complex picture. The United States was unwilling to rely on the Assad regime. Eventually, after the PYD/YPG's heroically defended the city of Kobane from ISIS in the winter 2014-15, the Obama Administration pulled its weight behind them, paving the way to the creation of the SDF (see above).²¹ Obama's successor Donald Trump (2017-21) downgraded but did not interrupt US support for the Kurds, which was again reinforced by Joe Biden after he became president in 2021.

The Kurds have proved formidable fighters against ISIS, eventually dislodging its forces from Raqqa and the adjacent areas. However, US reliance on them is highly problematic for Turkey, given the strong links between the PYD/YPG and the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is a designated terrorist organisation not just in Ankara but also in Washington and Brussels. Such are Turkey's concerns that it has conducted three military operations in the north of Syria, beginning in 2016. Turkey's aim has been to restrain the power and reach of the PYD/YPG and control portions of Syrian territory in the north, where it has created its own proxy, the Syrian National Army (SNA), centred in Idlib. Turkey has been negotiating with Assad the possibility of an additional operation and of establishing a 32-km-wide safe zone at its border.²²

Today, various foreign forces are still present in Syria. Russia has deployed military advisers, air and naval forces, as well as Kremlin-linked Wagner Group mercenaries in what Russian experts consider a strategic victory enabled by the deployment of a limited force, pioneered by a Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) contingent.²³ Iran is

²⁰ Patrick Mello, "Incentives and Constraints: A Configurational Account of European Involvement in the Anti-Daesh Coalition", in *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (April 2022), p. 226-244, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773921000333>.

²¹ Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen, *Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist*, cit.

²² Levent Tok and Selen Temizer, "32-km Wide Safe Zone to Be Formed in Northern Syria", in *Anadolu Agency*, 15 January 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1365790>.

²³ Ruslan Pukhov, "Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria", in *Defense News*, 11 December

also involved, directly through the Revolutionary Guards Quds Forces and through foreign militias under its control. Turkey has had boots on the ground since 2016. The United States has some remaining 900 troops stationed in the garrison at al-Tanf.²⁴ France is reported to have around 200 special forces in northeast Syria,²⁵ while the United Kingdom is also said to have some presence there.²⁶ Israel, although it has no presence in Syria, has been bombing Iran-related sites, weapons supply routes and forces for years.

The competition over Syria has prompted foreign actors to invest in negotiation initiatives. The most relevant by far is the so-called Astana process, launched in January 2017, which has brought actors supporting opposite sides in the civil war, namely Turkey, Iran and Russia, to the negotiating table. The Astana process has helped mitigate violence on the ground. However, by bypassing the United States and EU, it has eventually led to the consolidation of intra-Syrian fragmentation and increased geopolitical competition.²⁷ As part of the Astana process, for example, Turkey has been in control of the stronghold of the opposition, Idlib, which hosts about three million people that need Turkish protection from the Assad regime's reach. Turkey is also in charge of keeping the radical elements in Idlib on a leash.²⁸ But Idlib is fragmented, with many different fighting groups, the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham²⁹ being the strongest, and rapidly changing alliances and clashing interests. For example, in late 2022, Hayat captured the cities of Afrin and Azez, fighting against some elements of the Turkish-backed SNA.³⁰ Russia, unhappy

2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2017/12/11/moscow-based-think-tank-director-russias-unexpected-military-victory-in-syria>.

²⁴ Tess Bridgeman and Brianna Rosen, "Still at War: The United States in Syria", in *Just Security*, 29 April 2022, <https://wp.me/p5gGh3-l9v>.

²⁵ Robert Zaretsky, "France's Existential Loneliness in Syria", in *Foreign Policy*, 21 December 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/21/frances-existential-loneliness-in-syria>.

²⁶ "Britain's Secretive and Lethal Force in Syria" (video), in *BBC News*, 8 August 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-37013583>.

²⁷ Sinem Cengiz, "Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences", in *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 200-214, DOI 10.1177/2347798920901876.

²⁸ Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey's Mission Impossible in Sustaining Idlib's Unstable Equilibrium", in *GMF On Turkey*, No. 4 (April 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24543>.

²⁹ Hayat is considered a terrorist organisation by Russia, the United States, Turkey and the EU. See European Asylum Support Office, *Syria Security Situation. Country of Origin Information Report*, July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2847/851217>.

³⁰ Sirwan Kajjo, "Jihadist Group Takes Over Strategic Town in Northwest Syria", in *VOA News*, 13

with this advance, bombed the Afrin-Azez vicinity the next day. Then, some groups within the SNA allied themselves with Hayat and fought against some other groups in the SNA, asserting its influence in an area stretching from Afrin to el-Bab.³¹ It should also be noted that, although Iran and Russia seem to be on the same page regarding the survival of the Syrian regime, there is also an implicit yet strong rivalry between them. For instance, they hold different views of the composition of the Syrian Armed Forces (as well as their organisation and tactics) and compete over control of Syrian economic assets.³² The competition over the control of Syria's military, politics and economic resources seems set to endure even when the dust of the war settles, and the fragmentation of the Syrian state between allies and enemies is destined to continue.

2.3 The war in Ukraine and its implications for Syria

The war in Ukraine has considerably affected Syria. It has borne an impact on three areas in particular: humanitarian aid delivery to Syria, dynamics of escalation and de-escalation among major external players in Syria, and the prospect for regional and international normalisation of relations with the Assad regime.

In its February 2022 country brief, the World Food Program (WFP) pointed out that it had delivered general food assistance (GFA) to around 5.3 million people across all fourteen Syrian governorates.³³ “Of this, 27 percent was delivered through the cross-border operation from Turkey to areas of Idlib and western rural Aleppo governorates not accessible from inside Syria.”³⁴ More ominously, according to the same report, “12 million people, 55 percent of the total population of the country, are facing acute food insecurity, and 1.9 million people are at risk

October 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6788541.html>.

³¹ Guney Yilniz, “The Power Shift in North West Syria: Three Consequences of Hayat Tahrir al Sham’s (HTS) Seizure of Afrin”, in *Forbes*, 22 October 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/guneyyildiz/2022/10/22/the-power-shift-in-north-west-syria-three-consequences-of-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-hts-seizure-of-afrin>.

³² Nicole Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria”, in *CSIS Reports*, November 2021, <https://www.csis.org/node/63071>.

³³ World Food Programme (WFP), *WFP Syria Country Brief, February 2022*, 28 March 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3831915>.

³⁴ Ibid.

of sliding into food insecurity.”³⁵ These numbers underscore how alarming and grim the humanitarian situation was right before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The latter has made the picture even bleaker. For months, the delivery of grain to Syria from Ukraine, a major exporter of food to the Middle East, was impeded by Russia’s naval blockade in the Black Sea. Grain deliveries resumed only in July 2022 thanks to a deal brokered by the UN and Turkey, though the first shipments went to the Russia-allied Syrian regime rather than the opposition.³⁶ The humanitarian aid delivery has become hostage to the Russia-West confrontation, with Moscow not shying away from weaponising the subject. The last draft UNSC resolution for extending cross-border aid delivery to Syria was blocked by Moscow’s veto.³⁷ Russia eventually agreed to the extension of the resolution but only for six months,³⁸ as opposed to one year as initially envisaged.

To avoid presenting an image of weakness, Moscow has clung onto its role in Syria – arguably Russia’s presence there is a low-cost and high-benefit mission.³⁹ For now, deconfliction mechanisms between Russia and the United States and between Russia and Israel have remained unaffected, and Russia continues to engage with Turkey and Iran in the Astana process (in fact, without Moscow’s presence in Syria, the current diplomatic proximity with Turkey would have been unlikely).⁴⁰ However, there is now much uncertainty about the sustainability of Russia’s commitment in the face of its massive war effort in Ukraine, which is moreover being conducted under severe Western sanctions. Should Russia downsize its presence in Syria, Turkey and Iran would be scramble to fill this void. Ankara’s recent overtures towards Damascus reflect a concern about Syria’s future stability,⁴¹ but Israel is likely to increase its attacks on Iranian targets inside Syria, hence risking further

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jon Gambrell, “Satellite Images Show First Ship out of Ukraine in Syria”, in *AP News*, 17 August 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/ef9c1752c9d1010c221fcaf0a6764ca1>.

³⁷ “Russia Vetoes UN Resolution Extending Cross-Border Aid to Syria”, in *Al Jazeera*, 8 July 2022, <https://aje.io/6b5xmc>.

³⁸ UN News, *Syria: Security Council Extends Cross-Border Aid Delivery for Six Months*, 12 July 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/node/1122332>.

³⁹ Galip Dalay, “Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts”, in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 5 (August 2021), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP05>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ragıp Soylu, “Turkey-Syria Reconciliation: Ankara Wants to Play Host for Next Top Meeting”, in *Middle East Eye*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/275356>.

flare-ups between Israel, Iran and Hezbollah.

The war has brought the question of the normalisation of relations with the Assad regime on the agenda. Countries such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates had already taken steps in this direction before the war, potentially paving the way for the return of Syria to the Arab League.⁴² Full normalisation of relations has failed to materialise, however, not least because of the deterrent effect of the US Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act, which sanctions foreign companies involved in the development of Syria's energy resources and providing investment in reconstruction.⁴³ With the Ukraine war potentially altering Syria's internal and fragile balance of power, normalisation has acquired a new dimension, in that it could prevent escalation if indeed Russia is forced to leave Syria. With a nudge from Moscow, Turkey is taking steps to normalise relations with Damascus. The Turkish minister of defence and chief of intelligence met with their Syrian and Russian counterparts in Moscow on 28 December 2022⁴⁴ – the first such meeting since the start of the Syrian war, seemingly as part of a trilateral Ankara-Moscow-Damascus mechanism in the making.

This is the troubled context of EU foreign and security policy towards Syria, which we move on to illustrate below.

3. EU policies and mitigation strategies

The interplay between regional fragmentation and multipolar competition has been the main factor negatively affecting the ability of the EU and its member states to put up an adequate response to the main challenges emanating from Syria's civil war. In this section we look into how EU policy goals and tools in order to assess the extent to which the strategies and tools employed by the EU and its

⁴² "Syria Can Re-Enter Arab League If Certain Steps Are Met, Says Egypt's Foreign Minister", in *Middle East Eye*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/231986>.

⁴³ US Congress, *H.R.31 - Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019*, 3 June 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31>.

⁴⁴ "Turkish, Syrian Officials Meet in Moscow after Years-Long Chill", in *Reuters*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-syrian-officials-meet-moscow-after-years-long-chill-2022-12-28>.

member states have mitigated the effects of these constraints. EU policies have reflected a relatively loose consensus about Syria between EU member states, which have not always had a common perception of the war and its consequences for their own interests.

3.1 The heterogeneity of EU member states' policies

In the initial phase of the civil war in 2011, all member states agreed on condemning the regime's repression, economic sanctions and a call for Assad to leave office.⁴⁵ In March 2012, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark called for closing the EU delegation in Damascus, but Catherine Ashton, at the time High Representative for EU foreign and security, decided to keep it open as long as the security situation permitted (eventually the Delegation moved to Beirut, Amman and Brussels, with field visits to Damascus).⁴⁶ However, all EU member states but Romania and the Czech Republic ordered their diplomats out. Still in October 2015 the EU Council failed to agree on any policy course on Syria beyond sanctions against Assad. Intra-EU consensus extended only to general principles,⁴⁷ like the denunciation of crimes committed by Assad's regime and "its concern about the Russian attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and the risk of further military escalation".⁴⁸ It was only in April 2017 that the EU came out with a more concrete, though still pretty general, framework for action, the EU's Strategy for Syria, which includes six areas of intervention: (i) *ending the war* through a genuine political transition; (ii) promoting a meaningful and *inclusive transition* in Syria; (iii) saving lives by addressing the *humanitarian needs* of the most vulnerable Syrians; (iv) promoting *democracy, human rights and freedom of speech*; (v) promoting accountability for *war crimes*; (vi) supporting the *resilience* of the Syrian population and Syrian

⁴⁵ Erwin van Veen et al., "Band-aids, Not Bullets. EU Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars", in *Clingendael CRU Reports*, February 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/eu-relevance-in-the-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars>.

⁴⁶ Dimitris Bouris and Anis Nacrou, "The Ins and Outs of the EU's Shortcomings in Syria", cit.

⁴⁷ Cécile Ducourtieux, "L'Union européenne reste divisée sur l'intervention russe en Syrie", in *Le Monde*, 13 October 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2015/10/13/la-desunion-europeenne-face-a-la-turquie-la-syrie-et-la-russie_4788136_3218.html.

⁴⁸ European Council, *European Council meeting (15 October 2015) – Conclusions*, point 4, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21693/euco-conclusions-15102015.pdf>.

society.⁴⁹ The EU placed the first two dimensions of its strategy fairly within the requirements of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, adopted in December 2015, which demanded an end to attacks against civilians and set the parameters for a political transition in Syria.⁵⁰

As UNSCR 2254 has remained dead letter, the EU and its member states have stuck to their original position that they would not contribute to Syria's post-conflict reconstruction, normalise relations with the Assad regime and consider lifting sanctions until Assad commits to the road map included in the resolution. While this approach still serves as a benchmark, it is important to point out that the EU does not speak with one voice and, on the contrary, the Assad regime has spotted and tried to take advantage of differences in approach to the conflict among member states.

For the time being, the official position of the EU on normalisation remains unchanged, at least on paper. In March 2021, HR Josep Borrell confirmed that “[w]ithout credible progress and as long as the repression continues, targeted EU sanctions on leading members and entities of the [Syrian] regime [have been] renewed”.⁵¹ But in reality, conflicting interests exist among member states, which can be divided into two blocks. The first, led by France, Germany and the Netherlands, insists that the EU Strategy for Syria is still valid. The second, which includes Italy, Spain, Austria and the Czech Republic, supports what they deem a more pragmatic position, which assumes that, even “if Assad did not win, the EU has lost” (in the words of a Western diplomat).⁵² This means that the EU's strategy should adapt to this reality and EU member states revisit their non-dialogue policy with the Assad regime, if that can bring some benefits to ordinary Syrians (as the same Western diplomat put it: “if it is necessary to speak to a tyrant to help Syrian people why not”).⁵³

⁴⁹ Council of the European Union, *Syria: EU Response to the Crisis*, last reviewed 31 August 2022, <http://europa.eu/ljC96nD>.

⁵⁰ UN Security Council, *Resolution 2254 (2015)*, 18 December 2015, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/814715>.

⁵¹ Council of the European Union, *Syria: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the 10 Years of the Conflict*, 14 March 2021, <https://europa.eu/fM37kQ>.

⁵² Interview 5 with a Western diplomat in Beirut, October 2022.

⁵³ Ibid.

Another internal EU debate that has created divisions concerns humanitarian aid. In October 2015, HR Federica Mogherini opted for a downgrading of the EU's diplomatic ambition, as she qualified EU activities in Syria as "humanitarian diplomacy". Member states have avoided discussing this issue publicly, which would have highlighted their differences.⁵⁴ Yet, the issue has more political saliency than it seems at first sight. The EU's presence in Syria is, in a way, paradoxical: despite being the first contributor of humanitarian aid, the EU is not a political player. From 2015 onwards, the fear of a "refugee crisis", coupled with the initial successes of the Russian military intervention and the expectation that Assad would remain in power, pushed the EU to provide more humanitarian aid, and especially more assistance to neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees.⁵⁵ In so doing, according to Dimitris Bouris and Anis Nacrou, the EU ended up reducing its room for manoeuvre to the role of financial partner and provider of technical assistance to UN mediation initiatives.⁵⁶ Nothing proves this more than the 2016 deal struck with Turkey, under which the EU agreed to transfer significant funds to Turkey in return for a commitment to keep Syrian refugees from crossing into Europe.⁵⁷ The deal, adopted against the background of massive migration to Europe (especially Germany) in 2015 and widely criticised for neglecting the needs of millions of refugees,⁵⁸ gave Turkey much leverage on the EU.

3.2 EU policy tools: An overview

As Lorenzo Trombetta, a prominent expert on the Levant, writes, the Syrian war has arguably been the most difficult one faced by the EU, "for the unprecedented scope of the humanitarian catastrophe, its geographic proximity to the Union's borders, and the difficulties in deciphering a fluid and multi-dimensional conflict".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Interview 11 with a European diplomat, January 2023.

⁵⁵ Elise Daniaud and Yahia Hakoum, "The European Union in Syria: Too Complacent?", in *The Conversation*, 21 November 2022, <https://theconversation.com/the-european-union-in-syria-too-complacent-193988>.

⁵⁶ Dimitris Bouris and Anis Nacrou, "The Ins and Outs of the EU's Shortcomings in Syria", cit., p. 92.

⁵⁷ European Council, *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Uk83Xp>.

⁵⁸ For an analysis of the deal, see Kemal Kirişci, "As EU-Turkey Migration Agreement Reaches the Five-Year Mark, Add a Job Creation Element", in *Order from Chaos*, 17 March 2021, <https://wp.me/p7KzVY-600R>.

⁵⁹ Lorenzo Trombetta, "The EU and the Syrian Crisis as Viewed from the Middle East", in *The*

As recalled above, the immediate reaction of the EU was to call for Assad to leave office and to adopt sanctions, including an oil embargo, restrictions on investments, the freezing of assets of Syria's central bank held in the EU, and bans on weapons and sensitive technology transfers to Syria. The EU also targeted key officials within the Syrian regime with travel bans and assets freezes, expanding the list as years passed by.⁶⁰ These sanctions were last extended on 31 May 2022 and are to remain in place until 1 June 2023 (and arguably later too). Overall, 289 individuals and 70 entities are currently targeted by a travel ban and an asset freeze.⁶¹ Sanctions have reduced the Assad regime's revenues (especially from oil sales), but to no appreciable measure. They have certainly failed to bring about any change in the regime's conduct. As such, they remain a political signal and punitive measure, but no more.

As a supporter of the UN-led Geneva process, the EU has been calling for a political solution to the conflict since 2012.⁶² In December 2015 the EU welcomed UNSC 2254, which stated that

the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people [...], including through the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers.⁶³

The EU remains committed to supporting the UN-led Geneva process through the EU regional initiative on the future of Syria led by the High Representative of

International Spectator, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2014), p. 27-39 at p. 27, DOI 10.1080/03932729.2014.937134.

⁶⁰ Council of the European Union, *Syria: EU Adds Eight Businessmen and Two Entities to Sanctions List*, 17 February 2020, <https://europa.eu/!fW97rX>.

⁶¹ Council of the European Union, *Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/849 of 30 May 2022 Amending Decision 2013/255/CFSP Concerning Restrictive Measures against Syria*, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2022/849/oj>.

⁶² The EU fully endorsed the Joint Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria (as participants in the first Geneva conference were originally known), which set the "principles and guidelines for a political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people". See UN Security Council, *Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria*, 30 June 2012, point 4, <https://undocs.org/S/2012/522>.

⁶³ UN Security Council, *Resolution 2254 (2015)*, cit.

the EU.⁶⁴ However, Assad's resilience thanks to support from Russia and Iran, the perceived disengagement of the United States after the ISIS threat was reduced, the exclusion of the EU and United States from the most promising negotiation process (the Astana process), and the EU's prioritisation of the Ukraine war, have all progressively eroded the EU's ability to bring the warring factions to the negotiating table.

While the political and diplomatic role of the EU and its member states is limited, they have been more active on other fronts, such as migration management, humanitarian aid, the fight against ISIS and drug trafficking originating from Syria.

Migration

In 2014, the EU established an EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis (Madad Fund) with the aim of addressing the growing flow of refugees from Syria. The Madad Fund resulted from the merger of various EU financial instruments and contributions from member states into one single flexible mechanism in order to allow for quick disbursement of funds.⁶⁵ Most humanitarian assistance to Syria's neighbouring countries is channelled through this instrument. It primarily addresses the longer-term resilience needs of the Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, as well as the hosting communities and local authorities.⁶⁶ The fund not only aims to support the resilience of the migrant communities but also help the states that host the refugees.

While the financial assistance given to Jordan and Lebanon to support them host the refugee communities, mainly food and the provision of clean water, sanitation and health services, has been substantial,⁶⁷ the most significant assistance has been provided to Turkey in the context of the 2016 deal. The EU agreed to provide

⁶⁴ European External Action Service (EEAS), *The European Union and Syria*, 29 July 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/syria/european-union-and-syria_en.

⁶⁵ European Commission website: *EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis*, https://trustfund-syria-region.ec.europa.eu/index_en.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Patryk Pawlak, "Conflict in Syria. Trigger Factors and the EU Response", in *EPRS Briefings*, January 2016, p. 6, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2016\)573924](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2016)573924).

Turkey with 3 billion euro (and pledged another 3 billion for the following years). As discussed above, the deal reduced EU leverage because it gave Turkey the ability to control migration flows from Syria, but it achieved the desired result, which was that of stopping the flows of refugees into EU countries. Such flows had grown to considerable levels, in 2015-16, so much so that Hungary (supported by Poland and other Central and Eastern EU member states) closed its borders while Germany accepted to host up to one million refugees (not just from Syria though). The deal was thus meant not just to bring migration flows under control but also to mend the deep intra-EU rift. It continues to work to this day, in spite of the criticisms that it has resulted in a worsening of the situation for many Syrians.⁶⁸

More recently, some EU member states have determined that Syria is safe for the return of Syrian refugees. In August 2018, a delegation from the Polish government, headed by the deputy prime minister visited Damascus to discuss refugee return. Denmark has revoked the residence permits of some Syrians in 2021. This is not the official position of most EU states and institutions though (the European Parliament in March 2021 adopted a resolution rejecting the notion that Syria was a safe place).⁶⁹ The issue may soon become a hot topic again, as President Tayyip Recep Erdogan regards the presence of millions of Syrians in Turkey an issue that could damage his re-election prospects in 2023 and could therefore use the issue to put pressure on anxious EU countries.

Aid

The EU and its member states are the leading international aid donors to Syria. Since 2011, the EU has mobilised more than 27.4 billion euro to support Syria's internally displaced persons inside the country and refugees across the region.⁷⁰ According to the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), in government-controlled areas over three million people are internally displaced and 8.2 million need life-saving aid. In northwest Syria, 4.1 million people,

⁶⁸ Kyilah Terry, "The EU-Turkey Deal, Five Years On: A Frayed and Controversial but Enduring Blueprint", in *Migration Information Source*, 8 April 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/node/17035>.

⁶⁹ European Parliament, *Resolution on the Syrian Conflict – 10 Years after the Uprising*, 11 March 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0088_EN.html.

⁷⁰ European Commission website: *Syria Factsheet*, <https://europa.eu/!RXT863>.

including 2.7 million internally displaced, require urgent humanitarian assistance.⁷¹ Furthermore, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, at least 6.6 million Syrians have sought asylum, 5.5 million of whom are hosted in countries near Syria.⁷² ECHO has also shed light on the conditions of prisons in Syria, and has proposed that the EU agrees with the regime on an amnesty to increase the rate of prisoners' release and obtain more transparency about the situation of prisoners for their families.⁷³ So far, however, EU member states have not taken any action on this.

The EU also supports UN-led "Cross-border Humanitarian Reach and Activities" from Turkey. This special mechanism, valid until 10 July 2023, has to be renewed every six months (due to Russia's insistence, as the original plan was for an annual renewal).⁷⁴ As of January 2023, progress on crossline access continues, but it is not a substitute for cross-border operations. The latter are still relevant to help the six million people who need assistance in the northwest – 30 per cent more than in 2021 according to the United Nations.⁷⁵ No lasting solution to this issue can be found without the commitment of the Syrian regime, which hampers the arrival of aid as it imposes that the ministry of foreign affairs approves every field visit, and requests are often denied.⁷⁶ Another difficulty regarding humanitarian aid is the fact that local combatants are controlling key crossing points for trade and humanitarian aid.⁷⁷ This situation thus contributes directly to limiting European capacities by hampering access to the field, while regional fragmentation leads to an increase in the complexity and number of actors involved, within the proliferation of non-state actors.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² UNHCR website: *Syria Emergency*, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

⁷³ Interview 5 with a Western diplomat in Beirut, October 2022.

⁷⁴ UN Security Council, *Resolution 2642 (2022)*, 12 July 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3980717>.

⁷⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Today's Top News: Syria, Ethiopia*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/node/957843>.

⁷⁶ Laure Stephan, "En Syrie, l'aide humanitaire en terrain miné", in *Le Monde*, 10 June 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/06/10/en-syrie-l-aide-humanitaire-a-la-merci-des-puissances-politiques_6129744_3210.html.

⁷⁷ Samir Aita, "The Political Economy of Syria's Physical Fragmentation and Dependence", in *Syria Transition Challenges Project Discussion Papers*, No. 35 (August 2021), <https://www.gcsp.ch/node/1679>.

The situation in north-western Syria after the catastrophic earthquake of February 2023 dramatically demonstrates the issues that humanitarian aid providers face. UN secretary general, António Guterres, urged the Security Council to authorise the opening of new cross-border aid points between Turkey and Syria, but it is unclear whether that would overcome past objections. The Syrian government, while appealing the UN for aid, has nonetheless said that all assistance must be done in coordination with Damascus and delivered from within Syria, not across the Turkish border into rebel areas. This put EU member states in the spotlight because the Syrian regime is arguing that Western sanctions prevent help from reaching the affected areas.⁷⁸ Although the United States issued a six-month waiver on transactions destined to provide disaster relief to Syria,⁷⁹ the head of the EU delegation to Syria, Dan Stoenescu, argued that sanctions “do not impede the delivery of humanitarian aid”.⁸⁰

The fight against ISIS

The EU and some of its member states have played an active role in the fight against ISIS. Especially after the ISIS-directed terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, France has stepped up its security and military involvement in anti-terrorist operations in Syria.⁸¹ The EU’s Counter-Terrorism Agenda has been important in this context.⁸² In order to curb ISIS’s access to financial resources, the EU has contributed to disrupting and dismantling ISIS’s financing networks, depriving ISIS of its resources like oil sales or preventing the transfer of ransom money or money lent by private donors to ISIS.⁸³ Within this context, important elements of the EU’s contribution to counter ISIS have been provided by strengthening local

⁷⁸ Maya Gebeily, “EU’s Syria Envoy Says Bloc Is Not Shirking Earthquake Aid”, in *Reuters*, 12 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/eu-envoy-syria-absolutely-unfair-be-accused-shirking-earthquake-aid-2023-02-12>.

⁷⁹ Federica Marsi, “US Exempts Syrian Earthquake Aid from Sanctions”, in *Al Jazeera*, 10 February 2023. <https://aje.io/nqtb4>.

⁸⁰ Maya Gebeily, “EU’s Syria Envoy Says Bloc Is Not Shirking Earthquake Aid”, cit.

⁸¹ Michel Duclos, “Syria Seven Years Later - Lessons Learnt from France”, in *Institut Montaigne Analyses*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/node/5908>.

⁸² Council of the European Union, *The EU’s Response to Terrorism*, last reviewed 15 December 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism>.

⁸³ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), “Financing of the Terrorist Organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)”, in *FATF Reports*, February 2015, <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Financing-of-the-terrorist-organisation-ISIL.pdf>.

resilience to extremist recruitment through support in the areas of education, youth and preventing and countering terrorist propaganda.⁸⁴

The fight against drug trafficking

The fragmentation of Syria has created opportunities for smuggling and other illegal activities, for instance, the production of Captagon, a powerful amphetamine largely used by fighters in Syria, and other illicit substances like hashish. According to the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), a political risk consultancy, by 2022 Syria had become “the global epicentre of Captagon production” and “one of the world’s foremost narco-states”.⁸⁵ The EU is involved in the fight against this trafficking because it has serious consequences for European countries and is a huge source of income for the Syrian regime.⁸⁶ Drug trafficking also has a destabilising impact on neighbouring and regional states. For example, in July 2020, Italian officials announced the seizure of 84 million tablets of Captagon, valued at 1.1 billion dollars, aboard three cargo ships from Syria. The Assad regime has been using Captagon and other drug trafficking to raise money.⁸⁷ Drug trafficking is indeed a very important revenue for the regime, especially for Maher al-Assad, probably the most senior security official in Syria and the second most powerful man in the regime after his brother Bashar.⁸⁸

The results of EU policies

What to make of EU efforts? The EU has been relatively effective in reducing migration flows into its territory – which however has done little to impact the course of the war – and mitigating the humanitarian fallout of the Syrian crisis

⁸⁴ For more details see Global Coalition, *The EU – Countering Daesh*, 21 September 2016, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/the-eu-countering-daesh>.

⁸⁵ COAR Global, *The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State*, April 2021, p. 3-4, <https://coar-global.org/?p=52891>; Michel Duclos, “Understanding Syria’s Enduring Crisis”, in *Institut Montaigne Analyses*, 16 December 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/node/10185>.

⁸⁶ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), “Captagon: Understanding Today’s Illicit Market”, in *EMCDDA Papers*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2810/855785>.

⁸⁷ COAR Global, *The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State*, cit.

⁸⁸ Maher al-Asad is Bashar’s youngest brother commander of the Republican Guard and the army’s elite Fourth Armoured Division.

through considerable humanitarian aid. On migration, the EU's main goal has been that of preventing Syrians from reaching its territories after the massive flows of 2015–16. Yet, recent data shows that a significant number of Syrians are making new attempts to reach Europe rather than going back home. In 2022, the number doubled in comparison with the previous year, representing a challenge for European countries already dealing with an unprecedented surge in arrivals of asylum seekers from Ukraine.⁸⁹ Especially if Turkey is no longer willing or able to comply with the 2016 deal, migration management would again be a major issue in the EU's Syrian policy.

The 2016 migration deal has invariably cast a shadow on the EU's image amongst Syrian refugees in Greek and Turkish camps (and beyond), who feel they have been abandoned. It is not surprising that most Syrians are not aware of the EU's contribution to aid efforts and thinks that the UN is much more involved.⁹⁰ In fact, the only perception of the EU is linked with sanctions.

The impact of such sanctions is mixed at best. Most have been calibrated to target individuals involved in the repression of citizens and avoid weighing on the population as a whole, yet the reduction of income for the government from oil sales has inevitably had an effect on civilians too.⁹¹ Targeted sanctions have prevented officials in the Syrian regime from accessing the international financial system and from travelling into the EU. They have also led them to resort to illegal activities (i.e. money laundering, corruption, expropriation and smuggling activities), which remain an important source of funding for the regime.⁹² Some observers consider that the sanctions targeting state institutions and financial transactions are deepening the country's fragmentation, encouraging unofficial rent- and power-seeking mechanisms⁹³ or will severely cripple the economy in

⁸⁹ Kelly Petillo, "From Aid to Inclusion: A Better Way to Help Syrian Refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, January 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=101190>.

⁹⁰ Interview 5 with a Western diplomat in Beirut, October 2022.

⁹¹ Council of the European Union, *Syria: Council Extends Sanctions Against the Regime for Another Year*, 31 May 2022, <https://europa.eu/!QcPQ7v>.

⁹² Zaki Mehchy and Rim Turkmani, *Understanding the Impact of Sanctions on the Political Dynamics in Syria*, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, January 2021, <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108412>.

⁹³ Wael Alalwani and Karam Shaar, "A Comprehensive Review of the Effectiveness of US and EU Sanctions on Syria", in *MEI Policy Papers*, No. 2021-28 (August 2021), <https://www.mei.edu/>

the long term without redress.⁹⁴ In short, the EU has little political leverage and still continues to ask for a political process without being able to constraint the different parties to negotiate.

Policy recommendations

In this section, we provide a few recommendations about how the EU and its member states can mitigate the effects of the interplay between Syria's fragmentation and multipolar competition, while also reducing internal divisions inside the EU, to improve the effectiveness of their Syria policy.

The EU and its member states should *engage with local and external actors* more and more boldly than it does today. They should reach out to most forces in a fragmented territory and their respective backers like Turkey as well as Iran and Russia. Clearly, the circumstance to open a dialogue with Moscow and Tehran over Syria could not be worse, given Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Iran's decision to provide drones and potentially other weapons systems. EU relations with Iran are further complicated by the impasse on the nuclear issue and the brutal crackdown on Iranians demanding greater freedoms and an end to clerical rule.⁹⁵ Yet, EU countries should consider compartmentalising their grievances with Moscow and Tehran if they aim for Syria's eventual pacification. They can do so more easily if they coordinate with Turkey, which could channel their desiderata into the Astana process. The outreach to Iran and Russia is necessary if the EU wants to have any influence over the Assad regime while remaining committed to the policy of non-normalisation. Meanwhile, EUFSP actors should invest time and energy into devising ways in which the Syrian opposition's "proxiness" can be lessened. One way of doing this might be once again through high-level engagements. The EU states should be ready to provide more support to the Kurds and explore ways to engage the rebels in Idlib who do not share the views of radical groups like Hayat

node/83178.

⁹⁴ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "To End a War: Europe's Role in Bringing Peace to Syria", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, September 2017, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=3873>.

⁹⁵ Henry Foy, Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Andrew England, "EU to Consider Listing Iran's Revolutionary Guards as Terrorists", in *Financial Times*, 29 January 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/49545fc1-e318-43c9-9bfd-142a4c3b65e4>.

Tahrir al-Sham.

To avoid further aggravation of the humanitarian situation in this war-ravaged country, it is important that the EU, the United States, Turkey and Russia *insulate humanitarian cooperation in Syria from the war in Ukraine*. Moscow can still weaponise each extension of the UN aid delivery to Syria, even potentially vetoing it depending on the state of its relations with the West. In light of such an eventuality, the EU, the United States and Turkey should explore alternative options for aid delivery to Syria through limited multilateral cooperation. They can potentially deliver aid through Turkey-controlled areas in the northwest or the Kurdish-controlled one in the northeast (given that the United States, France and the United Kingdom still have a presence there).⁹⁶ In particular, as the regime needs humanitarian aid to fill in the gaps left by its failing government institutions, the EU could use its economic power as a financing actor for NGOs and UN agencies to negotiate with the regime an easier access to the field.

The *UN-led Syrian reconciliation process*, especially the work on a new constitutional arrangement, is another issue to which the EU could contribute in order to mitigate regional fragmentation, notably by involving all parties concerned. Until now, the work of the UN-facilitated constitutional committee's performance has been poor, to say the least. The process was postponed in summer 2022 following the government of Syria's refusal to send its delegation until the fulfilment of Russia's request to relocate the venue for the meetings from Geneva⁹⁷ (Moscow considers that the Swiss authorities have lost their neutral status by supporting EU sanctions against Russia).⁹⁸

The EU must also take into consideration that Syria is a narco-state and has become the global epicentre of Captagon production. *Fighting Captagon trafficking* is crucial because Europe is one of the three main destinations for the drug after North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.⁹⁹ The Assad regime delegates the

⁹⁶ Interview 7 with a Franco-Syrian researcher, Paris, October 2022.

⁹⁷ Diana Rahima, "Russia Makes Geneva a Wedge in the Syrian Constitutional Committee's Talks", in *Enab Baladi*, 16 August 2022, <https://wp.me/p7cv3Y-ikk>.

⁹⁸ COAR Global, "UN Procurement Statistics for 2021 Show Systemic Inertia", in *Syria Update*, Vol. 5, No. 26 (25 July 2022), <https://coar-global.org/?p=59115>.

⁹⁹ COAR Global, *The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State*, cit.

management of certain areas to local mafia-like groups against payment – this is the case in Aleppo and Deraa for example. Indeed, since the army ranks have shrunk extensively due to the war, the regime has to rely on militias and mafias. The EU, for example, could enhance Jordan's capabilities to control its borders in order to limit trafficking.

EU member states should refrain from taking unilateral steps on Syrian refugee policies.¹⁰⁰ Instead, they should stick to the common policy based on the principles of safe and voluntary return they shared until Denmark changed course.¹⁰¹ The EU should elaborate mechanisms to deal with the Syrian refugees within member states as an alternative to Turkey keeping them on its territory.


Reconstruction cannot be a priority for the EU today. Unless the EU has a unified policy or benchmark on the normalisation issue, it is likely to be dragged by the developments on the ground in Syria and other states' policies rather than pursuing its own. But the hypothetical prospect of a lessened Russian presence in Syria may change the picture and the EU should engage in an internal dialogue, as well as with the United States and Turkey, on how to build leverage (and contain Iran's influence) in case Russia indeed leaves Syria. The promise of economic investment is definitely an option.

The Union's strong involvement in the humanitarian field does give it some leverage to require gesture from the Damascus regime, for instance a partial amnesty to detainees. Europeans can also increase support for accountability mechanisms to be waged against the regime's reticence to provide an amnesty.¹⁰² Indeed, if the negotiation between the regime and the opposition ever moves further than the Geneva process has allowed for until now, a compromise will have to be reached between legal proceedings and an amnesty for the perpetrators of

¹⁰⁰ Kelly Petillo, "Stuck in Limbo: How Europe Can Protect Syrian Refugees", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 20 January 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=84589>.

¹⁰¹ Eleanor Sly, "Denmark to Send Almost 100 Syrian Refugees Home as Damascus is 'Safe'", in *Independent*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/denmark-syrian-refugees-residency-permits-b1811466.html>.

¹⁰² Emma Broches, "Accountability for the Syrian Regime: An Overview", in *Lawfare Blog*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/16721>. See also Anwar Al-Bunni, *A Dictatorial Regime and its Continuing Crimes*, Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, 5 December 2022, <https://sl-center.org/language/en/archives/2860>.



serious crimes. Furthermore, it is probable that the perpetrators of crimes among the opponents to the regime will be interested in an amnesty and ready to accept that the criminals of the regime are spared so that they are too.

Conclusions

How to make the EUFSP more joined-up, sustainable and effective in Syria? The EU appears to have only little room for manoeuvre since it has been politically marginalised, with the management of the situation in Syria having been *de facto* deferred to Russia, Iran and Turkey, albeit the United States retains some influence in the north-east of the country. It is only through negotiations with those external powers that support Syria's warring parties that the country's fragmentation can be reduced. That would mean de-emphasising the geopolitical contest surrounding Syria and re-establishing a degree of regional governance. While Russia's war against Ukraine and the deterioration of the EU's relations with Iran have rendered this proposition politically impractical, the EU and its member states should nonetheless be prepared to contemplate some form of dialogue in the near future. Otherwise, they will remain passive providers of humanitarian aid with little to no leverage on political processes and vulnerable to the security spill-overs from the unsolved conflict. Of course, the context is currently in a deadlock but that should not prevent the EU from maintaining a firm position on this issue while indicating to the regime's allies that a door remains ajar for a possible compromise within the framework of a credible negotiation. This, however, requires a clear and unified policy from all the member states.

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Interviews conducted as part of this report (anonymised)

Interview 1 – Academic and advisor to the Turkish military, who is a frequent visitor to North Syria, September 2022

Interview 2 – two-hour online meeting/interview with 12 scholars affiliated with the Center for Syrian Studies at St. Andrews, chaired by Raymond Hinnebusch who directed the meeting, September 2022

Interview 3 – Syrian researcher, Paris, September 2022

Interview 4 – French researcher, Paris, September 2022

Interview 5 – Western diplomat, Paris and Beirut, October 2022

Interview 6 – Italian diplomat, October 2022

Interview 7 – Franco-Syrian researcher, Paris, October 2022

Interview 8 – Swiss researcher, Paris, December 2022

Interview 9 – French diplomat, Paris, November 2022

Interview 10 – Former French and European diplomat, November 2022

Interview 11 – European diplomat, January 2023



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