



## THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: ENTHUSIASTIC OR RELUCTANT PARTY?

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### Abstract

*The Syrian conflict continues to have devastating and terrifying effects upon not only its people but also the wider region, through the flows of migrants, the intensifying of political and sectarian issues, growing foreign interference and the proliferation of terrorism. These serious instabilities coupled with the close proximity of the Middle East to Europe, justified Europe's fears of the region posing a significant threat to the security of European continent. Yet, the European Union, a growing power center in a world with increasingly multipolar characteristics, has found itself failing to adopt a proactive policy towards the crisis, owing to the lack of consensus among its member states. However, the objective to enable the EU to speak with a single voice on the global stage is far from being fulfilled. The domestic response in member states is an important factor in their respective positions on the crisis. This disunity resulted in a complete lack of influence from European states, collectively or individually, on the consequences of events in the Syrian conflict. This lack of influence will be further affected, as the United Kingdom ends its relationship with the EU, and major powers such as Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime seek to exploit the situation.*

**Keywords:** European Union, Syrian conflict, Common Foreign & Security Policy, Humanitarians Assistance, Middle East

The outbreak of pro-democracy protests in Tunisia in January 2011 developed into a wave of Arab popular uprisings that shook the Arab

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world, moving its way from the Maghreb to the Levant by March of the same year. The civilians of the town of Dara'a near the Jordanian border, took to the streets in protest against the torture inflicted by the Syrian regime on a number of local students who had been responsible for painting anti-government graffiti. The demands of the protesters evolved from the simple release of the students into broad, Syria-wide reforms, such as the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, introduction of multi-party democracy, instituting equal rights for the Kurds, and broader, more basic, human rights and political freedoms such as the freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly. By April the regime under al-Assad had reacted to these demands and formally repealed the 1963 emergency powers law that had granted the government sweeping powers to suspend constitutional rights. Yet, just as it seemed Syria would be yet another Arab state to give into the demands of demonstrators, the Syrian government launched a series of brutal crackdowns on protests.<sup>1</sup> These actions of the Syrian government led to unrest throughout the country culminated into a civil war. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights<sup>2</sup> by March 2018, seven years after the start of the conflict, documented the deaths of 353,900 people, of which 106,000 were civilians. The civil war had resulted in about 1.5 million casualties of war with permanent disabilities, including within that number 86,000 who had lost limbs as a consequence of the conflict with a further 6.1 million Syrians fleeing the violence and danger, becoming internally displaced, whereas another 5.6 million had fled Syria for safety abroad to adjacent states and further afield to Europe and elsewhere. In just a matter of three months, from January to March 2019, an estimated 7,770 civilians were killed in Syria as a result of the ongoing conflict.<sup>3</sup>

For Europe, the Syrian conflict cannot be viewed or understood as events in a far-off Middle East. The geographic proximity of the Arab world to Europe has led it to be traditionally viewed as close to the "backyard" of Europe, separated by sea and deserts but still close to major European centres of population. It is because of this geographic proximity that Europe is

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<sup>1</sup> 'Libguides: Arab Spring: A Research & Study Guide' (Guides.library.cornell.edu, 2019) <http://guides.library.cornell.edu/c.php?g=31688&p=200753>, accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>2</sup> A UK-based monitoring group with a network of sources on the ground.

<sup>3</sup> 'Syria - European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - European Commission' (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - European Commission, 2019) [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria_en) accessed 15 October 2019.

consequently affected by what are ostensibly localised disturbances within the wider Middle East region. The Mediterranean may be Europe's "backyard," and conflicts close to that "backyard" can result in more direct effects upon Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Syria signed a Cooperation Agreement, which governed its trading relationship with the European Union in 1977, beginning the formal relationship between the two. Syria would also become a part of the EU's Union for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Process, the European Neighbourhood Policy and was in the process of completing the EU-Syria Association Agreement when the Syrian Civil War broke out.<sup>5</sup>

### **EU's Political Stance on the Syrian Crisis**

On 22 March 2011, the EU foreign policy High Representative (HR), in a statement expressed the EU's 'profound concern' at the developing situation in Syria, and noted that the EU 'strongly condemned the violent repression, including through the use of live ammunition, of peaceful protests'.<sup>6</sup>

In a month's time and with no improvement in the behaviour of the Syrian regime, along with calls from the then US President Barack Obama, the EU also called for President al-Assad to 'step aside,' HR Ashton stated in a press release:

"The EU has repeatedly emphasized that the brutal repression must be stopped, detained protesters released, free access by international humanitarian and human rights organizations and media allowed, and a genuine and inclusive national dialogue launched. The Syrian leadership, however, has remained defiant to calls from the EU as well as the broad international community including Syria's own neighbours. This shows that the Syrian regime is unwilling to change. The President's promises of reform have lost all

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<sup>4</sup> Kenan Dagci, "The EU's Middle East Policy and Its Implications to the Region", *Alternative* 6, nos. 1&2 (2007), at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.529.8666&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European\\_Union\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European_Union_relations).

<sup>6</sup> See at [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising).

credibility as reforms cannot succeed under permanent repression. The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside.”<sup>7</sup>

The same stance was also reflected by other EU's institutions. The EU Parliament in September 2011 demanded an immediate halt to government crackdowns, for the Syrian regime and Assad to immediately relinquish power and for the establishment of a transparent investigation into all alleged human rights abuses. MEPs further urged Russia and China to condemn the lethal use of force by the regime and to impose sanctions. In the next month, the EU Parliament took the step to support the Syrian democratic opposition forces through a resolution. Clearly establishing the EU's stance on the legitimacy of the Syrian regime - there was none in their view.<sup>8</sup>

The European Council, the body responsible for defining the EU's overall political direction and priorities clarified the EU's position that the Syrian people themselves had a right to decide the future of their country without the fear of repression in October 2011. High Representative of the Union Catherine Ashton also indicated that if the Syrian regime continued with its programme of repression, the EU would be forced to apply further and more comprehensive measures against the Syrian regime,<sup>9</sup> and her statement on the 1st of February 2012 called on the UN to take strong action against the Syrian regime.<sup>10</sup>

Following the EU-US declarations, the EU stressed Al-Assad to step down from Syria's Presidency had been reiterated by the Arab League with the Kofi Annan six-point peace plans submitted on March 16, 2012, to the UN Security Council.<sup>11</sup>

The six-point plan called for a Syrian-led political process to transfer political power, a UN supervised ending of the armed conflict in Syria in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/timeline-of-international-response-to-syria-26.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Available at [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising).

order to stabilize the situation, effective coordination of humanitarian assistance, the release of arbitrarily detained persons to be sped up, freedom of movement for journalists to be ensured, and for the regime to respect the right to peacefully demonstrate as well as of freedom of association.<sup>12</sup>

The European Union's policy settled in its response package JOIN (2013) 22 stated that its aim was to bring together the EU and its Member States' policies regarding the issue of justice in order to "contain and resolve the Syrian crisis (and) to promote access to justice and accountability". The response package engaged "multilateral fora in order to ensure the ongoing and systematic violations of human rights, international humanitarian law and fundamental freedoms." The EU played a "leading role" in dealing with the crisis and was a key driver behind the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) decision to form a UN Independent Commission of Inquiry. The response package went on to state that the EU "should ensure that its concerns regarding the widespread violations of human rights are addressed as an integral part of the process to bring an end to the conflict." Additionally, the EU's position was to remain that, "if concerns about war crimes and crimes against humanity are not adequately addressed on a national level, the International Criminal Court should deal with the situation."<sup>13</sup>

The points in the RP were again addressed in the EU's strategy for Syria in April 2017, with the EU reiterating its demand for effective accountability for war crimes committed in the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> In the third Brussels conference, the EU emphasized again the importance of justice and accountability for a sustainable peace to take hold and suggested that the

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<sup>12</sup> Carl P Turner, *The Syrian War: A Conflict Analysis and Resolution Perspective: Identifying incompatibilities and the prospects for mediation and negotiation*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2018, Conflict Analysis and Resolution Information Services, see at <https://turnerconflict.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/caris-report-on-the-syrian-war-2018.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, *The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict*, February 2016, available at [https://www.fes-europe.eu/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz\\_2016/FES\\_LSE\\_Syria\\_Turkmani\\_Haid\\_2016\\_02\\_23.pdf](https://www.fes-europe.eu/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz_2016/FES_LSE_Syria_Turkmani_Haid_2016_02_23.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Syria: Council response to the crisis, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/>.

war crimes committed in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court.<sup>15</sup>

With regards to ISIL/Da'esh, the European Council on October 2014 calculated the growing proliferation of ISIL and other radical groups in Syria as a significant threat to the security and integrity of the wider Middle East region and the world at large. The EU's High Representative presented a detailed strategy for the EU to adopt with regards to Syria, Iraq and the ISIL threats. On 16 March, 2015, the Council of the European Union provided further furnishing of the EU's role in dealing with the ISIL the crisis in Syria, entitled "Elements for an EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat".<sup>16</sup> The strategy aimed to:

- Support the efforts of the international Coalition in countering the threat of ISIL.
- Decrease the supply of foreign fighters, monetary funds and weaponry into ISIL.
- Prevent further ISIL regional spill-overs and improve border security of neighbouring states.
- Provide desperately needed humanitarian aid and international protection to those negatively affected by ISIL.<sup>17</sup>

The European Council in its meeting held on December 15, 2016, repeated the EU's demand for the Syrian regime to cease hostilities in Syria immediately and committed the EU to working constructively with all partners, under the auspices of the UN, towards a political transition as agreed upon in the UNSC Resolution 2254, emphasizing the need to ensure accountability for war crimes.<sup>18</sup>

In an April 3, 2017, the EU Council meeting adopted many decisions, agreed on the need to develop a specific strategic framework for its approach to

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<sup>15</sup> Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/03/14/brussels-iii-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>.

<sup>16</sup> One year after: the impact of the EU Regional Strategy for Syria, Iraq and against Da'esh, see at <https://www.voltairenet.org/article192089.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Syria: Council response to the crisis,

<sup>18</sup> European Council, Brussels, 15 December 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21929/15-euco-conclusions-final.pdf>.

Syria. It endorsed the objectives which framed clear lines of action on all the dimensions of the crisis, stated below. The EU's aims with regards to Syria were summarized into the following six primary areas: <sup>19</sup>

- Instituting a genuine Syrian-led political transition ending the Syrian Civil War.
- Encouraging meaningful transition in Syria to be inclusive and non-sectarian.
- Fulfilling the humanitarian needs.
- Promoting the principles of democracy, human rights and freedom of speech.
- Promoting accountability for war crimes committed against the Syrian people.
- Supporting the resilience of the Syrian population and society.<sup>20</sup>

#### **EU's engagements with other international partners in Syrian peace process**

With regards to the political process, the EU has mostly taking a backseat role, despite the fact that together with individual member states it has engaged in, and supported the political process under the auspices of the UN.<sup>21</sup> Federica Mogherini, UNSC High Representative/Vice-President in March 2019 stated categorically the EU's stance on the Syrian conflict; consider it sustainable solution from a UN-led process and from the implementation of the UNSCR 2254,<sup>22</sup> a "road map for a peace process in Syria, setting a timetable" for talks between the major warring parties, with responsibility for the Crisis placed on all sides so as to avoid either side outright refusing to enter into negotiations.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 3530th Council meeting, Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg, 3 April 2017 <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/almdel/upn/bilag/201/1740711.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Syria: Council response to the crisis, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/>

<sup>21</sup> European Parliament Briefing January 2016, Conflict in Syria, Trigger factors and the EU response [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/573924/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)573924\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/573924/EPRS_BRI(2016)573924_EN.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the United Nations' Security Council, New York, 12/03/2019, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/59506/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-united-nations%E2%80%99-security-council\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/59506/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-united-nations%E2%80%99-security-council_en).

<sup>23</sup> N. Mozes, UN Security Council Resolution 2254 On Syria: International Community Softens Its Position on Assad Regime <https://www.memri.org/reports/un-security-council-resolution-2254-syria-international-community-softens-its-position-assad>.

The UNSC's first consideration of the unfolding events in Syria took place during an unrelated meeting on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in April 2011. The United States, and EU member states, Britain, France, and Germany expressed their serious reservations and concern regarding the level of force being used by the Syrian regime against the demonstrators, while Russia considered this response an unacceptable external interference in the internal matters of Syria. The UNSC held its first session focused entirely on Syria within a few days of this previous meeting which featured South Africa, Brazil as well as other states, joining the growing number of countries condemning the actions of the regime and encouraging a speedy conclusion to the violence. They were joined by Russia, China and India who expressed their concern at the development of events in Syria. Regardless, Russia reasserted that the developing situation in Syria did not constitute any major threat to the peace and security of the international community.<sup>24</sup>

In May 2011, a draft resolution sponsored by major EU member states (the UK, France and Germany) was introduced to the Security Council denouncing the regime's crackdown of the demonstrators and called on the government to immediately cease exercising force against civilians and stressed the need for accountability. Additionally, draft resolution called upon UN member states to prevent the supply of arms and military-related material to Syria. The draft resolution rejected by the Chinese and Russians, who threatened to veto the draft. Other states including Brazil and India expressed their objections. A common concern of the delegations was that such a resolution could form the basis for an actual military intervention and subsequent regime change in Syria, as had been the case previously in Libya.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of these developments, two opposing draft resolutions came under consideration in the UNSC, one drafted by the UK and the other by

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<sup>24</sup> France and the UK the members of the EU, holds the Security Council's permanent seats, alongside the US, Russia, China. Germany was elected this year as a non-permanent member for 2019-2021. Permanent members have veto power while non-members do not. As a bloc, the EU currently has permanent observer status without voting rights at the UN. Saira Mohamed, *The U.N. Security Council and the Crisis in Syria*, *Insights* 16, Issue: 11, March 26, 2012, The American Society of International Law, <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/16/issue/11/un-security-council-and-crisis-syria>.

<sup>25</sup> Jess Gifkins, *The UN Security Council Divided: Syria in Crisis*, University of Queensland, see at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42412732.pdf>.



Russia. The later draft included certain measures such as an asset freeze on key Syrian government officials and an arms embargo that were absent from the latter. This discrepancy between the two drafts led to the UK draft removing their more contentious points in order to make the resolution more receptive. The Chinese and Russian delegations, included a condemnation of violence exercised by state-organs against civilians, as well as a threat of sanctions. The Russian draft on the other hand merely required the regime to implement the protesters-demanded reforms they had themselves agreed to implement.

With the Russian draft lacking significant support and the UK draft vetoed, the UN Security Council was divided led to a deadlock. The Arab League had been quick to respond. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership of the organization stressed Assad resignation, plus demanded power transfer to the al-Assad's deputy while a new coalition government to be formed within two months and need parliamentary and presidential elections be held after a further three months. These demands were immediately and, in their entirety, rejected by al-Assad. Failing to pressure the regime into compliance the Arab League requested the UNSC to endorse its plan.

The joint vetoes of both Russia and China faced severe backlash from Western states. The US ambassador expressed his "disgust" by the vetoes, the UK "appalled by the decision of Russia and China to veto", a break from tradition for the British with the ambassador additionally saying that Russia and China had "failed in their responsibility as permanent members of the Security Council." <sup>26</sup>France went ahead in declaring that "history will prove [Russia and China] wrong, and it will judge them." <sup>27</sup>Even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that the vetoes will have emboldened the Syrian regime and will lead to an escalation in the violence.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the growing division and lack of unity in the UNSC, the UNSCs permanent members had unanimously adopted Resolution 2059 which

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Russia and China veto of Syria sanctions condemned as 'indefensible', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/19/russia-china-syria-sanction-veto>.

<sup>28</sup> Jess Gifkins, The UN Security Council Divided: Syria in Crisis.

renewed the period of the mandate of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria on 20 July 2012.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike the UNSC, the UN Human Rights Council responded rapidly in Syria, passed a resolution in April 2011 calling for an investigation into the human rights abuses and war crimes in Syria “with a view to avoiding impunity and ensuring full accountability”. The subsequent Commission of Inquiry on Syria was established for the fulfilment of this aim. Its initial reports required the Syrian regime to properly address war criminals and abuses. However, by its fourth report, the Commission recognised the inaction of the regime with regards to its reports and stated that it was “incumbent upon the Security Council, influential Member States and regional organisations to act urgently to ensure accountability”, shifting focus and impetus of action from the Syrian government to the Security Council and the wider international community. The report recommended that the UNSC “take appropriate action... by means of referral to justice, possibly to the International Criminal Court.”<sup>30</sup>

In June 2012, Switzerland led the process by drafting a letter to the UNSC requesting a referral, noting that the credibility of the UN would be called into question should it resolve to stay unresponsive to the crimes in Syria. The letter, signed by a total of 57 states, argued that “without accountability... there will be no sustainable peace in Syria” and that even the threat to refer Syria to the ICC due to the absence of any credible process within Syria to hold those responsible accountable, the threat “would have an important dissuasive effect.”<sup>31</sup>

The letter had been signed by all EU member states barring Sweden. Sweden was of the opinion that the referral itself would pose a significant hindrance in future negotiations with the Syrian regime concerning a political settlement to the dispute.<sup>32</sup> However, the chemical attacks carried out by the regime in August 2013 raised the point that by ignoring ensuring accountability for war crimes committed early in the civil war, it has now

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<sup>29</sup> Keesing’s Record of World Events vol 58, no7/8 August 2012, 52177.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Dworkin, Dilemmas of justice, accountability and peace in Syria, <https://www.ecfr.eu/iip/case/syria>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

led to the Syrian regime more confidently attacking their own population with an increase in atrocities, and conflict within the country.<sup>33</sup>

The UNSC resolution 2254 (2015) became the long-sought after foundation for negotiations with the regime in Syria and served as a framework for political transition. The resolution outlined the UN's backing of a Syrian-led political process that "establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution" within six months. Its other recommendations were that "free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months" under the supervision of the UN.<sup>34</sup> However, there were still significant divisions within the UNSC over the role, if any, of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Additionally, the resolution failed due to the differing views within the permanent members of the UNSC. Actions against groups considered terrorist organisations including Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front, were not deemed violations of the cease fire, allowing Russian and the US-led coalitions air-strikes against the "Islamic State"/Daesh to continue.<sup>35</sup>

The resolution had effectively adopted the stance of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), providing the Vienna statement international legal backing but had significant differences, a key one being that the resolution placed responsibility for the crisis on all sides whereas the Geneva communiqué had singled out the regime.<sup>36</sup>

### **Geneva Peace Talks on Syria**

The EU had also participated in UN-sponsored talks on the future of Syria in Geneva that had presented a potential for a more long-lasting settlement.<sup>37</sup> The Geneva Conferences on Syria were a UN-backed international peace conferences on the future of Syria<sup>38</sup>. Following the failure of the UN

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<sup>33</sup> Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict.

<sup>34</sup> Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/syria-diplomatic-talks-timeline-170915083153934.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Syria war: UN Security Council unanimously backs peace plan, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35138011>.

<sup>36</sup> Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) see at [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/fresh-round-of-geneva-peace-talks-on-syria-are-there-any-reasons-for-hope>.

<sup>38</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva\\_II\\_Conference\\_on\\_Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_II_Conference_on_Syria).

Supervision Mission in Syria, special envoy Kofi Annan sought to establish a United Nations “Action Group on Syria”, and to form a multilateral forum in order to “agree on guidelines and principles for a Syrian-led political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people”. In June 2012 in Geneva conference was attended by the five permanent members of the UNSC as well as officials from Qatar, Turkey, Kuwait, Iraq and a representative from the EU, but none from Iran - a key player in the Syrian crisis.<sup>39</sup> The conference paved the way for a political settlement, calling for the establishment of a power-sharing regime that would, surprisingly, include both members of the government and the resistance.<sup>40</sup>

The Syrian Civil War continued, with both the regime and opposition forces attempting to gain an advantage over the other before a ceasefire for negotiations came into effect in order to position themselves as in as powerful a position for those negotiations.<sup>41</sup> The Geneva II talks in January 2014, to create a process agreeable to both the parties on achieving a political end to the crisis, but failed.

The Geneva II negotiations were failures due to three main factors. First, there was no common ground between the involved parties over which armed organizations should be counted to be part of the “Syrian opposition”. Syrian Kurds under the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) were largely excluded out of the process due to Turkish objections. Second, the exiled group that officially represented the Syrian opposition, the Syrian Interim Government, at the Geneva II talks had limited contact with or even control over the rebel units and fighters on the ground. Third, Assad had no incentive to participate as US was not in his favour.<sup>42</sup>

The failure of the Geneva II talks to yield any result that Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) fought through and captured large swathes of Syria and then crossed the border into Iraq, seizing land and shifting the

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<sup>39</sup> [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SyrianUprising), see also UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi, March 2016, <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/IPI-Rpt-Syrian-Crisis2.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Katy Collin, 7 years into the Syrian war, is there a way out? March 16, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/16/7-years-into-the-syrian-war-is-there-a-way-out/>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

focus of the international community from peacemaking between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition in the civil war itself to combating the terrorist group that made constantly headlines due to their actions. The United States increased its support to rebels fighting such as the Kurds and brought together a coalition of countries to defeat ISIL in 2014.<sup>43</sup>

The third round of talks of Geneva began in 2016, failed due to Syrian regime retaliation, backed by Russian airstrikes and Iranian militia support, against the oppositions-held areas around the city of Aleppo. While the international community sought to establish a process without the cooperation of the Syrian regime, the Syrian government itself sought to dictate the reality on the ground.<sup>44</sup>

The proceeding Geneva peace talks IV, V, VI in, VII, and VIII on Syria collapsed with no breakthrough.<sup>45</sup> With the escalation of violence in eastern Gouta and Idlib, Russia sponsored peace talks on the settlement of the Syrian conflict in Astana in 2017, and then in Sochi in January 2018 undermining the multilateral process being undertaken by the UN.<sup>46</sup> In the 8th round of the Geneva Intra-Syrian peace talks in December 2017, a declaration was issued that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad definitively did not have a role to play in the country's future political transition.<sup>47</sup>

### **Friends of Democratic Syria Group/ Friends of Syria**

The deadlock and subsequent inaction in the UNSC following Russian and Chinese vetoes prompted the US and France to initiate the creation of a group in February 2012 that was referred to as the Friends of Democratic Syria Group/Friends of Syria. It holds no official international status; it is more akin to a group of like-minded states and international institutions that set up a forum to discuss the ongoing crisis in Syria outside of the UN Security Council rather than an actual political entity aimed at providing a workable, agreed upon solution to the conflict.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/syria-diplomatic-talks-timeline-170915083153934.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Katy Collin, 7 years into the Syrian war, is there a way out? March 16, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> New round of Geneva peace talks on Syria ends without any "real negotiations", [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/15/c\\_136826885\\_2.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/15/c_136826885_2.htm)

<sup>48</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends\\_of\\_Syria\\_Group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_of_Syria_Group)

The Friends of Syria group held its first conference in Tunis in February 2012 with 60 countries sending delegations including representatives from the UN, the EU, the Arab League, the OIC, Arab Maghreb Union and the GCC. Besides affirming their firm commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of Syria, they condemned the Syrian regime's widespread human rights violations and their failure to stop despite the international outcry. The group reiterated the crucial need to hold those responsible for perpetrating crimes against the Syrian people and end the impunity enjoyed by those perpetrators.<sup>49</sup>

The Group intent was to take the proper political and economic measures in order to apply pressure on the regime to end its continued human rights violations and prevent the further escalation instability. These agenda point of groups of friends included the following:

- Travel ban on the officials of the Syrian government.
- Freezing the personal assets of officials of the Assad government.
- Ending the purchase of Syrian hydrocarbon products.
- Ceasing infrastructure investment in, and financial services relating to, Syria.
- To decrease diplomatic relations with the Syrian government.
- Prevent the shipment of weapons and related equipments to the Syrian government.<sup>50</sup>

The Friends' Group additionally recognized the Syrian National Council as a legitimate representative of the Syrians and sought to increase its communication with and material support for the Syrian opposition forces.<sup>51</sup> The Friends Group met the seventh time in May 2013 in Amman and demanded that Hezbollah militias and Iran immediately withdraw from the country.<sup>52</sup> Within the Friends of Syria, the core faction were the London 11 comprising of the US, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar. The London 11's meeting in October 2013 was to persuade the leadership of the National Coalition to attend a

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<sup>49</sup> Group of Friends of the Syrian People: 1st Conference, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48418?lang=en>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> The Rise and Fall of the "Friends of Syria" Group, <https://www.moonofalabama.org/2013/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-friends-of-syria-group.html>

major peace conference in Geneva next month. They reiterated their stance on the issue that a transition government should be established as part of the final political settlement and that President Bashar al-Assad could play no role in any future government.<sup>53</sup>

In January 2014 the London 11 held a joint meeting with the Syrian National Coalition in Paris strongly condemned the refusal of the Syrian regime to attend the Geneva negotiations. The Syrian regime yet again found itself condemned by the international community by its violation of UNSC Resolution 2118. Also, the regime's insistence that any future presidential election would have Assad running for office, would be a violation of the Geneva II process.<sup>54</sup>

Federica Mogherini, EU's High Representative on May 9, 2016 expressed the support of the EU to the joint statement by Russia and the US on the need to reinitiate the ceasefires as a preliminary step to prepare the groundwork for the next meeting of the ISSG. She also made clear to Riad Hijab, Syrian opposition general coordinator, that the Group's expectations of their readiness to engage in the Geneva talks under the leadership of the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to make the political talks in Geneva work and hence provide a perspective for the country.<sup>55</sup>

### **The International Syria Support Group (ISSG)**

The ISSG was established in October 2015 to facilitate the discussions and negotiations at a ministerial level and to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Syria. The participants of the ISSG were the US, Russia, the European Union, China, Iran, Turkey, the Arab League, and the UN. The Co-Chairs of the ISSG are Russia and the U.S.<sup>56</sup>

The ISSG met in Vienna, Austria on October 30, 2015 and on November 14, 2015 consequently to resolve the conflict in Syria, developed "mutual understanding" on a number of issues, including that "Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character fundamental" and

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<sup>53</sup> Keesing's Record of World Events, vol 59, no 10, October 2013, 52986-52987

<sup>54</sup> Ministerial meeting on Syria, Paris, 12 January 2014, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/ENFORMASYON/paris-declaration-of-friends-of-syrian-people-core-group-january-2014.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> [https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/euromed...1/...2016/at.../arxiu\\_relacionat](https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/euromed...1/...2016/at.../arxiu_relacionat)

<sup>56</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna\\_peace\\_talks\\_for\\_Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna_peace_talks_for_Syria).

that “the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination must be protected.”<sup>57</sup> However, the failure of these meetings was that due to the fact it does not include any reference to, nor any plan how to effectively process perpetrators of war crimes, a system of justice and a mechanism for a transitional governments be implemented. These statements would however, despite their perceived faults, eventually become the foundations of the UNSC Resolution 2254 - which also excluded any mention of justice and accountability.<sup>58</sup>

The ISSG, in a meeting held in Munich in February 2016, issued their united approval and support of the UNSC Resolution 2254<sup>59</sup>, the Vienna Statements of 2015 and the Geneva communiqué 2012.<sup>60</sup> The ISSG committed themselves to a Syrian-led and owned political transition based completely upon the Geneva Communiqué, stressing the need to end the indiscriminate use of weapons, implement a Syrian-wide ceasefire, facilitate immediate humanitarian access to areas under siege, release any arbitrarily detained people and fight terrorist groups.<sup>61</sup>

### **Brussels conferences**

The European Union, Germany, Britain, Norway, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Nations convened a Conference in Brussels focused on “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, in April, 2017.<sup>62</sup> The EU and the UN co-chaired the second and third conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region', which held in Brussels in April 2018 and in March 2019. The overall aim of the three Syria Conferences had been to provide much needed support to Syrian people plus gather support of the international community to achieve a political solution to the Syria crisis, along the lines of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué.

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<sup>57</sup> Keesing's Record of World Events, Vol61, No.10, October 2015, 54349.

<sup>58</sup> Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict,

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria, Washington, DC, February 22, 2016, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/253115.htm>

<sup>61</sup> Statement of the International Syria Support Group, Munich, 12/02/2016 - [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5264/statement-international-syria-support-group\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5264/statement-international-syria-support-group_en)

<sup>62</sup> Supporting the future of Syria and the region - Brussels conference, 04-05/04/2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2017/04/04-05/>



The Brussels III also focused on the humanitarian crisis affecting the Syrian populace as well as the international communities hosting Syrian refugees. It additionally stated the international community's intention to provide political and financial support for Syria's neighbours who had undertaken an unbalanced and primary burden of having to host Syrian refugees, notably Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt.<sup>63</sup>

The last Brussels conference reaffirmed the need for justice and accountability for war crimes for maintaining sustainable and genuine peace and hence called for the issue of the Syrian civil war be referred to the ICC.<sup>64</sup>

### **EU's Restrictive Measures**

Following the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the resulting constant escalation and widespread violations of human rights, the EU adopted many restrictive actions towards Syria. The EU's first step against the Syrian regime, was to adopt "The Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) No. 442/2011 of 9 May 2011 concerning "restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria". Regulation 442/2011 represented an early example of the broader and future EU strategy and described measures to be undertaken with regards to Syria.<sup>65</sup> Since then, the EU has suspended bilateral cooperation with the Syrian regime and froze the Association Agreement that had been under negotiation before the outbreak of war, in response to the Syrian regime's high handed repression of the peaceful anti-government protests.

All of these restrictive actions were undertaken before any thought-out strategy towards Syria was outlined, either from the EU or any other state or international organization. A strategy for Syria was outlined in June 2013 two years after the joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee

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<sup>63</sup> Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/03/14/brussels-iii-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Seeberg, Syria and the EU: The crisis in Syria and the international sanctions with a focus on Syrian-EU relations, December 2012, available at <https://www.sdu.dk › Files › C. Mellemoest › Videncenter › Nyheder › 2012>

of the Regions, presenting these measures as steps “towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis”.<sup>66</sup>

Before the war, the EU was the fourth largest trading partner for Syria after Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. With the implementation of the EU’s restrictive measures lead to bilateral trade volumes contracting substantially over the years, to decrease to only €0.5 billion in 2016, whereby imports from Syria dropped by 97% and exports by 85% as compared to 2011.<sup>67</sup> The EU suspended the participation of the Assad regime in the regional programs and institutions such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), with the EIB suspending all loan operations and technical assistance to the Syrian government.<sup>68</sup>

The EU established and then expanded a list of targeted sanctions, including an arms embargo, asset freeze and a travel ban on select key government officials<sup>69</sup> which was extended to May 2018 and will remain in place until June 2019.<sup>70</sup> Now the European Union extended restrictive measures until June 2020. President Assad and his family were also included on the sanction list in May 2013, and an oil embargo was imposed. Syria consequently suspended its membership of and participation in the Union for the Mediterranean in retaliation.<sup>71</sup>

The EU put full and complete arms embargo on Syria for two years (2011-2013) in response to the violent repression of peaceful protestors by Syrian government forces and the following spiral into civil war.<sup>72</sup> However, the EU faced difficulties in developing a coherent policy that would enable them to adopt a strong role in handling the crisis on an international level. The EU’s position was further damaged when some countries and groups, among them the Friends of Syria, realized that the EU arms embargo had

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<sup>66</sup> Joint Communication to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 24.6.2013, JOIN (2013) 22 final, “Towards a Comprehensive EU Approach to the Syrian Crisis, see at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013JC0022&from=EN>

<sup>67</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/syria/>

<sup>68</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European\\_Union\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European_Union_relations)

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Syria: Council response to the crisis, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/>

<sup>71</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European\\_Union\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria%E2%80%93European_Union_relations)

<sup>72</sup> EU arms embargo on Syria, at [https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/eu\\_arms\\_embargoes/syria\\_LAS/eu-embargo-on-Syria](https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/eu_arms_embargoes/syria_LAS/eu-embargo-on-Syria)

mostly failed in its purpose and had inadvertently hurt the position of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and the armed groups recognizing its authority. With the supply of weaponry from Russia and Iran, the Gulf States and Croatia, neither the regime nor the jihadist armed groups had been seriously limited by the EU weapons embargo.<sup>73</sup>

The EU Foreign Ministers meeting in Dublin on March 22, 2013, France and the UK proposed to lift or amend the EU arms embargo to make exceptions for the sale and transfer of weapons to the Syrian opposition simultaneously armed Free Syrian Army in order "to reinforce international efforts to reach a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Syria". While, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Finland, Luxembourg and Sweden showed their reservations, especially on the practicality of the assurances given by the Britain and France that weaponry could be directed to moderate rebel groupings and kept out of the hands of the more radical Islamist elements in Syria - Germany and Austria, favored easing economic sanctions on rebel-held areas of Syria to strengthen the rebel's position. This apprehensive environment pleaded that if a consensus to renew arms embargo by June 1st could not be reached, then not just the arms embargo but all other EU sanctions against the Syrian regime would lapse.<sup>74</sup> Further, British and French determination to act alone, not only confirmed this possibility, but also led to extension of the Syrian conflict.<sup>75</sup> The common approach of the EU member states towards the arms embargo was doomed by May 2013, and the member countries opted to pursue their own independent policies towards Syria.

The fractional approach in Syrian conflict was again demonstrated when the EU opposed direct military intervention in Syria in retaliation to the alleged chemical weapons attack on August 21, 2013 by the Syrian regime on the outskirts of Damascus which had resulted in hundreds of civilian dead in direct contravention of international humanitarian law.<sup>76</sup> The EU President on November 2013 adopted a neutral position calling for a political solution to the crisis in Syria, with military intervention in Syria

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<sup>73</sup> What Can the European Union Do in Syria? A Joint Policy Paper [https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/04/syria\\_policy\\_paper.pdf](https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/04/syria_policy_paper.pdf)

<sup>74</sup> Adrian Croft, EU divided over approach to Syria conflict, March 23, 2013, [www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-eu-idUSBRE92M0CP20130323](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-eu-idUSBRE92M0CP20130323)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Keesing's Record of World Events, August 2013, vol 59, no 7/8, p 52861.

being supported only by France and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, the UK government forced to adopt a policy against military intervention when the UK Parliament rejected the possibility of UK military action in Syria in a vote in August 2013.<sup>77</sup> Germany also avoided joining the US-led coalition bombing Syria on a constitutional basis since foreign German military deployment requires a change in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>78</sup>

In April 2018, the European Council supported the American, French and British airstrikes on chemical weapons facilities in Syria by emphasizing that the EU's stance on the crisis remained to seek a political solution to the dispute within the framework of the UN-led Geneva process.<sup>79</sup> However, the response of the EU and its member countries to strikes clearly exposed the strengths and weaknesses of European power. While individual member states wielded the power and ability to engage in military action, the EU in its entirety was paralyzed to do so due to the multiplicity of views within its organization. This weakness being exploited and fostered by countries such as Russia to the benefit of the Syrian regime, which has a clear interest in keeping Europe divided.<sup>80</sup>

In May 17, 2019, the EU Council extended restrictive measures against the Assad regime and its supporters due to the continued repression of the civilian population until June 1, 2020, in line with the broader EU strategy on Syria.

The sanctions currently in place against Syria include an oil embargo, restrictions on certain investments, a freeze of the assets of the Syrian central bank held in the EU, export restrictions on equipment and technology that might be used for internal repression or for war as well as on equipment and technology for the monitoring or interception of the internet or telephone communications.

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<sup>77</sup> Radka Havlová, The European Union and the crisis in Syria, <https://www.vse.cz/polek/download.php?inl=se&pdf=123.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> Merkel plan to send German troops to Iraq 'may require law change', see at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11287726/Merkel-plan-to-send-German-troops-to-Iraq-may-require-law-change.html>

<sup>79</sup> Foreign Affairs Council, 16/04/2018, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2018/04/16/>

<sup>80</sup> David Ritchie, Europe: the movers and the shakers, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/europe-movers-and-shakers>

The EU believes that there can be no sustainable, and legitimate military solution to the Syrian civil war and remains committed to finding a lasting and credible political solution to the conflict in Syria as held in the UNSC resolution 2254 and in the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.<sup>81</sup> This stance also endorsed by the EU's High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the UNSC in March 2019.<sup>82</sup>

### **Humanitarian Assistance**

With regards to the international aid to the victims of the Syrian civil war, the EU and its Member States took the lead.

In March of 2019, the Brussels Conference managed to obtain pledges for aid totaling €8.3 billion for 2019-20 and beyond, out of which €6.2 billion was for 2019 after which €2.1 billion was pledged yearly. Of the overall pledge, roughly 2/3 was from the European Union which had contributed a total of €6.79 billion: €2.57 billion from the EU budget managed by the European Commission and €4.22 billion from individual member states. Out of the €2.57 billion from EU budget, €2.01 billion was committed for 2019 while €560 million was committed for 2020 for vulnerable Syrians within Syria and refugees in countries in the region.<sup>83</sup>

To date, millions of people have been helped by EU humanitarian assistance, aid such as emergency medical treatment, healthcare, psycho-social support, protection of children and vulnerable people, food, safe drinking water, essential items, and shelters.<sup>84</sup>

Since 2011, the EU's humanitarian funding has amounted to €580 million. In Jordan, the EU supports almost 660,000 Syrian refugees, most of them women and children, by supplying cash assistance, protection, and

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<sup>81</sup> Syria: EU renews sanctions against the regime by one year, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/05/17/syria-eu-renews-sanctions-against-the-regime-by-one-year/>

<sup>82</sup> Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the United Nations' Security Council, New York, 12/03/2019, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/59506/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-united-nations%E2%80%99-security-council\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/59506/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-united-nations%E2%80%99-security-council_en),

<sup>83</sup> Syria crisis: EU mobilises renewed international support, record overall pledge of €8.3 billion for 2019 and beyond, see at [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/syria-headline\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/syria-headline_en)

<sup>84</sup> European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, Syria, Last updated 20/08/2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria_en).

healthcare. In 2017, €55 million of the EU's humanitarian funding allocated to Jordan also targeted the emergency needs of more than 45,000 refugees stranded along its northeastern border with Syria and Iraq. Another €36 million was allocated for 2018. In Egypt, which hosts upwards of 122,000 registered refugees, the EU has allocated €7.8 million to help refugees living in substandard conditions in urban areas through healthcare, education and cash assistance. Since 2012, the EU's humanitarian aid to Lebanon has reached around 750,000 Syrians. An additional €4 million was earmarked for 2018.<sup>85</sup> In Turkey, there are an estimated 4 million refugees, of whom 3.6 million are Syrian.<sup>86</sup> The EU had pledged €6 billion in aid to refugees in Turkey. However, since June 2019 only €2.22 billion were disbursed.<sup>87</sup>

### Conclusion

The geographical proximity of Europe to the Middle East means that Europe cannot ignore the internal developments that take place in the neighbouring states in the Middle Eastern region. The effects of the refugee crisis are huge on the EU. In the Syrian civil war, the EU re-focused its attention from economic and political partnerships with Syria to the application of sanctions and scaling down of its mission in Damascus. The aim undoubtedly was to punish the Syrian regime for their human rights violations but the secondary effects of these measures was the reduction of the EU's political leverage within Syria and a worsening state of existence for the already battered populace.

The EU sacrificed what political leverage it had when it joined the US in pursuing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to step down without having the power to force. With the increasing influence of Iran and Russian air support for the current Syrian regime and Assad's triumph over most of his rivals on the battlefields of Syria, his resignation seems an unattainable goal without the cooperation of Syria's supporters, Russia, Iran and China. To further make the situation worse for the US and its allies. All of these

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Turkey: EU-funded programme to assist 1.7 million Syrian refugees, [refugees https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-eu-funded-programme-assist-17-million-syrian-refugees](https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-eu-funded-programme-assist-17-million-syrian-refugees)

<sup>87</sup> EU: Sum paid for refugees in Turkey must be clarified, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-sum-paid-for-refugees-in-turkey-must-be-clarified/1578213>.

factors helped compounded the already worsening refugee and humanitarian crisis taking place in Syria.

The EU has taken a back seat with regards to who has the leading role in the conflict. This stems from the EU's institutional make-up, with the 28 member states of the EU all failing to find a common stance on the issue, and without a common stance, the EU is internally paralyzed as to what its role in the conflict should be? What is common amongst all the members states regarding the conflict are their primary concerns, those being migration and terrorism. The EU's fractured response to these issues has mainly been due to the wave of far-right political developments in its member states such as 'Brexit' in the UK and the rise of the AfD in Germany, developments that threaten the integrity of the Union. Hence, demonstrating how events in Syria have had drastic socio-political consequences for Europe.

The major players in the EU with regards to the Syrian crisis are France, Germany and the UK. Each with their own aims regarding the role that they have as individual states, and collectively as a Union. The smaller member states have to choose to fall in line with one of the "big three" (France, Germany and the UK), for example: the Netherlands has decided to side with the German position and hesitate over military intervention, choosing to push more responsibility towards the UN Security Council. The major question of how far member states are willing to militarily intervene is another issue in this crisis that the EU member states have been unable to find a consensus on. Some member states will argue that military intervention remains the only meaningful and practical option to remove Assad from power and others will express their reluctance towards it, arguing that military action will only make the situation worse. Libya is a case in point. So, instead of a military intervention support, the anti-interventionist states support revitalizing the failed UN-sponsored Geneva talks among the warring actors in Syria.

The EU has been able to agree upon is embargo on Syria, blocking the sale of arms and setting in place economic sanctions against the regime. The Syrian regime is trying to mitigate the effects of crippling EU and European Investment Bank (EIB) sanctions by turning towards its allies Russia and Iran. Syrian goods found markets in Iraq and Lebanon while the Russian banking sector helped make funds available that the EIB had withdrawn or

made unavailable. The oil embargo that proved crippling initially for Assad's forces was sidestepped with imports from Russia and Iran. These efforts helped reduce the impact of the EU's sanctions, allowing Assad to continue the war and further diminished already crumbling EU political leverage over Syria.

Another key aspect of the EU's role in Syria is its coordination with the US with regards to sanctions and for individual member states, limited military intervention. In the initial stages of the conflict the US and the EU, restricted themselves but the cumulative effects of the civil war forced them. It was in response to the growing radical Islamist presence in Syria that the US, moved to take military action against them. The EU however, still lacking a consensus, was too paralyzed to follow the US's footsteps and engage even the terrorist organisations militarily. The EU is still searching for the common stance towards the conflict. The EU's focus on soft power projection, preference for legal solutions, and enthusiasm for multilateral diplomacy, has found it struggling to change the direction of the Syrian conflict, a conflict that is seen to be dominated by hard power politics in an increasingly multipolar world.

The EU has often tried, and failed in many regards, to be a crisis manager, whether it be in Syria, Libya or in the Ukraine crisis. Its lack of hard power capabilities has played a vital role in its failures.

This military deficiency, that will continue for the foreseeable future, as well as the limitations of soft power projection were major reasons behind the EU failing to achieve its stated objections. Having made tall demands of Syria and lacking any ways of forcing compliance the EU finds itself in a difficult position, a position where the only options are an insistence on Assad's resignation or a retraction of their earlier stance and an attempt to reach a compromise with the regime. None of the options are good for the image and standing of the EU. The EU will further lose clout in the international arena, making it weaker among the international actors.

There are, however, a number of possible actions the EU can take in order to regain some of its lost influence in the Syrian crisis:

1. The EU can bargain its economic strengths in return for concessions from the regime during negotiations: All the pre-war agreements



between the EU and Syria, such as the Association agreement and cooperation programmes such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and the economic support of the European Investment Bank with its loan operations and technical assistance to the regime, can be used as incentives for the Syrian regime to be more compliant in its behaviour. Additional benefits from such a move would be to combat Syria's war economy by re-legalising Syria's formal economy. It would help in providing more humanitarian aid in more parts of Syria to those who need it most.

2. The EU can also send a monitoring mission to ensure local ceasefires in Syria are upheld as part of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
3. The EU can also increase its support and aid for the local, democratic and legitimate actors in particular the Local Administrative Councils in Opposition-held Syria or LACs.