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## Struggling to Find a Recipe for Peace – Ten Years of European Initiatives to End the Conflict in Syria

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*Jette Knapp*

## **Struggling to Find a Recipe for Peace – Ten Years of European Initiatives to End the Conflict in Syria**

### ***Introduction***

The conflict in Syria has been raging for ten years. What started as peaceful demonstrations for more rights and democracy in March 2011, soon turned into a brutal proxy war that has witnessed the involvement of European countries, the United States, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and other local actors, in addition to the rise of the so-called Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL or Daesh). Thousands of Syrians have been displaced or lost their lives. The country's infrastructure is in ruins, war crimes have been committed, and the economy is shattered.

Up until now, the EU has been most prominent in its role as the biggest financial donor of humanitarian aid. Since 2017, the EU together with the UN has hosted an annual donor conference to renew its commitment and to generate funds. In addition, the EU has helped to provide education, rebuilt school buildings and invested in safety nets and job opportunities. With regard to military involvement on the ground, however, the EU has been rather hesitant, although the Union is directly affected by the civil war in Syria due to the large number of refugees that have arrived on European shores. Consequently, the EU should have a vested interest in seeing an end to the war, especially in light of growing populist movements, sparked by the refugee crisis and how they affect EU domestic affairs.

There is much literature focusing on the peacebuilding initiatives of the international community like the UN-led peace process and alternative formats, such as the Astana Process organized by Russia, Iran and Turkey and their impacts on the European Union. Plenty of literature also analyses

the political maneuvering of major players and local actors, Russian neo-imperialist policy and Turkish neo-Ottomanism, and how the EU is affected by these new phenomena. The literature is, however, somewhat scant when it comes to structures within the EU that may have served as stumbling blocks to more EU engagement. These topics shall be taken up in this paper, which, does not claim to provide an exhaustive list of reasons for the EU's inability to bring about change in Syria. Instead, it is to be understood as the starting point of further research, and an attempt to complete the picture of the structures both within Syria as well as in the EU that have made the civil war so seemingly unsolvable.

## **1. EU-Syria Relations Prior to the Conflict**

Relations between the EU and Syria are still officially based on the Cooperation Agreement signed in 1977. In 2007, the EU also adopted the Syrian Arab Republic Strategy Paper 2007–2013 & National Indicative Programme 2007–2010, aimed at establishing closer relations between Syria and the EU and fostering reform in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the conflict, the EU and Syria had embarked on a path of establishing closer ties with widespread support among EU members. By strengthening cooperation with Syria, the EU intended to promote political and administrative, economic, and social reform. This included supporting Syria in implementing an Association Agreement and strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The Association Agreement, first drafted in 2004 and revised in 2008, was intended to replace the 1977 Cooperation Agreement and eventually lead to Syria's full membership in the European

- 1 Turkmani, R. and Haid, M., *The Role of the EU in the Syrian Conflict*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016, p. 5, online 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). Last accessed: 9 Jul. 2020.
- 2 European Parliament, *European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. Syrian Arab Republic. National Indicative Programme 2011-2013*, 2011, p. 6, online at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/dmas/dv/1\\_enpi\\_syria/1\\_enpi\\_syria\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/dmas/dv/1_enpi_syria/1_enpi_syria_en.pdf). Last accessed: 16 Sep. 2020.

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Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).<sup>3</sup> However, Syria demanded more time to assess the Agreement and it was never signed, thwarted by the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Syria had also been a full member of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed or Barcelona Process), which led to the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, an intergovernmental organization with the objective to enhance regional cooperation, comprising the EU, the United Kingdom and 15 Mediterranean countries.

Prior to the conflict, the EU's intention was to increase its engagement in Syria due to its strategic relevance in the region and recent developments that the EU considered positive. The EU's positive evaluation, however, was also the result of the fact that the bloc tended to turn a blind eye to the human rights situation in the country prior to the outbreak of the civil war. As usual, the EU resorted to condemnations of arbitrary arrests and questionable sentences, merely calling on Syria to respect the international commitments it had entered.<sup>4</sup> This tendency on the part of the EU to only see the developments it wanted to, may be one reason why it took the bloc so long to respond to the outbreak of violence adequately and comprehend the magnitude of the conflict that has been unfolding since 2011.

### **2. Peace Proposals and Measures**

The key peace initiative for Syria has been organized under the aegis of the United Nations in cooperation with the League of Arab Nations (LAS). This process (the Geneva Process) started soon after the confrontation in Syria turned violent. In 2012, the so-called Action Group for Syria, comprising representatives from China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the UN, LAS and the EU, met in Geneva and agreed on the Geneva Communiqué. This document served to underpin the goal of

3 Turkmani, R. and Haid, M., op. cit. p. 5.

4 Turkmani, R. and Haid, M., op. cit. p. 6.

“a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future”.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Communiqué called for a sustained cessation of armed violence and the establishment of a transitional governing body formed on mutual consent to oversee the transition process. It also envisaged a new constitutional order, free and fair elections, and the full representation of women. Though the Communiqué was never implemented, it still has a high degree of international legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2254, which reconfirmed the need to implement the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, created a timetable for the political transition, scheduled free and fair elections within 18 months, and called for the drafting of a new constitution.<sup>7</sup> In the Resolution, it was also agreed that the question of leadership would ultimately be decided by elections, a question that had previously been avoided.<sup>8</sup> These two documents continue to be the most relevant documents in the peace process in Syria, and have served as the guiding principle behind the EU’s own peace process and measures taken thus far.

## 2.1 EU Measures

The European Union has been directly impacted by the Syrian civil war. As a result, the EU has a major interest in establishing peace in Syria, as stability in neighboring countries is of great importance for the bloc. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that it has launched its own initiatives, and has made proposals on how to end the civil war,

5 United Nations Security Council, *Final communiqué of the Action Group for Syria*, 2012, p. 2, online at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%20522.pdf>. Last accessed: 25 Aug. 2020.

6 Hauch, L., *Mixing Politics and Force Syria’s Constitutional Committee in Review*. Clingendael, 2020, p. 5, online at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/the-politics-of-syrias-constitutional-committee.pdf>. Last accessed: 25 Aug. 2020.

7 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2254 (2015)*, 2015, online at: [unscreg.org/en/resolutions/doc/2254](https://www.unscreg.org/en/resolutions/doc/2254). Last accessed: 25 Aug. 2020.

8 Hauch, op. cit. p. 6.

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while at the same time being closely involved in the UN-led peace process. These measures have always been intended to complement the Geneva Process, rather than replace it, as it would be naive to believe that the EU would be able to settle the Syrian conflict on its own.

### 2.1.1 EU Sanctions and Humanitarian Aid

Before the outbreak of the conflict, EU-Syria cooperation focused on trade and economic, social and democratic reform.<sup>9</sup> When the 2011 uprising turned violent, the EU naively assumed the conflict would end in just a few months, as it did in other Arab Spring countries. This may explain why then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the EU, only issued a statement condemning “the violent repression [...] of peaceful protests”, and calling “on the Syrian authorities to refrain from using violence and to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people”.<sup>10</sup> In May 2011, the EU imposed a travel ban, a freeze of assets, and an arms embargo. At first, the list of sanctioned people did not include President Bashar al-Assad in an effort to keep him at the negotiating table. In light of the regime’s response, however, the list was soon extended to the Assad family, and has been extended on a regular basis ever since. In May 2011, the EU also suspended all bilateral cooperation programs with the Syrian government under the ENP and froze the still unsigned Association Agreement. Furthermore, the EU put Syria’s participation in the EU’s regional programs on hold, in addition to the loan program and technical assistance of the European Investment Bank. In response, the Syrian government suspended its membership of the Union for the

- 9 European Union External Action Service, *EU-Syria Relations, Factsheet*, 2016, online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/6769/EU-Syria%20relations,%20factsheet](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/6769/EU-Syria%20relations,%20factsheet). Last accessed: 15 Jul. 2020.
- 10 European Union, *Declaration by High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on Behalf of the EU on the Violent Crackdown on Peaceful Demonstrators in Syria*, 2011, p. 1, online at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/120169.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/120169.pdf). Last accessed: 18 Aug. 2020.

Mediterranean. In an attempt to keep diplomatic lines of communication open, the EU delegation to Syria initially remained open, but was closed in December 2012, when the situation became too dangerous. In November 2011, sanctions were expanded to include a ban on the import of crude oil from Syria, which were eased again, when the Syrian oil fields fell under the control of the opposition in April 2013. One month later, at the request of France and the UK, the arms embargo was also amended to arm moderate opposition forces.

The sanctions target individuals responsible for repression, repressive official bodies, and individuals in the arms sector involved in the use or transfer of internationally banned weapons. Further sanctions target the energy sector, trade, and the export of certain commodities, such as gold. The sanctioned individuals include leading entrepreneurs, members of Assad's wider family, ministers, high-ranking members of the military, intelligence services and pro-Assad militias, and individuals associated with the production, dissemination and use of chemical weapons.<sup>11</sup> Some argue that of all the restrictive measures taken, the EU's oil embargo had the greatest impact given the high share of oil Syrian exports to the EU. The embargo, as well as the civil war, led to a drop in Syrian oil production, causing a shortage of fuel in the country. Assistance from Russia and Iran, enabled the Syrian regime to mitigate some of the effects. The arms embargo, meanwhile, had a rather limited effect on Syria, as the EU had not been one of the regime's major sources for weapons.<sup>12</sup> The civilian population of Syria has felt some of the indirect effects of the sanctions. For instance, the Syrian government tried to reduce subsidies by increasing the prices of basic goods, which drove more people into poverty. This, together with the collapse of the Syrian economy and

11 Turkmani, R. and Haid, M., op. cit. p. 15; Asseburg, M., 2020, op. cit., p. 24.

12 Giumelli, F. and Ivan, P., *The Effectiveness of EU Sanctions. An Analysis of Iran, Belarus, Syria and Myanmar (Burma)*. European Policy Centre, 2013, p. 23-24, online at: [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173758/pub\\_3928\\_epc\\_issue\\_paper\\_76\\_-\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_eu\\_sanctions.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173758/pub_3928_epc_issue_paper_76_-_the_effectiveness_of_eu_sanctions.pdf). Last accessed: 14 Jul. 2020.



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resulted in increased unemployment, forcing some Syrians to resort to criminal activities as a means to generate income.

The Syrian regime's ability to alleviate the effects of the sanctions show how limited their consequences were. Turkmani and Haid state that the effect of the sanctions would have been more pronounced, had they been made mandatory by way of a United Nations Security Council resolution.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it can be stated that while some sanctions certainly were effective, others were not, and some even affected unintended targets. Some experts have criticized the EU for not putting in place a mechanism that evaluates the effectiveness of its restrictive measures and its sanctions, as they have become almost automatic, involving little debate in terms of effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

The provision of humanitarian aid has been the most concrete action the EU has taken on the ground. The European Union is the largest donor of humanitarian aid, which is in direct contradiction to the relatively small role the EU has played politically, and the little influence it has been able to exercise. The funds are directed towards refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria and neighboring countries, such as Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan. In order to deliver on its pledges made in Kuwait, London and the four Brussels donor conferences, the EU set up the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis. The fund addresses educational, economic, social and health needs of Syrian refugees, and provides support to local communities. According to the International Crisis Group, humanitarian aid is classified into three categories: "humanitarian aid (the bulk of which is unconditional and based on assessed needs), 'resilience' aid (which differentiates between opposition-held and regime-controlled areas) and 'stabilization' aid

13 Turkmani, R. and Haid, M., op. cit., p. 16.

14 Giumelli, F. and Ivan, P. op. cit., p. 1; Al-Hussein, A., *EU Policy and the Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: Time for a Reassessment*. Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2020, online at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-policy-and-humanitarian-crisis-syria-time-reassessment>. Last accessed: 19 Aug. 2020.

(only in the North East).”<sup>15</sup> This categorization is made necessary by the fact that the EU has made a genuine political transition in line with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué, a condition for its contributions to the reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> However, given the relatively vague categorization, member states have some room for interpretation. The implementation of humanitarian aid is mainly done through UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Implementation follows what is referred to as the whole-of-Syria approach, which means that it takes place not only from inside the country but also across borders and battle lines. Furthermore, aid follows a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional approach as well as a do-no-harm approach, a concept for planning and implementing relief measures in a conflict-sensitive manner.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1.2 EU Brussels Conferences

Following previous donor conferences in Kuwait (2013-2015) and London (2016), the European Union, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations co-chaired the first Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region on 5 April 2017. The conference brought together 70 countries, international organizations, and international and Syrian civil society. The intention behind the conference was to resume dialogue and to strengthen the UN-led process in order to find a political solution for Syria based on UNSC Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué and to bring together the international

15 International Crisis Group, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum. Middle East Report 209*, 2019, online at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/209-ways-out-europes-syria-reconstruction-conundrum>. Last accessed: 2 Aug. 2020.

16 Council of the European Union, *Draft Council Conclusions on Syria*, 2018, p. 9, online at: <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7956-2018-INIT/en/pdf>. Last accessed: 23 Aug. 2020.

17 Kiesewetter, R., *Wiederaufbau jetzt? Die Rolle Deutschlands und Europas*, Die Politische Meinung, Volume 553 (63), 2018, p. 16, online at: [https://www.kas.de/documents/258927/4226681/14\\_Kiesewetter.pdf/dd409547-ccde-9f2a-469f-084257ca768e?version=1.0&t=1561970253745](https://www.kas.de/documents/258927/4226681/14_Kiesewetter.pdf/dd409547-ccde-9f2a-469f-084257ca768e?version=1.0&t=1561970253745). Last accessed: 12 Aug. 2020.

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community to pledge humanitarian aid to Syria and the region. The participants of the first Brussels Conference did not shy away from their responsibility and pledged a total of \$ 6 billion (€ 5.6 billion) for 2017, as well as multi-year pledges of \$ 3.73 billion (€ 3.47 billion) for 2018-2020. Another \$ 30 billion (€ 27.9 billion) in loans were announced by international financial institutions and other donors, of which certain elements are on concessional terms. They also acknowledged the fact that humanitarian aid alone would not be enough to establish peace in Syria, but that a political solution in line with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué was needed. Participants strongly condemned the use of chemical weapons, the continued violations and abuses of international humanitarian law, and the atrocities committed by ISIL and other terrorist groups. At the same time, the conference stressed the urgency of cross-border access of relief organizations, and commended the efforts made by neighbouring countries, notably Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, to host refugees.<sup>18</sup>

Between 2018 and 2020, the Brussels II-IV Conferences, co-hosted by the European Union and the United Nations, and raised billions of US dollars in donations and loans, in addition to renewing the international community's commitment to Syria. At each of the conferences, an evaluation of the previous year's pledges was presented, demonstrating that donors delivered on their promises, some even exceeding their pledged funds. Each time, donor countries also reconfirmed their unwavering support for the UN-moderated intra-Syrian talks in Geneva as well as the UN Special Envoy for Syria. Brussels II-IV also followed the lead of the first conference by condemning the use of violence and chemical weapons. They also

18 Council of the European Union, *Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region - Brussels Conference, 4-5 April 2017*, 2017, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2017/04/04-05/>; *Supporting the future of Syria and the Region: Co-Chairs Declaration*. 2017, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/05/syria-conference-co-chairs-declaration/>. Both last accessed: 18 Aug. 2020.

commended the efforts of neighboring countries to host Syrian refugees and reconfirmed the goal of getting all refugee children into quality education. Brussels III and IV also called on the international community to maintain ceasefire agreements, particularly the September 2018 memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey to establish a demilitarized zone in the northwest.<sup>19</sup>

The impressive financial outcome of the Brussels Conferences shows the genuine desire and commitment of donor countries to help the Syrian refugees scattered across the region. However, given that the co-chairs' final declarations all read rather similarly, suggests a certain level of stagnation. Margaux Nijkerk argues that for Brussels II, the EU did not develop any new ideas and concepts for a political solution, which seems to be true for all the donor conferences.<sup>20</sup> The EU's promises are merely the smallest common denominator, or rather measures that all member states feel comfortable supporting, as they do not compromise their national objectives. These facts again show that the EU is strongly committed to its role as the leading donor of humanitarian aid, but rather hesitant when it comes to taking any other measures.

- 19 Council of the European Union, *Brussels II Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region': Co-Chairs Declaration*, 2018, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/04/25/brussels-ii-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>; *Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region': Co-Chairs Declaration*. 2019, online at: <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/>; *Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration*. 2020, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/30/brussels-iv-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>. All last accessed: 18 Aug. 2020.
- 20 Nijkerk, M., *France's Role in Syrian Reconstruction, and the Implications for Israel*. Center for Israel Education, 2019, p. 60, online at: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/nijkerk.pdf>. Last accessed: 09 Aug. 2020.

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### 2.1.3. *EU Syria Strategies*

During the conflict in Syria, the EU has adopted two strategies that partly or fully target the country. As mentioned, these strategies are both based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and the 2015 UNSC Resolution 2254. Despite their widespread recognition, they have failed to deliver on their objective of putting an end to the violence. This is partly due to the fact that they did not ban violence per se but acknowledged the necessity to fight terrorist groups by using force if necessary. This flaw has been used as a backdoor by the Syrian regime, not least because it considers every opponent a terrorist, and is also found in the EU's strategies.

Given that the breakout of the civil war had made the 2007 Strategy Paper and Indicative Programme irrelevant, the European Union in October 2014 agreed on another strategy. This strategy did not focus on Syria alone, but on the region, and on the fight against ISIL. The EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh Threat, adopted in March 2015, had become necessary due to the rise of al Qaeda linked terrorist organizations, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL. The Regional Strategy focused on facilitating political reform, the provision of humanitarian aid to Syria and Iraq, and the EU's commitment to the fight against ISIL and other terrorist organizations in the region. The paper reiterated the urgent need for a "Syrian-led inclusive political process leading to a transition, based on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 and in line with relevant UNSC Resolutions". The document also acknowledged that there "cannot be lasting peace in Syria until the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all components of the Syrian society are addressed". Furthermore, the continued need for humanitarian aid was confirmed and that it must reach all people in need. The Strategy highlighted that the policies and actions of the Assad regime gave rise to ripe conditions for ISIL and other terrorist groups. As a result, it was impossible to consider the regime a partner in the fight against the terrorist group. The EU therefore reconfirmed its commitment to the efforts of the Global Coalition to counter ISIL, including military action. Further, the

Regional Strategy aimed to reduce the influx of foreign terrorist fighters, funds and weapons to ISIL, prevent regional spill-overs, and improve border security.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the fight against ISIL, the 2014 Regional Strategy failed to be successful. Moreover, the dire situation in Syria prompted the EU to draft a new strategy, this time with the sole focus on Syria. This new EU Strategy for Syria was adopted in April 2017 and stipulated six key areas on which the EU's objectives are focused: an end to fighting through "a genuine political transition, in line with UNSCR 2254" and negotiated by all parties involved; promoting a "meaningful and inclusive transition in Syria" by supporting the political opposition; addressing the humanitarian situation of the most vulnerable Syrians "in a timely, effective, efficient and principled manner"; promoting "democracy, human rights and freedom of speech"; ensuring accountability for war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons and human rights violations with a view to facilitating a national reconciliation process and transitional justice; and supporting "the resilience of the Syrian population and Syrian society". The Strategy also highlighted the EU's willingness to contribute to the reconstruction of Syria under the condition that "a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition [...] is firmly under way".<sup>22</sup>

The year 2017, however, was also when the Assad regime and its allies reclaimed control over most of the urban centers in the country, therefore considering itself victorious. Although the EU was careful enough not to state that political transition meant Assad's resignation, the regime's previous behavior made and still makes it unlikely that

Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh Threat*. 2015, p. 1-2, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/16/council-conclusions-eu-regional-strategy-for-syria-and-iraq-as-well-as-the-isil-daesh-threat/pdf>. Last accessed: 25 Aug. 2020.

- 22 Council of the European Union, *Council adopts EU strategy on Syria*, 2017, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03/fac-conclusions-syria/#>. Last accessed: 25 Aug. 2020.

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Assad will accept external solutions, especially if they may foresee the end of his rule at some point in time. Neither of the two EU strategies contain clear definitions nor concrete strategic objectives. They also fail to stipulate concrete steps or measures the EU intends to take, or set deadlines for accomplishing the objectives. Therefore, both strategies give a vague direction to EU measures in Syria but fail to provide a clear roadmap for which the EU could be held accountable.

### *2.2 Proposals and Measures by EU Governments and Policymakers*

While naturally all EU member states have been involved in EU measures to find a way to settle the civil war in Syria, some countries have been more visible in the process than others. The reasons for this are manifold. Larger members, for instance, generally tend to be more visible and sometimes assertive in matters of this magnitude; they may also have more financial and technical resources they can provide or some member states may have economic or other interests that could possibly be at stake. For the sake of conciseness, this paper focuses on proposals made by France and Germany, partly due to the fact that those two countries have, together with the United Kingdom, have been the most prominent in the process. Furthermore, France and Germany, while maintaining a close partnership, have often taken opposite positions. On the one hand, France has been the most active member state in calling for more EU initiative. Germany, on the other hand, has focused more on negotiations, and a mediating role. Therefore, their positions often reflect the wide range of views in the EU.

#### *2.1.1 France*

France has been the member state that has pushed most for active EU (military) involvement in Syria, which reflects Paris' general stance on EU defense matters. The past years have seen France intensively campaigning for stronger cooperation in European defense, in addition to more military presence from EU forces in global conflicts. One such example is the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), aimed at creating operational readiness and flexibility.

With regard to Syria, France, together with the United Kingdom, has been the most willing to contribute to military interventions on the ground. As early as 2011, then French foreign minister, Alain Juppe, hinted at the possibility of military interventions in Syria to create safe zones to protect civilians and aid workers. However, France first started airstrikes in the region as part of the US-led initiative against ISIL in 2014.<sup>23</sup> France expanded its intervention, titled Operation Chammal, into Syria in 2015, prompting ISIL to commit the November 2015 Paris attacks, according to an ISIL statement.<sup>24</sup> In response, France stepped up its efforts on the ground, including airstrikes on ISIL targets. Furthermore, France became the first EU member state to invoke the mutual defense clause of Art 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty, calling on all EU partners to stand with France in the fight against the terrorist organization. Whereas the United Kingdom had already approved operations in 2014, the German Bundestag agreed to deploy 1 200 military personnel in December 2015.<sup>25</sup>

France has not only been active with regard to military operations in Syria. Paris has also played an active role in making proposals to the United Nations. In 2013, Paris reconfirmed its tough stance on the use of chemical weapons and proposed a resolution to the UN Security Council on chemical weapons under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. The proposal was a response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government in August of that year. It came at a time when Russia was already negotiating a plan with the UN on how to place

- 23 Rettman, A., *France Recognises Syrian Council, Proposes Military Intervention*, EU Observer, 2011, online at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/114380>; Demebele, A., *The French Intervention in Syria*. Perspectives on Global Issues, Spring 2016, p. 40, online at: <http://pgi.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Demebele-PGI-Spring2016.pdf>. Both last accessed: 27 Aug. 2020.
- 24 Anna, C., *Isis Expresses Fury over French Airstrikes in Syria; France Says They Will Continue*, CTV News, 2015, online at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/isis-expresses-fury-over-french-airstrikes-in-syria-france-says-they-will-continue-1.2658642>. Last accessed 27 Aug. 2020.
- 25 Pawlak, P., Briefing. *Conflict in Syria Trigger Factors and the EU Response*. European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016, p. 9-10, online at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/573924/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)573924\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/573924/EPRS_BRI(2016)573924_EN.pdf). Last accessed: 18 Aug. 2020.



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Syrian chemical weapons under international control. The French proposal can therefore be considered an attempt to regain the initiative and speed up the process. The proposal envisaged the Syrian regime being forced to make its chemical weapon program public, having it controlled internationally, and then dismantling it. At the same time, Chapter 7 would enable the UN to take harsh measures in case of any violations, ranging all the way to military intervention.<sup>26</sup>

Another French initiative already mentioned was to lift the arms embargo on Syria in 2013 to arm the opposition in the fight against the regime. Despite initial objection, particularly from countries like Germany, Austria and Sweden, the EU agreed to drop the embargo thus allowing France and the UK to supply weapons to what was referred to as the moderate opposition.<sup>27</sup>

One of the reasons behind France taking such an active position in Syria, especially in the fight against ISIL, is that the French government considers the terrorist group a threat to its domestic security, an assessment tragically proven by the November 2015 Paris attacks.<sup>28</sup> France's failure to integrate substantial parts of its population caused them to adopt radical beliefs and several French citizens went abroad to fight for terrorist groups like ISIL. Samuel Ramani, on the other hand, believes that France is driven by three motivations: France is using its interventionist policy to reinstate itself as a great power, present itself as an alternative to the United States, and to promote cooperation with Sunni countries in the Middle East

26 Borger, J. and Chrisafis, A., *Syria Conflict: France to Seek Tough UN Resolution on Chemical Weapons*. The Guardian, 2013, online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/10/syria-conflict-france-un-resolution-chemical>. Last accessed: 27 Aug. 2020.

27 Traynor, I., *UK Forces EU to Lift Embargo on Syria Rebel Arms*. The Guardian, 2013, online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/28/uk-forced-eu-embargo-syria-rebel-arms>; *Syria Crisis: France and Britain Move a Step Closer to Arming Rebels*. The Guardian, 2013, online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/14/syria-crisis-france-britain-rebels>. Both last accessed: 27 Aug. 2020.

28 Demebele, op. cit., p. 40.

that also oppose Assad and are skeptical regarding Iran.<sup>29</sup> Both theories offer a possible explanation as to why France is much more involved in matters concerning the Syrian conflict compared to other member states. Both theories refer to aspects stemming from national issues not shared by other EU countries. Only a few EU countries are threatened to a similar extent as France by radicalized fighters returning home, and only a few EU countries may feel the (historic) need to present themselves as great powers.

### 2.2.2 Germany

Unlike France, Germany has assumed a bridge-building role in the Syrian conflict. It has often sought to find compromise both within the European Union as well as between other parties to the conflict. This is in line with Germany's general approach to foreign policy that is marked by a "culture of military and political restraint and a strong adherence to multilateralism"<sup>30</sup>, shaped by the experience of two world wars and the Cold War. This explains why Germany has often adopted a more hesitant approach than its close ally France. However, even Germany has seen a subtle change of position in the course of the drawn-out war in Syria. This first started in 2014 when, for the first time, the German government decided to provide weapons to a conflict zone and provided Iraqi Kurds with assistance in their fight against ISIL. This was followed by the deployment of German troops to Iraq for a training mission also as part of the fight against ISIL. After France's invoking of the mutual defense clause in 2015, Germany immediately pledged an expansion of the existing anti-ISIL missions in Mali and Iraq and to contribute to the US-led coalition in Syria by providing equipment. Such a policy change could be taken as

29 Ramani, S., *Why France is so Deeply Entangled in Syria*. Washington Post, 2015, online at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/11/19/why-france-is-so-deeply-entangled-in-syria/>. Last accessed: 09 Aug. 2020.

30 König, N., *Germany's Role in Libya and Syria: From Restraint to Responsibility. Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's Role in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy*. FIIA Report 44, 2016, p. 94., online at: [https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiareport44\\_europes\\_new\\_political\\_engine.pdf](https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiareport44_europes_new_political_engine.pdf). Last accessed: 30 Aug. 2020.

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a sign of Germany assuming more international responsibility in defense matters. Nevertheless, the German government did not fully abandon its culture of restraint, as the country did not actively engage in military activities on the ground. While this new policy could mean that Germany may be more inclined now to approve international interventions, the country still considers the use of force the last resort.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to military interventions, the issue of humanitarian aid has seen much consensus not just among Germany and France but within the EU in general. Germany, however, has placed a particular focus on the matter. As the second largest donor after the United States, Germany has pledged € 600 million in humanitarian aid for Syria and the region in 2020 alone.<sup>32</sup> Given, however, that German humanitarian aid has often been provided through EU or UN campaigns, this paper does not delineate the matter as the issue of humanitarian aid has already been dealt with in chapter 2.1.1. Another area in which Germany has also shown outstanding commitment is the fight against impunity in Syria. Germany initiated the Alliance against Impunity whose objective is to coordinate regional, national and international initiatives to fight impunity in Syria. Moreover, Germany was the first country to initiate proceedings against two Syrian nationals for the suspected use of torture, which is based on the principle of universal jurisdiction, allowing any country to prosecute individuals accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide.<sup>33</sup> Both areas of commitment show that Berlin's strategy is to help the people on the ground, ensure administrative structures, and uphold the rule of law.

31 Ibid., p. 94-106.

32 Auswärtiges Amt, *Humanitäre Hilfe für die Menschen in Syrien und seinen Nachbarländern*. 2020, online at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/themen/humanitaere-hilfe/geberkonferenz-bruessel-syrien/2359334>. Last accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

33 BBC, *Syria Civil War: Germany Holds Unprecedented State Torture Trial*. 2020, online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52393402>. Last accessed: 10 Aug. 2020.

In contradiction to Germany's traditional restrained approach in direct interventions, German defense minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, proposed establishing a security zone in northern Syria in October 2019. The zone would serve to allow Western powers to re-engage in the campaign against ISIL and to stabilize the region as a means to enable reconstruction and facilitate the return of refugees. While the proposal appeared to be unusually proactive at first glance, it soon transpired that the minister seemed to have communicated her ideas poorly, both nationally and internationally, with several crucial aspects remaining unclear. Kramp-Karrenbauer, for instance, did not specify who was to implement and enforce the security zone on the ground: the UN, the EU, NATO, or a coalition of the willing. In her view, the ideal solution would be a UN-led mission building upon the existing UN mandate for Syria. The tasks of the mission would be separating conflict parties, ceasefire monitoring and assessing the situation. Kramp-Karrenbauer also hinted at the possibility of splitting the security zone into several sectors, with Germany possibly assuming responsibility for one of them. This would constitute a complete change of policy, resulting in a situation where Germany would be leading a military operation for the first time since the initiative began. Both nationally and internationally, Kramp-Karrenbauer's proposal triggered mixed reactions, with some applauding it because it meant that the EU was reclaiming the initiative from Turkey and others criticizing its ill timing and communication.<sup>34</sup>

34 Backfisch, M. et al., *Muss die Bundeswehr nach Syrien? – AKK konkretisiert Pläne*. Berliner Morgenpost, 2019, online at: <https://www.morgenpost.de/politik/article227439987/Nach-Vorschlag-von-AKK-Muss-die-Bundeswehr-nach-Syrien.html>. Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2020; Hildebrandt, A., „Wir wollen, dass die Flüchtlinge eine Rückkehr-Chance bekommen“. *Interview mit Roderich Kiesewetter*. Cicero, 2019, online at: <https://www.cicero.de/aussenpolitik/roderich-kiesewetter-sicherheitszone-nordsyrien-akk-fluechtlinge/plus>. Last accessed: 13 Aug. 2020.

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### 2.3 *Proposals by Scholars and Experts*

While European governments and the EU institutions were busy trying to find answers to the atrocities committed in Syria, scholars and experts on Syria and the Middle East have also not been idle. The literature is full of proposals on which course the European Union should adopt and which measures to choose, with some proposals overlapping and others downright opposing. Given the long duration of the conflict and the great number of experts who have written about it, this paper only discusses a small selection of proposals and serves to illustrate certain tendencies.

Two of these tendencies can be described as a principled and a pragmatic approach. What must be noted, however, is that these are not clear-cut definitions and some experts hold opinions that sometimes follow one approach and sometimes the other. The principled approach looks at the conflict from the perspective of Europe and is based on the principles and values the EU is built upon. This approach tends to focus on the importance of the EU to uphold its values and not sell them out for short-sighted measures, as this would come at the expense of the EU's credibility. As early as 2016, Marc Pierini, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, wrote that while it may be unlikely that principles like the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, coexistence and tolerance would be adhered to in a post-war Syria, the EU should still promote them and support key democratic elements, such as the state's administration, legal system, civil society, and transitional justice.<sup>35</sup> The principled approach is generally critical of re-engaging with the Assad regime, as this could serve to legitimize it and reward it for the atrocities it has committed. Kristin Helberg, a German journalist who lived in Syria for many years, has spelled out clear recommendations as to how the EU should proceed in Syria. Normalization with the Assad regime is something she strictly opposes, including political, diplomatic, economic and

35 Pierini, M. *In Search of an EU Role in the Syrian War*, Carnegie Europe, 2016, p. 13, online at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_284\\_Pierini\\_Syria\\_Final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_284_Pierini_Syria_Final.pdf). Last accessed: 15 Jul. 2020.

intelligence service relations. Instead, she suggests agreements on the return of refugees and advises the EU against any involvement in reconstruction as long as there are no guarantees that Assad will not use the funds to reward his supporters. The principled approach subordinates the economic interests of European companies, forcing them to observe the principles and achieve the goals agreed upon by the EU and that are defined in UN Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué. Another recommendation of Helberg's is to promote civil society by drawing from the EU's experience of two world wars and reconciliation to help Syrians overcome their social division.<sup>36</sup> Another measure strongly advocated by the principled camp is to prosecute war crimes in Syria, particularly for the sake of the EU's credibility. Michael Bauer et al. in a study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, for instance, state: "the EU has made itself the clear advocate for Syria's civilian population, and is demanding compliance with international rules and human rights, the commitment to prosecuting war crimes carried out in Syria is important. Otherwise, the EU's credibility will be called into question."<sup>37</sup> Judging by the legal measures already taken in Germany discussed earlier, this does not seem implausible.

In contrast to the principled approach, the pragmatic approach tends to focus on the situation on the ground. It focuses on measures that could realistically be implemented in the hope that they will mitigate current hardship and lay the foundation for future progress. Muriel Asseburg, senior fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), is convinced that the EU's strategy on Syria has failed and thus needs to be adapted. In her view, this includes acknowledging that the EU will not bring about a negotiated settlement, and political reform in Syria. At the same time, she insists that the EU must not consider Assad a

36 Helberg, Kristin, *Der Syrienkrieg. Lösung eines Weltkonflikts*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg, 2018: p. 230-31.

37 Bauer, M. et al., *Antagonisms in the EU's Neighbourhood*. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019, p. 23, online at: [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/190522\\_Antagonisms\\_in\\_the\\_EU\\_s\\_neighbourhood.pdf](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/190522_Antagonisms_in_the_EU_s_neighbourhood.pdf). Last accessed 17 Aug. 2020.

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credible partner in matters pertaining to reconstruction. Instead, she suggests that the EU should focus on more sustainable ways to mitigate suffering, such as lifting sectoral sanctions that prevent development and, to a certain extent, supporting the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure in regime-held areas. All this, however, should be done without complete normalization with the Assad regime.<sup>38</sup>

Julien Barnes-Dacey, director of the Middle East & North Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, urges the EU to try seriously to implement its more for more approach, which makes it possible for incremental steps made by the regime to be rewarded with concessions by the EU. He also believes that the EU should review its sanction regime and adapt it where necessary, with derogations for basic civilian needs and humanitarian aid in place. As is characteristic for the pragmatic approach, Barnes-Dacey promotes re-engagement with Syria but only under strict conditions. In his view, the EU must give up the notion that re-engaging with Syria and re-establishing a diplomatic presence in the country automatically means legitimizing Assad. Reassuming relations with Syria for him, however, does not mean engaging with Assad but rather with local and vetted partners at a lower level. This too is an opinion often heard in the pragmatic camp. Barnes-Dacey believes that reinstated EU-Syria relations could present an opportunity to shape the future of Syria. His opinion is based on the fact that the Syrian regime still cannot act completely freely. Despite its recent gains, it is not in control of the entire country and is dependent on external assistance. Often, therefore, local Syrian organizations must meet key needs, which shows that there is room for some autonomy because some

38 Asseburg, M., *The EU Needs a New Syria Strategy*, International Politics and Society, 2020, online at: <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/middle-east/article/show/the-eu-needs-a-new-syria-strategy-4303/>. Last accessed: 29 Jul. 2020.

believe that increased European support could facilitate the ability of Syrians to deal with the government.<sup>39</sup>

Irrespective of a pragmatic or principled perspective, a third tendency in the proposals made by scholars and experts centers around the call for more unity, better coordination, more specific conditions within the EU, and more structured cooperation with partners. In 2017, Barnes-Dacey deplored crucial European actors for being too involved in national issues, such as Brexit or national elections in Germany, to focus on Syria. To bring about change in Syria he considered it crucial for the European Union to demonstrate unity and act in concert.<sup>40</sup> Asseburg is also convinced that the individual member states do not have the necessary leverage in Syria to be taken seriously by the regime. Like Barnes-Dacey, she believes that the EU can only act together in order to have some political weight.<sup>41</sup>

Another aspect criticized by scholars is the lack of a timeframe in EU measures. Neither the EU's strategies on Syria nor the final declarations of the Brussels conferences stipulate specific timelines. The only timeline indirectly used by the EU is the one set out in UN Resolution 2254. This lack of deadlines has made the EU's course of action vague and has made it much more difficult to hold both the EU and the Syrian regime accountable. Whether this was a deliberate move remains unanswered. Bauer et al. believe that the lack of a timeframe should be amended, at least with respect to the conditions set for reconstruction funding. According to them, there must be a clear plan of action with specific deadlines by which individual criteria must be fulfilled to allow reconstruction aid to begin under EU

39 Barnes-Dacey, J., *Society Max: How Europe Can Help Syrians Survive Assad and Coronavirus*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, online at:

[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/society\\_max\\_how\\_europe\\_can\\_help\\_syrians\\_survive\\_assad\\_and\\_coronavirus](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/society_max_how_europe_can_help_syrians_survive_assad_and_coronavirus). Last accessed: 17 Aug. 2020.

40 Barnes-Dacey, J., *To End a War: Europe's Role in Bringing Peace to Syria*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, online at:

[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/to\\_end\\_a\\_war\\_europes\\_role\\_in\\_bringing\\_peace\\_to\\_syria7223](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/to_end_a_war_europes_role_in_bringing_peace_to_syria7223). Last accessed: 17 Aug. 2020.

41 Asseburg, 2020, „New Syria Strategy”, op. cit.



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conditions. They furthermore advise the EU to install a control mechanism to ensure that funds reach their target.<sup>42</sup> What their proposal lacks, however, are suggestions as to what deadlines would be realistic, details as to what such a control mechanism could look like, and how it could be enforced.

Throughout the conflict, cooperation between partners has often worked well. However, at times, due to disputes between NATO, the United States, and the EU, as well as foreign policy tensions with Russia and Turkey, a certain shadow has been cast on the outcome of the Syrian crisis. Bauer et al. are convinced that the United States still plays a crucial role for the EU with regard to Syria. According to them, the EU's capacities are limited and the bloc should therefore try to establish new forms of US-EU cooperation to the greatest extent possible. While the United States will certainly continue to play an important role regarding European defense matters and crisis management efforts, time will tell as to whether the US is still willing to invest in Syria and cooperate with the EU on the matter under its new administration. According to Bauer et al., a second crucial partner is the United Kingdom. They therefore suggest creating new forums that enable foreign and security policy cooperation after Brexit.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to cooperation with longstanding partners, experts have also repeatedly highlighted the importance of cooperation with other parties to the conflict, notably the Astana states, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The course of the conflict has shown their crucial role on the ground and influence over the Assad regime. This alone would be reason enough to consider their interest in plans for a future Syria. A solution in Syria can only be obtained with their help, and taking them seriously is the only way to get them on board with a peace process. Experts have also pointed out that finding a way to establish a partnership or, at the very least, productive cooperation with these states should be one of the EU's top priorities, as this could create an opportunity for the bloc to exercise indirect influence on the Assad

42 Bauer et al., *op. cit.*, p. 23.

43 Bauer et al., *op. cit.*, p. 21-22.

regime and enforce EU interests. Taking Russian, Turkish and Iranian interests into consideration, requires the EU to perform a balancing act given the many foreign policy disputes with the said states impacting matters in Syria. Barnes-Dacey<sup>44</sup>, for example, suggests that the EU should convince the United States to stop using Syria as a theatre to wage war on Iran. At the same time, the EU should ensure that Iran agrees to a de-escalation process. Kurdish ambitions must also remain restrained to secure Turkey's willingness for dialogue. For this balancing act, Willem Oosterveld, strategic analyst with the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, advises the EU to apply what he calls linkage policy, which is the use of real leverage the EU has in other fields so as to incentivize tough actors in Russia, Iran, and Turkey to agree to the EU's vision of a democratic, stable and prosperous Syria. According to him, the EU's mere support of values and principles will not convince these powers to promote the EU's strategies on Syria. Instead, he suggests taking the pragmatic approach. This would involve, cooperating more closely with Russia on Libya to establish stability there, use the EU's economic weight to have Iran act more constructively, and assessing how the EU could help settle the Turkey-Greece conflict in the eastern Mediterranean. Oosterveld is convinced that only through real leverage will the EU be able to put its Syria strategy into reality.<sup>45</sup>

This selection of proposals shows that the EU has a broad range of options from which it could choose. The focus on values and principles may be the harder option as it requires backbone and the strict upholding of values. However, it may be the easier option when it is used as an excuse for simply not acting. Pragmatic measures mean that at least something is done but could be criticized for the lack of a holistic perspective and long-term solutions. Either way, the EU's lack of action has so far not appeared to be a deliberate decision taken for reasons of conviction but the result of challenges too big to

44 Barnes-Dacey, 2017, op. cit.

45 Oosterveld, W., *Does the EU Have a Syria Strategy?*, EU Observer, 2018, online at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/141249>. Last accessed: 19 Aug. 2020.

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overcome. The second part of this paper seeks to shed a light on some of these challenges.

### **3. Shortcomings within the EU**

So far, the adopted peacebuilding measures discussed in the first part of this paper have failed to make a major difference on the ground. The second part of this paper examines why the EU, despite its relatively unsuccessful track record in Syria, has not significantly stepped up its commitment. This is partly due to the EU's historic self-perception of a value-based mediator and peacebuilding power rather than one that decides conflicts by way of military interventions. In addition, there are also internal factors that have kept the EU from acting. The following section looks at how historically developed structures within the EU hamper and sometimes even paralyze decision-making. Subsequently, the paper analyses events, sometimes seemingly unrelated to the civil war in Syria, that have impacted the EU's maneuvers in the conflict.

#### **3.1 Contradictions and Flaws within the EU**

This section examines internal aspects of the EU that have impacted decisions regarding the Syrian conflict. In the EU, there are structures in place, which were originally developed to protect member state sovereignty. Over time, however, these structures have facilitated a tendency of member states to give higher priority to their national interests rather than EU issues. Furthermore, cracks have started to appear in the European culture of consensus and compromise finding over the years. Consequently, contradicting objectives, which abound in the EU with respect to Syria, become stumbling blocks, sometimes leading to decisions not taken at all. In addition, some member states, especially those with a strong colonial history, have historic ties in the Middle East that influence their commitment to the region.

##### **3.1.1 Structural Shortcomings in the EU**

In an article on the EU's foreign policy, Stefan Lehne, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe in Brussels, states that the EU is unable to adapt to

a world governed by power politics due to its preference for soft power, and legal solutions, and its adherence to multilateralism. He further states that there are structural constraints in EU decision-making causing the EU to be unable to address the currently deteriorating security situation. According to him, these constraints include the unanimity voting in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the fact that member states still have national foreign policies in parallel, and weak European leadership.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the fact that the Lisbon Treaty made the EU's foreign policy process run more smoothly and introduced more coordination, it left crucial issues like the unanimity principle and parallel national foreign policies untouched. Furthermore, it failed to equip the EU with the necessary means to respond to the rapidly developing security situation across the globe. Lehne also points to a certain paradox in the EU's development. In contrast to what could have been expected, the EU did not respond to the changing global security environment by pooling abilities and taking action. Instead, the EU remained inactive, relying on dialogue and declarations. The bloc did not seize the opportunity of conflicts to help rebuild societies and lay the foundations for democracy and the rule of law in its neighborhood, but scaled down its foreign policy goals, with stability as the new top priority. This has led to a somewhat patchy track record in security initiatives and an inability to choose goals in line with its instruments. In Syria, for instance, the EU called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's removal from power early on, despite being unable to enforce the claim and thus reducing its role in providing humanitarian assistance, while the diplomatic process was taken over by Iran, Russia, and Turkey.<sup>47</sup>

Compared to other policy fields like the internal market and the monetary union – albeit not complete either but much more advanced

46 Lehne, S., *Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?*, Carnegie Europe, 2017, online at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/05/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy-pub-74909>. Last accessed: 15 Sep. 2020.

47 Lehne, *ibid.*

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– EU foreign policy and defense policy is still woefully underdeveloped. The fact that the EU has yet to rectify this shortcoming can, to some extent, be explained by Mancur Olson’s concept of the collective action problem. The concept analyzes why members of a group do not invest as much of an agreed common good as would be in the group’s interest and therefore receive poorer results.<sup>48</sup> According to Olson, the group may have a common goal, but the individual members also have individual, debilitating interests, such as relations with third countries or domestic issues. According to Lehne, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a perfect example of conflicting national interests in the EU. Although it is the largest donor to Palestine and all member states are in favor of a two-state solution, the EU has failed to extend its political influence on the ground due to the member states’ different positions on Israel and the divided competencies of EU institutions.<sup>49</sup> Another limiting factor is the assumption by group members that the stipulated goal will be achieved anyway, even without their contribution. This phenomenon, which Lehne refers to as free riding, can also often be observed in EU foreign policy, especially (although not exclusively) by smaller member states. The EU’s lack of collectiveness is aggravated by the fact that global events are seen from 27 national perspectives and their relevance is often assessed very differently across the member states. National implications still trump those for the EU. According to Lehne, “the sum of national viewpoints and the willingness to take responsibility falls far short of the total potential of the union as an international actor.”<sup>50</sup>

Olson’s concept also acknowledges the fact that the larger and more diverse a group is, the more difficult decision-making becomes.<sup>51</sup> This is illustrated by the EU enlargements and the resultant difficulties when it comes to decision-making and finding consensus. A few years

48 Olson, M., *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard University Press, 16th edition, Cambridge, Mass., London: p. 9-36.

49 Lehne, op. cit.

50 Lehne, op. cit.

51 Olson, op.cit., p. 46.

ago, it was still common for disagreeing member states to join the majority eventually, driven by the desire to find an agreement. This commitment, however, is faltering and member states tend to be more inclined to veto decisions they do not agree with.<sup>52</sup> This is possible because EU decision-making in foreign policy follows the principle of unanimity, which includes that every member state has a veto right. When national foreign policy interests are at odds with EU objectives, member states can block decisions. This also means that those decisions that end up being taken are likely the smallest common denominator and fall short of their actual potential. For these reasons, there have been repeated calls to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy. QMV, which requires 55 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the total EU population voting in favor of a proposal for it to be adopted, is common in most EU policy fields. Leonard Schuette points out that with QMV, foreign policy decisions would probably still be adopted unanimously, as is usually the case in other QMV policy areas, however, “decisions would then be reached in the shadow of the vote rather than of the veto.” Schuette also believes that QMV would protect the EU from external influence as it would no longer take only one member state to block a decision but at least four. This could become particularly important for the future given that China and Russia will likely intensify their divide-and-rule approach.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, foreign policy decisions could also be less easily blocked by single member states wanting to push through national interests.

As a final aspect, Lehne states that “[l]eadership is a crucial factor in countering the inertia and free riding that impede collective action”<sup>54</sup> but that such leadership is lacking in EU foreign policy. Instead, the Lisbon Treaty grants the leadership role to the institutions, the High Representative, the European External Action Service (EEAS) as well

52 Lehne, op. cit.

53 Schuette, L., *QMV + CFSP = A-OK*, Berlin Policy Journal, 2019, online at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/qmv-cfsp-a-ok/>. Last accessed 15 Sep. 2020.

54 Lehne, op. cit.

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as the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. These actors have different fields of competence and levels of influence. In addition, the position of member states plays a crucial role in foreign policy decisions. Larger member states especially, are often the actors that are truly making the decisions. However, they are also guided by national interests and still operate as individual national states on the world stage. Their leadership in the EU, therefore, is often unreliable. This fragmentation of tasks, influence, and leadership cannot yield consistent foreign policy, nor can it create a player fit to operate on the global stage and be taken seriously by other powers. Decision-making in EU foreign policy is slow and often blocked by member states that feel their national interests have not sufficiently been taken into consideration. The problem is that EU members still see EU foreign policy through their national prisms rather than the other way around. They consider themselves as national states and only then as members of the European Union.

### 3.1.2 *Contradicting EU Positions and Objectives in Syria*

Given the underdeveloped status of European CSDP, the two strategies on Syria are, apart from the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the major sources guiding the EU Syria policy. This lack of foreign and security policy showed early in the Syrian conflict when France was isolated in its call for European military intervention in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the civilian population in Ghouta in 2013. This isolation was intensified when even the US decided to refrain from taking action, despite the fact that the Obama administration had previously defined the use of chemical weapons a red line.<sup>55</sup> A similar situation was observable in 2018, when France and the United Kingdom decided to join the United States in airstrikes against the Syrian regime in response to the renewed use of chemical weapons, this time in the city of Douma. The

55 Black, I., *France More Active than Rest of the West in Tackling Syria*, The Guardian, 2015, online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/14/france-active-policy-syria-assad-isis-paris-attacks-air-strikes>. Last accessed: 9 Aug. 2020.

remaining member states expressed their understanding of the measures but refused to take part in any active steps. Instead, they resorted to calls for the resumption of negotiations.<sup>56</sup>

A similar picture of disagreement among member states can be observed with regard to the question of re-engagement with Damascus and which role Assad is to play in a future Syria. However, the dividing lines run differently here. As with the proposals made by scholars and experts, the two camps are divided between a principled and a pragmatic approach, with the former camp relying on EU values and the latter pursuing more of a *realpolitik* approach. Representatives of the principled camp are, for instance, Germany, France and, while it was still an EU member, the United Kingdom. In March 2020, these three countries together with the United States in a joint statement reiterated their adherence to the existing EU position of not supporting reconstruction until a credible, substantive, and genuine political process was underway.<sup>57</sup> Other EU members, in contrast, are more inclined to acknowledge new realities on the ground and are even considering diplomatic relations with Damascus.

The way member states have handled the question of diplomatic relations has generally differed throughout the conflict. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania kept their embassies open with various forms of staffing, while Austria, Italy and Spain decided to have a *chargé* residing in Beirut. It comes as no surprise that these states are now the most outspoken supporters of officially reinstated EU relations. In contrast, Germany, France and the United Kingdom closed their embassies completely and reject EU relations with Assad. One argument of those countries calling for the re-engagement with Damascus is that a technical dialogue is the only

56 Dempsey, J., *Judy Asks: Is Europe Endangered by Its Impotence in Syria?*, Carnegie Europe, 2019, p. 60, online at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/80176>. Last accessed: 2 Aug. 2020.

57 Auswärtiges Amt, *Joint Statement on the Ninth Anniversary of the Syrian Uprising by the Governments of Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States*, 2020, online at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/ninth-anniversary-syrian-uprising/2319040>. Last accessed: 30 Jul. 2020.



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way for the EU to have at least some influence in the shaping of Syria without fully normalizing relations. Another argument is that a failed state cannot be in Europe's interest as the resulting instability in the region would entail the risk of new waves of refugees and the potential of further radical movements. Those states opposed to unnecessary engagement in Syria, on the other hand, question Assad's credibility. Arguing that in addition to political concerns, there are no guarantees that aid would reach its intended targets and not be misused by the regime.<sup>58</sup> While the latter argument relates to the provision of funds, it can also be expanded to general agreements with Damascus.

In addition to calls for re-engagement with Damascus, some member states have also questioned EU sanctions on Syria. According to Asseburg, reasons for this include the territorial gains made by the regime, the sustained refugee crisis, and business interests of European companies.<sup>59</sup> Some member states believe that the recent territorial gains of the regime suggest that the conflict is practically over, with the Assad regime being the winner. Consequently, the issue of reconstruction is becoming increasingly important. This is particularly true for EU members with national companies that have an interest in investing in Syria, given the lucrative opportunities this entails. These opportunities, however, are currently blocked by EU sanctions as well as the conditions the EU has defined for contributing to the reconstruction of Syria. Some member states are therefore calling for sanctions to be lifted. In terms of the reconstruction conditions, the position of member states varies, made possible by the fact that the conditions are not strictly defined. France, for instance, follows a rather narrow interpretation of them and opposes any so-called resilience activities, such as rehabilitation services in regime-

58 International Crisis Group, *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, Middle East Report 209. 2019, p. 23-24, online at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/209-ways-out-europes-syria-reconstruction-conundrum>. Last accessed: 2 Aug. 2020.

59 Asseburg, 2020, "Reconstruction in Syria", op. cit., p. 25.

controlled areas. Germany is generally supportive of small-scale rehabilitation measures in regime-controlled areas under the UN Humanitarian Response Plan but places a greater emphasis on lifesaving and protection activities, while the Visegrád states single out projects they feel politically comfortable supporting. One such example was a visit of Polish deputy foreign minister, Andrzej Papierz, to Damascus in mid-2018, where, on behalf of the Polish government, he offered to pay for the construction of 100 houses for Christian Syrian refugees currently residing in Lebanon as a means to enable them to return to their home country. The EU is caught in a dilemma in terms of reconstruction support. Prohibiting reconstruction funds and investment would further aggravate the economic situation on the ground and the living conditions of the Syrian population. Not only would this make the return of refugees even more unlikely, it could also play into the cards of ISIL and re-fuel radicalization. Conversely, providing financial assistance to the regime whose policy caused the uprising in the first place would put the EU at risk of legitimizing the very regime that is likely to misuse the funds to its own benefit.<sup>60</sup>

The issue of reconstruction funding demonstrates how national affairs in the member states impact the EU's attempts to find a compromise and a common policy. The issue is also intricately connected to refugees, possibly the most divisive issue for the EU in recent years. The question of how to deal with illegal migrants and refugees, and how to distribute them across the EU, has been discussed most controversially in the EU in the context of Syria and revealed the cracks in EU cohesion. It comes as no surprise that the different positions vis-à-vis Damascus and on EU reconstruction contributions are also reflected in the different positions on the refugee issue. To add to the complexity, European governments that previously followed an open-door refugee policy have felt compelled to adopt stricter rules due to the pressure of emerging populist and far-right movements. France, for instance, promotes strengthening Frontex and

<sup>60</sup> International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, 22-23, 27.

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taking a tougher stance on illegal migrants, on the one hand. On the other hand, it has accepted large numbers of refugees and favors a coordinated approach to irregular migration and a fair distribution system based on solidarity. The same holds true for Germany, which has also promoted increasing Frontex capacities while campaigning for an EU-wide approach and burden-sharing with frontline countries, such as Italy and Greece. Austria, rather, has often criticized Germany's open-door migration policy for its feared pull effect and has campaigned for stronger external borders. Italy, one of the hardest hit countries, has adopted a hard-line policy on refugees that has included denying rescue ships to dock at Italian ports. Poland has adamantly refused to accept refugees, citing national security as a reason to restrict migration.<sup>61</sup> Unilateral measures of individual member states, even if conducted for humanitarian reasons, have met with criticism in the EU. While some considered these measures as signs of humanity and compassion, they too showed the lack of cohesion in the Union. Furthermore, they increased resentment in member states with stronger Eurosceptic tendencies. Cohesion within the EU, however, is a crucial element of adopting a common EU refugee policy based on solidarity, both with those people in need, and among the members of the bloc.

In terms of Syria, both France and Germany still adhere to pursuing a political solution to the conflict and are convinced that this will reduce the pressure of refugees in the EU.<sup>62</sup> As stated above, they are also strongly opposed to re-engaging with the Syrian regime. Italy, on the other hand, has strongly campaigned to redevelop relations with Syria. The previous government considered reopening its embassy in Damascus. Other countries, such as Poland and Austria have also shown to be sympathetic to re-engaging with Damascus or, like

61 Deutsche Welle, *Where do EU Countries Stand on Migration?*, 2018, online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/where-do-eu-countries-stand-on-migration/a-44356857>. Last accessed: 1 Sep. 2020.

62 Dempsey, 2019, op. cit., p. 60.

Greece, have officially relaunched diplomatic relations with Syria.<sup>63</sup> The latter group of countries clearly sees the relations with Syria through the lens of the refugee crisis and considers recognizing and re-engaging with the Assad regime as an opportunity to send refugees back home. Barnes-Dacey believes that they are justified to some extent since only limited re-engagement can secure some influence but he calls for a unified European approach as the only way to be successful.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.1.3 Historical Involvement of Member States in Syria and the Implications

Some EU member states have longstanding ties with Syria rooted in colonial times. Most prominent among them are France and to some extent the United Kingdom. During the turmoil of World War I, France, the United Kingdom and Russia secretly concluded the Sykes-Picot Agreement, dismantling the failing Ottoman Empire and dividing it into spheres of influence. The United Kingdom henceforth controlled the area between the Mediterranean coast and the River Jordan, the whole of today's Jordan, southern Iraq and the Mediterranean ports of Haifa and Acre. France acquired southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This agreement contradicted promises the British had made to the Arabs in return for their support in the war to have them establish an independent Arab state. Instead, the League of Nations granted France a mandate for Syria and Lebanon in 1922, giving France the task of establishing an administrative infrastructure and helping the territory prepare for independence and self-governance. While the mandate intended for France to play the role of a trustee, in reality the French rather functioned as a colonial power. This period lasted until 1946, when France withdrew following elections held in Syria in 1943 and an

63 Vohra, A., *Europe Doesn't Even Agree on Assad Anymore*, Foreign Policy, 2019, online at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/08/europe-doesnt-even-agree-on-assad-anymore/>. Last accessed: 29 Jul. 2020; Antonopoulos, P., *Greece Finally Reopens Relations with Syria*, Greek City Times, 2020, online at: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/05/06/greece-finally-reopens-relations-with-syria/>. Last accessed: 1 Sep. 2020.

64 Barnes-Dacey, 2019, op. cit.

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agreement reached in the UN Security Council. Despite the fact that the way the French exercised their control over Syria was controversial, it laid the foundation for close ties and a strong French commitment in the Middle Eastern state.<sup>65</sup>

Given that France held the mandate for Syria, it is likely the one member state with the best historic ties, especially Syria's ruling ethnic group, the Alawites. The foundation of these relations was also laid during the French mandate. To prevent Arab nationalism, France pursued a policy of favoring and granting special protection to minorities. The Alawite community greatly benefitted as it was given special administrative autonomy, while ethnic and religious divisions were further entrenched.<sup>66</sup> Much of the complexity that makes the Syrian conflict so difficult to solve dates back to the French period. Given this special relationship between the ruling ethnic group and France, it comes as no surprise that relations between the French and the Syrian Alawite government were cordial before the conflict.

Over the course of the conflict, France changed its policy, becoming one of the member states most adamantly calling for Assad's resignation. In 2015, France's position was cemented by the Paris attacks, after which the French government stepped up its measures justified by self-defense.<sup>67</sup> Given that France was the European country with the largest number of citizen turned jihadists, their return to France posed a particular threat to the country. Hence, Paris, for reasons of security, has promoted military intervention against the threat of terrorism.

65 Busch, G. K., *The French in Syria – a Long and Tortured History*, Lima Charly, 2018, online at: <https://limacharlieneews.com/foreign-policy/french-in-syria/>. Last accessed: 5 Aug. 2020; Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Sykes-Picot Agreement*, online at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>; *The French Mandate*, online at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/The-French-mandate>. Both last accessed: 9 Aug. 2020.

66 Fildis, A. T., *Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria*, Middle East Policy Council, 2012, online at: <https://mepc.org/roots-alawite-sunni-rivalry-syria>. Last accessed: 7 Sep. 2020.

67 Nijkerk, op. cit., p. 56.

While the longstanding historical relations between Syria, the wider region and France do not explain why it is so difficult to establish a common approach within the EU, they at least explain why there are such strongly diverging positions, and why the levels of commitment of individual EU members so greatly differ. The countries that were more involved in Syria and the region prior to the conflict were also more strongly affected by its repercussions. Their economic and security interests are also more at risk than those of other countries.

### *3.2 Impact of Global Events on EU Behavior in Syria*

The previous chapter has looked at relevant aspects and processes within the European Union that have influenced the bloc's behavior in Syria or prevented it from acting at all. This showed the complexity of EU decision-making, and how the principle of unanimity can reduce action to a mere minimum, or even cause a complete lack of action. Moreover, other aspects must also be taken into consideration. As stated above, this paper analyses global events, sometimes without any obvious connection to the conflict in Syria, that the EU was involved in and that have indirectly impacted the EU's engagement in the Mashreq state. Again, the list provided is not exhaustive, but illustrates how different actors and different events are interconnected.

#### *3.2.1 Iran*

Iran has played a crucial role for the Syrian regime and decisively contributed to the fact that it has been able to persevere. Its involvement has also thwarted a political solution to the conflict. Furthermore, by supporting the Assad regime, Iran has enabled it to commit its atrocities against the Syrian population. Thus, Iran bears at least partial responsibility for this. Yet there has been surprisingly little criticism from the EU. Some believe that this is rooted in the EU's determination to conclude and later maintain the nuclear deal with Iran. Since the nuclear deal became a realistic option, the EU has been more inclined to turn a blind eye to Iran's involvement in the

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crimes committed in Syria for the sake of the emerging economic opportunities.<sup>68</sup>

This has become quite obvious since the United States under President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal. Under the Obama administration, closing a deal with Iran was a top priority. As a result, the US did not intervene in Syria before evidence of the use of chemical weapons could no longer be denied. However, even then the country did not defend its own red line. All this, according to some, was done to avoid antagonizing Tehran and risking the deal.<sup>69</sup> With the change of policy under Trump, which included withdrawing from the deal and re-establishing economic sanctions on Iran, the EU's situation changed. The determination to preserve the hard-earned deal, has meant a continued lenient EU position towards Iran. What is more, the US measures will also have an impact on future EU involvement. The economic sanctions have hit Iran hard, causing Tehran to reduce its financial support to Syria. This will have severe consequences when it comes to reconstructing Syria. As a result, the EU will be pushed harder to show commitment in the process but will also have more leverage as the reconstruction of Syria depends more on European funds. It remains to be seen, whether the EU will be able to play that increased leverage smartly.

### 3.2.2 *The United States*

During Donald Trump's presidency, US-EU relations became increasingly strained. Reasons for the deteriorating relationship include; Trump's America first policy, tensions in trade, derogatory remarks by Trump about the EU, referring to NATO as obsolete, his warnings that the US will no longer be the guarantor of EU security, and his insistence that EU NATO members step up their defense

68 Pierini, 2016, op. cit., p. 10; Dempsey, J., *Germany's No-Go Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Europe, 2018, online at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/76091>. Last accessed: 7 Sep. 2020.

69 Berman, R. A., *The Syrian Rebellion and Its International Resonance*, Hoover Institution (The Canvas), 2018, online at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/syrian-rebellion-and-its-international-resonance>. Last accessed: 21 Apr. 2020.

budgets and pay their stipulated 2 per cent contribution to the Alliance.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the US became less reliable from a European perspective, which had an impact on the military commitment of the EU in Syria as well as the view on defense spending within the EU. Van Ham refers to this impact as the Trump Effect. In terms of defense matters, he states that the effect has made the EU realize that it must contribute more to NATO and increase its own defense efforts. Moreover, the EU now intends to achieve more global assertiveness and strategic autonomy. This is reflected in the EU's Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024.<sup>71</sup>

The above developments have started to show in the Syrian civil war. So far, the European Union has relied on the United States to shoulder the main burden whenever both powers were jointly involved in a conflict. This was also the case in Syria, despite the fact that the United States was relatively hesitant compared with its involvement in other conflicts. A turning point for the EU came in October 2019, when the Trump administration turned rhetoric into action and unexpectedly withdrew its troops. The official reason for the withdrawal given by the White House was that Turkey intended to start a long-planned operation into Syria, which the United States would neither support nor get involved in. In addition, Trump stated that the United States was too involved in the conflict and it was time for the other actors to take over and settle the conflict. Earlier statements by Trump saying that it was time to put an end to US involvement in the Syrian conundrum and bring troops home, however, could suggest that Ankara's plans came as a welcome

- 70 Archick, K. et. al., *Transatlantic Relations: U.S. Interests and Key Issues*, Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 8-9, online at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45745.pdf>; Van Ham, Peter, *Trump's Impact on European Security. Policy Options in a Post-Western World*, Clingendael Report, 2018, p. 12, online at: [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/Report\\_Trumps\\_Impact\\_on\\_European\\_Security.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/Report_Trumps_Impact_on_European_Security.pdf). Both last accessed: 8 Sep. 2020.
- 71 Van Ham, op. cit., p. 12; Council of the European Union, *A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024*. 2019, online at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>. Last accessed: 21 Sep. 2020.



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excuse to finally take the initiative and withdraw US troops.<sup>72</sup> This would be in line with Trump's demands for the EU to assume more responsibility in global conflicts and a confirmation of his announcement that the US would no longer act as the world's policeman. The US withdrawal has had a direct impact on the EU as it was unexpectedly confronted with circumstances that reflect the situation announced by Trump: The United States will no longer try to settle an armed conflict and is leaving the EU to solve it. This left the EU with the task of having to compensate for the gap left by the United States.<sup>73</sup> While the bloc was still unable to accomplish this feat in October 2019, Russia and Turkey responded more swiftly and set the course for the future. The next years will show how much awareness there is among member states in terms of the necessity of a more coordinated defense policy.

With respect to the United States and its impact on EU involvement in Syria, the developments described here will be particularly relevant in the years to come. The situation is a good example of past US-EU relations and the EU's reliance on the United States, and may also be an example of newly defined relations. Under Joe Biden, US-EU tensions will most likely ease to some extent but this will not reverse the general trend of the EU striving for more responsibility and strategic autonomy. So far, the EU's reluctance to make active contributions in Syria has not only been promoted by the bloc's inability to find a common position but also by the fact that the EU has taken for granted that the United States would do what could be called the dirty work. It will be interesting to see, whether the EU's new desire for self-sufficiency and the US withdrawal from Syria will create a new relationship and approach in Syria. The conflict has the

72 BBC, *Turkey-Syria Border: Kurds Bitter as US Troops Withdraw*, 2019, online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49960973>. Last accessed: 8 Sep. 2020.

73 Champion, M., Fouquet, H. and Ainger, J., *Syria Shows Risks of U.S. Withdrawal for Europe: Irrelevance*, Bloomberg, 2019, online at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-20/syria-shows-risks-of-u-s-withdrawal-for-europe-irrelevance>. Last accessed 31 Jul. 2020.

potential to become a water shed moment for European defense efforts – and sooner rather than later.

### 3.2.3 Turkey

As briefly mentioned, Turkey has been a key player in the civil war in Syria, despite being mainly occupied with its fight against the Kurds in northern Syria. Turkey also played a decisive role in the situation following the US withdrawal in October 2019, with Ankara losing no time to launch an incursion into the Syrian territory vacated by the Americans. For the European Union, there have been two key issues regarding Turkey and the Syrian conflict over the past years. On the one hand, there has been a distinct backsliding on the rule of law and democracy in Turkey, itself reason enough for the EU to cool diplomatic relations with Ankara and possibly suspend EU accession talks. On the other hand, it cannot be in the EU's interest to have Ankara, Moscow and Damascus fill the vacuum left by the US. Moreover, Turkey plays a key role for Europe in curbing the large number of refugees and it is naive to believe that conflict settlement in Syria will be possible without Ankara.

In terms of the rule of law in Turkey, the situation has been deteriorating ever since the failed coup d'état in 2016. There has been worrying backsliding on fundamental rights. The Turkish response to the coup included a large-scale purge of government employees, the closure of many media outlets and the jailing of political activists and journalists.<sup>74</sup> The situation has prompted many in the EU to question the Turkish EU accession bid and to openly debate the option of an official ending. The European Parliament, for instance, officially called for the accession negotiations to cease, but this would mean the

74 Nielsen, N., *Turkey Backsliding on Rights and Rule of Law, Says EU*, EU Observer, 2016, online at: <https://euobserver.com/migration/135847>; Pierini, M., *Options for the EU-Turkey Relationship*, Carnegie Europe, 2019, online at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/05/03/options-for-eu-turkey-relationship-pub-79061>. Both last accessed 10 Sep. 2020.

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EU losing its last means of influencing the rule of law situation in Turkey.<sup>75</sup>

Another aspect that impacts EU-Turkey cooperation in Syria is the conflict between Greece and Turkey over rights to economic exploitation of resources in the Aegean Sea that re-flared in 2020 due to exploratory drilling activities of a Turkish research ship in the Mediterranean Sea. The border between the two countries was also the setting of another dispute in the refugee crisis caused by the civil war in Syria. In February 2020, 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in an operation in the Idlib area in northern Syria, the last rebel-controlled territory. The incident fueled Turkish concerns of a new surge of refugees pouring into Turkey due to increasing fighting in northern Syria. As a consequence, Ankara opened its borders with the EU and stopped holding back those refugees already in Turkey, thus violating the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal. As a result, Greece was confronted with the task of stopping the refugees that had rushed to the border in the hope of entering the EU.<sup>76</sup> The EU expressed its support of its member state Greece and criticized Turkey for its behavior. In light of such events and the deterioration of the rule of law situation, it comes as no surprise that Greece and other EU members have called for a tougher stance on Turkey. Some have even questioned the 2016 refugee deal.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, EU members opposed to welcoming refugees are concerned that a collapse of the refugee deal would lead to a second refugee crisis in Europe and thus tend to tread carefully around Turkey.

Given the powerful tool the EU has given Turkey with the refugee deal, the bloc cannot act freely in terms of Turkey. The refugee deal

75 Riegert, B., *EU und NATO: Diskussion um Sicherheitszone in Nord-Syrien*, Deutsche Welle, 2019, online at: <https://www.dw.com/de/eu-und-nato-diskussion-um-sicherheitszone-in-nord-syrien/a-50948286>. Last accessed: 11 Aug. 2020; Pierini, 2016, op. cit., p. 13.

76 Modern Diplomacy, *Reassessing EU-Turkey Relations*, 2020, online at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/03/15/reassessing-eu-turkey-relations/>. Last accessed: 10 Sep. 2020.

77 Riegert, 2019, op. cit.

between Turkey and the EU was negotiated to curb the 2015 influx of refugees mainly coming from war-torn countries like Syria. The deal came into effect in 2016 and stipulated that all refugees arriving in Greece from Turkey would be sent back. For every returned refugee, a refugee that is already in Turkey would be resettled in the EU. In return for the Turkish efforts, the EU committed to allocate a total of € 6 billion of aid. In addition, Ankara was promised visa-free access for Turkish citizens to the Schengen zone, an acceleration of Turkey's bid for EU membership and an expansion of the EU-Turkey customs Union.<sup>78</sup> The deal can be considered successful in terms of reducing the number of refugees arriving in the EU. Turkey does not consider it successful with respect to the concessions made to Ankara and has been critical of the EU stating that it has failed to pay the promised € 6 billion in full and deliver on pledges. The EU has contradicted the accusation regarding aid funds, claiming that it has paid the full amount, albeit to aid organizations and not the Turkish government.<sup>79</sup> In response, Ankara has threatened to withdraw from the agreement several times and eventually did so temporarily in March 2020, leading to the events on the Greece-Turkey border, triggering nervous reactions in the EU. Anthony Skinner is convinced that while Turkey may have failed to meet certain conditions, the EU should not have made those unrealistic promises in the first place given that such concessions would be exploited by anti-establishment, right-wing movements.<sup>80</sup> What must be noted, however, is that it is the same right-wing movements that have the biggest interest in a functioning refugee deal as this means fewer refugees arriving in Europe.

78 BBC, *Migrant crisis: EU-Turkey Deal Comes into Effect*, 2016, online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35854413>. Last accessed: 11 Sep. 2020; Skinner, A., *Migrants Likely to Remain Pawns in Turkey-EU Relations for Years to Come*, The Washington Institute, 2020, online at:

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/migrants-likely-to-remain-pawns-in-turkey-eu-relations-for-years-to-come>. Last accessed: 15 Aug. 2020.

79 Riegert, B., *Will the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal Collapse?*, Deutsche Welle, 2020, online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/will-the-eu-turkey-refugee-deal-collapse/a-52579348>. Last accessed: 10 Sep. 2020.

80 Skinner, op. cit.

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Given how concerned some member states are about a new influx of refugees, Ankara has a certain leverage over the EU. Some even say that the EU handed Turkey the means of blackmailing the bloc.<sup>81</sup> Many saw proof of this in the EU's hesitant response to the Turkish incursion into Syria following the US withdrawal and the EU's struggle to agree on language to condemn the Turkish action.<sup>82</sup> The EU's behavior with respect to the refugee deal again shows how divided the EU is on the refugee issue, and the degree to which this division paralyses the bloc. Handing Turkey the key to solve the refugee crisis has made the EU dependent on Ankara. This is at least the case as long as the EU fails to agree on a common position and course in terms of refugees. Once the bloc adopts a common refugee policy, it will be in the position to show more assertiveness vis-à-vis Turkey. Only when both powers meet on a level playing field can they form a true partnership.

### 3.2.4 Russia

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of EU-Russia relations, they have been characterized by a certain fluctuation between periods of relative stability and times when the EU was caught by surprise by Russian policy. Tania Marocchi argues that this is due to the EU's inability to comprehend the Russian perspective on global politics and the EU. In return, she states, Russia's view of EU policy is impacted by how it interprets international relations. According to her, it is important to understand how both the EU and Russia perceive themselves as well as one another to be able to understand why the relationship has been flawed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has continued to consider itself a great power and has tried to recover this status internationally. Russia follows a neorealist paradigm, based on zero-sum thinking and the assumption that states act out of national

81 Der Spiegel, *What the Syrian Debacle Means for the Middle East and Europe*, 2019, online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-syrian-debacle-and-its-implications-for-europe-a-1292149.html>. Last accessed: 12 Aug. 2020.

82 Champion, Fouquet and Ainger, op. cit.

interests. Military strength and strategy play are also key aspects. “In this paradigm, Russia considers states, with clearly defined national interests, the legitimate actors of the international arena. The EU, with its supranational nature, escapes this narrow definition”<sup>83</sup>. In contrast, the EU perceives itself as based on common values like democracy, supranationalism and multilateralism and opposed to power. These different perspectives have not been properly taken into consideration in policymaking, causing frustration on both sides. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU considered itself a model for the Russian development towards democracy. This was a time of relative Russian weakness, in which the EU took the leadership in the relationship. In 1994, the European Union and Russia signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which from the EU’s point of view was intended to help Russia develop into a fully-fledged democracy. By the time the PCA came into effect in 1997, Russia had already started to move away from European values and develop its own identity.<sup>84</sup>

After the 2004 Eastern enlargement of the EU, the bloc went further, launching its Eastern Partnership (EaP) program in 2009 aimed at Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and with the intention of strengthening ties and promoting EU values. This meant a turning point in EU-Russia relations, as Russia considered this a serious threat to its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. In 2011, Russia launched a counter-initiative, the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), thus emphasizing its claim to international relevance. Marocchi states that this was the point in time when a certain geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia started. Russia perceived the EU’s EaP as an encirclement, and when the EU intended to sign an Association Agreement with Ukraine, Russia felt that the bloc had gone too far and launched an invasion into Ukraine to claim

83 Marocchi, T., *EU-Russia Relations: Towards an Increasingly Geopolitical Paradigm*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung [online]. Available at: <https://eu.boell.org/en/2017/07/03/eu-russia-relations-towards-increasinglygeopolitical-paradigm>. Last accessed: 16 Aug. 2020.

84 Ibid.

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Russian interests. The Ukrainian crisis showed that “the EU’s normative approach [...] disregarded the fact that the EU policy of transfer and sharing of norms also carries with itself power implications. In its liberal mind-set, the EU systematically ignored geopolitical considerations. The European Neighborhood Policy was Eurocentric in its conception and didn’t fully take into consideration the role that external actors play in the EU’s neighborhood.”<sup>85</sup> At the same time, the EU was not adequately equipped to handle geopolitical conflicts, which put it in a weaker and more reactive position when faced with Russia’s new assertiveness.

Marocchi believes that the EU, at least to some extent, has learnt its lesson and that there is an increased awareness of the geopolitical dimensions of the ENP.<sup>86</sup> The fluctuation in EU-Russia relations, however, continues as was shown in the Syrian conflict. Again, the EU was taken by surprise as it failed to expect the extent to which Russia would engage in military interventions in Syria. The EU’s miscalculation was caused by its failure to comprehend the damage the many years of Western ignorance of Russia had done. The bloc also failed to realize Russia’s ambition to re-position itself as a great power and that by reviving relations with Syria, Russia was able to return to the Middle East, securing its strategically relevant access to the Mediterranean Sea.

With the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, EU-Russia relations reached a new low. At the same time, new cracks appeared between eastern EU members, especially former Soviet satellites, and western members, notably France, in favor of re-engagement with Russia, and Germany, keen to prevent escalation in bilateral relations. These tensions over Ukraine also impacted the war in Syria as it made EU-Russian cooperation there almost impossible.<sup>87</sup> The Ukrainian crisis is

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Morillas, P., Sökmen, M. J. and Ünver, A., *EU-Turkey Relations in the Midst of a Global Storm*, FEUTURE, Paper No. 7, 2017, p. 9-10, online at: <https://future.uni->

but one example of how tensions between Russia and the EU impact developments in Syria. The simple fact remains, however, that conflict settlement in Syria will only be possible with Moscow. Putin will not give up Russian interests in the country now that Russia has re-established its presence in Syria so firmly. As often, the future of EU-Russia relations remains in doubt.

### ***Conclusion and Outlook***

This paper gave an overview of peacebuilding measures and proposals made by the EU, national policymakers and experts. It was shown that EU sanctions, humanitarian aid and the bloc's donor conferences have had limited effect on the ground. The EU has often let others dictate the terms instead of using its position as the biggest donor smartly. Moreover, the roadmap provided in the EUs strategies has not been implemented successfully. A revision of EU measures and policy and an adaptation to the current circumstances is therefore necessary. The first step of this process must be for the EU to define its interests in Syria collectively and spell out its plans to show a path forward, including conditions for re-establishing relations with Syria and consequences for any violations. Furthermore, the EU must overcome its division and establish a common approach in foreign and security policy in order to be perceived as a power worth considering. With regard to Syria, the EU will have to find a middle ground between a pragmatic and a principled approach and ensure it does not sacrifice too many of its values while continuing to adapt to the current circumstances. A collectively established approach would make the task easier.

The second part of this paper addressed the question why the EU has not increased its efforts despite their obvious lack of success. For this purpose, the paper looked at structural shortcomings and contradicting objectives inside the EU as well as events across the globe that have impacted the EU's activities in Syria. With regard to the structural grievances, the EU is

[koeln.de/sites/feuture/user\\_upload/D2.5\\_Online\\_Paper.pdf](https://koeln.de/sites/feuture/user_upload/D2.5_Online_Paper.pdf). Last accessed: 15 Aug. 2020.



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hampered by the unwillingness of Member States to prioritize EU interests rather than national ones and their tendency to see global events from a national perspective. A major stumbling block in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the unanimity principle, which has become particularly difficult with a declining commitment to consensus and increasing dividedness. The veto right makes CFSP vulnerable to being blocked for national reasons. The solution to this hindrance can be qualified majority voting (QMV), which would also protect European CFSP from outside (Russian and Chinese) influence.

When it comes to European objectives, the divide between member states is most prominent with respect to refugees. Positions range from outright rejection of them, to an open-door policy. Finding a common position, will be the only way forward to find a sustainable solution to the refugee crisis and strengthen European solidarity. This is also true in terms of external events that have impacted the EU's steps in Syria. The fact that the EU's behavior was influenced by external events, is neither dangerous nor unusual. Due to the lack of unity in the EU, however, those events can create new battlefields and cause further resentment in the EU and have repercussions on its ability to act.

The reason why the EU has not stepped up its efforts, despite the fact that they failed to yield lasting results, is that it has been unable to do so. This inability is due to decision-making structures as well as fragmented objectives of member states. This lack of unity and identification with the European Union presents a major obstacle to a more assertive EU policy in the Syrian civil war. To overcome this grievance, the member states must realize how much there stands to gain in acting en bloc, as this means more international leverage and relevance. Big member states must be willing to relinquish their leadership position to some extent while smaller member states must be willing to assume more responsibility in terms of truly practicing the principle of equality. Whether these changes will come in time to play a role in the Syrian conflict is doubtful. Nevertheless, they are essential for the EU to be able to assert itself in times of geopolitical change and not to slip into irrelevance in future conflicts.



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