

HAS THE EUROPEAN UNION'S COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY FOR SYRIA BECOME STALE?

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The ongoing conflict in Syria has developed from simple protest movements against the President Bashar al-Assad's government and his failure to deliver on the promised reforms and economic growth into a full-fledged civil war. It's been four years since the outbreak of the conflict and the violent clashes between the government armed forces and opposition have taken their toll on the Syrian population, causing over 150.000 deaths, an unprecedented refugee crisis-over 2 million people found shelter in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey-, and a displacement of population over 4 million people inside the country.

Deemed the greatest humanitarian crisis of the present times by the United Nations, it caught the international community's eye with the gravity of the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime against his own population in his efforts to stifle the opposition's attempts to oust him from power. The European Union, in its position as a global actor, has been continuously condemning the serious violations of human rights and the atrocities committed by the Syrian Army and supported, therefore, the UN initiatives of reaching a compromise between the Assad regime and the National Coalition through the Geneva Peace Conferences in 2012 and early 2014. In addition, the EU devised its own strategy for Syria, employing instruments for civilian crisis intervention. Firstly, the support given and the Union's participation in the talks for the solving of the crisis in Syria, alongside the group of international partners Friends of Syria have had partial success in the sense that although it failed reaching an agreement, the Coalition stood out as an aggregate political actor, one which made its claims clearly and with whom common ground could be reached, opposed to the Assad representatives who were resistant to the idea of a transitional government or any kind of change that could alleviate the crisis.

Secondly, the strategy employed by the EU includes the bloc's economic leverage, mechanisms for deploying civilian peace operations and close working relationships with the United Nations and other multilateral organisations as means for pressuring the Syrian government to stop fighting the opposition, stop the deconstruction of state and harming civilians, as well as furthering its efforts to stabilize the country and give a sense of security to the war-troubled population. Yet we might ask ourselves whether this strategy has been efficient and effective or the Union might find itself in need of developing another approach, perhaps this time a military one. However, if there is the case for the latter, could such an approach be achieved?

How has the EU managed the Syrian crisis so far?

The EU as a lever

As the violence and repression continued, the EU decided to introduce a series of restrictive measures to increase pressure on the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The first action in a long list taken against the regime was to sever ties with Syria in May 2011, by freezing the Association Agreement that had been negotiated with Syria and suspending bilateral cooperation programmes between the EU and the Syrian government under the European Neighbourhood Policy. The participation of Syrian authorities in EU's regional programmes and the loan operations and technical assistance by the European Investment Bank to Syria were also suspended. Furthermore, the EU made repeated calls for the Assad regime to refrain from using force against civilians, as well as come up with a political solution to the conflict. However, having these claims fall on deaf ears, the EU strengthened the sanctions and added Assad, his family and more of its collaborators to the travel ban list in order to constrain their actions.

The oil embargo that followed in September 2011 and the trade ban on gold, precious metals and diamonds with Syrian public bodies and the central bank targeted the public accounts which were dependant on sales from oil. As European countries accounted for 90% of Syria's exports and about one third of the country's export income, the sanctions imposed on the Syrian oil industry have had clear consequences as indicated in a report of the European Policy Centre: the Syrian oil minister indicated losses of \$4 billion from the economy six months after the embargo had been imposed and a cut in the oil production by more than a half between May 2011 and June 2013, which resulted in internal fuel shortages and price spiking, affecting the population. However, even if it was one of the toughest measures adopted by the EU, it only had partial success because Assad managed to divert the trade to other neighbours such as Lebanon and Iraq and controlled the impact of EU financial sanctions using the Russian Banking sector. In addition, he managed to secure regular supplies of Russian and Iranian fuel, limiting the scope of European actions.

In addition, aside from the diplomatic and economic sanctions mentioned above, the EU issued a prohibition on the import of arms and related material from Syria. Export restrictions on certain equipment, goods and technology that might be used for internal repression or for the manufacture or maintenance of such products were also introduced. Yet, France and Great Britain made pleas to the EU to allow for weapons to be delivered to the opposition and rebel forces caught in the fight against the Syrian Army. The move, although with the purpose of showing the Assad regime the military balance could shift, might have not been fully positive; because the shipment of arms to a fractured opposition with factions linked to al-Qaeda only worsened the conflict. In support of this idea stands A Human Rights Watch report documenting the crimes and abuses committed by rebel forces against hundreds of people from President Bashar al-Assad's minority Alawite sect in August 2013. The problem highlighted by this report is that rebels from Islamist groups in the opposition perpetrate indiscriminate attacks on civilians on an equal footing with the regime they stand against, deepening the rife sectarian violence in the country. Then again, the decision made by the West had undesired consequences on the ground, but it tried to address this problem by dividing the way the West deals with the opposition. Thus providing support to the mainstream Free Syrian Arm while seeking to prevent money and weapons from falling in the hands of hardline Islamists and jihadists linked to al-Qaeda. However, the problem is still very much present with the extremist rebels who get support from some states and individuals in the Gulf.

The EU as an international partner

Now, having seen the effectiveness and shortcomings of the EU acting as a lever, we may proceed to analyzing the ways in which the European actor contributed to the international effort of managing the Syrian crisis. The comprehensive EU response has been following three lines of action related to 1) supporting a political solution that aimed at finding a sustainable solution to the crisis, 2) preventing regional destabilisation from the spill-over of the conflict to neighbouring countries and 3) addressing the dramatic humanitarian situation and assisting the affected population.

First of all, the EU has repeatedly called for the urgent need for a political solution to the Syrian crisis ever since the beginning of the conflict and supported the efforts made by the three joint UN-Arab League special representatives to broker an agreement between the Assad government and opposition which would have put an end to the war. In this sense, it commended Kofi Annan's initiative to hold an action group conference on Syria in Geneva (with the participation of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) that resulted in a Communiqué being issued. The declaration stated the need for a "transitional government body with full executive powers" which would include members of the present Syrian government and the opposition. Furthermore, the EU sought close cooperation with the US and Russia in their efforts to revive political negotiations on the basis of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. It also ensured a robust EU position that reaffirmed its support for political settlement to the conflict leading to a transition to a democratic process, while addressing the dire humanitarian situation.

Additionally, the EU has continued its engagement with the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), recognizing it as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people after the Assad government delegation had failed to find common ground with the

opposition at the Geneva II Conference back in January 2014, has kept its alliance with the terrorist group Hezbollah and continued indiscriminate shelling, causing more victims among the civilian population. However, much remains to be done and the Union calls on the SOC and all opposition groups to continue to work towards a political settlement by means of confidence building and to enhance inclusiveness of moderate groups, instead of working alongside extremist cells, such as the Al-Nusra Front. While it is true that a stronger and more united opposition is essential to representing a viable alternative to the actual regime, it is also highly recommendable for the component groups to share the same means for the achievement of positive change on the political stage, eliminating the possibility to perpetuate sectarian segregation.

Secondly, as a fierce promoter of accountability, the Union pushes for those responsible for the chemical attacks and other numerous grave violations of human rights and the murder of thousands of civilians, notably women and children, to be held accountable. In this respect, the EU has engaged in multilateral forums in order to ensure that the ongoing and systematic violations of human rights, international humanitarian law and fundamental freedoms are addressed. Therefore, the EU took a leading role, working closely with the states of the region, in the United Nations Human Rights Council to bring together three Special Sessions on Syria and to establish a UN Independent Commission of Inquiry.

Thirdly, the EU finds it crucial to engage with Arab countries and non-state organizations in the management of the Syrian conflict, which gained regional complexity with the effects of the humanitarian crisis beginning to show up in the neighbouring countries, as well as with the emergence of a serious threat posed by the terrorist Islamic State organization's territorial gains. On the one hand, as Europe is the world's largest donor to the international response to the crisis, with overall funding for humanitarian aid since 2012 amounting to €2.9 billion (EU+ Member States), it is dedicated to its mission to address pressing needs and the consequences of the war in Syria and its spill-over effects in the neighbouring countries, in particular Lebanon and Jordan.

The massive flows of refugees outside the Syrian borders have caused the countries in the region to be in dire need of humanitarian, crisis-response and development cooperation assistance in order to assist refugees and other persons in need of protection, the host populations, and to support health and education systems that are at breaking point. For this purpose, The EU humanitarian aid, channelled through mandated and professional partners (UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross), primarily provides life-saving food and nutritional items, medical emergency responses, shelter, distribution of basic non-food items, safe water, sanitation and hygiene and protection, including gender based violence and child protection. What's more, The European Commission has been encouraging UN agencies, NGOs, international organisations and other donors to prioritise relief operations, to target the most vulnerable, and to reinforce coordination in order to maximise the use of the funding available.

On the other hand, the EU is also committed to tackling in a comprehensive and coordinated manner the regional threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism and addressing the underlying instability and violence which have given the Islamic State and other terrorist groups the chance to ensure a firm grip on several territories in Syria. As such, the EU supports the US-led coalition of more than sixty states to tackle the threat from IS, including military action in accordance with international law.

Finally, the overall picture of the EU's strategy for Syria as outlined across the paper is not intended to simply determine the Union's role in the international management of the Syrian crisis, but rather to determine the effectiveness of its engagement in the joint efforts to reach a mainly Syrian-tailored agreement for peace and stabilization. The strategy, making use of leverage instruments such as diplomatic and economic sanctions, but also implying close cooperation and coordination with regional or international organizations as well as states, has proven more efficient in some lines of actions and less in others.

As far as the sanctions imposed by the EU are concerned, they have been in accordance to most of the international partners' views and stances and reaffirmed the bloc's condemnation of the use of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population and limited the resources at the disposal of President Assad's government. However, the restrictions imposed on Syria have only marginally

affected the regime and helped in as much as contain the conflict, rather than shake Assad's rule to the point of collapse as it had probably been envisaged. But there should be no surprise for this outcome when the government is receiving strong external support from allies such as Russia and Iran.

On the other hand, it is clear that the EU has proven a great political will in supporting the international partner's initiatives and work with an active participation, for instance conducting dialogues with the leaders of the National Coalition in order to ensure that it remains and consolidates as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people, whose view is kept within the limits of democratic principles and international law. Unfortunately, without strong unity in the opposition forces, without a clear control of the Islamist groups committing violations and crimes while associated with the Coalition and its armed wing, the Free Syrian Army, and more importantly, with a lack of will from the government to at least agree to a ceasefire, the situation in Syria is in stalemate. Nevertheless, the EU stands strong in its commitment to safeguard the lives and rights of the refugees under humanitarian law and it is relentless in its efforts to provide Syria and its neighbouring countries with humanitarian aid and crisis relief assistance. Therefore, this is certainly the EU strategy's most successful line of action.

Yet, in my opinion, the shortcomings faced by the EU within its comprehensive strategy are not inherent to this approach being flawed from the beginning, but they rather come as result of the unchanging dynamics in some states' behaviour, the on-ground conditions taking a turn for the worse or getting the hopes high in a process that seemed promising, but ended in failure. Of course we can try to envisage another approach, one that is found at the other end of the spectrum and which implies a military intervention as a solution to the raging war. But would it be a realistic approach? I honestly think it wouldn't. First of all, because a military intervention on behalf of the EU would require the international community's support and authorization, to be precise of the UN Security Council, and that would be a dead-end with China and Russia vetoing their opposition to any resolution of the kind.

Now, even though the EU would consider acting unilaterally, it would still be almost impossible to get the unanimous approval of the European Council for such a move. And, let's not forget one important aspect. The EU doesn't have at its disposal an army, but merely a few battle groups that have never been deployed to carry out a unified military mission and, in addition, mobilizing them has never been the EU's strongest point; it doesn't take long to remember the EU's response regarding Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo or the Central African Republic.

Secondly, military expenditure should be taken into account and the price for logistics, transportation of military equipment and personnel would certainly be much higher than any member state's willingness and ability to pay, letting aside the phantom of the economic crisis still looming over the EU.

Thirdly, there are member states in the Union, such as France and the United Kingdom, which, despite their prowess, oppose the idea of a strike on Syrian soil if it isn't prompted unanimously by the UNSC. And last but not least, an armed intervention by the West in Syria against the Assad regime might escalate the war. The army is not a unitary force, with many officers defecting to the opposition's armed wing The Free Syrian Army, leaving behind an army under governmental control and infiltrated with the President's family members and acolytes. Moreover, the opposition should be capable of handling the state affairs after the toppling of the actual regime and it can do so only if it is not divided by different ideological or religious views resulting in power struggles that could hinder the transitional approach towards democracy, respect for human rights and international law to which it adhered at the Geneva II Conference. So, in the eventuality of a military intervention, the leaders of the army should be persuaded to unify it and, thus, tipping the balance in favour of the National Coalition, which should instead, come forward as a real alternative that could be embraced by the population still supporting Bashar al-Assad. This way, a power vacuum where forces answering to no one might wage war against each other without restraint could be avoided.

In conclusion, the European Union's Strategy for Syria has proven all in all efficient in tackling the Syrian conflict and its effects and remains the EU's best option. Although there is significant room for improvement, a military solution to quelling the crisis is at the moment out of the question for the reasons stated above and because, in my opinion, the greatest threat Syria faces these days is not the

Assad regime and the fighting between rival parties, but the Islamic State's presence on its territory. Therefore, the country should first be ridded of the massive terrorist threat threatening all the more its stability. Unfortunately, for the benefit of the country and the region, the US-led coalition against the Islamic State may resort to collaborating with the government's armed forces, thus legitimizing Bashar al-Assad in his fight against terrorism or covertly against his own population.