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Of War and Peace: The EU Role in Syria's Peace Process

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The EU's DNA encodes the aspiration to globally promote democracy and, through it, peace. This info-sheet assesses how the Union took on this role in the Syrian peace process, and how effective its measures have been.

The conflict in Syria commenced in March 2011, first as a spate of peaceful demonstrations, then to violent demonstrations—escalating quickly into a full-fledged civil uprising. The EU responded swiftly to the Bashar Al Assad government's crackdown through the imposition of sanctions on those Syrian individuals deemed responsible. As the conflict sailed into civil war, further sanctions were passed by the EU Council—comprised of the Heads of State of the Member States.

In 2014, the dynamics of the conflict shifted fundamentally. Da'esh declared an Islamic State in the lawless, war-struck territories between Syria and Iraq. At the same time, the secular-minded, Free Syrian Army (FSE), dissolved as did the Iraqi armed forces in the country's centre and north. This prompted the Council to change course and to the adoption of the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/ Da'esh threat in March 2015.

As more and more regional and international actors became mired in the conflict, the war transformed into a multilayered, complex struggle that melted global geopolitics and regional hegemony into the festering quest for local dominance. This complicated the EU's search for an adequate response.

By 2017, the EU had adopted a more comprehensive strategy for Syria in a bid to manoeuvre the conflict in which multiple global actors were now warring alongside hundreds of fractured rebel-and terrorist groups. To establish the conditions necessary for a diplomatic solution, the EU called on the Syrian regime and major forces on the ground — notably Russia, Turkey and Iran — to enforce a Cessation

of Hostilities. Only hollow assurances were provided as Russia, Turkey and Iran maintained very different, even incompatible, interests in Syria than the EU.

As a result, the EU has had serious difficulties finding the most appropriate role to play in Syria: it is the largest donor of humanitarian aid to — contributing more than €10.6 billion allocated by the Member States since 2011 — while the European Parliament has adopted over 10 resolutions on the conflict since 2011, reiterating the importance of a Syria-owned political solution, through the embattled United Nations brokered International Syria Support Group (ISSG). The EU has also attempted to craft a greater role for itself by co-chairing two Summits named ‘Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region,’ in April 2017 and 2018. The Summits generated huge sums of humanitarian aid and reiterated support for the UN-led peace process (stalled amid heavy criticism by permanent Security Council Members China and Russia) but, beyond money, no tangible efforts were mounted to pressure Russia — the leading foreign actor propping-up the Assad regime — to change its behaviour. Indeed, Russia continues to militarily support the Assad regime even amid allegations of the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

It is also noteworthy that while the EU can be credited for sanctioning Syria from the onset of the conflict, it has failed to do the same for Russia or Iran or Turkey in connection to their roles in the Syrian war. This lack of assertiveness may seriously harm the EU’s efforts of becoming a serious contributor to the peace process.

The EU’s hesitation was due to concerns that sanctions against Iran would endanger the — now defunct — nuclear agreement with Tehran (JCPOA), which it widely regards as a stabilising factor in the region. Turkey keeps sanctions at bay through the political capital gained by sticking to the letter of the EU-refugee deal under which it continues to host millions of refugees that would otherwise attempt to enter Europe. With Russia, the EU relationship is already very confused (re: Ukraine, Georgia, assassination in the UK, gas etc) and Brussels lacked the interest in opening up yet another front with Moscow.

And, the US is setting a new direction with its retrenchment in Syria and its increasingly serious stand-off with Russia which further complicates the EU response since the Union counts on Washington to be the main regional security guarantor. The changing geopolitics is producing a new dynamic that the EU has yet to adapt to.

Another crippling factor is the long-standing lack of coherence within the Union. Whereas some EU members, such as France, the (soon to Brexit) UK and Ger-

many, have called for sanctions against Iran, others, such as Italy, Spain and Austria, have blocked the decision, which requires unanimity within the Council. This reveals the paralysis of the EU in foreign affairs and its inability to conduct itself as a capable, efficient and effective global actor. This fracture became even more apparent with the allied (France, UK, US) targeted air strikes against Syrian military installations—those likely used to perpetrate the most recent chemical attacks (April 2018). EU leaders, notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose government refrained from participating, broadly supported the strikes, however, the Union lacked a coordinated approach and Merkel's message was merely a function of trying to relay an image of European solidarity despite Germany's parliamentary declaration claiming that the strikes were 'illegal.'

The EU may look back at its strong rhetorical ambitions from the beginning of the Syrian conflict, but the lack of any tangible gains by the EU in limited or even ending the bloodshed in the country — in seven years of open warfare — is deeply problematic. The hesitation to take bold decisions, to be proactive — even if risky — restricted its' role in the war and will affect its role in the ensuing peace. With Brussels paralysed, the Syrian people continuing to suffer and the Russian-Iranian-Turkey nexus emerging victorious the question of how important Syria is to Europe becomes paramount to ask. At this stage, it seems that Syria is low on Brussels priority list.

We at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre deplore that lack of progress in the Syrian peace process and in establishing appropriate means to bring the warring sides to a dialogue that represents the national interest of Syrians. We also encourage the European Union to demonstrate leadership as a broker in the Syrian conflict, to deal with the humanitarian crisis as part of a larger issue of national stabilisation rather than the necessary outcome of an unfolding conflict. The EU should also use its leverage with Iran, Turkey and Russia to be included in the peace process and post-war development of Syria.

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