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Challenges Ahead for the EU in Syria – Aid, Sanctions and Normalisation

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In May 2023, Arab leaders who had called for ousting Syria's President Bashar al-Assad during the previous decade warmly welcomed him at the Arab League Summit and agreed to normalise diplomatic ties with Damascus. Syria's return to the League strengthened Assad's embattled rule while seriously weakening the opposition and those who still call for inclusive political reform.

The EU continues to impose sanctions on Syria and is adamant with its call for a political solution based on UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254. This said, there is an ongoing and robust debate regarding whether the EU should reconsider its policy. This reconsideration spans various aspects, including the efficacy of sanctions, the EU's role in reconstruction efforts, and the potential normalisation of relations.

Notably, news reports have emerged indicating that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) engaged in lobbying efforts in Brussels in June 2023. Their objective was to advocate for the lifting of sanctions specifically on key regime figures. This move is portrayed as a preliminary step toward facilitating the broader process of reconstructing Syria. The debates surrounding these developments underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the geopolitical landscape

in the region.¹

However, EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP), Josep Borrell, has said that an EU change of tack on Syria is unlikely to materialise as member states disagree on the matter.² Still, there are voices among the member states calling for a pragmatic stance. What is then the potential path ahead for the EU vis-à-vis Syria?

The EU Syria strategy: Sanctions and diplomatic isolation

EU sanctions against Syria encompass a broad spectrum, targeting not only the country's economy at large but also addressing high-ranking military, political and economic state officials. The EU's strategic approach to Syria, outlined in its 2017 Strategy, delineates several key policy objectives. Foremost among these objectives is the aspiration to bring an end to violence. Additionally, the EU aims to initiate an inclusive transition process, ensuring unhindered access to humanitarian aid for the civilian population, and pursuing accountability for war crimes committed during the course of the conflict.³ In line with UNSC Resolution 2254 of 2015, EU policy continues to be centred around three no's: no normalisation, no reconstruction and no lifting of sanctions until the regime agrees to a political transition. Since there has not been any progress and – despite the current stalemate – the conflict is far from over (with risks of escalation especially in the area of Idlib), there does not seem to be much ground for the Union to change position.

The earthquake strikes Syria

Before the February 2023 earthquake, according to the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), over three million people were internally displaced in Syria and 8.2 million needed life-saving aid in government-controlled

¹ "Saudis, UAE Lobby Europe to Restore Ties with Assad Regime", in *The New Arab*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/node/2912773>.

² European External Action Service (EEAS), *Syria: Opening Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Ministerial Session of the VII. Brussels Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region*, 15 June 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/430692_en.

³ Website of the Council of the European Union: *Syria: EU Response to the Crisis*, <http://europa.eu/ljC96nD>.

areas. In opposition-controlled northwest Syria, 4.1 million people, including 2.7 million internally displaced, required urgent humanitarian assistance.⁴ With 27.4 billion euros allocated to Syrians in Syria itself as well as in neighbouring countries, the EU is the largest international donor.⁵

Following the seizure of the northwest by opposition groups in Syria, the Syrian regime responded by imposing a blockade on all supplies to the region. The dynamics surrounding the provision of aid to this area are intricately tied to UNSC Resolution 2165, unanimously adopted in 2014. According to this resolution, all humanitarian aid destined for the northwest region was permitted to enter through Turkey via the main border crossing at Bab al Hawa, without requiring authorisation from the Syrian government. This cross-border aid mechanism was established to ensure the unimpeded flow of assistance to the affected population. However, the Assad regime asserts that all aid should be routed through Damascus, allowing it to exert control over who receives access to aid and who does not.⁶

Russia, a staunch ally of the Assad regime, has played a pivotal role in shaping the UN cross-border aid mechanism. Notably, Russia has advocated for the renewal of this mechanism every six months, deviating from the customary practice of annual extensions. The divergent perspectives on sovereignty and control over aid distribution continue to be key points of contention.

When the earthquake hit Syria, two more crossings were opened from Turkey at Bab el Ayni and el-Rai for aid delivery into the northwest Syria. However, it took a full week for Damascus to agree to open the crossings, delaying the delivery of aid at a time most needed. The Assad regime also tried to present itself as the only relevant body that can coordinate different agencies and manage the incoming aid and emergency funds by. The EU introduced a humanitarian exemption into the sanctions regime “to facilitate the speedy delivery of humanitarian assistance”.⁷

⁴ ECHO, *Syria Factsheet* (Last updated: 10/05/2022), <https://reliefweb.int/node/3846134>.

⁵ Council of the European Union, *Earthquake in Türkiye and Syria: EU Amends Restrictive Measures in Place Regarding Syria to Facilitate the Speedy Delivery of Humanitarian Aid*, 23 February 2023, <https://europa.eu/!xVBn7H>.

⁶ Margaret Basheer, “Syria Opens Aid Crossing for Six Months”, in *VOA News*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7180003.html>.

⁷ Council of the European Union, *Syria: EU Extends Humanitarian Exemption for Another Six*

What came as a shock in the UN was that in July 2023, when the six-month period was approaching expiration, Russia vetoed the extension of the cross-border aid delivery, leaving people living in northwest Syria on their own. This move aimed first to empower Damascus by forcing the international community to coordinate all aid effort with the Assad regime and, second, to weaken the opposition. A few days later, Syria announced it would let aid cross through Bab al-Hawa for the coming six months,⁸ thus leading to further concerns that the regime would use the provision or withholding of aid to control the opposition areas. As this six-month period would end by the beginning of 2024, the issue continued to be debated in the following months.

Normalisation with Arab countries

The consequences of the earthquake strengthened the prevalent view that Assad had essentially emerged victorious in the war and that engaging with him was crucial for the future stability and security of the area. Assad skilfully positioned his regime at the forefront of coordinating search and rescue operations in the earthquake-affected zones. He took control of the distribution of aid, utilising it as a tool to press the opposition, either by delaying or diverting assistance. Additionally, Syria was experiencing a relative stalemate in its civil conflict, with Assad solidifying his regime's control in Damascus.

In light of these circumstances, Arab states opted to readmit Syria into the Arab League. The rationale behind this decision was the expectation that such a move would expedite the safe return of Syrian refugees, address the issue of synthetic Captagon drug trafficking, and curtail the influence of Iranian-backed groups, particularly in southern regions of Syria.⁹ However, progress on all these issues is very hard to achieve.

The likelihood of refugees voluntarily returning to Syria appears slim, primarily due to the extensive physical devastation in the absence of any visible reconstruction

Months, 14 July 2023, <https://europa.eu/!bt8pmQ>.

⁸ Raffi Berg, "Syria Seeks to Assert Control over UN Aid Deliveries", in *BBC News*, 14 July 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66069530>.

⁹ Marwan Muasher, "An Inauspicious Return", in *Diwan*, 16 May 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/89762>.

efforts. More significantly, the Syrian regime's dismal track record in handling returnees adds to the uncertainty.¹⁰ Jordan cracked down on a Captagon network right after Syria's reintegration into the Arab League.¹¹ However, the notion the Assad regime might actively combat Captagon trafficking is questionable. The regime derives substantial profits from the drug trade. Most critically, the drug trafficking network has taken on a life of its own, making it highly doubtful whether the regime, even if willing, possesses the capability to dismantle it.¹²

As for Iran's influence in Syria, the Assad regime may leverage it but certainly not get rid of it.¹³ In recent years, notable geopolitical shifts and reconciliations among former adversaries have been unfolding. The Abraham Accords initiated a fresh wave of normalisation between Israel and Arab states, which the ongoing conflict in Gaza has stalled but not undermined altogether. The Chinese-brokered Iranian-Saudi deal has diminished the relevance of regional sectarian dynamics, altering perceptions of Iran as the primary threat to Arab countries. Turkey's renewed engagements with former adversaries, including Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are significant signs of change. The reintegration of Syria into the Arab League should be regarded as a noteworthy component of this evolving transformation in which Iran is increasingly – if grudgingly – being accepted as a regional player also in the Levant.

In this context, the EU should find new instruments to engage with the crisis in Syria, through further cooperation with regional actors. New diplomatic platforms with more vigorous regional backing than the defunct Geneva process and the Astana framework (which is limited to Iran, Russia and Turkey) can be established.

¹⁰ See for example, European Asylum Support Office (EASO), *Syria Situation of Returnees from Abroad. Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, p. 20-29, <https://doi.org/10.2847/980660>.

¹¹ "Jordan behind Attack that Killed Drug Trafficker in Syria: SOHR", in *Al Jazeera*, 8 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/sohr-attack-that-killed-drug-trafficker-in-syria-was-by-jordan>.

¹² Agnès Levallois et al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 17 (February 2023), p. 26-27, <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1540>.

¹³ Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Normalization Signals a New Middle Eastern Order", in *Brookings Commentaries*, 10 May 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/syrias-normalisation-signals-a-new-middle-eastern-order>.

The EU can still play a political role in Syria

Time is not ripe for any dramatic change in EU policy unless coupled with political reform and a negotiated and inclusive peace based on accountability and justice. Normalisation, lifting of sanctions and reconstruction without political change cannot be considered as options and will only help further downgrade the EU's political role in Syria and its actorness in the region at large.

However, the EU has the potential to foster initiatives by offering political and financial incentives, reintroducing a politically negotiated solution for Syria into the regional agenda. Multilateral platforms supported by the EU, particularly in specific issue areas such as local development and water management, can have a meaningful impact. Despite Damascus' reluctance to heed calls for political change, there should be a concerted effort to advance mechanisms for more robust aid monitoring.

It is essential to clarify that the EU's pursuit of stronger aid monitoring does not equate to normalising relations with Damascus. On the contrary, while maintaining its stance against normalisation, the EU can utilise regional platforms to exert pressure on Assad. While the Arab countries showed minimal concern for human rights, accountability, justice, or transparency, they do appreciate economic and political stability, as well as addressing the impact of the refugee crisis. This provides avenues for cooperation with the EU. The Union should offer Arab countries financial assistance on the condition that political change in Syria remains in the regional conflict management agenda and that targeted solutions are adopted to help segments of Syria's population, spanning those living in opposition-held areas, internally displaced persons and refugees. This approach has the potential to bring about significant improvements in the lives of the people in Syria.



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