

IN SEARCH OF AN EU ROLE IN THE SYRIAN WAR

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The Syrian war has left the EU in a second-tier position among international actors. The violent policies of the Syrian regime, Russia's show of force, Turkey's ambivalent policy on the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds, and the EU's internal divisions have given the union little influence on the course of events in Syria. Yet the brunt of the war's humanitarian, economic, and security consequences falls on EU countries. The EU's future role in Syria will be a litmus test of a genuine common foreign and security policy.

Key Themes

- As a peace project, the EU can hardly comprehend the clan of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the EU wrongly assumed that the Assad regime would collapse in short order. Yet the regime has so far assured its survival by combining Russian interests in the region and its own limitless violence.
- The United States has entered an unexpected relationship with Russia on Syria, creating a new situation for the EU.
- Russia has rescued the Assad regime and is back at the table where the world order is shaped. Beyond saving Assad, Russia's objective in Syria is to establish political parity with the United States, a development that sidelines the EU.
- With its ambivalent policy on the Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds, Turkey is not on the same page as the EU on Syria, even though Ankara and Brussels struck a deal on refugees in March 2016. But Turkey is now recalibrating its Syria policy, especially through an incipient normalization with Russia.
- Iran's regional role has been boosted by the July 2015 international nuclear deal, but the EU has not used its dialogue with Tehran to influence Iran's Syria policy.

Major Findings for the EU

- The prevailing institutional architecture of EU foreign policy has resulted in a complete lack of European influence on developments in the Syrian war, be it from the EU collectively or from member states individually. This has negative consequences on a critical regional issue like the Syrian conflict, especially because the bulk of the security, humanitarian, and economic consequences impact the EU.
- The EU needs to adjust to the new geopolitical landscape created by the Syrian conflict by recalibrating its position vis-à-vis other major players, contributing to regional security issues, and standing firm on its values. It needs to use its large foreign policy toolbox in a much better-coordinated manner under the leadership of its foreign policy high representative.
- If the EU is unable to craft an effective, well-coordinated policy on Syria, it may see its role limited to humanitarian actions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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