



IN SEARCH OF AN EU ROLE IN THE SYRIAN WAR

Marc Pierini



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About the Author

Marc Pierini has been a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe since September 2012; his research there focuses on developments in the Middle East and Turkey from a European perspective. Pierini was a career EU diplomat from December 1976 to April 2012. He was EU ambassador and head of delegation to Turkey (2006–2011), to Tunisia and Libya (2002–2006), to Syria (1998–2002), and to Morocco (1991–1995). He was the first coordinator for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or the Barcelona Process (1995–1998), and the main negotiator for the release of the Bulgarian hostages from Libya (2004–2007). Pierini served as counselor in the cabinets of two European commissioners: Claude Cheysson (1979–1981) and Abel Matutes (1989–1991).

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Summary

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.

Introduction

Civilian unrest in Syria started in March 2011 and quickly became an internationalized proxy war, with the involvement of France, Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and other actors, as well as the rise of a transnational terrorist movement, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The war has been fought at the price of massive loss of life, huge flows of refugees, widespread destruction, and multiple atrocities, many probably meeting the qualifications for war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Five and a half years later, it is not certain that one of the most intractable conflicts of the twenty-first century lends itself to any meaningful foreign policy analysis. However, from a European standpoint, certain trends stand out. The foreign policy positions taken over time by the European Union (EU) in the Syrian conflict have had little influence on the course of events. Conversely, the rebalancing of the diplomatic landscape triggered by the Syrian war has entailed prominent and coordinated roles for Russia and the United States, a development that has ended up marginalizing the EU.

Given the stark contrast between the EU's daring initial position—that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must go—and its modest military and diplomatic footprint so far, the Syrian war also offers some lessons for the union's future position in conflict resolution efforts. A key consideration is the discrepancy between the EU's limited influence on the course of events and the fact it bears the brunt of the humanitarian effects of the crisis, with massive social, political, and security consequences for European societies. Yet this huge gap between inaction and consequences is unlikely to trigger a different EU policy on Syria, as the implementation of the EU's Lisbon Treaty and the resulting foreign policy architecture and practices have left the EU less equipped than before to deal with such a major crisis in an efficient and comprehensive manner.

The Syrian war has no happy end in close sight. Even if hostilities were to cease tomorrow, the tasks of rebuilding the country's political system, security, infrastructure, and private dwellings and of clearing unexploded mines and ordnance would probably take a decade. Rehabilitating the traumatized Syrian people and piecing together communities that previously had a tradition of coexistence would take several generations. The EU has the potential to play a key role here. But because of the habits picked up during the first six years

of implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, it is far from certain that in the diplomatic and rehabilitation phases the union would find the role it has lacked during the war.

The Syrian civil war constitutes one of the most unpredictable conflicts in modern times, one that will undoubtedly become a case study in foreign policy cynicism. For the foreseeable future, the EU's role remains confined to humanitarian actions on a massive scale—in Syria, in neighboring countries, and on its own territory.

The EU's Incomprehension in Syria

In recent decades, the EU has not paid much attention to Syria, with which it negotiated but did not sign an Association Agreement, as with other countries around the Mediterranean.¹ Similarly, the Assad regime has never considered its relationship with the EU or EU member states a crucial component of its foreign policy when compared with Syria's ties to Russia, the United States, or Lebanon. It is therefore not surprising that EU leaders did not pay major attention to or wield influence on the course of events from 2011 onward.

When confronted with civilian unrest in Syria's southern province of Deraa in May 2011, the Assad regime could have chosen dialogue with the young unarmed activists. Instead, the regime's police, intelligence, and armed forces unleashed unspeakable violence, including torture of children and harassment of their families, to send the signal that despite widespread Arab movements demanding liberties and accountability, Syria would have none of it.²

As early as May 2011, Rami Makhlouf, a first cousin to Assad, gave a clear formulation of the regime's approach: "We will sit here. We call it a fight until the end . . . They should know [that] when we suffer, we will not suffer alone."³ In November 2011, Assad confirmed this line, saying, "Strike Syria and the world will shake."⁴ The tone was reminiscent of former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad's attitude to the Islamist uprising in Hama in 1982.⁵ Operating strictly within the parameters of the political, security, and economic system built by his father and predecessor and controlled by the entire Assad-Makhlouf clan, Bashar al-Assad did not have the conceptual ability—let alone the political will—to conceive of a different way to run the country.

As a result, unrest developed into a full-fledged civil war with massive casualties, mostly at the hands of the regime.

Current estimates indicate that as of July 2016, 280,000 people had been killed, over 13.5 million were in need of humanitarian assistance, 5.5 million lived in inaccessible areas, and 4.8 million were registered as refugees.⁶

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Violence exerted as a matter of power and survival is the opposite of what the EU stands for. As a peace project born out of Europe's successive and devastating wars in the twentieth century, the EU can hardly comprehend, much less anticipate, the unlimited violence that is customary to the Assad-Makhlouf clan. Consequently, the shocking repression of peaceful opponents by the regime during the first phase of the Syrian revolution resulted in a strong declaratory policy from EU leaders. The EU could not remain silent in the face of such levels of violence and therefore reacted rapidly with a straightforward position—that Assad must leave office—based on an early (and mistaken) assumption that the regime would fall in short order. Although this position never translated into swift action in the military or diplomatic field, for several years it remained the European Union's sole mantra.

By contrast, concrete EU action unfolded essentially in the humanitarian field.⁷ Hostilities in Syria triggered massive movements of people, both within Syria, where the United Nations (UN) counted 6.6 million internally displaced people as of May 2016,⁸ and in neighboring countries: 2.7 million refugees are registered in Turkey, or 3 percent of that country's population; 1 million in Lebanon, or 22 percent of the population; and 600,000 in Jordan, or 9 percent of the population.⁹ Overall, the EU and its member states have allocated a total of €5 billion (\$5.5 billion) in assistance to Syrian refugees from 2011 to mid-2016 and pledged an additional €3 billion (\$3.3 billion) at the Supporting Syria conference in London in February 2016.¹⁰

An Unexpected U.S.-Russian Convergence

While the EU's role in the Syrian war has been limited, other global actors have been significantly more engaged. Seen from Europe, U.S. policy on Syria has followed multiple twists and turns, the most important being the strong convergence between the U.S. and Russian diplomacies.

The United States initially deployed Patriot missiles—together with Germany, which later withdrew, and the Netherlands, which was replaced by Spain—to protect Turkey from possible Scud missile attacks by the Assad regime. This was followed by two train-and-equip programs for Syrian rebels. Washington then drew a redline in August 2012 at the use of chemical weapons in Syria, followed by a decision in August 2013 not to bomb Damascus after they were used. The U.S. decision to refrain from intervening was influenced by the August 2013 vote in the United Kingdom (UK) House of Commons not to authorize British military involvement in such an operation.

Soon afterward, a U.S. agreement with Russia to eliminate the Syrian stock of chemical weapons marked the beginning of an entente rarely seen since the end of the Cold War. This was perhaps a unique case of a joint diplomatic move in a conflict in which the two countries have otherwise differed on most subjects.¹¹

Subsequently, Washington's uneasy management of its relationship with Turkey had a number of distinct results. In 2015, Turkey granted the United States base rights at Incirlik, a base near the southern city of Adana already used for other purposes by the U.S. Air Force, and at the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. Turkey and the United States cooperated in efforts against the Islamic State. And the United States maintained a key role for the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the conflict—despite Ankara's opposition¹²—by providing military support to the party's armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG),¹³ while setting up an air facility in Rmeilan in Kurdish-controlled northern Syria¹⁴ and sending special forces to Syrian Kurdish territory.¹⁵

The most unsettling policy move for France and the UK, which were due to send bomber aircraft over Syria in conjunction with the United States, was U.S. President Barack Obama's change of mind between his declared redline on chemical weapons in 2012 and his decision in 2013 not to bomb Damascus.¹⁶ Contrasting with European and U.S. perceptions of his policy on Syria—various media outlets described the U.S. president as a “reluctant warrior,” while three former U.S. diplomats labeled Assad “the lesser evil”¹⁷—Obama has since confirmed that he thinks his policy choices were wise.¹⁸

In contrast to the relatively modest diplomatic activity of the EU, Russia and the United States have joined efforts in several ways. They have been co-chairing the International Syria Support Group since November 2015;¹⁹ they are involved in UN-led intra-Syrian talks in the so-called Geneva III framework; and they crafted an agreement on the cessation of hostilities in February 2016.²⁰ Overall, such a level of cooperation between Russia and United States has no precedent in the previous stages of the crisis, except for the chemical weapons agreement in 2013.

Despite the many differences between the two countries, such a U.S.-Russian diplomatic convergence constitutes a new element for EU leaders, who will have to adjust to this relatively unexpected reality. This situation leaves the EU with a choice: either to have a collective voice and exert influence on the course of action in Syria, or to let one or two EU member countries satisfy themselves with following the U.S. lead.

Russia's Political Parity With the United States

Russia's direct military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015 achieved four main goals in Syria and contributed to the emergence of a new diplomatic and military landscape to which the EU will have to adjust. Following the intervention, the part of Syria under the Assad regime's control has become a Russian protectorate of sorts.²¹

The first goal was undoubtedly to rescue the Assad regime from the brink of collapse and therefore shore up a long-standing political ally and military

client in the Middle East. The implied message to Western leaders—not least EU leaders, who are seen in Moscow as the drivers of the 2011 intervention in Libya—was that Russia also has friends, it cares about them, and they cannot be ousted at will by Western powers.

The second objective was to establish a forward military base in the Middle East. The civilian Bassel al-Assad International Airport near the eastern Syrian city of Latakia was swiftly transformed into an efficient (if rustic by U.S. standards) air force base renamed Khmeimim, and the use of the Russian naval facility in Tartus was substantially increased. This allowed Russia to launch intensive air campaigns, mostly against those rebels threatening to cut off the vital link between Latakia and Damascus. Despite statements by Western powers, it was no big surprise that Russia's priority targets were forces moving closer to the regime's core assets in the Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Idlib provinces, and not Islamic State forces.²²

The third aim was to put meat on the argument made by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his September 28, 2015, speech to the UN General Assembly, in which he said, "We all know that after the end of the Cold War the world was left with one center of dominance, and those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that, since they are so powerful and exceptional, they know best what needs to be done and thus they don't need to reckon with the UN."²³ Put in simple terms, this assertive Russian narrative meant that from then on, the world order would be shaped with Russia at the table, not by the United States and its European allies alone. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military campaign in 2011 in Libya—which Moscow considers an abuse of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 of March 17, 2011, concerning the way out of the Libyan conflict—was in retrospect the type of development that Russia wanted to avoid.

The fourth goal was to demonstrate to Western and regional powers that contrary to some analyses, Russia had the military might necessary to tackle important crises in a swift and rational manner. To that effect, Putin ordered the deployment of much more powerful military assets than needed for fighting an insurgency: S-400 missiles,²⁴ cruise missiles launched from the air and from ships in the Caspian and the Mediterranean Seas,²⁵ and sophisticated air reconnaissance assets.²⁶ These operations were conducted in a fast and flexible way, inside and outside Syria, including through a massive maritime resupply mission via the Turkish Straits. Syria also served as a demonstration that access to the Mediterranean Sea by sea and air was in no way a constraint for Russian forces.

In many ways, the Russian campaign in Syria played the role of a war showroom, exhibiting the use of weapons in an operational context and illustrating Russian force projection capabilities.²⁷ Even Russia's supposed withdrawal in March 2016 created surprise in Syria and the West, which was probably the

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main objective. Putin did not withdraw his forces entirely and soon gave a clear signal that they could be back anytime and in short order.²⁸ In itself, this surprise move constituted another tactical achievement of sorts.

Overall, the rapid sequence of Russia's military operations as of September 2015, its partial withdrawal, and its parallel diplomatic activity set the tempo for the Geneva III talks. During the talks, by entertaining the notion of wider autonomy for Syria's local administrations (that is to say, for the Kurds), Moscow ignored concerns that the United States might have about Turkey's reaction to a political role being given to Syrian Kurdish entities that it considers allies of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency in Turkey.

On the political side, Moscow indeed rescued Assad from the brink, but it appears that the rescue operation had a more general objective than just saving a friendly dictator: to use the Syrian crisis as a vehicle for challenging the assumed U.S. monopoly in the Middle East and achieving Russian diplomatic parity with the United States. This long-term objective of Russian diplomacy has been largely achieved if judged by Russian military supremacy in western Syria (including a de facto air interdiction) and the intensity of Moscow's diplomatic work with Washington. The drafting in early 2016 of a new Syrian constitution by Moscow is another example of Russia's firm intention to weigh in on the world order, as is its offer to the United States of conducting joint operations against the Islamist group the Nusra Front.²⁹

This new equilibrium between Moscow and Washington on Syria implies a relative marginalization of the European Union, including its largest member states. It will have lasting consequences on the way international relations are conducted.

Turkey: Stuck Between Domestic Issues, Historical Worries, and an Ambivalent Foreign Policy

Seen from Europe, Turkey's policy on Syria has been puzzling. On a practical level, Turkey's concrete moves in Syria have often proved to be at odds with EU norms or with the military decisions of some member countries. On a more global level, the broad objective of foreign policy convergence with the West—one of the requirements of Turkey's EU accession negotiations—is out of reach on the key issue of the Syrian conflict.

After a phase of positive relations aimed at economic reforms and increased trade, Ankara tried in 2011 to convince Assad to manage the crisis in a peaceful manner. Neither economic reforms nor a peaceful handling of protesters materialized. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Turkey's prime minister and now its president, rapidly switched to a firmly held position that Assad must go. That stance was similar to the initial EU and U.S. positions but also had a religious

and ideological background: Turkey's citizens are predominantly Sunni, while the Assad regime is Alawite, a branch of the Shia faith. This policy of opposing Assad involved training Syrian rebels and delivering weapons to some of them.

Ankara has also long been perceived in Europe as trying to manage a relationship with the Islamic State, a Sunni insurgency against a Shia regime.³⁰ Observers have noted striking similarities between the group's narrative when it proclaimed its caliphate in June 2014³¹ and Turkey's narrative about its "duty to stop" the fact that "each conflict in this region has been designed a century ago."³²

In 2015, Ankara started to perceive the Kurds in and around Turkey in a new light, with three simultaneous developments that evoked Ankara's historical worry of an independent Kurdistan. In Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, an already autonomous entity, benefited from increased military support from the United States and European countries. In Syria, the YPG received military backing from both the United States and Russia and accumulated territorial successes in Afrin, Kobanê, and Tell Abyad.³³ And in Turkey's two 2015 legislative elections, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) received 13 percent and 10 percent of the vote in the June 7 and November 1 ballots respectively, becoming a political obstacle to Erdoğan's ambition for an executive presidential regime.³⁴ Internally, this development was followed as of July 2015 by a massive flare-up in hostilities between the government and the PKK domestic insurgency as well as the abandonment of the so-called Kurdish peace process that Erdoğan had launched as prime minister to great applause from the EU.

Ankara's long-standing (and failed) attempt to persuade the West to implement a no-fly or safe zone in Syria created a sharp divergence with both the United States and the EU. Officially, Turkey's effort aimed at keeping Syrian refugees on Syrian soil, but in practice it sought to make the reunification of the Kurdish districts more difficult.³⁵ In early 2016, Ankara attempted to convince Germany³⁶ and the European Commission to spend on Syrian soil some of the EU assistance for Syrian refugees on which Ankara and Brussels agreed as part of the EU-Turkey refugee deal. That decision is still pending as of mid-2016.³⁷ The dangers of establishing such a seemingly safe zone without any semblance of international agreement or military cover (which would imply ground troops from Western countries, an option repeatedly excluded) were demonstrated on May 5, 2016, when the Syrian air force shelled a refugee camp established by Turkish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).³⁸

More generally, Turkey's entire Syria policy has been frozen since the Russian intervention to rescue the Assad regime, especially as Russia established an effective air interdiction zone over northwestern Syria. A number of negative episodes affected the Turkish-Russian relationship in late 2015: the Turkish downing of a Russian Sukhoi bomber aircraft in November;³⁹ and

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Russian accusations of Turkish corruption, secret dealings, and oil smuggling that boosted the Islamic State's financial strength⁴⁰—claims that Ankara firmly rejected.⁴¹ However, an exchange of declarations on July 1, 2016, set in motion a normalization process that started materializing in a meeting between the Turkish and Russian presidents in Saint Petersburg on August 9.

The Islamic State's increased terrorist operations in Turkey, including a multiple suicide attack on Istanbul's main airport on June 29, 2016, are bound to trigger a policy recalibration on the part of Ankara. After years of ambivalence toward the Islamist group, Turkey launched a difficult process of counterterrorism cooperation with some EU member countries. Counterterrorism cooperation will probably soon become a dominant theme of Turkey's relations with both the EU and Russia.⁴²

The humanitarian emergency resulting from the Syrian war hit Turkey most in absolute terms. It is estimated that since the end of 2011, Turkey has received a total of 2.7 million refugees who are registered with the UN refugee agency. Of these, 285,000 (10.6 percent of the total) are hosted in camps run by the Turkish emergency agency AFAD, the Turkish Red Crescent, and local municipalities.⁴³ While nearly 90 percent of the refugees organize their accommodations privately, all receive a temporary guest identity card and can benefit from free healthcare in public hospitals.

A deal between Turkey and the European Union reached in general terms on November 29, 2015, and finalized on March 18, 2016, resulted initially in a sharp decrease in the number of uncontrolled migrants arriving on the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. But the deal quickly became embroiled in litigation about the concessions offered by the EU and the conditions to be met by Turkey.

Iran's Renewed Regional Presence

The EU's main interaction with other regional powers in recent years has focused largely on Iran and on the management of talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (the P5+1) that resulted in a deal on Tehran's nuclear program.⁴⁴ In its dealings with Iran since the July 2015 agreement, the EU has not gone much farther than diplomatic statements concerning Iran's role in the Syrian war, although Tehran's strong support for the Assad regime remains a major obstacle to a political settlement.⁴⁵

A number of European and Western analysts have made the assessment that the nuclear deal gave Iran an opening for a more assertive policy in the region and helped Tehran achieve its primary objective—to be back on the regional diplomatic scene after years of isolation.⁴⁶ Iran's official statement after the nuclear deal was couched in very general and appeasing terms: “The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to actively contribute

to promotion of peace and stability in the region in the face of increasing threat of terrorism and violent extremism.⁴⁷ Yet a crucial element of Tehran's policy in the region is to maintain an active Shia crescent through Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus, with the support of the Lebanese Islamist group Hezbollah. Indeed, it has been argued that Iranian involvement in Syria is essential to the survival of Assad's army.⁴⁸

The EU's Diplomatic Absence

The European Union has been conspicuously absent from core international diplomatic discussions on Syria and has not taken any meaningful diplomatic initiatives since 2011. While most EU member states involved in anti-Islamic State operations are focusing on Iraq, the European military involvement against the Islamist group in Syria comes mostly from France, whose air force complements U.S. operations.⁴⁹ The United States and France⁵⁰ are supported directly or indirectly by Denmark,⁵¹ Germany,⁵² the Netherlands,⁵³ the United Kingdom,⁵⁴ and, recently, Belgium.⁵⁵

More importantly, the very limited role of the EU as a bloc in the Syrian conflict also has a systemic origin. The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty—the most recent evolution of the EU's legal architecture—weakened the policy initiative role of the EU institutions, in particular the European Commission and the European External Action Service, giving this responsibility back to the member states, especially the larger countries and at the level of heads of state and government.⁵⁶ Examples of this shift abound: the larger member states have made multiple statements on the Syrian crisis; the bigger EU countries have made deliberate efforts to have national diplomats appointed to head important EU delegations; and foreign ministers have been excluded from the European Council, which brings together national leaders.

In addition, by an unfortunate coincidence of timelines, the new European foreign policy architecture came into being at the very same moment that the Arab Spring unfolded, raising entirely new challenges to a disrupted EU foreign policy mechanism.⁵⁷ Contrary to expectations in Berlin, London, or Paris, the prevalent voices of the big three member states and the diminished voice of the Brussels bureaucracy did not lead to any increase in efficiency—much the opposite.

True, the toolbox of EU diplomacy—humanitarian assistance, development aid, trade sanctions, agreements with third countries, and so on—remained with the European Commission. But the EU's ability to use these tools in conjunction with and in support of broader political initiatives—in short, the EU's capacity to exert political leadership—has been severely curtailed. The experience of the Syrian civil war, including the case of the refugee deal with Turkey, has shown

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that a single member state cannot become an acceptable leader for the entire EU. Instead, this new architecture produced either inaction (witness the EU's nonpolicy on Syria) or confusion (as on the refugee deal with Turkey, whose key features were negotiated by Germany instead of the EU institutions).

The massive refugee crisis that began in 2015, albeit not made up exclusively of Syrian asylum seekers, quickly showed a triple divide in the European Union. Germany, initially with Sweden, was the only European country open to hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. This was hardly surprising as the country has a strong economic growth record, near full employment, a budgetary surplus, unfilled job positions, and a positive attitude from its citizens toward refugees (the *Willkommenskultur*). In a second group of EU member countries were those that refused to play any part in the refugee crisis, such as the UK, Denmark, and the entire Central European group of member states, which had opted out of the EU's Schengen passport-free travel zone. Then came the countries that tried to show solidarity with Germany but had neither the economic leeway nor the political will to do so.

After the EU Council of Ministers failed to decide on new asylum and migration policies in May 2015, political panic broke out during the summer, and many EU countries refused to share the burden of refugees with Germany. As a result, and at Berlin's behest, EU institutions initiated a negotiation with Turkey meant to ensure refugee retention in Turkey in exchange for financial support and the promise of concessions in unrelated fields—a visa-free regime for Turkish citizens traveling to EU countries and Turkey's EU accession negotiations. This highly unusual diplomatic deal coincided with an acute domestic political crisis in Turkey and hence quickly became extremely difficult to manage. Of particular concern were Turkey's nonapplication of certain provisions of the UN Refugee Convention, the renewed armed conflict in the southeast of the country, and Turkey's sharply degraded situation on human rights and the rule of law. The conflictual discussions about this deal continue as of this writing.

Adjusting to the New Landscape

It would be exaggerated to state that the EU has been watching the Syrian conflict from the sidelines. Yet the major developments that have taken place in relation to the Syrian war form a new political landscape to which the EU must now adjust.

The EU needs to recalibrate its position vis-à-vis other major players. The United States has become more reluctant to guarantee the region's security and stability than in the past seventy years. Meanwhile, Russia has established a permanent military infrastructure in the Middle East and regained a more important diplomatic role on the world stage. Moscow has also launched a diplomatic tandem of sorts with Washington, at least on the Syrian war.

The exit from the Syrian crisis will likely require an even deeper convergence between Russia and the United States on a political solution. This new trend is already forcing Turkey to amend its foreign policy. The EU may have to fine-tune its policy accordingly by bringing its various tools—humanitarian aid, development aid, reform support, NGO funding, coordination capacity, and a political-military role in a future settlement—to bear through a more proactive role for the EU foreign policy high representative.

The EU may also want to weigh in on regional security issues. There are divergences between the West and Russia on the future of Assad and the fight against the Islamic State—in terms of combat operations and possible prosecutions for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The EU can contribute in two different ways: the individual military actions of some of its member states and the diplomatic role of the EU high representative.

At the same time, the EU is now dealing with a Turkey that is a more uneasy partner than in the past. With its hitherto ambivalent policy on the Islamic State, its unwillingness to factor in strategic changes at the regional level, a quasi civil war in the southeast, the negative evolution of its rule-of-law situation, and the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, Turkey is more distant from EU internal standards and foreign policy principles than in the past fifteen years or so. For the EU, this means that Turkey's interest in its EU accession process is bound to be significantly reduced, and as a result, the EU leverage on Turkey's rule-of-law architecture will be considerably diminished, if not annihilated. Yet, close dialogue and cooperation will need to continue on key matters such as energy, trade, counterterrorism, and refugees.

Concerning Syria, the EU should also stand firm on its values. It is far from clear that the principles that the EU is keen on upholding in its foreign policy—the rule of law, fundamental liberties, coexistence, and tolerance—stand a chance of being applied in a post-settlement Syria. Russian-induced *realpolitik* might not leave much room for EU standards in Syria. But what the EU can do, irrespective of the immense difficulties ahead, is to keep promoting these principles and offering to support key elements of a democratic state—the reconstruction of the country's administration, judiciary, free media, and civil society, as well as transitional justice—if and when a political settlement is reached.

Given these new realities, conditions may seem ripe for an EU foreign policy comeback in the Syrian crisis. Yet, engineering such a revival will meet considerable difficulties, especially because the political preferences of key member countries tend to keep decisions in a strictly national framework, with only limited involvement of the EU as an organization. In Germany, the domestic priority has shifted from welcoming the wave of refugees from Syria to curbing it, and hence to managing the EU-Turkey refugee deal—as difficult and

Russian-induced *realpolitik* might not leave much room for EU standards in Syria.

The conclusions—if any—that EU leaders draw from their lack of influence on the evolution of the Syrian crisis will, to a substantial extent, define the future of EU foreign and security policy.

politically costly as this may be. In France, especially since the massive terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, the priority is to show citizens that the government is acting against the Islamic State, hence the extension of the French military operation to Syria. The UK, for its part, is currently managing the aftermath of its vote to leave the EU, in which resistance to refugee flows played an important part, and is therefore highly unlikely to take any fresh initiative in an EU context.

At a technical level, experts have raised the question of whether an EU foreign policy role in a mediation capacity could become possible in Syria.⁵⁸ The issue is whether, at one point, a consensus could emerge among international stakeholders to entrust the EU with managing discussions between key players on an eventual transition agreement, like the P5+1 format in the Iran nuclear negotiations. The convenience of having a somewhat neutral middleman or convener in the discussion might, it is argued, prove useful again for Moscow and Washington.

However, there are considerable differences between the negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal and a prospective settlement in Syria. In particular, Russia, which had a distinct interest in limiting the military nuclear capabilities of Iran, is squarely siding with the Assad regime in Syria. For the time being, the formal role entrusted to the United Nations, albeit ineffective so far, seems to be the only format acceptable to all parties.

The road to a future EU role might be found in another direction, especially if European leaders find the time and energy to rethink the union's role in major crises on the basis of the EU global strategy presented on June 29, 2016, by the EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini.⁵⁹ The key words of the strategy are “[serving] common European interests . . . by common means.”

Syria as a Litmus Test for EU Foreign Policy

The lack of proactive and collective EU engagement in the Syrian crisis has deprived the union of any significant influence on the direction of events in its immediate vicinity. Yet, most of the humanitarian and economic consequences of the Syrian crisis fall on EU countries. Arguably, such a major discrepancy is politically unsustainable.

The nature of the EU's role in the resolution of the Syrian crisis constitutes one of the litmus tests of a genuine common foreign and security policy. If an EU consensus on a stronger political stance on Syria does not emerge, the EU may end up being confined to the role of an accessory actor in modern conflicts—a provider of humanitarian assistance, reconstruction support, development and technical assistance, trade concessions, or sanctions.

Causes of the EU's Indecision

The EU's absence from any decisive role in the Syrian war—be it at the level of the institutions or of the member states—is the result of two distinct elements.

First, the EU grossly miscalculated the Assad regime's resilience and the extent to which both Iran (and therefore Hezbollah) and Russia would provide military support to Damascus. The Syrian war is a context in which the EU's valued-based reasoning is of little relevance to Assad's allies and the U.S. aversion to military risk is high.

Second, the three largest EU member states have shown a lack of unity. Britain has been averse to engaging militarily, had opted out of EU policies on refugees, and has been preoccupied with its vote to leave the EU. Germany has traditionally been reluctant to become involved militarily abroad and had, at least initially, a uniquely open policy on refugees. France has been willing to engage militarily, within limits, but has an overestimated assessment of its role as a global power. This disunity resulted in a total lack of influence from European countries, collectively or individually, on the direction of events in the Syrian war. The EU's lack of influence may now be considerably reinforced when the UK leaves the bloc, although EU-UK foreign policy coordination mechanisms could palliate some of the inconvenience.⁶⁰

Consequences for EU Foreign Policy

The long-term consequences of the Syrian conflict are far from predictable at this stage. Yet, they remain of crucial importance for European countries, as illustrated by terrorist acts, flows of migrants, and the consequences of the refugee crisis on EU relations with Turkey.

The conclusions—if any—that EU leaders draw from their lack of influence on the evolution of the Syrian crisis will, to a substantial extent, define the future of EU foreign and security policy. More than grand strategies, let alone treaty revisions, what is needed is a political understanding about where, when, and how the EU should act.

In this respect, Syria could provide the EU with a demonstration of a crisis in which no single EU member state has crucial economic or military interests in the country in question but in which the entire EU faces the substantial moral, socioeconomic, and security consequences of not acting.

In 2011, a simple analysis of the Assad regime's political and security mindset and a concomitant analysis of the interests of third parties—Iran, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey—should have sufficed to induce EU leaders to get their act together, for example by setting up a Syrian crisis management center entrusted with the coordination of diplomatic, military, and humanitarian actions of the EU and its member states. Most importantly, close EU involvement with regional actors could have influenced their policies and triggered much earlier engagement on the humanitarian front with the three

frontline states of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In all these dimensions, the European External Action Service and the European Commission are appropriately equipped for the task at hand, as long as the political will at the decisionmaking level is there.

The EU could use the unfortunate story of its lack of influence in the Syrian war to draw useful lessons for the future. Such lessons would be especially relevant in terms of the possible operational formats the EU could use in cases like Syria where the military weight of the few member states involved cannot make a decisive difference to the conflict. The EU global strategy, published in June 2016 and yet to be widely discussed, comprises some useful thoughts about future policies, in particular in the fields of security and defense, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, energy security, and strategic communications. But overall, this remains a case of political will—whether or not EU leaders will see a benefit in collective action.

It will probably be a while before Britain's vote to leave the EU is dealt with and another while before the new EU global strategy is processed. But one overwhelming fact remains: the most tragic consequence of the war in Syria is the unspeakable suffering of Syrians of all creeds and ages, a trauma bound to generate frustration and resentment for generations to come.⁶¹ And inevitably, the EU's foreign policy ambitions will be judged at least in part on its contribution to the alleviation of Syrians' suffering, while at home, EU leaders seem set to pay a heavy political price for not finding a course of action that European citizens deem appropriate.

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