

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AFTER A DECADE

THE SURVIVAL STRATEGY OF DAMASCUS AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

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ABSTRACT

The uprising in Syria started ten years ago which eventually turned into a bloody conflict, killing hundreds of thousands of people and displacing millions. Much has been said and written about the role and objectives of Russia, the US, Turkey, and Iran. Instead, this research paper highlights the positioning and the objective of the Syrian government which prioritizes the consolidation of power in its controlled areas, while adopting a discourse that aims for unity and full territorial integrity. By exploring Bashar al-Assad's strategy in northern Syria against Turkey and the Kurds, this paper reflects on the potential implications for the EU and offers concrete policy proposals for the decision-makers in Brussels. Especially the worsening economic situation in Syria ensures that the EU needs to re-assess its sanctions regime, considering more targeted sanctions against the perpetrators of human rights violations while alleviating the suffering of the ordinary Syrian citizens. Additionally, this paper argues that the EU should use its socio-economic expertise to increase its visibility in the UN-led Geneva peace process while engaging in bilateral talks with the Astana tripartite, particularly in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Keywords: Syrian crisis; Syrian government; European Union; Turkey; Syrian Democratic Forces; Humanitarian aid.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 29-30 March 2021, the EU will host its fifth Brussels conference on Syria (Commission Press Release 2021). The aim of this annual event is to contribute to the peace-building efforts of the United Nations (UN) in the war-torn country. It also seeks to mobilise international donors to provide support to the Syrians, who are suffering from the dire economic conditions whether inside Syria or in the neighbouring refugee-hosting countries. The EU has not played an active role in shaping the developments on the battleground in Syria. Nevertheless, the Brussels conference has been a tool for the EU to remain relevant, particularly on the provision of humanitarian aid. It also acts as a platform to maintain cohesion and unity among the EU countries on the Syrian dossier, yet not foreseeing any release of the reconstruction funds before a political transition is achieved in line with the UNSC resolution 2254 (Van Veen et.al 2021, 26).

In advance of the fifth EU event in Brussels, it is critical to reflect on the strategies of the key actors that have territorial control in Syria, namely the Syrian government, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) / People's Protection Units (YPG), and Turkey. In this research report, the focus will be on the game plan of the Syrian government in confronting Turkey and the SDF/YPGⁱ in northern Syria. The positioning of Damascus in the tenth year of the uprising will be explained by benefitting from the semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists, academics and regional experts who are familiar with the developments on the ground. The paper will conclude by highlighting the implications for the EU and by offering concrete policy proposals for the decision-makers in Brussels. The role of Russia, Iran and the US will be dealt within the context of their relations with the key actors, as well as the support they provide to the Syrian government (Russia and Iran) and the SDF/YPG (the US).

So far Damascus succeeded in re-governing about two-thirds of Syria. Yet, stating that Bashar al-Assad has already won the war would undermine the current complex and dire reality on the Syrian soil. In particular, large parts of northern Syria are still dominated by

ⁱ The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is an alliance that has been established during the Syrian crisis. The alliance is militarily led by the People's Protection Units (YPG), a mostly Kurdish militia.

opposition groups, including a large presence of Turkey at the Syrian border. Despite the short to medium-term aspirations of the Syrian government and Russia to push further north and northeast in order to re-control the strategic M-4 highway in Idlib, prevent a further Turkish expansion, and weaken the PYD-led administration, several challenges are hindering these ambitions and will most likely remain roughly frozen on the ground.

Meanwhile, a worsening economic crisis is affecting the country and catalysing tendencies such as extremism, mass displacement and further regional instability. Developments that can continue spilling over to the European mainland as well, unless the EU would seek for an alternative Syrian strategy that might offer prospects for the Syrian population. This requires adjustments regarding its position on the issues of conflict resolution, sanctions, and the provision of humanitarian aid. This paper argues that the EU should use its socio-economic expertise to increase its visibility in the UN-Geneva peace process while engaging more with the Astana tripartite. The EU has to reconsider its sanction regime to ensure that its sanctions do not target the ordinary Syrian people, yet without doing any harm to the businessmen – who profit from the war economy by monopolizing the Syrian market and exploiting people's needs. Finally, the EU needs to take a balanced and neutral engagement with all the conflicting sides, mediating among them to prevent any hindrance of the provision of humanitarian assistance.

2. SYRIAN ARMY'S TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN THE NORTH

In the spring of 2013, two years after the start of the Syrian crisis, only one-fifth of Syria was controlled by the Syrian government (Balanche 2021). Yet, the Russian military support after September 2015 has provided Damascus the capability to gradually enlarge its territorial control in the country. "Private, state-backed and foreign militias" have also played a key role in gaining and protecting territories (Waters 2019). As of 2021, the Syrian Army controls nearly two-thirds of Syria, including the important cities of "Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, and Deir al-Zour", and corresponding to "12 million people out of an estimated resident population of 17 million" (Balanche 2021).

Meanwhile, in the official discourse, the Syrian government underlines its determination to liberate all Syrian territory (Aji 2019). Yet, Turkey's presence in the west of the Euphrates River, as well as between the towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad on the one hand and SDF's territorial control in north-eastern Syria on the other, hinder the ambitions of the Syrian government. The frontlines have remained almost the same since March 2020 and at present, no conflicting side appears to be willing to change this in the short run. In the medium to long-term, however, it is likely that the Syrian army will seek to move further north in the Idlib province, in order to secure control along the Latakia-Aleppo section of the M-4 highway. To achieve this, it needs full Russian support, which will depend on Russia's relations with Turkey. It is also probable that Damascus is waiting or wishing for Turkey's increasingly assertive and militarised foreign policy to fail at some point, which would lead to a reduction of Turkey's financial and logistic capacity to support the Syrian opposition.

Despite ruling two-thirds of the country, the Syrian government "controls only 15 percent of the country's international land borders" (Balanche 2021). In northern Syria, Turkey and Turkish-backed armed groups, Hayat-Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and SDF control several border crossings, in detriment to Bashar al-Assad's plans to restore full sovereignty in his country (Balanche 2021). Even in the long-term, the immediate border zones in Idlib, Afrin, Azaz, Jarablus, Tel Abyad and Ras-Al Ayn will most likely remain under Turkish control (direct or indirect through the support/relations with the Syrian National Army (SNA)ⁱⁱ and HTS). The Syrian government lacks the military or political power to re-capture the border crossings in these regions. Russia, on the other hand, has established a balanced relationship with Turkey and is unlikely to take a step to confront Turkey which has deployed thousands of soldiers to the areas it controls.

In the SDF controlled regions in the north-east, Turkish-Russian agreements will likely continue favouring joint patrols by the two, seeking to distance SDF/YPG from the immediate Turkish-Syrian border. This was agreed by Ankara and Moskovo after Turkey's military operation in October 2019, targeting the region between Tel Abyad and Ras-Al

ⁱⁱ Syrian National Army (SNA) is a coalition of opposition armed groups backed by Turkey.

Ayn. Since then, Russian troops have been deployed to secure the contact zones between Turkish Army and SNA on one side and SDF/YPG on the other in north-eastern Syria. The Syrian Army was also asked to send a few hundred troops to the border but at present, their presence is limited and mostly symbolic (Balanche 2021). In the future, the Russians may push for the deployment of more Syrian government forces – not a fully unfavourable development for Turkey which would prefer a Syrian government rule at its border rather than a SDF/YPG one as it considers YPG as an offshoot of the terrorist group PKK and does not accept a Kurdish autonomy across its border.

3. CONFRONTING TURKEY IN NORTH-WESTERN SYRIA

A good source to know the official Syrian government's position on Turkey's actions in Syria is the weekly letters presented by the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UNSC. In these letters, the Syrian government calls upon the Security Council to fulfill its responsibility to "end the illegal presence of Turkey" on the Syrian soil (Identical letter on 11 February 2020). The Syrian government avoids directly accusing the Turkish Republic or the Turkish people. Instead, it blames what it calls the "Erdogan regime" or the "Turkish regime", replicating the labeling used by Turkey to define Assad's rule over Syria as the "Syrian regime" or "Assad's regime" (Identical letter on 12 January 2021). The identical letters refer to Turkey's expansionist agenda, which according to the Syrian government, manifests itself in the following practices: "forcing Syrian citizens to obtain Turkish identity cards; coercing farmers to sell their crops to Turkish merchants; imposing the Turkish curriculum in the schools; and pursuing a policy of forced displacement, demographic change and Turkification" (Identical letter on 12 January 2021).

Additionally, the identical letters indicate the aim of the Syrian government to eliminate Turkey's military presence in northwestern Syria (Identical letter on 02 January 2020). With intensive Russian and Iranian military support, the Syrian army was able to restore control along the M-5 highway, linking Damascus to Aleppo. Turkey does not want to see a

repetition of the M-5 scenario along the M-4 highway in the Idlib province and has deployed between 10,000-15,000 troops, in an effort to deter any Syrian army offensive in this region (Kardaş 2020, 118). However, the Syrian government lacks the military power to change the current frozen conflict situation in Idlib.

The presence of radical groups in Idlib – Hurras al-Din, Turkistan Islamic party, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and others – led to a (legal) footstep of Turkey in the region as part of the Sochi Agreement in 2018. Although, according to the Syrian government, this agreement is time-bound and Turkey's fight against these radical groups has remained unsuccessful, Turkey's presence in Idlib seems to be a rigid one, complemented by the enormous amount of IDP's at the Turkish border. Turkey does not want a new refugee flow into its borders and desires to keep Idlib as a de-facto safe zone that can continue sheltering nearly 3 million Syrians. This leaves the Syrian government blocked because its reconciliation agreementsⁱⁱⁱ will be more difficult to apply in this region.

When reconquering lost territories between 2016 and February 2020, the Syrian army and the supporting militia groups launched offensives, gained some territory, brokered de-escalation with opposition armed groups and Turkey, and re-started the same cycle by continuing their military operations (Medina 2020). Idlib, however, has become “a small Syria without Assad” and the majority of the population has nowhere else to go (Gjevori 2020). Syria needs Russian and Iranian support to enable new territorial gains and at some point, the Astana trio (Russia, Iran and Turkey) may cut a deal in allowing the Syrian Army to seize sections of the M-4 highway in Idlib (Medina 2020). This may pave the way for the occurrence of what Balanche calls the “new Gaza” situation, reducing the opposition presence to 1,000 sqkm. in the immediate vicinity of the Turkish Syrian border in the north of the Idlib city center (Balanche 2020). Nevertheless, in the short term, this is not a likely scenario. For now, it does not seem plausible for the Syrian government to change the established *status quo* in the region. As Hediye Levent argues:

ⁱⁱⁱ The pro-regime camp used local conciliation agreements to “push the rebellion away from the city centers to the rural northern Syria”. The rebels and the civilian population could evacuate suburbs of Damascus and Homs, leaving for Idlib. See Adleh and Favier (2017).

“Syria didn’t win the war with Turkey and Turkey didn’t win the war with Syria (..) Syria wants Turkey to leave Idlib without taking anything, but Turkey doesn’t want to do that and besides, Turkey has some advantages in its hands and nor Damascus nor Russia nor Iran can ignore these advantages (..) In its controlled operation zones, Turkey is establishing a new administration amongst education at schools, economic relations, also at the market, people are using Turkish Lira, so Turkey doesn’t want to leave all of those investments behind without taking anything (..) so, we will witness very tough negotiations and we might see some limited clashes on the ground but I think nor Turkey, Russia or Damascus know what will happen tomorrow”.¹

A significant problem for the Syrian government impeding its capacity to launch additional offensives in Idlib or elsewhere in northern Syria is the dire economic conditions in the country. People are suffering from bread and fuel shortages and famine is a big risk for millions (Lister 2021). In 2019, 83 percent of Syrians have already been living below the poverty line and with the current inflation hitting the country, this percentage is not going to lower anytime soon (Tsurkov 2021 a). As indicated by the United Nations World Food Programme, prices have been rising by 247 percent in Syria, while Elizabeth Tsurkov indicates that the currency reached its lowest peak with an average value of 4000 Syrian lira compared to one dollar at the time of writing (Tsurkov 2021 b). Moreover, the re-emerging ISIS threat in central and southern Syria continues to inflict casualties on the Syrian army (Waters 2020). Not less important, the Syrian government cannot fully count on Russia in enabling its army to re-gain “every inch of Syria”, considering the Russian view on Turkish military presence on Syrian soil (Aji 2019).

Russia does not appear to show full interest in expelling Turkey out of Syria for now. As Dries Lesage stresses: “Russia tolerated some Assad intrusion into Idlib but limited. Russia allows the Turkish presence for the time being (..) Russia is playing a much bigger game at a global scale where that kind of de facto understanding, not to say alliance, with Turkey is precious for Russia (..) geopolitically speaking, to weaken NATO and the Western bloc”.²

Berkay Mandiraci and Oytun Orhan follow this statement by arguing that in Idlib, a new power balance on the ground has been reached. They stress that both Turkey and Syria suffered and especially the Syrian army is not capable to carry out a new military offensive, unless Russia would stand-by, but Russia and Turkey have their own interdependencies such as energy issues and bilateral trade.³

Therefore, we can argue that, for now, no one intends for a new clash in Idlib before a political solution is reached, in particular with regards to the IDP's. As Hamza Hasil, Levant Research Assistant at ORSAM, stresses: "first they need to draw a map on what will be the future of Syria and what will be the political solution (..) after this Russia and the Syrian army may operate new military operations against radical groups in Idlib".⁴

Regarding the broader Turkish-Syrian relations, in the short to mid-term, a direct diplomatic reconciliation between these two countries remains unlikely. As Ferhat Gurini argues: "You need a more decisive nature on the ground before you reach the point that Turkey and Syria might talk with each other".⁵ Moreover, as Oytun Orhan stresses, the Syrian IDPs living in Idlib and other Turkish operation zones in northern Syria are extremely antagonistic to Assad, and hence, if Turkey directly engages with the Syrian government, this will create other problems for Turkey, damaging the reflected image of Erdogan as the "saviour of Syrians".⁶ Yet, Engin Yüksel points to some backchannel talks between the intelligence officers, including the Moscow meeting between the chiefs of Turkish and Syrian intelligence services in January 2020.⁷ Here, the Syrian government is reported to demand "Turkey's recognition of Syria's territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Turkish troops and proxies from Syria, and Ankara's elimination of radical elements from Idlib to open up the M-4 and M-5 motorways" (Erdemir and Knippen 2020). In the near future, diplomatic traffic between Ankara and Damascus will likely remain to be secretive and involve the intelligence community rather than the representatives from the foreign ministries.

4. RELATIONS WITH THE SDF AND PYD/YPG

In north-eastern Syria, SDF and the key dominant group in the alliance – PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its armed-wing YPG (People’s Protection Units) – seek to preserve the gains achieved during the civil war and seek a continuation of their governance model in the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)”. To achieve this, PYD/YPG needs to ensure the continuation and even extension of the US political and military support, while balancing the demands coming from Russia in order to compromise with the Syrian government. The group also depends on Russia and the US to avert any future attacks from Turkey and its proxy militias.

For Damascus, the primary enemy in the decade-long conflict has been the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other revolutionary, religious, or radical groups that claim affiliation with Islam. Excluding some occasional clashes in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah, the Syrian Army did not militarily confront PYD/YPG. Both sides have not refrained from cooperation in northern Aleppo and in north-eastern Syria, endorsed and facilitated mostly by Russia, in order to thwart the military threat posed by Turkey and its auxiliary militias. That said, both Russia and the Syrian government use Turkey’s military preparations and activities as a way to convince YPG to cede more territory to the Syrian army’s control, as became apparent in the latest Turkish attacks in the vicinity of Ain Issa in late 2020 and early 2021.

With Bashar-Al Assad feeling more confident as a result of the territorial gains between 2016 and 2020, the Syrian government is more assertive in its demands from the PYD/YPG which can be summarized in five points. First, the Syrian government does not officially recognise the autonomous administration set up by SDF and PYD in the provinces of Hasakah, Raqqa and Dayr az-Zawr (Hatahet 2019, 2). Second, Damascus opposes any federal solution to the Syrian conflict, contrary to what SDF/YPG envisions (Mansour 2019). Third, in a future Syria, the central government may be willing to give PYD some kind of authority in local governance, but this is primarily considered in cultural and educational rights rather than political ones (Deli 2020). Fourth, Damascus wants PYD to end its cooperation with what it calls the “occupying American forces” (Identical letter on 16 September 2020).

Finally, the Syrian government wants the integration of YPG into the Syrian Army (Van Wilgenburg 2020).

The Turkish threat may push PYD/YPG to concede more to the demands of the government in Damascus. Nevertheless, deteriorating economic conditions strengthen the hand of PYD, as the region they control in north-eastern Syria is rich in agricultural resources and includes major oil fields. (Van Wilgenburg 2020). Moreover, PYD is aware that the Syrian army has suffered a lot throughout the civil war and the emergent Daesh attacks continue to inflict casualties in central and eastern Syria. PYD also has a well-established presence in some cities like Qamishli and Hasakah. In these cities, its internal security force, Asayesh, was able to impose a blockade to the government's security squares most recently in January 2021 (SYRIAHR 2021). This was declared to be in response to Damascus's prevention of aid delivery to the Kurds living in Tel Rifat and the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo (Van Wilgenburg 2021). In the big picture, however, the convergent interests of Turkey and Syria in blocking the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria, might lead to an increase of tensions between the Syrian government and the PYD/YPG.

On this topic, Hasil contends that in the long term, it is not unrealistic to see that the Syrian government will take back and govern more territories in northern Syria along the Turkish border. He stresses: "this idea is always realistic because Turkey also supports the unity of Syria (...) Turkey doesn't want the dismantling of Syria because the main threat in Syria for Turkey is the YPG".⁸ Frédérique Geerdink adds: "of course Assad and Erdogan are not friends officially, but I think they have the same goal, like the Kurds cannot have the autonomy, so if it would be Assad that takes over the Kurdish regions again, that would probably be fine for Erdogan too, as long as the Kurds are suppressed and not building any autonomy".⁹ In reality, this implies that Turkey may stop its occasional shelling of cities like Manbij, Tel Rifat, Ayn al-Arab or Tel Tamr, if the Syrian army gradually increases its control in these regions with the support of Russia and Iran.

5. TOWARDS A STATUS-QUO

Overall, the Syrian government's strategy involves an ambition to achieve three key objectives: recovery of its territorial control in the entire country; emptying as many opponents as possible; and eliminating the possibility of armed opposition or counterinsurgency against its rule (Balanche 2019). It is rather unlikely, however, for Damascus to re-govern the entire Syrian territory, perhaps, even in the long term. We may still see some shifts on the ground, but the Syrian government lacks the military and political power to change the current status-quo in the remaining opposition held-regions in northern Syria, considering, in particular, the strong Turkish military support for the opposition.

It is highly probable that the tripartite of Russia, Iran and Turkey will determine to what extent Damascus will be able to regain more territories in Idlib. At some point, Syrian army troops may move further north, in order to secure the economic interests along the M-4 highway. On the other Turkish-controlled zones, however, Damascus will likely need to accept the current status-quo with the Turkish military.

In the north-east, the balancing strategy of the SDF/YPG between Russia and the US, will most likely determine to what extent the Syrian government will be able to regain additional territories. With Russian mediation, the Kurds and the Syrian government can strike a balance between their demands of autonomy on one side and territorial integrity and sovereignty on the other, but until now all Russian initiatives failed. Nevertheless, the dissolution and integration of SDF/YPG into the Syrian army is not likely as the SDF only wants to integrate into the Syrian army under the condition that they keep their special status (Van Wilgenburg 2020). Especially with PYD remaining to be the strongest political decision maker within the Autonomous Administration in north-east Syria, the SDF/YPG will not be eager to integrate into the Syrian army, unless the Kurds enjoy some degree of autonomy and they are recognized as a distinct ethnic group. As stressed by Frédérique Geerink "they envision themselves as part of Syria, but their goal is to undermine the state structure and if they can break down the centralized structures then that is the Syria they

want to invest in and that is what their defense forces would be served to”.¹⁰

The maximum the Syrian government will be willing to offer to the Kurds is expected to be the “Qamishli-model”^{iv}, which provides the Kurds the means to exercise some form of local governance, while remaining under the authority of the central government in Damascus. This might improve the cultural, educational, and economic rights of the Kurds without introducing substantial changes to the political ones, as indicated by Assad as a potential future step (Deli 2020). In other words, the Kurds could gain some power over the local decision-making process, but realizing conditions in which Damascus really recognizes the national presence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group is rather unlikely – something which the Kurds are striving for after years of marginalization by Damascus.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

With the Syrian uprising and the ensuing civil war entering its tenth year in 2021, Bashar al-Assad is likely to stay in power, ruling what he calls “a healthier and more homogeneous society” (Hubbard 2017). Territorial control of Turkey and its armed proxies on the one hand and that of the SDF/PYD on the other, will most probably continue with some potential shifts on the ground.

In its determination to re-govern all Syrian territory, the Syrian government and Russia will most likely attempt to broker a deal with the Astana tripartite to push further north by re-controlling the Latakia-Aleppo section of the M-4 highway. Additionally, Damascus will eventually insist on seeing Turkish troops leaving Syrian soil, yet, the established status quo following the Turkish-Russian agreement in March 2020 is not expected to change in the short to medium term. Moreover, the geopolitical relationship between Turkey and Russia will most likely solidify a foreseeable frozen conflict situation in whole northern Syria – at least in the short run.

^{iv} This model was brought forward by Vitaly Naumkin, an advisor to Russian President Putin. See Deli (2020).

Meanwhile, in coordination with Turkey, Russia will seek to distance the SDF from Turkish-Syrian border, while increasing the Syrian army presence. Moreover, it is likely that Russia will keep on exploiting Turkey's presence in the northeast to push for concessions from the PYD-led administration in the north-east. In this process, it is most likely that Damascus will adopt a rather rigid stance – the Kurds could gain some power over the local decision-making process and some improvement on cultural and economic rights – but realizing conditions in which Damascus really recognizes the national presence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group is rather unlikely.

Until now the EU refuses to talk with the Syrian government, nor does it want to invest in reconstruction until a political transition is to be started. As the EU High Representative of Foreign Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borell reminds, the EU can only start talking about normalization with Damascus after the Syrian government “changes its behaviour, stops the repression against its own people and engages in the political process” (European Commission 2020). The main motivation for the EU's rigid stance is the notion that reconstruction funding would be ineffective as it would re-legitimise the current policies of the Syrian government as it is now (International Crisis Group 2019). Meanwhile, the EU has chosen to pressure Damascus by posing sanctions on the country, which particularly makes daily life even more unbearable for Syrians living under government rule. Despite Borell's statement that these sanctions do not target humanitarian aid or medical supplies, more than 80 percent of Syrians are reported to be living below the poverty line (European Commission 2020 and Tsurkov 2021). Along with the military instability, this reality requires the EU to seek an alternative Syrian strategy that might offer prospects for the Syrian population.

The latest EU strategy on Syria was adopted in 2017 and identified six key objectives to achieve: “ending the war through a genuine political transition; promoting a meaningful and inclusive transition in Syria; saving lives by addressing the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable Syrians; promoting democracy, human rights and freedom of speech; promoting accountability for war crimes; and supporting the resilience of the Syrian population and

Syrian society” (European Council 2020). In accordance with these strategic objectives, the EU’s political actions have involved targeted sanctions against selected individuals and entities; supporting the UN-led Geneva process that aims for finding a peaceful solution; and the provision of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people inside the country and those outside in neighbouring countries (Van Veen et.al 2021, 24).

Despite the changes in the battlefield and the emergence of a situation favouring Assad’s rule in the most-populated central and western regions of the country, the EU’s official position remains to prioritize a political change in line with the language adopted in the “Geneva Communiqué” of June 2012 (Van Veen et.al 2021, 26). This UN document declares that the Syrian people should decide on the future of their country and calls for the establishment of a “transitional governing body exercising full executive powers”, including people representing the entire Syrian society (UNSC 2012). The EU has also linked its engagement in the reconstruction of Syria to the realization of a political transition (Asseburg 2020).

A political transition as envisioned by the “Geneva Communiqué” of 2012 and re-emphasized by the EU in its 2017 strategy document is highly unlikely to happen in the entirety of Syria. This requires a re-assessment of the strategy together with EU’s current red lines in Syria, “no normalisation with the regime; no risking of our funding being diverted to the regime or to terrorists, and no reconstruction before a political process is firmly under way” (Borrell 2020). A direct engagement with the government in Damascus at the EU level will likely create a lot of controversy both within the Union and among the supporters of the Syrian opposition. Nevertheless, it is high-time for the EU to make some adjustments regarding its position on the issues of conflict resolution, sanctions, and the provision of humanitarian aid, because unless the EU acts more assertive in these three fields, a worsening economic humanitarian crisis will characterize the country, leading to more refugees, extremism and further regional instability.

Firstly, the EU must increase its visibility in the UN-led Geneva process, while engaging in bilateral talks with the Astana actors. Until now, the EU missed the opportunity to play

a role in the peace-making attempts, as it is excluded from the Astana peace talks and has remained in the shadows at the UN-led Geneva process. In its tenth year, the military dimension of the Syrian conflict has become somewhat negotiable amongst the Astana trio of Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Nevertheless, as Carmit Valensi stresses, the reduced intensity of the violent conflict in Syria “has exposed the new face of the Syrian war in the form of a deep socio-economic crisis” (Middle East Institute 2021), which the Astana platform is ill-equipped to address.

The ongoing corruption and mismanagement in government-held areas, the overall depreciation of its currency, the lack of socio-economic prosperities, the imposed internal aid embargos by Damascus as well as the threat of an even more distressing humanitarian situation in Idlib in case of further Syrian army operations, necessitate that **the EU should bring its expertise on the socio-economic dimension to the fore and seek bilateral talks with Russia, Iran and Turkey**. Yet, the authors of this paper are aware that the Syrian dossier does not dominate bilateral relationships between the EU and the tripartite. In turn, talks have been taken over by a hostile tone – most recently in February 2021, Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, called the EU an “unreliable partner” (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi, 2021) – which undermines a constructivist approach that Syria needs. Therefore, the EU should reflect on how to re-create a more balanced relationship based on opportunities of cooperation regarding the Syrian crisis.

The same holds true for the Geneva talks that currently prioritize the writing of a new Syrian constitution. Recently, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, has expressed “the need for constructive international diplomacy” in bridging the gaps between the conflict parties (OSES 2021). The EU’s current position does not help and **at the institutional level, the EU should reflect on how it can play a more prominent role in Geneva and whether it should or could create some other channels that can support peace-making in Syria**.

Secondly, the current EU sanctions are in place until 01 June 2021 and before an automatic extension of the restrictive measures, **the EU needs to ensure that its sanctions do not target the Syrian people**, yet without doing any harm to the businessmen – who profit

from the war economy by monopolizing the Syrian market and exploiting people's needs. It is likely that the EU will seek alignment with the Biden administration. Nevertheless, the sanction-regime has not played any positive role in bringing peace to Syria. Worse, it has aggravated the lives of the ordinary Syrian people, some 80 percent of whom are now living in poverty (UN News 2021). Additionally, the sanctions damage the credibility of the West among the Syrian society, endorsing Damascus's propaganda that the "present situation was the outcome of a 'western conspiracy' against their state" (Salman and Zahid 2014).

Finally, the EU needs to take a balanced and neutral engagement with all the three key conflicting actors (with HTS through the help of Turkey), mediating among them to prevent any hindrance of the provision of humanitarian assistance. Territory-wise, Damascus controls the majority of Syria but along the borders in the north and east, its access is limited. Accordingly, the EU and its member states need to ensure that international organizations and NGOs receive the institutional support they need when engaging with multiple actors that control the border crossings. They cannot let the Syrian government or Russia centralize the humanitarian aid in Damascus. Yet, this may require some kind of horse-trading on sanctions. Therefore, the EU has to reconsider its sanction regime, while being ready to talk to all relevant actors in resolving the conflict in Syria.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Hediye Levent, freelance journalist (Damascus)
- 2 Interview with Dries Lesage, Associate Professor of Globalization and Global Governance at Ghent University, Belgium
- 3 Interview with B. Mandiraci, Crisis Group Turkey analyst and Oytun Orhan, Levant Studies Coordinator at ORSAM (Center for Middle Eastern Studies)
- 4 Interview with Hamza Hasil, Levant Research Assistant at ORSAM
- 5 Interview with Ferhat Gurini, a freelance journalist based in London
- 6 Interview with Oytun Orhan
- 7 Interview with Engin Yüksel, Research Associate at the Clingendael Institute
- 8 Interview with Hamza Hasil
- 9 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink, a freelance journalist based in the Netherlands
- 10 Interview with Frédérique Geerdink, a freelance journalist based in the Netherlands

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