

Preparing for a post-Assad Syria: What role for the European Union?

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The summer in Syria is particularly hot and dry this year. As the battle for Aleppo is raging, already 200,000 people have fled Syria's second biggest city. Estimates of the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) currently hover at around 1 million. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent has reported that the food and shelter needs of these people are becoming a real concern. The UN refugee agency has registered around 125,000 individuals who have sought refuge in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Based on the average daily new arrivals in neighbouring countries, this figure could rise to 200,000 refugees by the end of 2012. International organisations and agencies, neighbouring countries and other states are trying to alleviate some of the stress of the unfolding humanitarian disaster.

The EU too is engaging in relief efforts. So far, it has given more than €90 million in humanitarian assistance (€63 million from the European Commission and more than €27 million from member states). It continues to call for unhindered access for humanitarian organisations to assess the needs of the civilian population and to provide humanitarian and medical aid where needed.

Apart from the displaced, wounded and the sick, the death toll keeps rising. In the 16 months since the government of President Bashar al-Assad began its violent repression of the uprising, 18,000 Syrians are estimated to have died. The EU has been calling for a process of transitional justice. It has commended the work of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria and its investigations into alleged violations of international human rights law with a view to holding accountable those responsible for such violations, including those that may amount to crimes against humanity.

The violent implosion of Syria has underscored the deterioration of the strategic environment in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. For years, Syria and Lebanon have been sites of strategic competition between Iran and Turkey. Since President Assad's father staged a coup in 1970, the minority group of Alawites has dominated the Syrian government and controlled 80% of the positions in the powerful Republican Guard. The Alawites are a heterodox Muslim sect related to a Shiite offshoot that makes up about 12% of the country's population, which is overwhelmingly Sunni. The Iranian Islamist regime has given the Syrian regime its support in the decades-long suppression of Syria's Sunni majority. Tehran, whose main instrument in Syria and Lebanon is the radical Shiite force Hezbollah, also gave

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Syria support in its adventures in Lebanon. As the current crisis in Syria deepens, Iran has been reported to have warned Turkey not to intervene militarily or risk activating the Iranian-Syrian mutual defence agreement and thus meeting with a harsh response.

In the last decade, Turkey has been investing heavily in Syria. Ankara believed that by engaging with the secular regime in Damascus, it could lure Syria (and Lebanon by proxy) away from its close alliance with Iran. Also, Turkey tried to broker a peace deal between Syria and Israel but negotiations collapsed after Israel invaded Gaza. The subsequent inability of Turkey to overcome the hostile fallout from the Mavi Marmara incident with Israel, has led to a dramatic worsening of Turkish-Israeli relations. At the same time, Turkey has a keen interest in averting an Israeli military operation against Iran's nuclear facilities.

After months of futile attempts to convince President Assad to begin a transition to a more open and democratic system, Turkey unequivocally called for his departure. It unilaterally slapped sanctions upon the regime and has firmly sided with the Syrian opposition, whose representative organisation, the Syrian National Council, it hosts. Turkey has also allowed the Free Syrian Army to set up camp on its side of the 900-kilometre-long border with Syria and, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has propped it up with financial support. However, Turkey is unlikely to intervene unilaterally, especially in view of the deadlock in the UN Security Council over the issue.

Together with China, Russia has blocked three different attempts by the US and its EU allies to impose sanctions on Syria under the heading of Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. For fear of being embroiled in another protracted and bloody conflict with wider geopolitical ramifications, there is no appetite in the West for a military intervention in Syria. Instead, the US and the EU are waging an economic war on the Assad regime.

For its part, the EU has cranked up the pressure on Assad and his cronies by adopting a comprehensive package of restrictive measures. In 17 rounds of tightening sanctions, the package now includes:

- an embargo on exporting arms and equipment for internal repression to Syria (accompanied by an obligation for EU countries to inspect vessels and aircraft heading to Syria if they suspect the cargo contains arms or equipment for internal repression, and an obligation to seize such items if they are found);
- a ban on exports of key equipment and technology to the Syrian oil and gas sectors;
- a ban on participation in the construction of new power plants in Syria;
- a ban on exports of equipment and software intended for use in the monitoring of internet and telephone communications by the Syrian regime;
- a ban on providing grants, loans, export credit insurance, technical assistance, insurance and reinsurance for exports of arms and of equipment for internal repression to Syria;
- a ban on trade in gold, precious metals and diamonds with Syrian public bodies and the central bank;
- a freeze on 52 entities' assets held within the EU, including the Syrian central bank, while ensuring that legitimate trade can continue under strict conditions;
- an asset freeze and a visa ban on 155 persons associated with the regime and/or responsible for violent repression or human rights abuses; and
- a prohibition on access to EU airports for cargo flights operated by Syrian carriers, with the exception of mixed passenger and cargo flights.

Money is the main reason to believe that the Assad regime cannot last. Inflation is reported to be as high as 30%; the regime is said to be freely printing money; the Syrian pound has depreciated against the dollar by more than half on the black market. Meanwhile, the regime is running out of foreign cash. Some 90% of Syria's oil used to go to the EU but sanctions have now put a stop to that. Trade has plummeted. Monetary support from Iran cannot be counted on indefinitely as Iran itself is buckling under unprecedented sanctions from the EU and the US.

But for all the pressure applied by the West, the effects thereof are partly undone by Russia, which continues to provide cover to the besieged Assad regime and is asserting its influence through arms sales and a naval presence in support of the regime.

A tipping point in the conflict was reached with the opposition's successful attack on the national security building in Damascus on July 18th, which killed the Minister of Defence, the deputy Defence Minister (a brother-in-law of Assad), a deputy Vice-President (Assad's chief of crisis management) and the director of the National Security Bureau, i.e. the architects of the regime's violent repression. The attack, which struck at the heart of the regime's power-base, has helped to boost the morale of the opposition forces and has consolidated the belief in the West that the fall of the dictator is inevitable. The various political opposition groups are finally coming together to plan for a post-Assad Syria. Now that, besides scores of pilots, ambassadors and colonels, a top Sunni general (who for 30 years served as a Minister of Defence under President Hafez al-Assad) has also defected, it has dawned even on Moscow that Assad's days are numbered. If the increasing number of top-level defections is a signal that the Sunni elite, which is comprised of generals, businessmen and bureaucrats who have so far stuck with Assad, is now moving away from the President, then that represents a huge shift; one that will ultimately bring down the regime.

The regime has reacted angrily to the bomb-attack on the national security building by launching what may turn out to be a make-or-break offensive to regain control over parts of Damascus and other big cities that fell into the hands of the ever-stronger and better organised opposition forces.

The most troubling scenario for the region, as indeed the world, may also be the most likely one: protracted chaos and sectarian violence in Syria, leaving a security vacuum and an opportunity for terrorist organisations like Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda to harvest the country's weapons of mass destruction, in particular the large stockpiles of chemical weapons, with an on-going risk of spill-over effects affecting the security and stability of neighbouring countries. A prolonged period of great uncertainty, with regional and global powers trying to preserve their own interests in Syria, underlines the limits of unilateralism.

The EU should now actively plan for a post-Assad Syria. Arguably, these plans should extend beyond the European Union's measured lifting of sanctions and half-hearted responses to the monumental changes that have ripped through other parts of the Arab world. The conditioned levels of financial support and the speed with which trade liberalisation and mobility of people can be achieved under the European Neighbourhood Policy's revised approach are simply not enough to rebuild the country's bombed-out towns and cities, to create a rule of law-based democracy, and to turn the potentially vicious circle into a virtuous one. What is needed in terms of peace-building in Syria is the extension of Marshall-like aid which goes beyond the EU's current means and capacities.

Together with its partners, the EU must review and recalibrate its policies towards Syria, as indeed the entire region. After all, the EU cannot pursue an effective humanitarian, political, or military strategy towards Syria on its own and without taking into account the security

interests of Syria's neighbouring countries. In recognition of the geostrategic shifts in the Middle East and the Gulf, and pursuant to the constitutional obligation imposed upon the European Union by way of the Lisbon Treaty (Article 8 TEU),¹ the EU should plan for the creation of a regional space of shared security.

Given the zero-sum security metrics in the region, and to a certain extent at global level, a common security framework that commits all relevant actors, takes everyone's security needs into account, and thus diminishes the mistrust that fuels proliferation, would be a huge step forward. Arguably, the EU is better placed to launch such an initiative than the US, Russia or China. The EU has maintained day-to-day exchanges with all countries in the region, including Iran since the Islamic revolution. It is leading the E3+3 talks with Iran on nuclear non-proliferation, is currently steering the Quartet's efforts in the Middle East Process and has strategic relations with Turkey. The EU could inspire the countries in the region by using the historical experience of its own creation. It would be up to High Representative Catherine Ashton, supported by the European External Action Service, and in cooperation with the member states and the European Commission, to draw up a plan that revives the idea of a security zone for the wider Middle East. Such a plan would fit well into the current efforts to revamp the European Security Strategy.

¹ Paragraph 1 reads: "The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation."