

The Conflict in Syria and the Responsibility of the European Union

Introduction

The sudden and unexpected rise and military success of ISIS in Iraq and Syria over the summer has led to a dramatic shift on the ground in the Middle East, in Western public opinion and subsequently in the involvement of the international community. A coalition of Arab and Western countries, led by the USA, has started a military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and since September in Syria. The coalition is supported by most EU Member States. But how does this affect the Syrian population? Syrians have been suffering violence and war crimes since the beginning of the popular uprising more than three years ago. With a death toll of around 250.000, over 3 million refugees and an even higher number of IDP's and large parts of the country in ruins, the Syrian civil war is the most violent and destructive conflict at the moment. The rise of ISIS is not so much the cause of the current crisis in Syria, but the result of the failure of the international community to find a solution to the conflict and to protect civilians in Syria. Now the response to the rise of ISIS is mainly a military one and lacks a clear political objective. However, any meaningful strategy against ISIS in Syria (as in Iraq) needs to address the root causes of the conflict and keep the protection of civilians against gross human rights violations and war crimes as its primary objective. EU and EU Member States have previously ended their formal relation with the Assad regime in response to serious human rights violations and recognised and built relations to the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Europe has contributed generously to the humanitarian aid to Syrians. These have been important steps, yet this policy has not been enough to find a solution for the conflict, enabling political transition in Syria and to protect civilians. The new stage in the international involvement in Syria and Iraq demands a rethinking of strategies. How can Europe contribute to a much needed broader political strategy for Syria?

Recommendations¹

- While all focus currently is on ISIS, it should be kept in mind that the Assad regime has committed war crimes for over three years now causing a much higher number of victims and that a political solution for the crisis has to facilitate a transition into a free, democratic and inclusive post-Assad Syria;
- When building anti-ISIS coalitions the EU should avoid repeating earlier mistakes by re-engaging with authoritarian regimes;
- The delivery of arms to local actors in the region has to occur under well-defined conditions. Already several EU Member States have decided to deliver arms, also to the Free Syrian Army and the Lebanese army. Yet delivering even more arms in a conflict region is highly risky and raises serious issues in relation to the EU code of conduct on arms exports which bans the delivery of military equipment to crisis regions. The EU Member States should at least agree among each other on criteria, an effective monitoring and tracking and tracing system;
- The EU should consider the protection of civilians as its primary objective. Although stated as an objective of the campaign against ISIS, it still is an urgent question whether operations actually protect civilians or further endanger them. The EU could be a platform to develop, in dialogue with the USA and Arab states, a collected, inclusive and strategic plan of action, couched in international legality including strict criteria and a monitoring system on human rights and human security consequences of the operations against ISIS and further involvement in Syria;

- The EU has to engage with the Syrian Opposition and the Syrian Kurds. Even if there are good reasons to be highly critical about the lack of unity and effectiveness of the Syrian opposition, the only option to prevent either a victory of ISIS or the full rehabilitation of the Assad regime is an ongoing engagement. Although the PYD is linked to the PKK which is on the EU terror list, political engagement aiming at realisation of Kurdish rights is needed now;
- The EU should build on the resilience of local communities in Syria. There are some good examples where organised local communities with provisional local governments that managed to provide a minimum of basic needs for the people, for instance in Sarraqeb, managed to show resilience against ISIS, yet these communities are highly dependent on outside support;
- There can be no sustainable peace in Syria without accountability for the crimes committed by all sides during the conflict; therefore the EU and EU Member States should support all initiatives for the referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court or other instruments to secure justice is done;
- EU members in the Security Council should invest all efforts in a Security Council initiative to design a regional strategy addressing the root causes of radicalism, which would take into account the interests of the populations in the region;
- The EU and its Member States have to apply a consistent and coherent human rights policy and avoid the double standards which have caused so much resentment in the Middle East. EU human rights instruments have to be consistently and equally applied to all countries with which the EU has a formal cooperation;
- The EU and its Member States will need to continue or even further increase the efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees and to Syrian citizens, especially those in areas that are not controlled by the Syrian regime. The efforts undertaken by Europe are known and appreciated, but with the further escalation of the conflict the demands will be even higher;
- The EU and its Member States should increase the admittance of the number of refugees from Syria granted to stay on their territory, especially those facing additional risks, such as people belonging to Islamic minority groups and human rights defenders, call with all urgency for an international conference to coordinate the reception of refugees and set up an emergency programme to this end.

ⁱ These recommendations were presented at the event “The Conflict in Syria and the Responsibility of the European Union” co-organised by the offices European Union and Middle East Beirut of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and PAX (formerly PAX Christi, the Netherlands) held on 4 November 2014. The event built on previous [events on Syria in 2012 and 2013](#).