

Can the EU Help Syria?

19. September 2018 by [Paweł Pieniażek](#)

Seven years into the Syrian conflict, all Syrian citizens dream about is stability and the return of normal life. Some of them want to leave the camps and come back to their homes, others need water or electricity, and all of them need jobs. While their problems might seem easy to solve at first glance, there are no simple solutions.

The war in Syria continues, although its form and complexity are constantly changing. There are no short and medium-term perspectives to end the conflict. Because the conflict has been taken over by outside players, it will be difficult to find a comprehensive solution for the whole country. Foreign powers have their own interests on the ground and they are not eager to cooperate with each other.

This does not mean, however, that there are no viable solutions. Western countries support local forces which are controlling almost one third of Syria. The European Union could propose a comprehensive strategy to counter the aggressive and chaotic US policy and guarantee safety and stability, which in the future could benefit the whole country. Today, only complex and ambitious projects could prevent further bloodshed and humanitarian crises, which in consequence would decrease migration flows and terrorist activities in Europe.

I. Intervention of global powers

In 2014, the war in Syria transformed into a global conflict, in which local forces began to receive support from outside players.

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL or ISIS; since 2014 – the Islamic State or IS), which seized control over a territory in Syria and Iraq comparable in size to the United Kingdom, transformed the conflict into a global one. In 2014, US planes began bombing ISIS's positions. In October, the jihadists besieged the Kurdish town Kobane located next to the Turkish border. The event cemented the alliance between the Kurdish militias, including the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), and prompted the US led coalition to offer military support to the Kurds. The coalition provided the Kurdish militias with weapons and conducted airstrikes against ISIS's positions.

As a result, the jihadists were stopped. The battle has been commonly regarded as the beginning of the end of the self-proclaimed caliphate. The Kurdish together with some Arab militias formed the Syrian Democratic Forces, which until 2018 managed to push out IS from most of the territories of north-eastern Syria. As the last stage of the 'Jazeera Storm' operation, the SDF is targeting Hajin – a town in the Deir ez-Zor province and IS's last stronghold in the area.

The success and rapid territorial expansion of the SDF – in which the YPG and the YPJ played a dominant role – created a dilemma for Turkey. The Kurdish militias are closely connected with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which since 1984 has been engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Turkish government. As a result of the conflict, more than 40,000 people lost their lives. Turkey, the EU and the US consider the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

In 2016, the SDF captured the city of Manbij on the western bank of the Euphrates River and was preparing to capture other cities dividing the Afrin region in the north-western part of the

country from the rest of the Kurdish held territories. The plans caused an immediate reaction by Turkey which began the 'Euphrates Shield' operation to prevent the expansion of Kurdish forces. Within a few months, Turkish soldiers captured the area between Manbij and Afrin, including Azaz, al-Bab, Jarablus. The Kurds were blocked.

In 2015, Russia became yet another power which actively engaged in the conflict. A long-time ally of president Bashar al-Assad, Russia decided to send their forces to Syria to prevent the government's collapse. The official reason for the intervention was to stabilise Syria and fight terrorism. However, the Russian definition of terrorism has been much wider than the Western one and under the pretence of fighting terrorism, Russia helped the regime to deliver the final blow to the opposition.

Thanks to the Russian support, in a short period of time, the regime forces managed to recapture Palmyra (located 210 kilometres northeast of Damascus, Syria's capital) from IS. Following the victory, the government's forces attacked Aleppo, which since the beginning of the war was partly controlled by different opposition factions, and partly by various jihadist groups. The ruthless use of barrel bombs, forbidden by international humanitarian law, invoked a harsh critique of the methods used by the regime. In December 2016, the government's forces seized control over Aleppo.

Iran, another ally of the regime, has been involved in the war almost from the beginning. The country has been consistently increasing its number of troops and hardware in Syria, in an attempt to build a Shia crescent stretching from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Such control would give it access to the Mediterranean Sea and significantly strengthen its position as a regional power vis-a-vis Israel and Saudi Arabia.

II. Spheres of influence

The process of dividing Syria into foreign spheres of influence began in 2014 and is almost completed. There are three zones; the biggest one is controlled by Russia and Iran backing the regime. The second one is controlled by the West (mostly the US), with the SDF being the main local force on the ground. Moreover, the American forces and the rebels they support are also present in the At Tanf garrison in the desert in the country's south, close to the Jordanian and Iraqi borders. These groups, however, are unlikely to be game changers in the Syrian conflict. The third sphere is controlled by Turkey, which backs various anti-Assad Sunni rebels.

Beyond these zones are the last strongholds of the IS. They are located in Hajin and Idlib provinces, with the Idlib based Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) being the dominant force. The UN estimates that there are around 10,000 HTS fighters¹. Hajin is likely to be soon seized by the SDF, Idlib either by the regime or Turkey.

Finally, Israel has been increasingly engaged in the conflict, although it does not have any forces on the ground. The country worries about the expansion of Iran's influence and has been trying to push back Iran's forces – fighting on the government's side – as far as possible from its border.

The regime and its allies

At the beginning of the Syrian war, it was hard to imagine that Assad would remain in power. Before the Russian intervention in the end of 2015, the regime was controlling less than one

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1018342>

fifth of the country. However, thanks to the support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation Forces, the Iranian forces and Russia, today, it is hard to imagine that the regime would not remain in power.

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and their allies firstly crushed the opposition groups and pushed ISIS far away from the major cities. In 2018, they took control over all suburbs of Damascus, Daraa – where the revolution began in 2011, and all territories close to the Israeli border. Currently, they are controlling more than 60 per cent of the country² – from Deir ez-Zor city in the east, through Daraa in the south and Aleppo in the north. Both Russia and Iran seem to have long-term stakes in Syria and are not planning to leave anytime soon.

In addition, the regime is not a target for the West and replacing Assad is currently not the goal, something that Western representatives say openly. Even the Western missile attacks, such as the joint operation of the US, France and the UK from 13 April 2018, did not aim to target Assad but to establish ‘red lines’ – a point of no return, a game changer which would require the application of harsher military measures. In 2012, President Barack Obama referred to the use of chemical weapons as the ‘red line’ in the Syrian conflict, however, in 2013, when 1,400 people died as a result of a chemical attack in Ghouta, the US failed to act accordingly³. The brightest example of the approach has been the reaction of the US, when on 1 September 2018 Russia threatened to attack the forces located in At Tanf with ‘precision strikes’. Six days later, more than a hundred US troops began unexpected exercises in the region, although they made clear that they do not want to fight the regime.

‘The United States does not seek to fight the Russians, the government of Syria or any groups that may be providing support to Syria in the Syrian civil war. However, the United States will not hesitate to use necessary and proportionate force to defend US, coalition or partner forces, as we have clearly demonstrated in past instances,’ Cmdr. Sean Robertson, a Pentagon spokesman, said.⁴ Several months before, a similar statement was made by the ambassador of France to Russia, Sylvie Bermann. ‘We will not decide for the Syrian people, but we are not talking about the demand of Bashar Assad’s unconditional withdrawal anymore’, she said.⁵

The fact that the government’s forces and their allies caused the highest death rate among civilians during the war, does not seem to bother the West. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, estimates that around 85 percent civilian casualties were the result of the regime’s actions.⁶ Reports on mass tortures and executions in Syrian prisons, such as the infamous Saydnaya prison near Damascus, also have had little influence on the West’s policy.⁷

Currently, the Assad regime is not only far from collapsing but has a serious chance to take control over the whole of Syria in the future.

² <https://syriancivilwarmap.com/war-statistics/>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nearly-1500-killed-in-syrian-chemical-weapons-attack-us-says/2013/08/30/b2864662-1196-11e3-85b6-d27422650fd5_story.html

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/07/politics/us-military-exercise-syria-russia/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3622402>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M>

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/syria-investigation-uncovers-governments-secret-campaign-of-mass-hangings-and-extermination-at-saydnaya-prison/>

The SDF backed by the US led coalition

The YPG/YPJ – and later the SDF – managed to expand their territories with foreign support. From three small islands of control around Qamishli, Kobane and Afrin, they extended their reach to more than 30 percent of Syria.

They control all territories on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River which they captured from the IS. In 2017, the SDF took control over Raqqa and large parts of the Deir ez-Zor province, where the majority of inhabitants are Sunni Arabs. They control most of the Syrian oil reserves as well as vast gas fields, which are the major source of income for the region's budget. The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is linked to PKK, from the beginning has been running a parallel administration to the regime, called the Northern Syria Federation or Rojava. It has its own schools, hospitals, as well as security and armed forces. However, they declare that they do not want to separate from Syria but become an autonomous region or a federation within the country.

Since the siege of Kobane, when the US decided to support the Kurds, the YPG/YPJ lost only one battle: in 2018 in Afrin – a city and a region located in north-western Syria. Afrin was one of the regions the PYD has controlled since 2012. During the war, it was one of the calmest parts of Syria. This changed in early 2018, when Turkey attacked the area. The airspace over the western bank of the Euphrates River is controlled by Russia, which allowed Turkish airplanes entry. The US led coalition refused to engage in a conflict with Turkey and enter the Russian controlled airspace. Afrin is a mountainous region, especially the parts located near the Turkish border. Planes, helicopters and drones were crucial in the fight against the Kurdish militias which have a lot of experience in guerrilla fighting. Because of that, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and Turkey backed anti-government rebel fractions (also called the Turkish Free Syrian Army or TFSA) initially struggled in the fight, but they soon managed to take control over the area. Finally, in mid-March, Kurdish militias surrendered and left the city almost without fighting, together with around 137,000 civilians⁸. The YPG/YPJ did not hold up their fight and began guerrilla warfare. Frequent assassinations of the TFSA fighters by the Kurds make Afrin an unstable area, although the YPG/YPJ will not be able to recapture the area. The Turkish offensive showed how helpless the Kurdish militias are when faced by airpower and deprived of air support.

The anti-regime rebels backed by Turkey

Turkey decided to support the anti-government forces, with the exception of the Kurdish militias. In 2016, TAF – accompanied by some FSA groups – began the 'Operation Euphrates Shield', targeting both the IS and the YPG/YPJ. Turkey took control over Jarablus, Azaz, Bab cities as well as Dabiq, which was a symbolic place for the IS. The takeover marked the beginning of the TFSA's formation. Turkish proxy forces are mostly composed of Syrian Sunni Arabs and Turkmen groups, including some of the FSA, Ahrar al-Sham or the Levant Front units.

Turkey's goal is to unite the anti-government forces under its flag. It has recently allied with Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam) – the strongest rebel group in Douma, one of the cities of Ghouta located in the suburbs of Syria's capital. After the deadly battle of Ghouta – the longest siege in modern history⁹ and one of the worst humanitarian crises in the Syrian war – Jaysh al-Islam struck a deal with the SAA and was allowed to flee to the Turkish-controlled territory of Jarablus – the capital of the Euphrates Shield. It is estimated that around 10,000 fighters decided to move there. At the same time, many civilians from Douma left for Afrin,

⁸ https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_369.pdf

⁹ https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/.../A_HRC_38_CRP_3_EN.docx

where as a result of the Turkish offensive a month earlier, many houses were left uninhabited as 130,000 people had fled the area.

Similarly, Ankara is likely to have an influence on the future of the Idlib province. Fearing another wave of refugees fleeing to Turkey in an event of the regime's attack against Idlib, Turkey proposed the local militias: Ahrar al-Sham and the HTS to reorganise and become part of the TFSA. Idlib is home to three million people – at least half of whom are IDPs – and the government's offensive would likely affect 900,000 civilians. For this reason, Turkey is not interested in fighting in Idlib. At the time of writing, the fate of the region has not been decided, and it is unclear how Turkey would respond to the government's offensive.

Stalemate

At first glance, the current situation seems much less complex than it was a few years ago. The number of groups on the ground has decreased since the beginning of the war, when an estimated 1,000 armed opposition groups operated.¹⁰ Currently, this number is much lower and they are organised within the foreign spheres of influence. At the same time, however, this outside engagement has made it even more difficult to solve the conflict.

The fate of Syrian cities and provinces is often decided on the international level. Syrian voices are barely heard or not heard at all. International debates take months and meanwhile local and foreign forces on the ground keep fighting. While no decision has been made with regards to Idlib yet, over the past few months, bombs have continued falling there.

The conflicting interests between the outside players within Syria have posed a challenge for NATO, too. Turkey, a NATO member, seeks to seize control over the city of Manbij, currently under the SDF's rule. Ankara's aim is to hold the Kurdish militias on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River and to this end, it is exerting pressure on the US – SDF's main partner, to allow it to seize Manbij.

For a long time, Turkey was a prospective candidate for the European Union and a natural Western ally in the Middle East. Yet, over the past several years the country has been slowly drifting toward authoritarianism and strengthening relations with Russia. This process accelerated after the failed coup in 2016. But the West cannot afford to lose Turkey. With the fourth army within NATO¹¹, Turkey is the only Middle Eastern member of the alliance.

At the same time, however, the US does not want to betray the SDF – its main partner on the ground. Thus, the fate of Manbij is in the hands of Washington and Ankara, not the local forces, not to mention the civilian population living in the area. Based on my observations and discussions with the representatives of the Manbij Military Council (MMC; part of SDF), they are usually the last ones to know about the deals between Turkey and the US.

In contrast to Idlib, the frontline around Manbij is quiet with clashes taking place only occasionally. The TFSA and the MMC are in a deadlock. They understand that without the support of their foreign patrons they cannot do anything. What will happen if the foreign actor disappears or decides not to engage? This has already happened in Afrin, when the US refrained from helping the Kurds during the Turkish offensive. As a result, one of the safest regions in Syria destabilised and the conflict went into a new phase.

The three zones controlled by foreign countries will soon divide Syria, which can make the future reunification of the country a long and bloody process. The escalation of conflict

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>

¹¹ <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>

across Syria is thus quite possible. The triangle of alliances, namely: the government–Russia–Iran, the SDF–the West and Turkey–anti-government rebels can invoke many possible scenarios of conflict.

III. The role and goals of the West

I have been using the term the ‘West’ because in many cases, it is impossible to separate US actions from the actions of the most active EU Member States. While what happens in Syria affects the EU to a higher degree than the US, the EU has so far failed to speak with one voice and has no plan for Syria (neither does the US).

Both sanctions and financial assistance for Syria (with the EU as the main donor¹²) have been elaborated jointly but there is no comprehensive strategy to deal with the conflict and its consequences. Some EU Member States are actively participating in the Syrian war on the side of the SDF; others provide weapons or humanitarian assistance, while some contribute only marginally.

Given the political debates within Europe, two aspects of the Syrian war are the most important for EU Member States: migration and terrorism. Both of them are related and directly influence the EU’s socio-political landscape. The lack of strategy on how to manage these two issues has brought a wave of far- and extreme-right moods across the continent and threatened the EU’s integrity, which has been most vividly demonstrated by Brexit.

The underrated strength of IS

The problem of terrorism is directly related to the IS’s activities. The West has been involved in military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the ‘war on terror’ in Iraq in 2003. The West’s presence helped to strengthen terrorist groups on the ground, including al-Qaeda, and later IS, and mobilised the group’s followers all around the world, including the EU. Even though only several months ago, defeating IS seemed within reach, the optimism proved premature.

In September 2014, right after the Warsaw NATO summit, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel announced in a joint statement that they were building a broad coalition ‘to degrade and, ultimately, to destroy the threat posed by ISIL’. At the beginning, ten countries agreed to contribute supplies, military training or air support: the UK, France, Australia, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland and Denmark.¹³ Soon, however, US representatives announced that the number of allies has increased to 62 countries.¹⁴ Currently, there are 78 members of the coalition (with Kenya being the newest).¹⁵

In addition to providing air support, the US deployed around 2,000 soldiers and military personnel in Syria.¹⁶ This is the biggest Western contingent in the country, albeit not the only one. Other EU armies are on the ground, too. While only France has officially acknowledged the presence of its forces,¹⁷ which constitute the second largest Western contingent, there

¹² <https://eu.boell.org/en/2018/02/20/eu-syria-biggest-payer-aid-no-key-player>

¹³ <http://time.com/3273185/isis-us-nato/>

¹⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/09/25/what-the-60-members-of-the-anti-islamic-state-coalition-are-doing/>

¹⁵ <http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/home/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/24/pentagon-us-2000-troops-syria-not-500>

¹⁷ <https://www.france24.com/en/20180427-syria-france-usa-mattis-trump-french-special-forces-sent-bolster-operations-defence>

are also British¹⁸ and – as the SDF had informed me – Italian soldiers in Syria. Their presence, however, has never been confirmed by their respective governments.

After thousands of airstrikes and operations on the ground, IS lost 98 percent of the self-proclaimed caliphate's territory.¹⁹ In December 2018, the coalition claimed that fewer than 3,000 IS fighters remained in Syria and Iraq.²⁰ However, in August, the US Department of Defence (DOD) claimed the numbers are likely to be higher: between 28,600-31,600 fighters. 'The DoD estimated that 13,100 to 14,500 ISIS fighters remained in Syria, but cautioned that due to continual clearing operations, these numbers were likely in flux. The DoD estimated that 4,000-6,000 of them remained in the US military's areas of operation in north-eastern Syria,' the report stated.²¹

The discrepancies between the data provided in December and August demonstrate that the numbers are either used as a tool of military propaganda, or the US lacks knowledge of what is happening on the ground. Especially that in 2015, when the IS was at its strongest, the CIA estimated that the group had 20,000-32,000 fighters in both countries. At the same time, US officials claimed that the coalition had killed more than 20,000 fighters.²² What these numbers also show is that even without a territory of their own, IS is, indeed, a huge threat.

Migrants and the EU

The EU's second problem is directly related to the first one. The civil war, and the proxy war that followed, forced almost 12 million Syrians to leave their homes, out of which 5,6 million left the country. The peak of the crisis took place in 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived at the shores of Europe – a process which has been one of the main topics in the European political debate. Currently, all Member States are interested in stopping the influx of migrants from outside the EU.

Politicians have been so desperate to find a solution to prevent people from reaching Europe that they decided to outsource the problem. As a result, the EU and Turkey signed the refugee deal, aimed at keeping refugees in Turkey or bringing them back from the EU to Turkey in exchange for three billion euro and other benefits. The deal worked. The inflow of asylum seekers through the Balkan route, which in 2015 was the main path for people from the Middle East and Central Asia, is currently almost unattended. Many people have remained stuck in Turkey or Greece, often living in destitution.²³

Nevertheless, people are still looking for alternative ways to get to Europe.²⁴ A lot of people I spoke with in Syria and Iraq are awaiting new possibilities to leave, but they do not find them. At the same time, many of those who stayed in Syria hope that the situation will eventually stabilize. If the conflict erupts again, they will not hesitate to go abroad whether with a legal or illegal route.

¹⁸ <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/03/30/manbij-car-bomb-kills-coalition-personnel-syria/>

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/coalition-says-fewer-than-3000-is-fighters-remain-in-iraq-and-syria-idUSKBN1DZ29Z>

²¹ p. 42, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/07/2001951441/-1/-/1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR3_JUN2018_508.PDF

²² <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/17/politics/isis-fighters-killed-iraq-syria/index.html>

²³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/19/stories-asylum-seekers-trapped-greece>

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-albania/migrant-numbers-leap-on-new-balkan-route-across-albania-idUSKCN1J41KP>

IV. What to do?

There is only one solution to these two main problems: bringing stability back. The US actively engages in military campaigns but never rushes with complex strategies of conflict resolution. This is the role that the EU could take on.

The crucial obstacle in achieving stability are the three zones of foreign influence. Today, it is almost impossible for the EU to implement any strategies outside of the SDF controlled territories. Russia and Iran want to control Damascus and they are unlikely to support any wide-scale stabilisation and peace building efforts by the EU. Similarly, Turkey would not back such plans in the area it controls, although real stabilisation efforts in this part of Syria could, perhaps, have a positive effect on the rest of the country.

Trust and security

The US is not seen as a trustworthy partner by the people in north-eastern Syria. This trust was undermined particularly when the coalition failed to help the Kurds during the Turkish offensive on Afrin, and when President Donald Trump announced that US soldiers would 'very soon' leave Syria.²⁵ For this reason, France decided to act and made their presence in Syria official, thanks to which many people in north-eastern Syria started viewing the country in a positive light.

Giving people a sense of stability means making their lives more predictable, so that they know what to expect in the future, at least in the short term. With unclear US declarations, such a stability is impossible to achieve. A guarantee of long-term EU presence in the area would change the perspective of the population. At the same time, however, this would imply a constant EU military presence and air support should the US really leave. Otherwise, north-eastern Syria will be easily captured by the government or Turkish forces or torn apart by both of them, and threatened by such groups as IS.

The EU cannot stay in Syria forever, so together with partners on the ground they need to find a formula which would allow an exit strategy. One of the options could be a new round of peace talks. The Geneva process held by the UN, the Astana process facilitated by Russia and the Sochi meeting in the formula Russia-Iran-Turkey have failed because there were too many groups and no will for dialogue. Currently, Assad feels too strong to negotiate with anyone. Rather, he is expecting US forces to eventually leave Syria. But if the stalemate continues and north-eastern Syria receives security guarantees, a new, more effective peace process can begin.

Making Syria liveable

General stabilisation efforts should firstly make northern Syria liveable. Almost every person in north-eastern Syria complains about poor services. Irregular access to water and electricity, or lack thereof, is particularly burdensome. In many areas people depend on their own power generators because electricity lines have been destroyed. Representatives of the local administration told me that there is currently no schedule for the resumption of energy supplies because they lack the equipment and funds.

Many people depend on the local administration for subsidised bread, fuel, electricity and water. Many of them used to work in agriculture. However, the lack of water and damaged irrigation systems have made it impossible, which makes people's lives even more miserable. In the history of conflicts there have been many examples of companies which

²⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/29/politics/trump-withdraw-syria-pentagon/index.html>

made huge profits during the time of instability, not necessarily benefiting the local populations but at the expense of local people. Any foreign investment, therefore, should be made with the best interest of local residents in mind.

In such conditions, many people do not have funds to rebuild their houses or find new ones, as they cannot return to their cities or villages. The former IS territories require intensive demining, since the IS specialised in IEDs and contaminated all areas. While local teams of volunteers with limited support of international NGOs do try to address the problem, clearing the areas is likely to take a long time.

Governance

Even the opponents of the IS admit that the group governed the territories it controlled much more efficiently than all the previous factions. They set up a functioning bureaucracy and their fighters had a reputation of being well-disciplined, motivated and incorruptible. These features made the group unique, since corruption has been widespread not only among the government forces but rebels as well.

After years of war, people appreciated the order IS brought, even though it was ruthless. Moreover, in a sense many Sunni Arabs finally felt represented and not oppressed by other sects or ethnicities. Under the SDF, northeast Syria is not as corrupt as other parts of the country (which is considered a heritage of the PKK) and if the group makes an effort to improve the work of its administration, they may gain more trust of the local population.

The biggest challenge, however, will be to address the feeling of discrimination among the Arab population. While within the ranks of the SDF and the administration Arabs are highly represented, the Kurds are still a dominant group in the area, in charge of the political process.

Public institutions

Since the war began, many children and youths have not finished or even begun education. Among young Syrians, illiteracy is a huge issue, which requires immediate action. A whole generation without education and no prospects for the future will be much more prone to radicalisation.

Hospitals and other institutions need rebuilding which will require know-how and training for the local staff, as mass emigration has drained the Syrian society.

Other obstacles and issues

If the EU decides to support north-eastern Syria, it will lead to another tension with Turkey. Ankara will never accept a Syrian Kurdish movement led by the PYD. Moreover, the PYD's version of democracy is questionable. The group is not dedicated to political pluralism and does not accept any critique. Some of their political opponents are held in prison or have left the territory, although they are probably the group's most open for diversity (including women rights) in today's Syria.

V. Conclusion

The EU can play an important role in Syria, but it is impossible to achieve this only through peace talks and humanitarian assistance. Currently, the war-torn Syria needs military presence. For the EU it is achievable only in the north-eastern part of the country, where a long-term strategy would help to make the area safe and stable. If such a model proves

successful, it may have a positive impact on other parts of the country, too. This kind of strategy demands long-term planning, a huge budget and military presence. But a strategy to resolve one of the worst conflicts since the Second World War needs to be demanding. It is impossible to win the fight against IS and encourage people to stay in their country with military might. Only peace and stability can make these goals achievable.

Abbreviations

FSA – Free Syrian Army

HTS – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (before Jabhat al-Nusra)

ISIL/ISIS or IS – Islamic State of Iraq and Levant/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, later Islamic State

MMC – Manbij Military Council

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD – Democratic Union Party

TAF – Turkish Armed Forces

TFSA – Turkish Free Syrian Army

SAA – Syrian Arab Army

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG – People's Protection Unit

YPJ – Women's Protection Unit