

Ten Years of the Syrian Conflict: Time for the EU to Reconsider Its Strategy?

by Amer Al Hussein

The Syrian conflict entered its eleventh year on 15 March 2021, bringing this “living nightmare” back to our minds.¹ This ominous anniversary should remind the world of the importance of addressing the bleak reality inside Syria. While the new US administration provides a glimmer of hope for a return to diplomacy, multilateralism and an end to the mercantilism of the past years, Europe would be wrong to simply wait for the US lead on Syria.

Military operations have largely dissipated across the country, particularly after the Turkey–Russia ceasefire agreement in March 2020 which ended military hostilities in Idlib, one of the last hotspots of the conflict.² This led Syria to again fade from front page news and the needs of the Syrian

people have also been progressively overshadowed.

Yet, conditions on the ground have continued to worsen. The World Food Programme’s (WFP) latest report on Syria states that 12.4 million Syrians are food insecure and 1.3 million people are facing severe food shortages. It stresses that if no action is taken another 1.8 million Syrians could become food insecure, reinforcing the urgency of the WFP’s 375.3 million US dollars funding appeal for the summer of 2021.³

The vast majority of the 8 million locals and refugees living in Damascus now rely on food boxes and lack basic needs like electricity which only comes 4 hours daily. Speaking to a government employee in Damascus, his salary can hardly buy him two kilograms of meat and “even clean water is a luxury nowadays”.⁴ Recalling the

¹ UN News, *Ten Years On, Syrian Crisis ‘Remains a Living Nightmare’: UN Secretary-General*, 10 March 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086872>.

² Samer Jabbour et al., “10 Years of the Syrian Conflict: A Time to Act and Not Merely to Remember”, in *The Lancet*, 12 March 2021, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00623-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00623-1).

³ World Food Programme (WFP), *Syria Emergency Dashboard February 2021*, March 2021, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/syria-2>.

⁴ Author’s interview, 10 November 2020.

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contrast between his living conditions throughout the years, he stressed that he began “working in the 90s for 90 US dollars a month, then it went up to 300 US dollars a month in 2010 and in 2021 my whole salary is hardly worth 30 US dollars”.

With severe shortages of bread and fuel, queues are stretching for kilometres in all cities. The new generation is particularly suffering, with over half of the children out of education according to a UNICEF statement issued on 24 January 2021; “Inside Syria, there are over 2.4 million children out of school, nearly 40 per cent are girls.”⁵

The COVID-19 situation is particularly bad in a country lacking medical infrastructure and funding to combat a pandemic. Official government numbers currently stand at roughly 16,000 cases and 1,045 deaths, but real statistics are expected to be much higher due to weak testing capacity.⁶ “If I was seeing in my clinic two or three cases a day last year now I am seeing five or six”, Dr Nabough al-Awa told Reuters.⁷ The World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in Damascus mentioned that the COVAX programme which provides vaccination to low-income countries will deliver 5 million doses to Syria, enough to inoculate a meagre 20 per cent of the population.⁸

⁵ UNICEF, *After Almost Ten Years of War in Syria, More than Half of Children Continue to Be Deprived of Education*, 24 January 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/node/47371>.

⁶ “Syria Sees COVID-19 Spike But Grim State of Economy Limits Lockdown Options”, in *Reuters*, 4 March 2021, <https://reut.rs/3bZPKTA>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “WHO Preparing to

Although US and EU sanctions are not the only contributing factors, they play a leading role in Syria’s economic crisis. The sanctions regime with its landmark legislation, the US Caesar Act,⁹ has caused acute shortages of necessities from fuel to wheat and contributed to the freefall of the Syrian currency. However, they have not undermined loyalty amongst President Assad’s core supporters or led to any of the desired outcomes stated by the US and EU. Instead, this policy has sidelined western players and left the stage for Russia, Iran and Turkey. The main avenue for a resolution that western powers relied on, the constitutional committee, has also stalled.¹⁰

A recent report by the US based Carter Center analysed the unintended impact of sanctions on Syria’s economy.¹¹ The report highlights that most foreign entities have taken a de-risking approach for all business with Syria, including foreign banks severing correspondence with local banks and even private banks not listed by the

Deliver Vaccines Across Syria from April Despite Conflict”, in *Reuters*, 4 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/2NWC2Z6>.

⁹ The Caesar Act provides for secondary US sanctions against all individuals or entities which engage in transactions with sanctioned Syria entities. See “Legal Briefing – July 2020”, in *Syrian Law Journal*, 1 August 2020, <http://www.syria.law/?p=1557>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Feltman and Hrair Balian, “The United States Needs a New Syria Policy”, in *Responsible Statecraft*, 20 January 2021, <https://responsiblestatercraft.org/?p=8997>.

¹¹ Samir Aita, *The Unintended Consequences of U.S. and European Unilateral Measures on Syria’s Economy and Its Small and Medium Enterprises*, Atlanta, Carter Center, December 2020, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/syria-unintended-consequences-aita-12-20.pdf.

US's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

Likewise, the majority of foreign firms adopted a similar strategy, thus terminating their licensing deals with Syrian factories, including pharmaceutical producers. The impact of de-risking even extended to UN agencies, which must pass through a rigorous process to deliver humanitarian aid, despite the exemption for humanitarian transactions.

In a world fighting the worst pandemic in 100 years, the Biden administration has already shown signs of "deprioritising" the Middle East. A close Biden advisor claimed that "if you are going to list the regions Biden sees as a priority, the Middle East is not in the top three."¹² However, the region's hot files are too difficult to ignore, and while the Biden administration has already engaged with issues like Libya, Yemen and the Iran nuclear deal,¹³ the issue of Syria remains unaddressed, despite recent US military action against Iran-backed militias in Eastern Syria.¹⁴ This could be either due to a belief that the issue is directly dependent on the Iran deal or simply a lack of interest and understanding of the Syria file.

¹² Natasha Bertrand and Lara Seligman, "Biden Deprioritizes the Middle East", in *Politico*, 22 February 2021, <https://politi.co/3aENOQI>.

¹³ "US, European Powers, Egypt Hail Libya Unity Government", in *The New Arab*, 12 March 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2021/3/12/us-european-powers-egypt-hail-libya-unity-government>.

¹⁴ "Biden Takes First Military Action with Syria Strike on Iran-backed Militias", in *BBC News*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56205056>.

This approach has fed ongoing speculation about a US retrenchment from the region, leaving Europeans to deal with the crisis in their immediate neighbourhood.¹⁵ This drawdown comes at a cost and other players such as Russia have already moved to capitalize on these developments.

During the European Parliament debate marking the tenth anniversary of the Syrian crisis, Europe's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, emphasised that the EU is sticking to its current strategy: "There will be no end to sanctions, no normalisation, no support for reconstruction until a political transition is underway."¹⁶

As noted by other analysts, however, this EU goal "is increasingly disconnected from the reality on the ground".¹⁷ These remarks came on the same day as Russia's top diplomat Sergei Lavrov toured the gulf region with visits to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, which many saw as a clever manoeuvre by Moscow to fill the gap caused by President Biden's cold

¹⁵ Justyna Gotkowska, "USA – Germany – NATO's Eastern Flank. Transformation of the US Military Presence in Europe", in *OSW Commentaries*, No. 348 (14 August 2020), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-08-14/usa-germany-natos-eastern-flank-transformation-us-military>.

¹⁶ European Parliament, *The Syrian Conflict – 10 Years After the Uprising* (debate), 9 March 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-03-09-ITM-019_EN.html.

¹⁷ Julien Barnes-Dacey and Anthony Dworkin, "Promoting European Strategic Sovereignty in the Southern Neighbourhood", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, November 2020, p. 6, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=63484>.

shoulder to the region.¹⁸

The visit saw the UAE foreign minister pushing for Syria to re-join the Arab League. He also criticised current sanctions: "To keep the Caesar Act as it is today makes this path very difficult, not only for us as a nation, but also for the private sector."¹⁹ Similar statements with varying degrees of political support for a rapprochement with Damascus also came from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.²⁰

The European position voiced by Borrell does show strong sentiment towards the Syrian issue. However, there are two aspects to be considered: first, for Europeans, the US's disengagement from the region combined with the emergence of European strategic autonomy as a guiding principle in designing its global role²¹ should prompt a rethink of its policy towards Syria, especially as the EU does not have the luxury of geographic distance from the conflict. Second, for both the EU and the US, the Syrian issue poses a major moral dilemma: should political objectives outweigh humanitarian needs?

¹⁸ "Lavrov in Saudi Arabia to Take Advantage of Biden's Mistakes", in *The Arab Weekly*, 10 March 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/node/51909>.

¹⁹ "Abdullah bin Zayed: US Caesar Act Complicates the Situation in Syria", in *The Arab Weekly*, 10 March 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/node/51908>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nathalie Tocci, "Europe and Biden's America: Making European Autonomy and a Revamped Transatlantic Bond Two Sides of the Same Coin", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|81 (November 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12331>.

In a paper published by the Quincy Institute, Jeffrey Feltman, former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs during the Obama administration, insisted that Biden should reassess its Syria policy and favour diplomacy over force, especially given the latter's failure after ten years of conflict.²² However, regardless of the outcome of such revaluation, Europe must forge its own way.

While some in the EU will assume that a Biden administration means a return to status quo, this is a major error and should not be used as justification for abandoning European strategic autonomy. A more proactive EU approach could lead to the Europeans driving a joint diplomatic push with the US to reassess its sanctions regime in light of the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries.

Yet, given current realities on the ground and internationally, such efforts will take time, thus prolonging Syrian suffering. This is particularly serious as 35 aid agencies have recently warned of "irreversible impact",²³ should the humanitarian emergency remain unaddressed and a political settlement is not reached. Hence, in the absence of a political strategy, Europeans could drive a new discussion on the humanitarian crisis and seek to develop creative means to address the most

²² Jeffrey Feltman and Hrair Balian, "The United States Needs a New Syria Policy", cit.

²³ ACT Alliance et al., *35 Aid Agencies Warn of Further Irreversible Impact, Marking 10 Years of Syrian Conflict*, 11 March 2021, <https://actalliance.org/act-news/35-aid-agencies-warn-of-further-irreversible-impact-marking-10-years-of-syrian-conflict>.

urgent needs of Syrians such as fuel, wheat, medicine and vaccines.

This diplomatic effort could include efforts to convince Washington to relax its secondary sanctions and allow Europe to provide a financial channel for the central bank of Syria to be able to buy commodities and vaccines on international markets. This would represent a necessary lifeline for people in government-held areas. Further support to organisations like WFP, and providing a framework to encourage utilisation of sanctions exemptions as well as providing sanctions relief, like the one recently granted to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen,²⁴ could provide much-needed support to Syria.

While many will question whether such an approach could lead to viable projects, a recent study by Norwegian Refugee Council and Oxfam have shown that it is possible to ensure global humanitarian standards from the Damascus hub. However, the report emphasised the need for more support and engagement from donors to meet the needs of people in government-held areas.²⁵

While the return of the US to the world stage could provide positive signals and momentum, it will ultimately fall to Europe to take the lead in its own neighbourhood. Coordination

and cooperation with the Biden administration will be important, but so will Europe's capacity to develop proactive and courageous policies when its interests are most at stake.

When it comes to Syria, Europe has long been side-lined from the political and military track, but Brussels and European member states have dedicated significant funding to address the Syrian humanitarian emergency since 2011. After ten years of conflict and devastation, and with the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, it is high time for Europe to explore creative means to have a greater impact on the ground and mitigate the suffering of ordinary Syrians across the country.

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²⁴ Conor Finnegan, "US to Resume Aid to Houthi-Controlled Areas in Yemen Amid Desperate Need, Intensified Fighting", in *ABC News*, 11 March 2021, <https://abcn.ws/2N7zabM>.

²⁵ Daniel Gorevan, Matthew Hemsley, and Rachel Sider, "Hard Lessons. Delivering Assistance in Government-held Areas of Syria", in *Joint Agency Briefing Papers*, July 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/node/13503>.

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