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A FADING PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST? THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ENGAGEMENT IN SYRIA

INTRODUCTION

The current turmoil in the Middle East proves that Europe is gradually losing its political influence in the region. Although this influence was already limited after World War II due to the American domination, European countries managed to keep their spheres of influence during the Cold War and in the first decade of the post-Cold War period. Post-colonial factors played crucial roles in this case. At the moment, however, it is generally believed that the post-9/11 developments, especially the war on terrorism, military intervention in Iraq as well as the process of political changes in the Arab world after 2011, changed this situation to Europe's disadvantage even more. The same claim applies to the European Union.

Nowadays it seems that other global players like the United States or the Russian Federation have a much bigger political influence in the Middle East than the EU. The lack of progress in case of the Middle Eastern conflict has been probably the best example of EU's diplomatic weakness for two decades. Can the same be observed in case of the ongoing Syrian conflict? Just a cursory analysis indicates that the EU does not play the leading role in the peace process. Moreover, some authors claim that the EU's limited influence in case of Syria is intentional.¹ Others point out that the EU is relatively weak as an international actor due to its legal foundations laid down in the treaties.² In this context Marc Pierini openly claims that "the Syrian war has left the EU in a second-tier position among international actors. The violent policies of the Syrian regime, Russia's show of force, Turkey's ambivalent policy on the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds, and the EU's internal divisions have given the Union little influence on the course of events in Syria."³ But is such claim

¹ See: C. Berg, *Lebanon and Syria*, in: *The European Union and the Arab Spring: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East*, J. Peters (ed.), Lanham 2012, p. 104-105.

² See also: J. Horst, A. Jünemann, F. Kühn, E.M. Maggi, D. Rothe, *Logics of Action in the Euro-Mediterranean Political Space: An Introduction to the Analytical Framework*, in: *Euro-Mediterranean Relations After the Arab Spring: Persistence in Times of Change*, J. Horst, A. Jünemann, D. Rothe (eds), Farnham 2013, p. 4.

³ M. Pierini, *In Search of an EU Role in the Syrian War*, Carnegie Europe, 18 August 2016, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/08/18/in-search-of-eu-role-in-syrian-war-pub-64352> (6.10.2017).

justified? The EU already describe the conflict “as one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has faced since World War II.”⁴

This article is dedicated to a detailed analysis of the European Union’s engagement in Syria after 2011, namely during the ongoing civil war. It focuses mainly on diplomatic activities such as mediation efforts as well as imposed sanctions. The main research question is whether the European Union could play a more constructive and influential role as a peace broker in Syria. In order to answer it one has to analyze actions undertaken by the European Union especially in the framework of European Council’s Strategy on Syria of 2017 and the EU’s Global Strategy. In this case one has to focus mainly on initiatives and actions of the current High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, as well as of the European External Actions Service (EEAS). Does the EU fully exploit its political potential to the benefit of Syrians? Is the EU’s approach constructive and realistic?

The analysis is based on selected documents issued by various EU institutions especially a Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy of 2016, the Strategy on Syria of 2017, Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities of 2009 as well as relevant reports, monographs, and academic articles.

EU ACTORNESS IN CRISIS RESPONSE: A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Maria Raquel Freire and Maria Grazia Galantino point out that “in recent decades the European Union has quantitatively and qualitatively increased its commitment to crisis response. This has come as a result of the many challenges that have emerged, particularly in a post-Cold War context, where old and new problems have surfaced in a changed political context, prompting a more active response from the EU.”⁵ Nathalie Tocci adds that “inherent in the EU’s approach is the link drawn between values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law on the one hand, and the prevention and resolution of conflicts and regional cooperation on the other hand. The former values, while being viewed as ends in themselves, are also considered as instrumental to achieving the latter objectives.”⁶

The European Union promotes peace and prosperity mainly in the framework of the EEAS. Its external actions focus on such issues as conflict prevention, conflict management, and peace building. Besides, the European Union has at its disposal such tools as dialogue and mediation mechanisms.

⁴ Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council elements for an EU strategy for Syria, European Commission, 14.03.2017, JOIN (2017) 11 final, p. 2.

⁵ M.R. Freire, M.G. Galantino, *Introduction: The Role of the EU in International Peace and Security*, in: *Managing Crises, Making Peace: Towards a Strategic EU Vision for Security and Defense*, M.G. Galantino, M.R. Freire (eds), New York 2015, p. 1.

⁶ N. Tocci, *The EU and Conflict Resolution: Promoting Peace in the Backyard*, New York 2007, p. 7.

The EU's conflict prevention is generally based on such actions as:

- “early identification of risk of violent conflict, and closing the gap to early action;
- improved understanding of conflict situations (root causes, actors and dynamics);
- enhanced identification of the range of options for EU action;
- conflict-sensitive programming of external assistance;”⁷
- using of the EU Conflict Early Warning System.

As far as peace building is concerned, the European Union can use a wide array of external assistance instruments like close bilateral and multilateral cooperation with various strategic partners, and financial contribution to international organizations.⁸ According to Anders Persson, “while there is no explicit mention of the term peacebuilding in the most important EU treaties or in the Union’s security strategy, it is a term increasingly found in EU documents. It is now frequently used by the Council, the Commission, the European External Action Service, EU delegations around the world and the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs.”⁹ Martina Spornbauer emphasize the fact that “the amendments brought forth by the Lisbon Treaty – under the renamed Common Security and Defence Policy – now better reflect the type of mission that the EU has deployed thus far, and codify the consistent the European Union has at its disposal its own dialogue and mediation mechanisms. In November 2009 the Commission and the Council of the European Union presented a joint Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities. Both institutions described the concept’s overall aim as follows: “The EU, as a global actor committed to the promotion of peace, democracy, human rights and sustainable development, is generally seen as a credible and ethical actor in situations of instability and conflict and is thus well placed to mediate, facilitate or support mediation and dialogue processes. While mediation is not a new area to the EU, a more coordinated and focused approach will enhance the EU’s ability to play a more active international role in this area.”¹⁰

Various EU institutions are involved in mediation processes, according to needs and situation. In this case the EU as an actor in mediation uses a wide spectrum of tools. Among them are:

- civilian crisis management instruments;
- military crisis management instruments;
- development tools;
- trade tools.¹¹

⁷ *Conflict Prevention, Peace building and Mediation*, https://ecas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/426/ (15.06.2017).

⁸ N. Koenig, *EU Security Policy and Crisis Management...*, p. 12.

⁹ A. Persson, *The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1971-2013: In Pursuit of a Just Peace*, Lanham 2015, p. 49.

¹⁰ Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities, Council of the European Union, 10 November 2009, 15779/09, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

As far as the EU's preferred solutions in conflicts are concerned, Nathalie Tocci claims that one can distinguish three most common solutions. "In most of cases, the Union advocates federal and/or power-sharing solutions to secessionist conflicts. (...) In other cases, the Union supports the integration of the minority community through the extension and respect of individual, cultural and minority rights within multicultural unitary states. (...) In very rare cases, the Union has supported secession."¹² What are the observations in case of the ongoing Syrian conflict?

THE EU POLITICAL POSITION ON THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN SYRIA

The proper understanding of the meaning of conflicts is essential in order to analyse their role and nature in the West and in the Arab world. This matter is also important to understand the EU's attitude towards the ongoing conflict in Syria. According to Hasan Al-Momani and Sarah Anne Remnick, there is a significant difference. They claim that "conflicts in the West can be sometimes viewed in an optimistic light as a potential source of change, a force for bringing about new social orders or re-establishing relations. They are seen as problems that can be solved by understanding the positions of the two sides and proposing common, interest-based solutions. In contrast, conflict in the Arab cultural framework is seen as something negative and disruptive of the normal social order. Conflicts cannot necessarily be solved, but can be managed."¹³

The above claim seems to be very true in case of Syria. While the European Union perceives the conflict as a chance for a new political order in Syria and emphasize the importance of a quick and very effective solution, the Syrian regime seems to pay more attention to maintaining the status quo.¹⁴ Bashar al-Assad manages the conflict rather than tries to solve it as soon as possible and at all costs. The EU strategy on Syria only proves that member states pay attention to the Syrian war and, at least verbally, do everything possible to resolve it.

The European Union has been engaged in the peace process in Syria since the very beginning. Federica Mogherini, the current High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, played an important role in the so-called Geneva talks. Although the negotiations, conducted under UN's auspices, have not resulted in any comprehensive agreement so far, the EU has already proved its determination to end the conflict.

¹² N. Tocci, *The EU and Conflict Resolution...*, p. 8-9.

¹³ H. Al-Momani, S.A. Remnick, *EU peacebuilding in the Arab-Islamic world*, in: *Rethinking Peacebuilding: The quest for just peace in the Middle East and the Western Balkans*, K. Aggestam, A. Björkdahl (eds), Abingdon 2013, p. 145.

¹⁴ More on the ongoing Syrian conflict see: C. Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, London 2016; *The Syria Dilemma*, N. Hashemi, D. Postel (eds), Cambridge 2013; B. Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads*, London 2013; C.C. Sahner, *Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present*, New York 2014.

The Union was represented, for instance, during the Geneva II Conference on Syria in 2014.

The EU's interest in the deteriorating situation in Syria was reflected in its global strategy, namely the document entitled *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* of 2016. In this strategy the EU underlined the fact that "conflicts such as those in Syria and Libya often erupt locally, but the national, regional and global overlay they acquire is what makes them so complex". At the same time the Union declared that "it will therefore pursue a multi-level approach to conflicts acting at the local, national, regional and global levels."¹⁵ A year later, in 2017, EU officials reviewed the strategy implementation and concluded that blends work on a political solution at national, regional and international levels in the framework of the Geneva process, with local work with Syrian civil society, local councils, the Syrian interim government, and support for dialogue towards national reconciliation.¹⁶

Moreover, in April 2017 the EU co-hosted an international conference on the future of Syria, entitled *Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region*. The event was co-chaired with the United Nations and with the governments of Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar and the United Kingdom. This way the Union contributed to commitments undertaken during the conferences held previously in Kuwait and the United Kingdom. In the final declaration participants including the EU underlined "the importance of maintaining a sovereign, independent, unitary and territorially integral country where all Syrians will be able to live in peace and security."¹⁷ They also made pledges to Syrian refugees, namely six billion USD for 2017. Last but not least, the participating states and organizations "re-iterated their full support and commitment to the UN-moderated intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, as the only forum where a political solution should be negotiated."¹⁸ Undoubtedly, it was a clear message for the Russian Federation and critique of its actions in the framework of the so-called Astana process. This way the EU and its partners emphasized the role of the United Nations and the peace dialogue under its auspices. Yet officially the conference participants recognised the Astana meetings and declared that they "have a potentially crucial role in consolidating and strengthening the nationwide ceasefire, guaranteed by Russia and Turkey, and, now, with the participation of Iran."¹⁹

¹⁵ Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy, Brussels 2016, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/pages/files/eugs_review_web_13.pdf (29.09.2017), p. 29.

¹⁶ From Shared Vision to Common Action: Implementing the EU Global Strategy Year 1. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, 2017, http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/full_brochure_year_1.pdf (29.09.2017),

¹⁷ Supporting the future of Syria and the region: co-chairs declaration, 5.04.2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/05-syria-conference-co-chairs-declaration/> (29.09.2017).

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

The most relevant EU document dedicated to the ongoing conflict was published in 2017. On April 3, 2017 the European Council adopted EU strategy on Syria. The EU's position on who is to blame for the current turmoil in this country is very clear.

"The Syrian regime has the primary responsibility for the protection of the Syrian population. The Council therefore calls upon the regime and its allies, notably Russia including as a co-Chair of the ISSG, to undertake all efforts to ensure: a full cessation of hostilities; the lifting of sieges; and full unhindered sustainable country-wide humanitarian access. The Council strongly condemns the continued systematic, widespread and gross violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties, particularly by the Syrian regime. This must end and those responsible must be held accountable."²⁰

The EU's strategic objectives in case of the ongoing civil war in Syria were pinpointed in six points. These are as follows:

- an end to the Syrian war in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions, especially resolution 2254;
- support for an inclusive transition in Syria;
- humanitarian aid to save lives;
- promotion of human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech;
- accountability for all war crimes;
- support for the resilience of the Syrian population.²¹

In the same document the European Union underlined the fact that it "firmly believes that there can be no military solution to the conflict and is committed to the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian State."²²

ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN BY THE EU IN CASE OF SYRIA

In the opinion of Eva Gross and Ann E. Juncos, "the latest reform, as laid out in the Lisbon Treaty, has at least the potential to improve the coherence of EU conflict prevention and crisis management with the establishment of a double-hatted High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a European External Action Service as well as allowing for Permanent Structured Cooperation in military matters."²³ Despite that, the EU's initial actions were rather limited and could not really change the situation on the ground. According to Carin Berg, "the EU was one of the first international actors to take measures against the Syrian regime, but it could have done

²⁰ Council Adopts EU Strategy on Syria, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03-fac-conclusions-syria/> (12.06.2017).

²¹ Council Adopts EU Strategy on Syria...

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ E. Gross, A.E. Juncos, *Conclusions and outlook*, in: *EU Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management: Roles, institutions and policies*, E. Gross, A.E. Juncos (eds), Abingdon 2011, p. 147.

much more much sooner. For the first four months the measures were more or less entirely rhetorical.”²⁴

As far as the comprehensive settlement of the Syrian conflict is concerned, “the EU strongly supports the work of the UN Special Envoy and the resumption of the talks in Geneva. Reaffirming the primacy of the UN-led Geneva process, the EU will continue to provide political support to it through the High Representative’s regional initiative which is fostering political dialogue with key actors from the region in order to identify common ground.”²⁵ Although some analysts suggested the need for a Western military operation, it was never taken seriously. Emile Hokayem claims that European states’ experience in Libya was one of the reasons for that: “There was no appetite among European generals and NATO leaders for what would be a significantly larger military operation in Syria, which would certainly require US backing that was unlikely to be forthcoming.”²⁶ What’s more, there are more international actors involved in the Syrian conflict including the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation.

The Strategy only proves that the EU does not intend to lead any peace talks in Syria and does not see any opportunity of that. The first point of the document is probably the best example of such position. Some commentators had criticized the EU for the absence of constructive and coherent diplomatic actions in case of the Syrian conflict long before the EU accepted the Strategy of 2017. One of them was Frederic Pichon who pointed out to the lack of a political strategy towards Syria after 2011 and the lack of a clear vision of the post-war future.²⁷ In this context one can say that the proposed attitude, based solely on the United Nations’ actions, may not be very efficient as some key members of the UN Security Council like the United States and the Russian Federation have divergent visions with regard to the Syrian conflict as well as the future political structure of this country. Yet one should emphasize the fact that the EU did attempt to improve the situation in Syria indirectly. It was one of the reasons why Europeans supported talks related to the Iranian nuclear program. The Commission hoped that Iranians could play a positive role in Syria in return for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015.²⁸

The question is if the EU could come with its own diplomatic initiatives like the Russian authorities did in the framework of the so-called Astana process. If not, what are the limitations?

²⁴ C. Berg, *Lebanon and Syria*, in: *The European Union and the Arab Spring: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East*, J. Peter (ed.), Lanham 2012, p. 101.

²⁵ *Council Adopts EU Strategy on Syria...*

²⁶ E. Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, London 2013, p. 168.

²⁷ F. Pichon, *Syria. Porażka strategii Zachodu*, Warszawa 2015, p. 120

²⁸ More on the talks related to the Iranian nuclear program see: T. Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*, New Haven and London 2017; R. Fiedler, *Iran a reżim nieproliferyjacji broni jądrowej. Dylematy i wyzwania*, Poznań 2013; K. Simpson, *U.S. Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran: From the War on Terror to the Obama Administration*, Lanham 2016; N. Entessar, K.L. Afrasiabi, *Iran Nuclear Negotiations: Accord and Détente Since the Geneva Agreement of 2013*, Lanham 2015.

It is true that the EU has been very critical of the Assad regime from the very beginning of the Syrian unrest. This way the Union intends to put the Syrian president under pressure and force him to step down. Europeans introduced the first package of economic sanctions in 2011. The most important one was to ban the import of Syrian oil. According to Christopher Phillips, "the EU oil sanctions were felt hardest. (...) 28,3 percent of Syria's total GDP loss in 2011-12 was due to sanctions and over half of this was from the oil sector."²⁹ The sanctions were extended by the Council one more time in May 2017. No doubt such measures are in line with the Strategy of 2017. On this basis the Council stated "that the EU will maintain its restrictive measures against the Syrian regime and its supporters as long as the repression of civilians continues."³⁰ Whether these sanctions are effective or not is an open question. At the same time one has to underline the fact that such actions do not enable the EU to become a potential peace broker as it is not impartial anymore. And it is not the only obstacle.

Some member states including France have supported various rebel groups and the political opposition since the very beginning of the social unrest in Syria. On this basis one could say, again, that the EU cannot become a peace broker in this particular conflict. Yet Russia faced a very similar dilemma. While supporting Bashar al-Assad, Moscow did try to convince some opposition groups to take part in negotiations. What's more, Russian authorities managed to convince both Iran and Turkey to participate in the Astana process aimed at establishing four de-escalation zones in Syria in 2017. While it was not a big surprise to see Iranians backing Moscow in this particular case, the Turkish presence was quite surprising given Ankara's official position on the conflict as well as continuous support for some rebel groups. Could the EU do the same and convince Assad to accept its proposals? It seems very unlikely due to the EU's general approach to international relations and the importance of fundamental rights. While Russians tend to compromise on various issues related to violations of human rights in the contemporary Syria, Brussels gives priority to respect for human rights. The other divergent aspect is connected with Assad's political future. While Russia supports the Syrian president and may convince some opposition groups to tolerate him at least during a transition period, it is very unlikely that the EU could accept Assad as a legitimate Syrian leader again. Such decision would undermine its reliability and would not be in line with the current sanctions as well as ultimate goals of the EU foreign policy. Last but not least, the EU is a multilateral forum and cannot act as national states. Various member states have convergent and divergent views on the current developments in the region. EU's strategies and policies are always results of compromise and its representatives do not have a free hand in international negotiations to such extent as representatives of nation states. For these reasons the EU's room for diplomatic manoeuvre in the Syrian case is very limited. The Union

²⁹ C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven and London 2016, p. 87.

³⁰ *Syria: EU extends sanctions against the regime by one year*, Council of the European Union, Press release 299/2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/05/29-syria-sanctions/> (17.08.2017).

can either pursue its own policy within the UN framework or wait for any initiatives from the United States. At the moment everything indicates that the EU is unable to undertake any serious diplomatic actions on its own. The only exception is related to EU's financial engagement.

European states are already the biggest donors of humanitarian aid to Syria. It should be noted that all EU member states have contributed to financial aid to Syrians, although the total sum differential is still very significant. So far EU28 plus EC member states have provided more than 8,6 billion USD. As a comparison, the United States has channeled around 4,5 billion and Kuwait 1,6 billion USD.³¹ Such actions are in line with two points of the EU Strategy on Syria, namely on humanitarian aid to save lives and support for the resilience of the Syrian population.

The European Union supports Syrian refugees in camps located in Turkey. It is a part of the agreement between the EU and Turkey signed in March 2016. The EU agreed to provide Turkey with direct financial aid for Syrian refugees located in this country and gave its promise to relocate some of them to Europe. At the same time Turkey committed itself to step up measures against people smuggling. One year on the European Commission stated that "despite challenging circumstances, the first year of the EU-Turkey Statement has confirmed a steady delivery of tangible results. While continuous efforts need to be made by all sides and all EU Member States, the EU-Turkey Statement has become an important element of the EU's comprehensive approach on migration."³² The effects of the agreement were almost immediate. The Commission stated that the average of daily arrivals dropped almost dramatically from more than 10 000 to below 47. The drop of 97 percent.³³ This way the EU limited immigrant inflows to Europe through Turkey. In 2016 and 2017 the Union provided refugees with more than 3 billion euro through its Facility for Refugees in Turkey. The Commission underlines the fact that so far thanks to its support around 500 000 Syrian children have gained access to regular education and more than 2 million people have got access to primary healthcare.³⁴

Yet the EU helps Syrian refugees not only beyond its territory. Some EU member states have already accepted more than one million Syrians. Almost all of them applied for asylum. Germany with more than 450 000 asylum seekers and Sweden with more than 100 000 are top receiving countries in Europe.³⁵ This way the EU brings relief to some victims of the ongoing Syrian conflict. Yet the problem is other EU members are not so open and do not intend to share this burden with leading donors. Among them are Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. In June 2017 the European Commission opened sanctions procedure against these three countries for refus-

³¹ *Syrian Refugees*, <http://syrianrefugees.eu/> (15.08.2017).

³² *EU-Turkey Statement: One Year On*, the European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/eu_turkey_statement_17032017_en.pdf (15.08.2017).

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Syrian Refugees...*

ing to take refugees, including refugees from the war torn Syria, from frontline states like Greece and Italy.³⁶ Although all three Central European governments point out to security reasons and criticize proposed relocation methods, the Commission insists on sharing the burden and underlines the importance of fundamental EU values as well as respect for human rights.

After a few spectacular terrorist attacks in Europe, conducted by followers of the so-called Islamic State, "the EU has also stepped up its engagement, including by supporting, by non-military means, the efforts of the Global Coalition to counter Da'esh. The EU actions to counter Da'esh illustrate that the EU is fully committed to fighting terrorism, both inside and outside the European territory."³⁷ And there are a few examples of actions undertaken by the EU.³⁸ In 2014 the EU introduced its counter terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq.³⁹ Two years later its member states introduced a European sanctions regime which targets Da'esh, Al-Qaeda, and natural and legal persons, entities, and bodies associated with them directly.⁴⁰ Although such actions cannot eliminate terrorist acts completely, they have already resulted in a lower level of threat. Nevertheless, European politicians still have to bear in mind that "with hundreds of jihadists from Europe, Russia, the Arab Gulf, and the United States fighting in Syria, Europe and the rest of the West and Arab Gulf states become likely return destinations for them and the skills they have acquired."⁴¹

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED? SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU Strategy on Syria of 2017 is very realistic. One could even say that the current EU's attitude is too cautious. Yet at the same time it should be emphasized that the Union and some of its member states do a lot in order to help Syrian refugees and provide them with humanitarian aid. The EU is the biggest donor in the world. What's more, the Commission supported multilateral negotiations related to the Iranian nuclear program hoping that Iran would play a positive role in Syria in return for the JCPOA signing. Although this approach was rather unsuccessful, one has to value EU's diplomatic efforts.

³⁶ *EU opens sanctions procedure against Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic over refugees*, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/eu-opens-sanctions-procedure-against-hungary-poland-and-czech-republic-over-refugees/> (15.08.2017).

³⁷ *The EU and the Crisis in Syria: Factsheet*, https://ecas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-home-page/22664/eu-and-crisis-syria-factsheet_en (22.06.2017).

³⁸ More on combating terrorism in Europe see: S. Wojciechowski, P. Osiewicz, *Zrozumieć współczesny terroryzm*, Warszawa 2017, p. 135-154.

³⁹ Outline of the counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq, with particular focus on foreign fighters, Council of the European Union, 16 January 2015, 5369/15.

⁴⁰ Council Regulation (EU) 2016/1686 of 20 September 2016 imposing additional restrictive measures directed against ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda and natural and legal persons, entities or bodies associated with them, Official Journal of the European Union, 21.09.2016, L255/1.

⁴¹ W. Young, D. Stebbins, B.A. Frederick, O. Al-Shahery, *Spillover from the Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of the Factors that Aid and Impede the Spread of Violence*, Santa Monica 2014, p. 59.

Like in almost all previous cases, EU decision-making process seems to be one of the biggest limitations of EU crisis management. All crucial decisions are still made at national level. Nicole Koenig claims that this "liberal intergovernmentalism gives priority to governmental interests, namely the desire to be re-elected. Political leaders first ask how decisions are likely to affect their own power before considering potential systemic implications."⁴² The crisis in Libya, when Germany did not offer its support to other EU member states especially France, seems to be one of the best examples. Later in Mali it was the United Kingdom that refused to back a France-led operation due to domestic reasons.⁴³

As far as the post-war Syria is concerned, it seems that the European Union may use its peacebuilding and statebuilding potential to the benefit of Syrians to a greater extent. As Anders Persson points out, the EU,

"of its political system, its distinct and in many ways unique structure, is a special actor in peacebuilding and statebuilding. It is often described in statebuilding literature as a statebuilding institution *par excellence*, and is widely credited for having decisively contributed to stabilizing the transition toward democracy in the ten Central and Eastern European states. (...) Where the EU has employed the statebuilding approach to peacebuilding in ongoing conflicts, primarily the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Balkans, it has been far less successful."⁴⁴

A cursory analysis proves that there still is an unexploited potential in this area. In the opinion of Martina Spornbauer,

"peacebuilding appears a natural area for engagement of the European Union whose external action is said to be guided by principles that have inspired its creation and that it declares to promote beyond its borders, in particular the rule of law and the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms. (...) At the same time, peacebuilding is a potentially vast playing field that provides ample opportunity for the European Union to set itself apart as a stability actor guided by international law and human rights."⁴⁵

Yet in the case of Syria, at least for the time being, the EU's room for manoeuvre is very limited due to Assad's actions which are in breach of human rights and fundamental freedoms. As long as Bashar al-Assad does not change his attitude towards his political opponents, the European Union will not treat him as an equal partner for dialogue and cooperation. For the moment, however, nothing indicates any change. The Assad regime still persecutes its opponents and the EU maintains sanctions which have been imposed on Syria since 2011.

⁴² N. Koenig, *EU Security Policy and Crisis Management...*, p. 173.

⁴³ More on EUTM Mali see: B. Rouppert, *EUTM Mali: A Rapid Response Operation Launched in an Open Conflict*, in: *Managing Crises, Making Peace: Towards a Strategic EU Vision for Security and Defense*, M.G. Galantino, M.R. Freire (eds), New York 2015, p. 236-254.

⁴⁴ A. Persson, *The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1971-2013: In Pursuit of a Just Peace*, Lanham 2015, p. 6.

⁴⁵ M. Spornbauer, *EU Peacebuilding in Kosovo and Afghanistan: Legality and Accountability*, Leiden & Boston 2014, p. 385.

All in all, although it is quite easy to criticize the EU for its lack of diplomatic influence and efficiency in the Syrian conflict, one has to underline the importance and the scale of diplomatic efforts as well as humanitarian aid and other soft actions undertaken both in Syria as well as to the benefit of Syrian refugees. The EU exploits its diplomatic potential in order to end the ongoing conflict in Syria. At the same time its approach has to be classified as very constructive and realistic. EU diplomats suggest solutions and actions which are possible and achievable. Besides, they are aware of local and regional determinants which seriously limit their room for manoeuvre on the spot, although the situation may change in the post-war Syria. Then EU's experience and resources may appear essential to rebuilt society and economy. In case of the refugees the main problem is related to some internal division lines and lack of solidarity among EU members. Undoubtedly, the EU's voice could be better heard both in Syria and in the Middle East if some Central European governments changed their current attitude to the conflict and the fate of Syrian refugees.

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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that the post-9/11 developments, especially the war on terrorism, military intervention in Iraq as well as the process of political changes in the Arab world after 2011, changed the situation in the Middle East to Europe's disadvantage. The same claim applies to the European Union. This article carries out a detailed analysis of the European Union's engagement in Syria after 2011, namely during the still ongoing conflict. The main research question is whether the European Union could play a more constructive and influential role as a peace broker in Syria. In order to answer this question one has to analyze actions undertaken by the European Union especially within the framework of European Council's Strategy on Syria of 2017. The author concludes that although it is quite easy to criticize the EU for its lack of efficiency in the Syrian conflict, one has to underscore the importance of previous diplomatic efforts, the scale of humanitarian aid and other soft actions undertaken both in Syria as well as in the case of Syrian refugees. Yet in this case the main problem is related to some internal divisions and lack of solidarity among EU members. Undoubtedly, the EU's voice could be better heard both in Syria and in the Middle East if some Central European governments including Poland changed their current attitude to the conflict and the fate of Syrian refugees.