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The EU needs a new Syria strategy

There is no sign of a political opening or a negotiated conflict settlement in Syria. It's time for Europe to change its strategy

Read this article in German.

Armed confrontations in Syria are not over yet. Five global and regional powers (Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey and the US) still have a military presence in the country. And yet: the civil war has turned long since in favour of the regime. Reconstruction has already begun – albeit not as a country-wide, centrally planned, controlled and internationally financed programme as the standard approach of international financial institutions would prescribe. Instead, players with different and partly contradictory interests – above all the Syrian leadership, Russia, Turkey and Iran – have been implementing specific projects, mainly on the local level. These projects have one thing in common: they are hardly geared towards people's needs.

The highest priority for the leadership in Damascus has been the consolidation of its authority. In this vein, reconstruction is to entrench the population exchanges carried out in the course of fighting, forced displacement and so-called reconciliation agreements. Moreover, loyalty of old and new elites is to be rewarded with lucrative investment opportunities, while the regime's international supporters – above all Russia and Iran – are to be compensated via access to Syria's resources. At the same time, structural reforms are no more on the agenda than measures of transitional justice or reconciliation between population groups. Rather, grave human rights violations continue.

Damascus has, on the one hand, created the legal basis for reconstruction and carried out widespread expropriations of land and property without proper levels of transparency and compensation. It has prevented internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees from returning to areas considered strategic. And it has torn down whole districts to create space for lucrative investment projects.

On the other hand, it has set a framework for humanitarian help, which

gives the regime a monopoly on decision-making – at least in the areas that it controls – as to who is allowed to provide international aid where and who benefits from it. It has thus made sure that emergency aid is not distributed according to humanitarian principles but based on the regime's interests. As a consequence, those living in areas formerly held by rebels, who suffer from the greatest war damage, are particularly disadvantaged.

The Syrian leadership has made it clear that it will only accept foreign reconstruction involvement from friendly countries which grant their support unconditionally. Yet, Damascus's friends, Russia and Iran, are neither in a position nor willing to provide funds for comprehensive, countrywide reconstruction. Other potential supporters have so far categorically rejected involvement (such as the US), have been hesitant (Arab Gulf states), have been merely positioning themselves for future involvement (China) or have been only focused on the areas they occupy (Turkey). The economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the sharp fall in global oil prices, is likely to further reduce available resources, in particular of the Gulf States.

EU approach to Syria

The European Union and its member states have, for their part, made involvement in the reconstruction dependent on there being progress on the way to a negotiated resolution of the conflict and a political opening in Syria. As such progress has remained elusive, European involvement has remained limited mainly to humanitarian aid. In this area, the EU and its member states have been by far the biggest donors. From 2011 until late autumn 2019, they provided over €17bn in humanitarian aid for Syrians inside the country and in neighbouring states. This aid is being mostly rolled out locally by UN organisations and international non-governmental organisations and it has been, in principle, restricted to emergency aid to the local populations, refugees and IDP.

The European approach has not proved effective.

At the same time, the EU has imposed comprehensive sanctions. For one, these are targeted at those people, who are responsible for the violent suppression of the population and the use of internationally banned weapons, whose activities have directly benefitted the Assad regime or who profit from business dealings violating housing, land and property rights. For another, the aim of the sanctions is to limit the regime's revenues as well as its capacities for repression – and to isolate it

internationally. In this vein, the Europeans have imposed an arms embargo against Damascus as well as export restrictions for goods that can be used for internal repression. They have also enacted an oil embargo, frozen the assets of Syria's central bank in the EU as well as banned exports of 'dual use' goods to Syria.

Yet, far reaching sector-related measures, which stand in the way of rehabilitation and reconstruction, are also included in the package of sanctions. This concerns, in particular, restrictions for the financing of infrastructure projects in the oil and electricity sectors, a ban on the European Investment Bank (EIB) financing projects in Syria that would benefit the state, as well as sanctions against the Syrian finance and banking sector that also prohibit a financing of trade with the country.

The EU's approach has not worked

The European approach has not proved effective. *First*, the EU and its member states have hitherto not been able to exert any tangible influence on local conflict dynamics and the behaviour of the Syrian leaders. That is because Europeans have not had any significant military presence and have refrained from exerting political influence internationally. But it is also because the EU has stuck to an objective that is no longer realistic. Admittedly, the EU has softened its rhetoric. It no longer speaks explicitly about regime change or division of power. But the sanctions regime and the conditionality for reconstruction aid continue to target regime change. Also, Brussels has so far not spelt out which kind of behavioural change in Damascus – below the threshold of regime change – would lead to which European concession.

Second, the European approach is problematic in that both the focus on humanitarian aid and the comprehensive sanctions do not allow for effective and sustainable support for the population. Such support, however, would be urgently needed, in particular in the face of the worsening economic crisis and erosion of service provision in Syria. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit Syria, some 11 million Syrians (of the 18 million who have remained in the country) were dependent on international humanitarian support. The EU runs the risk of contributing to entrenching a situation in which the Syrian population remains permanently dependent on international aid deliveries.

Sustainable stabilisation will only be achieved if

Third, cracks have been appearing in the joint European approach. Germany, France and Great Britain in particular have been sticking to

and when far-reaching reforms ensue.

the agreed-upon position. Other EU member states have, in recent years, resumed relations with relevant people in the regime's leadership circle (Italy, Poland) or have vociferously discussed the reopening of their embassies and greater economic involvement in Syria (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland). One thing is crystal clear in this context: if the EU member states fall apart in their dealings with Damascus, they run the risk of throwing away even the slight influence they potentially have. Only if reconstruction money, a resumption of diplomatic relations and sanctions relief are played jointly can such measures have political weight.

That is why the EU and its member states should adapt their dealings with Syria so that it is more fine-tuned to local challenges and current circumstances, so that it brings European interests and instruments into line and so that it uses the small room for manoeuvre as effectively as possible.

First of foremost, this would mean to admit that Europeans cannot, with incentives and sanctions, bring about what the Assad regime and his allies have militarily averted: a negotiated settlement to the conflict and a political opening. It also means not deluding oneself that Damascus could be a reliable partner in the economic recovery and the reconstruction of the country, in fighting terrorism and in the return of refugees. And it means to not confuse the economic and currency crisis as well as the erosion of state capacities in Syria with an imminent collapse of the regime – even less so in favour of an alternative power which would unify and stabilise the country.

In concrete terms, Europeans should contribute in a more sustainable way to alleviating the misery and allowing for economic recovery in Syria. In that vein, they should above all dismantle those sectoral sanctions that prevent any development. They should also, under certain conditions, support the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure in areas under regime control and help to improve living conditions via work programmes and local procurement.

'More for more'

Sustainable stabilisation will only be achieved if and when far-reaching reforms ensue. In this vein, Europeans should spell out their 'more for

more' approach to show a concrete path forward as to how relations with Damascus could be significantly normalised in return for a political opening and structural reforms.

At the same time, they should refrain from complete normalisation with the Assad regime's top officials. Rather, they should establish the necessary capacities to press ahead with the prosecution of war crimes, grave human rights violations and the use of internationally banned weapons.



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