European Policies and the Syrian Crisis
Susceptibility or Disability?

Policy Studying Unit
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Harmoon Centre for Contemporary Studies

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First: Introduction

There is no argument that the Syrian crisis is one of the most complicated issues the world has witnessed since the end of World War II; and that is due to the scale of the tragedies caused by the very particular kind of the authoritarian regime governing Syria. This regime uniqueness is rendered by the availability of certain allies who do not abide by any of the moral standards of the modern world. The Syrian Revolution has highlighted two shocking facts; first is the collapse of the values of freedom and human rights, which were supposedly given a major boost by globalization in the last two decades, and second is the ineffectiveness of international values and laws against international interests and conflicts of influence. Such interests have blocked the UN Security Council from doing its assumed duty; which is the maintenance of international peace and security, and the protection of civilians in situations of war. So how were the European policies drawn towards this issue? And what were the factors that influenced them, and limited their effectiveness?

Second: how did the European Union face the repercussions of the conflict in Syria?

It is not out of the ordinary that the bloody conflict ongoing in Syria, and its repercussions, have a strong impact on the European conditions. Syria is one of the Mediterranean countries, which borders Europe in the south-eastern and southern shores. It practically shares deep historic, economic and cultural ties with the European space, influencing and being influenced by Europe for thousands of years. Europe in whole, including countries like France and
Britain, had huge interest in Syria, being part of the Anglo- French influence area, which was formed after the First World War, and the heirloom that was left by the dying Ottoman Empire.

After World War II, and the demise of the old empires, Syria remained under the French influence in general, and some areas were influenced by the British as well. The rising bourgeoisies of Aleppo for example, being closer to Iraq, were more influenced by Iraq, which was the stronghold of the British influence at the time, unlike the bourgeois of Damascus, who were inclined towards Egypt. Despite the gradual withdrawal of the European influence after the Suez War in 1956, and to the benefit of the Americans who started taking interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and other issues of the region, the Europeans did not totally abandon the region, given their long experience in the conditions and culture of the region, which was something that gave them advantage over the Americans. The European relationship with the region is reflected in the way the Syrian migration flow, which intensified in the spring of 2013, was conducted. The Syrians passed the neighbouring countries, and headed to European countries (Germany, Sweden, Holland, Denmark and France) mainly and Italy and Spain secondary, while Greece remained the starting point for most immigrants, due to its difficult economic crisis on the one hand, and its political stance which supported the Syrian regime on the other.

On the political front, the EU has failed to meet expectations; considering its economic power at least. This is not only caused by the US decision to limit the Union's role in the Syrian file, but also due to the mechanism of the decision-making process in the EU institutions
concerned. So that the EU’s efficiency is derivate directly from the effectiveness of its members, and the varied positions between one state and the other. For instance, all the Eastern European countries that joined the Union after the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union, had a hostile attitude towards the Syrian refugees, considering they were only transitional countries, who did not commensurate the values of the European Union and its well respected laws, as they miscarried the Union plans, regarding the sharing of the burden of the refugees; claiming to have weak economies, but in fact, it is their political support of the regime, and enthusiastic positions, if not hostile, towards a revolution of freedom and dignity in Syria. Such attitude posed a serious threat to the Convention on the "Schengen" and the freedom of movement of individuals.

The role of the European Union was exclusive to providing aid in relief or services, wither through the relevant United Nations bodies, or the Syrian civil society organizations who were mainly operating from neighbouring countries and refugee camps there. Politically speaking, the Union has facilitated conferences and negotiations relating to the Syrian affairs, and the activities of the Syrian opposition. Inevitably, the Union and its state members are seriously facing two major problems. The first problem is connected directly to the events in Syria, in terms of people having to flee to save their children and their lives, and the search for a safe haven, away from the hell of war which was sparked by a violent regime and its allies. The Syrian refugees issue is a humanitarian crisis of the first degree, especially with the obvious failure of the international community to stop the violence. The second problem facing the EU relates to the globalized terrorism, which has become an imminent threat in Europe, and in all earth’s stretches, being blamed for political reasons, and with much of an exaggeration,
on what is happening in Syria alone. It is true that the EU can deal with the refugee problem by restricting it, but it cannot stop it; for it is one of products of wars throughout history, and will always be.

Third: the central countries of Europe and their position regarding the Syrian crisis.

The three major countries in the European Union (Germany, France, and Britain) have played important roles in the Syrian case. They have maintained a pro-revolution stance, despite of many shifts in the conflict, and the roles of those involved, with a bit of discrepancies and oscillation. While it was expected that the French and German positions would mutually be more supportive to the Syrian cause; given the solid ties within the EU, the Franco-British rapprochement was the most compatible and congruous in this regard. This raises a lot of questions, especially about Germany, being the largest European economy, and with such a huge population, on top of that, being the locomotive of the Union, it did not show a desire to perform a political role corresponding with its potential.

Looking for answers or explanations for this reluctance, we need to look at the economy. Germany is interested in the open market and strategic investments more than any political gain, which can only render temporary advantages. Additionally, Germany has the largest investment in Russia and Iran, who are deeply involved in supporting the Syrian regime. Germany is also an important economic partner of Turkey and the Gulf states, who stand with
the opposition. On the other hand, Germany have borne the brunt of the refugee burden in Europe, and absorbed alone more than a half of the Syrian refugees who arrived to the European territory, and provided them with acceptable living conditions, which could not be provided by the Arab nations neighbouring Syria.

Fourth: The British position: unstable but demanded

Britain has a very critical role internationally, and you can hardly find a problem in the world, without Britain being present; by virtue of its enormous potential and expertise in the field of international politics. But Britain’s firm and strategic decision, since World War II, to stand behind the US policy, makes it hard to rely on a distinct and clear British position, and this applies to the Syrian crisis. The British attitude has remained unstable, controlled by American whims, and this was clearly manifested when in July 2013 David Cameron, the British prime minister, asked the House of Commons to vote on the subject of Britain’s involvement in military action in Syria, after the regime used chemical weapons in Damascus suburbs (Ghouta). It seemed later that the House of Common’s vote “no” was the US president’s way out of his claimed warning of ‘red lines’, which in turn proved to be a blunt instrument. The US president than accepted the Russian offer, only to deprive the regime of its chemical weapons, ignoring the rights of the civilian victims, ignoring the moral responsibility of America and its position in the world, and never minding the imperatives of the prohibition of chemical weapons treaty.
Fifth: Will 'Brixit' reflect negatively on the Syrian Crisis?

On the twenty-third of June of this year, the British people voted to leave the EU by 51.9 percent, after forty-two years of membership. Britain was the troublesome thorn in the side of the Union, always complaining, and requesting to amend many of its effective laws.

The referendum results caused a shock in the European circles, officially and publically, and among Britons alike. the five founding members of the Union have quickly arranged a summit meeting, confirming their strong determination to maintain the unity of Europe, and not to succumb to the blackmail of the British conservative right, and called for invoking Article 50 of the Barcelona Convention, which sets out the process and the implications for countries who decide to exit the union. On the other hand, Britain demanded to start negotiations with the EU on this matter. Donald Tusk, the President of the European Commission, said: "The 27 members are determined on the unity of Europe, and are ready to tackle the British move," and "that Europe will maintain its unity, and it cannot remain a hostage to the conflicts within the Conservative Party."

There is no doubt that the Europeans do not want ‘Brixit’ to happen, or in fact the exit of any other member country, as the exit might be contagious, and it would lead to the breakdown of the Union. The founding members have spent half a century building the union, have made a strenuous effort, and bore the financial burden to stabilise it, and they don’t want to see all that go in vain. The German chancellor Angela Merkel, on the eve of the European summit to
discuss the British move, confirmed her disagreement on the urgency to activate Article 50 and requested to give Britain a chance to reconsider their position.

On the other side of the English Channel, it was not less of a shock to many, especially among the young and in the City, amongst the Labour Party, and among the supporters of openness to the world and globalization, against insularity and isolation. Just as there could be negative effects on the Union, there could be severe effects on Britain, where independence calls started to rise again, from Scotland and Northern Ireland, even in the City of London, which voted heavily in favour of staying in the EU. A petition for re-vote has been signed in the millions.

The chances of Britain remaining in the EU are not little, because the referendum is not legally binding, not to the government nor to the House of Commons, and because the law allows for a second referendum as long as the conditions are available. Wither ‘Brixit’ happens or not, it is inevitable for the EU on this occasion to reconsider its loopholes and weaknesses, on top of its well-known bureaucracy, especially now it seems that the Europeans have a clear and strong will to reform the Union’s institutions and to strengthen its structure.

However, what is actually alarming, is that there is a clear indication on the rise of extremist and racist right in most of the European countries, and the potential negative implications of such rise on the future. Both leader of the extreme right, in the Netherlands and France, have rushed to support the British move, and called for similar referendums in their countries.
What matters the most, is the effect of the whole event on the Syrian issue. If all goes towards leading Britain out of the EU, how does that affect the Syrian case, and in particular what will be the negative impact on the issue of asylum, with the rise of hostility against the presence of refugees, and all the procedures taken to tightening immigration laws and reduce the number of immigrants. In terms of Britain’s role in the Syrian conflict, it is unlikely to change, unless the political stability of Britain is undermined, and internal problems prevails.

Sixth: France and the Syrian Crisis: Consistent but non-effective.

The Franco-Syrian relations have suffered subdued stress, at least since 2005, due to the Syrian role in Lebanon, with the exception of Sarkozy’s term in 2008, when he vowed to improve these relations, but failed to do so. When the Syrian Revolution out broke, France did not try to hide its inclination towards the Syrian opposition, and it was one of the founders of the Friends of the Syria in 2011. France was also very enthusiastic about a military action against the Syrian regime when it used chemical weapons, which was later aborted by the American president, and was present always in the Syrian file, and seeking an active role, especially that it has broad interests in Syria. But the French position has always suffered America who continued restraining the Syrian Opposition, and subjected them to its strategy in this matter. However, the Franco-American contrast, in this regard, surfaced after the American-Russian agreement on what could be a political solution in Syria, which nobody
knows what it was so far. Vienna conference was held at the end of 2015, and then two rounds of negotiations in Geneva 3, concrete results are yet to be seen.

France was quick to call for a meeting in Paris on 9 May 2016, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Riad Hijab, the chairman of the negotiating body. The aim of this meeting was to unify the positions of these four countries. Afterwards France called to another meeting, which was the Group of 17 meeting on 17 May 2016, wishing to express its rejection of exclusion, along with its partners, as well as to put pressure on Russia, and blame them for the breach of the international resolutions adopted by the Security Council. But what actually happened was that the two ministers, Kerry and Lavrov, preceded the meeting with a joint statement on the cessation of hostilities in Syria. The reason behind that statement was to achieve two complementary targets. First to keep sponsoring the negotiations. Second, to de-root any demands that could result from their agreement. Thus, France and its allies have failed to achieve what they were hoping for.

It is unlikely for France or Britain to accept being excluded from the Syrian file so easily; therefore, the French were actively seeking to form an unspoken alliance with Turkey and the Gulf states, to reduce the US hegemony, and obstruct their attempts to singularly manage the Syrian file, with Russia on its side. It is obvious that recently, France’s position has become more consistent with that of Britain, than it was in the past, and the fact that they both chose not to declare the presence of their military units on the Syrian ground (the British in the south, and the French in the north) is nothing but a practical interpretation of these positions.
The struggle for hegemony and power is never definitive, and that is what distinguishes such struggle from that of control. This is actually what happened in reality to the situation in Syria. In this case, it is not necessary for the parties involved to be able to apply all what they’re planning or scheming. This type of conflict is usually shrouded in complexity, and it involves many other types of major or secondary conflicts, even some very unlikely ones. The location factor and its place in the equation plays a key role in determining the final results, which may take a long time to take root. All the political players involved have lived through the US invasion of Iraq, with all its human and material losses, and in the end the biggest beneficiary was Iran. The same happened in Libya, where the final scene is still to be set.

Europe, as a single union or separate countries is a vital necessity for the Syrian opposition and its regional allies. It is important for the opposition to encourage these countries, and especially Germany, to engage further in the Syrian case, not only because of its geographical proximity, and its enormous potential, nor because it is the desirable destination for the Syrian refugees, although it is still an important matter, but because it gives the opposition and its supporters the potential of better efficacy, and more room to manoeuvre between the conflicting positions of the parties intervening. This could help to improve the conditions in which they are working, because the expected solution, wither sooner or later, will have to be an international solution by virtue of the complexity and the number of the intervening states, regardless of the local party’s attitude towards such solution, and wither they acknowledge or ignored it.
On the other hand, it is not in the best interest of Europe to turn its back on what is happening in Syria and the region, and is unlikely for the Europeans to do that. Europe’s relationship with Syria is governed by geography, history and interests, and it has become more involved with migration and its consequences, and terrorism, which has become an imminent threat in the streets of Europe. There is no doubt that terrorism derives its strength and continuity from the absence of stability, democracy and justice, which have plagued the region for decades, and even some terrorism is a direct result of its own policies.