
Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions

Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı



Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions

Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı



Kore Şehitleri Cad. No: 38/3
Zincirlikuyu, 34394, İstanbul
T +90 212 217 75 65-66
F +90 212 347 18 86
E info@podem.org.tr
www.podem.org.tr

EUROPE AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: POLICIES AND PERCEPTIONS

Author

Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı

Editor

Omar Sheira

Cover Design

Berrak Hümnet Türkmen

Publication Design

POMPAA

info@pompaa.com

+90 850 885 0 722

www.pompaa.com

Cover Photo ©Istockphoto/Vicnt

Place of Publication

UZMAN DİJİTAL BASKI VE BÜRO MAKİNELERİ LTD. ŞTİ.

Fahrettin Kerim Gökay Caddesi No:13/B

Hasanpaşa, Kadıköy, İstanbul

+90 216 700 10 77 (pbx)

Publication Date

September, 2017

Print Run

100

PODEM PUBLICATIONS

ISBN 978-605-67530-1-5

Copyright © September, 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced electronically or mechanically (photocopy, storage of records or information, etc.) without the permission of the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM).

The viewpoints in this publication belong to the authors, and they may not necessarily concur partially or wholly with PODEM's viewpoints as an association.

PODEM would like to acknowledge the support of the Chrest Foundation to this research project. PODEM is liable for the project content.

About PODEM

Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi Çalışmaları Derneği, PODEM) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey. At PODEM, our vision is to contribute to the building of an environment in Turkey where the institutional and legal foundations for democracy are established, a democratic mind-set, social peace and justice are embedded, and one that yields greater credibility to Turkey to facilitate regional and global peace and justice. Our mission is to understand and analyze, through research, the changing dynamics of Turkey's society, its relations with other societies and states and to translate our insights into policy suggestions.

Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı

Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı graduated from Brown University in the U.S. in 1997 with a double major BA degree in Economics and History. She received her MA in Political Science from Sabancı University in 2005.

She worked as a Research Analyst at Global Securities, a Turkish investment bank, between 1997 – 2001. In 2001, she joined TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation) as Project Manager and served in various positions such as communications director, researcher and coordinator, and acted as the General Director between 2012-2015. Since February 2015, she has been the General Director of PODEM, as well as a founding member. Yırcalı has contributed to field research and publications on anti-corruption, peace and reconciliation processes and the constitutional reform process in Turkey. She is the co-author of "European Citizens with Origins in Turkey: Identities, Individuals and Citizens" published in 2016 from PODEM Publications.

Table of Contents

8	Introduction
12	The European Union's Stance
17	Germany
29	The United Kingdom (UK)
37	France

Note from the Author

The author would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report by sparing time to meet, talk, share networks and provide contacts.

In regards to the methodology and research principles, the identities of the interviewees are confined to the records of the researcher.

The author especially would like to thank Gülşah Dark for managing the publishing process, and Omar Sheira for his exceptionally diligent editing. Last but not least, the author is grateful to all her colleagues at PODEM for their generous support throughout this project.

Introduction

A Note on the Research Project

This report is part of an extensive research study conducted by PODEM on the Syrian conflict which, despite all efforts, continues to grind on for the sixth year, pushing millions of people into adversity. PODEM's "Future of Syria: Actor Analysis" project aims to map out the main actors involved in the conflict and provide multi-layered analyses of their strategies and expectations.

To that end, the overall study is expected to survey the positions and future outlooks of state and non-state actors regarding the future of Syria; this includes Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the European Union, Qatar, Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Turkey, the United States, Russia and Iran. In addition to speaking with experts and professionals, the research team also reached Syrians who reside in these countries in order to publish a separate study with their perceptions.

This project's reports aim to achieve three objectives: first, pave the way for a discussion on the possible scenarios and areas of collaboration between actors; second, aid the formulation of conflict resolution policies; and third, create a better understanding among the involved parties.

This particular report focuses on the European actors and ruminates on their positions regarding the Syrian conflict, as well as their views on other actors involved. It also sheds light on the future role of the European actors and institutions in facilitating a resolution in Syria.

The interviews for this report took place between February and June 2017, in Berlin, Brussels, London and Paris, consecutively, and many also in Istanbul. The interviews in each country were held with members and analysts of state institutions, experts from civil society organizations and independent professionals with experience on Syria. Meetings were also held with Syrian residents (in these countries) active in politics and civil society work.

The author would like to emphasize that the views, opinions and perceptions stated by the interviewees herein constitute a major part of this report. The author has only added her assessments and external information wherever necessary for increased clarity.

Main Findings in Short

In Syria, European countries typically find themselves revolving in the Russian-American orbit, where it is not possible for them to take any action outside of the sphere already determined or to be determined by the US and Russia. Not only do European countries lack the required military power to be 'playmakers', but they also lack the political appetite to be more engaged in the conflict. This reality is rooted in the European public's general stance against military involvement in foreign conflicts due to their values and bitter past experiences.

Given this framework, the political role assumed by the European countries to assist or confront the US and Russia in formulating and implementing their policies in Syria remains limited. Europe will settle for a resolution formula agreed upon by these superpowers as long as it prevents war and instability. The UK – having a closer relationship with the US – works in alliance with the American government in policy formulation, whereas Germany and France, act with a view to steer Russia in the 'right direction'. France, however, can especially be expected to play a significant role vis-à-vis the Russian strategy.

The European Union's political stance is additionally burdened by the national interests of its members. Therefore, lacking the means and measures to assume an engaged stance, it suffices with supporting the Geneva Process for a political settlement. Its most important and effective engagement, however, is providing humanitarian aid and assistance to Syrian citizens, in many parts of Syria and its neighboring regions.

The EU and its member states are heavily criticized for not being more engaged in Syria, not putting enough pressure on Bashar al-Assad and not even intervening militarily at a stage when it was possible. Nevertheless, given the above framework, these expectations do not appear to have been realistic. In fact, most of the Syrians we spoke to during this research were pragmatic and reasonable in their expectations regarding an EU military involvement, without a Russian-American deal.

Accordingly, it would be fair to say that the EU has indeed acted in a rational manner, allowing it to maintain a position that would make it possible to embrace its role when a settlement is being negotiated and enforced.

In the context of policy-making and conflict resolution, the most value added role the EU should be expected to play is being a 'conciliator' during the peace talks and transition. To attain this main aim, the EU has acted in a way that will allow it to communicate and negotiate with all the parties involved. Together with the UN, the EU will also be the overarching agency to monitor the legitimacy of the transitional period and the new form of government to be instituted in Syria.

A second, imperative role the EU is set to play – which will also take place after a resolution – is the political, economic and infrastructural reconstruction of Syria. The EU is, however, persistent on one condition: that it will not pay for reconstruction without a transition and sustainable resolution; a condition which the EU can leverage for its political role as well.

Briefly stated, European countries – while refraining from being militarily involved in the conflict – are waiting for the parties to reach a settlement. In the meantime, they are exerting efforts to adeptly steer the settlement process to meet their priorities, through their relations with the US,

Russia and other regional countries. Europe awaits its time to come, investing its assets in the future and the future of Syria.

European Views on the Nature of the Conflict

Historical Context

The Syrian conflict was seen to have shifted its trajectory, from being a tripolar conflict – between the Regime, Opposition and extremists – to a bipolar conflict – between the Regime and all others. This perception was shared both by state and civil actors throughout our interviews in Europe. The Regime was viewed to be successful in attaining its strategic goal of putting pressure on the international community to choose either ‘them’ or the ‘others’. Russia’s decision to intervene in favor of the Regime was also regarded as a substantial contribution towards this end.

According to the experts and those with experience on Syria, the revolution itself was part of a massive transformation process that dates back to 1916, the year the Syrian state was founded. They similarly underlined the roles of different identity groups and shortcomings of citizenship as important issues for the upcoming process of nation-building. The fact that the Syrian state survived for such a long time by building its legitimacy on “providing security but taking everything else away” was also singled out as one of the biggest hurdles ahead in the construction of a new, healthy citizenship.

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father Hafez al-Assad in 2001, he was expected to be a reformer. However, the interviewees opined that he could only be a modernizer. In that sense, he was successful in introducing liberal economic reforms, which meant connecting the economy to the pillars of the state system, particularly the military, Baath Party and security services. This led to the creation of a business class in Syria, and contemporaneously encouraged politicians to engage in economic activity, which, in turn, increased the dependency of larger groups on the Regime. Nonetheless, despite opening up economically, Assad did not introduce liberal policies to the political realm, specifically to prevent other actors from becoming a part of the system. This measure was taken to secure his political survival. Solely relying on loyalty, any opposition was silenced, jailed or banned from traveling.

Many of our interviewees touched upon the notion of a former ‘social contract’ that was established and sustained by Hafez al-Assad: “if you shut up, I will take care of you”. This meant that in return for the Regime’s provision of all necessary social services, economic means and security, it demanded unconditional obedience. This way, people could question but not rebel. Bashar el-Assad was seen to have destroyed this informal contract by opening the economic system, which simultaneously led to the prosperity of a newly-emerging elite and impoverishment of the middle and lower classes. During that time, ordinary people were compelled to search for second or third jobs to earn a living; families began to struggle economically; and urbanization worsened the poor’s living conditions. The mutual understanding between the public and the Regime eventually collapsed when the population’s livelihood grew more unsustainable. The situation further deteriorated as the Regime became more repressive; the people were increasingly humiliated by state employees on a regular basis, state resources were misused and corruption became common place. The disgruntlement of people finally culminated in a single question: ‘Why should I tolerate this system any longer?’

This explanation sheds light on why the revolution started in the countryside and among the young people who opposed corruption and humiliation. Those who were economically impacted took to the streets in an abrupt, spontaneous manner, and without any initial political demands. Until that time, the opposition groups in Syria were seen to have still been dormant and ineffective, especially the older generations that were dominated by pan-Arab nationalism. However, the Regime's divisive policies alienated these groups and created the grounds for rebellion. When the protests finally erupted, Assad was perceived to be fortunate, as the protesters initially asked for domestic reforms in Syria, which would have confined the conflict to being a solely national issue. Yet, instead of addressing the root cause of the protests, he chose to oppress even the most moderate groups, through the humiliating arbitrariness of the security system.

Status Quo

The current Syria was described as a country in the private hands of a mafia-like family, surrounded by a vast network. This embedded network of politics, economy, intelligence and military, based on inter-dependency and interest, is a very efficient tool for the Regime's survival; one that has created a symbiotic relationship between the Assad family and the system. Therefore, it does not seem viable to reach a solution in Syria simply by getting rid of Assad since the system still needs to be thoroughly reformed. For example, law enforcement seems to be undertaken by the Secret Service who disregards the most basic legal and human rights. The fact that a war economy has prevailed for the better part of the past decade has increased the number of groups benefiting from the conflict. It was generally believed that the warlords – whom not even Assad could control – are immensely profiting, to the extent that it is arduous to persuade them to make peace. Each transfer of new military equipment made to the warlords in Syria changes the daily parameters and power balances on the ground. Therefore, as long as the remnants of the existing system continue to profit from this conflict, stability was thought to be remote.

For many, the worst part was that the Syrian society is disintegrating into fragments. With millions of internally displaced people (IDPs), rampant poverty and high tensions, the Syrian people are losing their faith in the future. Moreover, political officers lack respect and power, and so, cannot provide any positive outlook. Therefore, ordinary people are forced to choose a side: either that of the Regime; or one of the different groups among the Opposition; or ISIS.

Above all these inner dynamics and conflicts, foreign interventions further complicate the conflict. Iran's long-standing involvement in Syria and close collaboration with the Assad family especially create yet another line of dependency. Many expressed the possibility that Iran and Assad are changing the demographic structure in certain regions of Syria, relocating loyalists to the areas they control, particularly Damascus.

Apart from the mostly negative opinions, good progress was observed in the development of Syria's civil society, which has become efficient and highly decentralized. On the other hand, democracy and women's rights were seen to have internalized. The newly-created sector of civil society has already taken root in Syria and is regarded to be sustainable. The sector is mostly dominated by young activists, as most of the elderly figures have fled the country. Besides Syria, they also work from Turkey and Jordan; however, this has decreased throughout the last two years as traveling was hindered by the changing border policies. CSOs, too, were found to be very active on social media but not to be acting prudently.

The European Union's Stance

Foreign Policies and Activities regarding Syria

"The European Union has no Syria policy"

One of the phrases most frequently heard during this field research was that "the European Union has no Syria policy." The EU was not considered to be in a position that enables it to have a concrete policy on Syria, due to three factors. First of all, many acknowledged an internal division on the conflict,

explaining that "Berlin, London and Paris never agreed on a policy." Secondly, with no unified position, member states prioritized their own national interests over the EU's stance towards the region. And thirdly, European policies were seen to be dependent on the US, meaning that even if the EU had a more concrete policy towards Syria, there would be little room for its implementation.

Given this framework, some experts argued that since the EU cannot play a bigger role in resolving the conflict, then logically, it does not and cannot portray a stronger stance. One EU politician stated that "if you really shout, you have to do something". She further explained that the European Council's statements regarding Syria have been overly general due to the lack of political unanimity.

Migrants and refugees are the top priority issue for the EU. Terrorism and regional security follow suit. While the priorities attached to these issues vary from country to country, the policies of the EU are more geared towards stemming the refugee flow.

Efforts mostly aiming to control and suppress the refugee flow are found inadequate to help end the conflict

Officials classified the EU's efforts in the conflict under three main headings:

1. Humanitarian Aid

This has been the most prioritized issue throughout the conflict. Since 2011, the EU has extended over €9 billion

to Syria in humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid, making it the largest donor to the war-torn country. While working closely with the UN, the EU also cooperates with a full range of NGOs on the ground in Syria. In this sense, the Aleppo Initiative – which was launched at the time of the Aleppo crisis – is a good example of EU efforts coordinating an aid scheme for evacuation. The EU also cooperates in this field with other actors, including Iran and Russia.

2. Non-humanitarian Assistance

These activities include the governance, education and livelihood of the Syrian population. Although assistance is delivered to Regime-held areas, the EU is unequivocally clear that it neither cooperates with the Regime nor supports it in any way. Its efforts only aim to assist and benefit the whole Syrian population. Accordingly, the EU plans to position itself as an actor that can reconnect the different regions of post-settlement Syria.

3. Political Settlement

In this field, the EU is active through its support for the Geneva Process. It works in close coordination with UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura and tries not to be involved with activities that may contradict the Geneva Process. Within the Process, the EU backs the Syrian Opposition and views the High Negotiations Council (HNC)¹ as the representative body of the moderate opposition. The objective here was described as providing the Opposition with the means to aptly act in unison at the negotiations. Support provided includes financial, logistical, organizational support as well as trainings.

Most of these efforts were viewed by our interviewees as ways to control and suppress the refugee flow to Europe. By providing humanitarian aid and supporting the livelihood of the Syrian population, there was a perception that these measures aim to contain the stranded, displaced Syrians in the country or at least those in the near vicinity. While many accepted this approach as a logical measure for containment, several others underlined that it is inadequate. They criticized the EU's policies for being myopic and intensely driven by domestic politics, emphasizing that it has failed to see that "in order to stop the refugee flow, it is first necessary to stop the war."

Regarding the Middle East (and Turkey), European institutions, like the public, were considered to be highly uninformed. "Europeans live in their national bubbles, there is a disconnect", one expert commented. The number of field experts was said to be very low and collective wisdom very little. Another expert warned, regarding Syria, "they see it as a forest fire and act only to contain and prevent the spillover, but we may not have seen the worst yet, people don't get how serious this is." The same verdict applied to politicians, as only a few are interested in Syria. The researchers were informed that it is generally very difficult to get people interested, let alone moving, even at times of heightened tension.

Resolution

There was one shared understanding in Europe and it was of Bashar al-Assad. The EU and its member states have all taken a stance against him since the beginning of the conflict; most cut diplomatic relations, ceased to acknowledge the legitimacy of his Regime and suggested he step down. Subsequently, the EU extended support to the Opposition, and many European countries established diplomatic relations with the Opposition's ambassadors in their countries. This support, however, remained "weak" as it never had a military component, and is solely

¹ HNC was created in Saudi Arabia in December 2015.

diplomatic and financial, serving organizational and training aims. It was noted that there is a division among EU member states on their approach to the Opposition. For example, while Denmark and Sweden were viewed to be closer to the German position in their positive support, Cyprus, Greece and the Czech Republic were said to be reluctant in extending support because of their historical links to Syria.

With the emergence of ISIS as an aggressively effective belligerent in the conflict, the strong stance against Assad was revised by around late 2014. Although there was no shift in the EU position regarding Assad's future, there is now a more flexible approach as to when he should go. The common argument posited that Assad could stay during the transitional period and then leave. The EU's position can be said to have adopted a pragmatic approach which deems a longer ruling period for Assad more possible – especially if it would warrant diminishing ISIS and restoring stability. European countries, like some others, were also wary of whether Assad's replacement would be less preferable, especially in their fight against ISIS or any other 'jihadist' groups.

European pressure on Assad weakened

(i.e. threat, terror, migrants) and moved away from human rights and democracy, pressure on Assad weakened.

Assad's discourse, that the Regime is fighting all 'jihadist' terror organizations and groups (most importantly ISIS) – not only to keep Syria intact and secular but also to protect Europe – was embraced by some Europeans. As European public opinion regarding the conflict shifted towards the right

While Germany prioritizes the refugee crisis, France and the UK are more concerned with countering terrorism

The general European approach towards the Kurds was protective yet skeptical, and against an independent Kurdish state in Syria. There was visible concern that a pure PYD (Democratic Union Party-Syria) dominance in northern Syria could damage the local dynamics and disgruntle the Arab population there, which could consequently result in re-strengthening ISIS or any other 'jihadist' groups. The EU

endorsed the PYD's absence in the Geneva Talks; yet, it is worthy to note that the interviewees observed ample sympathy among the European public for the group, that emphasize courageous fight against ISIS, modern approach to religion and respect for equality on gender issues. Although experts were aware that the PYD may not be as democratic as it projects – and has committed human rights violations – they also underlined that they are inexperienced and fighting under dire conditions. Consequently, the PYD's 'usefulness' to the West is considered to increase its prospects for realizing a Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria.

France, the UK and Germany were considered to be the most prominent European actors with regards to the conflict. Terrorism, regional security and refugee flow were common critical issues for all. However, while Germany prioritized the refugee crisis, France and the UK were more concerned with countering terrorism. In terms of efforts towards a resolution, Germany seemed to be at the forefront in supporting the Syrian Opposition's activities and hosting the refugees. The UK took the lead (after the US) in terms of humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid to Syria and neighboring countries. It was also forthcoming in facilitating and coordinating policy alignments between the US, Europe and regional actors. France was regarded to be the

diplomatic leader with most experience, deep knowledge and ties in Syria and the region. Thus, France could be expected to play the most important role – especially considering its special relation with Russia – by effectively defining the parameters of a peace plan. Most experts believed that France and the UK drive the discussions on Syria and other countries usually follow the trend.

EU officials viewed direct talks with Iran as a necessary component of resolution and highlighted their exceptional diplomatic advantage in communicating with Iran through working channels created by the Nuclear Deal. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were all regarded as important actors for regional security. For a peaceful and stable future in the region, it was deemed necessary to consider the three important aspects together – namely, the Syrian conflict, regional agreements and the international nature of the conflict – and accordingly work on an interwoven equilibrium. EU officials suggested that a sustainable resolution can only materialize by means of this approach; otherwise it would merely be a quick fix. Finally, the Astana Talks initiated by Russia and Turkey in January 2017, to be later joined by Iran, were acknowledged as a positive track that provides a ceasefire. In this sense, Turkey's involvement in the talks was also supported.

Reconstruction

Europe awaits for reconstruction

During the interviews, the most significant role cut out for the EU in Syria was the reconstruction (estimated to cost hundreds of billions of dollars) of the country. It was commonly suggested that the peace deal will be concluded by the US and Russia, and the EU will follow suit in reconstruction. Policy makers and experts suggested that it is in the EU's interest to pay for the reconstruction so that the refugees in Europe could return to Syria. For this reason, public opinion in Europe will be supportive of this idea. It is also likely that the Syrian diaspora in Europe will play a key role in reconstruction.

It seemed that the EU is waiting for its turn to play its role in the conflict. The fact that reconstruction is the main domain, where the EU can contribute, also prevents it from taking a firmer political stance now. As suggested by a policy maker, "the EU can only do it [reconstruction] if it does not become a player in the conflict now. If you have too many interests, it's hard to play a neutral role."

"The European support cannot begin until there is a transition according to a UN resolution"

Nevertheless, the EU has one firm position and it is that European support cannot begin until there is a transition according to a UN resolution. The Regime's discourse of the conflict approaching an end and reconstruction to have already begun was found to be unrealistic. Instead, there was a strong EU position suggesting that the Regime cannot legitimize itself solely through its fight against ISIS, but also needs the blessing of the international community to attain a sustainable resolution. It was believed that the EU's soft power in the context of reconstruction will be leveraged when the time is right. In terms of financing the reconstruction, attention was directed towards the EU for ensuring that the finances are prudently utilized and not used to support an illegitimate Regime.

The European civil society's work, in general, is similarly preparing for the post-war reconstruction efforts. Many have been active on the ground by collaborating with Syrian

NGOs through Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, while also assisting Syrian organizations in Europe. In addition to assisting the distribution of aid extended by European institutions, civil society is likewise active in areas such as training and working on human rights; governance and constitutional issues; and documentation of crimes against humanity. There are currently cases for the violations of human rights against the Syrian Regime in Germany, France and Spain. Further efforts (said to be lacking) are being made to establish coordination among the ministries of these countries to achieve broader support. Other fields of work include support for international negotiations – so Syrian activists could be directly heard – and empowerment of a civil society network comprised of the refugees in Europe.

Europe's Role in Building the Future for Syria

The EU rationally prefers not to be involved in the conflict now to be able to play an impartial role during peace making

Due to the aforementioned factors, it was widely-accepted that it is very difficult for the EU to have a strong, common position on the Syrian conflict and how it should be resolved. It was also not recommended since it would hamper the EU's capability to execute its main strategy of reconstruction. The complexity of relations with Russia (oil and Ukraine) and Iran (the Nuclear Deal) were also underlined as other important factors that impede a more advanced position.

Moreover, the EU was perceived to have bigger problems, such as Brexit and the economy. Thus, Middle East policies were not its main area of focus. Also, as suggested above, the EU neither has the muscle nor the tools to change the discourse of the Syrian conflict and take a stronger position.

Despite these determining factors, there was notable disappointment with the EU, first and foremost by Syrians, and also empathetic European experts. One commentator stated that "Syria has been the most shameful example of the EU's ineffectiveness." Time and again, the Syrian conflict was believed to have shown the EU constantly delegitimizing itself and its institutions. While it tries to keep its distance (to be more effective in the future), it is criticized for idleness in its search for a solution. It was further underlined that the EU is confounded, as it does not have answers to what comes after a ceasefire, or what kind of stance should be taken.

All in all, the EU was expected to wait and eventually accept a settlement by Russia and the US. European priorities will require that this settlement stem the refugee flow, counter Islamism/Jihadism and address an unstable Syria led by Assad.

The EU's first significant role during this process will be to provide international/Western legitimacy to this settlement. For this, the EU, as a soft power, will be able to play a more dominant political role after the resolution and become more influential with Syrian actors. The second substantial role will be the reconstruction of post-war Syria, in terms of planning, financing and executing.

To secure its position in undertaking these two aims, the EU does not directly or fully support or portray categorical hostility towards any one Syrian actor. As this stance elevates the EU to a more neutral, conciliatory position, it also makes it a trusted party to construct the future of Syria.

Germany

The interviews in Germany were held in Berlin in February 2017. Among the interviewees were members and analysts of state institutions, experts from German civil society organizations and independent professionals with experience on Syria. Meetings were also held with the representatives of the Syrian Opposition, as well as Syrian individuals active in politics and civil society work.

Germany's Position

Background

Diplomatic relations between Syria and Germany were severed in 2012 when Germany closed its embassy in Damascus then due to security-related concerns. Presently, regional representatives of the German Foreign Office follow the developments in Syria. In Germany, the Syrian Regime has a chargé d'affaires in Berlin with whom the German government communicates. However, there are no formal bilateral relations between the two states at the political level; to the extent that Germany does not refer to the Regime as "The Syrian Government" anymore.

During the interviews, the most frequently repeated statement by German interviewees was, "who would have thought we would still be here six years ago?" This perception pointed to a certain level of bitterness for all, and possibly a degree of guilt for some. At the outset of the conflict, although the Western international community commonly agreed and advocated the departure of Assad, nothing more than solidarity was offered to the Syrian revolutionary groups. One of the underlying reasons for this is that, at the beginning, Syrians were seen to hold an anti-imperialist attitude, which negatively portrayed foreign cooperation. In effect, they were not perceived as being in favor of foreign intervention, believing they could topple the government by their own means. Indeed, in 2012, the Free Syrian Army predicted imminent victory at the outskirts of Damascus, a shared expectation by foreign powers as well. As the tide changed, however, the German government remained to withhold the extension of military support to the Opposition and awaited them to revise their stance regarding foreign involvement.

Germany's Priorities and Foreign Policy in Syria

Principally, Germany's main priority in the Middle East is to merely sustain the stability and cooperation of Middle Eastern states. Democracy for the region always came second to this

goal. However, the post-2011 migration crisis and ISIS attacks expediently prioritized security over stability. As stated during the interviews, Germany is also very mindful of a safe and stable Israel, and treats it as a security issue.

Germany's traditional foreign policy is known for its non-interventionist approach which has, since the Second World War, prohibited the practice of exporting weapons to active war zones. Moreover, the German Constitution imposes strict limitations on the deployment of military forces in foreign territories. One of the most notable examples of this policy is Germany's decision in 2011 to abstain from voting on UN Resolution 1973, sanctioning the military intervention in Libya.²

Likewise, Germany was initially reluctant to intervene in Syria. One interviewee stated that the "sorrowful experience of the intervention in Libya in 2011" was one of the reasons why the international community refrained from intervening in Syria earlier. Others also generally believed that it seemed impossible for international actors to have foreseen the developments in 2012; "when Damascus was about to fall, everyone thought that any action would mean nothing but a gamble." However, Germany appeared to make exceptions to this rule of non-intervention later to counter the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In 2014, it made the controversial decision of arming the Kurdish Peshmerga (the military forces of the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq). And in 2015, following the Bataclan attacks by ISIS in Paris on November 13, Germany began assuming a bigger military role in the fight against ISIS in Syria through military means, such as deploying Tornado reconnaissance jets to help France.

Germany joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS only when the US decided to do so

A point of regret, which dates back to 2013 – "when Obama's famous red line was crossed by Assad's chemical attacks" – was described as a missed opportunity to stop the war. The common belief at both civil society and state levels was that the international powers should have intervened militarily at that time. The Syrian Opposition,

which has now almost been crushed, had made "the difficult mental switch" by then; seemed ready to accept foreign support; and was adamantly pressuring the international community to intervene. "It was a point of hope; in Damascus people were waiting at the rooftops, hoping that American planes would be there any minute." But they never came. There was also a common opinion that "Germany should have been more to the point" regarding its stance, rather than signal an indecisive and vague approach. For example, although Germany supported the Syrian uprising, its official declarations were found to be more cautious than those of France. Accordingly, many found the support extended to the Opposition to be weak and insufficient.

Despite this shared opinion, it was widely accepted that Germany's foreign policy is not independent, and thus, that it could not take a strong proactive position on its own. In

² In March 2011, the UN Security Council faced a crisis in Libya, where the government of Muammar al-Qadhafi was violently suppressing protests. Germany joined China, Russia, India and Brazil in a vote of abstention. The UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which was passed on 17 March 2011, authorised a military intervention in Libya.

support of this argument, we are reminded that Germany joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS only when the US decided to do so. Moreover, its traditional relationship with Russia – and their common interests elsewhere, like in Ukraine – made it more difficult for Germany to take a stronger anti-Regime stance. On the other hand, however, although there was an overall agreement on the non-interventionist policy, it was argued that Germany can be more proactive and bolder with regards to Syria. Even though the discourse of the German state did not want “Assad ruling for even one more day”, stronger steps should have been taken to deliver stronger messages.

Germany extends support to the Opposition with the aim of empowering them to become effectual parties to the negotiations

At the present stage, Germany continues to provide support to the Opposition. Most concretely, financial and technical support is extended to the Opposition with the aim of empowering them to become effectual parties to the negotiations. Given that the Opposition is large as it is fragmented, its groups need to be supported logistically and financially in order to organize, prepare and travel to political meetings. Germany supports all these activities

to integrate the groups as much as possible and increase dialogue among them. The interviewees, though, highlighted the presence of certain influential personalities and groups that want to assume leadership or act independently and hence, complicate the integration process. That being said, the methodology of German support was also criticized for having been developed without accounting for the views of all factions of the Opposition. This was considered to result in the exclusion of some factions (especially the more moderate ones) from participating in the political processes and receiving financial aid.

Another noteworthy assertion was that apart from supporting the Syrian Opposition, Germany is also assisting groups close to the Regime. In other words, it is said that while Germany officially backs the Opposition, it is in fact supporting both sides. This can be described as cautious positioning in anticipation of possible future scenarios in Syria. Therefore, relevant to the now-accepted assumption that the Assad regime is here to stay for at least some more time, the big question for Germany is how to position itself? Here, two aspects come into play: firstly, if the Assad Regime is internationally accepted during a transitional period, the German government will similarly have to recognize its officials as the representatives of Syria, and hence, maneuver from its current official stance. Secondly – and pertinent to all sectors in Germany, including the civil society and the state – is how to support Syrians without providing help to the Regime’s elements or accepting the rule of Assad.

Internal Debate in Germany

Refugee flow is a top priority issue in German elections

In Germany, the Syrian conflict seems to pose more of an internal problem than a foreign policy issue. 2017 is a year of elections in Germany, with three federal elections throughout the year and general elections on September 24th. One of the main issues dominating the election

campaigns is the ‘problem of refugees,’ and how Germany can deal with the large number it has on its territory with the prospect for more to come. There was visible disappointment toward the Eastern EU member states for their indifference in sharing the refugee burden with Germany.

Perceived risk, increasing with the flow of refugees, has made people fearful and estranged towards them. The political establishment was viewed to be divided, especially with the recent rise of the right-wing political parties in Europe. Considering the discussions on the return of refugees, serious questions and concerns exist, as the post-conflict scenarios in Syria are still bleak. The suggestions for the forcible return of the refugees to Libya – seen as another exile for them, especially received criticism from the civil society participants.

Support to the liberation efforts of the Opposition are undermined by the rise of ISIS in Syria

The political movements in Germany and Europe were found to view the Syrian conflict in a way that disregards the Syrian Opposition's liberation efforts in the country. This was supposedly created by the rise of ISIS and builds on the shrewdly-designed perception that the Regime is protecting Syria against fundamentalist terrorists. In particular, Die Linke (Germany's Left Party), was perceived to adopt and push this discourse, while suggesting support to Putin, who is purportedly leading Russia's great efforts in weakening ISIS. The traditionally pacifist discourse of the Left Party – that opposes Germany's involvement in all foreign crises – was found reassuring by most, "not wanting to strengthen any one party in Syria." Political platforms such as the Peace Movement and the Easter Process were also still seen to be influential on the leftist segments of the society.

Despite these views, there are various civil society organizations in Germany that work on and for Syria. While some are focused on the more political aspects of the situation, others are involved in humanitarian aid, and support civil society on the ground. They have relations with local people in Syria and organizations of the Opposition, based in Germany and elsewhere. These organizations aim to influence the political discourse in Germany conjointly with that of the EU by lending visibility to the urgent problems and needs of people on the ground. In this context, three points were commonly expressed: first, for the German public to be better informed; second, for a much more unequivocal position vis-à-vis Assad to be clearly communicated; and third, for more support to be extended to the Syrian Opposition. Civil society actors stressed a valid concern, specifically that "Europe should not be setting an example to other current and possible autocrat leaders in the world by closing their eyes to the atrocities."

Views on Current Peace Talks and Other Actors

On the short-term, no party foresaw any concrete outcomes from the on-going peace talks, namely the Geneva Process and the Astana Initiative. The momentum before the Geneva Conference, which was due to start on February 22, 2017, was also not viewed favorably. Last year, only proximity talks were possible, since the Regime adamantly insisted on its position that the opposition groups were all terrorists. This year in 2017, a modest goal was set: to bring the parties together and keep them in the same room for negotiation on a limited number of specified issues. The Syrian Opposition stated that the best possible outcome from that round of Geneva talks would merely be for the Regime to renounce treating them as terrorists and instead, negotiate with them as legitimate parties. The UN talks were expected to hold further rounds

There exists a modest goal for the Geneva talks: to bring the parties together and keep them in the same room

to discuss issues of governance (transition), a roadmap (timeline and a new constitution) and possible elections.

Described as a new factor, trio and format, the Astana Initiative, was generally viewed positively, at least as another peace effort. It was further seen as “the joint baby of Russia and Turkey”. Although not an original guarantor, Iran was considered to be fully engaged in the process. With its obvious focus on the cessation of hostilities, the Astana Initiative was valued for curtailing fighting, albeit not in all strategic areas. However, the worsening situation in certain areas – starting from the Damascus country side through Duma and its south and the south of Darrab towards the Jordanian border – raises questions on the validity and effectiveness of the cease fire. The notion of “supporting both the ceasefire and escalation at the same time” was perceived ironically. The attendance of Free Syrian Army members at the Astana Initiative was positively viewed but the Regime was still considered hard to restrain.

Astana is viewed positively yet as a showcase of Russia

Germany considers the Astana Initiative to be driven primarily by Russia. The Initiative was even portrayed as a showcase of the Russians “who are showing us [Westerners] how to do it.” First, delivering military support; now, the Russians were believed to be raising the bar

of political support through the Astana Initiative. Although Germany commended Russia for its performance, a significant amount of criticism exists for the reckless way Russia has pursued this goal. Russia’s attitude, which implies that “I don’t need Europe to proceed,” was thought to have started before Astana, notably at Lausanne ³, when Russia attempted to act unilaterally, without Europe, for the first time.

The most concrete example to illustrate this stance was the retake of Aleppo by the Russian-aided Regime. During the interviews, it was stated that Germany had warned Russia several times about this issue. Russia’s later attempt to ‘cleanse’ Damascus from the Opposition factions by bombing local groups also raised arguments that Russia, as a guarantor, does not respect cease-fires.

Many believe Russia wants to withdraw from Syria as soon as possible

Many of the interviewees agreed that Russia actually wants to withdraw from Syria as soon as possible. Considering its military presence in the region, Russia was thought to be content by keeping its two military bases in Syria. However, it was not predicted to pursue a long-term agenda in the political future of the country. With no interest in Syria’s

reconstruction – as they would not have the economic means to do so – the expectation was that “they [Russians] want to attain the end of the conflict, and leave Syria for the world to rebuild.”

Regarding how Russia will deal with the Assad issue, the opinions mostly centered on the view that Russia does not see an alternative to Assad. Some argued that “even if there was an

³ The Syria talks convened by the US in Lausanne in 2016 failed to reach an agreement on a common strategy with Russia to end the conflict in Syria. The meeting gathered seven other countries from the region including Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and Egypt weeks after the collapse of the US-Russian ceasefire plan.

alternative, they could not have named him, since this would endanger that person's future." According to these opinions, Russia believes it must keep Assad to ensure that the Astana Initiative can at least make some progress. On another note, it was also disclosed during the interviews that there are different outlooks in Russia, notably between the Ministries and Kremlin, on how to proceed in Syria. Russia's ideas were overall expected to play a more crucial role than in the previous years, especially with its involvement in the Astana Initiative. It was suggested that this Russian role would only be balanced if and when the US returns to the stage as a prominent actor.

On the other side, German interviewees did not consider Iran a trustworthy party for cooperation. They also believed that Russia is having difficulties with Tehran and might be running out of patience. The role of Iran vis-à-vis Syria was obscurely described in the following statement: "they take part in Astana, support Geneva, but then do as they wish in Syria militarily." Those well-versed in Iranian matters suggested that there are two different active forces in Iran: on one side is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which openly supports the political solution; and on the other, the Supreme Leadership Authority that is pushing for a more militaristic solution. In this respect, the Astana Initiative was considered as an opportunity to assess the intentions of Iran. The country's leadership was expected to formulate its policies according to international political developments, most importantly, US foreign policy towards Iran. The US, on the other hand, was expected to cautiously observe Iran, especially on anything Israel-related.

Iran, on the other hand, is believed to aim for a long-term involvement in Syria

Many believed that, unlike Russia, Iran aims for a long-term involvement in Syria. Since the Revolution, Iran has been very active in the Syrian system, especially through its intelligence network, by means of its cordial relations with the Assad family. Many agreed that Iran's strong hand in Syria is necessary for the country to sustain its

power in the region; others furthered this statement by arguing that Iran seeks to expand its regional role and dominance. Thus, Iran's continued involvement in Syria, which will serve its interests and future goals, was expected to continue unabatedly. Most commentators additionally concurred that Iran will never find a better partner than Assad, whom they can greatly influence and rely upon to use Syria as a bridge for their regional aspirations (like the Hezbollah model in Lebanon).

Germans argue that as long as the US remains absent from the scene, it would be very challenging to reach a resolution

With regards to the United States, Germany – together with the European Union – is exerting efforts to persuade it to return to the table.⁴ Germany's view was that the US did not want to be drawn into another conflict in the Middle East, especially after its strenuous experiences in Iraq and Libya. Another opinion was that the US was abandoned by other major Western actors, such as the UK, in Syria. In this context, even though the US' demarcated red lines were crossed, it seemed easier to carry this burden and stay optimistic about

⁴ Please note that the interviews in Germany were held before the US response to the use of chemical attacks in Aleppo in April 2017.

Syria's future than intervening militarily. In other words, the lack of American credibility was deemed less costly than another war. The view in Germany was that as long as the US remains absent from the scene, it would be very challenging to reach a resolution. The researchers note that Germany finds it difficult to act without the leadership or presence of the US, for the sake of its own diplomatic relations with Syria. Contemplating the current bigger picture, the interviewees stated that Germany is on the same page with the US and that cooperation between Europe and the US is of utmost importance.

Apart from Germany's above-mentioned official stance, experts drew attention to the fact that the US is presenting the Syrian conflict as more of an ISIS problem and less of a Regime issue. With that in mind, several experts remarked that "they cannot simply look at ISIS but also need to see and resolve the conflict in Damascus, since it is this conflict that is continually perpetuating the void for ISIS to exist."

Turkey is praised for hosting millions of refugees

Turkey was firstly, and surely, acknowledged for its humanitarian approach by hosting more than three million refugees, who have fled Syria. Secondly, it was discussed as a significant actor in light of its on-going support to the Opposition. Turkish support was posited as a critical factor for the Opposition's inception and continued existence, making Turkey a game changer. Although it continues to be influential among and supportive of the Opposition, certain problems were said to have recently surfaced between different groups in the Opposition. Turkey's priority was seen to have evolved from empowering the Opposition to obstructing the PYD in northern Syria, seen as a terrorist organization by Turkey. To this end, the claim that Turkey's commissioning of rebels against the PYD forces was believed to have created some distress among the Opposition. For instance, the Opposition fighters were weakened both in terms of social support and military strength when they simultaneously battled with the PYD and ISIS. Likewise, there were concerns that the rebels do not wish to fight the Kurdish forces with whom they might be living as neighbors in the future. Lebanon was thought to be engaging in the same practice, which leads rebels to the impression that they are being used as proxies or agents of yet another foreign aspiration.

Assad seen as completely dependent on Russia and Iran

All comments overlap on the proposition that the Regime is heavily dependent on Russia and Iran. According to these views, Assad, on his own, does not have much power and has become a "puppet" of these two major players. In addition to having long standing links with the Syrians (in both trade and military training), Russia was considered to be the country that can protect Assad from international prosecution, if circumstances call for that.⁵ Russia, too, was mentioned as the actor that can shield Assad on the ground and possibly help him flee the country. On the other hand, Russia's close relations with the Assad family, along with the fact that this relation is greatly heeded by Iran, were seen as the two other factors that obscure the path to a resolution. There was also an understanding that Iran does not enjoy any popular support among the Syrians due to the very small Shia minority in the country (2 percent). Nevertheless, the interviewees remarked

⁵ As one of the permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council, Russia can protect Assad from any resolution which would initiate a prosecution by using its veto power, granted in Article 27 of the UN Charter.

that the long-term partnership between the two regimes is giving Iran a very strong hand to penetrate Syria's inner networks.

Resolution can only be possible if and when the super and regional powers agree on a plan and follow through to impose it on the local actors

The outlook on the status quo was that the Opposition is rapidly weakening, while Assad continues to capture important regions. And since Assad was seen to have no interest in giving up his authority, it was concluded that he would continue to advance against the Opposition until their eventual surrender. As the war grinds on indefinitely, the super and regional powers were acknowledged to be the key drivers of the conflict, and not the Syrian actors. Therefore, the

common verdict was that the resolution can only be possible if and when the super and regional powers agree on a plan and follow through to impose it on the local actors.

Views on Kurdish aims in Syria

Moving on now to discuss the Kurds in Syria, from the perspective of Germany, they function under two regional umbrellas: first, the PYD; and second, the Kurdish members of the Opposition. There are also some independent Kurdish

parties that do not side with either group. The only Kurdish representation at the Geneva Process was that of the Opposition's Kurdish members; all other groups, including the PYD, were excluded. Together with some other Kurdish parties as well as Arab Muslim actors, the PYD recently began acting under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, composing an overbearing part of it. Other Kurds that prefer to side with the Opposition converge under the Kurdish National Coalition (KNC) and typically, have bitter relations with the PYD. Rojava, controlled by the PYD as a separate entity, is not recognized by Germany, and there are no official relations with its administration. While the PYD's links to the PKK (recognized as a terrorist organization by the EU and NATO) were usually acknowledged, many emphasized that the PYD itself is not an officially-designated terrorist organization, and that it is regarded as a substantial actor in the fight against ISIS. The PYD forces are known to sustain their own communication with Damascus and do not consistently fight against the Regime.

There was no anticipation for the Assad Regime to grant the Kurds their long sought autonomy, but instead, that it might only recognize their cultural rights. According to the comments, this would depend on the extent that Russia is willing to push for the Kurds' and the PYD's aspirations, which is still unclear, considering the fact that the Russian offer to the Kurds was very limited in their draft constitution. The general outlook was that "Russia wants to see how far the Kurds can go in making concessions before making any commitments." In 2011, the Kurds had no demand for autonomy. However, now that this has changed, Russia was not expected to deliver it on a silver plate. Therefore, it would be a considerable gamble for Kurds to act more aggressively, trusting the US protection.

On the other hand, there was an increasing awareness and recognition that the PYD is directly linked to the PKK, and that it is pursuing transnational Kurdish goals in Rojava. Formerly Assad's biggest victims, the Kurds, under the PYD, do not face much hostility from the Regime today as they are efficient in fighting ISIS. More importantly, this may be related to their relatively low interest in regime change. Several interviewees agreed that the PYD is exerting great efforts to realize the Kurdish objectives, as many of their military leaders and fighters

come from outside Syria; yet another factor changing the demographic structure of the region. This argument was followed by an assertion that “the Kurds in Syria were really Syrian before, but this is now changing.”

Most of the commentators acknowledged that a rapid exit of Bashar al-Assad did not seem feasible amid the status quo; it was also stated that the transitional period will most likely include him

In terms of what Europe could contribute to the resolution, there was not much expectation within Germany. Europe was said to be looking to Turkey and Russia as the most important drivers at present but that “[they] are playing the cards too close to their chests to allow Europe any room to play.” Through providing financial means and supporting the reconstruction of Syria, the role that the EU will assume is cut out for the post-resolution era. Having said this, it was asserted that a resolution should be acceptable by the EU. As stated during the interviews, Europe does not merely

view itself as “check-writers”, and believes that Syria should ultimately become a state that is accepted by the international community.

Resolution, Reconstruction and Political Future

Time and Type of Resolution

Conflict may continue for some time but there is also a fatigue of actors

The interviewees in Germany predominantly agreed that the conflict will continue for a few more years. Nevertheless, some emphasized that there is a “fatigue of actors on the ground,” which makes them restless to see the end of conflict. Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran were also believed to be exhausted, a factor that should not be underestimated.

There was consensus that the major actors are the ones who could predominantly facilitate the commencement of any resolution process. This perception rests on three notions: first, Syrians are no longer the decisive party in the conflict; second, there is not much they can negotiate, due to the Opposition’s weaker position; and third, Assad is heavily dependent on Russia and Iran. Therefore, super and regional powers are first required to reach an agreement and then enforce it on the ground. One outstanding observation was that the ISIS problem should not be separated from the conflict itself, and treated as something different and more substantial. This view is especially relevant to the current US policy that seems to solely target ISIS, and disregard the Regime. Known to support the Regime’s agenda, ISIS will in fact strengthen its hand if the Regime survives. Furthermore, even if ISIS is defeated, similar organizations were expected to emerge and fill the extant void, and so, it was stressed that the conditions aiding ISIS’ survival in Syria should be addressed.

Again, most of the commentators acknowledged that a rapid exit of Bashar al-Assad does not seem feasible amid the current circumstances; it was further stated that the transitional period will most likely include him. A certain inclination among the European opinions was observed during the interviews, notably, that Assad’s exit could further complicate the status quo. Iran’s strong grip through Syria’s security services pressed many to think that in the case of Assad’s absence, it would seize total control. Upon considering the possibility of Iran’s ultimate

control in Syria, under such chaos, one of the interviewees remarked that “Syria would be like Afghanistan on steroids.”

A foreign policy expert indicated that a deal for a resolution might work if Assad loses his relevance or a transitional period or new constitution could be initiated to neutralize the Regime. In this case, Assad would voluntarily leave, as it would not be in his best interest to continue ruling, “he would want to be 100 percent dictator or not rule at all, because it would be too risky for him to rule with limited powers. He might be killed.” Nevertheless, it should be noted that a long-lasting peace should fulfill both Iranian and Russian interests. Another possibility discussed was that the transitional period might last two or three years and end in elections where Assad would not run. There was more agreement on the likelihood of this scenario, which could potentially be acceptable for Russians. Subsequently, the expatriated civilians would also be able return to their home country.

Civil society interviewees predicted an unfavorable peace deal, like Lebanon’s Taif Agreement,⁶ which encompassed different types of amnesties for different actors of the regime. Such conditions, however, were thought to hold the prospect for an outbreak of hostilities among the Regime and its allies, as Hezbollah and Shia militias should be expected to resist foregoing their gains or demand compensation in return.

There was consensus that even a transitional period with Assad can be difficult to digest by the people of Syria, who have suffered so dreadfully under his regime. However, if there was a moment when a transition with Assad seems to be the only way out, it may be accepted. Many considered the Regime not as a government but as a band of democidal murderers, and this made some wonder whether a transition is possible at all. On the other hand, some warned that “even if you get rid of Assad, if you do not change the regime, it’s impossible for people to return to their homeland.” Another question was whether Assad would accept those currently exiled back into the country as most of these people are Sunnis and have been part of the Opposition.

Civil society experts emphasized the necessity for securing justice and accountability for victims of torture and murder. They suggested that “transitional justice is the keyword” and cautioned that Syria could be another Lebanon if it is not implemented after the war. Experts claimed that since the West cannot play a concrete peace-making role in Geneva, it should immediately focus on post-war Syria, specifically on the planning transitional justice processes, increasing cooperation with local councils and assisting CSOs on the ground.

Political and Social Future

Most of the experts we interviewed concurred that people still feel Syrian despite the increased sectarianism and national ambitions of some groups. It was argued that Syria has existed in its demarcated territory for 100 years since the conclusion of the Sykes-Picot

⁶ The 1989 Taif Peace Agreement was an initiative of the Arab League, which ended the civil war in Lebanon and aimed to reconcile the different parties. After this agreement, however, political sectarianism was consolidated and a divisive tension emerged between Lebanon’s two main Muslim communities, the Sunnis and Shia.

Agreement, and that the cultural mosaic of the country makes the probability of a divided Syria unlikely.

When the subject turned to the political future of the country, one of the first projections raised during the interviews was that of a federation. On this subject, there were opposing views on whether or not a federal system is feasible in Syria.

Due to the fragmented structure of the society, some view the federalist system as an unviable option for Syria

The first group, which argues that the Syrian nation state should remain as it is, emphasized that it would be impossible to introduce a federation on any given ethnicity and religion as there are several ethnic and religious groups in the country such as Jews, Bedouins, Christians, Arabs, Sunnis, Alevis, Shiites, Turkomans and Kurds. While some asserted that a federation would require certain groups to be relocated from their home towns to different regions, others went further and claimed that it could trigger ethnic cleansing. Pursuant to these arguments, many Syrians were thought to be suspicious of federalism, to the extent that they would overturn it at a referendum.

Others argue that the federalist model is the only viable option to preserve the unity of Syria

On the other hand, there was a second group that viewed federalism as a feasible idea and efficient model for Syria. One of the ideas frequently articulated as a possible future scenario was the adoption of a federalist model similar to that of India – where there is a multitude of diverse ethnic and religious groups – which serves as an example for the preservation of unity. It was argued that, in this manner, the Indian model can be explained to the Syrian people. As a term, federalism can create alarming thoughts in people's minds and so, the trick may be to avoid dwelling on the term, and instead, pragmatically discuss levels of administrative and political decentralization. Some, however, noted that administrative federalism is almost in place with several city councils, of which some are becoming highly efficient and independent in providing local services.

One important point put forth was that the political federal system is a proposition that is mostly affiliated with the Kurds, and many believed that a majority of Syrians would not approve an autonomous Kurdish region with a separate parliament. Be that as it may, there was a perception that the Kurds, as a whole, are not in agreement among themselves. The PYD, the KNC and independent Kurds were all considered to aspire to a high degree of decentralization yet there seemed to be discussions on autonomy, among other issues, and inclusivity of all Kurds. The interviewees similarly claimed that Russia is providing the grounds to bring together the PYD, other Kurds and the Regime to work towards an agreeable political model. This was explained in the context that Kurds aspiring for autonomy will need more support from non-Kurdish groups to attain their goals.

Germany's Future Role

At the time of this study, in February 2017, the German view was that some change in the strategy of prominent actors seemed possible. However, it would most likely come at the price of keeping Assad. The US-Russian relations and necessity of their agreement on a

solution – while accounting for Iran – were presented as the most determinant factors of the conflict. And regarding the future of Assad, the most important question asked was whether or not the Russians would be able to ‘twist his arm’? Or, in other words, how much leverage they would have over him? In this context, the interviewees boldly underlined the need for Russia to understand that an internationally accepted political deal will require Russian efforts and guarantees for its enforcement.

Germany was expected to continue extending its support to the Syrian Opposition within the framework of the Geneva Process and also, play a diplomatic role by working with Russia to pave the way for a resolution.

Besides these, Germany was regarded as the best-situated, apt actor in Europe, and the most willing to partake in the reconstruction of Syria. However, the official view on this issue was clear and strong throughout the interviews, namely that Germany will not engage before a political process moves towards permanently resolving the conflict. The condition for reconstruction is that its roadmap “has to be part of an intra-Syrian deal” that is negotiated and agreed upon.

International agencies and civil society institutions were also committed to the reconstruction efforts, and certainly aware of the added value of Germany’s leading role in this area. Some interviewees insisted on the view that even today, more can be done beyond humanitarian aid, such as empowering Syrian refugees by providing training on federalism, political systems and local governance, as well as offering them professional education to rebuild their country in the future.

The United Kingdom (UK)

The interviews for the UK report were held in London and Istanbul during May and June of 2017. Among the interviewees were members and analysts of state institutions, civil society organizations and independent professionals with experience on Syria. Meetings were also held with Syrians in the UK who are active in politics and civil society work.

The UK's Position

Background

The 2015 Parliamentary vote to expand the air strike in Iraq to Syria marked an important decision in the UK's policy vis-à-vis the conflict.

However, the Syrian conflict is not high on the UK's list of priorities. While policy makers were cognizant of the consequences and repercussions of the Syrian war on the UK, it seemed that there was "no political appetite" to be involved in the conflict. One important factor cited for this was the UK's bitter experience in the Iraq War.⁷ The "scarred" British politicians were therefore, believed to dread the price of possible active involvement in Syria and simply "settle in for the long ride."

The UK's reluctance to intervene was also perceived to be fed by the public's ignorance and indifference towards understanding the link between Syria and domestic issues. One expert commented, "Syria comes on and goes off the list as a priority according to the developments. It comes back to the table when there are ISIS attacks in the UK or in Europe."

The public debate in the UK on Syria has shifted to the ISIS threat from the evils of Assad

Although the uprising had caught a lot more interest and support in its early stages, the duration and complexity of the war created fatigue and waning interest in the public eye. Only the recent chemical attacks in Aleppo were able to revive some interest. Furthermore, the public debate has shifted to the ISIS threat rather than the evils of Assad.

⁷ According to The Chilcot Inquiry into the UK's involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the UK government, led by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, improvidently drew the country into war based on flawed intelligence and poor planning. Sir John Chilcot, Head of the Iraq inquiry, said in a press statement that the UK backed the invasion of Iraq before exhausting the other peaceful alternatives for disarmament.

Returning to the UK's engagement in the Syrian war, an expert journalist remarked that the UK is doing nearly nothing militarily and sending almost no armed support to the Opposition. Although British foreign policy has been entirely opposed to the Assad Regime since the very beginning of the uprising, the UK – according to commentators – neither introduced new policies towards Syria nor increased its military involvement in the country. It was insinuated that the UK prefers to merely maintain balance and control until the US makes a decision. On the other side, another discussion driven by left-wing indoctrination suggested that, "Assad is a protector of minorities, fights against radical Islamists and is himself a victim." Although these words were viewed disapprovingly, they were considered to dominate the discourse of the left wing in the UK.

The UK's Priorities in Syria

Although the Syrian conflict is not generally a top priority for the UK, there are certain issues in Syria that the UK prioritizes. The first and foremost priority is counter-terrorism, which is described as an approach to eradicate ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and concomitantly eliminate British ISIS recruits. The UK is working both at home and abroad to develop and implement the aforementioned counter-terrorism strategy: at home, it is taking domestic measures to halt the recruitment of British citizens by ISIS; and abroad, the UK acts as a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. A common assessment was that although ISIS is very close to being militarily destroyed, it is still far from being politically defeated. This view stems from the current hard security approach to the problem; yet, focus should likewise be directed towards winning the battle for the hearts and minds.

The UK's top three priorities in Syria are countering terrorism, managing the refugee crisis and restoring regional security

The UK's second highest priority in Syria is the refugee crisis. The UK's main policy addressing this crisis is to provide humanitarian aid to the refugees 'where they are' to disincentivize immigration. Considering the various impacts of the refugee crisis on economic, social and political levels, much focus is currently directed towards transferring the necessary resources to refugees' locations to curb the number fleeing their countries. As an important note, this endeavor often requires working with the Regime to deliver the necessary aid to the people living in the areas under its control.

To address its third priority – regional security – the UK is working actively to find a regional balance among the regional actors under the auspices of the UN, while being part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. To this end, the UK continues to maintain its embedded relations with Iraq and the other Gulf countries.

Humanitarian Aid

The United Kingdom is the second largest donor country to Syria after the US, in terms of humanitarian aid

The UK is the second largest donor country to Syria after the US, in terms of the humanitarian aid it has been providing to the Syrian people. Its strategy for foreign aid to Syria is described as assistance to ensure political stability and increase the resilience of refugees. The UK has pledged £1 billion to Syria ⁸ for the next two years and a total of £2.46 billion pounds by 2020 ⁹. In addition, an extra package of 100 million pounds ¹⁰ was granted to help Syrian refugees, including £40 million pounds to those in the neighboring host countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

The Department of International Development ¹¹ (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) are leading the UK's efforts in Syria on humanitarian aid in collaboration with the Ministry of Defense. The Humanitarian Aid Fund, £250 million of which has been allocated for 2017, supports programs in Syria ¹² that include projects for providing food, shelter, non-food supplies and water sanitation. One half of the aid goes through the UN agencies and the other, goes through both prominent international and local NGOs. Here, it should be noted that the aid goes to both the Opposition and the Regime-controlled areas. Therefore, 50 percent of the aid is transferred through Damascus, and the rest is delivered across the borders of Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, without the Regime's consent. ¹³

Another important aid channel is the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund, £50 million of which is aimed to support local governance (local councils), education, livelihood (e.g. agriculture, skills and markets) in the areas controlled by the Opposition. The program, which started in 2012, is based on the idea that political transition can only be possible through viable and effective opposition. A dominant part of the UK's efforts in this field is concentrated in the Idlib area, and the researchers understand from the interviews that the aim is to establish a governance model there when no serious conflict is taking place. The UK seems to be the most active (if not the only) international donor in Idlib. However, local sources noted that Turkey has the upper hand in the area compared to all other foreign actors.

The UK aims to manage the refugee crisis by keeping Syrians safe and healthy in their own locations

The dominant cause of these activities is geared towards managing the refugee crisis by keeping Syrian people safe and healthy in their own locations. From a cost-benefit perspective, experts commented that it makes more sense for the UK to pay this expenditure than carry the risk of refugees coming to their country. It was also conveyed that the DFID's humanitarian aid activities are not often voiced

⁸ Reuters (2017), "Britain allocates 1 billion pounds for Syrian refugees, host countries." Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-conference-brita-idUKKBN1761KC>

⁹ The UK Parliament (2017), "The UK response to the Syrian refugee crisis." Available at: <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06805>

¹⁰ The GOV.UK (2015), "Prime Minister to see first hand how UK aid is helping most vulnerable Syrian refugees." Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-to-see-first-hand-how-uk-aid-is-helping-most-vulnerable-syrian-refugees>

¹¹ The UK's foreign aid is delivered by the DFID. Under the 2015 legislation, the UK government is legally required to spend 0.7 percent of the gross national income on foreign aid.

¹² In addition to Syria, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Pakistan top the list of humanitarian aid provided by the UK.

¹³ Most of this information is available on the DFID's official website, and is contributed by personal interviews.

in the public, as the domestic debate is unfavorable to foreign aid. Other projects, such as those supporting local councils in Syria, also enable donor countries to sustain an existence in certain regions by means of close ties to the local people and leaders, and thus, establish control, dominance and influence. Apart from these efforts, several research projects are currently being conducted in various parts of Syria; some of which are funded by the DFID and others by the UK Parliament.

Views on the Conflict and Other Actors

The Syrian Revolution was viewed as an explosion, resulting from the 40-year oppression inflicted on the Syrian people by the Baath Party. In line with this view, and the deeds of Assad following the uprising, the support extended to the Opposition has continued thus far. Despite the red lines, which have all been crossed by the Regime, the interviewees saw it to be critical that Assad somehow “keeps the show running”, as he managed to survive the most turbulent period of 2012 - 2013 (the early phase of the uprising) and got re-elected as President in 2014. In that sense, he was considered to be successful in executing a viable plan, which in turn, forced those who had wanted change in Syria to leave their country. The Regime’s discourse saying “we are defending ourselves against terrorists and fighting against a global jihad” was found to be working; and while Assad is gaining time, the Opposition is wearing out. Factors like the war economy, regional dynamics and interim agreements were pronounced as ways which can enable Assad to escape through the back door. Here, the researchers observed that a future with Assad

A future with Assad seems to be increasingly an acceptable option for the West in Syria

is increasingly becoming an acceptable option for the West in Syria. On the other hand, following the US’ missile attack reaction to the chemical attacks of the Regime in April 2017, Assad was regarded as being in a more difficult situation, where he will eventually – within one or two years – be forced to compromise.

UK officials are in close contact with Opposition representatives and support them in the formulation of a feasible plan for the future of Syria. The divisions and fighting among the Syrian groups, however, was mentioned as one of the most notable reasons for why this process has not efficiently progressed. Another point of criticism was voiced about the political leaders’ escape from the country, making them inept to be fully representative and deal hands-on with the local realities. The interviewees suggested that the political leaders of the Opposition should be more realistic during negotiations by taking into account the disparity of military power. The fact that the Opposition has been losing since Aleppo was foreseeable as, unlike the Regime, they never had air power. It should be noted that some of the remarks hinted that the UK might be looking for ways to be more proactive with the Opposition.

Development of the civil society in Syria is underlined as a positive outcome

Amid the discussions on the evolution of the Opposition forces, one interviewee posited a thought-provoking remark; particularly, that it is an unjust assessment of the current situation to claim that the moderate groups are being radicalized. He further explained that radical groups always possessed the military power and seized the opportunity to partake in the Syrian chaos, whereas moderate groups were neither radical nor armed, but are now only armed by necessity of being parties to the conflict.

According to the comments, the best development thus far has been the emergence and flourishing of civil society. In 2010, no one could speak about an independent civil society in Syria. However, now, it is possible to see a vibrant civil society, which is committed to building the future.

As for the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) forces and PYD aspirations in northern Syria, the official line of the UK was that they will not support the PYD's political project, which aims to establish a separate/special PYD administration in this territory. The argument was that the PYD's aspirations will have to be considered alongside a holistic solution for Syria. The main

The UK does not want to hamper its relations with Turkey over the PYD issue

reason for this stance is the UK's caution to preserve its good relations with Turkey, which they believe is a sentiment shared by many other states. The British are also critical of the PYD's "useful accommodation with the Regime" and possible cooperation with it to protect their cantons and export their oil.

There was a very clear awareness in the UK that the SDF are dominated by the YPG and that the YPG/PYD is directly linked and governed by the PKK, which is an officially-designated terrorist organization in the UK. The YPG was acknowledged to be using both the PKK's means and methods in fighting, as well as education and mobilization of youth and women, which is similarly practiced by the PYD. The PYD was also thought to dominate and manipulate all other Kurdish actors in the region. The view was that at the moment it excluded other Kurdish parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) and KNC (the ENKS in Kurdish).

On the other hand, however, there was a certain amount of sympathy¹⁴ among the public and intellectual circles for the Kurds' Rojava Project and battle against ISIS. Someone commented that "Kobane changed everything and gained a lot of currency for them." Another interviewee explained that "the Kurds, viewed to be strongly dedicated to fighting ISIS, while appearing secular, modern and inclusive, emerged as the most effective actor in the regions where support is extended to them." There was agreement on their success to promote their project in Western capitals, "making Rojava an international brand" and hence, "there should be no element of surprise regarding the Western support for the YPG." "They are a sellable, palatable ally because of their ideology" another comment mentioned, "and can receive support from the leftist circles in the UK."

That being mentioned, the Turkey factor is too significant to turn this sympathy into political support, knowing that the relations would suffer. The priorities of counter-terrorism and Turkey are too important to take any risks that would harm bilateral relations. A participant exclaimed that "the PKK is a terrorist organization and you cannot trash the relationship with Turkey; what will you do when you are faced with terrorism yourself?" It was also stated that there is a notable difference between the UK and the US in terms of their positions on northern Syria. The UK has a small military investment in northern Syria, for Raqqa, and was expected to support the US without being too involved or visible.¹⁵ Once the Raqqa Operation is completed, however, it

¹⁴ There is a moral/sentimental approach that the British should correct the historical injustice of the past when they eliminated the prospect for a Kurdish kingdom.

¹⁵ This approach stems from the controversy in UK politics around military involvement, due to the past experience in the Iraq War.

was deemed possible that the US can withdraw its support from the YPG. It was hinted that, at this stage, it might be challenging for the Americans to keep them under control afterwards (referring to the Taliban experience in Afghanistan). Raqqa was expected to be like Menbij and not part of Rojava, with a council comprised of the SDF and local Arabs but the main question of “who will really rule” remained unclear. One suggestion was that Turkey and the UK should work together to pressure the US to uphold their promises to local Arabs.

The relations between different Kurdish groups were perceived as another significant factor for the future of northern Syria. The conflicts between the Kurdish parties ¹⁶ (PYD and KDP, as well as others) were foreseen to impede the sole dominance of the PYD in the region. The opinion was that the Kurds will eventually have to find a way to live together since a fight would be detrimental to all parties.

The Geneva Process needs to survive as a means of preparation for the real negotiations

The UK and other European countries shared similar opinions of the Geneva Process. The UN processes were viewed as a “show” that was “not going well.” The support to the Opposition continues while the Assad issue remains unresolved. On the other hand, although everyone agreed that Geneva is not able to provide any concrete results at the moment, they noted that it needs to survive as a means of preparation for the real negotiations. The fact that the Opposition and the Regime were seen to share a similar perspective on the future of Syria – barring the Assad factor – signaled that something unexpected could also happen. As stated during the interviews, “things look bleak but can also move very fast.” Apart from the Regime-Opposition disagreement, divisions and fights among the Sunni Opposition were listed among the most prominent reasons why the Geneva Process is not working.

The UK is “just watching Astana” and considers it to be a positive proposal from the Russians. Conflict-free zones were believed to be the “first daylight, maybe in six years, to slowly get to a ceasefire.” The fact that they allow Turkey the opportunity, for example in Idlib, to weaken the Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) elements was received positively. Some commented that the Astana dynamics can also support the Geneva Process as a card against the Regime. On the other hand, the interviewees underlined the weakening armed Opposition and Iran’s role in Astana as critical factors.

The traditional traits of distance and mistrust continue to dominate the relations between Russia and Britain. The lack of economic dependence between the two countries is definitive in perpetuating these bilateral relations. The British saw Russia as the dominant actor in Syria. One commentator explained that “when Russia started building the air base in July 2015, the Western military intervention became impossible in Syria.” In Astana, it was argued to play a role in “shaping and packaging the agenda” and “creating the framework of how diplomacy works.” Strong criticisms were also leveled at Russia’s actions, which diverged from what was negotiated. A case in point was Russia’s attempts to establish a ceasefire in one region while focusing on

military advances in another. However, the West was not considered to be in a position that can challenge such behavior. The only impact the West was perceived to have on Russia was its capacity to push for the Regime's chemical weapons disarmament. But despite all these statements, a focal point of agreement was that Russia will not go to war with the US in Syria.

The Brexit seems to have positively affected relations with Turkey, as the UK now needs more friends and trading partners outside of Europe. The researchers also understood that the UK has started taking a softer approach towards Turkey in the international arena (e.g. on criticisms related to democracy) in favor of improving bilateral relations on regional security and increasing trade. Contrarily, however, criticism towards Turkey's policies in Syria was strongly voiced by many interviewees. Turkish actions were considered unpredictable, notably in the Raqqa Operation. While Turkey urged the West not to support and arm the YPG, its counter-plan was not deemed viable and military capabilities found insufficient. In this sense, the British showed no sympathy to the PYD's political project and concurrently expected Turkey to be more realistic, at least in the future, about the presence of PYD in northern Syria. The statements also indicated that Turkey's ability "to make the line less grey and more black and white among the opposition groups" would be considered a significant added value.

The Gulf countries were considered to have "lost in Syria" as a natural result of their lack of military presence in the region. Compared to Iran, which has a strong foothold in Syria, the Gulf actors were thought to be in extreme apprehension of Iran's regional intentions. Taking the advantage of Iraq's volatile state and the advancement of ISIS, Iran was believed to have consolidated its regional standing. Some viewed this as an effort to accumulate territory and strength, which would mean that Iran is concomitantly fighting a defensive war. In this context, one expert drew attention to Hezbollah's setting up of colonies in Syria and warned that its autonomy from Iran should be cautiously observed.

Resolution, Reconstruction and Political Future

Resolving and Rebuilding

Experts mostly agreed that a resolution is still not in sight due to the unchanging fundamentals of the conflict. Moreover, they acknowledged an increase in the number of actors involved, which further complicated the status quo. The general perception favored "a calm on the ground first, [before] a resolution can take place." The fact that foreign donors are supporting different groups in line with their own regional interests was thought to create further divisions among the Opposition and thus, form the biggest obstacle to a resolution.

Conversely, many also stated that there has been a momentum shift since the fall of Aleppo (December 2016); one which invited a stronger US reaction to the Regime. From this point onwards, although the outlook seemed bleak, it was thought possible to witness an unexpected momentum.

Like many other actors involved in the Syrian conflict, one common notion in the UK was that the resolution has to be a bilateral deal between the US and Russia, and every other actor should anticipate that. In that regard, the importance of domestic agendas and pressures in these countries – like the upcoming elections in Russia – was underlined.

The UK government extends support to local government structures in Syria

The decentralization act of 2010 in Syria was mentioned as an asset for the transitional period, as it provides an opportunity to preserve the state structure while implementing the required reforms. The UK government gives considerable amount of support to local government structures in Syria and would prioritize the effective and plural functioning of local councils.

In terms of reconstruction, the EU, UK, UN and US were predicted to be the major contributors, whereas, Iran and Russia were not expected to be part of it, at least financially. There was an understanding that Russia would play its role in bringing peace to the region and Iran would be reluctant, since it would not own all of it. Although the Regime asserts that reconstruction has already started in the country, it remains negligent in comparison to the necessary post-conflict efforts. Presently perceived as a small market with limited natural resources and deplorable economic conditions, the country will continue to immensely rely on foreign support for the foreseeable future. This was discussed as the Regime's weakest point and a card that could be played against Assad when negotiating for a credible political process.

Reflecting on the country's political future, many agreed that Syria will hardly look united. As stated during the interviews, as long as stability and security are ensured in Syria through the peace, the UK would be fine with it. Some further commented that the UK, although reluctantly, would even accept the Assad Regime if it formally made concessions.

The UK's Future Role

Experts argued that the Brexit would influence the way the UK handles its foreign policy and approaches the Middle East. Many suggested that after the Brexit, the UK will have to be more closely aligned with the US than before and possibly even compromise in certain policy areas. It

Brexit is an important factor in how the UK constructs its policies in the Middle East

should be noted, however, that through the Brexit, the UK was regarded to have relatively more autonomy from the EU and be in a position that enables it more flexibility. Thus, in the near future, the UK can be expected to be more engaged in foreign conflicts, in line with a renewed strategy towards the Middle East.

That being said, there was consensus on the UK not having much interest in Syria beyond the priorities discussed in the first part, specifically, countering terrorism, managing the refugee crisis and restoring regional security. According to the experts, the UK was found to be relatively powerless when compared to the US and Russia. However, it was expected to increase its influence on other actors by pressuring the US to keep their promises to local Syrians and persuading Russia to work towards an internationally legitimate resolution in Syria.

In addition, the UK may increase its role within the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. To achieve this, it can expand its role in the Raqqā Operation and other operations against ISIS, not necessarily in military terms but in governance and stability issues. Some suggested that the UK can be useful in providing ideas for viable models for northern Syria and be a mediator between the US and Turkey on the PYD issue.

France

The interviews in France were held in Paris at the end of May 2017. Among the interviewees were members and analysts of state institutions, civil society organizations and independent professionals with experience on Syria. Meetings were also held with Syrians in France who are active in politics and civil society work.

France's Position

Background

When the uprising erupted in Syria in 2011, the French public immensely supported it. The Syrian revolt was initially interpreted within the framework of the Arab Spring, through which autocratic leaders were removed and democratic transitions were anticipated to take place. There was a perception that a new chapter was being written in the history of the Middle East. Indeed, the Regime's repression of the Syrian people – exacerbated by the use of chemical weapons – depressed and shocked the public in France, and subsequently, led to an increased support for the revolt and entitlement to responsibility against any possible genocide.

However, as the conflict unfolded, this ephemeral, fiery spirit was gradually extinguished. The rapid and strong militarization of the uprising created an initial confusion in the minds of the French public. This was coupled with the fact that several different militant groups emerged within the original Opposition and further blurred the picture. Therefore, Assad's discourse, which read "we are protecting the Syrian Republic against terrorists," ironically began to seem justifiable.

The French narrative on Syria shifted from being anti-Assad to being anti-ISIS

The real shift in perceptions occurred upon the appearance of ISIS on the stage of the Syrian war, and afterwards, the 2015 attacks in Paris ¹⁷; transforming the French narrative from being anti-Assad to being anti-ISIS. As the tendency of "what's going on there will hit here," increasingly spread across Europe, France's priorities accordingly changed

¹⁷ The ISIS-claimed attacks took place in Paris in January and November 2015: on 7-9, January 2015, the attacks targeting the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo's headquarters and a Jewish supermarket in Paris killed 17 people and wounded 22; and on 13 November 2015, a series of coordinated attacks on the Bataclan Theater, Stade de France and cafes and restaurants killed 130 people, making them the deadliest attacks in France since World War II.

towards the Syrian conflict. Assad's continued advancement of this discourse – which focuses on the Regime's battle against ISIS – was observed to shift the political narrative and urge bystanders to choose a side. The interviewees stated that this narrative was even used during the presidential election campaign, during which Wahabism and Jihadism (i.e. in relation to terrorism and security) were evoked unlike before, and foreign policy issues appeared more salient. Thus, the original anti-Assad position shifted to prioritize the defeat of ISIS as a primary goal and the intra-Syrian issue as a secondary one.

At the time, the Socialist Party supported this new French stance of defeating ISIS. Moreover, the Party brought forward a new discourse underlining that the real problem is ISIS, while claiming that there is no need to antagonize Assad for the purposes of the fight. In light of this rhetoric, some MPs were criticized for crossing the line by ignoring human rights and Assad's despotism.¹⁸

It was also mentioned that by 2014, France's over-emphasis of Assad and regime change had started to impact its credibility in emerging market countries and marginalize France in dealing with prominent actors. By 2015, Russia's dominant entrance into Syria compelled France to manage its relations with the Regime and refrain from focusing too heavily on Assad's departure. This supported the argument that "in order to face the common enemy, collaborating with Assad through Russia can be possible."

As reported during the interviews, the far-right asserted that France should protect the Christians in Syria, who make up about 11 percent of the population. Moreover, since Syrian Christians had sided with the Regime, the far-right of France similarly followed suit. In this sense, the Church was said to be supporting Assad.

Nevertheless, the common suggestion of the Syrian experts was that neither Assad nor ISIS should be in Syria's future and that they are equally unacceptable. It was further explained that France should not and cannot choose a side and there must be an alternative resolution.

France's Priorities in Syria

At present, it is possible to identify three major problems that France faces in relation to the on-going chaos in Syria:

1. terrorism;
2. refugees; and
3. use of chemical weapons

In the context of terrorism, the interviewees stressed that the liberation of Raqqa is extremely important for France, as the 2015 terrorist attacks were known to have originated there. Furthermore, they referred to a strong public sentiment and interest regarding the future of Raqqa as the proclaimed capital of the 'ISIS Caliphate', explaining that it led France to adopt a deliberate position for a hastened intervention. Apart from this, however, there was also a

¹⁸ In 2015, French lawmakers – including the representatives of the ruling Socialists – travelled in their personal capacity to hold talks with Assad in Damascus. The visit was later condemned by former French President François Hollande, who opposed any actions that could be interpreted as strengthening Assad's hand.

more pragmatic view that the liberation of Raqqa will not be an easy task, and that the city's future remains uncertain. The fact that the Civil Council of Raqqa is currently run by Kurdish forces, along with the possibility that they may cooperate with the Regime to govern the city in the future, was deemed impossible by the French authorities. They stated two reasons why this scenario would be risky: first, if ISIS regained its power – by supporting the marginalized local Arabs – it would return with a vengeance to reclaim the city; and second, the possibility of a Kurdish and Regime-controlled Raqqa was thought to constitute an opportunity for Iran to further its influence in the region. Accordingly, the French stance posited that technocratic and moderate local governance should be formed in Raqqa after the city is liberated by the SDF. Another opinion was that the local council should neither be affiliated with the Regime nor the Kurdish forces, but instead, be mainly comprised of local Arab communities or

The future of Raqqa is extremely important for France as the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris are believed to originate from there

parties. It was believed that the regional security can only be restored by means of a stabilization force, constituted by Arabs and not the YPG. The Menbij Local Council was pronounced as a probable model. Although there was cognizance that the realization of such a model would not be an easy task in Raqqa, France's position and aim for the future of Raqqa lie here. Yet, France remains highly skeptical that radicals might return to the country; a risk that it seems determined to avoid.

France's current position simultaneously focuses on fighting terrorism and pushes for a political transition. However, it was acknowledged that not much progress was possible on the issue of political transition. Here, the main liability was on the Regime, which was perceived to be stalling the negotiations in order to gain time and preserve its power.

As for the involvement of other powers, the French interviewees viewed the use of chemical weapons and terrorism as the greatest concern for the US. Additionally, they considered Iran to be a significant regional threat, whose stake in Syria is a strategic asset and vested interest. As for Germany, the French highlighted its refugee influx as the most pressing, top priority issue. And finally, with regards to Russia, they argued that its affordable intervention in Syria is aimed at increasing its regional power. France advocates openness to dialogue and thereby, its dialogue spectrum involves talks with Russia and can include a strategic dialogue with Iran. It might also include talking to people from the Regime, but without extending them any legitimacy.

President Macron is expected to prioritize the future of Syria in his foreign policy; a renewed Syria policy is underway

With the newly elected President Emmanuel Macron, there appears to be a realistic possibility that the future of Syria will be prioritized by the French Presidency. It was agreed by many that the status quo, following Macron's election, calls for a revision and reconstruction of France's foreign policy on Syria. Former President Hollande had been criticized by the public opinion and the political elite for his Syrian policy as it

was viewed to put France in an inconvenient position. As previously stated, the strong rhetoric against Assad was considered to marginalize France and hamper its relations with Russia. Thus, President Macron was expected to present a more balanced Syrian discourse and build more efficient relations with other actors involved. At the time of the visit, the researchers were informed by officials that the preparations for a renewed Syria policy were already underway.

During the interviews, it was suggested that President Macron should project a vision for the “end state,” which would include the following five parameters:

1. No state system to be based on Muhaberat, communism, or Jihadism.
2. No Shiite militias and no support to Sunni extremists.
3. A Syria secure – by means of binding regional agreements – from regional rivalries and radical groups as well as the Shia and Sunni divides.
4. Syrians should be the ones to decide the structure of their future government, but prior to that, a foreign disengagement should be secured. These processes should, at least, move in parallel.
5. No change of borders and territorial integrity, unity should be kept.

Strengthened alliance between Russia and France is expected with respect to Syria

Immediately before the researchers’ visit at the end of May 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin was welcomed by President Macron at the Élysée Palace. Macron’s reception of Putin was described as a “magnificent ceremony” and “as [that of] the Kaiser.” The meeting of the two presidents at the Palace attracted immense public interest. The sentiment of this meeting was touted as a signal towards a strengthened alliance between Russia and France, which is expected to reflect on their bilateral relations with respect to Syria. It seemed highly probable that France will direct its future efforts towards Russia, with the aim of persuading it to pressure Assad and facilitate negotiation with the Western powers.

A day after his meeting with President Putin, President Macron invited and met with Riad Farid Hijab¹⁹ and other representatives of the HNC. “The president spoke of his personal commitment to the Syria dossier and support for the Syrian opposition in view of a political transition,” his office said in a statement.²⁰ A representative of the HNC stated during interviews with the researchers that although France remains committed to its principles, it is overwhelmed by the security threat of ISIS, which is the French Presidency’s most pressing issue.

The defeat of ISIS in Syria comes as a primary goal and the intra-Syrian issue as a secondary one.

The sentiment expressed in the interviews was that Assad is a secondary enemy and more so, the enemy of the Syrian people. Although France appears to fully support the Syrian Opposition as a possible democratic alternative to Assad, the researchers understood that the Opposition has accepted the fact that ousting Assad is no longer a top priority in many circles in France. The expectation from

France was to assist the Opposition in projecting a detailed vision for the future of Syria with regards to state institutions, administration model, security, judiciary, and reconstruction. Securing the continuity of the Syrian State was described as a common priority both for France and the Opposition.

¹⁹ Dr. Riad Farid Hijab is the former Prime Minister of Syria and General Coordinator of the High Negotiations Committee.

²⁰ Middle East Eye (2017), “Macron holds surprise meeting with Syrian opposition,” Available at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/frances-macron-has-unannounced-meeting-syrian-opposition-635254561>

Views on the Conflict and Other Actors

In reference to its oppressive methods, the Regime was recognized as a failed government, with a small, poorly-equipped military force funded by Iran and Russia. Furthermore, it was believed to lead a process of demographic engineering which is changing the economic realities of Syria, while paving the way for a war economy. The Regime's highly clientelistic and radical conduct was therefore, considered to concentrate economic power in the hands of warlords and a select few. In this respect, the French interviewees voiced concern that of the 70 percent of foreign aid that goes to the Regime, only half reaches the Syrian people.

While the French saw the radicalization of the Opposition as a major problem, they contrastingly expressed support for the Kurdish forces in eastern Syria and commended them as the most rapid and effective force to fight ISIS in the region. It was further argued that the PYD is backed by the international community against ISIS, "not because they are cool but because they are effective fighters." As stated during the interviews, this is also the reason US President Donald Trump is thought to approve of them. In Europe, the Kurdish forces were seen to be gaining popular support to several factors, such as being very effective in their communication methods; presenting themselves as secular-minded people; and rushing to

France shares a similar position to Turkey on the issue of safe zones, and holds that some of Turkey's concerns should have been more closely heeded

the rescue of minority groups in need, like the Yezidis. On the other hand, the researchers noted a candid valuation of the PYD's position, which indicates that, "Kurds have never departed from the Regime." There was an apparent concern that the PYD may cooperate with the Regime to sustain their regional gains. This was perceived as a threat that can lead to the alienation of the local Arabs and thus, strengthen the ISIS discourse.

France shared a similar position to Turkey on the issue of safe zones, and held that some of Turkey's concerns should have been more closely heeded. Nonetheless, three issues of contention were expressed towards Turkey, particularly, that it mishandled the Kobane crisis, which resulted in the radicalization of the PYD and some other Kurdish groups in the region; did not submit a viable plan for Raqqa, although it was asked to do so; and finally, made a problematic advance in al-Bab, which raised concerns on its capability to lead an operation in Raqqa.

The researchers were told during the interviews that while France thinks the West should arm the PYD/YPG, it prefers to keep this position rather ambiguous. The French interviewees argued that if the Turkish option seemed realistic, they would have preferred Turkey to lead the Raqqa Operation. This sentiment was attributed to the skepticism of French policy

US reactions of the Regime's chemical attack in 2017 was viewed as a turning point; but a concrete US policy was deemed absent

towards the future ambitions of the PYD, including any backlash on their part, especially against Turkey. A conflict scenario was perceived as imprudent on the part of the PYD, since it could risk reversing their political and territorial gains. Although France exerted momentous efforts to persuade the US and Turkey to join forces in the region, no consensus was reached due to their diverging priorities – France prioritizes ISIS, while Turkey prioritizes the PKK.

The arrival of Trump was viewed as a turning point in the conflict and his reaction to the Regime – namely, that it “spoiled the spoilers” – signaled that he can strike anytime, anywhere, making Russia much more insecure. Against this background, the interviewees commented that Washington “[had] gotten back the hand but doesn’t know what to do with it yet.” There was a suggestion that France could become a part of the deliberation process in Washington as “they have a say in the matter and ties with the region, at least much more than Russia.” They were also considered to have the military credibility. French experts argued that as a step forward, the US and its allies should convince the Russians to push for the Regime’s increased flexibility in the Geneva Talks; this would show the Russians that they have alternatives to both Iran and Assad. In this sense, France seemed to be willing to play an important role in forming new alliances.

The Russian political discourse was viewed to be less powerful; “in September 2015, Putin had stated we are going in Syria to crash the terrorists, but it was the US, Europeans and Kurds who ultimately defeated ISIS.” Here, the dynamics of the Russian economy were underlined as a factor that might hamper further Russian involvement. The Astana Process, on the other hand, was assessed as “the embodiment of what Russia wanted to further in Syria; 2016 was a year of war; and in 2017 they wanted a year of peace, so they shifted to the diplomatic process.” Astana was positively perceived in its capacity to freeze the conflict but acknowledged as another effort short of a political solution.²¹ Moreover, despite European approval of Russian Resolution 2336²², there was no progress on the issue. As an endnote, Astana was appraised but not seen as a platform for political transition talks.

Nevertheless, as the American strikes – which took place in April 2017 – reopened the Russian-American dialogue on the implementation of de-escalation zones, an important

France can be expected to play an important role in assisting Russia to develop resolution alternatives

assertion made was that Europe should facilitate and strengthen this dialogue. At this stage, it should be noted that Russia was seen to be facing a dilemma; leading a peace agreement along with the US could mean that Russia would lose or have to confront Iran. Consequently, this could result in difficulties for Russia to maintain its presence in Syria without the support of Iran-backed militia groups.²³

Resolution, Reconstruction and Political Future

Resolving and Rebuilding

There was general consensus on the difficulty to reach a resolution: the optimistic view, of UN Special Envoy de Mistura, pronounced a period of two to three years until a resolution is reached; and the pessimistic take, posited that the war will follow the usual course of civil wars and last 10-20 years. These factors are further complicated by the nature of the Syrian conflict, which has drawn in a multitude of foreign actors. As long as the Regime does not exert any

²¹ The Astana Process did not result in a political solution since the armed groups could not negotiate.

²² In December 2016, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2336, welcoming and supporting the efforts by Russia and Turkey to end the violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process for the war-torn country.

²³ For a more detailed discussion, please refer to “Syria: To End a Never Ending War” by Michel Duclos, Institut Montaigne, Note-June 2017.

Things are seen to be developing in favor of the Regime and also for Iran

efforts towards resolution, the root causes of the conflict were anticipated to perpetuate. Some expected that there could even be worse human tragedies than Aleppo, which would be humanitarian nightmares. Things were seen to be developing in favor of the Regime and also for Iran. One added note was that “with the [pressure of the] Korean crisis, there can be a shift in focus, priorities and resources for Western powers” which would further help the Regime buy time and survive for five more years. The interviewees concluded that if, for example, the Regime clings on to power for five years, Europe may gradually accept autocracy rather than a failed state, and start considering the reconstruction of Syria.

Despite the dominant pessimistic view, a window of opportunity described by government circles was expounded by means of four main parameters:

- 1. Russia’s need for a political solution.** It is currently at a different point of “freezing the conflict” compared to 2015.
- 2. The new US administration and its strike against the Regime after the fall of Aleppo.** As opposed to the Obama administration’s weak engagement in Syria – which resisted using force – the Trump administration was perceived to be moving towards a new foreign policy.
- 3. Changes in the regional equation following Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia and the ensuing Qatar crisis, which has altered balances.**
- 4. The fall of ISIS is nigh.** So far, the top priority has been the fight against ISIS, at the expense of other political problems. As the inevitable defeat of ISIS approaches, however, there will be an opportunity, and frankly a necessity, to address the root causes of the conflict and deliberate a political solution.

While some maintain their pessimism, others observe the beginning of a new era towards resolution

When these four parameters are all taken into account, a new era was expected to start. If the dialogues between the US and Russia make progress, there could be a joint management of the crisis, even if a real peace deal is not immediately in place. Still, experts were mostly pessimistic for a real deal to materialize in the foreseeable future due to the prevalent terrorism in the region, and the roles of Iran and the Regime in the exploitation of war economy.

France was also expected to play a facilitative role between the US and Russia and supply them with consistent agendas and options for a sustainable peace

France’s Future Role

Increasing military involvement seemed to be a secondary issue when discussing the role of France in the future of the conflict. It appears that it would only be considered in case of a new and large-scale operation against ISIS or chemical attacks by the Regime against civilians.

However, at the same time, the interviewees emphasized France’s power of negotiation and diplomacy, as well as the added value of its role with respect to French-Russian relations. At the time of the researchers’ visit, Russia’s importance was quite visible and discussed in France. The researchers frequently

heard the following words: “talking to Russia is important; Iran is not in support of a resolution but Russia can be. Russia is the main actor that can enforce for the resolution.” Another repeated idea was that France could work with and aid Russia for its efforts towards a peace deal in Syria by projecting an exit strategy and political resolution to them. France was similarly expected to play a facilitative role between the US and Russia and supply them with consistent agendas and options for a sustainable peace.

It is difficult to ascertain whether or not France – with its historical mission and experience – can play a special role in Syria. It was also mentioned that France was always more interested in Lebanon than Syria, but that it has a special connection with the Alevis and Christian communities in Syria. Some experts underlined that while it is true that France has a deeper understanding of the Syrian public than other Western actors, the French touch should not be exaggerated. Conversely, international experts that regularly follow the on-going events reported that “mostly the French are there, and they understand the best.”

PODEM Publications



THE ALEVIS' AGENDA FROM JULY 15 TO THE PRESENT

Ulaş Tol



SECULARISTS IN TURKEY IN THE AFTERMATH OF JULY 15: DEBATES, SENTIMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar,
Aybars Görgülü



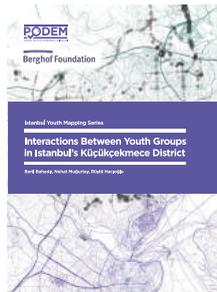
FROM JULY 15 COUP ATTEMPT TO THE REFERENDUM: IMPRESSIONS FROM DİYARBAKIR

Vahap Coşkun



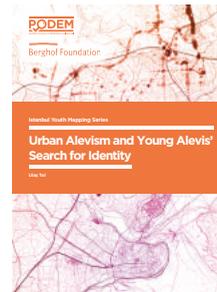
EUROPEAN CITIZENS WITH ORIGINS IN TURKEY: A CLOSE LOOK AT ALEVI AND SUNNI GROUPS

Etyen Mahçupyan



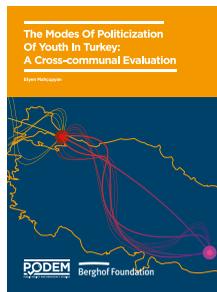
INTERACTIONS BETWEEN YOUTH GROUPS IN ISTANBUL'S KÜÇÜKÇEKMECE DISTRICT

Beril Bahadır, Nuh Muğurtay,
Rüştü Hacıoğlu



URBAN ALEVISM AND YOUNG ALEVIS' SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Ulaş Tol



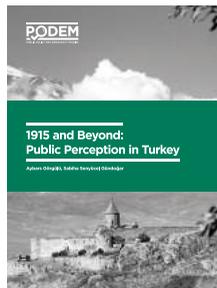
THE MODES OF POLITICIZATION OF YOUTH IN TURKEY: A CROSS-COMMUNAL EVALUATION

Etyen Mahçupyan



REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIAL PEACE: IMPRESSIONS FROM BUSINESS COMMUNITIES IN ISTANBUL AND DİYARBAKIR

Beril Bahadır



1915 AND BEYOND: PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN TURKEY

Aybars Görgülü, Sabiha Senyücel
Gündoğar



Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi alıřmaları
Public Policy and Democracy Studies

ISBN: 978-605-67530-1-5

Kore Őehitleri Cad. No: 38/3
Zincirlikuyu, 34394, İstanbul

T +90 212 217 75 65-66

F +90 212 347 18 86

E info@podem.org.tr

www.podem.org.tr