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Whether it be in Syria or Palestine, the political landscape of the Middle East has been witnessing dramatic changes over the past year. For the EU, this has meant a series of unprecedented challenges but also unique opportunities to recalibrate and reassess its strategy towards the region, particularly Syria. In Syria, for over a decade, and to pressure the Assad administration to adhere to international standards and implement democratic reforms, the EU has pursued a policy of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and humanitarian assistance. However, this strategy has to be quickly re-evaluated in light of the abrupt fall of the Assad regime.

Examining the EU's participation in recent high-level gatherings after Assad's fall is necessary to evaluate potential changes to the bloc's approach to Syria. The bloc's emerging Syria strategy reflects a significant departure from isolation to nuanced engagement, balancing humanitarian support with diplomatic outreach and exploring multilateral approaches that can fuel potential policy revision.

An EU of Pre-Assad Fall:

Before Assad's fall, the EU's approach to Syria was intricate, multidimensional, and typical. After first condemning the regime diplomatically and imposing economic sanctions, the EU progressively adopted a comprehensive strategy to isolate the Assad administration while also aiding the Syrian people.

Initially, the [EU demonstrated a strong diplomatic stance](#); it suspended its bilateral cooperation initiatives and closed its delegation in Damascus in 2012. This strategy was supported by a moral stance that disapproved of any normalization of ties with a government that routinely violates human rights. However, with [more than €33 billion in aid between 2011 and 2024](#), the EU continued to be the biggest humanitarian contributor to Syria despite the sanctions in place, helping both Syrian refugees and local inhabitants.

With Syria's readmission to the Arab League in May 2023 and the [growing diplomatic participation of regional powers](#), the EU strategy of isolation-imposed challenges on the bloc. Over a year later, the changing regional dynamics, and more specifically the fall of Assad's regime, revealed the shortcomings of the EU's strategy of isolation and demonization, paving the way for a more thoughtful re-examination of its Syrian policy.

Meetings & Visits: A Turning Point?

The EU's active engagement in the number of high-level diplomatic discussions taking place since the departure of Assad suggests possible changes in the bloc's strategy towards Syria. To better assess the Syrian issue and how to potentially move forward, regional and Western diplomats convened at the [Riyadh Conference](#) on January 12, 2025. The attendance of EU Foreign Affairs



High Representative Kaja Kallas demonstrated the bloc's dedication to working with regional allies to support Syria's transition to a post-Assad democratic country.

While momentarily upholding the bloc's position on sanctions, [German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock](#), speaking on behalf of the EU, suggested a €50 million humanitarian aid package during this meeting- momentarily because EU leaders were set to meet on January 27th to discuss lifting the sanctions.

The Riyadh Conference focused on a number of crucial concerns, including guaranteeing immediate post-Assad stability, coordinating humanitarian operations, and addressing political transition plans. The EU's participation underlined its desire to play an active role in Syria's future, while its insistence on retaining sanctions highlighted the ongoing tension between engagement and pressure in its strategy.

On January 18, 2025, the Rome Quint Meeting gathered representatives from the EU, US, UK, France, and Germany to harmonize Western policies to the emerging Syrian environment. This summit underscored the EU's efforts to collaborate with its traditional allies in developing a cohesive response to the post-Assad reality. The discussions focused on combating Russian and Iranian influence, backing moderate opposition groups, and coordinating economic and diplomatic instruments to influence Syrian developments.

The trips of the various high-level EU officials further illustrate the shifting and evolving strategy of the EU to post-Assad Syria. On a country-to-country level, Germany's Baerbock and her French counterpart Jean-Noel Barrot met with Syria's de facto leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, demonstrating the EU's desire to engage with the new political reality in Syria. Perhaps the most important visit so far is that of the EU Commissioner for Crisis Preparedness and Management Hadja Lahbib on January 17, 2025. [Lahbib's visit](#) was the first by an EU Commissioner to Syria since the regime transition. During her visit, she unveiled a new humanitarian aid package totaling €235 million for 2025. Lahbib spoke with Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and reaffirmed the EU's support for a peaceful and inclusive transition, as well as advocating for the protection of women and ethnic and religious minorities.

These meetings and visits have set the stage for prospective revisions in the EU's strategy towards Syria. Perhaps the most important event in the EU on Syria was the EU Foreign Ministers' Meeting, that took place on January 27, 2025, in Brussels. The [discussion](#) centered on modifying the EU's 2017 policy to address evolving challenges, reaffirm humanitarian obligations, and consider assistance for Syria's political transition. Key objectives included exploring a gradual reduction in sanctions, addressing regional stability, managing the refugee crisis, pushing accountability for war crimes, and organizing assistance for Syrian resilience. The ministers also indicated a desire to collaborate closely with foreign partners on post-conflict stabilization measures.

The EU has agreed to gradually ease some sanctions on the new leadership, but remains both unsure about the order of implementation as well as cautious about potential turnover. The meeting's suggested "[roadmap](#)" is expected to be further developed over the coming period, and the focus seems to be on the energy and transport sectors as well as key financial institutions. This signals a fundamental shift in the EU's approach, weighing the necessity for engagement with the



new political reality against the bloc's principles and long-term goals in the region, but it is premature to assess its effectiveness.

Assessment of the EU's Emerging Strategy:

The EU's emergent strategy for post-Assad Syria, as indicated by recent high-level meetings, visits, and policy themes, displays both strengths and challenges that should be carefully considered. One of the EU's significant assets is its expanded diplomatic engagement, which demonstrates a willingness to adjust to new circumstances on the ground. This increased involvement may give the EU more clout in supporting Syria's future and preserving its strategic interests in the region. Furthermore, the EU has maintained its emphasis on essential concepts such as human rights, inclusive government, and accountability, bolstering its reputation as a normative power capable of supporting Syria toward a more stable and democratic future.

In addition to meeting urgent needs, it could be argued that the €50 million relief package as a strategy may foster goodwill for further interaction. Moreover, the EU's attempts to cooperate with Western allies and regional entities demonstrate a departure from the bloc's long-standing strategy of isolation towards the exploration of a multilateral strategy that could potentially contribute to a more cohesive and successful global response to the Syrian crisis.

However, there are also a lot of challenges and flaws in the EU's new approach. With possible disagreements within the bloc regarding the future of sanctions and cooperation with Syria, the conference of EU foreign ministers underscores the danger of internal fragmentation. These internal conflicts may make it more difficult for the EU to implement a cohesive and successful plan. Furthermore, the EU may be less proactive to quickly changing circumstances on the ground mainly due to its consensus-based decision-making process on foreign policy matters.

The EU must maintain a delicate balance between its call for accountability and the requirement for practical engagement with emerging power structures in Syria. This normative clash will potentially hinder efforts to contribute effectively to Syria's political transition. Furthermore, while the EU has enormous economic and diplomatic capabilities, its capacity to actively influence events on the ground in Syria remains restricted, possibly diminishing the effectiveness of its policy, especially in the face of more powerful and active regional powers.

The EU's approach of linking reconstruction funding to political transition faces new challenges in the post-Assad era. Defining clear benchmarks for engagement while addressing pressing reconstruction requirements creates a complex policy quandary that the bloc must carefully navigate. Furthermore, the high-level diplomatic focus may have hampered greater interaction with Syrian civil society groups and grassroots organizations, potentially missing out on vital insights and support for developing an inclusive post-war governance framework.

Reality on the Ground:

Since the Brussels EU Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the situation in Syria has continued to evolve. On one hand, Syria's de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, [declared himself the president and abolished the country's constitution](#). He has laid out [proposals for a new constitution](#) where he



plans to release a constitutional proclamation in the coming days and has established a preparatory committee to choose a transitional legislative council. Al-Sharaa intends to form a committee to hold a national dialogue conference that will serve as a forum for talks about [Syria's future political agenda](#). The outcomes of this conference will serve as the foundation for the new "[Constitutional Declaration](#)." Although his "[revolutionary legitimacy](#)" has been defended and emphasized, and various steps towards a new governance framework are being put forward, the path to a stable, democratic Syria remains uncertain and complex.

On the other hand, [Hay'at Tahrir al Sham \(HTS\)](#) has been working on gaining regional recognition. From Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani's visit to Damascus on January 30th in the first visit by a head of state to the Syrian capital since the fall of Assad and [al-Sharaa's meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman](#) in Riyadh for his first official foreign visit on February 2nd, 2025, to [criticism of Iran](#) and [rapprochement with Turkey](#), the new Syrian leadership is resetting its regional alliances and imposing its presence and vision for regional stability.

Recommendations:

To enhance the efficiency and consistency of its post-Assad Syria strategy, the EU should examine three critical aspects:

1. *Internal EU Cohesion:* Strengthening internal cooperation within the EU is critical for implementing a coherent and effective strategy toward Syria. To do this, forming a dedicated Syria task force inside the European External Action Service would greatly improve coordination between EU institutions and member states. This task force could facilitate information sharing, policy formulation, and strategic planning, resulting in a more prompt coordinated reaction to developments in Syria.

Creating a long-term reconstruction strategy in collaboration with international donors is another important facet of internal cohesion. This policy should be built on clear governance criteria, allowing for a gradual increase in support as reforms are implemented in Syria. This strategy would not only ensure that EU funding is used properly, but it would also provide Syrian authorities and other stakeholders with a clear road map. It would reflect the EU's commitment to long-term development and good governance in Syria following the conflict.

Developing a framework for the safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation of Syrian refugees is an important part of the EU's domestic strategy. This framework, created in conjunction with the UNHCR and host nations, should be connected to changes in Syria's security and governance frameworks. By tackling the refugee situation properly, the EU can reduce strain on host countries, contribute to regional stability, and guarantee that returns are sustainable and do not cause more unrest in Syria.



One element that could be of support in this aspect is the upcoming appointment of Christian Berger as the EU's special envoy to Syria. This is an important step toward improving the EU's internal cohesiveness on Syria policy. Berger's significant diplomatic experience as a past leader of the EU delegations in Egypt and Turkey provides valuable regional understanding to the position. This appointment could act as a focal point for coordinating information sharing, policy formulation, and strategic planning among EU institutions and member states, perhaps resulting in more rapid and coherent responses to Syrian developments.

2. *EU as a Bridge Between Regional Global Actors:* The EU's prospective position as a neutral negotiator in the Syrian war is critical, and it should be actively utilized. Increasing diplomatic involvement by reopening its delegation in Damascus while keeping clear prerequisites for government change and inclusivity would allow for more direct communication and interaction. This approach, while potentially contentious, would offer the EU firsthand information and allow it to influence developments on the ground.

Leading international efforts to negotiate the complicated web of interests that includes Turkey, the GCC, the United Nations, and Russia is an important component of the EU's bridging role. By encouraging conversation and finding common ground, the EU can help ensure a more coordinated and effective international response to the Syrian crisis. This strategy would leverage the EU's diplomatic strengths and reputation as an impartial mediator.

Creating a comprehensive regional security framework is critical to long-term stability in Syria and the wider Middle East. This framework should handle critical issues such as the existence of foreign militias, the involvement of neighboring countries, and the threat presented by extremist organizations. By taking the lead in this process, the EU can contribute to a safer and more stable environment, which is critical for Syria's rehabilitation and the region's general stability.

3. *Preeminence of Transitional Justice and Human Security:* Human security and accountability should continue to be top priorities for the EU in Syria. Supporting transitional justice proceedings while encouraging reconciliation is critical in resolving war crimes and human rights violations. This strategy has the potential to help lay the groundwork for a more stable and just Syria. However, it is critical to approach and conduct these processes with care, taking into consideration local conditions and avoiding the perception of imposing Western values.

Effective engagement with local stakeholders is vital to the success of any EU program in Syria. This entails respecting local settings and cultural sensitivities while upholding global



human rights standards. The EU should aim to strike a balance between its norms and pragmatic participation, avoiding crises like the "[handshake incident](#)" that could jeopardize its legitimacy and efficacy. By taking a balanced approach, the EU can uphold its objectives while cultivating positive ties with local stakeholders.

Increasing funding for Syrian civil society organizations is a critical step toward improving human security and transitional justice. By providing financial and technical aid, the EU can ensure grassroots engagement in governance processes. This assistance should try to empower local players, foster inclusive dialogue, and contribute to the creation of a more representative democratic structure in Syria. While this method necessitates careful management of complicated local dynamics, it has the potential to contribute considerably to the country's long-term stability and democratic advancement.

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