





## COMMENTARY

# Why It is the Right Time for the EU to Renew Its Strategy for Syria

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EUROPE

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# WHY IT IS THE RIGHT TIME FOR THE EU TO RENEW ITS STRATEGY FOR SYRIA

## Background

The 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2021 marked the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian revolution. A revolution that started as peaceful protests in the Southern Syrian City of Deraa but rapidly turned into one of the most internationalized and deadliest wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The conflict, which has plagued the country with military, political and humanitarian crises, also had heavy repercussions on its neighbourhood and beyond. Indeed, the outburst of an all-out war in Syria rapidly sent EU policymakers into distress, tormented by internal divisions following the multiple waves of refugees fleeing the region and struck by acts of foreign terrorism. But, as some European countries such as France and the United Kingdom sought to directly intervene within the conflict<sup>1</sup>, the EU remained for the most part as inactive as irrelevant.

Accordingly, in March 2017, the EU presented its updated strategy for Syria<sup>2</sup>. However, this strategy strictly followed the largely ineffective previous one which had been devised as late as 2013, two years after the onset of the war<sup>3</sup>. European policymakers chose to reiterate their deep concerns in face of the atrocities, offering humanitarian aid to the neighbouring countries, supporting an UN-led political solution, sanctioning figures of the Syrian regime and its accomplices and, at last, presented its future commitments towards Syria based on the achievement of a “comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition”<sup>4</sup>. However, as the conflict entered its 10th year, it is clear that the EU’s strategy did only bear some scarce fruits, if any.

Today, it is high time that Europeans stop dwelling on the EU’s incapacity to affect an ongoing conflict<sup>5</sup> which, and we cannot emphasize this enough, also had detrimental effects on itself and its members. Instead, the EU should seize the opportunity to redirect and realign its strategy with the current situation, even more so as the EU’s latest strategy for Syria was published four years ago. As the Syrian civil war comes to an end and as the regime, which has successfully fought with its allies for its survival, does not show any sign of stepping down, it is high time for the EU to take into consideration this new – but not so new – reality and update its policy and strategy towards Syria, its regime and its people.

A reorientation of the EU’s strategy aiming at the end of the Syrian conflict would positively impact its security, both internal and external. Besides, a shift in the EU’s policy regarding the Syria issue would accomplish three more specific objectives. First of all, at the Syrian level, it would reduce

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Borger & Peter Beaumont (14 April 2018). Syria: US, UK and France launch strikes in response to chemical attack.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/14/syria-air-strikes-us-uk-and-france-launch-attack-on-assad-regime>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (14 March 2017). JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Elements for an EU strategy for Syria.

<https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/celex3a52017jc00113aen3atxt.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (24 June 2013). JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE EU APPROACH TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013JC0022&from=FR>

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (14 March 2017). JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Elements for an EU strategy for Syria.

<https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/celex3a52017jc00113aen3atxt.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Xavier Baron (2014). Histoire de la Syrie. 1918 à nos jours (p. 358); Ignace Dalle & Wladimir Glasman (2016). Le cauchemar syrien (p. 358); Nikolaos Van Dam (2017). Destroying a nation: The civil war in Syria (p. 112); Marc Otte (February 2018). The question for A regional ORder in the Middle East. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-quest-for-a-regional-order-in-the-middle-east/>

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civilian suffering, foster peace within the country and make the EU's humanitarian aid much more effective. Secondly, at the regional level, it would promote stability and security in the Near East region and beyond. Lastly, at the global level, as the EU is seriously lacking international credibility in the realm of foreign policy, it would show that it is still a relevant power, capable of influencing its neighbourhood. After having answered why, this commentary will look into how the EU should go about redirecting its Syrian strategy.

## Current State of Play

Even though the end of the conflict is in sight and that we are now far from the 2017 reality, when the EU published its latest strategy for Syria, the EU diplomacy seems stuck in a status quo. The [latest declaration](#) of High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU on the 10 years of the conflict further reinforces this sentiment. Now, with the Syrian regime controlling most of what is considered as “the useful Syria”<sup>6</sup>, we can hardly believe that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would give-up what he has tried to recover with difficulty for the past decade. Thus, to reduce human suffering, to help increase regional stability and to promote its position as a key player in the realm of foreign policy, the EU should realign itself, and its policies, with this reality. Furthermore, the EU can do so by engaging with local, regional and international actors, without the need to give back any sort of legitimation to the current regime.

## Defining the position of relevant actors

Within Syria, the main actor is, of course, the **Syrian regime**. With its control over most of the “useful Syria”, the regime, personified by President Bashar al-Assad, seeks without compromise to reunify the country under its rule and win its *Syrian war on terror*<sup>7</sup>. However, the 10-year long war that ravaged the country left it on the brink of bankruptcy, decimated its infrastructures and fatigued its people<sup>8</sup>. But would the Syrian President slightly alter its position a true post-conflict process could be engaged.

In addition to the regime, we can mention the **Civil society** and its **organizations** (CSO) that have developed during the course of the conflict whether inside or outside the regime's sphere<sup>9</sup>. Albeit scarce and hardly independent, it would be a mistake to overlook the Syrian civil society based on the premise that funding it would only benefit the regime, as multiple experts argue<sup>10</sup>. Thus, even if CSOs do not represent a power by themselves, their development and support would foster more positive living conditions for the population and foster positive change for the country<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The expression “Useful Syria” refers to most of Western Syria where most of the country's population and economic activities are located. Roughly, it is made up of the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis alongside the coastal region which englobes Latakia and Tartus. For more information on the expression “Useful Syria”, see Matthias Sulz (6 September 2018). RE-INTERPRETING THE NOTION OF ‘USEFUL SYRIA’. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/re-interpreting-notion-useful-syria>

<sup>7</sup> Ian Blake (12 February 2016). Syrian president Bashar al-Assad vows to retake whole country.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-vows-to-retake-whole-country>

<sup>8</sup> Action on Armed Violence (18 December 2019). Syria in 2020: the deadly legacy of explosive violence and its impact on infrastructure and health.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-2020-deadly-legacy-explosive-violence-and-its-impact>

<sup>9</sup> Reem Maghribi (June 2020). Supporting Syrian CSOs. Addressing challenges faced and Promoting self-determination.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/6686921/Supporting+Syrian+Civil+Society+Organizations.pdf/e6d42d56-12aa-5a71-cd81-5454083b3a37?version=1.4&t=1610714082418>

<sup>10</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey (21 April 2020). Society max: How Europe can help Syrians survive Assad and coronavirus.

[https://ecfr.eu/publication/society\\_max\\_how\\_europe\\_can\\_help\\_syrians\\_survive\\_assad\\_and\\_coronavirus/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/society_max_how_europe_can_help_syrians_survive_assad_and_coronavirus/)

<sup>11</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations (11 March 2020). Syrian voices: Where next for European policy?.

[https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_syrian\\_voices\\_where\\_next\\_for\\_european\\_policy/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syrian_voices_where_next_for_european_policy/)

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Now, the Syrian regime owes its salvation only to its two main backers, **Iran** that supported it financially and militarily since the beginning of the conflict and **Russia** which provided it with significant military support since 2015. These two countries bore a significant military, human and, above all, financial cost throughout their involvement<sup>12</sup>.

Today, both of them look for stability which would reduce their burden and start benefiting from their position within the country. In addition, Russia and Iran are heavily involved in the multiple peace processes that have taken place since the beginning of the conflict, especially outside of the UN framework. As such is well-known that today, the two political and economic backers of the regime enjoy a significant amount of influence over the Syrian regime<sup>13</sup>.

**Turkey** can be considered as the last key-player in the conflict. Hostile to the Syrian regime and concerned by its Southern border with Syria<sup>14</sup>, Turkey is the only credible player which, if not capable of threatening the Syrian regime directly, is capable of tempering the Syrian President's ambition in the North-West. It can do so because the Syrian regime is weak and that, as we observed during the February-March 2020 operation in the Idlib region (*Operation Spring Shield*), Russia is not willing to go all-out against Turkey. In the North East, Turkey also has ambitions, not so linked with the Syrian conflict *per se*, but with its Kurdish question.

Adding to these key-stakeholders and as evidence of the unprecedented stage that has reached the Syrian conflict, other important, albeit less influential, actors have started to emerge or reemerge.

In 2011, as the Arab League suspended Syria's membership and Gulf countries rapidly withdrew their ambassadors from the country, most **Arab countries** offered their support to the Syrian opposition. But in recent years, the ousting of Bashar al-Assad and his regime grew harder, Gulf countries have started to shift their policies regarding Syria<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the growing influence of Iran and Turkey alongside the opportunities offered by the country's rebuilding prompted countries to grow closer to the Syrian regime. As such, countries like Oman<sup>16</sup>, the UAE<sup>17</sup> and Bahrain<sup>18</sup> have all reestablished or deepened their ties with Damascus.

**China**, which has been a key ally to the Syrian regime since the beginning of the conflict. Throughout the conflict, Beijing vetoed most UN resolutions against the Syrian regime or in support of the Syrian rebels and population<sup>19</sup>. However, now that the conflict is slowly entering its "post-conflict" phase,

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<sup>12</sup> Jay LMens (Winter 2019). Footing the Bill. Russian and Iranian Investment and American Withdrawal in Syria. [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEEAA/Journals/Volume-01\\_Issue-2/JEMEEAA\\_01\\_2\\_Mens.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEEAA/Journals/Volume-01_Issue-2/JEMEEAA_01_2_Mens.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Ramani (7 Octobre 2019). Russia's efforts to expand the Astana process in Syria. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-efforts-expand-astana-process-syria>

<sup>14</sup> The Conversation (20 February 2020). In Syria's Idlib, Turkey is trying to play middle man between Russia and the US - with little success. <https://theconversation.com/in-syrias-idlib-turkey-is-trying-to-play-middle-man-between-russia-and-the-us-with-little-success-131852>

<sup>15</sup> Sima Aldardari (29 Decembre 2020). Strategic Interests Drive Gulf Policy Toward Syria. <https://agsiw.org/strategic-interests-drive-gulf-policy-toward-syria/>

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Cafiero & Brett Sudetic (17 Decembre 2020). Oman's Diplomatic Moves in Syria. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83486>

<sup>17</sup> Reuters (27 Decembre 2018). UAE reopens Syria Embassy in boost for Assad. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates/uae-reopens-syria-embassy-in-boost-for-assad-idUSKCN1OQ0QV>

<sup>18</sup> Reuters (28 Decembre 2020). Bahrain says no to interruption to diplomatic ties with Syria. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-bahrain/bahrain-says-no-interruption-to-diplomatic-ties-with-syria-idUSKCN1OR0FI>

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Foot (28 February 2020). China's vetoes during the Syrian conflict.

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we could most definitely see China's role and involvement in Syria deepen<sup>20</sup>. The reason for that is simple: China's massive economic resources make it one of the very few actors capable of financing the reconstruction of Syria. In addition, its friendly, strategic and economic ties with both Russia and Iran make its penetration of Syria even more so credible.

**Israel** can also be mentioned, albeit as a marginal actor. Towards the conflict itself, Israel has always maintained a position of neutrality. However and despite this position, Israel often strikes Iranian positions in Syria, trying its best to limit and reduce Iran's influence in the region.

Above the evolution of the Syrian environment, another element to take into account is the position of the **United States** within Syria and towards the Syrian regime. Today, Washington does not seek a regime change in Syria anymore but still employs a strategy of "maximum pressure" to try to force a change of behaviour in Damascus<sup>21</sup>. Most notably, the recent "Caesar act"<sup>22</sup>, which imposed a new set of unprecedented restrictive measures against the regime, most definitely won't affect the behaviour of a regime that has been fighting under strict sanctions for a decade. However, these sanctions could provide new opportunities for the EU policymakers.

## *Where does the EU stand?*

Realistically, even though the EU provides a significant amount of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people<sup>23</sup>, its role ranges from marginal to non-existent. However, the EU's economic weight and political and diplomatic engagement towards some key-players could make it an ideal power broker between the conflict's multiple stakeholders. To do so, it will have to use its limited foreign policy leverage, especially with bigger actors, to target each of their specific interests. But then, which arguments can the EU put?

With Iran, the EU only has very limited leverage over the regime. However, European policymakers could make use of the INSTEX mechanism (note) to increase their leverage. For example, European countries could gradually implement oil trade within the INSTEX which is considered as a lifeline<sup>24</sup> for the Iranian economy. Also, within the framework of the JCPOA, the EU could help Tehran push its interests and work with the United States, especially now with the arrival of a new American administration that is more willing to work with Iran in that regard<sup>25</sup>.

With Turkey, President Erdogan's hectic behaviour has made its intentions unclear and Europeans unsure about how to deal with it. But in the context of Syria, Turkey seeks one thing only from the

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<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/02/28/chinas-vetoes-during-the-syrian-conflict/>

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Cafiero (20 February 2020). China plays the long game on Syria.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-plays-long-game-syria>

<sup>21</sup> Robert Fisk (26 June 2018). This moment will go down in history: the US has given up on the overthrow of Assad in Syria.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-assad-regime-us-support-syria-rebels-israel-golan-heights-a8417716.html>

<sup>22</sup> 116th Congress (01 March 2019). H.R.31 - Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31/text>

<sup>23</sup> European civil protection and humanitarian aid operations (n.a.). Syria.

[https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria_en)

<sup>24</sup> Financial Tribune (03 July 2019). INSTEX Worthless Without Oil Import).

<https://financialtribune.com/articles/business-and-markets/98751/instex-worthless-without-oil-import>

<sup>25</sup> Karen DeYoung & Kareem Fahim (14 March 2021). United States and Iran warily circle each other over reactivating nuclear deal.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-iran-nuclear-deal-talks/2021/03/14/4b020904-8376-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-iran-nuclear-deal-talks/2021/03/14/4b020904-8376-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html)

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Europeans: the EU's support in front of Syria, Russia and Iran<sup>26</sup> and a greater easing of the refugee burden<sup>27</sup>. However, the Turkish President's aggressive and menacing tone<sup>28</sup> did not satisfy Europeans who seemed to not understand Turkey's needs. Indeed, the Syrian offensive, supported by Russia and Iran, especially in the North-West, pose a vital threat to Turkey. Regarding refugees, the Turkish regime is always on the lookout for increased help from the EU to lessen their weight on its society.

In Syria, what the regime lacks is, among many other things, an economy and funds. The EU can provide both. On the one hand, it could provide humanitarian relief and financially supervise the reconstruction of the country, things that the regime nor its allies can provide, and, on the other hand, it could alleviate some of the sanctions which have been in place since 2011, thereby allowing trade with some EU countries.

Therefore, if Europeans would shift from their "regime change" policy towards Syria, they could go through the regime's main allies to find a way for Damascus to make, small, incremental concessions. But before that, clearly defined and achievable benchmarks should be set for the regime. In addition, Europeans could also work with the Americans in easing the devastating "Caesar" sanctions that are debilitating the Syrian economy in exchange for more concessions from the regime.

If not through the regime, which Brussels does not recognize, the EU has its way with the Syrian regime through Russia. Because even if the EU does not have any sort of leverage on the Russian regime in the context of the Syrian crisis, Moscow could still benefit a lot from the EU's goodwill. Indeed, Russia would have much to gain from a healthier Syria.

Like we mentioned previously, as the war perdures the price paid by Russia in terms of men and money increase and as every peace processes that have been launched have failed, President Putin cannot yet pride himself on having "won" the war in Syria. Furthermore, the extraterritoriality of American sanctions prevents Russian trade with Syria<sup>29</sup>. Thus, the EU should work with the United States on stirring Russia's economic ambitions in Syria, as well as Iran's, to encourage Moscow and Teheran into pressuring Damascus. Furthermore, the EU should also exploit whatever frustration President Putin feels *vis-à-vis*<sup>30</sup> his ambitious and hard-to-control Syrian counterpart.

About less influential actors that do not possess as much influence over the regime itself or the conflict, the EU should nonetheless work with some (Gulf states, United States), all the while paying close attention to the others (China, Israel) capable of frustrating Brussels' ambitions. Yet, if the EU truly wants to see positive changes in Syria, a change that would suit the interests of the Syrian people, the region and its own, European policymakers have to act quickly and swiftly.

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Jazeera (09 March 2020). Erdogan demands 'concrete support' from EU, NATO over Syria.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/erdogan-demands-concrete-support-from-eu-nato-over-syria>

<sup>27</sup> Francesco Guarascio & Tuvan Gumrukcu (06 Decembre 2020). EU, Turkey in stand-off over funds to tackle new migrant crisis.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-eu-idUSKBN20T1RH>

<sup>28</sup> Matina Stevis-Gridneff & Patrick Kingsley (28 February 2020). Turkey, Pressin E.U. for Help in Syria, Threatens to Open Borders to Refugees.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/world/europe/turkey-refugees-Geece-erdogan.html>

<sup>29</sup> 116th Congress (01 March 2019). H.R.31 - Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31/text>

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Haboush (18 June 2020). Moscow sending signs it is frustrated with Assad: US official.

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/06/18/Moscow-sending-signs-it-is-frustrated-with-Assad-US-official>

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First of all, if the EU engages a more active, determined policy towards the Syrian conflict and the main stakeholders, we would undeniably see a decrease in the conflict's violence. In turn, this would improve living conditions of the Syrian people and reduce overall human suffering by facilitating the work of NGOs on the ground<sup>31</sup>. Second, an engagement with key players of the conflict would pave the way for the engagement of a credible peace process, and possibly under the auspices of the UN. Thus, this would improve local and regional stability, thereby reduce terrorism and the threat it poses to the EU<sup>32</sup>.

Lastly, the EU could greatly benefit from foreign policy success, which, except for the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal<sup>33</sup>, have been lacking for years. Thus, what is more at stake for the EU remains that becoming a key player in the resolution of the conflict would most definitely enhance the bloc's credibility vis-a-vis the international community. This is why the EU should realign its strategy with the current situation and involve key stakeholders in the process.

## Policy Recommendations

First and foremost, the EU should develop a common stance between each and every member-states. Then, this would enable Brussels to effectively lead a unified policy for Syria since, at the moment, diverging opinions between member-states<sup>34</sup> threaten the adoption of any new policy for Syria.

Secondly, the EU should recognise that the current regime will not disappear anytime soon and work with this reality. Doing otherwise, as it currently does, will not allow the EU's strategy for Syria to have any meaningful impact. Thus, European policymakers should move away from the "*Assad departure or nothing*" conditionality that currently form the basis of its policy. Then, the EU should acknowledge that it is possible to work and develop accesses to Syria without fully legitimising the regime and developing diplomatic ties. To do that, the EU will have to negotiate access with the regime's allies on the one side and make use of the existing networks on the ground such as the one of its member states (e.g.: Czech Republic<sup>35</sup>) and the variety of international NGOs on the other side.

Thirdly, the EU should position itself as a mediator between the different stakeholders involved in the country in order to define common and particular objectives and interests of every party. European policymakers would do so by making use of the leverage it has over each party. This first step would help foster de-escalation between the parties and increase stability within Syria. Then, agreements between the main stakeholders would make it possible to elaborate a *real* and *credible* roadmap, on the basis of a *more for more* approach, designed by a group of representatives of the Syrian civil society, opposition and government, akin to the one currently operating in Geneva.

The current European strategy for Syria does not represent much more than a declaration of fine intentions. Not before the EU changes its strategy and implements these various steps could have any bearing on the future of Syria. So, instead of deploring missed opportunities and the strategy that

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<sup>31</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (7 April 2017). The four things we must do to reduce suffering in Syria. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/four-things-we-must-do-reduce-suffering-syria>

<sup>32</sup> Daniel L. Byman (23 June 2016). How war drives terrorism. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/06/23/how-war-drives-terrorism/>

<sup>33</sup> Stefan Lehne (05 Decembre 2017). Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/05/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy-pub-74909>

<sup>34</sup> Recently, [Hungary](#) and [Greece](#) have partially re-established diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime while [Italy](#) seemed reluctant to put the blame on the Syrian regime regarding the seizing of 15 tons of drugs coming from Syria.

<sup>35</sup> The [Czech Republic](#), which has historically been close to the Syrian regime, never cut its diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime. To this day, the Czech embassy in Damascus remains the only operating embassy of an EU member state in Syria.



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never was, European policymakers should focus on the present and seize their moment. Indeed, we are at the turning point of the Syrian crisis. If Europeans want to achieve the triple objective of reducing human suffering, increasing regional stability in its neighbourhood and proving to itself and the international community that it is a relevant actor in the realm of foreign policy, there is nothing more to do for the EU than to *act*.

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