



CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH  
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

# REPORTS AND ANALYSES

**5/2012**

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**Eyes wide shut? The European Union diplomacy's  
stance upon the Syrian unrest 2011 – 2012  
in the context of the Middle East Quartet.**

**Warsaw 2012**

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## **Eyes wide shut? The European Union diplomacy's stance upon the Syrian unrest 2011 – 2012 in the context of the Middle East Quartet.**

### **Executive summary:**

The article constitutes for a particular undertaking of the author to describe and analyse the European Union's influence over the ongoing conflict – civil war in Syria, which outburst in March 2011 and lasts until nowadays with no clear answers regarding the resolution of the conflict. The article analyses the EU's stance upon the Syrian unrest, taking in the account the actions of the so called 'Middle East Quartet' – the assembly of the countries (Russia, the United States) and international organizations (the United Nation, the European Union) that are involved in mediating in the conflicts of the Middle East and that formally established their cooperation in the form of the 'Quartet' in 2002. The article's objective is to evaluate the level of influence the European Union's diplomacy exerts regarding the conflict by describing and analyzing its actions within the broader background. To this end, the actions of all the other Middle East Quartet members are included in the analysis.

### **Introduction:**

Syria has not been an exception. The anti-governmental riots (so called Arab Spring) that swipped away some of the Middle East and Maghreb governments (to mention only Tunisia and Egypt) and messed in many other, have not left Syrian citizens indifferent. Thus, they too took to the streets, in March 2011, to protest against the al-Assad regime, demanding his removal from the post of the Syria's president. The al-Assad<sup>1</sup> family has ruled Syria since over forty years and Syrian people felt fed up of the self-feeding government on the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011. Having been encouraged by the examples of the other Arab nations, who managed to remove their counterproductive country heads, the Syrians have got serious about liberating themselves from the regime of the Assad family. The struggle to overthrow the government has turned into a full scale civil war.

The aim of the article is to describe the European Union's diplomatic efforts regarding its stance upon the developments in Syria in the context of the so called

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<sup>1</sup> Bashar al-Assad's, president's in office father, Hafiz al-Assad, took the chair of Syria's president in 1971.

Middle East Quartet<sup>2</sup> and to analyse the EU diplomacy's influence that it exerts regarding the case, using as a reference the comparison with the actions undertaken by the other Middle East players, thus the United States, Russia and the United Nations. The timing of the developments shown in the article coincides largely with an important upgrade of the EU's foreign action: the creation of the European Union's External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010 (European Union, 2010) as a result of the reforms in the EU's institutional set – up outlined in the Lisbon Treaty (European Union, 2007). The EEAS' creation came just before the outbreak of the antigovernmental riots and uprisings in most countries of the Southern and Eastern flanks of the Mediterranean Sea.

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### Syria

Syria's population is complex. The heterogenic society is a mix of Sunnis, Alawis, Shiis, Druze, Ismailis, Greek Orthodox, Maronite and other Christians. The only ethnonational identity other than Arab is Kurdish (6-8 % of population maximum). Thus, as it would seem to many people, Syria is no simple Sunni – Alawi divide (President Bahar Al-Assad is an Alawi). There is a sizeable segment of the Syrian society that has lent unintended support to the regime. But even the regime supporters admit that since 2012 there is an ever bigger expansion of the instability areas and even more decline in the regime's ability to guarantee stability. There are now parts of the country, that are outside the influence or authority of the regime (such as Idlib, Dara, Northeast). The regime has been massing its forces in troubled metropolitan areas (like Homs) and in the two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which for a long time enjoyed a modicum of normalcy<sup>3</sup>, but finally were attacked too by the regime air strikes. What is happening now in Syria is unprecedented for its regime, as until March 2011 it was able to maintain domestic peace through social alliances and fear of reprisal. Today the situation seems to have changed completely and the regime is unable to implement policies beyond its constrained zone of influence. The regime is gradually losing its capacity to exercise effective control over the institutions, associations and alliances that it was able to manage through a combination of coercion and accommodation<sup>4</sup>.

The regime's main opposition is the so called Syrian National Council (SNC), which formed a government – resembling body and has its siege in Turkey. However, the SNC remains divided, even though it claims to speak for the entire opposition. It

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<sup>2</sup> The Middle East Quartet is a foursome of nations and international and supranational entities involved in the Middle East affairs and comprises: the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. Tony Blair is the Quartet's current special envoy to the Middle East. The group was established in Madrid in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> B. Haddad: "Syria's stalemate: the limits of regime resilience", in: "Middle East Policy", vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

struggles to contain divisions within its own ranks, as well as to unite with competing opposition partners<sup>5</sup>.

Another resistance compound that found its place in Turkey is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which aspires to oppose the Syrian military in spite of its limited resources. The head of FSA is Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad<sup>6</sup>. The internal opposition, an amalgam of what is called the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC), local groups and increasingly an armed component under the rubric of the Free Syrian Army, have been capable of playing substantially with the regime's resilience. Even though in the regime's rhetorics these groups are defined as "armed gangs", they have managed to shrink the regime's authority over a recognisable part of the country and they remain the most authentic representatives of the uprising. The regime has limited resources, so they must be deployed in areas of strategic value.

The Syrian opposition is cross – sectarian and cross – ideological as well as regionally diverse, thus reflecting the country's social make up. It is not a secret either that the organisations are primarily related to the Muslim Brotherhood, which received ample financial support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar<sup>7</sup>. There are also Kurdish parties. They do not trust Turkey, which has been sponsoring the SNC, nor do they trust Arabs who regard their recognition demands as a prelude to a call for independence. In addition to that, there are religious minorities, fearful of the success of the Islamic parties. Thus, the Syrian opposition can be grouped regarding two dimensions: home – abroad and Islamist – secular. The social and ideological mix-up of the opposition groups renders any external policy directed to Syria more difficult, as it is extremely hard to navigate in a varied environment and to make such an amalgam listen to external call for unity.

The Syrian regime may be weak, but its opposition is even weaker. Resistance groups in the country are organized locally, depend on civilian volunteers as well as defectors from the military and take orders from the FSA's leader, Colonel Asaad. The SNC<sup>8</sup> would like to be regarded as the representation of the entire Syrian opposition, but has been struggling to contain divisions within its own ranks as well as to unite with competing opposition partners. The US and the EU recognize the SNC as the rightful leader of the opposition and have sought to build up its legitimacy and authority, but it is too weak and divided internally to constitute for a

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<sup>5</sup> J. Landis: „The Syrian Uprising of 2011: why the Asad regime is likely to survive to 2013”, in: “Middle East Policy”, vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> B. Haddad: “Syria's stalemate...”

<sup>8</sup> The leader of the SNC is Burhan Ghalioun, a secular Sunni, lecturer at the Sorbonne in Paris.

proper and only representant of the Syrian opposition. It has failed to unite other opposition groups who have challenged its leadership<sup>9</sup>.

The SNC and the NCCDC differ in opinions. For example, the SNC criticized the NCCDC for being willing to negotiate with the regime, for refusing to recognize the FSA and for standing against any foreign intervention. The NCCDC has even been accused of being Asad's *mukhabarat* (secret police). The NCCDC does not stay silent about the SNC. It accuses the SNC of betraying Syrians by supporting military action that would result in widespread bloodshed. The NCCDC officials say for example, that imposing the no-fly zone would require neutralizing the regime's vast air defenses, which would lead to heavy civilian casualties. They argue that foreign intervention would result in an "occupation" of Syria similar to the prolonged military presence in Iraq after the ouster of Saddam's Hussein regime in 2003<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the social unrest in Syria, which at a time of writing this article has lasted for over 15 months<sup>11</sup>, the regime feels strong and confident, because it assumes it has managed to control the demonstrations, which is partially true. The regime has, for example, developed counter measures, penetrating the opposition though incentives and threats, often using blackmail. Therefore, it has partially succeeded, adopting violence to limit the scope and movement of protesters, and determine the actual location and time of demonstrations. But the regime can not be everywhere at the same time and the protesters are numerous enough to mobilize protests whenever they see a window of opportunity. But the protests are not enough to override the regime. The main illness of the Syrian opposition is the lack of unity and fragmentation. In Tunisia and in Egypt the opposition could be leaderless and disorganized because their armies turned against their presidents. In Syria the military is standing by the president and shooting at the protestors. Actually the opposition leaders would like to get foreign powers involved. Already in 2011 the SNC issued a statement to international community demanding "international protection, the establishment of safe zones and intervention"<sup>12</sup>.

### **The Middle East Quartet**

After having presented the short summary of the composition of Syrian opposition and society as well as outlining how these do not necessarily agree with each other and upon the ways to resolve the conflict (they agree, in principle, to overthrowing the regime, but differ about the way to do it, whether international intervention

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<sup>9</sup> J. Landis: „The Syrian Uprising of 2011...“

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Until June, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

would be favourable and who would take over the governing of the country afterwards), time is now to proceed to the core of the article, which is the analysis of the European Union's diplomacy – the EEAS stance with regard to the conflict, and embedding it within the broader background of actions led by the other core Middle East players, namely the US, UN and Russia.

The outside actors, witnesses of the conflict, remain uncertain about the situation. They realize they are at risk of making an appalling situation worse. Surely, there is a division in the international community about the regime's perception. The West is generally favouring toppling of the regime, whereas Russia is not really sharing the same opinion. But even if the West would like the regime change, nobody is really willing to undertake a military action, similar to the one of 2011 in Libya. The Russian stance upon Syrian uprising is quite different than that of the US, UN and the EU and within the EU block countries are divided on the issue of a direct intervention in the country. Some of the EU countries are strongly against it, as e.g. Cyprus, a country holding the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2012<sup>13</sup>.

### **Russia**

Russia asserts neutrality but its actions make this claim doubtful. On 4 February 2012, it vetoed, together with China, the Arab League inspired, Western-backed UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned the violence and endorsed the proposal for a political transition<sup>14</sup>. Its reasons were various – notably, Moscow is still under the shock of the Libyan precedence<sup>15</sup>, when another UN resolution backing limited intervention was used for regime change. Moreover, Russia dislikes Western interventionism, which comes from its general foreign policy and aspirations of being a power, if not global, then at least in the former USSR and in the territories neighbouring the former Soviet republics. In fact, Russia would like to control and influence every country apart maybe for the US and the EU countries, that seem to have created a pretty solid block of West – minded countries. Russia fears regional instability and worries about Islamists gains in its backyard. Despite that, Russia does not really have any viable alternative of its own. Rather, it encouraged Assad to “accelerate” the reform process and urged the opposition to accept it. As an outcome, the opposition is even more convinced that an armed

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr Michalis Koumides, Press Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU, Brussels, 26.06.2012.

<sup>14</sup> R. Spencer: „Russia and China veto UN resolution on Syria”, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9061622/Russia-and-China-veto-UN-resolution-on-Syria.html#>, The Telegraph, 4.02.2012.

<sup>15</sup> International intervention that led to the death of Muammar Ghaddafi and regime change.

struggle is the only way forward, and countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have pledged their wholehearted support to that effort<sup>16</sup>.

Another issue in the Russian politics that certainly does not contribute to peace in the Middle East is more technical and concerns its arms exports. As the second world's largest arms exporter, Russia is delivering to the Assad regime the firepower it needs to crush one rebels group after another. Russia is in effect becoming an accomplice in the Syrian's regime murder of civilians. Moscow says there is nothing illegal about these deliveries. It is right because Russia and China have stopped any UN Security Council resolution that could block arms to the Syrian regime. Russian claims that it wants to avoid a civil war at all costs fall short of its policy of boosting the muscle of the Syrian army<sup>17</sup>. It is a perfect example how a big power, such as Russia, is able to blend its economic and political interests .

### **The United Nations**

The United Nations, an organization whose main task is supposed to be the policeman of the world, is in favour of a negotiated transition. To this end, the organization, in cooperation with the Arab League, appointed a joint Special Envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan<sup>18</sup>, who kept his office until August 17,2012, when he was replaced but the new Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi<sup>19</sup>. He is now responsible for rescuing fading prospects for a negotiated transition. Annan's best hope lied in enlisting international, including Russian, support for a plan that comprised the transfer of power that preserves the integrity of key state institutions; ensures a gradual and thorough overhaul of security services and puts in place a process of transitional justice and national reconciliation<sup>20</sup>. Annan proposed the so-called six-point plan to end the violence, bring relief, and forge political process to address grievances in Syria. The plan has been backed by the UN Security Council, and as Annan's office said, it was also accepted by president's Bashar al-Assad's regime<sup>21</sup>.

Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi has accepted the position of Joint Special Representative of the United Nations and League of Arab States for Syria, replacing former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan whose six-point peace plan seems dead. "I

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<sup>16</sup> „Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria”, Middle East Policy Briefing, no. 32, International Crisis Group, 5.03.2012.

<sup>17</sup> R. Boyes: „Moscow is an accomplice to murder”, The Times, 14.06.2012.

<sup>18</sup> He is former UN Secretary General.

<sup>19</sup> The United Nations, Department for Political Affairs,  
[http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/main/activities\\_by\\_region/middle\\_east/syria](http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/main/activities_by_region/middle_east/syria), 10.10.2012.

<sup>20</sup> „Now or Never...”

<sup>21</sup> „Annan's six-point plan for Syria”, [http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-27/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_syria-annan-plan\\_1\\_syrian-conflict-special-envoy-president-bashar?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-27/middleeast/world_meast_syria-annan-plan_1_syrian-conflict-special-envoy-president-bashar?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST), CNN, 27.03.2012.

might very well fail but we sometimes are lucky and we can get a breakthrough,” Brahimī told the BBC in an interview.

Describing the violence in Syria as “absolutely terrible,” Brahimī said he urgently needed to clarify what support the United Nations can give him and said it was too soon to say whether Assad should step down.<sup>22</sup>

The Annan’s plan addressed the killings, that have until September, after bloody August of 2012 consumed around 25,000 people in Syria<sup>23</sup> (around 10,000 at the time of the Annan’s plan writing) and urged to stop the violence. It called the government to respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed. Another point call on Syrians to “commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country”. According to the plan, the government also should pull back the concentrated military deployments in and around population centers. The plan also mentions the government’s cooperation with the UN’s Special Envoy in order to bring a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms, by all parties, including the opposition, with effective UN mediation and supervision<sup>24</sup>. In spite of the fact that it has been already 7 months (at the time of writing of this article) since the plan was issued and agreed, nothing seems to have changed for better,. This leaves room for further speculation about the UN’s effectiveness.

Lakhdar Brahimī, the Annan’s successor in the UN’s – Arab League’s joint undertaking for a peaceful resolution of the civil war in Syria, actually got some success recently. On October 24,2012, he managed to talk the Syrian government into establishing a ceasefire during the four day Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha. Many rebel leaders who were contacted by Brahimī also agreed to the truce during the holiday

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<sup>22</sup> J. Klein: „The new Syria’s envoy bloody background”, Prontpagemag, <http://frontpagemag.com/2012/joseph-klein/the-new-syria-peace-envoys-bloody-background/>, 20.08.2012.

<sup>23</sup> „Death from the skies”, The Economist, September 15th – 21st, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21562922>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

starting on October 26. Brahimi believes that if this modest initiative succeeded, a longer ceasefire would be built on it, and the launch of a political process for peace<sup>25</sup>.

Sadly, the ceasefire did not last long. On Sunday, October 28, the government forces pounded the airstrikes on the opposition strongholds in the outskirts of Damascus, leaving a temporary truce between President Al-Assad and rebels in shambles. The two sides of the conflict accuse each other of violating the conditions of a ceasefire called of the religious holiday of Eid al-Aidha. The rebels are supported by the Al Quaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who called on the Syrians to oppose the 'murderous, cancerous regime' of Bashar al-Assad<sup>26</sup>.

Brahimi has a hard job to do, this is no doubt. If a ceasefire can not last even more than two – three days in Syria, this indicated an extremely complicated and tough situation. Perhaps is he could persuade Russia to back a transitional plan, the regime would be confronted with the choice of either agreeing to negotiate in good faith or facing near – total isolation through loss of a key ally. Changing Russia's approach might not be unfeasible. If Brahimi can address the Russian concerns about preserving the state apparatus (it seems less important if it has to be under Assad, or someone else) and the army, it could be brought on board. Especially, if Moscow can be convinced that its current course maximises the risk of chaos, civil war and the empowerment of more extreme Islamist forces<sup>27</sup>.

In the meantime, the UN has accused Iran of supplying weapons to Syria's pro-government forces, while Damascus has accused Qatar and Saudi Arabia of arming rebels wanting to topple President al-Assad. The 193-nation General Assembly of August 2012 overwhelmingly approved a non-binding resolution, which expressed "grave concern" at the escalation of violence in Syria and condemned the U.N. Security Council for its failure to take strong action. As Syria spirals deeper into civil war, the Security Council has been paralyzed on taking strong action as Russia and

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<sup>25</sup> "Syria government agrees Eid ceasefire:Brahimi", AAJ News, <http://www.aaj.tv/2012/10/syria-govt-agrees-eid-ceasefire-brahimi/>, 24.10.2012.

<sup>26</sup> "Airstrikes, casualties and fingerpointing leave Syrian truce in shambles", CNN, [http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/28/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html?hpt=imi\\_c1](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/28/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html?hpt=imi_c1), 28.10.2012.

<sup>27</sup> „Now or Never...”

China have blocked three Western-backed resolutions that criticized Assad and threatened sanctions<sup>28</sup>.

Kofi Annan, even if no longer in the position of the UN envoy to Syria, still has a lot to say about the conflict. Regarding the most important question in the international debate over the civil war in Syria – whether to intervene there militarily, as it happened in Libya in 2011, or not, Annan underlined recently his discontent and disbelief about the outcome of such a move. He warned that the military intervention in Syria by the major powers would not work. In the Fareed Zakaria's 'GPS' (a political talk show of a prominent and very influential US journalist and opinion maker working for the CNN), Annan said that the situation in Syria is more complex than in Libya, and that military intervention would only make things worse<sup>29</sup>

### **The Unites States**

The United States' stance regarding the situation in Syria is not too bold either. Like the other Western countries, the US clamour the regime to fall, but are hesitant and uncertain about how to make that happen and worried of what it would entail. By and large, they have taken refuge in a blend of outrage and ever-tightening sanctions. The truth is, neither the US, nor the EU truly enjoy a moral credibility in this part of the world. Moreover, the sanctions are nothing more than a remedy of choice when nothing else is at hand and what they mainly do is catalysing an economic collapse that turns a socio-political crisis into a comprehensive humanitarian one.

The US's view on the situation in Syria can be described using the words of Susan Rice, the US Ambassador to the UN: "Our aim is not to intensify the violence but to reduce it. What we have done is to ratchet up the economic pressure on the Assad regime such that the economy is quite fragile now. Arming the opposition or implementing the no – fly zone – the kinds of solutions that have been mooted – are not only not readily available, but not suited to our objectives, which is why we have

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<sup>28</sup> "Ban Ki Moon says Syria arms suppliers spreading misery", Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/04/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE8830VZ20120904>, 4.09.2012.

<sup>29</sup> "Annan: military intervention in Syria won't work", CBS News, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202\\_162-57536692/annan-military-intervention-in-syria-wont-work/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57536692/annan-military-intervention-in-syria-wont-work/), 20.10.2012.

supported Kofi Annan's peace plan"<sup>30</sup>. As seen from this summary by the American Ambassador, the US is waiting, curious about what will happen, but unwilling to intervene in Syrian affairs as it did e.g. in the Libyan case. The reasons for such a passive approach of Washington is that the US start to recognise their weaknesses and unsuccessfulness in the Middle East. They have recently quitted Iraq without glory and soon they will quit Afghanistan leaving it to itself as they have not really managed to restrain the Taliban influence in the country and possibly it will spread up again once they leave. This all has had an impact on the US policy towards the Middle East and now Washington is trying hardly to avoid another military adventure that may mess up and destabilise already tumultuous situation in Syria more, than improve it. Moreover, the traditional enemies of the US: Al-Qaida and dijihadists have certain influence in there<sup>31</sup>. The US would probably not like to provoke them more.

So far, the Western governments, thus the EU and the US, have been agreeing that direct military intervention, which would almost certainly have to introduce the creation of buffer zones, was out of the question. Nevertheless, as the massacres of the civilians continue, this view is changing. Officials in Britian, France and the US have all said that military intervention "cannot be ruled out" in due course. Although Western governments would like to avoid it, calls for intervention, especially in Washington, are growing. There are two main arguments against it that still prevail. The first is that it would require the endorsement of the UN Security Council, which Russia and China still show no sign of giving. The second is that Syria with 23 million people, unlike Libya with "only" 7 million, would be a hard nut militarily to crack and that the ensuing bloodshed would be on a far bigger scale than now. An option to intervene by bypassing the UN Security Council is an action like in Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia in 1999, which would probably annoy Russia just as it did back then. But in Syrian case such as step of the Western powers is hardly conceivable without the close cooperation and public endorsement of both Turkey and the Arab League<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, void of good ideas, Washington, just as well as the EU allies, seem endlessly to be waiting for something to happen – for protests to

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<sup>30</sup> 10 Questions to Susan Rice, Time, July 2, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> A. Gresh: „Onde de choc syrienne”, Le Monde Diplomatique, No. 697 – 59 anee, Avril 2012.

<sup>32</sup> „Changing Calculations”, The Economist, June 9 – 15th, 2012.

build up as they did in Cairo's Tahrir Square, for the opposition to unite, for a palace coup, or for defections to swell and blow up<sup>33</sup>.

The question of the military intervention in Syria has also been put on the table by the two presidential candidates in the 2012 US elections that are to be held in November. In the recent electoral debate between the US President Barack Obama (the Democrats Party) and the Republican candidate Mitt Romney, the candidates for the future presidential chair shared one major agreement and one potential difference on Syria. The two agreed that the US should not send its own armed forces to intervene in the conflict. However, they slightly disagreed on the need of arming the Syrian opposition. Romney expresses the opinion that the US should provide the rebels with the arms necessary to defend themselves, but that attention should be paid that the arms do not get into the wrong hands. Obama generally does not exclude arming the Syrian opposition but he remarked that the US should make sure the arms do not 'get into the hands of folks who eventually could turn them against the US or its allies<sup>34</sup>'. That showed that Obama is in principle less eager than Romney to arm the rebels.

### **The European Union**

The thing is now to place the EU's stance in the context of the other Middle East players of the so called Quartet. As noticed above, the EU is a part of the Western countries club and shares similar views on the Syrian conflict as the US and the UN (or more precisely – UN's western members). But unfortunately, not much more can be said about the EU's activity and influence in the region and in Syria despite the recent upgrade of the EU diplomatic capabilities in the form of the creation of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010, as a result of the Lisbon Treaty reforms<sup>35</sup>. The EU is a good talker, because the issue is often being raised at various European meetings in the European Parliament, Commission and the Council. European politicians and officials condemn the Assad's crush on the opposition and killings of its own citizens, but this is pretty much all. The same level

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<sup>33</sup> „Now or Never: A Negotiated...”

<sup>34</sup> “Obama and Romney in final push”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-20038723>, 23.10.2012.

<sup>35</sup> Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, OJ C115/13, 9.05.2008, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:115:0001:01:EN:HTML>, article no 27.3, 47.

of influence (read: low) used to exist before the EEAS was created, which can lead to a certain opinion about its effectiveness. But for a greater picture, a short description of the EU's actions is feasible here.

Perhaps most important action of the EU diplomacy is sanctioning the Syrian regime. So far the EU has issued sanctions against 155 persons and 49 companies and institutions that 'support the regime', as well as 17 sets of restrictive measures<sup>36</sup>. The sanctions got worse after Syrian forces shot down a Turkish jet in international airspace on June 22, 2012. Syria admitted knowing the plane's origin and even fired again on a Turkish rescue plane when it searched the jet's two downed pilots. Ankara seeks support with its NATO partners, calling on Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, which states that the parties should consult together if in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, independence or security of any of the parties is threatened<sup>37</sup>. The military alliance is compelled by article no 5 of the NATO Treaty to defend member states should they come under attack. But Western powers ask for patience, explaining that this particular article should not be abused. They do not want to flame more the sectarian Syrian conflict<sup>38</sup>. For the international audience, the EU's sanctions on the Assad's regime seem to be perhaps the only visible acts of the EU's diplomacy attention towards Syria. The EEAS, a body which has as its head Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative (EUHR) for Common Foreign and Security Policy, does not seem to be a transformative power. Nevertheless, Ms Ashton works on the crisis resolution in the Council of Ministers of the EU – one of the EU's main institutions. Being a CFSP High Representative, she presides, as a principle, the EU's Foreign Affairs Councils<sup>39</sup>, no matter of the country holding the EU Council's presidency<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> "The European Union and Syria", Council of the EU Factsheet, 7.09.2012,

[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128379.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128379.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> NATO Treaty; accessed on the NATO website: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm), 28.10.2012.

<sup>38</sup> „Losing friends, making enemies”, Time, July 9,2012.; „Unijni ministrowie potepili Syrię za zestrzelenie tureckiego myśliwca, tymczasem Damaszek ostrzelał kolejny”, <http://www.euractiv.pl/polityka-zagraniczna/artikul/unijni-ministrowie-potpili-syri-za-zestrzelenie-tureckiego-myliwca-tymczasem-damaszek-ostrzela-kolejny-003749>, Euractiv, 26.06.2012.

<sup>39</sup> Sometimes the Foreign Affairs Council may be presided by the High Representative's deputy, when e.g. it takes place during some important mission of the HR.

<sup>40</sup> Normally ministers the country holding its half-year presidency in the EU Council preside the other Council formations. (e.g. for regional policy it will be a regional development minister etc.).

On 23 April 2012, the EU Council of Ministers (presided by High representative C. Ashton) welcomed the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council resolution 2042, authorising the deployment of an advance team of up to 30 unarmed military observers and of the UN Security Council's resolution 2043 establishing the UN supervision mission in Syria (UNSMIS), to monitor the cessation of armed violence and support the work of UN – Arab League joint envoy Koffi Annan and later on Lakhdar Brahimi. Furthermore, the EU Foreign Ministers stressed that they strongly condemn the widespread violations of human rights by the regime, recalled that all the people responsible for that should be held accountable and called upon Syria to cease the violence.

The EU Council's factsheets reads: "The European Union has responded decisively to the violent repression and anti-government protests in Syria, which began in March 2011. We have called for an end to the appalling and unacceptable violence, the withdrawal of the Syrian army from besieged towns and cities, the implementation of genuine democratic reforms and a credible, genuine and inclusive national dialogue...." The EU froze as well the draft Association Agreement that had been negotiated with Syria and suspended bilateral cooperation programmes between the EU and Syrian government under the MEDA/European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument. The European Investment Bank as well suspended all its loan operations and technical assistance to Syria<sup>41</sup>. What is seen there is that the EU can talk, definitely, it can freeze the assets and agreements, but its influence remains low as the conflicts escalates instead of being calmed down, arms are smuggled to Syria on a 'business as usual' model and the situation on the ground there is a full-scale civil war. For the people fighting for their ideas it does not change much if the Association Agreement is paused from being negotiated, or if the cooperation programmes are working or not, this is not important for them when the war over the control of the country is going on.

To give another example of the EU actions, they are not always directly linked to the EEAS, but the officials of the service take part in various meetings in other EU institutions and beyond. Such a meeting was held e.g. in the European Parliament (EP) on June 19, 2012. During the Committee of Foreign Affairs sitting in the EP, the

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<sup>41</sup> "The European Union and Syria"...

representatives of the Syrian opposition Haitham al-Maleh and Kamal al-Labwani gave their speeches on the state of the affairs in Syria and pledged the EU to do its best to help topple down the regime. Mr al-Labwani stated that the fall of the regime is a prerequisite for any change and for starting the implementation of the Annan's plan. He added that a stronger pressure from the international community would force al-Assad to leave and thus enable any social negotiations in the country. Mr al-Maleh was even more convinced as he said that the Assad's regime is practically finished already and becomes a history just like the Soviet regime became 20 years ago and due to similar reasons: the inner burning out and general deprivation. Both men urged the EU and wider international like minded countries to pressure Russia more in order to make it stop vetoing the UNSC sanctions. The European deputies called on the Syrian opposition to unite, as this would facilitate a peaceful transition in the country<sup>42</sup>.

The other EU's actions regarding the Syrian crisis are the European Council's statements, statements of the EU Council of Ministers on Foreign Affairs and the EP resolutions, such as the one of 16.02.2012<sup>43</sup>. But this is basically all that the EU has done so far. As seen, more, but still not actively enough, has been happening in other EU bodies, than the EEAS has been doing itself. The EU in general keeps similar stance with the UN and the US. But it rests in the shadow of the other actors and the diplomatic upgrade of creation of the EEAS has not yet changed much in this regard. The social unrest that has been affecting Syria Since March 15, 2011, will likely have a lasting effect on both state – society relations and the country's future development trajectory<sup>44</sup>. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if the EU diplomatic service will be mentioned here as a real transformative force in Syria, or wider Middle East.

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<sup>42</sup> 'MEPs call on Syrian opposition to unite', <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120614IPR46888/html/MEPs-call-on-Syrian-opposition-to-unite-in-preparing-for-post-Assad-regime>, Europarlament, 19.06.2012.

<sup>43</sup> The Europarlament resolution of 16.02.2012 on the situation in Syria: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0057+0+DOC+XML+V0//PL>.

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#### **Interview:**

Interview with Mr Michalis Koumides, Press Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU, Brussels, 26.06.2012.

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