

BULLETIN

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International Initiatives and the Civil War in Syria

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Despite the raging civil war in Syria, both the opposition groups and the international community are developing plans for a future without Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. However, those initiatives that consume large financial and operational resources are detached from the actual situation in Syria. The Gulf states and Turkey have real influence on the developments, although they favour opposition groups with different religious affiliations and aim to maximise an outcome of the conflict that most favours their individual interests. European–Arab cooperation risks weakening the impact of European activities in favour of these regional countries' interests.

Due to political, economic and historic reasons, the international community is unable to end the Syrian civil war. Many countries, in particular those whose vital interests are related to the situation in Syria or for whom their image depends on the level of their involvement in this issue, participate in initiatives that aim to support the already divided opposition and to form plans for a “new Syria.” However, the international group of states that view the fall of Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad as inevitable displays only a facade of unanimity, while beneath they are pursuing their own interests.

European and American Initiatives. Neither the U.S. nor the EU has a coherent strategy for the future of Syria. Even though they agree that Assad has to leave power and an inclusive provisional government should be formed, they are still struggling to find a proper way to mitigate the conflict. Until now, their priority has been to deliver humanitarian aid to refugees and civilians inside Syria. The total contribution by the Commission and EU is more than €222 million (including €35.5 million from the United Kingdom, €22 million from Germany, €20 million from France), while the U.S. has provided more than €100 million.

The U.S., France, Germany and the United Kingdom are the ones most involved in shaping the democratic transition of Syria. Those governments are also helping opposition groups in Syria (for example, the United Kingdom provides €9.4 million and the U.S. has sent €35.5 million) and have created a platform for cooperation for the Syrian opposition outside the country. Supporting civilian opposition inside Syria consists on the one hand of delivering non-lethal equipment (body armour, helmets, satellite phones) and on the other hand of organising training for activists, students, and journalists to prepare them for political transition.

The U.S., France, Germany and the United Kingdom are members of the “Friends of Syria Group,” which was created at the beginning of 2012. In that framework, two Working Groups were established: “Sanctions” (co-chaired by the Netherlands, Turkey, and Canada), and “Economic Recovery and Development” (co-chaired by Germany and the United Arab Emirates). The latter aims at coordinating support for the reconstruction and development of Syria and generating ideas for the country’s economic and social reconstruction. The last meeting of this group took place in Berlin on 28–29 August and coincided with a presentation of a document called “the Day After Project”—prepared at a workshop for the Syrian opposition in Berlin—which outlines the principles and goals of a successful transition (consensus, transparency, accountability, social participation). Among the goals of reconstruction listed are: equality of all citizens, a civil character of the state, territorial unity with elements of decentralisation, a commitment to democratic principles and an economy that incorporates issues of social justice.

Regional Initiatives. For more than half a year now, three regional countries—Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia—have been involved in helping the opposition groups the most, although the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait are also active. These countries provided financial and military aid, most probably weapons and other equipment, while Turkey has managed the flow of supplies through the northern Syrian border. Over the past month, however, the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has weakened. It seems that Qatar wants to support the Muslim Brotherhood (as it did in Egypt and Libya), whose aim is to control who gets the supplies in Syria in order to influence the future political process. Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are likely supporting Salafist groups, ignoring the fact that Al Qaeda affiliates are in their ranks. The most important aspect of the Syrian conflict for those countries is the Sunni–Shiite rivalry and its ethnic dimension. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar wish to see the Sunni group dominate Syrian politics, which would ensure a consolidation of the anti-Iranian Arab alliance. Turkey, on the other hand, wants to control the Syrian part of Kurdistan and to weaken the PKK-affiliated Kurds. The difference of interests between Qatar and Saudi Arabia could also have an economic background. A future Syria governed by the Muslim Brotherhood could strengthen Qatar’s near-monopoly control over the world’s production of liquefied natural gas due to the discovery of natural gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea.

Conclusions and Recommendations. In short, two groups that have different goals and use different tools have emerged in support of the Syrian opposition. The first one is international and a principal donor of humanitarian aid, is engaged in creating plans for a democratic Syria and supports a unified Syrian opposition, especially the political-social liberals, but has little influence on the real situation inside the country. This group includes the U.S. and the EU. The second group is regional and not only actively engaged in arming selected religious opposition groups but in fact has real influence on the militarisation of the conflict in Syria. This group includes the Gulf states and Turkey. While the first group is calling for a unified and inclusive character of the future state, the second aims at instilling a dominant group or the political degradation of others.

It may seem that international conferences are ineffective and that creating provisional governments has little significance because most likely a new Syrian government will not emerge from the opposition groups outside of Syria but from within the rebel factions inside the country. The fact remains that the groups fighting most intensely, such as those in Aleppo, are trying to distance themselves from umbrella organisations such as the Syrian National Council. However, after the end of the civil war, when solutions coming from inside the country are lacking, the plans created by the West (such as the “Day After Project”) could be the only ones that propose effective scenarios for the reconstruction of the state. The gravest challenge, however, is not a lack of ideas for a “new” Syria, but the fact that the EU and the U.S. seem to rely on Turkish and Arab assessments of the situation in the country, which contributes to their interests in the Syrian conflict and the region more broadly. In addition, cooperation of this kind is burdened with the risk that, contrary to their statements and interests, the European states could *de facto* support those opposition groups that are unworthy of it because of their extremist inclinations.

At this stage, it cannot be foreseen what kind of government will emerge from within the opposition groups. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are not able to control all of them inside Syria and are uncertain as to how the situation will eventually develop. From a strategic point of view, the EU and the U.S. should maintain communication channels with the Arab states with regard to the conflict. They should, however, take proper precautions regarding both the level of coordination and cooperation with them and the level of financial support given to particular opposition groups. Apart from imposing sanctions on the regime, increasing humanitarian aid seems to be the most urgent and politically viable way forward for the EU, along with the promotion of previously initiated pro-democracy projects. Poland, which maintained its embassy in Damascus longer than even the largest EU countries and which remains a close ally of Germany with regard to EU policies in the Middle East, should become an important member of the German-led working group on “Economic Recovery and Development.” As Poland also has represented the U.S. in Syria, it could possibly gain direct access to information about the situation there, and together with the Americans put additional pressure on the Gulf states to limit their supply of weapons to Syria’s opposition groups.