



A European Syria initiative: De-escalation and devolution

By Julien Barnes-Dacey

The stakes for Europe in Syria could hardly be higher. Apart from the humanitarian tragedy, the war has precipitated a refugee crisis that divides European societies, threatening the European project itself, while driving a “European War on Terror” of questionable utility.

Despite the enormous stakes, Europeans have largely been bit players in the diplomacy on Syria – contracting the process out to countries such as Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, which have distinct interests, priorities, and often values. Europe’s interests are at times subordinated to the proxy wars being conducted between the main regional players, as well as between Moscow and Washington. The current strategy in some European capitals of simply waiting for a new US president to change the direction of policy is at best an abdication of responsibility, and at worst an error of Trumpian proportions.

It is already past time for a coherent European strategy that seeks a lead role for Europe in managing the Syrian crisis. But it is still possible. Europeans have a compelling interest in the crisis, hold seven of 26 seats in the International Syrian Support Group (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the European Union), and have substantial resources – diplomatic, humanitarian, and military – to bring to the table. But harnessing those resources requires both a strategy that works for key European actors, and a coalition to support that strategy.

The recent ceasefire shows that an external push can deliver results. Despite its clear shortcomings, the ceasefire heralded significant humanitarian and political gains, including a wave of civil activism and unprecedented opposition pressure against Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as moves against the Islamic State (ISIS) from all sides. Even as this track teeters on the brink, it may represent the last chance for any form of negotiated solution that can hold Syria together. Europe, quite simply, cannot afford to let the opportunity slip away.

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As such, Europe should get behind an urgent diplomatic effort aimed at salvaging this political effort and ceasefire, focusing on decentralisation as the path around the Assad impasse. Any hope of reviving the ceasefire rests on the existence of a meaningful political horizon that sketches the outlines of an eventual settlement. But the reality is that there is next to no chance of a breakthrough in intra-Syrian talks or a transition away from Assad in the near term given the ongoing commitment of the regime, Iran, and, in all likelihood, Russia to Bashar al-Assad's preservation. Nor is any actor likely to commit to delivering the significant military measures necessary to have any chance of shifting the trajectory.

Rather than focusing on the unattainable near-term goal of transition, Europe should push for devolution – in the form of decentralisation rather than sectarian federalisation – to incentivise Syrian and regional buy-in to the ceasefire.

Russia has indicated some willingness to test devolution, and Iran might also be open to this approach, given that it would keep Assad in place in Damascus. To win the support of the opposition, the initiative would focus on moving powers away from Damascus and giving rebels secure control of the areas they currently hold, with the longer-term intention of eroding the capacity of the Assad regime (and the clout of its backers in Iran). By setting the limits of Kurdish territorial autonomy, this initiative could also be used to satisfy Turkey's concern about the rising power of Syrian Kurds and their relationship with Turkish militant group the PKK. In the end, devolution may be one of the few approaches sellable to all parties – with varying degrees of persuasion, co-option, and coercion.

A strong European consensus around this strategy could be used to help secure agreement from both friends and adversaries. The key to that consensus is a united front among the E6+1 (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK, and the EU high representative). Together they could carry the rest of the EU along with them.

These parties currently disagree on the best way to de-escalate the war. France in particular stands out in its belief that a sustainable end to the conflict is not possible without the swift removal of Assad. The UK broadly supports the French position, while others have focused on the need for a negotiated solution that may involve Assad to a greater degree.

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But, given the gains of the ceasefire and the lack of any viable alternative, this option deserves to be fully tested. Germany in particular could help to secure French buy-in, affirming the message that this approach offers a more viable means of locking in urgently-needed humanitarian de-escalation and addressing refugee and terrorism concerns, while its reduction of Assad's power could be a meaningful step towards his ultimate removal.

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