Briefing

January 2016

Conflict in Syria
Trigger factors and the EU response

SUMMARY

Since its beginnings in 2011, the conflict in Syria has cost more than 250 000 lives, and over 4 million Syrians have been forced to seek security in neighbouring countries – primarily in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon – and Europe. A further 7.6 million people are displaced within Syria. The rise of ISIL/Da'esh and other jihadist groups has aggravated the situation. However, despite the humanitarian and security crisis, progress towards a United Nations (UN) negotiated political settlement of the conflict has been slow, mostly due to disagreement over President Bashar al-Assad's future. The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 on 18 December 2015 – setting out a roadmap for a peace process in Syria with a clear transition timeline – offers new hope, but the real test will be in the implementation.

The European Union laid down its approach to the crisis in Syria, as well as responding to the ISIL/Da'esh threat, in its Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq, which is based on three main pillars: humanitarian assistance, prevention of regional spill-overs and fighting terrorism. While certain Member States have decided to join the US-led military operations in Syria, the EU has abstained from direct military involvement. Instead, it has proven to be a valued partner in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and support for the activities of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). For its part, the European Parliament has focused on addressing the implications of the refugee crisis inside the European Union, strengthening EU humanitarian assistance in Iraq and Syria and aid to vulnerable communities, and improving the EU response to the terrorist threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh.

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Root causes of the conflict in Syria

The 2011 World Bank report on Conflict, Security and Development explored the theoretical link between conflict, security and development issues. The report noted that at least 1.5 billion people were (at that moment) affected by ongoing violence or its legacies. It found that organised violence was often spurred by a range of domestic and international stresses, such as youth unemployment, income shocks, tension among ethnic, religious or social groups and trafficking networks. Risks of violence were greater when high stresses combined with weak capacity or a lack of legitimacy of key national institutions. The conditions described in the report were present in Syria at the outset of the conflict. What started as local anti-government protests staged via social media in the south-western city of Daraa in 2011, evolved into nationwide demonstrations, including in urban areas of Homs, Hama, Idlib, parts of Damascus and Aleppo. The response of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad – who wanted by all means to avoid the fate of Tunisia's President Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak – was brutal and extensive. After promises of reforms in 2011, Assad's regime resorted to violent methods of repression, including the regular bombing of civilian areas from mid-2011; the arrest, torture and execution of thousands of political activists; depriving rebellious regions of access to food, water and electricity; and the alleged use of chemical weapons against the civilian population from 2013.[1] With the spiral of violence quickly escalating, the conflict evolved into a full-blown civil war within a year, resulting in the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Millions of Syrians have either been internally displaced or have fled the country, and a security vacuum has been created, allowing terrorist organisations to prosper without any constraint.

Socioeconomic conditions

The conflict in Syria has its roots in structural and economic problems that were already widespread in Syria in the early 2000s. Prior to the violent uprising of 2011, the countries of the greater Fertile Crescent had experienced one of the most severe droughts in history. According to the United Nations Response Plan, by 2009, some 1.3 million inhabitants of eastern Syria had been affected by this disaster, with 803 000 persons having lost almost their entire livelihoods and facing extreme hardship. Between 2006 and 2009 the income of over 75 641 affected households decreased by 90% and their assets and sources of livelihood were severely compromised, resulting in large-scale migration out of the affected areas to urban areas (figures range from 40 000 to 60 000 families). At the time, the international community was slow to respond to the appeals by major donor organisations: according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, as of June 2010, only 33% of the required assistance had been provided. A report by the National Academy of Sciences of the United States suggests that a mass migration of farming families to urban centres and growing inequalities eventually contributed to the political unrest.

The escalation of the conflict in Syria has further aggravated the situation in the country and has compromised development opportunities for decades to come. A report by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research published in March 2015 claims that, as a result of the conflict, Syria lost more than US$119 billion in GDP between 2011 and 2014 (contracting by an average of 15.4%). The report also states that the reallocation of resources and capital to the military resulted in the growth of black markets, disrespect for the rule of law, and increasing dependence on external support. According to a socioeconomic and damage assessment report by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), even if the conflict ceased now and GDP grew at an average rate of 5% each

year, it would take the Syrian economy an estimated 30 years to return to the economic level of 2010.[2] The World Bank reports that conflict in Syria has significantly damaged public and private assets, including health, education, energy, water and sanitation, agriculture, transport, housing and infrastructure. A further decline in GDP by nearly 6% compared with 2015 is expected in 2016, primarily due to a sharp decline in oil production (from 368 000 barrels per day in 2010 to an estimated 40 000 barrels per day in 2015) and falling oil revenues. As a result of the civil war, total international reserves have declined almost thirty-fold, from US$20 billion at end-2010 to an estimated US$0.7 billion by the end of 2015, while the Syrian pound has depreciated significantly from SYP47 per US$ in 2010 to SYP305 per US$ at end-August 2015. Consequently, the report leaves no illusion about the dramatic economic condition of the country and the amount of resources that will be needed to grapple with immediate economic challenges once a political solution to the conflict has been found.

Political stalemate

Two main challenges face those working towards lasting political solution to the conflict in Syria. First, a realistic middle ground needs to be found between those who want to remove Assad from power, including the USA, the EU and the majority of Arab states, and pro-Assad countries like Iran and Russia, who see the regime's survival as crucial to their own interests in the region. Secondly, and perhaps even more difficult, the solution to the conflict in Syria requires putting a process in place that provides room for the reconciliation of the divergent positions of pro-government forces and hundreds of anti-government groups on a wide variety of issues. Replacing the Assad regime with a state governed by some form of Sunni Islamic law provides an ideological umbrella for many of the opposition groups, but is rejected by some Sunni and non-Sunni minorities. Views also differ on which members of the currently ruling Alawite elite, if any, should be allowed to form part of the new political arrangement. Additional challenges will come in agreeing future power-sharing arrangements to be enshrined in a new constitution (i.e. redistribution of competences between the executive and legislative branches, political freedoms, or the role of Syria's regional authorities).

A number of earlier political initiatives aimed at finding a solution were unsuccessful – including efforts by the Arab League, the Friends of Syria group, Iran and Russia. UN Special Envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi consecutively resigned in the absence of genuine talks, whilst the UN-led process remains the only viable framework. The international conference convened by the USA, Russia and the UN in Geneva in January 2014 – the Geneva II conference – had initially provided new impetus to the implementation of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, but the talks broke down only a month later. In July 2015, the UN Security Council endorsed a new approach presented by the UN's current Special Envoy for the Syrian crisis, Staffan de Mistura. The novelty of de Mistura's plan rests in the idea of deepening the Geneva consultations format, through establishing intra-Syrian working groups to address the key aspects of the Geneva Communiqué: safety and protection of civilians; political and constitutional issues pertaining to the formation of a transitional government; military, security and counter-terrorism issues; and the continuity of public services, reconstruction and development. The aim is to steer the consultations towards the emergence of a 'Syrian-owned framework document' on the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué. The intensification of external military operations in Syria and their potential impact on an already dire humanitarian crisis, and even bigger refugee crisis, provided impetus for reinvigorating the diplomatic process. At the initiative of the United States and Russia, a

group of 17 countries, plus the European Union, the United Nations and the Arab League, formed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)[3] in October 2015. For the first time, the ISSG brought all regional stakeholders to the same negotiating table, while in the past Iran was not invited. In the ISSG joint statement issued on 14 November 2015, the participants expressed their commitment to ensuring 'a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué in its entirety' – a point that had previously led to disagreement. However, no consensus has been reached on Assad's future. The elements of the ISSG joint statement provided the foundations for UN Security Council Resolution 2254 adopted on 18 December 2015 – the first UN resolution laying out a possible political solution to the conflict in Syria, as Russia and China have vetoed four other UN Security Council resolutions on Syria since 2011. The resolution acknowledged the central role of the ISSG platform in facilitating the United Nations' efforts and requested the Secretary-General to report back to the Security Council on the implementation of this resolution, including on progress of the UN-facilitated political process, by 16 February 2016.

Key provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of 18 December 2015

- The UN Secretary-General, through his good offices and the efforts of his Special Envoy for Syria, will convene Syrian government and opposition representatives for formal negotiations in January 2016. All the parties to the political process are required to adhere to the guiding principles, including a commitment to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character; to ensuring that state institutions remain intact; and to protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination.

- Support for a Syrian-led process facilitated by the United Nations that aims, before June 2016, to establish credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, and to set out a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution. Within 18 months (before June 2017), UN-administered elections will take place under the new constitution, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability. All Syrians, including the diaspora, are to be eligible to participate.

- Putting an immediate stop to any attacks against civilians and civilian objects and implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria, as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards a political transition under UN auspices (according to the ISSG statement, by June 2016). The UN Special Envoy in consultation with relevant parties is to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire and its implementation. Member States, in particular members of the ISSG, should support and accelerate all efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including through pressing all relevant parties to agree and adhere to such a ceasefire.

- A ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against individuals, groups, undertakings and entities, associated with Al-Qaeda or ISIL/Da'esh, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the ISSG and determined by the Security Council.

The implementation of Resolution 2254 will depend on the success of two other parallel processes led by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, aimed at establishing a list of the groups that will be allowed to participate in the political transition process and developing a common understanding of groups and individuals to be designated as terrorists. At the meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia on 9-11 December 2015, the opponents of President Assad agreed on a broad joint coalition to represent them during the formal peace negotiations, but insisted that Assad and his aides quit power at the start of the transition period. At the same time, Damascus, which has opposed any attempts to bring 'terrorists' to the negotiating table, immediately rejected the legitimacy of the joint coalition formed in Riyadh. On 17 December 2015, the UN adopted Resolution 2253,

which confirmed that any individual, group, undertaking or entity that has direct or indirect links to ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaeda is to be eligible for inclusion on the ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaeda Sanctions List. In practice, this implies that such groups will be subject to asset freezes, travel bans and arms embargos, and will also be excluded from participating in the political transition process. However, the designation of certain rebel groups as terrorist organisations is still an open question, given that some leading Syrian opposition groups might be considered extremists and have had distant links to Al-Qaeda; with Russia insisting that it is 'inadmissible to divide terrorists into good and bad ones'. Resolving the differences in views over the status of certain organisations – like Ahrar al-Sham, which Russia considers a terrorist organisation, but which played an essential role during the Riyadh talks – will be challenging.

Figure 1 – Division of groups by ideology

Data source: Centre on Religion and Geopolitics; Press reports.

Security vacuum

In July 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the ongoing conflict as 'slaughter' and a 'shameful symbol of the international community's divisions and failure'. The UN reports on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014) have regularly highlighted that 'the conduct of hostilities by all parties continued to be characterised by widespread disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law and the parties' obligation to protect civilians'. Extensive human rights violations and war crimes are also documented in the

reports of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the total number of civilians killed in Syria up to November 2015 amounts to about 250 000 people, 96% of which have reportedly been killed by government forces. Numerous reports suggest that, since the beginning of the conflict, the Syrian government has used cluster munitions extensively, with at least 249 attacks from July 2012 to July 2014. Anti-government groups and extremist Islamist groups like ISIL/Da'esh and Jabhat al-Nusra also commit systematic abuses, including the intentional targeting and abduction of civilians. Reports by Médecins Sans Frontières and the OPCW suggest the potential use of chemical weapons by ISIL/Da'esh against the civilian population. In August 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2235 (2015) establishing a mechanism to identify perpetrators using chemical weapons in Syria.

To 'degrade and ultimately defeat' ISIL/Da'esh, the United States mounted a 65-nation global coalition in September 2014 – with 22 coalition members currently engaged in the military operation 'Inherent Resolve'. There is no explicit legal basis for the coalition's operations, but several UN Security Council resolutions – including Resolutions 2170 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2199 (2015) and 2249 (2015) – call for a comprehensive response and the taking of all necessary steps, within the limits of international law, to counter the threat to international stability posed by ISIL/Da'esh. The 'Train and Equip Program' for Syrian soldiers to counter ISIL/Da'esh, launched in parallel to the aerial operation, brought very limited results and has since been discontinued. With only a handful of troops active on the battlefield, critics of the United States' strategy proposed alternative approaches, including the deployment of significant numbers of US and coalition ground troops. The White House questioned this approach and instead opted for providing arms and ammunition to militias fighting ISIL/Da'esh in Syria and the deployment of Special Operations Forces to assist with logistics and planning. The coalition operations against ISIL/Da'esh have intensified with the French decision in 2015 to expand anti-ISIL/Da'esh operations to Syria.

The declared aim of fighting ISIL/Da'esh has also prompted other external actors to increase their involvement – most notably Russia, Turkey and Iran – even though the real reasons for their presence has often been questioned. Iran initially denied any military engagement, claiming that its involvement was in a purely 'advisory' capacity. However, numerous media reports suggest that at least 57 members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps have been killed in Syria. Russia's involvement in fighting ISIL/Da'esh – in addition to supporting the government in Damascus – intensified in November 2015 following the terrorist attack on a Russian aeroplane in Egypt. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, between September and December 2015, the Russian air force performed 4 201 combat sorties and primarily targeted main infrastructural objectives, concentrations of military hardware and militants' manpower. Turkey's involvement has also grown – including through direct military action and opening Turkish airspace and bases to coalition forces. Turkey has also long campaigned for a 'safe zone' to be created in northern Syria – an idea relaunched at the UN General Assembly in 2015, but which so far has gained little traction. Turkey's motives have been questioned, with some observers arguing that Ankara is more concerned about containing Kurdish political aspirations than fighting ISIL/Da'esh.

Humanitarian crisis
Since the beginning of the fighting in Syria in 2011, the conflict has forced over 4.3 million Syrians to flee the country and seek refuge across the region – primarily in

Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Another 6.6 million people have been internally displaced. In January 2016, the UN held a number of meetings devoted to the humanitarian situation of the 394 000 people living in besieged areas in Syria, including over 180 000 people besieged by government forces, 200 000 living under ISIL/Da'esh siege, and 12 500 besieged by rebel groups.

In the first quarter of 2015 alone, the World Food Programme delivered food assistance to over 4 million people in 12 governorates. However, the UN estimates that as many as 9.8 million Syrians require food assistance. In 2015, the World Health Organization delivered over 10 million medical treatments to people in need, and every week it dispatches medical aid to an average of 196 500 people across Syria. In December 2015, in view of an outbreak of cholera in Iraq at that moment, the WHO country office in Syria took steps to enhance preparedness and readiness measures for cholera in the whole of Syria. While the government continues to provide basic services to areas under its control, as well as in many areas not under its control, the UN Secretary-General's report of November 2015 highlighted that the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need remains extremely challenging in many areas, due to active conflict and insecurity and deliberate obstruction by the parties, including continuing burdensome administrative procedures. Furthermore, access and delivery of humanitarian assistance to the 4.5 million people residing in hard-to-reach areas, including some 393 700 who are besieged, is extremely difficult. In December 2015, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O'Brien, stated that, according to the newly finalised Humanitarian Response Plan for 2016, US$3.2 billion is needed to provide assistance to 13.5 million Syrians, including nearly 6.5 million internally displaced persons. The Syria Donors' Conference – a follow up to previous pledging conferences organised by Kuwait – is scheduled for 4 February 2016 in London and will be hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Kuwait and the UN.

Directly affected by the humanitarian disaster, Syria's neighbours are also struggling with the consequences of the conflict and have taken the driving seat in designing an adequate response. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have each become home to hundreds of thousands of Syrians, while the EU is adapting its policies to deal with increasing numbers of Syrians seeking international protection. A fragile situation in host countries in the region has shifted the focus of many donor agencies to building resilience. The World Bank and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are trying to minimise risks and build resilience in host communities, to ensure that local services and local people in countries neighbouring Syria are not over-whelmed by the numbers of refugees arriving on their doorstep. However, with needs rapidly increasing, many countries and donor agencies are facing funding shortages.

The European Union approach and response

The European Union has consistently highlighted the need to address development, conflict and security in a holistic way. Council Conclusions on Security and Development (2007) acknowledged that 'there cannot be sustainable development without peace and security', just as there will be no sustainable peace without development and poverty eradication. The EU's comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises (2011) established a guiding framework for the joined-up deployment of EU instruments and resources when dealing with situations of crisis and conflict. The Council Conclusions on the EU Approach to Resilience (2012) and the Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis-prone Countries for 2013-2020 (2013) have further recognised the need to address the root

causes of crises and to incorporate a number of key elements, including: risk assessment; risk reduction, prevention, mitigation and preparedness; and swift response to and recovery from crises. The European Commission and the EEAS have taken steps to improve their operational capacities by issuing guidance notes on the use of conflict analysis in support of EU external action and on addressing conflict prevention, peace-building and security under EU cooperation instruments. The latter also highlights the role of parliaments as main venues for formal political process and dialogue, which ultimately contributes to conflict prevention, reduction and recovery. Nonetheless, despite such an extensive policy framework, most EU decisions concerning the conflict in Syria were taken in response to concrete events (i.e. the refugee crisis, and terrorist attacks in Paris), rendering the EU response primarily reactive and late.

Political response

With regard to the political process, the EU has mostly been in the passenger seat, even though together with individual Member States it has engaged in and supported the political process under UN auspices. Following the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, the EU froze the draft Association Agreement and suspended bilateral cooperation programmes under the European Neighbourhood Policy between the EU and the Syrian government. Syria's participation in the Union for the Mediterranean was suspended at its own request. The European Investment Bank has suspended loan operations and technical assistance to Syria. In addition, the EU has tried to influence the regime in Damascus by progressively expanding targeted restrictive measures and inflicting substantial damage on regime-affiliated businesses.

The EU has repeatedly stated that the regime bears the primary responsibility for the conflict and that its actions fuel extremism and undermine any potential political transition. The EU has also regularly called for the regime to stop targeting civilians, halt airstrikes and artillery attacks, and for an immediate end to all violence. The Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions of 12 October 2015 reaffirmed that 'only a Syrian-led political process leading to a peaceful and inclusive transition, based on the principles of the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012', would return stability to Syria. Since the early months of the conflict, the EU has expressed support for the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, also known as the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). The majority of the international community, including the EU, have recognised SOC as the legitimate political representative of the Syrian people, but its authority has been challenged domestically. At the same time, the EU called for those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria to be brought to justice, including by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. With regard to Assad's future, the EU is of the view that there cannot be a peaceful transition under the current regime, with Member States taking different views on Assad's role in the transition process: France is keen to see Assad removed as soon as possible, while the United Kingdom and Germany would prefer to involve him in the transitional phase.

On 14 December 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted Conclusions endorsing the Joint Communication of 18 November 2015 on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Joint Communication reiterates the importance of the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat – adopted on 16 March 2015 – which state that a lasting solution requires a Syrian-led 'sustainable and inclusive' political process leading to a transition, and that the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. Three main pillars of the EU Regional Strategy are humanitarian aid,

preventing regional spill-overs and countering terrorism. The European Council [Conclusions](#) of 18 December 2015 expressed support for the efforts of the International Syria Support Group to end the conflict in Syria through a political process and the efforts of the Global Coalition to defeat the regional and global threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh.

Military response

Direct EU military involvement in Syria was never an option, but the EU did take a number of steps to stop the violent repression of protesters by the Syrian security forces. In May 2011, the EU [imposed](#) a full arms embargo on Syria, which covered the supply of arms, military equipment and equipment which could be used for internal repression. Council regulations adopted in [January](#) and [June](#) 2012 imposed a further ban on telecommunications monitoring and interception equipment and certain other goods facilitating internal repression. The same year,

Map 1 – Member States' military involvement

the EU [decided](#) to oblige Member States to inspect all vessels and aircraft bound for Syria if they had reasonable grounds to believe that the cargo included sanctioned items. In February 2013, on the [initiative](#) of the United Kingdom and France, the EU partly [eased](#) the embargo, to provide greater non-lethal military support and technical assistance (e.g. communications and logistics equipment) for the protection of civilians. Most sections of the arms embargo on Syria were [lifted](#) as of June 2013, except for arms and material and equipment that could be used for internal repression. Current restrictions [remain](#) in place until June 2016.

In line with the [Strategy](#) against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, the EU has been at the forefront in supporting the proposals for putting Syrian [chemical weapons](#) under international control, leading to their eventual destruction. UN Security Council [Resolution 2235](#) established a United Nations and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), which would identify 'to the greatest extent feasible' individuals, entities, groups or governments involved in the use of chemicals weapons in Syria. Following requests from the OPCW and JIM, on 30 November 2015 the Council adopted [Decision 2015/2215](#) in support of two projects aimed at implementing the OPCW special missions in Syria related, among other aims, to the OPCW Fact-finding Mission and establishment and operations of OPCW-UN JIM. The financial support implemented through the trust funds amounts to over €4.5 million. Previously, the EU also provided close to €5 million for armoured cars and technical assistance, and €12 million to the OPCW Special Trust Fund for the destruction phase.

The primary aim of the military involvement of certain EU Member States is fighting ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq under the umbrella of the US-led [coalition](#). Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, **France** has expanded its military [operations](#) in Syria, including [airstrikes](#) on command centres, recruitment sites for jihadists, a munitions depot, and a training camp for fighters near Raqqa. This followed France's earlier decision in September 2015 to initiate [reconnaissance](#) missions over Syria and conduct [airstrikes](#) against targets in Syria. For the first time in history, France also invoked the [mutual defence clause](#) enshrined in Article 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty, requesting all EU

partners to assist France in fighting ISIL/Da'esh. In August 2013 the **United Kingdom's** Parliament rejected the possibility of military action. However, a year later it approved operations against ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq, including airstrikes and possibly troops to train Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. In November 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron presented a report detailing arguments as to why it was militarily, legally and morally right to attack ISIL/Da'esh in Syria. After a debate, the House of Commons finally approved airstrikes against Syrian targets, in particular the oilfields under ISIL/Da'esh control. At the beginning of December, the **German** Bundestag approved the deployment of 1 200 military personnel in the Middle East to support US, British, and French airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh. The German contribution until the end of 2016 will consist of Tornado reconnaissance planes, refuelling aircraft and a frigate, and complements German training operations in northern Iraq. The EU also supports the Global Coalition against ISIL/Da'esh by non-military means. It is involved in three out of five Working Groups of the Small Group of the Global Coalition: on stabilisation, countering terrorism finance and foreign terrorist fighters, as well as an observer in the counter-messaging Working Group.

Humanitarian response and building resilience

To date, the total humanitarian, development, economic and stabilisation assistance provided by the EU and its Member States to Syrians and Syrian refugees has amounted to over €4.4 billion. In addition, to allow for more flexible and speedy reaction in response to shifting needs, the European Union created the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis (Madad Fund) with the overall objective to support the resilience of refugees from Syria, as well as of the communities hosting the refugees and their administrations. The informal meeting of EU Heads of State or Government on migration, held on 23 September 2015, resulted in several decisions, including additional funding to respond to the urgent needs of refugees in the region. Since then, Member States' pledges and additional contributions to the Madad Fund from the EU budget have risen to €621.95 million in total, out of which €389.5 million has been committed to concrete projects implemented in 2015 and 2016. Following the proposal to increase the resources to tackle the refugee crisis by €1.7 billion, the EU adopted budgetary amendments that will bring the EU's response in 2015 and 2016 close to €10 billion.

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 the EU has gradually scaled up its support to countries in the region. In **Lebanon**, the European Commission's assistance alone has reached almost €546 million, including more than €269 million from the humanitarian budget. In **Jordan**, Commission assistance amounts to some €580 million for Syrian refugees and host communities and is spent primarily on food aid and the provision of clean water and sanitation, as well as health services and protection. The biggest share of the funding is destined for assistance to **Turkey**. In November 2015, the EU committed to provide Turkey with €3 billion – to be coordinated by the Refugee Facility for Turkey – in addition to €175 million for Syrian and Iraqi refugees already provided since the beginning of the crisis, including the above humanitarian aid as well as longer-term assistance. The Joint Action Plan which was endorsed by EU leaders on 15 October 2015 identifies a series of collaborative actions to be implemented as a matter of urgency by the EU and Turkey aimed at providing more coordinated help to people in need of protection in Turkey. Finally, in order to better respond to humanitarian challenges along the Western Balkans route, the European Commission agreed to release €13 million destined primarily for refugees in **Serbia** and the **former**

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, bringing the total amount of the EU humanitarian aid to the Western Balkans to €21.74 million.

Map 2 – The EU contribution to building refugee and host community resilience
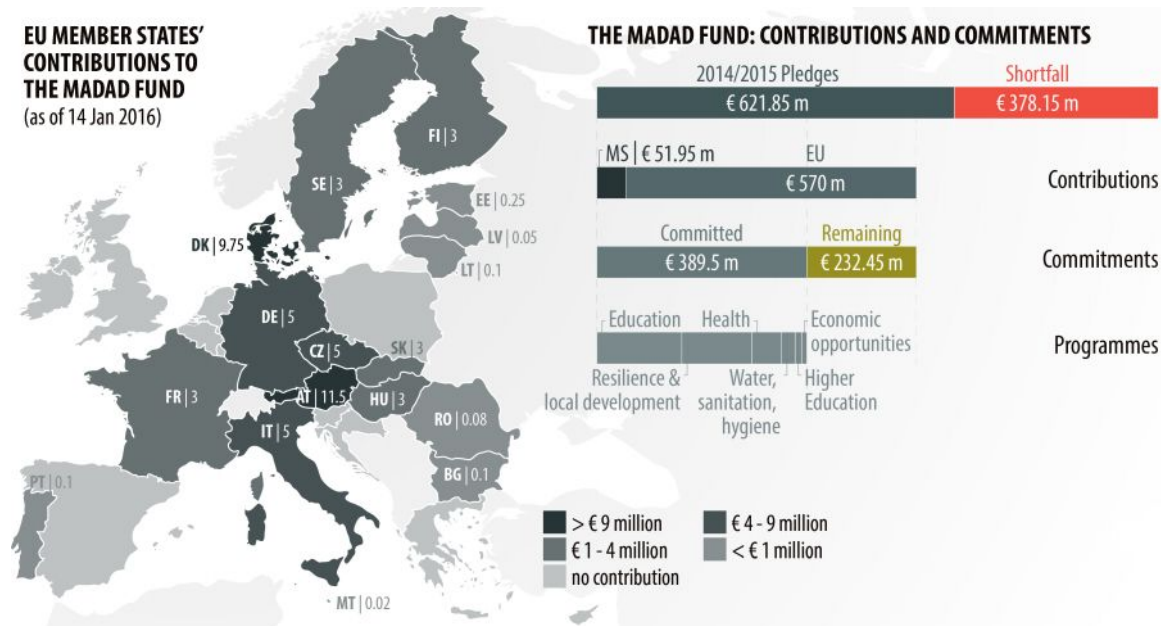
Data source: Information received from the European Commission, DG NEAR; Press reports.

What role for the European Parliament?

As the conflict in Syria unfolded, the current legislative approach has developed along three main tracks: addressing the implications of the refugee crisis inside the European Union, increasing EU humanitarian assistance to Iraq and Syria and aid to vulnerable communities, and improving the EU response to the terrorist threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh. Throughout 2015, the European Parliament was closely involved in the implementation of the legislative package proposed by the European Commission under the umbrella of the European Agenda on Migration. The European Parliament's approach was laid down in the resolution of 10 September 2015 on migration and refugees in Europe. After having approved the first temporary emergency rules for relocating an initial 40 000 refugees from Italy and Greece, on 17 September 2015 the European Parliament backed the Commission's new proposal to relocate an additional 120 000 asylum-seekers from Italy, Greece and Hungary. As co-legislator, the Parliament is expected to take a position on the proposal for a regulation concerning a European list of safe countries of origin and monitor progress on the implementation of the hotspots in Greece and Italy. The European Parliament has also adopted a series of resolutions concerning humanitarian needs in Syria, in particular the situation in Palmyra and the Yarmouk refugee camp. After the plenary debate with Commission Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva and the Luxembourg Minister for Labour, Nicolas Schmit, EP President Martin Schulz called on Member States to meet their commitments and provide additional national financial contributions to tackle the migration crisis. On the fight against ISIL/Da'esh, the Parliament adopted a resolution in September 2014 on the situation in Iraq and Syria, in which it calls on the Member States 'to assist the Iraqi and local authorities by all possible means, including appropriate military assistance' in containing and repelling ISIL/Da'esh expansion. In November 2015, the EP adopted a resolution on prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisations, in which it stresses the vital

importance of the EU establishing close cooperation with third countries, in particular with regard to strengthening links between internal and external security in the EU, promoting the exchange of good practices on deradicalisation, and dismantling terrorist networks.

The conflict in Syria is far from over and the European Parliament still has an important role to play on a number of fronts. Firstly, the parliamentary elections and the process of writing a new constitution for Syria, foreseen in Resolution 2254 provide opportunities for intensified **parliamentary diplomacy**. For instance, even if the implementation of the roadmap leads to the formation of a new government, any such new government is likely to face a 'rebellion of the excluded' – those who disagree with the outcome of elections or who have been purposefully excluded from the process of political transition (e.g. pro-Assad forces, affiliates of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL/Da'esh). Drawing from its experiences in other countries, the European Parliament could be a valuable partner in managing the political transition process. The challenge will be even harder to overcome if – under military, financial and ideological pressure from the coalition – ISIL/Da'esh turns into a 'colonial power' by strengthening its other 'provinces' in Nigeria, Libya or Sinai and increasing its reliance on their resources (i.e. manpower, revenues from oil or kidnappings). The Parliament also has at its disposal tools for foreign policy **agenda-setting**. In particular, it may contribute to strengthening the EU's role in conflict resolution and finding sustainable political solutions to regional conflicts, including through supporting inclusive and democratic institutions, the rule of law, building the resilience of local communities, and fostering social and democratic development. Finally, the Parliament has demonstrated in the past that it has the necessary **budgetary powers** to ensure that the EU shifts away from the 'low-cost democracy' model that has brought limited results in other countries in transition (e.g. Egypt, Libya, Iraq) towards a more sustainable model of transition, based on building resilient societies by addressing the root causes of conflicts, such as poverty, inequality, injustice, and corruption.

Endnotes

[1] Many of these crimes have been documented in the 'Caesar report'.

[2] Individual academics struggle with numbers on the economic impact of the Syrian crisis, pointing to problems with data availability. The *Global Economics Prospects* reports no longer provide data on Syria.

[3] ISSG comprises the European Union, Arab League, United Nations and 17 states: China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, UK, and USA.

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