Band-aids, not bullets

EU policies and interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars

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Abstract

Engaging in the conflict cycle in other countries to gain outcomes favourable to one's own interests is akin to playing in the champions league of foreign policy. Doing this effectively and responsibly requires a coherent and full-spectrum political strategy as well as the diplomatic, financial, developmental and military means to deliver it. It is clear from the scope of the security interests articulated in the European Union's (EU) Global Strategy (2016) and its many associated foreign policy statements that the EU intends to meet these requirements. However, study of EU institutional policies and interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars highlights that it falls well short of doing so. As a result, EU institutions are not well placed to intervene effectively in high intensity conflicts with existential features such as these two civil wars. This observation may extend to violent conflict more broadly.

Reasons for this state of affairs include: the absence of a strategic culture supported by mechanisms that can generate coherent and long-term interventions, including force deployment; EU Member State reluctance to endow EU institutions with a full-spectrum foreign policy toolkit; and bureaucratic interoperability problems. Underlying such reasons is the fact that the foreign policy interests of EU Member States are diverse and sometimes competitive, which limits the demand for EU foreign policy as a public good that is produced by the EU's institutions.

In conflicts like the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, with their high levels of violence and existential elements, this state of affairs makes EU institutions 'event takers'. That, in turn, is problematic because it is conflicts such as these that can produce negative effects for the EU, such as damaging the international legal order, generating human flight, developmental regress, causing regional conflict spill-over, radicalization and transnational organised crime. Instead of mobilising to address such conflicts as a collective action problem, EU Member States have largely preferred to remain in the social trap of prioritising their individual foreign policies – attractive in the short term, but less effective in the long term. Despite promising recent policy developments in Brussel, this situation is likely to persist in the near future.

With this problem in mind, the core recommendation of the paper is to increase the effectiveness of EU institutional interventions in high-intensity conflicts by institutionalising full-spectrum decision making, policy implementation and force deployment modalities for the EU as a whole, *as well as for EU coalitions of the willing*.

The parallel existence of such tracks will enable the EU to act jointly in conflicts where Member States have more or less compatible foreign policy preferences with

matching intensity preferences, and to act in part in conflicts where Member States have more or less compatible foreign policy preferences with a mixed distribution of intensity preferences (like Iraq or arguably Syria). EU foreign policy inaction, including institutional paralysis, will continue to occur where Member States' foreign policy preferences are largely not compatible and have high-intensity preferences.

To operationalise such modalities, EU Member States need to install two critical system upgrades regarding the existing toolkit for EU institutional engagement in the conflict cycle:

- The EU's institutions need to be enabled to mobilise dedicated conflict task forces, with broad authorisation to create, align and implement political conflict strategies across the EU bureaucracy that leverage short- and long-term capabilities and interventions coherently (including sanctions, funds and missions). Such task forces can build on the existing practice of inter-services consultations.

- The EU as a whole needs the capability to deploy armed force on the battlefield. This can be done indirectly by providing training, (lethal) material and mentoring support for partner armed forces – including non-state groups – via the European Peace Facility. It can also be done more directly by creating limited high-end EU expeditionary military forces (off-budget) that can be deployed in support of such partner armed forces. Reviving the EU Battlegroups could be an element of such an upgrade. The purpose of force deployment is to support partner armed forces in a bid to halt atrocities or to create conditions amenable to negotiating a solution to the conflict – not to engage in sustained conventional warfare.

Both upgrades require significant prior improvement of the quality of the EU's conflict analyses, as well as the processes by which such analyses are connected to political conflict strategy design, review and implementation. Examination of EU institutional interventions during the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars demonstrates that its understanding of both conflicts was partial at best and dangerously incomplete at worst. Unsurprisingly, this creates a risk of interventions doing more harm than good. While creating harmful effects cannot be avoided in the fog of war, there is ample scope to improve the current conflict analysis practices of the EU institutions first.

The two conflicts assessed in this report suggest that EU institutions do a decent job on the softer aspects of conflict – mostly humanitarian aid and peacebuilding – which helps to mitigate its awful consequences. But if the EU wishes its institutions to engage effectively across the entire conflict cycle, it needs to create institutional modalities that can better navigate alternating constellations of Member State interests, develop more coherent political intervention strategies backed by high-quality resources and be able to deploy limited (auxiliary) force on the battlefield.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The foreign policy of the European Union (EU) tends to be a topic for both gratuitous and justified criticism. The EU lacks a strategic culture and shared external threat perception; it lacks military bite; and its toolkit and funds remain scattered throughout the European Commission, the Council Secretariat and the European External Action Service (EEAS) – not to mention Member States' different foreign policy priorities. Of late, criticism has even gone as far as (correctly) stating that the EU lacks strategic autonomy in the face of extraterritorial US sanctions. This has been especially pronounced in the case of the nuclear deal with Iran, but the Nordstream pipeline offers another example.

Such criticism tends to overlook that the EU was never designed to carry out a coherent foreign policy commensurate with its weight, simply because its Member States do not want it to become too relevant in this sovereign domain *par excellence*. Nevertheless, they have grudgingly made incremental improvements, for example through the creation of the EEAS and the High Representative, the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the European Peace Facility (EPF). Yet, such advances have been overshadowed by several major conflicts in Europe's direct vicinity as well as the harsh realpolitik conducted by strongmen like Putin, Xi, Erdogan and, arguably, Trump. Stuck in a mid-way position between a well-developed sectoral foreign policy (i.e. economics and trade) and an incipient full-spectrum foreign policy, the EU struggles to deal with conflict on a classic power-capability basis.[1]

In this paper, we examine whether EU foreign policies and interventions as conducted by its Brussels-based institutions[2] are relevant in the conflict contexts in which they

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1   Whether the EU should develop into a more realpolitik-type actor akin to the US or Russia is a matter of debate in which it should be noted that the routine use of force does not necessarily have a positive track record of achieving desired results (consider Afghanistan and Iraq, but also Chechnya, Syria and the Ukraine). However, there are crisis and conflict situations in which only the deployment of force can prevent further suffering and atrocities (consider for instance Syria in 2011/12, Iraq in 2014 or Libya in 2011) or create conditions for negotiating a solution. See also: Kribbe, H., *The strongmen: European encounters with sovereign power*, London: Agenda Publishing, 2020.

2   The key EU foreign policy institutions are the European External Action Service, the European Commission and the Council Secretariat.

play out.[3] We use the conflict cycles[4] of the Syrian civil war (2011–2020) and the Iraqi civil war (2010–2020) as case studies.[5] Since these conflicts are both high-intensity and existential in nature, they are not necessarily representative for other conflicts in which EU institutions engage.

As to our decision to focus on EU *institutions*, we appreciate that EU foreign policy – especially its 'high politics' – is formed through a complex set of interactions between EU Member States and EU institutions. Under current decision-making rules, EU Member States are the masters of the bloc's foreign policy insofar as it pertains to engagement with conflicts elsewhere. The shortfalls and recommendations noted in this report are therefore largely theirs to address. Yet, it is the EU's institutions that can deliver foreign policy as a European public good in their capacity as semi-autonomous service centres if and when key Member States require it. Hence, the diplomatic and military representatives of the EU Member States are the primary audience of the paper, while its analytical focus lies on the EU's institutions as key levers for improvement.

Even though the EU as a whole has made impressive recent steps to improve the quality and effectiveness of its foreign policy making and implementation, we nevertheless use an external benchmark by taking local conflict dynamics as a starting point for assessing the relevance of EU foreign policy and interventions. This is appropriate, we feel, because EU foreign policy related to conflict seeks to effect change in the real world, which is much less forgiving than paper circulating in Brussels.

Finally, we have taken Syria and Iraq as case studies precisely because they epitomise the EU's foreign policy conundrum. It is the most violent conflicts in Europe's neighborhood that produce the greatest negative effects for the EU and yet these are the most difficult cases for EU institutions to engage in effectively. In other words, we examine an extreme in order to cast the dilemma as to how much collective foreign policy EU Member States actually (should) want into starker relief.

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3   Apart from references cited, the report also benefited from four key informant interviews with staff at the European External Action Service, European Commission and European Parliament in November 2020.

4   We define the conflict cycle as the iteration between the growing risk of violence (policy: conflict prevention), conflict itself (policy: crisis management) and the instability resulting from conflict (policy: peacebuilding and recovery) that is typical of protracted contemporary intra-state conflicts.

5   While few saw the Arab Uprisings coming, including what developed into the Syrian civil war, this was not the case for the rise of Islamic State in Iraq. The writing was on the wall given the legacy of radical extremism since 2003, the withdrawal of US forces in 2011 and al-Maliki's exclusive rule that marginalised Iraq's Sunni population. Hence, in Syria we examine only the (still) active conflict, while in Iraq we examine the prelude to the conflict (2010–2014), the conflict itself (2014–2017) and its aftermath (2018–2020).

Section 1 briefly takes stock of how the EU foreign policy universe has developed over the last decade in relation to the conflict cycle. This provides context and identifies initial strengths and weaknesses. Section 2 traces the evolution of the Syrian civil war, with Section 3 examining the development of EU foreign policy in relation to local conflict dynamics. Sections 4 and 5 accomplish the same tasks for the Iraqi civil war (the fight against Islamic State). Finally, Section 6 offers a set of reflections that intend to provide an agenda for discussion in Brussels between EU institutions and Member States on how EU foreign policy can be made more relevant to the conflict cycle.

1 Assessing the broad evolution of EU foreign policy related to conflict

Today, the strategic foreign policy thinking in Brussels is in full swing. But it is of recent date and far from complete. Significant focus has been brought to bear on putting different bits of EU foreign policy architecture in place, reconceptualising the EU's understanding of conflict (cyclical, context-specific) and creating conceptual drivers to ensure a higher degree of bureaucratic coherence (comprehensive approach, global strategy). Key issues that require future attention include creating a shared strategic outlook and threat perception, modalities for more effective EU institutional action under different configurations of Member State interests and creating greater bureaucratic coherence.

From modest beginnings and a limited level of ambition throughout most of the 2000s, the foreign policy of the European Union as a whole has developed significantly over the last decade, particularly regarding the conflict cycle that is the focus of this Section.[6] By way of a visual analogy, current EU foreign policy resembles a communal residence held in joint ownership by 27 inhabitants, the top floor of which is under construction while the roof leaks. In other words, EU foreign policy requires a significant degree of consensus – inevitably reducing speed and effectiveness – and its functionality remains limited. The two critical constraints on the effectiveness of EU foreign policy are the willingness of Member States to move the needle of their ambition and their ability to put corresponding institutional innovations and routines in place.

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6   Note that the EU treaty uses 'External Action' to refer to the EU Common Commercial Policy, developmental and humanitarian policies, restrictive measures and a number of more minor external activities. In addition, there is the 'Common Foreign and Security Policy' (CFSP) that encompasses the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This division reflects EU institutional competences and is at odds with the more classic, national understanding of foreign policy that would encompass all the listed elements under a single header. Also note that the CFSP is more an umbrella term that sets out core principles, authorities and procedures than a policy with content in the sense of priorities, threats and strategic context. The consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union can be accessed here and the consolidated Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union here (both accessed 6 January 2021). In this paper, 'EU foreign policy' refers to those foreign policy aspects relevant to the conflict cycle across the EU categories of external action and CFSP (i.e. diplomacy, development, humanitarian, restrictive measures and military force).

The year 2009 was an important marker as the Treaty of Lisbon re-tooled parts of the EU foreign policy architecture by enabling the creation of the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) in 2010 and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011.[7] It also put in place the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).[8] In good EU fashion, the reform was sufficiently incremental to generate a hybrid. Despite the creation of the EEAS, several other bureaucratic centres for making and implementing EU foreign policy also remained in existence, while the CSDP was initially created without much of the infrastructure needed to ensure it could be operationalised. Such steps – including the EU force generation concept, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF), Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), Civilian CSDP Compact and the European Peace Facility (EPF) – followed only in 2015–2020.[9]

In the wake of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU also re-conceptualised its policy understanding of conflict: away from a linear view that depicts a logical sequence of prevention-war-recovery and towards a more protracted and iterative view of the conflict cycle that is typical of contemporary intra-state conflicts.[10] This opened the door to the idea that a more integrated approach and mix of instruments should be mobilised to address conflict effectively, since these different phases tended to repeat, overlap or even occur in parallel.

Such re-conceptualisation became more operational with the publication of the 2013 Joint Communication of the European Commission on the comprehensive approach to external conflict and crisis. It intended to pave the way for better practical coordination of EU instruments and resources, as well as to anchor the principle of shared responsibility between EU institutions and Members States in the EU's foreign policy.[11]

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7   The FPI mostly ensures (financial) implementation of foreign policy tasks that straddle the new domain of the EEAS and the old domain of the European Commission's directorate-general for development, which otherwise risked falling between the cracks. Key FPI tasks are: (i) preparing the budget for every operation under the CSFP and CSDP; (ii) managing the activities of the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP); (iii) coordinating the tripartite cooperation between the United Nations, the World Bank and the EU on recovery and peacebuilding assessments and post-disaster needs assessments; (iv) operationally supporting Election Observation Missions (EOM); (v) managing the Partnership Instrument to promote cooperation with countries of strategic interest to the EU; (vi) participating in the Kimberly Process. See: https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/what-we-do_en (accessed 26 November 2020).

8   The text of the Lisbon Treaty can be accessed here (accessed 25 November 2020).

9   The European Council reached political agreement on the EPF on 18 December 2020, for example. Its press statement and the underlying proposal can be consulted here (accessed 6 January 2021).

10   World Bank, *Conflict, security and development: World Development Report*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2011.

11   European Commission, *The EU comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 2013, online.

Crisis and conflict could now officially be approached through the full suite of existing EU policy options and instruments, including political (e.g. declarations), diplomatic (e.g. mediation), economic (e.g. sanctions), security (e.g. CSDP missions) and development (e.g. humanitarian or stabilisation programmes) options – if the right strategic culture, decision-making structures and operational modalities could be created. This development also pointed to the next inevitable policy 'insight', namely that each conflict is violent in its own way and EU interventions in conflict situations ought to be context-driven and context-specific.

In 2016, a revamped European Global Strategy gathered together the architecture elements of the Lisbon Treaty with the Joint Communication's objective of generating more comprehensive interventions to increase the level of ambition of EU foreign policy.[12] Between 2016 and 2020, the EU institutions began to operationalise the EU Global Strategy by creating new frameworks and processes (i.e. PESCO), institutions (i.e. MPCC) and developing/streamlining resources (i.e. the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, EDF and EPF). But it was not until 2020 that the EU Strategic Compass was launched, which is an initiative to define EU strategic objectives in the area of security and defence more clearly. The Compass effort seeks to: a) generate a shared EU threat assessment and b) estimate the capabilities and resources to counter these threats. Both are essential to creating a policy culture of strategic deliberation in cases of crises and conflict.[13] However, until the end of 2021/beginning of 2022 when the Compass is due to be finalised, the EU will muddle through based on its present array of policies, actors and tools. At the end of 2020, the Council moreover adapted a global human rights sanctions regime and gave a boost to the EU's institutional ability to mobilise civilian experts for CSDP missions.[14]

Dimensions of the EU foreign policy toolkit

To understand what strengths and weaknesses the developments outlined above generate in relation to the conflict cycle in particular, we must briefly survey the toolbox of EU foreign policy, its internal organisation and the role of Member States. In terms of the EU foreign policy toolbox in relation to conflict in its neighbourhood, several

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12 Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy online.

13 For a critical analysis and some recommendations: Mölling, C. and T. Schütz, *The EU's Strategic Compass and Its Four Baskets: Recommendations to Make the Most of It*, DGAP report no. 13, 2020, online.

14 See: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/07/eu-adopts-a-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Civilian CSDP Compact*, 13571/20, 7 December 2020, online.

dimensions can be identified underneath the European Global Strategy that serves as a capstone:

- To begin with, there are thematic and geographical policies, such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP, thematic) or the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP, regional in name, mostly bilateral in practice) that make the Global Strategy relevant to a particular subset of issues, or group of countries in its broader Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) context. They are more specific, still quite general, but also dynamic. For example, originally designed in 2004 and reviewed in both 2011 and 2016, the ENP[15] has remained focused on its core objectives of assisting transitions to democracy via elections and support for inclusive economic development while also innovating itself (2011: introduction of the 'more for more' principle in response to the Arab Uprisings; 2016: greater focus on security in response to growing migration concerns and tailoring its approach to specific country conditions).[16]

- Next come a number of strategic forums for engaging foreign policy partners, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (since 2008), political dialogue with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (since 2014/15) and the Strategic Dialogue between the EU and the League of Arab States (since 2015). These are places where broad EU foreign policies can be discussed in relation to regional developments and the collective priorities of the EU's partners. While these forums typically produce fairly bland summit statements, they are also useful places for structural dialogue with key stakeholders.[17]

- A third – and vital – dimension of EU foreign policy related to the conflict cycle are country-specific arrangements that are always based on an association agreement (the EU's legal basis for engagement with third countries) and typically rest on a cascade of action plans, country (progress) reports and conflict assessments. Such documents operationalise more generic thematic or geographic policies for a particular country and funnel resources into the achievement of the objectives it identifies (critical resources include funds, human capital, political capital and time). It is not clear at present how well this crucial link in the process ensures that realities on the ground are leading in setting policy feasibility parameters and guiding

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15 MENA countries covered by the ENP include Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Tunisia.

16 European Commission, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Joint Communication, JOIN(2015) 50 final, 2015, online.

17 See for instance the 2019 Sharm el-Sheikh EU-LAS summit declaration, online (accessed 26 November 2020). Note, for example, the relative absence of human rights given developments in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East.

operational modalities. The fact that there is currently no monitoring mechanism to ensure that short-term interventions (e.g. CSDP missions) and long-term ones (e.g. programmatic initiatives) reinforce one another, based on shared conflict assessments, is a telltale sign that further improvement is needed.

• The final dimension of the EU's foreign policy is the instruments and mechanisms that exist in addition to the EU's bureaucracy (EEAS, Special Representatives, relevant Commission Directorate Generals and Delegations) that can initiate, operationalise and finance foreign policy interventions in specific countries, themes or other contexts. Instruments and mechanisms include the likes of CSPD missions, sanctions (restrictive measures), the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace, the new European Peace Facility[18] and the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).[19] It is worth noting that significant variety exists in the range of financial instruments, operational mechanisms and decision-making procedures that the EU has available, which depend on the Treaty basis of particular elements of EU foreign policy. For example, while the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) has significant leeway in the distribution of humanitarian aid,[20] the initiation and extension of CSDP missions require unanimous European Council approval.

This brings the analysis to a key observation, namely that the creation of the EEAS has not dissolved other centres of foreign policy making and implementation in the EU bureaucracy. The ensemble of existing internal actors relevant to intervention in conflicts elsewhere, such as the European Commission Directorate-Generals for development cooperation (DG DECVO), neighbourhood policy (DG NEAR), humanitarian

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18 This is an off-budget instrument to finance activities in the security and defence domain that is likely to be used to fund military operations (including of partner countries), or to support partner country armed forces directly. See: Deneckere, M., *The unchartered path towards a European Peace Facility*, Maastricht: ECDPM, 2019. The full EPF proposal from the High Representative can be consulted here (accessed 6 January 2021).

19 The NDICI is supposed to absorb existing instruments related to conflict prevention, mediation, cooperation, development and stabilisation. However, it remains some way from being operationalised, risks being security and migration-centred, and has been designed with a convoluted system of leads that involve different parts of the EEAS and the European Commission. Jones, A. et al., *Aiming high or falling short? A brief analysis of the proposed future EU budget for external action*, Maastricht ECDPM, 2018; see also the recent press statement of the European Council here (accessed 6 January 2021).

20 See Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 concerning humanitarian aid and subsequent modifications. The case of Syria demonstrates that it would be a mistake to think that humanitarian aid cannot have highly political effects. See for example: Leenders, R. and K. Mansour, 'Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 133, Issue 2, Summer 2018.

aid (DG ECHO), the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) as well as the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union itself, do not operate on the basis of similar timelines, mechanisms or procedures. On paper, foreign policy is made in the European Council, supported by the EEAS, which in turn coordinates all other internal EU actors. In practice, a framework for strategising and monitoring the execution of agreed actions in different parts of the bureaucracy is absent while the High Representative has a limited ability to bring about greater alignment.[21] One consequence is that integrated strategic action remains difficult and that ensuring continuous coherence of EU foreign policy interventions takes considerable bureaucratic effort.

In addition to the remaining multi-polarity of the conduct of foreign policy within the European Union institutions, it should be noted that the national interests of the Member States related to conflict in Europe's near abroad can be substantial and diverge profoundly. They tend to vary in function of geographic proximity (consider e.g. the role of France in the Sahel and the role of Germany in respect of Ukraine). This means that either EU foreign policy needs to be aligned with key Member State(s) to be effective – providing additional 'services' or supplying greater collective engagement – or risks being rendered ineffectual. When larger EU Member States cannot agree on foreign policy priorities, paralysis tends to ensue. This has for example happened regarding Libya, with France supporting Haftar's Libyan National Army and Italy supporting Serraj's Government of National Accord – the opposing sides of the civil war. EU foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war has arguably also suffered from divergent Member State preferences and views. In other words, the extent to which the political positions of key Member States can be aligned on a given conflict is a key variable for EU institutional foreign policy effectiveness.

Headline strengths and weaknesses of EU foreign policy regarding the conflict cycle

Based on the preceding analysis, Table 1 outlines a number of strengths and weaknesses of EU foreign policy regarding the conflict cycle. These will be tested against the specific cases of Syria (Sections 2 and 3) and Iraq (Sections 4 and 5) later in the paper.

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21   The mission letter of European Commission President Von der Leyen to the High Representative and European Commission Vice President, Joseph Borrell, is illustrative in this regard. It is rich on intention and responsibilities but low on accompanying authorities and resources. See: https://ec.europa.eu/ commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-josep-borrell-2019_en.pdf (accessed 26 November 2020).

Table 1   Headline strengths and weaknesses of EU foreign policy re conflict (2020)

	Strength	Weakness
Strategic	(1) EU foreign policy has been constantly evolving and improving since the Lisbon Treaty (2009) in both its policy implementation frameworks and supporting institutions. Member States appear keen to make it better and more effective by trial and error. (2) Since 2017, the EU has taken significant steps to improve its defence and security toolkit, including PESCO, the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility, as well as creating an EU strategic military HQ.	(3) The EU's general strategic culture remains weak and the foreign policy interests/divergence of its Member States profound. Moreover, the Strategic Compass work is limited to the area of security and defence and has only just started. Without broader positive change in strategic culture and perceptions, new capabilities and institutional innovations risk being hamstrung. (4) The EU remains unable to project meaningful armed force beyond its own borders and, while this capacity is evolving, at least in the indirect sense, it is not yet usable.[22]
Operational	(1) The EU has said goodbye to its boiler-plate template of approaching conflicts as a generic phenomenon and introduced much more conflict contextuality in its approaches, at least on paper.[23] (2) The EU has a strong record and is well capacitated to perform on softer aspects of conflict such as humanitarian aid and peacebuilding.	(3) The diversity of foreign policy funding instruments and foreign policy implementation centres makes developing a coherent approach a Herculean task without greater strategic consolidation and streamlining of methods/authorities. Crisis management, especially, is disconnected from interventions in the conflict prevention and recovery spheres. (4) CSDP missions have largely become political symbols of EU engagement. Their effectiveness and integration with other interventions has taken a backseat.

Sources: Debuysere, L. and S. Blockmans, *Europe's Coherence Gap in External Crisis and Conflict Management*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019, online; Musiol, L, *Better Early than Sorry: How the EU Can Use its Early Warning Capacities to their Full Potential*, Brussels: ICG, 2019; ECDPM (2018), *op.cit.*; ECDPM (2019), *op.cit.*; Particip et al., *External Evaluation of EU's Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding (2013–2018)*, European Commission, online, 2019; Key informant interviews at European Commission, Parliament and External Action Service (November 2020); Mölling and Schütz (2020), *op.cit.*

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22 Technically, the EU Battlegroups exist and reached full operational capacity in 2007. However, they have never been deployed, mostly due to slow political decision making regarding their use. In operational terms they are non-existent. See for example: Barcikowska, A., *EU Battlegroups – ready to go?*, Paris: EU ISS, 2013; Major, C. and C. Mölling, *EU Battlegroups: What Contribution to European Defence? Progress and Prospects of European Rapid Response Forces*, Berlin: SWP, Research Paper 2011/RP 08, 2011.

23 A lack of expert staff, high rotations and a somewhat technical conflict assessment procedure reduce the benefits of this gain.

The next Sections on the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars start by tracing the evolution of these conflicts. This helps develop an 'external' benchmark for assessing the relevance of EU foreign policy, i.e. how well does it relate to particular conflict episodes and dynamics? Subsequently, the report discusses how the strengths and weaknesses outlined above apply.

2   Tracing the evolution of the Syrian civil war (2011-2020)

This section traces the broad evolution of the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2020 by identifying the main conflict periods that together make up its history of violence. These periods are simultaneously connected, overlapping and yet feature a unique mix of dynamics of their own. However, as parsimony does not have the virtue of completeness, the analysis confers only the essence of the conflict. For the purpose of this report, the analysis sketches a benchmark for examining the relevance of the EU's policies and interventions in relation to the different episodes of the Syrian civil war. These EU policies and interventions are discussed in the next Section.

A national conflict in a sub-, inter- and transnational context

At the core of the Syrian civil war are the multiple transformations of the Syrian people's initially peaceful uprising in early 2011 against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Competing claims on the legitimacy of an incumbent regime that are viable and violently contested are the essence of civil war, even though the Syrian regime today remains internationally recognised by a far greater number of countries than the opposing Syrian National Coalition ('Etilaf').[24] As the country's powerful and authoritarian ruling incumbent, the actions of the regime and its allies (Iran and Russia) have largely determined the course of the war, which includes having enabled the initial rise of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Islamic State (IS).[25] Substantial but insufficient foreign support for armed groups opposing Assad also played a significant role in prolonging the conflict. It is for these reasons that the rebellion against the Syrian regime represents the central conflict of the country's internationalised civil war. Having said that, the difficulty in analysing the Syrian civil war lies in the fact that it consist(ed)(s) of a number of nested conflicts that add to the central conflict outlined above. These include:

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24   This is in part the case due to Russia blocking UN Security Council resolutions that could have delegitimised the Syrian regime. Yet, the Assad regime can no longer be considered as a universally recognised member of the international state-based order in Hedley Bull's (1977) conception of it. Moreover, around 20 countries have recognised the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) (based in Istanbul) as the 'legitimate representative of the Syrian people' without, however, taking any further steps.

25   The more salient factors that explain the rise of IS can be found in Iraq, however. They include Sunni marginalisation under the US-run Coalition Provisional Authority and al-Maliki's terms as Prime Minister, as well as the huge initial success of IS in 2014 when it captured Mosul. This enabled IS to re-launch its offensives in Syria after having been initially pushed back by other opposition forces.

Internationally – Growing geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia throughout the 2000s clashed more overtly over the nature of global order after the UN-mandated intervention in Libya in March 2011. Syria subsequently became a key conflict theatre in this broader argument. In addition, there was the longstanding standoff between Iran and the US, which transformed into a more open confrontation between Iran and the US, Saudia Arabia (KSA)and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) between 2017 (Qatar blockade) and 2018 (US withdraws from the nuclear deal), mixing international and regional conflict dimensions.

Regionally – There was the competition between Turkey/Qatar and KSA/UAE/Egypt after 2011 to take account of, based on markedly different perceptions of the Arab Uprisings (opportunity versus risk; Muslim Brotherhood-driven renewal versus maintenance of an authoritarian status quo). This competition escalated after the coup in Egypt in 2013, which ended the presidency of Mohammed Morsi. Qatar and Turkey only fully teamed up after the Saudi-led blockade of 2017, however. Moreover, there is the longstanding rivalry between Iran and Israel, and Iran and KSA/UAE at the regional level, which is nested in the broader Iran versus US confrontation at the international level. With regards to Syria, Israel especially has been strategically silent on the dynamics of conflict. However, at the same time it has intervened substantially in the military sense by seeking to roll Iranian influence back via aerial bombardment, as well as engaging in intensive political lobbying of the US administration.

Transnationally – To begin with, there was the rise of IS spanning both Syria and Iraq, and the International Coalition's fight against it. In Iraq, it was conducted with the Iraqi Security Forces and the Hashd al-Sha'abi (PMF); in Syria with the YPG/Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also maintain(ed)(s) pragmatic relations with Damascus. At the transnational level, there was also the revival and regionalisation of Turkey's conflict with the PKK and the YPG/Democratic Union Party (PYD) since 2015, which is fought out in both Syria and Iraq, as well as in Turkey itself. In Syria, this has led to three Turkish interventions in the north (excluding Idlib, which is not related to the YPG/PYD). In Iraq, it has recently led to greater tensions in the Sinjar area where Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) are at odds with the PKK and Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). Finally, there is transnational Shi'a militancy across the region to consider, with mobilisation framed in terms of engaging both IS and the US in conflict. Shi'a militancy is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon that, in Syria, featured Hezbollah, various Iran-linked PMF groups from Iraq, as well as the Fatemiyoun (Afghan-recruited) and Zeinabiyoun (Pakistan-recruited) brigades.

Sub-nationally – at this level, there was both conflict and cooperation between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (today called the SNA or TFSA), nationalist Islamist groups (like Ahrar al-Sham or the Levant Front) and radical Islamist groups (like Jabhat al-Nusra and IS), as well as both conflict and cooperation between the YPG/ PYD and the FSA, nationalist and radical Islamist groups.

Figure 1 below offers a schematic rendering of these nine conflicts that sit nested within the core conflict of the Syrian civil war: the rebellion against the regime. The total of 10 resulting conflicts are linked with variable intensity at different moments in time. Their interactions have been analysed in greater detail elsewhere (see sources below Table 2) and for the purpose of this paper it suffices to note their existence and highlight their linkage.

Figure 1   The Syrian civil war as a nested set of conflicts

Subnational: 1) FSA vs./ with national and radical Islamists; 2) YPG vs./ with FSA, national and radical Islamists

Core: Assad vs. rebels (FSA, national and radical Islamists)

Transnational: 1) IS; 2) Turkey vs. PKK/YPG; 3) Shi'a resistance against US and Israel

Regional: 1) Qatar/Turkey vs. KSA/UAE/Egypt; 2) Iran vs. KSA/Israel

International: 1) Russia vs. US; 2) Iran vs. US
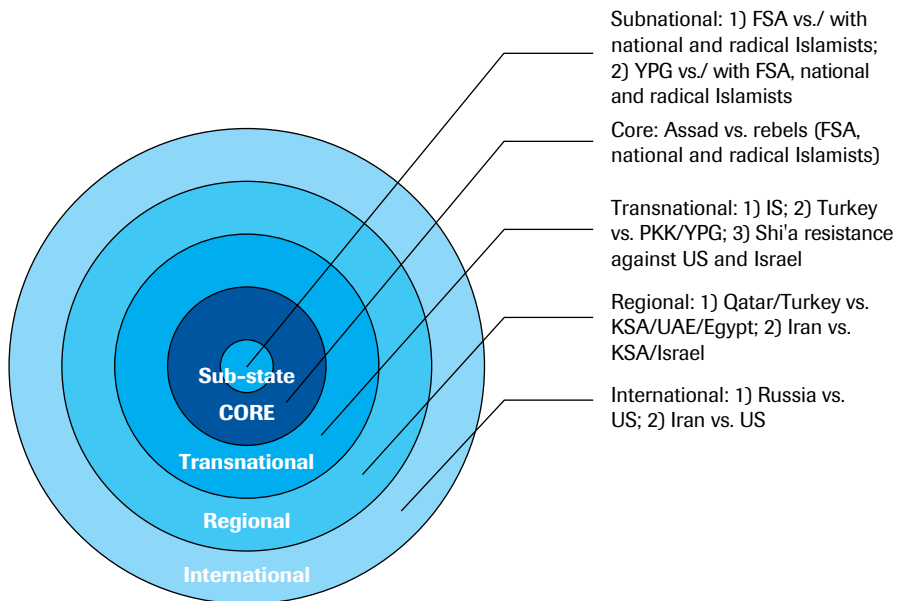
Note: The sources for this assessment can be found underneath Table 2.

Key conflict episodes

With a structure of nested conflicts in mind, several main periods of civil war can be distinguished. Each features a different mix of the conflicts reflected in Figure 1. For each period, Table 2 identifies the key contestation, major conflict factors and central turning points.[26]

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26   An alternative set of periods can undoubtedly be developed as any selection is slightly artificial. The idea here is to use a periodical approach to grapple with the evolution of key conflict dynamics.

Table 2   Conflict dynamics in different periods of the Syrian civil war

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From peaceful protest to militancy Early 2011 to early 2012	Syrian regime versus protestors and an emerging FSA *Turning point to next period*: Creation Jabhat al-Nusra	The Syrian regime consistently sought to repress protests with overwhelming violence that was coordinated out of the presidential palace. Its reform proposals were modest and not considered credible. The FSA was built bottom-up in haphazard fashion. Internal divisions and external patronage increased fragmentation. The YPG/ PYD stayed out of the growing rebellion.	• Hardline regime response (n) • Different ideologies and regional orientations fractionalise the rebellion (n) • Lack of unified international support to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and FSA (n)
From militancy to radicalization Early 2012 to 2017	Syrian regime and Iran-linked groups versus a growing FSA, emergent nationalist and radical Islamist armed groups *Turning point to next period*: Recapture of Mosul in July 2017	The emergence of Ahrar al-Sham in 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012, the Islamic Front in 2013 and IS in 2013 created a range of well-armed and organised Islamist forces that fought with and against FSA groups, each other and the regime. This further fragmented the rebellion, as did various coordination mechanisms and funding channels from the Gulf/US. Paradoxically, both the regime and the US (through the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its 2011 withdrawal) brought the conditions for armed radicalisation about, while Turkey and European countries fanned its flames through lax border controls. The capture of Mosul and proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014 enabled a new IS offensive in Syria that culminated in the battle for Kobani (2015), Dabiq (2016) and Raqqa (2017). The rise of IS accelerated intervention by the International Coalition. Meanwhile, the regime and its allies continued their fight against all opposition forces from their 'rump Syria' bastion, including with barrel bombs, starvation tactics and chemical weapons (e.g. August 2013 in Ghouta) until the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) initiative puts a temporary stop to this particular tactic to stave off the risk of direct US intervention.	• Hardline regime response (c) • Different ideologies and regional orientations fractionalize the rebellion (c) • Lack of unified international support for the SIG and FSA (c) • Iranian support for regime, including Hezbollah entry (n) • Turkey and Gulf countries / individuals (mostly Qatar and KSA) support a variety of Islamist groups (n) • Western (US) response shifts to IS as primary threat (n)

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From regime setbacks to regime recovery 2014 to 2016	Syrian regime, Iran-linked groups and Russian forces versus a reduced FSA, national and radical Islamist armed groups *Turning point to next period:* Battle for Aleppo (December 2016)	The combination of opposition forces (mostly Jaysh al-Fateh, the Southern Front and IS), more aligned Turkish/Gulf support, and manpower shortages nevertheless brought the regime closer to defeat as Latakia and Daraa were threatened in early 2015 while the rebel Ghouta salient remained active right next to Damascus. Greater Iranian support and militiafication of regime forces sustained it, but ultimately proved inadequate. A high-end Russian expeditionary intervention in September 2015 rescued the regime and paved the way for the reconquest of Aleppo in late 2016. Meanwhile, IS started to be rolled back by the International Coalition after the battle for Kobani (2014/2015). UNSC Resolution 2254 was passed in December 2015 – after the Geneva-I and Geneva-II UN-led peace talks – to almost no effect.	• Hardline regime response (c) • Iranian support for regime (c) • Western (US) focus on IS (c), US enlists YPG after Kobani (n) • Russian support transforms from political to military (n) • Turkey enters the conflict via operation Euphrates Shield (n)
From regime recovery to reconquest 2017–2018	Syrian regime, Iran-linked and Russian forces versus weakened opposition groups of all stripes *Turning point to next period*: Regime assault on Idlib	With Russian and Iranian support, the regime renews its offensives, using the de-escalation zone logic of the Astana process as a foil to reconquer major opposition-held areas one after another (northern Homs, eastern Ghouta and along the Jordanian border) after the battle for Aleppo, leaving only Idlib (HTS) and the northeast (SDF). Meanwhile, HTS forms in Idlib in January 2017 as a reincarnation of Jabhat al-Nusra. Turkey escalates its fight against the YPG by occupying Afrin in 2018.	• Hardline regime response (c) • Iranian support for regime (c) • Russian support for regime (c) • Western (US) focus on IS (c) • Turkey joins Astana process (n)

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From re-conquest to stalemate 2019-2020	Syrian regime, Iran-linked groups and Russian forces versus SNA + Turkish forces, and YPG + US forces	Having completed its reconquest of Syria – except for ongoing low-level incidents in the south, the YPG/PYD-held northeast, HTS-held Idlib and various Turkish-held border areas – the regime and allies started their next offensive in Idlib, Hama and north Aleppo. This caused Turkey to double down, move into Idlib with substantial forces and complete the process of nominally unifying FSA and NLF forces into the TFSA/SNA.	• Hardline regime response (c) • Iranian support for regime (c) • Russian support for regime (c) • US alliance with YPG see-saws (n) • Turkey turns against regime and Russia (n)
	Turning point to next period: Resumption of hostilities in Idlib or north-east (if)	The US keeps backing the PYD/YPG, pushing it to increase its distance from Damascus as well as the PKK, while HTS and its Hurras al-Din offshoot keep control over parts of Idlib. HTS also formed the Syrian Salvation Government. There are initial signs of an IS resurgence in the regime-held Badia desert.	

Main sources: Phillips, C., *The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*, New Haven: YUP, 2020; Van Dam, N., *Destroying a nation: The civil war in Syria*, London: IB Tauris, 2017; Lister, C., *The Syrian jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an insurgency*, London: Hurst, 2015; Cockburn, P., *War in the age of Trump*, London: Verso, 2020; Van Veen, E. and I. Abdo, *Between brutality and fragmentation: Options for addressing the Syrian civil war*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2014; Ahmadian, H. and P. Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence', *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, Issue 2, 2019, pages 341–364; Lund, A., *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations*, Stockholm: Swedish Institute for International Affairs, 2019; Hauch, L., *Mixing politics and force: Syria's Constitutional Committee in review*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

Based on this broad review of the Syrian civil war, several observations can be made with regard to the conflict's evolution at the national level (i.e. the core conflict of rebellion against the regime, which interacts with the nine nested conflicts identified – see Figure 1):[27]

i. The Syrian regime did not indicate at any point in time that it was willing to seriously negotiate or compromise with either the opposition or its foreign backers in any international forum. This meant that the contestation of its rule would be decided on the battlefield. At the local level and as part of its battlefield tactics, the regime did consistently propose 'local reconciliation agreements' which, however, usually prevented outright warfighting but not further repression and displacement in their

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27 Nikolaos van Dam also offers an interesting take in this blogpost (accessed 10 November 2020).

wake (i.e. after a cease fire had been arranged). If such agreements could not be achieved, the regime consistently applied all possible means of coercion at its disposal and spoke the language of violence throughout.

ii.   Throughout the conflict, the regime has welded temporary informal 'deals' (including with the YPG/PYD and IS), progressive use of fear-inspiring tactics (bombardment, barrel bombs, chemical weapons, starvation and deportation), concentrated offensives, insistence on control over humanitarian relief efforts in its areas and various diplomatic processes (Geneva especially) to advance its agenda of reconquest.

iii. The international allies of the regime, Iran and Russia, proved to be steadfast in their support and were willing to increase their involvement to prevent collapse of the regime. Iran did so via military supplies and credit lines, successively sending in Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) elements followed by Hezbollah armed formations, helping to mobilise the NDF, and mobilising Shi'a armed groups from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Russia shifted from political support and military supplies (in part on credit) to a high-grade expeditionary intervention in 2015.

iv.   In contrast, other international support for Syrian opposition forces consistently offered a mix of promising rhetoric but limited or fragmented actual support / intervention which, while contributing to the prolongation of the conflict, did (too) little to improve the battlefield position of the opposition forces. This holds for the initial support for the FSA by Turkey and the Gulf countries (mostly Qatar and KSA), limited Western support for selected FSA groups as well as for Gulf and Turkish support for a range of Islamist groups (both from the countries themselves and from individuals/'charities'). The only exception of sorts was US support for the YPG since early 2015, which continued fairly consistently and at scale. But this was aimed at fighting IS, not the Syrian regime – with which the PYD/YPG engaged in practical deals in the early years of the civil war.

v.   A Western military intervention against Assad, be it direct or indirect (following an Afghanistan Northern Alliance or Benghazi-type support model of special forces and aerial intervention) was not seriously on the cards after the US let the regime chemical weapons attack on Ghouta go unpunished in 2013, despite having marked it as a red line.[28] In fact, it was consistent with US policy to look for a settlement for a number of reasons, including to avoid a Sunni Islamist takeover of Syria (associated with the risk of radical extremism).[29]

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28   As part of a US-Russian compromise, the OPCW intervened to export and destroy Assad's chemical weapons arsenal with reasonable success.

29   See for instance: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38297343 (accessed 25 November 2020).

vi. Unsurprisingly, Western (especially US) conflict concerns shifted from the rebellion against Assad to fighting IS in the course of 2013. With growing doubts about rebel battlefield performance, increasing concerns that the rebellion was becoming more religious, and with resources being funnelled into the International Coalition, any hope of cohering and growing support for the FSA and, perhaps, nationalist Islamist groups, against the regime disappeared. The campaign against IS brought a brutal group of extremists down and also further aggravated the ravages of the war with, for example, Raqqa reduced to a total ruin.[30] Once the fight against IS was over, the core rebellion against the regime had run its course and it was too late to turn the tide.

vii. Turkey has used a mix of its own military and Syrian-recruited auxiliary forces (SNA) to establish four areas under effective Turkish control in northern Syria via unilateral interventions. In Idlib, its military makes it more difficult for Syrian regime and Russian forces to unleash a new major offensive. In Afrin, the Azaz-Al-Bab-Jarablus area, and between Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad, Turkish forces have carved out buffer zones against the YPG/PYD. The nature and scale of reconstruction in the areas under effective Turkish control suggest that Turkey is there to stay. Turkey appears to be aiming to resettle Syrian refugees in these areas and have them controlled by the SNA and the local police force that it backs.

Although one could argue that these observations can only be made with the benefit of hindsight, this is not entirely correct. Much of the above had become readily apparent before the Russian intervention of 2015 (points i, ii, iii (re Iran), parts of iv, v and vi) and the remainder shortly after this intervention (iii (re Russia) and parts of iv). Only point vii is of a later date. For the purpose of this analysis, we argue that these core conflict factors became clear between 2014 and 2016, i.e. before the battlefield situation decisively turned in favour of the Syrian regime and its allies.

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30 See: https://raqqa.amnesty.org/; https://apnews.com/article/36eb52e3692d4812b2208b61299bcf89 (both accessed 25 November 2020).

3   EU institutional policies and interventions in the Syrian civil war

Until 2011, relations between Syria and the EU were focused on improving political dialogue between both entities to establish mutually beneficial trade and investment as well as cooperation on social and democratic reform. After 2004, most EU projects in Syria were carried out under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and financed through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).[31] It was through its membership of the Union for the Mediterranean that Syria benefited from EU market integration initiatives.

The EU's initial institutional response to the conflict (2011–2013)

The EU's initial institutional policy response to the conflict was a mix of containing the Syrian regime (sanctions), exploring diplomatic conflict resolution routes (Friends of the Syrian People, Geneva process) and providing temporary support for those hard-hit by regime repression (humanitarian).

At the very beginning, the Council of the European Union established restrictive measures (i.e. sanctions) against the Syrian regime in May 2011 in response to the repression of protestors by the Assad regime in March–April 2011. Targeted restrictions initially aimed to block travel and freeze assets of individuals associated with the violent repression of protests. They were later broadened to include sectoral restrictions on trade in oil, the export of military and dual use technology, and investment. Restrictions in the oil trade mattered especially since Syria exported the vast majority of its production to the EU. But while the regime incurred appreciable short-term losses, it nevertheless managed to find other sources of demand and, later, supply.[32] A wide range of EU restrictive measures remain in place today barring, for example, EU-based actors from engaging 273 individuals and 70 entities linked with the Syrian

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31   See: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria_en (accessed 26 November 2020).

32   Giumelli, F. and P. Ivan, *The effectiveness of EU sanctions: An analysis of Iran, Belarus, Syria and Myanmar*, Brussels: European Policy Center, 2013.

regime.[33] Later in May 2011, the initial sanctions were followed by the suspension of EU-Syrian cooperation programmes along with a prohibition on grants and loans via the European Investment Bank.[34]

In addition, the EU as an entity developed close ties with the Syrian opposition via the 'Friends of the Syrian People' conferences, which started in February 2012 as a French initiative, after it became clear that the UN Security Council was paralysed by Chinese and Russian unwillingness to condemn the suppression of protests. When the UN established the Geneva process in June 2012 under the leadership of Special Envoy Kofi Annan, the EU made this the main building block of its own policies as both a forum and a set of conditions for resolving the conflict. The 'Geneva Communiqué', which was based on the Geneva I conference, effectively became EU institutional policy on Syria. Ever since, the EU as entity has stuck faithfully to the guiding principles it sets forth, such as its call for a transitional government body with full executive power made up of representatives from the Syrian opposition as well as Assad's regime, and refused to engage with the regime prior to the fulfillment of these conditions (for example, in reconstruction work).[35] The political transition the Geneva Communique demands also permeated EU institutional policy in the form of the belief that there was no military solution to the conflict, only a political one. For a long time, this view was accompanied by the belief that Assad would fall and that this was only a matter of time.[36] A final element of the EU's initial institutional response to the Syrian civil war was the provision of humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance to the Syrian population from 2012 onwards in both the national and regional context (i.e. host communities of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon).[37]

33 In May 2020, the EU extended its restrictive measures against the regime until June 2021. See: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/28/syria-sanctions-against-the-regime-extended-by-one-year/. For the full list of activities sanctioned under the EU restrictive measures: https://www.europeansanctions.com/region/syria/ (both accessed 26 November 2020).

34 Including ENI (the ENP's main implementation mechanism) and MEDA (the Union of the Mediterranean's main implementation mechanism). See also: Council conclusions on Syria, 23 May 2011, online; Council Decision 2011/273/CFSP, online (both accessed 26 November 2020).

35 The Geneva Communique can be found online here (accessed 26 November 2020).

36 See for instance: Duclos, M., *La longue nuit syrienne*, Paris : Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2019.

37 Development aid consists of humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid is apolitical, needs-based, conflict-neutral (at least on paper) and finances actions necessary for immediate human survival. It usually targets those directly involved in man-made or natural disasters (like refugees and the displaced). It tends to be sanctions exempt. Non-humanitarian aid covers longer-term development issues like reconstruction, peacebuilding and statebuilding work. Early recovery is a grey area between immediate survival and longer-term development.

At the end of this period, the belief in the need for a political solution, the inevitability of the fall of Assad and the feasibility of a political transition set the EU institutions on a patient wait-and-see course without initiating efforts that might have brought the violence to an end sometime sooner (like a dedicated mediation endeavor or greater diplomatic engagement with Iran and Russia).[38]

Turning to the fight against Islamic State (2013-2017)

From 2012/2013, the Syrian opposition fighting Assad radicalised. In response, the EU associated itself with the 'Global Coalition Against Da'esh' in 2014 as a non-military party.[39] The main consequence was that the EU increased its humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid to Syria's population in relation to IS, both within and outside of Syria, by several billion euro (including via a Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis – the 'Madad Fund'),[40] covering Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Such support reached its apex in March 2016 when the European Council – under German leadership – and Turkey concluded an agreement to halt the irregular migration flow from Syria via Turkey to Europe.[41] In exchange for resettling some refugees in Europe and funding the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, among a few other things, Ankara closed its borders with the rest of Europe to Syrian refugees. Another consequence was that the EU enacted a set of restrictive measures against IS in 2016, targeting mostly individuals and entities through travel bans and asset freezes.[42]

It was only in 2015, four years into the conflict, that the EU adopted a regional strategy for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, including the fight against IS. This was reviewed in 2016 and replaced with a strategy specific to Syria in 2017.[43] As regards Syria, the regional strategy centred on the need for a political transition via the work of the UN Special Envoy, which enabled EU support for intra-Syrian negotiations, civil society and women's participation, as well as the work of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). It also underlined the EU's pursuit of accountability for human rights abuses, enhanced the EU's humanitarian efforts, and stepped up preparation for early recovery

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38 Van Veen, E. and O. Macharis, *Hope springs eternal: EU options for dealing with the Assad regime*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

39 A number of Member States supported the Coalition with military means.

40 The Madad fund can finance both humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid activities.

41 On paper, the deal stipulated that all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek Islands would be returned to Turkey and that for every Syrian thus returned, another would be resettled in the EU. In practice, no such arithmetic came into play.

42 Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/1693 of 20 September 2016, online (accessed 26 November 2020).

43 Council conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat from 23 May 2016, online; Council Press Release of 3 April 2017, online (both accessed 26 November 2020).

and rehabilitation efforts (once a political transition had been initiated). Practically speaking, this enabled initiatives such as the Syria Peace Process Support Initiative (SPPI) in support of the UN-led Geneva talks (together with Germany and funded from the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace); EU support for the consolidation of Syrian civil society diaspora actors, such as the 'Aswat Faeela' (Active Voices) programme;[44] and EU support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), aimed at preserving evidence of war crimes.

Notably, the regional strategy was adopted when the rebels threatened the regime in Idlib and Latakia in early 2015 when its assumption of a negotiated settlement might have reflected the belief that a 'mutually hurting stalemate' was imminent.[45] Yet, the 2016 revision kept its main policy foci and objectives in place, although the Russian expeditionary intervention of 2015 and the (imminent) fall of East Aleppo in 2016 had fundamentally changed conflict prospects. Both events not only demonstrated that the regime and its allies were pursuing a battlefield solution, but also that they were gaining the upper hand while stalling the Geneva process.[46] The EU's Syria strategy of 2017 did not reflect these changing realities on the ground either. In other words, the EU's emphasis on political process and transition failed to adjust to changing realities or, alternatively, to develop greater leverage to help bring such a transition about while negative externalities such as refugees and transnational terrorism grew.

Institutionalising a policy of relief and wishful thinking? (2017–2020)

Persistent in its belief in a political solution via an inclusive and meaningful transition, in line with UNSCR 2254 and the Geneva Communique, the EU continued to support and strengthen the Syrian political opposition as well as civil society while also pursuing accountability for war crimes and providing relief to a suffering Syrian population. It created and ran the annual Brussels conference from 2017 onwards to accomplish two objectives. First, to maintain a pipeline of humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid to both the region and Syria. Second, to institutionalise a policy of 'wishful thinking' as it was abundantly clear well before 2017 that there was no political transition on offer. The primary advantage of this position was that it provided a rallying point to maintain EU Member State policy unity and cohesion. It also put a lock on the release of any reconstruction funds until a political transition was firmly underway. In other words,

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44   This is a regional youth development project (2016–2018) that has created a network of 21 Syrian community groups in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands involved in local research, advocacy and social action.

45   The point during conflict where battlefield losses and prospects suggest to both sides that talking might be more productive than shooting. The term was coined mostly by William Zartman.

46   Hauch (2020), *op.cit.*

while the EU institutions had little direct influence over developments on the Syrian battlefield, they sought to exercise such influence indirectly by the power of continued disengagement. The disadvantage was that this locked both EU institutions and Member States in an irrelevant position since none of the fighting parties showed an inclination to compromise just because the EU was withholding its reconstruction funding.[47]

Brussels Conferences on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'

- **I (4–5 April 2017):** Focused on supporting the resilience of Syrian refugees and their host countries (Lebanon and Jordan). EUR 5.6 billion pledged for 2017;
- **II (24–25 April 2018):** Focused on the provision of humanitarian aid to the Syrian population inside Syria and in the region. EUR 3.5 billion pledged for 2018;
- **III (12–14 March 2019):** Focused on the international response to the Syrian Crisis and the needs of the Syrian population. EUR 6.2 billion pledged for 2019;
- **IV (22–30 June 2020):** Focused on the impact of Covid-19 on the Syrian population inside and outside of Syria and the implications for humanitarian aid efforts. EUR 4.9 billion pledged for 2020.

A key aim of the Brussels conferences has been to reduce the risk of 'donor fatigue' with Syria. In that regard, they have been successful. The EU also supported the otherwise flailing UN peace process substantially by giving Syrian civil society a prominent place during the Brussels conferences, which helped keep the political opposition alive and develop its organisational and intellectual capacities.

Interim conclusions

The EU as an entity has been unable to intervene effectively in the Syrian civil war for a cascade of reasons. First, the growing intensity of the war's violence and the uncompromising stance of its belligerents rendered the non-coercive intervention tools and instruments of the EU institutions irrelevant from a conflict resolution perspective early on. Second, the EU institutional toolkit and mechanisms necessary for deploying coercive force did not exist in 2011–2012. In other words, if one had argued that military

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47   See also Duclos (2019), *op.cit.* on this point, or this webinar by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and Clingendael on the occasions of the Syria: IV-Brussels conference: https://www.clingendael.org/event/webinar-eu-options-dealing-syrian-conflict (accessed 7 January 2021).

intervention was the only effective crisis management method in 2012/2013 to help end the Syrian civil war, it would not have been operationally possible. Third, even if the EU institutions had been capable of fielding such an intervention directly or indirectly (e.g. through a European Peace Facility Fund *avant la lettre*), its Member States would probably not have allowed it due to a mix of policy divergences and mistaken beliefs about the state of the conflict (negotiated solution feasible, fall of Assad inevitable). Fourth, had all these factors come together positively, it still stretches the imagination to see the EU mounting an intervention commensurate with the scale of the war. Instead, the EU as an entity took recourse in the non-coercive policy instruments it could mobilise, with humanitarian aid increasingly serving as a cloak to cover a hollow policy position based on the Geneva Communiqué.

Practically, what the EU institutions might have done better was to develop a political strategy enabling large-scale support for the Syrian opposition by others early on. This could have included a diplomatic offensive in particular, with associated incentives, vis-à-vis the Gulf countries and Turkey to ensure more and better coordinated support for the opposition, including weapons and equipment. In the Gulf, playing on concerns about the regional profile of Iran and the need to halt its growth in Syria through a concerted effort, such a diplomatic offensive might well have gained traction.

As inevitable 'event-taker', some argue that the EU as an entity has done reasonably well in limiting two critical negative effects of the war in the short-term – refugees and radicals – if the war is considered only from a security perspective. This counterfactual is hard to argue with, but the huge flow of refugees in 2015 and the serial terrorist incidents on European soil (e.g. at the Bataclan theatre in Paris in 2015) illustrate the limits of this argument. The long-term negative effects of the EU's 'hands-off approach' are hard to predict, but do not look promising.[48]

Turning to the practicalities of EU institutional interventions during the Syrian civil war, by far the largest amount of its diplomatic energy and financial resources has been devoted to creating and maintaining a flow of humanitarian aid to shield the most vulnerable Syrians from the worst fallout from the war. At a much lower order of magnitude are the EU's efforts to support the Syrian political opposition to develop alternative representation, Syrian (diaspora) civil society to maintain and re-create some social texture while the country was consumed by war; and limited governance and service provision in opposition-held Syria to maintain some public functions. Yet more modest has been the EU's support for formal negotiations under UN-auspices. Without a Syria envoy or mediation team of its own (there are individual officials engaged), its support was limited to funding and high-level participation.

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48 Batrawi, S., *Pandora's box in Syria: Anticipating negative externalities of a re-entrenching regime*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

Finally, there are the restrictive measures that the EU put in place to prohibit EU-based actors from dealing with the Syrian regime. After the initial reduction in trade (especially oil) that these measures brought about, they mostly served a signalling function.[49] Table 3 below maps the main EU policy packages against the course of the civil war.

Table 3   **EU institutional policy and interventions in the context of the Syrian civil war**

Period	2011–2012	2013–2017		2014–2016	2017–2018	2019–2020
Conflict phase	From peaceful protest to militancy	From militancy to radicalisation		From regime setback to regime recovery	From regime recovery to reconquest	From reconquest to stalemate

Period	2011–2013		2013–2017		2017–2020	
EU policy & intervention logic	Initial response (restrictive measures, political opposition, Geneva-process, humanitarian and non- humanitarian aid in Syria)		Turning to the fight against IS (humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid in Syria and the region, additional restrictive measures (IS), Geneva-process, civil society support, International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIMM), Syria Peace Process Support Initiative (SSPI)		Institutionalising a policy of relief and wishful thinking (humanitarian aid, Brussels conferences, no reconstruction, restrictive measures)	

Based on the preceding analysis, a number of observations can be made regarding the relevance of EU institutional policy and interventions in relation to the Syrian civil war. They are summarised in Table 4 and discussed below.

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49   Although the EU-Syria trade volume in goods hardly exceeded EUR 7,5 billion in 2011, the EU was nevertheless one of Syria's top trading partners. See: European Commission, *European Union, trade in goods with Syria*, DG Trade, online (accessed 26 November 2020); Giumelli and Ivan (2013), *op.cit.* It is difficult to separate the reduction in trade and investment due to the outbreak of war from their reduction due to restrictive measures. Moreover, enforcement of the EU's restrictive measures has been weak.

Table 4   Major strengths and weaknesses of EU institutional policy / interventions in the Syrian civil war

	Strength	Weakness
Strategic	None	*Syria (1)*: The EU's Syria policy remained constant despite significant shifts in the battlefield evolution of the conflict *Syria (2):* A regional policy was only agreed in 2015, covering the immediate region and IS *Syria (3)*: EU Member States agreed on what **not** to do, but not on how to intervene from a crisis management perspective. Policy interests diverged substantially *Syria (4)*: The EU as an entity did not contribute militarily to crisis management, including as part of the International Coalition
Operational	*Syria (5)*: EU interventions seem to have effectively supported Syrian civil society organisations as alternative sources of socio-political influence, but less so regarding the Syrian political opposition *Syria (6)*: The Brussels conferences have been a success in terms of maintaining the aid funding pipeline	*Syria (7)*: EU policy has been based on increasingly unrealistic expectations and demands, which prolonged EU operational irrelevance to the direction and consequences of the conflict (becoming an 'event taker') *Syria (8)*: A conflict-encompassing political crisis management strategy remained absent beyond copy/paste of the Geneva process and Geneva I/II
	Syria (9): EU humanitarian aid has been successful although slow to respond to regime utilisation and diversion of aid[50]	

A few points in Table 3 deserve a short explanation. Throughout the conflict, the EU as an entity maintained a relatively static policy with little effort at rejuvenation. It stuck to its mantra that there could only be a political solution to the conflict – even while a military alternative was implemented. Similarly, throughout the early stages of the conflict it continued to view the fall of Assad as inevitable, despite both early and

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50 See for instance: Darcy, J., *Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lesson Learning (CALL) Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis*, New York: OCHA on behalf of the Steering Group for Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations, 2016; Leenders, R. and K. Mansour, 'Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War', in: *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 133, Issue 3, Summer 2018; Haid, H., *Principled Aid in Syria: A Framework for International Agencies*, London: Chatham House, 2019; Thépault, C., *How to Aid Syria Without Aiding Assad*, Foreign Policy, online, 2020; McCurdy, D. and C. Thépault, In Syria, put humanitarian aid ahead of a political solution, War on the Rocks, online, 2020.

growing evidence to the contrary. This may have been a stance born out of political necessity that was also comforting and helped avoid the awkward conclusion that, even if the EU had wanted to intervene militarily, it would probably not have been capable for most of the conflict given that development of its defence policy toolkit only accelerated between 2015 and 2018. This policy position also relegated the EU to irrelevance with respect to both the diplomatic course of negotiations and the military course of the conflict (*Syria 1, 3, 4 and 7*).

It is more surprising that the EU institutions never enacted a truly encompassing political strategy towards the conflict that included structured and sustained diplomatic outreach to Russia, Syria, Iran, Turkey and the US backed by whatever leverage it was capable of mustering (mostly humanitarian and developmental aid, some sanctions and some accountability initiatives). The EU never fielded its own crisis management team, mediation team (although individual officials have played a role) or Special Representative to increase the tempo of its engagement with international or domestic parties key to the conflict. Instead, it kept supporting a dysfunctional UN-led political process (*Syria 2 and 8*).

On the upside, the EU as an entity performed strongly in its ability to mobilise financial resources to mitigate the humanitarian fallout of the conflict as best as possible. The European Commission (DG ECHO) successfully managed a rapid scale-up of humanitarian aid operations to provide both a cross-sectoral and multi-country response in countries where humanitarian capacities and expertise were not present or inadequate.[51] The Brussels conferences have served as a reliable institutional mechanism to make sure aid keeps flowing and the EU does not carry this burden alone. Yet, also in the area of humanitarian aid did major operational issues arise that remain largely unresolved:

• EU-sponsored international humanitarian actors struggled from the beginning of the conflict to operate independently from the Syrian regime. This became even more complicated after the regime's gains in 2016. It imposed multiple administrative obstacles, including the need to obtain permission for field visits, needs assessments, operations and monitoring/evaluation that disabled humanitarian actors from acting without government approval. The regime was thus able to use humanitarian aid flow punitively against its opponents and to benefit its supporters.[52]

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51   ADE et al., *Evaluation of the ECHO response to the Syrian Crisis 2012-2014* (Executive summary of June 2016), Brussels, EU, 2015, online.

52   See footnote 50; also: Asseburg, M., *Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States*, Berlin: SWP, 2020.

- A key objective of EU humanitarian aid has been to ensure that Syrian refugees remain in the region (i.e. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq). With the exception of the migration influx of 2015, this has been successful. But from a conflict prevention perspective, it is a rather debatable approach since Syria's neighbours are all crisis-prone themselves (with the exception of Turkey). Keeping c. 5.5 million refugees in the region in countries with plenty of problems of their own stores up trouble for the future (*Syria 2 and 9*).

Also on the upside, the EU has helped to reinforce a more autonomous and capable Syrian civil society in two ways. First, the EU promoted and sustained its creation by selecting such organisations as implementers of EU-funded initiatives in and outside Syria. Second, the EU engaged Syrian civil society actors prominently in discussions about the political transition in Syria with the aim of making such discussions as inclusive as possible. This has helped to develop an ecology of political alternatives to the Syrian regime and a group of organisations that will continue to clamour for accountability and explore the possibilities for change (*Syria 5*).

On balance, EU foreign policy and interventions have not been of much relevance to the Syrian civil war from the perspective of the conflict cycle. They have not mattered from either a conflict prevention or a crisis management perspective. This should be a serious cause for concern because the Syrian civil war, together with Ukraine and Libya, is taking place in Europe's immediate neighbourhood. Its spillover effects are extensive.[53] In brief, the EU failed its geopolitical-actor-in-the-neighbourhood test rather convincingly. As a result, it was and is an event-taker, forced to respond to the consequences of civil war. The bright(er) note is that, without the EU's reasonably effective and rapid humanitarian effort, the human consequences of the war would have been much worse.[54]

It bears observing that the EU was bound to fail given that the Syrian civil war turned out to be one of the victory/defeat variety rather than the more common negotiate-and-share-power variety to which the EU is better suited. The victory/defeat variety requires large-scale military intervention against hostile conventional forces – directly or indirectly – if the tide is to be turned. Despite recent progress, the EU does not have the culture, doctrine or capabilities to mount this type of intervention.[55]

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53   Batrawi (2020), *op.cit.*

54   See for example ADE (2015), *op.cit* for the period 2012–2014.

55   In a comparable future situation, the new European Peace Facility might be used to infuse a rebellion with sufficient training, arms and guidance to win the day. But this would require careful synchronisation with parallel political, mediation and humanitarian strategies, as well as it would need to be done at scale.

4 Tracing the evolution of the Iraqi civil war (2010–2020)

This section traces the broad evolution of the Iraq war against Islamic State between 2013 and 2017 by identifying its main conflict episodes and by tracking key conflict factors across different periods of the civil war. These periods are connected, but also featured their own dynamics. Each had a significant impact on the next. In comparison with the Syrian civil war, the Iraqi conflict is more straightforward. It featured less complexity in terms of its degree of internationalisation, the number of nested conflicts and the fragmentation of the 'opposition' (IS). A key difference lies in the fact that the Iraqi state was opposed by a single radical extremist group committing gruesome acts of violence based on its eschatological world view, rather than by a range of armed rebel groups covering the ideological spectrum, as was the case in Syria. A key similarity with Syria, however, is that both wars arose in large part in response to the authoritarian practices of the state.

The emergence of Islamic State: Exploiting new social fractures

The Iraqi civil war was an armed conflict pitting a variety of Iraqi and international forces against IS from December 2013 to December 2017. Already in 2013 the IS insurgency had escalated into a full-scale war as the group launched its 12-month campaign 'Soldiers' Harvest' that targeted in particular Iraqi forces in the northwest, resulting in the later conquest of Ramadi, Fallujah, Tikrit, Mosul and major parts of northern Iraq. The campaign included an attack in July 2013 on the Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons, which freed between 500 and 1,000 inmates, including senior al-Qaeda leaders and other militants. In June 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the creation of an Islamic State in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and named himself caliph. At its height, IS held 56,000 square kilometers – a third of Iraq's territory and inhabited by 4.5 million of its residents. The organisation instituted a reign of terror that included rape, abductions, executions, mass murder, pillaging, extortion, seizure of state resources and smuggling.

Before the capture of Mosul by IS in 2014, international and Iraqi policy makers believed that the Islamic State of Iraq (a predecessor of IS)[56] had been defeated and another insurgency highly unlikely. They were wrong. This was mostly due to their perception of the insurgency as a disease inflicted upon society by external sources that could be rooted out, rather than viewing it as a violent manifestation of deeper social grievances. The emergence of IS was, in fact, the result of many dynamics that interacted over a long period, including the collapse of Iraqi state institutions, foreign occupation mobilising armed resistance and a civil war that tore through Iraq's social fabric and hardened group identities. Often interpreted solely through the lens of religious doctrine and religious extremism, IS legitimacy and attraction rested on multiple trends that have been evolving deeper down within Iraqi society.

For example, IS monopolised the Sunni rebellion that emerged in 2013–2014 against al-Maliki's repressive central government in Baghdad.[57] By early 2013, tens of thousands of Sunnis were participating in anti-government protests in Ramadi, Fallujah, Samarra, Mosul and Kirkuk. Not unlike the 2019 protests, they faced a bloody crackdown.[58] While the politics of Sunni and Kurdish marginalisation played a role at the national level, intra-communal fractures (e.g. the disconnection between Sunni political elites and their constituencies) were essential in providing social inroads for IS, helping to anchor it locally, and expanding rapidly. These fractures were brought about by the major shifts in power and the emergence of new stakeholders that followed the fall of the Ba'ath regime after 2003. A good example is the demise of the 'Awakening', a movement of Sunni tribes that was instrumental in the fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq between 2006 and 2008. Its dismantlement by Prime Minister al-Maliki can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of the marginalisation and fragmentation of Iraq's Sunni community after the fall of Saddam Hussein. As a result of the Awakening's disempowerment at

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56 IS emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, a local offshoot of al-Qaeda. It faded into obscurity for several years after the surge of US troops and their Sunni tribal auxiliaries in Iraq in 2007. It began to reemerge in 2011, taking advantage of growing instability in Iraq and Syria to carry out attacks and grow its ranks.

57 The post-Saddam period was a disaster for Iraq's Sunni community. After 2003, a de-Baathification programme stripped hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civil servants of their jobs, including doctors and teachers. Many sacked Sunni army officers joined the al-Qaeda insurgency against US forces. Yet, it was also Iraq's Sunni tribes that helped drive out extremist groups and militants in the so-called Sunni Awakening. It is therefore not a simple matter of equating IS with Sunni extremism. When the tribes that fought and died during the Awakening were subsequently disempowered and dishonoured by al-Maliki, IS received a further boost.

58 In April 2013, the Hawija region's anger at the government exploded after the Iraqi Army attacked protesters. Up to 200 civilians were killed and at least 150 were injured. Such incidents fuelled the surge of IS in the area the following year. By June 2014, IS had seized Hawija and much of southern Kirkuk.

the hands of the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi state, many of its remnant groups fell victim to / joined the extremist forerunners of IS.[59]

Internal displacement and the proliferation of informal settlements in response to war and violence added new socio-political cleavages that split traditional social structures and disrupted community authority. By promising a new era of Sunni dominance, IS drew widespread support from disenfranchised Sunnis and was able to expand its territories rapidly. Depending on the context, IS served as a form of empowerment, not only against the government and its repression, but also as a mechanism to address local grievances, i.e. to carry out revenge and to settle longstanding scores that had accumulated within Sunni communities.

Key conflict episodes

Despite the gradual growth of IS between 2010 and 2014, it only erupted into international and domestic consciousness in June 2014 when its fighters first captured Mosul and then marched on to reach the outskirts of Baghdad and Erbil. In a short time, the fight against IS came to involve the Iraqi armed forces, the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF),[60] various Kurdish forces, several self-defence groups and tribal factions. Iran was the first foreign country to provide military assistance, partly because Sunni jihadis came within 25 miles of its border. US airstrikes against IS began in August 2014 but were initially restricted to Sinjar. In September 2014, the US formed 'The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS', consisting of 79 countries and institutions. However, the coalition's airstrike campaign and ground combat operations 'Operation Inherent Resolve' only began to engage seriously in 2015, supporting the recapture of Tikrit in April, Ramadi in December, Fallujah in June 2016 and Mosul in July 2017.

Looking back from a conflict prevention perspective, the full-blown emergence of IS could have been foreseen prior to its dramatic seizure of Mosul, which brought in cash, recruits and weapons in large quantities. In late 2013/early 2014, IS was already on the rise before it morphed from a shadowy insurgent network into a quasi-state that held territory, collected taxes and conducted large-scale military operations.[61] The Iraqi government did in fact request international (US) assistance, but the Obama administration declined to intervene militarily – acting only after Mosul had fallen and IS

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59   Rudolf, I., *The Sunnis of Iraq's "Shia" Paramilitary Powerhouse*, The Century Foundation, 2020, online.

60   The PMF was mobilised after a fatwa from Iraq's top Shi'a cleric (marja'iya), Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, mobilised tens of thousands of volunteers, mostly Shi'a, that formed or joined more than 60 armed groups.

61   IS captured swathes of Anbar and Nineweh provinces in 2013, months before the fall of Mosul. Heibner, S et al., *Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes,* London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017.

had taken control of a third of the country, with both Baghdad and Erbil under threat.[62] Allowing IS to consolidate control of Mosul and much of Anbar dramatically raised the costs and duration of the military campaign needed to defeat it. What transpired was devastating urban warfare in mostly Sunni-dominated cities, thus, in a sense, aggravating the original problem. The US military used 29,000 munitions in the form of bombs, rockets and artillery during the campaign to liberate Mosul alone, decimating basic infrastructure. The capital city of Anbar province, Ramadi, was reported to have been 80 per cent destroyed by the 2015 liberation campaign – a fate not dissimilar to that of Raqqa in neighbouring Syria. Moreover, had IS not taken Mosul and threatened Baghdad, the Iraqi government would not have become as dependent on the mobilisation of an array of armed groups, often supported by sectarian and regional actors, that helped prevent the outright collapse of the state but went on to subtly undermine it afterwards.

Table 5   Key conflict periods and conflict factors in Iraq's war against IS

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From margi-nalisation to protests and insurgency 2011 to 2013	Al-Maliki government versus Sunni protestors and an emerging IS *Turning point to next period*: Infiltration and capture of key Sunni cities	Massive protests spread throughout Iraq in Sunni-majority areas including Fallujah, Ramadi and Anbar against the Shia-dominated government of al-Maliki. Sunni insurgency intensified and Islamic State of Iraq launched its 'Breaking the Walls' campaign carrying out 24 bombings and orchestrated prison breaks.	• Repressive government response to protests (n) • Proliferation of jihadis in Syria (n) • Breakout of al-Qaeda prisoners (n) • US troop withdrawal (n)
From insurgency to full-scale war Late 2013 to mid-2014	IS versus a fragmented Iraqi army *Turning point to next period*: Capture of Mosul and march on Baghdad/Erbil	IS launched a 12-month campaign, 'Soldiers' Harvest', against Iraqi security forces to sap morale, including an attack on the Abu Ghraib prison freeing between 500 and 1,000 inmates, including senior al-Qaeda leaders and other militants. IS infiltrated Fallujah and Ramadi after months of mounting violence, mainly in the Sunni Anbar province.	• Collapse Iraqi army (n) • Lack of early action against IS (n) • Local disaffected residents facilitate IS insurgency (c)

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62   The US administration did expedite arms deliveries to Baghdad in late 2013 and early 2014, as well as providing greater intelligence support via occasional unarmed drone flights.

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From full-scale war to entrenched caliphate Mid-2014 to late 2015	IS militants versus a crippled Iraqi army, as well as the PMF and Iranian forces *Turning point to next period:* Launch of coalition campaign against IS	IS militants took over Mosul, Tikrit and Ramadi in a large offensive and seized the border crossing at Abu Kamal with Syria. IS extended its control to the Yazidi towns of Sinjar and Zumar, forcing thousands to flee. IS marched on Baghdad and Erbil. Iranian forces deployed to support Iraqi troops. Establishment of a caliphate rebranded as the Islamic State, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph in Mosul. Sistani responded to IS with a fatwa calling Iraqis to arms. Tens of thousands of men, mostly Shi'a, joined new and old armed groups, a number of them supported by Iran. Resignation of PM Nouri al-Maliki and the announcement of the creation of a broad, US-led international coalition to defeat IS.	• Collapse of Iraqi army (c) • Creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (n) • Influx of foreign militants in support of IS (n) • US-led global coalition forms (n)
From entrenched caliphate to fall of the caliphate Late 2015 to 2017	IS versus coalition forces (Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), PMF and international) *Turning point to next period*: Declaration of victory against IS	Launch of the US-led campaign against IS named 'Operation Inherent Resolve'. Gradual recapture of Baiji Refinery, Sinjar Ramadi, Kirkuk and Fallujah in 2016 and a large-scale campaign to liberate Mosul. Mosul is recovered in July 2017, followed by Tal Afar, Hawija, al-Qaim and Rawa, the last towns under IS control. Increased IS suicide attacks in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Najaf, Samarra, Tikrit, Karbala and Nasriyah. PM al-Abadi declared victory over IS in December 2017.	• Iraqi forces start recovery through training and creation of Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) (c) • Legalisation of the PMF (c) • US coalition airstrikes cause large-scale destruction and casualties due to dense urban warfare (c) • Large-scale displacement (n)

Periods	Key contestation	Synopsis	Major conflict factors (continuity (c) / new (n))
From insurgency to guerrilla *tactics* 2018 to 2020	IS versus ISF and PMF	IS continues to strike via sleeper cells and guerrilla warfare in hard-to-reach mountainous areas and occasionally conducts suicide attacks in main cities. The gradual withdrawal of US and Coalition troops, weakened state institutions and mounting political, economic and health crises in Iraq facilitated IS insurgency.	• ISF remain weak, as does the state (c) • Withdrawal of coalition combat (support) troops (n) • PMF become more influential (c) • Continuing marginalisation of Sunni communities (c)
	Turning point to next period: Resumption of IS insurgency in main Sunni cities (if)	Preventative military approaches by CTS and PMF are successful but are not comprehensive. The government lacks policies at the national and local level to reintegrate Sunni communities and address grievances.	

Main sources: Lister, C., *Profiling the Islamic State,* Brookings Doha Center, 2020; Hamasaeed, S., *Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War,* USIP, 2020; Hashim, A., 'The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate*', Middle East Policy,* Vol. 21, Issue 4, 2014, pages 69-83; Mardini, R., *Preventing the Next Insurgency: A Pathway for Reintegrating Iraq's Sunni Population,* Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020; Schmid, A., *Challenging the Narrative of the Islamic State*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015; Van Veen, E. and N. Grinstead, *Iraqi Imbroglio: The Islamic State and beyond – A brief analysis of the 2014 political-security crisis*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2014.

Ever since IS lost its last stronghold in 2017, security experts have warned about the risk of resurgence. The only reliable way to reduce this risk is to address reconciliation and grievances with and within Iraq's Sunni community, which is not happening at present. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case as an initial popular campaign of revenge has been followed by a government policy of further neglect.[63] The preceding analysis has highlighted a few further issues for consideration:

i. Intra-Sunni dynamics in Iraq have an outsized impact on the country's stability and even regional security but remain neglected and marginalised in Iraq's political discourse. In fact, the Sunni socio-political and economic landscape of Iraq has arguably been neglected since 2003 at a huge cost to the country. Even though IS has been territorially defeated, conditions within the Sunni community are poor and likely to set the parameters of potential future insurgency in Iraq.[64]

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63   See for example: Taub, B., *Iraq's post-ISIS campaign of revenge*, The New Yorker, December 2018, online.
64   For instance: Haddad, F., *Competing Victimhoods in a Sectarian Landscape,* Maydan, October 2016, online.

ii. The war against IS liberated mainly Sunni-dominated territories but was largely
    fought by non-Sunni forces. During the US-backed military campaign against IS,
    Sunni leaders were denied numerous requests to participate and were often only
    allowed to operate with sponsorship from Baghdad or Erbil. This has helped to bring
    about a victory that is a partial memory rather than a collective one, which is further
    strengthened by national level politics in which Sunni political elites (are forced to)
    seek legitimacy by aligning with Shi'a and Kurdish elites in Baghdad/Erbil or serve as
    their local proxies.

iii. The weakness of Iraqi state institutions and the influence of a range of armed groups
    across the post-war politico-security landscape has produced political barriers that
    have hindered reintegration. The influence of such groups is especially salient where
    demographics are mixed, which provides an incentive to alter ethnic and religious
    balances in favour of such groups. They have also transformed their territorial control
    of liberated areas into political influence and economic gains by instating mayors
    and governors affiliated with them.[65]

iv. The most sensitive reintegration problem concerns the families of IS members.
    This, too, is a problem that persists due to a weak and fragmented government,
    which has lacked a national plan and effective policies. Until these families are either
    freed or dealt with through the criminal justice system, they remain a risk as well as
    a potential source of grievance due to their generally poor treatment.

v.   More than 1.5 million Iraqis, the majority Sunni, remain displaced from their homes
    several years after the fight against IS ended.[66] Sunni leaders have received little
    help from the central government, which is more focused on smoking out remaining
    militants. This situation is also likely to reproduce grievances within the Sunni
    community and drive future instability.

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65 See for example Clingendael's work on the Hashd al-Sha'abi: https://www.clingendael.org/research-
    program/levant including: Ezzeddine, N., Sulz, M. and E. van Veen, *The Hashd is dead, long live the Hashd!*
    Fragmentation and consolidation, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.
66 See: https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq (accessed 30 November 2020).

5 EU institutional policies and interventions in the Iraqi civil war

The EU has been a partner of Iraq since 2003, engaging originally as one of the country's main donors at the 2003 Madrid Conference after the US-led invasion 'Helping the Iraqi People Build a new Iraq'. At the time, the EU and its Member States pledged US$1.44 billion to the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI).[67] It subsequently launched the civil crisis management mission EUJUST LEX-Iraq in 2005 as well as establishing a small delegation in Baghdad in December of the same year.[68] EUJUST LEX-Iraq was the first EU integrated Rule of Law mission under the CSDP with a mandate primarily geared towards training high- and mid-level officials in the criminal justice system. It was entirely based in Brussels from 2005 to 2009, providing training only in Europe. From 2009 to 2013, the mission operated from Baghdad with satellite offices in Erbil and Basra. Although the mission trained over 7,000 officials during its lifecycle, its impact appears to have been highly constrained by prevailing levels of insecurity and the absence of a more holistic approach to rule of law development.[69]

Building on the International Compact with Iraq (2007) and wishing to shift its support from short-term emergency reconstruction projects towards longer-term development (2009), the EU put its relations with Iraq on a legal footing through the EU-Iraq Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which was concluded in November 2009, signed in 2012, and came into effect in 2018 (nine years later). It focused on governance, socioeconomic recovery, water management and agriculture.[70] In January 2010, the EU and Iraq signed an Energy Memorandum of Understanding and the EU deployed an Election Assessment Team (EAT) at the request of the Government of Iraq to support the Iraqi parliament (Council of Representatives) ahead of the elections in March 2010.

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67 Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, the EU did not maintain relations with Iraq. For more details on the Madrid conference: https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/26038.htm (accessed 27 November 2020).

68 Council Joint Action 2005/190/CFSP of 7 March 2005, online (accessed 27 November 2020).

69 See: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/eujust-lex-iraq/pdf/facsheet_eujust-lex_iraq_en.pdf (accessed 10 January 2021).

70 The EU-Iraq PCA did not come into force until 2018 but nevertheless in the meantime constituted the legal basis for the EU's engagement in Iraq.

The EU's institutional response to the emergence of Islamic State (2014–2017)

European engagement in Iraq reverted to humanitarian assistance in 2014 when IS marched on Baghdad, mobilising about €1 billion over the next few years. The European Commission's humanitarian office ECHO established itself in Erbil in 2014 and implemented an Iraq-wide humanitarian assistance programme reaching 3.2 million internally displaced Iraqi and 250,000 Syrian refugees over the next two years. From 2015 onwards, the EU also engaged in a number of recovery activities – including national reconciliation and stabilisation efforts (provision of security and basic services, initial rehabilitation of infrastructure), removing unexploded ordinance, counter-terrorism training, protection of cultural heritage, accountability for IS crimes and border control capacity building – via projects financed by the Instrument Contributing to Peace and Stability.[71] An example of a national reconciliation effort is the 'Supporting Iraq National Reconciliation' project (CMI, 2015–2017) focusing on comprehensive (re-)integration of Sunni 'opposition' into national politics without, however, achieving much by way of concrete results. Moreover, in 2015, UNDP established the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) at the request of the Government of Iraq and with substantial EU support to stabilise areas liberated from IS (i.e. mostly Kirkuk, Nineveh and Anbar). Operating rapidly and efficiently, it focused on the rehabilitation of public infrastructure (especially schools and hospitals), electricity and livelihood opportunities through cash-for-work programmes.[72]

The EU also adopted its strategy for Syria and Iraq in 2015, which enabled greater attention for the security side of the conflict such as strengthening Iraqi counter-terrorism capabilities (strategy, interoperability and respect for human rights), and training for Iraqi federal and local police forces, as well as Kurdish paramilitary and intelligence forces (Zeravani and Asaysh) in areas liberated from IS. Despite paying some attention to the root causes of IS in Iraq – namely the US-led invasion, exclusive governance and abusive rule – the regional strategy focused squarely on IS, an omission which has characterised EU intervention in Iraq ever since.[73] It has been in similar vein that the annual EU Council conclusions between 2014 and 2019 did not take stock of the destructive legacy of al-Maliki either, be it in terms of the grievances or in terms

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71 See: https://icspmap.eu/ (Iraq)

72 See: https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/all-projects/funding-facility-for-stabilization.html (accessed 27 November 2020).

73 For example, not being clear on what else was 'regional' about the 'regional strategy' ultimately made it an anti-IS strategy. See: Council conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat of 16 March 2015, online (accessed 29 November 2020). The annex contains the Council Conclusions while the annex to the annex contains 'elements for an EU regional strategy'.

of the sectarianism his rule deepened.[74] And neither did the EU Council conclusions meaningfully highlight Sunni marginalization between 2014 and 2019, even though they regularly mention problems faced by Yazidi and Christian minorities.[75]

EU institutional engagement after Islamic State (2017–2020)

As territories held by IS were progressively liberated, the EU reintroduced a development dimension to its engagement while maintaining its humanitarian assistance at a lower but appreciable level of funding. A key intervention in the post-IS period was the launch of the European Union Advisory Mission in support of the Security Sector Reform in Iraq (EUAM in Iraq) in October 2017.[76] A CSDP civilian mission tasked with implementation of the civilian-related aspects of the Iraqi National Security Strategy, EUAM focused mostly on: (i) providing strategic advice on the National Strategy and SSR coordination; (ii) national security legislation; (iii) command and control and crisis management; (iv) strategic human resources management; (v) countering terrorism and organised crime; (vi) modernisation of federal intelligence; (vii) integrated border management.[77]

In 2018, the EU replaced/complemented its regional strategy on Syria and Iraq with one dedicated to Iraq itself. It essentially laid out a roadmap balancing longer-term development and reconciliation objectives with shorter-term humanitarian aid and stabilisation initiatives.[78] One pertinent aspect – especially given the low prioritisation of such work by the Iraqi Government itself – has been the EU's commissioning of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) to create and run a project fostering the resolution of grievances between local actors and the Iraqi Government, and among local leaders themselves, in Basra, Nineveh, Anbar and Salah ad-Din. In Nineveh, in particular, the project appears to have laid the foundations for dialogue between the Yazidis and Sunni tribes. To underline its engagement, the EU co-chaired the February 2018 Kuwait 'International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq' where it also pledged EUR 400 million in grants to support reconstruction and reconciliation in Iraq.[79]

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74   Excepting an implicit reference in the EU Council conclusions of 2014.

75   EU Council conclusions of 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 (all accessed 10 January 2021).

76   Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/1869 of 16 October 2017, online (accessed 27 November 2020).

77   Key Iraqi partners include the Ministry of Interior, the Office of the National Security Adviser, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Border Points Commission and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

78   For greater detail on objectives and strategic rationale, see the European Council meeting proceedings of 22 January 2018, online (accessed 27 November 2020).

79   In total, the international community pledged US$30 billion in a mix of grants, loans and export credits against an Iraqi needs assessment of US$90 billion.

Interim conclusions

Simply put, EU engagement in Iraq shifted from statebuilding (before IS) to humanitarian/stabilisation efforts (during IS) and back to statebuilding (after IS). Starting in 2014, the EU has provided significant levels of aid to Iraq, which has helped mitigate the impact of the brutal fight against IS via humanitarian aid and recovery initiatives in affected governorates. The problem has been the conceptualisation of the fight against IS – or rather, the lack of it. There is little on record of the period in the run up to the fall of Mosul being seen in policy terms as having played a fundamental role in bringing about the tragic years that followed. In other words, the rule of Prime Minister al-Maliki does not seem to have triggered any alarm bells in Brussels, which simply continued training Iraqi legal professionals via EUJUST-LEX while the Iraqi state was being thoroughly politicised and put on a clientelist footing. Even during the fight against IS, its defeat was prioritised as a standalone issue unconnected with the fact that it was largely a homegrown phenomenon. The EU Council conclusions between 2014 and 2019 neither included Iraqi domestic politics in their analysis as a root cause for the emergence of IS nor pointed to the problem of ongoing Sunni marginalisation. After the defeat of IS, there is some evidence of greater EU recognition of the need for reconciliation although without mention of Iraq's Sunnis, focusing largely on Christian and Yazidi minorities.[80] If the EU Council conclusions are taken as proxy for the focus of EU diplomatic activity in Iraq itself, this suggests limited advocacy or programmatic action with the exception of the aforementioned HD Centre initiative. In other words, the EU's political strategy for Iraq appears to be limited and lacking in acknowledgment of the key domestic political dynamics that led to war and crisis. Table 6 below maps the main EU policy packages against the course of the civil war.

Table 6   EU institutional policy and interventions during the Iraqi civil war

Period	2011–2013	Late 2013 to mid-2014	Mid-2014 to late 2015	Late 2015–2017	2018–2020
Conflict phase	From marginalisation to protests and insurgency	From insurgency to full-scale war	From full-scale war to entrenchment of the caliphate	From entrenchment of the caliphate to its fall	From insurgency to guerrilla tactics
Period	2003-2014		2014-2017		2017-2020
EU policy & intervention logic	Supporting Iraqi statebuilding (reconstruction, development, EUJUST-LEX, elections)		Turning to the fight against IS (humanitarian aid, stabilisation, training ISF, reconciliation)		Supporting Iraqi reconstruction (mix of humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid, EUAM in Iraq)

80   See footnote 75 for hyperlinks to the respective EU Council conclusions.

Based on the preceding analysis, a few observations can be made regarding the relevance of EU policy to the conflict cycle of the Iraqi civil war. They are summarised in Table 7 and discussed below.

Table 7   Major strengths and weaknesses of EU institutional policy / interventions in the Iraqi civil war

		Strength	Weakness
Strategic		*Iraq (1)*: The EU's Iraq policy evolved with the conflict once it had broken out (but did not anticipate it from a conflict prevention perspective)	*Iraq (2)*: While a regional policy was agreed in 2015 it barely traced IS back to domestic Iraqi politics and focused squarely on IS as radical extremist group operating across the region (e.g. EU Council conclusions 2014-2019) *Iraq (3):* The rising tensions between Iran and the US after 2018 played out to a significant extent in Iraq, but the EU/E3's nuclear deal strategy nor its Iraq strategy addressed this issue[81] *Iraq (4)*: The EU as an entity did not contribute militarily to crisis management, including as part of the International Coalition
Operational		*Iraq (5):* EU humanitarian aid is successful throughout and after the fight against IS *Iraq (6)*: The EU recognises the need for reconciliation initiatives, but diplomatic focus and practical efforts remain limited	*Iraq (7)*: The political insight that the dynamic of Iraqi statebuilding prior to 2014 (Sunni marginalisation, growing authoritarianism) was a major cause of conflict is not clearly apparent in diplomatic action or programming. The same applies to fragmented and divided national governance after 2018 *Iraq (8)*: Although the EU mobilised substantial financial means, these were spread out over a large number of themes with few staff, making it difficult to maintain coherence *Iraq (9)*: The EU field(ed)(s) two CDSP missions – EUJUST-LEX and EUAM in Iraq – suffered from substantial performance problems due to limitations in their setup

A few points of Table 7 deserve a short explanation. To start with, a major difference with EU engagement in Syria has been that the Iraqi government remained a workable partner for Brussels to cooperate with. Yet, the run-up to 2014 also shows how deceptive

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[81] Van Veen, E., *Coming out and breaking out: The US, Iran and Europe go nuclear*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

this modus operandi was as al-Maliki re-organised and cannibalised the Iraqi state to serve his own interests, those of the Da'awa party and, up to a point, Iran. The EU did not impose any conditionality on its engagement in the face of Iraq's slide towards authoritarianism. It is also worth noting that the glacial progress of the PCA (start 2009; finish 2018, nearly a full decade 'in the making') limited the amount of political pressure the EU could bring to bear on Iraq as partner country. Although one would anticipate a learning curve, there is limited evidence that the EU engages differently today in view of the self-centred rule of Iraq's political class, even though this has already led to massive protests for several years in a row *(Iraq 1, 6 and 7)*.

As in Syria, the EU was irrelevant to the military dimension of the fight against IS in Iraq due to its being incapable of mobilising kinetic resources. But it did mobilise twice its next closest alternative in the form of a CSDP mission: before the fight against IS and after the fight against IS. Their foci on respectively the rule of law and civilian security sector reform made sense in their context of deployment. Nevertheless, both missions suffered from key performance issues:

- In the case of EUJUST-LEX, the comparative evidence suggests that running a rule of law mission as a training-focused capacity-building effort, at distance, and without being embedded in a broader rule of law improvement effort supported by a political strategy, is largely a waste of resources.[82] If one is charitable, it could be argued that the late 2000s were early days for such insights.

- In turn, the EUAM in Iraq seems to struggle with fragmentation of effort as well as serious quantitative and qualitative shortages in personnel. It is also focused on civilian aspects of security sector reform in the aftermath of a conflict that teems with military problems (such as the future of the PMF) and engages deeply with the Ministry of Interior – an inward-looking organisation with extensive links to Iran, requiring a high level of experience, soft skills and political savvy – most of which the mission appears to lack. *(Iraq 7 and 9)*.

In terms of addressing the softer aspects of the Iraqi civil war, the EU was effective in mobilising humanitarian assistance from 2014 onwards – in part by establishing the European Commission's DG ECHO country headquarters in Erbil. Much of the EU's engagement during the conflict was humanitarian in nature. Moreover, due to its ability to work directly with the Iraqi Government, it could start recovery and reconstruction programmes in a timely manner. Starting preparations in 2016, the EU could initiate its first initiatives in 2017 via the Funding Facility for Stabilization which followed in the footsteps of the military campaign against IS. It restored at least some basic services

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82 Van Veen, E., W. Bos and M. van Beijnum, *Mission impossible? Police and justice capacity building by international peacekeeping missions*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

(education, healthcare, water and electricity) and job opportunities in liberated areas that would otherwise have been worse off.

Yet, despite these efforts, EU support appears to enjoy little political and social visibility in parts of Iraq (KRI especially), which reinforced its image as 'payer' rather than 'player'.[83] This underlines the view that the EU's political strategy and diplomatic advocacy can be improved. Better mobilisation of the EU's political clout might also have helped to push the issue of reconciliation more firmly onto the national political agenda as a crucial 'soft' aspect of post-conflict recovery – in addition to the EU's own programmatic initiative *(Iraq 2, 5, 6 and 8)*.

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83   See: Wirya, K., D. Ala'Aldeen and K. Palani, *Perceptions of EU Crisis Response in Iraq*, MERI and EUNPACK, 2017, online (accessed 27 November 2020). The report focused on the Erbil, Sulamaniyah, Dohuk and Kirkuk governorates.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Engaging in the conflict cycle in other countries to gain outcomes favourable to one's own interests is akin to playing in the champions league of foreign policy. Doing this effectively and responsibly requires a coherent and full-spectrum political strategy as well as the diplomatic, financial, developmental and military means to deliver it. It is clear from the scope of the security interests articulated in the European Union's (EU) Global Strategy (2016) and its many associated foreign policy statements that the EU intends to meet these requirements. However, study of EU institutional policies and interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars highlights that it falls well short of doing so. As a result, EU institutions are not well placed to intervene effectively in high intensity conflicts with existential features such as these two civil wars. This observation may extend to violent conflict more broadly.[84]

The analysis has brought to light several key reasons why EU institutions struggle to intervene effectively in conflict elsewhere. First, EU Member States have so far been reluctant to endow EU institutions with the required full-spectrum toolkit and a fully interoperable bureaucracy. The EU is especially incapable of deploying – directly or indirectly – credible military force on a battlefield. Given the mixed track record of bringing about political change by force of arms, it can be legitimately debated whether it is desirable to develop this capability. But for now, the EU has indicated its intention of doing so in recognition of the fact that there are conflict circumstances in which only the deployment of force can prevent worse (such as war crimes and atrocities) or create conditions for negotiating a new political settlement. This problem can in part be resolved by creating the required institutions, capabilities and procedures.

Second, even if EU institutions had the required toolkit and interoperable bureaucracy, it would still lack the strategic culture and mechanisms that can generate coherent and long-term interventions, including force deployment. The geopolitical interests of EU Member States are diverse – sometimes they compete – which limits the demand for EU foreign policy as a public good that can be produced by the EU's institutions to address

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84 Many conflicts are characterised by sporadic episodes of high-intensity violence (e.g. Libya), continuous low-level violence (e.g. Turkey versus the PKK or Egypt in the Sinai), or a mix of both (e.g. Israel versus Palestine), instead of by continuous high-intensity violence (e.g. Iraq and Syria). Value or ideological compatibility between the fighting parties also tends to be less black/white in many cases than in Syria and Iraq.

conflict as a collective action problem. This issue cannot be resolved without developing greater political agreement on the need to be able to intervene in conflict elsewhere in times of significant great power competition.[85] In brief, if the EU as a whole does not see a need for being able to influence the course of conflict in neighbouring countries like Libya, Syria or the Ukraine, why would any great or regional power take it seriously in respect of such conflicts?

These limitations make EU institutions 'event takers' in conflicts that feature high levels of violence and/or existential features. That is problematic because it is exactly such conflicts that produce negative effects that affect the EU, such as damaging the international legal order, generating human flight, causing developmental regress and regional conflict spillover, radicalisation and transnational organised crime.[86] Even though key elements of the EU's CSDP architecture that would enable more direct intervention in such conflicts – such as the global human rights sanction regime or the European Peace Facility – were not yet in place during much of both civil wars (see Section 1), it would hardly have been possible to use them due to the aforementioned foreign policy divergence among EU Member States and lack of strategic culture / threat perception.

In turn, this suggests that a full spectrum upgrade of the EU's foreign policy and toolkit will not suffice in the absence of a shared strategic culture. This is likely to be elusive, efforts such as the Strategic Compass notwithstanding. After all, some EU Member States have a provincial foreign policy and others a more global orientation; some have a middle-of-the-road foreign policy while yet others take a more assertive posture. Despite promising recent policy and institutional improvements, this strategic challenge is likely to persist in the near future. Wholesale replacement in EU foreign policy decision making of unanimity by qualified majority voting would leave the underlying diversity of Member State interests intact, which is bound to create problems – even though the experience in some policy areas suggests that the introduction of (the threat of) qualified majority voting can produce smoother decision-making by unanimity.

With this in mind, the core recommendation of the paper is to increase the effectiveness of EU interventions in high-intensity conflicts by institutionalising full-spectrum decision making, policy implementation and force deployment modalities for the EU as a whole, *as well as for EU coalitions of the willing*.

The parallel existence of such tracks will enable the EU to act jointly in conflicts where Member States have more or less compatible foreign policy preferences with matching intensity preferences. It will also enable it to act in coalitions in conflicts where Member

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85   See also Kribbe (2020), *op.cit.*

86   Batrawi (2020), *op.cit.*

States have more or less compatible foreign policy preferences with a mixed distribution of intensity preferences (like Iraq, or arguably Syria). EU foreign policy inaction, including institutional paralysis, will continue to occur where Member States' foreign policy preferences are largely not compatible and have a sufficient quorum of high-intensity preferences.

Table 8   'Prisoner's dilemma' of EU Member State foreign policy interests on a particular conflict

	Low-intensity preferences prevail	Mixed distribution of intensity preferences (low, medium, high)	Quorum of high-intensity preferences
Interests are largely compatible	Inaction or joint action	Joint action or coalition action	Joint action
Interests are largely not compatible	Inaction	Coalition action or inaction	Inaction or paralysis

Note: Whether a mixed distribution of intensity preferences in a case of compatibility of interests leads to joint or coalition action depends on which Member States (large, medium, small) have what kind of intensity preference (high, medium, low) and the diplomatic skill of EU institutions and dedicated Member States to create a collective will for action. The same holds for coalition versus inaction as possible results of a mixed distribution of intensity preferences in a case of incompatibility of interests.

A joint modality that enables conflict intervention by the EU as a whole could consist of a newly-established European Security Council, supported by the European External Action Service (including scalable conflict task forces built on existing inter-service coordination platforms – see below), an enlarged but now operational EU Military Headquarters and dedicated European or national force assets.[87] A modality for coalitions of the willing could consist of a fast-track Council Qualified Majority Vote for a new PESCO-type 'Council'[88] supported by an EEAS-based conflict task force, a Service Level Agreement with an operationalised EU Military Headquarters and national force assets. To operationalise these modalities and give them teeth, EU Member States also need to install two critical system upgrades regarding the toolkit for EU engagement in conflict.

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87   This echoes recent work of the Dutch Advisory Committee for International Affairs (AIV). See: AIV, *Europese veiligheid: Tijd voor nieuwe stappen* [European security: Time for new initiatives], The Hague: AIV Advies No. 112, 2020.

88   That is to say, a subset of EU Member States at ministerial level on a voluntary basis with joint decision-making authority for their collective intervention in a particular conflict under an EU banner.

Table 9   Practical toolkit upgrades to turn EU institutions from 'event takers' into 'event co-makers' and from 'payers' into 'players'

Upgrade	Objective	Role of the EU institutions
(1) Enable rapid mobilisation of dedicated conflict task forces built on existing inter-services consultation formats	Create better political conflict strategies that leverage existing EU capabilities more coherently	Serve as fulcrum for EU foreign policy
Explanation Rapidly scalable teams of civil servants and external experts with a core of EEAS officials[89] that are managed at director or special representative level and which have a pre-set budget for diplomatic action as well as, crucially, specified exceptional authorities to guide policy making and financial decision making across the European Commission and the EEAS pertaining to the conflict for which they are responsible. They would be tasked to design a high-grade political conflict strategy, creating and maintaining Member State buy-in, and ensuring that short- and long-term interventions are strategically aligned and coherently implemented. Located within the EEAS, these teams would report directly to either the High Representative's office or to the Secretary General's office. Such teams would be based on a generic conflict task force template that can be activated by the Foreign Affairs Council based on a proposal by the High Representative. Approval is by unanimity, after which further Council decision making on conflict task force proposals are made by qualified majority voting. The EU budget makes provision for the creation of 3 or 4 such conflict task forces per year and limits their existence to a four-year term after which they are automatically discontinued.		
(2a) Enable indirect material support for partner armed forces via the European Peace Facility	Create the ability to engage in the crisis management part of the conflict cycle	Act as secretariat for coalitions of the willing
Explanation The European Peace Facility enables training, financing, supplying and mentoring of partner armed forces, including of the non-state variety. It allows the EU to sustain and expand existing armed forces on the battlefield in an indirect manner, such as by supporting the likes of the FSA or YPG in Syria at scale. The fund is kept off-budget so that it can be financed by those Member States that use it. Decision-making procedures depend on whether it is tapped via the joint modality (Foreign Affairs Council) or the coalition of the willing modality (PESCO-type Council).		

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89   Drawn, for example, from the relevant EEAS regional directorate and the EEAS Integrated Approach for Security and Peace directorate (previously called PRISM).

Upgrade	Objective	Role of the EU institutions
(2b) Enable direct deployment of limited high–end EU expeditionary military forces and/or EU Battlegroup(s) in support of allied armed forces	Create the ability to engage in the crisis management part of the conflict cycle	Serve as agent of the Council in its capacity as principal

Explanation

A limited high-end EU intervention capability consisting of e.g. special forces, drones and combat helicopters to work with partner armed forces on the ground (including of the non-state variety) that can give them an edge – akin to the US working with the Syrian Kurdish YPG or the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Such forces should be recruited from among EU citizens, paid for from the EU budget and report directly to an operational EU Military Headquarters. They can only be deployed under the joint modality. If their deployment is proposed by a newly created and approved conflict task force, this is decided based on qualified majority voting. Alternatively, the EU battlegroups can be revived and refitted for the same purpose, although battalion-size infantry formations are likely less suited to high-intensity conflicts. Initially, such as an instrument would need to be created off-budget given article 41 (2) TEU (as is the case with the EPF), but it might be incorporated into the EU budget in the longer term whenever the inevitable next round of treaty changes comes around.

Notably, both upgrades require significant parallel or prior improvement in the quality of the EU's conflict analyses, as well as the processes by which such analyses are connected to conflict strategy design, review and implementation. Examination of EU institutional interventions during the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars demonstrates that its understanding of both conflicts was partial at best and dangerously incomplete at worst. Unsurprisingly, this creates a risk of interventions doing more harm than good. While 'doing harm' cannot be avoided in the fog of war, there is ample scope to improve the current conflict analysis practices of the EU institutions, recent progress notwithstanding (a process driven by the EEAS directorate's 'Integrated Approach for Security and Peace').

The two conflicts assessed in this report suggest that EU institutions do a decent job on the softer aspects of conflict – mostly humanitarian aid and peacebuilding – that help mitigate its awful consequences. But if the EU wishes to engage effectively across the entire conflict cycle, it needs to create institutional modalities that can better navigate alternating constellations of Member State interests, develop more coherent political intervention strategies backed by high-quality resources and be able to deploy limited force on the battlefield.