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THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE SINCERITY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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No solution to Syrian crisis with Assad in power. Source: Arabnews.
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1.0 Introduction

The role played by the European Union (EU) in the crisis in Syria has not really manifested in a significant measure despite being affected by the conflict. It can be noted that just before the outbreak of the crisis, the EU's relationship with Syria was rather somewhat extensive, economic and political situations were being improved upon through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as well as the European neighbourhood policy, at the outbreak of the crisis, all these efforts were abandoned.

The EU became interested in applying sanctions while its mission in Damascus was reduced, it resorted to extreme political measures which resulted to the political advantage it had. The situation in Syria called for policies and plans that are fundamental enough to bring the desired improvement in the life of the people (Berti, 2015). The EU, however, had policies that did exactly the reverse of this desire. The sanctions it resorted to made the condition of the ordinary people even worse and also increased the growth of the defective economy. Also, no serious importance was attached to social issues such as justice and accountability by the EU being some of the main causes of the crisis. These and some of the vital issues surrounding the crisis as they bother on the role of the EU in the crisis as well as the way forward will be the focus here.

1.1 Research Questions

In addressing the core essence of this work, it is pertinent to identify and clarify some germane posers that serve as guide to this work. In doing this, this work will provide answer to the following research questions:

1. What dimension did the EU policy on Syrian crisis take?
2. How fundamental is the impact of EU in Syrian crisis?
3. To what extent is the crisis aggravated or abated by EU response?
4. What has been the relationship between Syrian and EU before and since the crisis?

1.2 Hypothesis

The following hypothesis will be tested and answered in the study:

- 1 There is a correlation between EU's policy dimension and the persistence of the Syrian crisis.
- 2 There is a relationship between EU's policy and the escalation of the crisis.

1.3 Literature Review

The Crisis as Emboldened

The crisis in Syria got escalated and took another dimension in the wake of Arab spring that started in Tunisia in 2011. The Arab spring started in March 2011 and its effects trickled down to Syria when small and peaceful protesters took to the streets of Damascus Syria demanding political freedom as well as reform in line with democratic process (Berti, 2015).

The Syrian regime in its typical autocratic character did not respond to this the right way, the killing of the young protesters by the security forces of the state triggered an outrage that led to statewide protest. Sirkeci and Cohen (2016) stated further that the protest against the government of al-Assad in Syria and gradually it evolved into an armed conflict between oppositions and government forces in certain cities and then later degenerated into a full scale civil war. Violence became widespread all over the country. This dimension that the crisis assumed has been constantly deepening with several actors getting involved on both sides; the government side and the opposition side. This gave the crisis both a national and international look making it both a civil and international war. In all of this chaos, opportunity was made available to the already existing terrorist groups such as the Islamic State who are more than ready and glad to cause new havocs to anyone that cross their paths, the group used Syria as their base from where they expanded in that axis of the Middle East and launched attacks into Europe to embolden other terrorist group around the world (Berti, 2015) The problematic phenomenon in Syria has grown to become a burden to the world for years now and it has been a problem arriving at a consensual solution to addressing the crisis. International bodies and states such as

the United Nations, the United States of America, Middle East countries as well as the European Union are all concerned and confounded on how best to tackle the crisis.

From the above mentioned dimension, problems and effects that the crisis has presented, it should be noted that the crisis can be examined theoretically using various theories. However, in its international relations dimension, the Realist and Liberalist theories will be used to draw out some realities surrounding the crisis. These will explain the various actors involved and their actions as well as the rationalization of their actions.

1.3.1 Realism

In comprehending this Syrian crisis and the issues it raised, there is the need to look at how the various actors acted. In this line, Realism as a theory will best discuss the Syrian increasing crisis. The Realists, in their tenets and elements put their assumptions in position that explain the situation in Syria. Among the assumptions of Realism three are core in this respect: that state is the central actor in the international politics (state-centrism); this is saying in other words that state is the most important actor in international politics. State is unitary and rational actor that is propelled by egoism and act only in self-interests. These among others, is the security of the state that must be satisfied. Since each state will pursue its security it tends to leave the international system in an anarchic state (Martha, 2017). The characteristic nature of realism is anarchy, it leaves the global stage with as obtained in the state of nature. In this, the state acts in a very self-interested manner as actor that is power hungry. Power, being the most crucial to state is placed far above morality and justice. Situating the Syrian situation within the context of the realists, it appears to justify the realists' assumptions. Several reasons are presented to be responsible for war by Realists. Martha, (2017) further claimed that war is a controlled and rational act and a continuation of politics by other means, the import of Martha position is if war is seen by state as a vital tool that could be deployed to get or increase the power of the state then the state will consider it as a rational political tool. This point is attributable to be one of the causes and escalation of the conflict in Syria. The action of the young protesters in Syria which was triggered by the Arab spring was mainly due to the long stay in power by the Al-Assad and his family where the people experienced authoritarian rule, unemployment and hardship due to the

selfish and undemocratic rule of the government of Syria. When the protests escalated by the repression and force that the Syrian military forces applied and this attracted a reaction from the opposition and this led to full scale war.

Boeri and Brucker (2005) also points out another possible cause of war. According to him: "With many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them, with each state judging its grievances and according to the dictates of its own reason conflict sometimes leading to war is bound to occur". This means that the international system has no government that will enforce law which means state will be able to act in the way they deem fit and get away with it irrespective of the effects on others. Knowing therefore, that states do not have the same desires and interests the pursuit of the different desires and interests of the different states will no doubt result to conflicts. The self-interested nature of the states that are after acquiring and accumulating power will bring conflict and this contextualizes the condition of the Syrian crisis.

Though, the crisis in Syria is mostly between people of the same country fighting one another, however, many studies have submitted that what was really happening in Syria was more of war of proxy. It is considered a proxy war because of the backing of foreign states that each faction in the crisis enjoyed of course for their selfish interest. In this, there is Iran and Russia backing Assad while the United States and Turkey back the opposition.

The European Union could not be said to any different in this respect, although, the EU is acclaimed as champion of human rights and democracy, however, many of the states in EU are not pleased with the idea of accommodating refugees irrespective of the fact that the refugee situation represents a serious issue of human right. Making reference to the realist assumptions of the international system being anarchical and lacking a global government, it then means that the state only acts for its national interest, hence it is only expected that several EU states are not pleased with the accommodation of the Syrian Refugees. To these EU states the refugees will be harmful to their national economies with little or no benefit coming from the refugees for them. Another thing that crisis shows is the inefficiency of the international government as well as law as states only consider their own interests. According to a convention on refugee status as stated in the United Nations' charter, it is obligatory for the EU countries to accommodate the refugees as they are signatories to the convention. However, many of the states declined accepting the

refugees in their increasing number and this reveals the powerless nature of the international law and convention.

1.3.2 Liberalism

In order to have further understanding of the crisis in Syria, it becomes necessary to look at it from another perspective other than the perspective of Realism. In doing this successfully, liberalism comes to play, this theory is believed by Liberals to be an articulate and a practicable international relations theory (Moravesik, 1992). Liberalism presents the main challenge to the ideas of Realism. A strand of liberalism advances that states' economic interdependence would discourage them from resorting to force against one other because it is reasoned that war would impede the prosperity of both side. The other strand of liberalism as often linked with Woodrow Wilson, viewed global peace hinged on the spread of democracy and this is based on the belief that democratic states do not go to war. That democratic states were more peaceful than authoritarian states. A more recent strand of the theory posits that international institutions could be of help in overcoming selfish nature of the character of the state by mainly urging states to give up direct personal interests for the greater gains of lasting cooperation (Walt, 1998).

Situating this within the context of Syrian crisis, it should be noted that the United States America was the primary country that expressed concern in the Syrian situation. Obviously perturbed by the chaos and terrible situation in Syria under the despotic regime of Al-Assad, the United States was of the opinion that Al-Assad would have to step aside and allow Syria embrace and constitute a democratic form of government. Expressing the Liberalists' opinion in this light, America advanced that by the introduction and adoption of democracy in Syria could bring an end to the crisis and restore peace in Syria again. In the view of the Liberalists, "war was a cancer on the body politic. But it was an ailment that human beings, themselves, had the capacity to cure...the 'disease' of war could be successfully treated with the medicine of democracy" (Boyle, 1986). From these views of the Liberalists, if democratic process is constituted and principles adhered to it is capable of breaking the hegemonic strong hold of the ruling elite with its inherent self-interest that is usually violence oriented.

Looking at the views of the liberalists in relation to that of the Realists as they relate to the crisis in Syria, while Liberals opine that actors in international relations address conflict from a selfless perspective caring more about the general good and not from a self-interested angle, it is the

opinion of the Realists that states being the most important actors in the international system are innately selfish and self-interested. The realists' perspective appeared to have played out in Syria in which at the failure of the Geneva II the EU, not pleased with the activities of the Syrian regime restricted its activities in Syria to a large extent thereby forcing the Syrian authority to look towards China and Russia for help and support. Personal Interest and preference could be said to play out here as dissuaded by the Liberalists. If the Syrian regime had stayed in the direction that the EU wanted as regard the Geneva II agreement the EU would not have cut or reduced its help and support for the regime and tended towards the opposition.

According to Liberals' view as reechoed by President Obama in his speech, the liberals are more cooperative in approach in the sense that they produce a conducive environment for mutual cooperation to thrive to pave way for effective peace. This was however not seen or could not be achieved in the case of Syria despite the involvement of the liberalism oriented body like the EU and interest and ideology cannot be spared as the cause for this. Also, it is part of the tenets of liberalism to encourage and promote freedom of expression, it then should be that the interventions international bodies and such as the EU and the United States would achieve this freer expression ideas and help to eliminate or reduce the power of groups that try to subdue the others' views as the later escalation of the crisis suggests.

2.1 The Impact of EU Policies on Syria

The relationship that existed between the European Union and Syria as well as the various policies undertaken by the EU as response to the crisis is the main focus here.

2.1.1 EU-Syria Relationship before the Conflict

Prior to the crisis in Syria that was later escalated by the Arab spring, the EU-Syria Co-operation Agreement of 1977 served as the legal regulation of relationship between the EU and Syria. The agreement saw Syria taking full participation in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This agreement was structured to outline the economic, political and social components. It was put in place to enable Syria to participate fully in the European Neighborhood Policy. The Agreement which was only initiated in 2004 but was not signed was in 2009 agreed to be signed by

members of the EU but this was not to be as the government of Syria asked for time to study the agreement further and this finally resulted to the agreement not being signed. (Ağır, et.al, 2016)

Ağır, et.al, (2016) further buttress the fact that EU made financial commitments meant to inspire reform, particularly political reform, this served as an encouragement to Syria making use of the Governance facility that compensates partners that are doing well with raised financial support. In the Euro-Mediterranean programme, emphases are placed on the need to be committed to the political plurality of the state as well as encouraging citizens' participation in political activities. Also stressed are the need to improve the condition of stateless people, developing the civil society, the issue of respect for human right and decentralization to encourage local democracy among others (Ağır, et.al, 2016).

These are the identified political and social problems in Syria. In fulfillment of these commitments, the EU became the leading contributor in Syria committing €286.5 million to bilateral collaboration with Syria spanning between 1995 and 2016. Since 2000, a sum of € 925 million in form of loans from the European Investment Bank was earmarked for Syria between 2000 to the year 2007 (Ağır, et.al, 2016).

It should be noted that before the crisis began the criticism about the situation of human rights in Syria was very minimal. Criticisms were rather restricted to condemnations of the indiscriminate arrests in 2008, arrest and subsequent sentencing of advocates of human rights in 2010, as well as the sentencing of Tal Al-Mallouhi to a five year jail term in 2011. A statement was issued by the EU's High Representative, Catherine Ashton on the 15th of March 2015 appreciating the release of Haitham Maleh, a lawyer noting it as a first step in the right direction that should be followed up to the complete return of his civil rights not excluding his right to freely travel outside and return to Syria, concerns were also raised on the sentencing of Mr. Ali Al-Abdullah (David and Senne, 2016). The limitation of criticisms prior to the crisis could be seen from the point of view of self-interest as advanced by the realists. All could not have been well with Syria before the crisis but the seemingly silence of the EU at this point restricting its condemnations to few areas may have been caused by its non-serious commitment in terms of resources as it was during and after the conflict.

2.1.2 EU-Syria relationship after the conflict

The EU commitments as regards the addressing the crisis in Syria at this point have surpassed that of its commitments prior to the conflict probably because of the resources it has committed to the struggle, still a matter of interest. While this is not to say that the crisis is finally and completely over, some of the actions the EU has taken have been more if placed side by side with that taken prior to the conflict. According to David and Senne, (2016) barely two months after the crisis began in May 2011 some of the first set of actions taken by the EU against the Syrian government are outlined below:

1. Suspension of the bilateral cooperation programmes that have existed between the EU and the Syrian government under the European Neighbourhood Policy.
2. The draft EU-Syrian Association Agreement was halted.
3. Syrian authorities got suspended from participating in the regional programmes of the EU, also the loan operations and technical assistance by the European Investment Bank to Syria was suspended as well.
4. EU's sanctions on Syria got expanded with time and even its delegation got reduced overtime to only security issues alone.

Syria, on its own did not sit idly by to take all these sanctions as they came, as stated by the foreign minister in June 2011 that they suspend their membership of the Union for the Mediterranean and look elsewhere for friendship and partnership and they actually did turning to China, Iran and Russia.

However, it should be noted that these actions were first taken as follow up to a more specific strategy. The new strategy was later enumerated for Syria after two years tagged "towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis" and was published in June 2013.

2.1.3 The new strategy

In the wake of June 2013 the EU introduced a new strategy towards Syria that replaced the one of 2007, according to Foged and Peri (2016), the new strategy is aimed towards a comprehensive

EU approach to the Syrian crisis. The strategy enumerated the core objectives of the EU in Syria some of these objectives as stated as at then include:

- Backing a political resolution through a strong EU position at the 'Geneva II' international conference.
- Connectwith the opposition in order for it participates and is well represented by legitimate representatives that are able to make commitments at the 'Geneva II' conference.
- Making sure that work is further done to guaranteethat all the areas affected by the crisis have access to humanitarian assistance.
- Improveon relaxing the sanctions regime further so as to encourage support to the Syrian populace.
- Increasing the financial aid by the EU by €400 million in 2013 to cater for the important needs of the affected populacein and around Syria.
- Making sure that support is given to the Syria's neighbours that are accommodating the refugees in order to enhance the capacity.
- Admonishing the United Nations persistently to handle the violations of human rights allegations, fundamental freedoms and international humanitarian law.
- Making sure the EU citizens dealing with the foreign fighters in the crisis ridden zone are not radicalized.
- Plan for a post-conflict phase of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Part of the strategy was to support the efforts by the US and Russia to restorepolitical negotiations in line with the 2012 Geneva II promoting political resolution headed by Syria with a conducive conditions that would entail obtaining an approach that is common with the representatives ofboth sides that requirethe legitimate representatives that are able to make commitments. However, the Geneva II did not succeed and this failure once again brought the political process to a halt. The EU has since been restricted to making contribution revolving around funding of civil society, increased humanitarian financial aid, supporting the opposition in exile as well as increasing sanctions. All these were caused by the Syrian authorities using lethal force on the protesters (Foged and Peri, 2016).

The EU restated its position in a comment it made on the 4th of June 2014 in an official statement regarding the presidential elections in Syria, as it put it "The election on 3 June cannot be considered as a genuinely democratic vote", it urged the Syrian regime to "re-engage in genuine political negotiations that will produce conditions allowing for a real expression of the will of the Syrian people"(Foged and Peri, 2016).

The rise of extreme organizations that are linked with Al Qaeda in Syria, groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al Nusra (JAN) resulted to the formation of 'Counter Terrorism/Foreign Fighters Strategy' by Syria and Iraq in October 2014. Thereafter the major concerns became Terrorism and the problem of Refugee. Hence, the actions and statements by EU consistently border on these two areas and not the political process anymore which the EU maintained it can only support efforts of the United Nations and not take the lead anymore UN (Foged and Peri, 2016). The EU in a statement on the 12th of October 2015 further emphasized that Assad regime could not be a partner in the fight against Dae'sh .

3.1 What the EU should do in Addressing the Syrian Crisis

The direction the EU was focused on as regard addressing the Syrian crisis may not be the right one, placing more emphasis on the negotiation and peace process at the detriment of accountability and responsibility. It could be advanced that the failure of the EU and other international bodies to make the Syrian government to be accountable and hold it responsible for the mayhems and crimes against humanity in 2011 as well as 2012 no doubt may have emboldened the government of Syria to carry out even more vicious brutalities like the chemical attacks (Daniel and Sloane, 2016). This, no doubt, also served as an impetus to the opposition too to engage in heinous activities. This presented a situation of absence of accountability and justice as well as escalated crisis in Syria.

Daniel and Sloane (2016), further stated that in order to correct this, there is the need for the EU to rework its policy that will involve bringing about accountability and justice in Syria which will precede making the first moves to passing a message of encouragement of justice in Syria using the following steps:

1. The EU should take the lead in calling on the Security Council of the United Nations to take the Syrian situation to the ICC. While this may not work out smoothly at the Security Council as a result of the veto power possess by the members some of whom might be in support of the

government of Syria, but it will however serve as an indication that steps towards justice are being taken.

2. Its policy should be reworked to ensure that accountability and justice are demanded and not just focus on peace alone in order for those who perpetrated atrocious acts are not made to go scot free.

3. Working cooperatively with other countries especially those sharing borders with Syria to internally facilitate the prosecution of criminal matters in order to encourage accountability and justice process.

4. Witness protection programme should be created which could enhance criminal suits infuture, knowing that the prosecution of such cases could be within the national courts or at the international level or maybe at even both levels.

5. The EU should give more financial and technical assistance to the Civil Society Organizations in Syria who are about ideas and actions that have to do with transitional justice as well as providing support missions that will advocate for them both within Europe and the United Nations.

6. Some of the allegations raised by those seeking asylum should be seriously looked into by member states of the EU so as to hold those responsible for serious crimes accountable through a process of prosecution.

If the sincerity of the European Union is anything to go by if the views of the Realists are considered, then if the steps enumerated above are judiciously followed the Syrian crisis would be reasonably tacked if not completely put to rest would have been reduced to a very manageable proportion. Individual actors as well as state actors in the international relations will always pursue their interests first irrespective of the projection presented according to Realism. If this is the case, it is up to the major actors in the crisis if they are not pawns themselves in the hand of the self-interested bodies and states to work with the bodies that relatively have genuine interest in resolving the conflict for the benefits of the people of Syria.

Conclusion

While it is true that the crisis in Syria assumed many forms from a highly complicated pattern of insurgency, civil war to proxy, regional and international war as well as terrorism, the real cause of the crisis as well as the public bitterness it generated domestically and internationally can be traced to political oppression. And with sincerity or not, several steps, plans and policies introduced by foreign powers such as the EU did not seem to yield far reaching results in helping to lessen the political oppression. The crisis situation has grown to become even more complicated resulting to the breakdown of the system of governance in that state as well as the economy and the emergence of war economy. This did not take long before it degenerated into a situation of refugees that has come to seriously affect even Europe itself. If man will be able to suppress their innate flaws that is accounted to be responsible for the conflict in the world by the Realists and then seek a common front to tackle a collective problem, in this case the actors in the crisis in Syria, then it will be much more easier for the foreign bodies such as the EU if it has any sincerity of purpose to have a success at resolving the long protracted crisis.

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