

Civil war in Syria - major 2021 challenges from a European security perspective

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Article in short:

- The war in Syria has a more considerable impact on Europe than predicted in 2011.
- Uncontrolled migration has created obstacles to international cooperation in Europe to maintain security at the external borders and threaten the internal movement of people in the Schengen Zone.
- The subsequent challenge to Europe is the threat of terrorism that are evolving under the Syrian conflict. There are at least five large terrorist organisations in this country.
- Humanitarian law does not seem to apply in this war-torn country, and the Geneva Conventions are long forgotten.
- From the European perspective, there is a chance to neutralise, or at least minimise, the effects of such threats as uncontrolled migration, terrorism, and humanitarian crises.

Introduction

The inner conflict in Western Asia has blown hot and cold about foreign states' intervention in Syria's civil war. Initially, tensions started after Arab Spring in 2011, and it was the very beginning of the dispute between the Syrian Arab Republic and its citizens. Subsequently, the situation became even worse when more entities joined the conflict searching for their benefits due to the state's disintegration. In addition to various states taking part in the Syrian war, also international and national organisations, as well as terrorist groups, became involved. Each actor in the conflict has its own goals and can only achieve them by joining one of the coalitions, which automatically turns them into an enemy of the other groups. **Moreover, even though thousands of civilians have died, many more must have fled from their houses, cities are being regularly bombed, the war is ongoing, and chances for a ceasefire seem fairly limited**

After more than a decade of incessant struggles and engagement of many European countries to minimise the Syrian conflict's damaging effects, it is vital to concentrate on current challenges and obstacles. The war in Syria has a more considerable impact on Europe than predicted in 2011, and numerous problems must be solved immediately. **Some of them, such as migration, terrorism, the use of new technologies to wage a war, and the humanitarian**

catastrophe, have been pressing issues for years, while others, such as the involvement of other countries in the conflict, will emerge in months to come if not stopped.

Migration

Overall, migrations, along with clandestine immigration, are the largest challenges for European security. The Syrian conflict has resulted in 5.3 million refugees in neighbouring countries and 6.6 million internally displaced persons¹. Refugees from Syria numbered 378,000 in 2015, accounting for 29% of all of the asylum seekers in the European Union – the highest share of any nation². Besides, among 3 million people who applied for asylum in the EU between 2015 and 2017, more than 800,000 were recorded as Syrian citizens³. Moreover, Syria has remained the main country of origin for asylum seekers in the EU since 2013. In 2020, the number of Syrian first-time asylum applicants in the EU fell to 63 500 from 74 900 in 2019⁴. In addition, it must be underlined that Syrians accounted for 17% of illegal EU border crossings in 2019. **Those people are aware of the European Union's limits and special programmes offered to migrants but still trying to make their way through illicit passages to Europe, risking their lives and disrupting the EU migration policy⁵.**

Uncontrolled migration has created obstacles to international cooperation in Europe to maintain security at the external borders and threaten the internal movement of people in the Schengen Zone. Firstly, a vast number of people are willing to come to Europe, but they are still in Syria. Nevertheless, they are going to cross the border if not stopped. Secondly, there are already dozens of camps in Europe, for instance, in Greece, Italy, and Spain, and those migrants who live there rather sooner than later will have to leave these camps. Campsites are overcrowded, the number of people is still growing, and there is no sign of an upcoming decrease or marvellous solution. Thirdly, many European countries have already accepted thousands of migrants. Their pro-migrant programmes have limits, and there has been a lack of space for

¹ P. Orchard, *Is the European Union Failing Syrian Refugees?*, Australian Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/is-the-european-union-failing-syrian-refugees/>, accessed: 01.04.2021.

² Pew Research Center, *Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015*, [www.pewresearch.org/Pew Research Center/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/](http://www.pewresearch.org/Pew%20Research%20Center/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/), accessed: 30.03.2021.

³ Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *From Syria to Europe: experiences of Stateless Kurds and Palestinian Refugees from Syria Seeking Protection in Europe*, January 2019, p. 11.

⁴ Eurostat, *Asylum statistics*, Brussels 2021, p. 3.

⁵ European Commission, *Statistics on migration to Europe*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-of-life/statistics-migration-europe_en, accessed: 30.03.2021.

new incomers since 2015. Moreover, migrants from Eastern Europe - Ukraine and Belarus - are also leaving their countries due to current conflicts or internal political situation. Besides, it must be underlined that European countries are on the edge of their economic efficiency. **The global Covid-19 pandemic is placing further obligations on Europe to verify each migrant so that they do not spread the virus, or its new mutations, on the continent.**

Terrorism

The subsequent challenge to Europe is the threat of terrorism that is evolving under the Syrian conflict. There are at least five large terrorist organisations in this country, among others Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Nusra Front⁶, which are either trying to radicalise people living in Europe or sending their members to the European Union to carry out attacks. The fundamental objective in using refugees, even though the success rate is not high, is a cover transport of jihadists and criminals that will start their illegal activity in Europe⁷.

In addition, terrorism is not only about bombs or knife attacks, but it also takes into account other activities such as drug smuggling, extortion, robbery, religious radicalization in the state, and finally, efforts to create a caliphate in Europe. Terrorist organisations are aiming to influence states. Terrorism is a bone of contention between neighbouring countries that blame each other when one of them fails to stop migrants who engage in terrorist activities and cross their external borders. Such problems disrupt international cooperation due to the loss of bilateral trust. Terrorist groups' members in Syria will continue to plot or inspire external terrorist operations, and one of their main goals are still western European countries.

Humanitarian crisis

The third current obstacle that is a major challenge to Europe is a humanitarian crisis. Millions of people are displaced and many more under the threat of hunger and death. Even though the European Union has continued to condemn violations of human rights and international

⁶ Charity & Security Network, *Syria: Listed Terrorist Groups and Humanitarian Crises*, <https://charityandsecurity.org/country/syria>, accessed: 31.03.2021.

⁷ M. Funk, R. Parkes, *Refugees versus terrorists*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, January 2016, p. 3.

humanitarian law in Syria, and has reiterated support for international accountability efforts, it is not enough to help Syrians. Moreover, humanitarian law does not seem to apply in this war-torn country, and the Geneva Conventions are long forgotten.

Given the above, Europe has another problem to solve. For years, the European Union member states have cultivated equality and respect, enforcing implementation of international law. And now, during the crisis in Syria, there is a lack of identity of Europeans who are perceiving themselves as defenders of human rights and gender equality, supporters of cultivating all religions, and offering support to homosexual communities. Syria has been forgotten, even though the European Union continues to condemn violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Syria, it does not matter. In June 202, the EU hosted its fourth Brussels conference on Syria remotely, focusing on a political solution to the crisis and response to humanitarian needs; however, the situation inside the country has further deteriorated⁸. In addition, currently, Europe is dealing with the unresolved problems of migrants in Africa and the Middle East that should have been solved years ago⁹.

Solutions

As it was indicated, the conflict had broken out more than a decade ago, and none of the ideas and solutions was successful enough to significantly ameliorate Syria's status as well as secure Europe. Nonetheless, some of the actions must be highlighted, such as international missions held by the European Union and NATO members. There are a few missions that protect Europe as well as have an influence inside Syria. Those operations must be taken into account¹⁰:

- *Securing the Mediterranean Sea 'Sea Guardian'* – a mission carried out on the Mediterranean Sea in order to maintain security, fight terrorism, build defence capabilities

⁸ More information about the current situation in Syria and the necessity of humanitarian aid can be found here: C. Thépat, C. Wilder, *Expanding Humanitarian Assistance to Syrians: Two Deadlines Approaching*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expanding-humanitarian-assistance-syrians-two-deadlines-approaching>, accessed: 02.04.2021.

⁹ A. Olech, *Działalność UNHCR w Afryce i na Bliskim Wschodzie*, *Przegląd Geopolityczny*, 2018, s. 134-152.

¹⁰ A. Olech, *Cooperation between NATO and the European Union against hybrid threats with a particular emphasis on terrorism*, <https://ine.org.pl/en/cooperation-between-nato-and-the-european-union-against-hybrid-threats-with-a-particular-emphasis-on-terrorism>, accessed: 02.04.2021.

in the region, protect freedom of navigation and critical infrastructure, and help maintain cooperation for security with other actors in the region.

- *Training mission in Iraq* – it is a training mission with the main task of strengthening Iraqi forces' capacity and protecting the region from the renewed wave of terrorist attacks and fighting the terrorist organisation Islamic State (ISIS). The training concentrates on the following areas: counteracting the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), civil and military planning, armoured vehicle maintenance, and military medicine. NATO also supports building international cooperation with the Iraqi armed forces. The introduction of such a mission in Syria could prove crucial for building a national Syrian army.
- *EUNAVFOR MED 'Trini'* – the European Union has made an effort to enforce the UN arms embargo against Libya and Syria. It is thus contributing to the peace process in that country by conducting a military operation in the Mediterranean. The operations are carried out using air, satellite, and naval resources in cooperation with European Union's member states.
- *Inherent Resolve* – US armed forces are the initiator and commander of the international coalition, and nearly 70 countries engaged in Iraq are involved in the entire operation. Currently, the mission in Syria is overseen by France under the name Chammal - an extension of the mandate of the international coalition Inherent Resolve. Operation Chammal rests on two pillars - support and training. The training pillar consists of educating Syrian soldiers in order to prepare them for the self-defence of the country. It is also an opportunity to familiarize soldiers with new technologies and combat strategies. The support pillar is based on the active participation of French military units in the fight against the Islamic State.

From the European perspective, there is a chance to at least minimise, the effects of such threats as uncontrolled migration, terrorism, and humanitarian crises. The most convenient means is to start acting at the location before those dangers appear in Europe. For this reason, foreign missions, civilian and military, supported by international organisations, are crucial to outrun, alleviate and eliminate threats before they arrive in Europe. The mandate for missions in Syria should be given to all EU and NATO members and be a prolongation of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) that was set up in

2012. Only multilateral and unanimous cooperation can be a foundation to build up an environment for stabilising the situation in Syria. All missions which are being held must be used to strengthen the activity of military and civilian bodies of international organisations to avert the conflict. **The first step is to restore the mission in Syria, consisting of representatives of the EU and NATO. It is vital to control the internal situation, offer humanitarian aid for civilians, and control migration and fight the terrorism threat. In the beginning, both organisations could engage observers, and soldiers from other missions conducted near Syria and on the water border with Europe, which were mentioned above.**

Summary

Syria is a battlefield on which more and more problems will emerge. The list of threats is enormous, and for this reason, the international community must react swiftly. Migration, terrorism, and the burden of humanitarian support of the Syrian nation are priorities in the process of strengthening European security. **After all, those threats are still abroad the European continent, and there is still time to react appropriately. Politicians should use international law and engage the EU and NATO to operate closer to Syria and concentrate on the most critical parts of Syrian territory.** If European entities united in organisations do not respond, the Russian Federation, which is very active in Syria, will continue to expand its military bases. **Currently, the Kremlin has 4 of them but it has already started to invest in more facilities¹¹.** This could lead to further attempts to put pressure on NATO and the EU in the Middle East. The security of Europe is strongly dependent on the situation in Syria, and it is the very last moment to act.

¹¹ A. Rogozińska, A. Olech, *The Russian Federation's Military Bases Abroad*, Institute of New Europe, Warsaw 2020, p. 46-51.

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