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The EU's Foreign Policy In Syria

Is a coherent common foreign and security policy possible?

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE - Introduction

When looking at the present critical situation in Syria, one cannot help but acknowledge the obstacles that the European Union has been encountering while trying to develop a coherent uniform foreign policy. On the one hand, these obstacles are intrinsic to the progression of the Syrian civil war since 2011, namely the escalation of violence, the multiplication of actors opposing the regime, some of which are external combatants interfering in the battlefield, and the regime's indiscriminate use of chemical weapons against its own population. On the other hand, various obstacles stem from characteristics inherent to the nature of the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP), to the configuration of Euro-Mediterranean relations and to the difficulties the EU encounters while attempting to find a common standing point between the quite diverse strategic positions held by each Member State singularly.

By analysing both approaches to these obstacles, from the European and the Syrian point of view, the aim set out in this research is to try an answer the question, is the EU capable of constructing an independent and coherent foreign policy and security strategy in Syria? In the attempt to give an answer to this question I will examine different aspects, institutions and decision-making processes that are crucial to understanding the context in which relations between the EU and Syria have been and may be constructed.

CHAPTER TWO - The Transformation of EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon

In the past decade, the European CFSP has been subject to important restructuring with the intent to build a more coherent diplomatic and security strategy. In this context, the most important changes occurred within the framework of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. These changes are principally of general provision, institutional and decision-making nature.

The general provisions of the Lisbon Treaty stemmed from the long negotiations on the elaboration of a Constitutional Treaty for the European Union, which was however never ratified. The principle contents of this treaty were transferred into the new Lisbon Treaty, although the more "Constitutional" elements were left out on request of some of the member states to ensure that institutional competences follow a stricter interpretation (ISIS Europe, 2008). Furthermore, elements of the European Security Strategy that had been adopted in 2003 through the document "*A secure Europe in a Better World*," drafted by the former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, were integrated. This document had stemmed from the divisions among the EU Member States regarding intervention in the Iraqi war, which had highlighted the necessity for "a strategic vision to enhance internal cohesion at EU level" (EEAS, 2013), and thus brought about compromises between constitutional elements and strategic ones. Finally, the Lisbon Treaty significantly confers legal status to the European Union, under article 46A of the Treaty granting it the capacity to act in the international arena as a legitimate actor. Thus, since 2009 the EU may conclude international treaties or agreements within which it has played an active role in the elaboration and negotiation. However, the Union may make use of its legal personality only if specifically deliberated by the Member States, and specific decision-making procedures still govern the CFSP (ISIS Europe, 2008).

Thus, democracy, rule of law, universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity are referred to in article 10 of the Treaty's "General Provisions of the Union's External Action," as guiding principles of the Unions action on the international scene. These principles identify explicitly their inevitable ties to the UN system in content and are foreseen to be the guidelines for an increasingly coordinated action, which, must necessarily begin with institutional reform (Howorth, 2013).

If the EU's external action was in precedence exercised by a multiplicity of actors, which had the effect of diluting the establishment of common and coordinated practice, the Lisbon Treaty attempts to overcome this lack of coherence and effectiveness by reorganizing the institutional framework in a number of ways. The novelties of institutional reform comprise the modification of two important figures: the President of the Council, who assumes a permanent post replacing the rotating one to favour continuity and which is largely considered as a chairmanship and the role of the High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who assumes also the role of Vice President of the Commission in the attempt to bridge the institutional divide between the two foreign policy institutions, namely the Council and the Commission. The former position has been held since its creation by Herman Van Rompuy who is now in his second term and the latter by Catherine Ashton. As far as changes in decision-making are concerned, while in general the Treaty aims at achieving a higher degree of centralization and coordination addressing the original division of competencies between states and EU, the "EU's foreign policy system" (Hill, 1996) remains "fundamentally decentralized and multilayered" (Telò, 2013). However, the Lisbon Treaty does envision some simplifications in the procedures of decision-making. For example, an exception is added to the unanimity rule in CFSP by which Member States are now entitled to adopt decisions with a QMV on proposals that the HR has presented. QMV is of particular importance because it overcomes the obstacle of veto posed by Member States, i.e. it enables a majority of states to overcome a decision opposed by a minority. However, if an objection is raised by a Member State to vote by a QMV for what is defined as "vital reasons" and is reluctant to apply the constructive abstention provision, the question may be brought to the attention of the European Council, which shall then take a unanimous decision. Hence, this provision reaffirms the prevalence of Member States in CFSP (ISIS Europe, 2008).

Furthermore, some important transformations were envisaged within the Lisbon structure. One of these is the conversion of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) into the Common Foreign and Security Defence Policy (CFSP). As far as the Lisbon treaty is concerned, there is little dealing with *military capacity* and its development on behalf of the Union, and must be considered an ongoing process (Howorth, 2013). However, a significant measure of approval has now been reached by Member States on the necessity of *pooling, and sharing specialization* of military capacity within the framework of the European Defence Agency (EDA, 2012). Not only was the European Defence Agency (EDA), which had been created in 2004, placed within this new framework, but also new mechanisms were included such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Another important novelty of the Lisbon Treaty is the extension of the scope of the so called *Petersberg tasks*, i.e. a series of actions that the EU is called to fulfil outside its borders by way of civil and military means.

In the context of the Lisbon Treaty the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was also strategically reviewed and given a legal status. In particular in article 8 paragraph 1 TEU lays out that "*The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation*".

While separating it from the enlargement provisions, contained in article 49 TUE, the ENP is placed among the general provisions of the treaty. However, article 8 is not even within the framework of the dispositions regarding EU external action. Thus, from a legal point of view, ENP and European external action remain completely disconnected. Nonetheless, from an institutional point of view ENP is *de facto* strongly linked with the organ that more than any other deals with EU external action, i.e. the European External Action Service (EEAS) (Comelli & Pirozzi, 2013). Thus, with the Lisbon Treaty the elaboration and supervision of ENP, become competences of the EEAS. The problem is that, regarding ENP, EEAS staff now answers both

to Commissioner Štefan Füle, responsible for neighbourhood policy, and to High Representative Catherine Ashton creating not little confusion.

Hence, the transformations under the Lisbon Treaty also included the creation of this innovative institution, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which constitutes a newly independent diplomatic service for the European Union and supports the EU Foreign Affairs chief, High Representative Ashton, in forging a common foreign and security policy (EEAS, 2013). Composed of officials from the Council, Commission and diplomatic services of Member States, the EEAS has the task of rationalising the EU external services by compounding all those involved in foreign affairs (ISIS Europe, 2008). The organization and functioning of the EEAS, as indicated by the Lisbon Treaty, is set by decision of the Council, which deliberates on proposals from the High Representative after hearing the European Parliament and Commission, in the attempt to create a coherent action. However, the current EEAS setup still presents some structural weaknesses, which are trying to be dealt with and overcome through further reform, as noted in the 2013 official review. A notion of EU diplomacy is yet to be identified and there is still no clear internal structure or organizational criteria between geographical and thematic operations, not to mention a questioned level of quality of skills and training (Telò, 2013). What is more, the controversial role of HR-VP occupied since its creation by Catherine Ashton was characterised by increased and enlarged scope of responsibilities that has given rise to many criticisms for its lack of efficient and coherent action (Lehne, February 2013).

Finally, the new European CFDP system is also still in its embryonic phase, as it continues to depend greatly on NATO forces. Fundamental to a well functioning security foreign policy in the EU implies a good balancing of both diplomatic and armed forces, with the goal of not resorting to the latter if not strictly necessary. On the other hand, greater coordination between CSDP and NATO to avoid duplication and dispersion of already lacking investment possibilities is necessary. In conclusion, the power shift that is taking place today at the global level will inevitably shed light on the impossibility for European countries to continue to be relevant players acting on their own. If they are willing to accept a more modest role on the international stage, allowing others to take the decisions regarding their neighbourhood and the future global order, then there is no reason to change modus operandi. If, on the other hand, they want to step up to occupy a decisive role they must combine efforts, pool resources and empower strong common institutions (Lehne, Why Is It So Hard to Develop an Effective EU, May 2013).

CHAPTER THREE - The Euro-Mediterranean Relationship: Transformations in EU Foreign Policy in the Southern Mediterranean Region

The EU's relations with the Southern Mediterranean region have also been subject to significant change since the recognition of the importance of creating stable and enduring economic, political and security relations, which gave life to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995. The Barcelona Process as it came to be known resulted from 20 years of intense bilateral and trade cooperation between EU Member States and 12 Mediterranean Partners: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey as well as EU members since 2004, Cyprus and Malta. This initiative sought to create strong and durable bonds between the shores of the Mediterranean (European Council, 2005). The EMP reflected a restructured Mediterranean policy whose goal was not only to address issues regarding finance and trade but also a wide array of non-traditional political security issues such as migration, terrorism, social development, as well as cultural issues (i.e. the inter-religious dialogue, racism, xenophobia). Hence, a new extended concept of comprehensive and multidimensional security spread to the domain of EU international relations, a systemic change due to multiplying security threats that often have transnational origins and go beyond a purely military dimension to include social and human dimensions as distinct features of global security (Buzan & Waever, 2003). The basic assumption was that these threats must be accounted for in

order to achieve economic development in the EU's partner countries. The main financial implementation instrument for the EMP was the MEDA Programme: "for the period between 1995 and 2004, MEDA accounted for €6.2 billion of the total €8.8 billion of budgetary resources allocated for financial co-operation between the European Union and its Mediterranean Partners" (European Council, 2005). This cooperation program was replaced in 2007 by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). The latter has been operational since the 1st of January 2007 and is the main source of funding for the 17 partner countries. Regrettably, the inconsistency between the principles laid out in the Declaration and the effective institutional attitude resulted in what has been defined as "low profile Euro-Mediterranean Partnership" (Panebianco & Rossi, EU attempts to export norms of good governance to the Mediterranean and Western Balkan countries, 2004), which was able to meet only a minor part of the goals it had originally set out to fulfil. The impossibility to apply sanctions to human rights and democratic norms violations coupled with degenerating stability in the area brought to transformations in the way the relations were to be carried out, almost completely abandoning the regional approach and privileging the bilateral one on a selective basis.

Moreover, the bilateral approach was further developed within a new complementary mechanism which would deal with each European neighbouring state on a bilateral and more "functional" basis namely, the European Neighbourhood Policy that was set up in the 2004 "European Neighbourhood Strategy Paper." Thus, the EU struggled to find the right balance of principles and priorities to obtain the desired result of increased cohesion and stability in the region. However, the democratisation process seems to remain always instrumental to the exigencies of security, especially in the face of new rising threats of terrorism spiralling from the region. In fact, the preoccupation of creating secure borders seemed to acquire new strength following the events of September 11, 2001. In addition to this, the war in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq of 2003, the stagnation and failure of the peace process following the Arab-Israeli conflict and the consequent destabilisation of the region were all elements that created renewed security issues, due also to the use made by politicians and mass media of these events (Panebianco, The EU involvement in the Mediterranean: changing priorities and strategies?, 2007). The fact remains that, since the EU had no coercive means to convince Mediterranean Third Countries (MTCs) to adopt their democratic principles, the EU appears to be what Nye defines as a "soft power": the transmission of values and principles can occur only thanks to the admiration on behalf of the Southern Mediterranean states and their will to apply them to their political systems (Nye, 2004). Thus, it would appear as though up until now the only channel of transmission and interrelation capable of bridging the two shores of the Mediterranean is the one of bilateral economic agreements, since assimilation of principles appears quite arduous. Moreover, ultimately different goals, priorities and instruments were identified in EU relations with MTCS more focused on building economic and security agreements and less on creating a common Mediterranean region: in 2007 the EMP was already almost completely abandoned by the EU; surely it remained symbolically important, even if not operatively active (Panebianco, The EU involvement in the Mediterranean: changing priorities and strategies?, 2007).

In 2007-2008 a new proposal for a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was set forth by French President Sarkozy that re-launched the Barcelona Process and replaced the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. However, the UfM was prevented from being implemented due to the beginning of the revolutionary movements in North Africa and the Middle East. After undergoing its principal enlargement, almost doubling its extension, the agenda of the EU seems to have slightly changed and so has the character of the Euro-Mediterranean integration process (Bicchi, 2011). The bilateralism that characterizes the ENP moving away from the multilateral nature of the EMP seems to have set its' roots also in the development of the UfM. Thus, as analysed by Bicchi, with the development of the UfM Euro-Mediterranean relations have witnessed the latest shift in its institutional logics: the EMP seemed to be a highly politicised regionalism, with the intent to create a truly regional project of integration and cooperation; the ENP represented a shift towards bilateralism with a functional twist, centred on managing Association Agreements and Action Plans, seen

that the highly political nature of the EMP didn't appear to be capable of bearing the fruit that had been hoped for; finally the UfM represents the last development of this evolution (Bicchi, 2011). Most probably the original plan set out by France was that of creating a new institution capable of creating regional and functional impetus, with the intent of moving the focus away from the highly politicised Middle Eastern question. Yet, because of the context in which the UfM was developed, this auspicated outcome was not possible, and what survived was a structure of bilateral agreements that because of the participation of heads of states and government remained highly politicised (Bicchi, 2011).

Further improvement of the functionality of EU neighbourhood cooperation was attempted within the Lisbon Treaty framework, representing an important turning point for the ENP as it fulfilled a strategic review of the latter and granted it legal status in article 8 of the Treaty on the European Union. However, on the one hand placing article 8 within the EU "constitutional" framework and, thus, creating a legal basis for ENP through the modality of a formal mandate may had the positive effect of "substantive coherence" (Hillion, 2013); but on the other it also generated a policy system in which the production of norms is quite formal and cooperation is necessary between different institutional actors (Comelli & Pirozzi, La Politica estera dell'Unione europea dopo Lisbona n.72, 2013). The positive repercussions of ENP codification in the Lisbon framework are still to be seen. This could also be due to the fact that the revolutionary outbursts that took place in the Southern Mediterranean region were mostly independent, bottom-up events, therefore that did not allow the EU to extend the "values of the Union" from the top (Comelli, Potential And Limits of EU Policies in the Neighbourhood, 2013).

Finally, in the light of the events that have been largely referred to as the "Arab Spring," the EU witnessed a radical transformation of its Southern neighbourhood due to the popular protests and consequent uprisings that have taken many forms, from North Africa through the Middle East. In particular some new paradigms came to characterise the region, namely the necessity of a different economic model than the neo-liberalist one, fragmentation of society, the domination of a political Islam, the rise of Nationalism and increasing regional polarisation between Sunni and Shi'a movements (Behr, 2012). These elements consequently transformed also the EU's relations with the area and they had to be taken into consideration when developing further relations in the Southern Mediterranean. The first document of this review was the Commission's and EU HR's March 2011 joint communication on "A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean"; it was followed by communications on "A new response to a changing neighbourhood" in May 2011 and on "Delivering a new European Neighbourhood Policy" in May 2012, along with a great number of accompanying EU documents and communications (Amirah Fernàndez & Behr, 2013). Thus, to respond to the many challenges the south Mediterranean region presented, the EU launched a major revision of the ENP in 2011 (Amirah Fernàndez & Behr, 2013). Despite initial division among policymakers, a new regional strategy was put together (Amirah Fernàndez & Behr, 2013). The member states finally realised that Arab regimes could no longer guarantee their stability necessities in the region, and therefore the only thing that could possibly be in their interest was if a clear transition to democracy took place, thereby offering realignment with the principles and values of the Union. The first document of this review was the Commission's and EU HR's March 2011 joint communication on "A partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean"; it was followed by communications on "A new response to a changing neighbourhood" in May 2011 and on "Delivering a new European Neighbourhood Policy" in May 2012, along with a great number of accompanying EU documents and communications (Amirah Fernàndez & Behr, 2013). In this model, not only free and regular elections are envisioned by the EU, but also a much wider scheme of prerequisites such as the rule of law, freedom of expression and association, eradicating corruption and creating democratically controlled security forces are contemplated (Behr, The European Union's Mediterranean Policies after the Arab Spring: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?, 2012). Political conditionality is reaffirmed as the EU sets out a "more-for-more"

incentive-based approach on the basis of which the countries that are more willing to apply the previously stated democratic principles will receive more generous European assistance than the others (Behr, The European Union's Mediterranean Policies after the Arab Spring: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?, 2012). However, the regional and geopolitical context has not finished evolving and if the EU intends to maintain some level of influence in the area it will have to increasingly compete with other actors (Behr, The European Union's Mediterranean Policies after the Arab Spring: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?, 2012). The most plausible result will be further concentration on bilateral agreements. Although this will not work in favour of regaining a predominant regional role, it might help keep the EU in the region long enough to be able to improve its coordination for when politically transformed Arab countries stabilise.

CHAPTER FOUR - Syrian Foreign Policy in the Assad Regime

The fourth chapter examines the Foreign Policy of Syria during the al-Assad regime and the first developments of EU-Syrian relations. The EU's relations with Syria had been complicated from the outset under Hafiz al-Assad. When the protests started in 2011 the only official agreement that had been ratified was the Cooperation Agreement of 1977 established within the framework of the European Economic Community (EEC) and thus characterised by predominant economic and trade features. Syrian foreign policy under the authoritarian Al-Assad regime was principally connected to obtaining two regional goals: affirming a legitimate nationalist Arab sovereignty and overpowering Israel to regain the Golan Heights territories lost in the 1967 war, with the further intent of reaffirming Syria's role as the "beating heart of Arabism" in the region (Goodarzi, January 2013). Moreover, the fulfilment of these two objectives tended to overshadow Syria's domestic policy development in favour of its foreign policy aims and political liberalisation was thus not a priority as proven by the establishment of the state of emergency since the 1980s. Society was divided along sharp class lines which also divided the country between the landlords and commercial oligarchy, a rising middle class, which came to dominate the army, and an aggrieved peasantry (Hinnebusch, 2012). A new political elite characterised by a rural background and participation in the socialist and nationalist movements of the 1950s was brought to power by the Ba'ath coup of 1963 that marked the beginning of a new era of authoritarian ruling (Hinnebusch, 2012; van Dusen, 1975). However this coup did not bring to consequent stability. Opposition from the old oligarchic rule, but also from other rivals such as Nasserites and the Muslim Brotherhood, endangered the fragile support on which the regime rested. Moreover, struggles for power were going on inside the regime itself, on the basis of sectarian, ideological and generational differences. It was the "ex-peasant" radical Alawis that came out victorious from this fight and gained power at the expense of the predominantly Sunni middle class moderates (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). However, Hafiz al-Assad was capable of creating a regime coalition based on economic fidelity, which connected to society through bureaucratic and party-corporatist institutions and cross cut the sectarian and social divides, incorporating both the rural and middle class population; this granted Syria social legitimacy, completely focused on the problematic of Arab nationalist and anti-Israeli foreign policy that Hafiz intended to pursue (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005).

Rent seeking was also a crucial element for the regime's consolidation and it represented a central driver to the relationships that Assad created in the region. Internally, clientele networks were essential to the functioning of the regime and the oil revenues and aid received from Arab oil states played an important role in financing them. Externally, they contributed to the creation of an image of power and strength by funding the construction of a huge national security state further reinforced by the acquisition of Soviet arms (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). In this framework, revenues and aid from other states were justified by the fact

that Syria took it upon itself to occupy the role of 'paladin of the Arab cause' against Israel, whilst not threatening the other Arab states' national sovereignty.

Hence, in these years a precise foreign policy trajectory was defined characterised by a tight link between foreign and domestic policy that will be very difficult for Bashar to untangle. Syria's geopolitical position in the Middle East, its' enduring confrontation with Israel and even with the generalised "West" were all elements which allowed the regime to cultivate its nationalistic goals by leading the front of resistance and ultimately legitimised the shortcomings of domestic policy (Colombo, June 2011). What had created stability during the regime of Hafiz, created not few problems in the following reign of his son. Moreover, Syria's failure to reach a peace settlement with Israel was perhaps the most important factor that undermined Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy options from the outset (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005).

The foreign policy decision-making process is characterised by the dominant role of the President that ultimately makes all final calls, as stated in article 94 of the Syrian Constitution (Ziadeh, 2011). The latter is aided by the strong presence of military and security services, the *muktabarat*, extremely infiltrated into all levels of society and notorious for their cruel and illegal methods of interrogation. The legislative power's role is limited to discussing policy elaborated by the Foreign Minister and ratifying international treaties and agreements related to state security. The Ministry of foreign Affairs is in charge of the formulation of foreign policy which must then be submitted to the President. However, when the issues in question have to do with military or security matters the role of the Foreign Minister is usually reduced. In these cases, it is the President that assumes control in quality of general leader of the armed forces and some of their assisting institutions, such as the Ministry of Defence, the intelligence organisations and general staff (Ziadeh, 2011). Thus, foreign policy decisions are strictly connected to the personal decisions made by the President and are a direct reflection of his will, namely the will of Hafiz first and Bashar now.

With the nomination of Bashar al-Assad as President after the death of his father Hafiz in 2000, the all around hope of the Syrian population and the international community alike was that with his appointment a change in register of the totalitarian regime would take place.

Domestically some internal economic liberalisations were initiated, while externally the US had started to become an increasingly hostile regional presence, also as a consequence of the events of September 11th 2001. The instrumentalist dynamics that had been carried out by Hafiz had been exhausted by the end of the cold war and now a new approach was needed to guarantee a role for Syria in the region and internationally capable of reconciling its integration in world economy with its Arab nationalist identity, based on regional stability and security. When Bashar came to power he had declared his dedication to the cause of the peace process that he and the Syrian population alike were in a hurry to give life to, as long as it was not at the cost of land or sovereignty (Source and translation: Syrian Arab News Agency, 2009). However, his policies ended up seeming confused and incoherent because of the context of extremely sensitive regional circumstances in which his arrival to power took place (Ziadeh, 2011). The strained relationship that had come to be created with Lebanon was additionally complicated by the fact that Syria's strategic security vision encompassed a tactical balance with Israel. Since the 1980s Syria had treated Lebanon as if it were merely an extension of its territory, a "surrogate battlefield in a proxy war" against Israel (Hinnebusch, 2005), that had to be controlled and militarily secured, and it was ultimately this context that instigated Syria to interfere in Lebanon's security, military and political affairs (Ziadeh, 2011). However, when the events of September 11th 2001 arose, Syria allegedly agreed to a European request to maintain calm in south Lebanon. Consequently, Syria saw its impunity in retaliation actions against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon fade, and it was forced to come to terms with the fact that it could no longer pressure Israel back to the negotiation

table with a cost-free line of action (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). With the Palestinian organisations, especially those situated in Syria, such as Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for Liberating Palestine and the Democratic Front, Syria maintained a very similar behaviour as the one entertained with Lebanese Hezbollah. Anything, related to political or security issues, was coordinated by Syrian military intelligence, and it was with the latter that the Palestinian organisations entertained relationships. The final decision was nonetheless always up to the President. On another front, Bashar was preoccupied with regaining other important regional relationships, since an emerging Turkish-Israeli-Jordanian alliance could have threatened Syria's survival in the region. Thus, Bashar decided to try to neutralise this threat by mending fences with Turkey and Jordan (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). Central to Syria's regional strategy were the inherited relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: during the rise of the al-Aqsa intifada Bashar made his first trip to Cairo as President, and obtained a declaration from Egypt that it would reconsider its relations with Israel if the latter had attacked Syria, and from Saudi Arabia assurance that an attack on Syria or Lebanon would not be ignored (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). The pressure to be part of an Egyptian-Saudi alliance became increasingly serious after the events of September 11th. However, the dissatisfaction of Syria for the continued state of occupation of the Golan Heights brought it to reach out also for an opposing alignment with Iran and Iraq. Hence, Syria was trying to create a position for itself that would be able to take advantage on the one side of its alliance with the pro-Western states, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia and on the other of a new anti-Western front represented by Iraq and Iran (Hinnebusch, Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership, 2005). The relation with Iraq was one primarily of geo-economics: in 2000 the re-opening of the oil pipeline from Iraq to Syria's Mediterranean port of Banias was an economic strategic move on Syria's behalf, receiving in return crude oil at a below market price, thus being able to make huge profit by exporting it at much higher international prices (Hinnebusch, 2005). Of a complete different nature was the Syrian relation with Iran's Islamic theocracy. It began under Hafiz al-Assad, when he decided to support the 1979 Iranian revolution and proved to be long lasting, also due to the complementary strategic aims of the two regimes: their relationship was one based on mutual defence, which conjugated two different ideological motors into political and strategic concerns (Goodarzi, January 2013). Ultimately, it was the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 that brought consolidation to the relations between Iran and Syria, that proclaimed its unwavering support for the Islamic Republic and procured valuable diplomatic and military support to Tehran (Kandil, 2008). Relations remained close under Bashar. Amongst strong criticism from the other Arab countries, Damascus has continued to defend this relationship, and Bashar has described the Iranian role as one that is "vital to regional stability" that "does not contradict, but rather reinforces an Arab role" (al-Assad, 2006). As far as Syria's relations with the US are concerned, after the fall of the Berlin Wall Syria unwillingly came under pressure to sacrifice some of its nationalist Arab elements, in order to appease the growing presence of the US hegemonic power, and avoid greater threat from Israel; certainly, the participation of Syria in the Gulf war coalition and the Madrid Peace Process can be seen in this light (Hinnebusch, 2005). However, it was evident that as long as Syria's conflict with Israel continued to remain unresolved and as long as the al-Assad regime kept its ties with extremist Islamic groups it could count on pressure from the Washington front. As a consequence, attempting to neutralise this threat, Syria decided to further strengthen its' inter-Arab links, tighten its relationships with Iran and also with extra-regional actors, in particular with Europe (Hinnebusch, 2005).

Consequentially, the strategic opening of the Syrian regime to the creation of further relations with Europe started to take place, in the hope of obtaining European support capable of counterbalancing the regional power struggle. The new Syrian president saw an alignment with Europe as a crucial ingredient for forging

Syrian economic renewal and was perceived as a tactical move to protect itself from US hostility (Hinnebusch, 2005). At the 1995 Barcelona meeting Syria had presented mainly political reasons for approaching partnership, hoping to obtain from Europe the much needed support to pressure Israel to return the regimes occupied territories. However, co-operation with the EU seemed not to be able to get past the economic sphere. In fact, EU-Syrian relations had been in place since 1977 on the basis of a Cooperation Agreement which had a mostly economic and trade nature. Syria's reluctance to embrace Western foreign policy positions was creating some uneasiness and impatience on the European front. For its part, Europe has expressed scepticism towards Syria's good intentions to bring forth economic and especially political reforms, and although the Association Agreement was initialled in October 2004, after an arduous five-year negotiation period and numerous delays, it still has not been signed and ratified (Kandil, 2008). Syria also became a member of the Union for the Mediterranean and the European Neighbourhood Policy, developed on a bilateral basis between the EU and neighbouring countries, but never benefited from all of its instruments and incentives, pending entry into force of the Association Agreement. Its bilateral co-operation agreements were suspended in 2011 due to the escalation of violence inside the country at the beginning of what is now an extensive civil war (European Commission, 2013).

CHAPTER FIVE - The EU's Foreign Policy in the Syrian Crisis

The last chapter deals with the latest developments of EU-Syrian relations, in particular in the light of the most recent events of August-September 2013. The advent of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the civil war which followed put an end to the developments reached in the EU-Syrian relationship as restrictions and sanctions were posed by the former on the latter. The few co-operation programs in place under the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI), were transformed into funds for humanitarian aid, of which the EU is the largest global contributor, and finally all diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime were cut. HR Ashton's first underlined the EU's extreme concern for the Syrian situation on the 22nd of March 2011, condemning "the violent repression, including through the use of live ammunition, of peaceful protests in various locations across Syria" (Ashton C. , 2011a). A plan of humanitarian aid was established. In this framework "The Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) of the European Commission has mobilized €265 million to date to support emergency assistance to the population affected by the Syrian crisis, both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey)" (European Commission, 2013). Restrictive measures on Syria entered into force on the 1st of June 2011entailing first of all an embargo on arms and equipment that could be used for internal repression; second, targeted sanctions, comprehending a travel ban and asset freezing against those responsible for or associated with the repression (EEAS, 2013).

However, creating international political and economical isolation didn't seem to produce the desired deterring effects, as the conflict continued and now, in 2013, is well into its third year. Bashar al-Assad showed no intention of leaving his post, as the opposition forces had been requesting. The most moderate opposition, the Syrian National Coalition of the Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, "reflects the ethnic and religious diversity that is a fundamental part of Syrian heritage; Coalition members include Shia and Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, Armenians, Assyrians, and Circassians," and their aim is to create a "democratic Syria free from Assad's tyranny" (Etilaf, 2013). However, if on the one hand this new moderate force has gradually gained recognition as legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition from most of the international community, namely 120 states and organizations including United States, the European Union, the Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Etilaf, 2013), on the other it has dealt with a number of internal disputes, disorganisation and a number of changes in leadership due to the incredibly difficult conditions in which it is forced to proceed summed with regional and international pressure. On the 6th of July 2013 Ahmah Asi al-Jarba was elected as new President of the Syrian National

Coalition and on September 14th 2013 Ahmed Tumeh was elected as the new Prime Minister of an interim Government. The election of al-Jarba seems to confirm the strong regional interests since he confirms having relations with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and other regional actors although he denies being as some have called him "Saudi Arabia's man" (Aljazeera - J. Bays, 2013). He underlined that the situation on the ground is complicated and confirmed that not only rebels responding to the Free Syrian Army are opposing the regime, but that on both fronts external actors are taking part in the battle (Aljazeera - J. Bays, 2013). However, he made a clear distinction between the two fronts: on the one hand the rebel forces affiliated with the National Coalition, that surely need of coordination but that do not have connections or control over external participation, and on the other the forces of the Syrian regime, which on the contrary have explicitly and systematically allowed Hezbollah and Iranian forces to participate in strategic attacks against the Syrian population (al-Jarba, 2013).

On his part, Bashar al-Assad has often reprimanded the West for not backing the regime in favour of the rebel opposition of the Syrian conflict, strategically manipulating the multiplication of actors and the increasing interference of external extremist militants, some even tied to the al-Qaeda organisation, to dissuade the West from arming the opposition. The confusion of combatants constituting the opposition front in Syria also influenced significantly the debate in Europe on arming or not the rebel front, since there was a widespread fear that arms could fall into the wrong hands and constitute a counterproductive move. Moreover, two different standings were taken in Europe: on the one hand the states that were in favour of arming the opposition, namely the UK and France that therefore asked for the arms embargo to be lifted; and on the other, those who were contrary to sending arms, principally Germany. Thus, the main result of the split among the three major European powers was a sideline position. EU High Representative Catherine Ashton was very cautious and besides advocating the need for a political solution, no concrete alternative to arming the rebels was actually set forth, and the divide between the European countries continued to hold strong. This careful stand was nonetheless accompanied by a clear and strong message of disapproval of "the continued brutality and criminality" of the Assad regime, as stated by British Foreign Secretary William Hague (BBC News, 2013). The intent to set up Geneva talks expressed by US Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and welcomed by Joint Special Representative for the UN and the Arab League on Syria Lakhdar Brahimi at the beginning of May 2013, represented an important step forward in finding a political solution but without a set date it seemed to put on hold indefinitely. Thus, the stand held by the EU on the Syrian crisis underlined the paralyzing effects on EU's foreign policy of its institutional procedures: the European Union has self-marginalized itself "through the mechanisms emanating from the Lisbon treaty. Even the "big two" (France and the United Kingdom) do not matter much on their own, because the weakness of the EU system as a whole (which they engineered) prevents them from carrying the entire 27 with them" (Pierini, 2013).

In the midst of what seemed to be a never ending stall in establishing a date for a Geneva peace conference on Syria, the number of displaced, refugees and regional migrants continued to grow exponentially, creating not few preoccupations for Syria's neighbouring states. Jordan, for example, hosts the Zaatari refugee camp at 5 km from the Jordan-Syrian border which counts more than 120,000 inhabitants and at the end of July 2013 was Jordan's fourth largest city (Doucet, 2013).

A turn in civil war events occurred when the regime attacked Eastern Damascus on August 21st 2013, where many rebels were stationed. This attack against the Syrian population saw the use of chemical weapons, which were confirmed shortly after by a UN inspection team led by Swedish scientist Åke Sellström to contain Sarin, a lethal nerve gas that in the attack killed 1400 people, 400 of which were children.

The attack, since it entailed the use of chemical weapons, was immediately condemned by the international community especially by the US, which deemed that such an action crossed a pre-established "red line" and therefore entailed intervention. Many countries, the UN, the EU and the Arab League condemned this action as a war crime and a crime against humanity, which breached the hundred year international pledge to not resort to the use of chemical weapons or WMD, thus calling for strong actions. Moreover, two fronts were rapidly built: on the one hand the states sustaining Obama's stand and his will to intervene military in Syria and on the other, the states that wanted to avoid intervention headed by Putin. However, the latter in the attempt to avoid intervention proposed a negotiated arrangement that would entail the consignment of all chemical weapons to UN forces by the Syrian regime and their further destruction. The result was an agreement in Geneva on the 14th of September 2013 between US Secretary of State Kerry and Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov to requisite and to destroy all chemical arms in the Syrian regime's possession, this agreement entails the approval of a UN resolution, which was negotiated during the weeks that followed the agreement.

On the 26th of September 2013 the wording for the UN resolution was agreed on by the five permanent members of the Security Council – USA, Russia, China, France and Britain - that entailed a "binding and enforceable" resolution to eliminate Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons. However, the agreement did not authorise the use of force in the case in which Syria does not comply (Borger, 2013). After the hastily set up talks between US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, the document represents the first legally binding resolution on the Syrian conflict (Borger, 2013).

To date, September 28th 2013, the UN Security Council resolution requires that "Syria will have to destroy all its chemical weapons production facilities by November and dismantle all its poison gases and nerve agents by the middle of next year, under an accelerated timetable drawn up by the world's chemical weapons watchdog", the OPCW (Borger, Syria given November deadline to destroy all chemical weapons facilities, 2013). The governing council of latter agreed for a plan of disbarment starting on the 1st of October, 2013 when inspectors are planned to arrive in Syria to commence "the task of checking Syria's declared stockpile of chemical munitions, delivery systems and production facilities" (Borger, Syria given November deadline to destroy all chemical weapons facilities, 2013). OPCW director general Ahmet Uzumcu stated that "[t]his decision sends an unmistakable message that the international community is coming together to work for peace in Syria beginning with the elimination of chemical weapons in that country" (Borger, UN security council agrees wording of resolution on Syria chemical weapons, 2013). What remains to be seen is to what degree the EU will be capable of participating in the process.

The role of the EU in Syria during the crisis has remained fairly marginal, not demonstrating the capability to overcome the divisions between the different standings of the various Member States and thus being gridlocked into a position of inaction or, at the most, of rhetorical indignation in a region that should be of its interest over all other international actors. Thus, while agreeing in EU meetings on the centrality of improving a unified EU front and recognising the essentiality of pooling and sharing to guarantee a higher degree of coherence and legitimacy, the Member States when faced with concrete security decision-making issues such as the impelling Syrian question, cannot let go of the power-politics of the European state system, and consequentially fail to project the image of a strong and coherent actor within the international community.

CHAPTER SIX - Conclusions

Getting back to the initial question, is the EU capable of building an independent and coherent foreign and security policy in Syria, in the light of the analysis pursued in this research the answer for now may only be negative. If on the one hand impediments to the creation of strong political ties between Syria and the EU

were due to the authoritarian nature of the al-Assad regime, on the other they also depended deeply on the lack of a coherent EU foreign and security policy framework. The diverse approaches of the different Member States, the lack of coherence within the institutions and the indecision in the way the Southern Mediterranean was ultimately perceived (within a Mediterranean partnership or as a neighbouring region), are all factors that contributed to impeding the consolidation of a consistent relationship of cooperation. What is more, in the face of the Syrian conflict, the EU must decide what role it aspires to occupy: if it perceives as more important being an internationally relevant security actor, along the lines of the US foreign policy of intervention, with the risk of creating a hostile front in the Southern Mediterranean; or if deems it to be more functional to assume the line of mediator with the final goal of creating a more secure and stable Mediterranean region, which is ultimately Europe's backyard. However, before even evaluating these considerations, the EU must first deal with the divisions between the various Member States and its institutional limitations in foreign and security policy, and Syria represents a case on point.

In the light of issues of geo-political, strategic and security nature the CFSP's legitimacy to act is still trumped by the will of the single Member State. The latter, while agreeing in EU meetings on the centrality of improving a unified EU front and recognising the essentiality of pooling and sharing to guarantee a higher degree of coherence and legitimacy, when faced with concrete security decision-making issues, such as the impelling Syrian question, are still not capable of overcoming the power-politics of the separate state system. France does not know how to let go of its colonial past, which ties it deeply to the Middle East and Syria, the UK cannot overlook its devotion to intervening alongside its historical partner, the US, and Germany seems to be too preoccupied with its domestic politics to have any interest in taking part in the debacle.

Catherine Ashton has been much criticised for her lack of assertiveness as High Representative of the CFSP and Vice President of the Commission, but it appears as though she is kept on quite a short leash by EU Member States as far as her freedom to express important, game-changing positions in the Syrian context in concerned. During the Syrian crisis the over 100 statements released and the 21 sets of sanctions without any visible impact have been defined as "impotent hyperactivity" (Bond, 2013). What is more, if one looks at the intent of the reform of the ENP policy, it appears clear that its intentions were to reaffirm the importance of the Southern Mediterranean region for Europe, not only for economic and trade aims but also in order to create stronger common policies that would entail issues of stability and security. If the latter scenario is to be made possible, Member States must carry out a strong reality check of their actual willingness to cede parts of sovereignty in the field of foreign policy, in the name of creating a united and coherent single EU front capable of remaining a relevant player in global politics, and capable of taking action and asserting its role in areas of its direct interest such as Syria.

Perhaps for now the bilateral way is still the only viable option to construct durable relations in the region, in light of the extremely diverse characters of the states in the Southern Mediterranean region, which allows with extreme difficulty to create a unified plan of action and which depends often on the degree of democratisation of the political system. In any event, in the light of the CFSP reforms and the intent to improve the functionality of the EEAS, a more coherent EU line of action towards the Mediterranean seems also to be due, in order to overcome the state-system logic. The scarcity of coherence that persists within the CFSP creates a lack of legitimacy of the EU as a dominant international actor in the region, since the Member States are not willing to give up their different positions, and ultimately still show resistance to concrete financial contribution to build a stronger European defence mechanism.

What is more, seen the new functions and scopes gained by military action, namely security reinforcement for countries that lack it, recreating the conditions for democracy building and cooperating to assure human security, much pooling and sharing is needed. It is probably too late for the EU to assert itself as a dominant

mediating actor in the resolution of the Syrian crisis, this role has been already occupied by Russia, but the EU may still be in time to play a central role in the reconstruction of the country. As pointed out by Pierini, since the escalation of the Syrian conflict, the United Nations, the United States and Russia have been engaged in "protracted diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis, while China and Europe [have been] relegated to the sidelines" (Pierini, 2013). But what seems to be important at this point, besides the "diplomatic choreographies," is where the EU will stand in the international effort to reconstruct Syria (Pierini, 2013):

> "The European Union is the unknown factor. It has been conspicuously absent so far from each and every phase of the core negotiations during the Syrian crisis. The EU's lack of influence on the political aspects of the Syrian crisis is not surprising given the way the Lisbon Treaty is translated into institutional arrangements. "Foreign policy" responsibilities are separate from "operational" issues, and there is no effective link between the European External Action Service, the EU's foreign policy arm, and the European Commission, its executive body. In this new context, the EU has a harder time generating relevant initiatives combining foreign policy positions with concrete actions on the ground… But helping with Syria's reconstruction is not about debating the virtues of the Lisbon Treaty. It is about concrete action in favor of desperate Syrian citizens. Syria requires more than just another EU foreign policy statement to be promptly archived. The European Union should act in a way worthy of its economic power and international responsibilities and develop a plan for post-conflict Syria."

Moreover, the events of the 21st of August 2013 that saw the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons on behalf of Bashar's regime against the Syrian population constituted the ultimate escalation of the conflict. The dominant role occupied by Russia as a mediator in reaching an agreement will surely strengthen its ties to the country, at least until the regime is able to resist the forces of the opposition, or until the 2014 elections. In June 2013 Ian Bond had observed that the only way to shake the confidence of the regime would have been by posing a credible threat of military strikes (Bond, 2013). Although he his previsions proved to be correct, then he had proposed this threat come from NATO and Middle Eastern power. Instead, it was once again the US to pose this threat. However, if the agreement for the destruction of chemical weapons is approved and Western military action is able to be avoided, and moreover *if* the regime is finally deposed and judged as it should be for committing such appalling crimes against humanity by the ICC, then Europe may have another chance to assert its role in rebuilding Syria. This would be ultimately the only way to contribute to overcoming such an immense security disaster, which has produced millions of refugees that poured into the region and beyond, thousands of displaced that are without food, water, shelter and electricity and a country that has been destroyed by bombings, deprived of homes, schools, hospitals and institutions. Moreover, the EU has recognised the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate political opposition in the country and they will surely need support in order to build political reform. Finally, Syrians will need to have a safe country to go back to, and the EU should take its place in the frontlines of this operation to attempt to reassert its role at home and abroad and in order not to lose completely the possibility of being a key player in the region's future.

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