

Europe is struggling to play a meaningful role in the Syria crisis

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What role can the European Union play in the Arab awakening? Julien Barnes-Dacey argues that the case of Bashar al-Assad shows that short of military intervention Europe maintains a limited ability to shape its Southern neighbourhood. For the time being it remains a fairly insignificant political actor in the unfolding Syria crisis.



If the example of Libya served to bolster the idea that European states could significantly impact the trajectory of democratic uprising in their Southern neighbourhood, the case of Syria has rapidly shattered this illusion. One year after unrest first broke out in the southern Syrian town of Daraa, Europe's inability – despite unanimity and a wide deployment of its diplomatic toolbox – to loosen Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's hold on power has severely humbled its ambitions. With Assad looking unlikely to fall any time soon, Europe may now have to settle for less simply to stop the killing.

From the very outset Syria has presented Europe with a far more complex dynamic than Libya – and one that has consistently left it wrong-footed. Wary of the ramifications of an uncontrolled collapse of a regime at the centre of potentially destabilising regional forces, Europe initially chose to embrace Assad's long-heralded – though unsubstantiated – reform credentials. Even as Assad embarked on a violent suppression of peaceful protestors in April UK Foreign Secretary William Hague stated that “it is not too late” for reform and European leaders channelled their efforts into persuading Assad to launch such a process.

By May, at which point it was clear that Assad was not going to embark on any meaningful political opening and as state-orchestrated violence escalated, European leaders changed tack and fell back on their tried and tested policy of sanctions, introducing a number of measures including asset freezes and travel bans on prominent officials. Even so, ever wary of the uncertainties of rapid change, it was not until August 2011 that Europe definitively called for Assad to stand down. A joint statement by Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron declared that Assad “has lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the country.”



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prominent role in blocking wider

commercial activities. On the diplomatic front Europe emerged at the forefront of efforts to mobilise UN Security Council (UNSC) action against Assad, while it has gradually cut ties with the regime with many European states closing their embassies in Damascus.

Despite Europe's efforts and the loud predictions of politicians and diplomats that Assad's days were numbered, the regime has nonetheless succeeded in maintaining its brutal stranglehold over power. Diplomatic steps targeting the regime in the UNSC have repeatedly floundered in the face of ongoing opposition by Russia and China, neither of whom has seen their interests guarded by the proposed measures. Additionally, continued military and financial support from Iran and Russia and the non-closure of commercial routes in and out of neighbouring countries have provided the regime with economic lifelines. Assad clearly retains the military upper hand within the country and the loyalty of a sizeable minority of the population, making his immediate demise unlikely.

As such, European policies (alongside, in all fairness, those of those of the US and the Arab world) cannot be said to have succeeded in significantly altering the balance of power. As in Libya, the one game changer could be military intervention. And yet the geographic, political and strategic terrain is vastly more complex and European governments have understandably rejected direct intervention or the arming of the opposition, fearful that militarisation will only make a bad situation worse and inflict more pain on the civilian population. Some now hope that the long game will favour the opposition and that European sanctions will play a meaningful role in gradual economic collapse, thereby eating away at the regime's power base and sustainability. However, while possible, Assad's continued ability to secure external support, leaves this scenario very much to chance.

One year on, therefore, and with the prospect of a prolonged civil war becoming ever greater, Europe appears to be slowly recalibrating its position in a last bid to avert a long and bloody conflict that could be even more painful for the Syrian population (and potentially the wider region). Driven by the necessity of securing wider international consensus, and the increasing realisation that Assad remains dominant, Europe is apparently softening its line. It has now given [Kofi Annan's peace mission](#) its full backing. In a bid to halt the violence Annan has in turn directly reached out to Damascus (as well as Moscow and Beijing) and proposed a political path forward not preconditioned on Assad stepping down as was previously the case. This could well prove a wise move. A political track may ultimately have more success in shaking the regime by persuading a wider share of the population and elements within the regime itself that Assad must go. If it fails, Europe will in all likelihood face the prospect of a long civil conflict in its near neighbourhood.

For Europe, the failure to make a more decisive impact on dislodging Assad from power is being felt acutely, particularly as the horrific death toll continues to mount. The ongoing crisis has served to highlight that short of direct military intervention, as in Libya, Europe's ability to influence the course of the Arab Awakenings remains limited in the face of competing internal and international dynamics. This does not, however, need to reflect European weakness. At the end of the day the Arab revolutions will rightly be shaped by the Arab people themselves.

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