

# The civil war in Syria shows that to prevent and manage conflicts, the EU needs a more proactive approach with greater regional focus.

by Blog Admin

*Since its beginning the European Union has struggled to play a meaningful role in Syria's civil war, illustrating that there is now a clear need for the EU to pursue a faster, more proactive approach in preventing violent conflicts. **Tanja Tamminen** writes that the Lisbon Treaty has created structures for a more coherent foreign policy and that the EU should use this to build more comprehensive regional strategies to take advantage of the local knowledge of EU delegations on the ground.*



After over a year of bloody conflict, the civil war in Syria shows no sign of abating. The inability to act efficiently to prevent such a violent crisis from escalating has tragically shown the limits of the conflict prevention and conflict management policies of the international community.

Given that the European Union is suffering a grave economic crisis, this also seems to have weakened its appetite for constructive leadership. Yet, the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in 2009 created structures for more coherent foreign policy. What would the EU require to act faster, more efficiently and in a proactive manner to prevent violent conflicts or their escalation?

The International Community or "a coalition of the willing" may agree to intervene in a conflict, but is often criticized for its non-coordinated action in post-intervention activities. Many agree that the ideal situation would be where the best tools are used in a comprehensive manner to achieve a certain objective – thus each actor needed has a specific role to play and there is neither overlapping nor gaps in the action.

The Lisbon Treaty, the EEAS and the strengthened role of the EU delegations already make coordination smoother. In any conflict-prone area, when early warning signs are detected by the EU delegations on the ground, a political decision-making process should be quickly initiated on how to react and on which tools to use – all within a larger strategic framework. The EU has lacked a proactive stance on smouldering conflict zones but this should change in the future,

especially as High Representative and European Commission Vice President Catherine Ashton has noted that the EEAS's main role is crisis prevention. Each crisis is unique in nature and happens in a regional context. The EU has started to prepare regional strategies. To fully embrace the regional focus, the EEAS should find ways of strengthening the dialogue between the regional expertise, conflict prevention and the crisis management field.

The EU has developed two regional strategies for specific conflict areas: the Horn of Africa and the Sahel area (2011). Both strategies are often quoted as examples of comprehensive EU action, where



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both development aid and crisis management efforts are being jointly coordinated. None of these strategies fully reflects the possibilities of truly comprehensive crisis management and proactive crisis prevention, however.

Recently, discussions have started on whether the EU should renew its Security Strategy from 2003. Rather than renewing a strategy full of generic objectives and high-level conceptualisations, the EU should focus on writing and agreeing upon pragmatic regional strategies, where the high-level objectives, such as peace and stability, would be operationalized into more concrete goals. These kinds of strategies would create a frame whereby all the EU tools from diplomacy, development aid and financial support to peace mediation, dialogue facilitation and all the CSDP instruments would be balanced and the best tools chosen to strive towards joint objectives. Regional strategies should be made easy to update depending on the changes on the ground, as the agility to use the best tools in the right place and at the right moment is the key to effective conflict prevention.

It is important for the EU to take steps towards more proactive policies and to recognize the importance of conflict prevention and mediation as a tool in this field. Yet, mediation and dialogue facilitation are tools that can be used all the way from the conflict prevention phase to early action logic and the processes of crisis management itself.

In the new EEAS structures, the Mediation Support Team (Division for Conflict Prevention, Peace-Building and Mediation) is now placed in the crisis management structures. This may slowly change the old mindsets to see that reconciliation cannot be achieved only through traditional crisis management tools such as military intervention or by mentoring the police forces. It requires dialogue and mediation, fields where EU capacities can be further strengthened.

In a region-specific strategic framework, different EU instruments can be engaged in view of long-term objectives. But this begs the question of whose objectives we are talking about. One of the guiding principles in EU crisis management has been the local ownership and local responsibility to implement reforms. However, if the required reforms are based on objectives defined by outsiders, one cannot talk about genuine local ownership. The strategic priorities of the EU itself seem to steer its work in the conflict areas.

This year, many EU member states have endorsed the “New Deal” document elaborated by leaders of the G7+ countries, a group of fragile states, to bring a local voice into the founding principles of peace-building and state-building policies. Thus, these EU states have committed themselves “to support inclusive country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility based on a country-led fragility assessment”, and to support inclusive and participatory political dialogue. The EU delegations present in the region are in a key position to listen to local needs. Mission planning should also be participatory and start from the local needs perspective, not from the so often institutional mindset (i.e. what capacities do we have, what could we deploy).

How can the EU know whether it is “doing the right thing”? It is often easy, but from a long-term perspective it is also risky, to create benchmarking systems of crisis management based on short-term institutional reforms. Genuine rule of law cannot be measured in the number of EU-compatible laws, action plans and administrative guidelines that have been adopted under the supervisory eye of EU monitors. The main thing is implementation, which is much more difficult to measure.

CSDP missions are by definition relatively short-term interventions and as their mandates are agreed for a maximum of 2 years at a time, very often their objectives are in a quite short time frame, compared to the needs of the conflict transformation. Self-assessment and transparent reporting from the missions and operations are necessary tools to steer the work of the EU and flexibly change the priorities and instruments if needed. However, they should not be taken as tools to measure the impact of the EU strategies as a whole. EU peace-building efforts should be long-term and strategic, even though different tools can be used along the way.

External evaluation has been a central tool in the field of development aid for a long time already. Thus, Commission activities can be evaluated by outside experts, whereas the member-state-driven CSDP is still a no-go zone for external evaluators. The current economic crisis may lead to a situation where the

European Parliament, as well as the parliaments in the EU member states, will start asking questions about the CSDP budget use and “value for money”. To provide plausible and transparent information on the impact of crisis management activities, the member states may sooner or later need to comply with the demands of external evaluation. This will only serve to reinforce the efficiency of the EU activities.

*This article is a shortened version of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs briefing paper [Towards efficient early action: The EU needs a regional focus and proactive tools to prevent and manage conflicts](#).*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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