

# SOCIETY MAX: HOW EUROPE CAN HELP SYRIANS SURVIVE ASSAD AND CORONAVIRUS

Julien Barnes-Dacey

April 2020

## SUMMARY

- After nine years of conflict, the US is mounting a ‘maximum pressure’ campaign against Syria, seeking the regime’s demise. But, with Assad having effectively won the war, he is unlikely to succumb to US economic pressure.
- Assad bears responsibility for the country’s freefall but this strategy will further accelerate societal collapse, especially as coronavirus looms, and will not deliver a transition.
- European governments should pivot to a longer-term strategy focused on protecting those societal forces that are still standing and that can help salvage a better future aligned with European interests. This should include increased – and cautious – support to them within government-controlled Syria.
- The unpredictability of the Trump administration means persuading the US down this track is not impossible – Europeans should seek to influence Washington to widen space for societal support.

## Introduction

Families are eating less and less daily – if they can even find food to put on the table. Desperate parents are cutting short their children’s schooling to send them out to earn. The government continues to detain thousands of prisoners. And now coronavirus looms large, threatening a medical and economic catastrophe.

The situation in Syria continues to worsen – an observation made innumerable times over the last nine years of brutal conflict. But the further hollowing-out of Syrian society, the ongoing suffering of its people, and its impact on European interests should still spark intense internal reflection in Europe. Now that the conflict has moved on to a new stage, can Europeans help Syrians this time?

As it stands, Bashar al-Assad has effectively won the military battle, and he now faces a new struggle to cement his hold on power: the United States and some European governments are betting that he will not be able to win the peace. The regime’s problems are largely due to its own corrupt mismanagement but Western actors are also intent on using their remaining tools of influence to ensure this bet pays off. The US has opened a new front in the shape of a ‘maximum pressure’ campaign, driven by a fierce determination to deny Russia and Iran an enduring victory in Syria. This campaign aims to increase Syria’s isolation and domestic economic pain, while also raising the cost to Assad’s backers. Its stated goal is ‘behaviour change’, but its backers really seek regime collapse.

In addition to the moral imperative of helping the Syrian people, Europe’s chief interest in Syria is to re-establish stability and thereby prevent refugee outflows to its own shores and terrorism in its own cities. Stability in Syria could also enable refugees to return from Europe and elsewhere in the Middle East. Ultimately, this depends on addressing the root causes of a conflict in which Assad is the main culprit, having led a military campaign that has left Syria devastated and up to 500,000 people dead.

But since the onset of the US campaign, some European officials have grown increasingly wary that pushing the Syrian regime to collapse will not advance their interests. Assad bears responsibility for the country’s societal freefall but some European officials – including those supportive of seeing Assad ousted – fear that

the US is intent on bringing Syria to its knees with a “disregard for the Syrian people and wider regional stability”.<sup>[1]</sup> Deepening state failure in Syria is only likely to lead to further instability and entrench Assad’s warlord-like hold on the country as he defends the organs of state needed to maintain power. The end result will not be a transition, but an exacerbation of the country’s Assad-directed implosion, leading to increased Syrian suffering, more refugees, and wider space for an extremist resurgence. And none of this even begins to account for the potentially devastating impact of coronavirus.

This paper focuses on European policy on government-controlled Syria, arguing that there is an alternative track to help drive a stabilising, longer-term transformational agenda. It recognises that the Assad regime is the problem, not the solution, but seeks a constructive agenda that accounts for the reality that a transition is not on the cards. Importantly, it sets out how European governments can achieve this at an acceptable political cost, including by shoring up much-needed European unity on Syria.

As part of a ‘society max’ approach, European policy should now focus squarely on strengthening Syrian societal resilience, seeking to proactively protect the positive societal forces that have emerged over the past nine years. Europeans will need to tread very cautiously, working on small initiatives and holding firm to key principles. The regime will clearly look to frustrate elements of this approach but it is not good enough to say that nothing beneficial can be done so long as Assad is not ousted. This approach will necessitate increased engagement with Syrian actors on the ground and widen support beyond humanitarian aid, with a focus on initiatives aimed at strengthening local capacity. It seeks to empower Syrians to counter the worst effects of Assad’s rule rather than embrace a US approach that will accelerate societal breakdown. It should not involve wider reconstruction support or European re-legitimisation of Assad.

This bottom-up approach should be complemented by European efforts to energise higher-level negotiations on related issues. Rather than focusing solely on political progress in international negotiations, European states should pay greater attention to issues that would strengthen the ‘society max’ approach. The plight of detainees, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, should be a priority. As part of this approach, European governments should publicly benchmark a more

viable 'more for more' track than has been tested to date, one that is delinked from political ambitions. This track will aim to secure tangible gains for the Syrian people that can complement European efforts on the ground.

## A Syrian reality check

After more than nine years of conflict, Assad is victorious on the battlefield of his broken country. But while he may have secured his own survival, he faces immense challenges. The severest of these is Syria's devastated economy. According to the [World Bank](#), Syria's losses from 2011 to 2016 alone amount to at least \$226 billion, four times its GDP. This includes significant [damage to critical capital stock](#), including more than one-third of housing stock and half of all healthcare and education facilities. The Syrian government says it will cost around \$400 billion to rebuild the country; money it does not have and its international backers are unwilling to supply.

Against the backdrop of woes resulting from regime corruption and its focus on maintaining a brutal security grip on the country, the outlook is incredibly grim. Despite decreasing levels of violence, the country's socio-economic situation continues to deteriorate dramatically. As of March 2019, the United Nations estimated that 83 percent of the population lived below the [poverty line](#), with many Syrians now eking out an existence in conditions that are even worse than those during the years of conflict. The Syrian people are having to navigate around a regime that has repeatedly committed [war crimes](#), is responsible for [attacks on identified medical facilities](#), and has shown minimal concern for addressing the population's needs. Despite some public sector pay rises and subsidy increases, the government is largely leaving the population to [fend for itself](#). "The government has no agenda [to fix the country]", observes one Syrian businessman, decrying the rapidly worsening situation.<sup>[2]</sup>

Two exacerbating factors are now at play. First, the deteriorating outlook in neighbouring Lebanon – described as "Syria's economic lungs" by one Syrian economist – is restricting US dollar inflows and wreaking havoc on the Syrian lira. Syria's currency now trades at around 1,200 lira to the dollar, up from around 600 to the dollar in mid-2019 and well above the pre-conflict average of 50. This devaluation has significantly pushed up prices of staple goods. The price of the

World Food Programme (WFP) national average reference [food basket](#) has increased by 57 percent since the onset of the crisis in Lebanon in October 2019. “Syria is facing the spectre of famine,” notes one Syrian NGO worker.<sup>[3]</sup> “This winter, the humanitarian situation was truly dire, and it will be worse next year.”<sup>[4]</sup> According to the WFP: “the higher price of food has meant that an increasing number of interviewed households reported reducing the number of meals they consume, from 3 to 2 meals per day.” Across Syria, queues for subsidised bread are growing ever longer with the government struggling to secure sufficient wheat imports.

The economic impact has [social and educational ramifications too](#): “reported coping mechanisms as a result of the increase in prices since September 2019 have been removing children from school due to the high cost of transport to school. Some households also reported removing children from school to have them work instead ... Reports of early child marriage were on the rise across Syria.”

The second factor relates to long-standing US and European sectoral sanctions. While an important tool to respond to ongoing crimes, they also have a wider impact by blocking financial inflows and hindering imports of key commodities. According to one Syrian opposition figure, “sanctions have collateral, indiscriminate effects, no matter how smart they are. Their impact is pervasive.”<sup>[5]</sup> Last winter, there was a fuel crisis – which led to significant increases in heating, food, and transport costs – partly caused by [US measures](#) aimed at blocking Syria’s imports of Iranian oil. Ordinary citizens, not the Syrian elites, often suffer the consequences. While this is largely due to regime policies, European and US humanitarian exemptions are [not functioning effectively](#). As noted by one [report](#), “aid groups working in Syria say the bureaucracy involved in getting exemptions can be bewildering, slow, and costly, especially given that it often requires the involvement of trained legal staff. An exemption from EU sanctions must be cleared with both an EU office in Beirut and with national European authorities involved in the trade of whatever product an NGO wants to bring into Syria.”

These sanctions are also having a detrimental effect on redevelopment efforts, including legitimate activities not linked to regime allies under targeted sanctions. One Syrian businessman still working in the country describes a situation in which “[we are] affected by sanctions even if [we] have nothing to do with the regime

because people are scared to deal with Syrians all together,” referencing the unwillingness of international banks to clear financial transactions as a particular obstacle.[6]

The regime remains focused on its own situation above the plight of the wider population, but this economic situation is stretching its capacity to govern and provide basic goods and services. Looking forward, this reality is likely to be brutally exposed by coronavirus. The healthcare sector, which accounted for [under 4 percent of total spending](#) in the 2020 budget, is wholly unprepared to deal with the crisis. According to one [study](#), “the maximum number of COVID-19 cases that could be adequately treated in Syria is currently 6,500.” The study also suggests some provinces have no intensive care unit capacity at all. The regime has responded very slowly to the spread of the illness, imposing a blanket of fearful silence over the country on the issue. But if – or, more likely, when – the virus spreads, the government will not have the means to manage the situation and the result is likely to be devastating. To compound the pain, economic indicators suggest that there has been a dramatic deterioration since March, with local media reporting [sharp price increases](#) and [devastating forecasts](#) for the wider economy. As ever it will be the most [vulnerable who will pay the highest price](#).

Significantly, Syria’s struggling economy is provoking increased public discontent, including from those long unwilling to criticise the government within the loyalist community. Instances of public [protest](#), channelled against government ineffectiveness and corruption rather than the president, are increasing. Growing bread shortages recently provoked a display of public anger. And there are signs of possible internal regime tensions, highlighted by the government’s unprecedented seizure of assets owned by [Rami Makhlouf](#), the president’s cousin and the country’s long-dominant economic player.

## **The maximum pressure campaign against Syria**

Against this backdrop, Western states, led by the US, have come to see the economic sphere as the venue in which to ensure that Assad cannot win the peace. Making life difficult for the regime by using economic instruments possesses an attractive glow to Western powers unwilling and unable to consider military interventions or other ways of bringing the war to a definitive end. The US has, in

particular, taken up these instruments with gusto of late.

An emerging [US-led pressure campaign](#) aims to exacerbate present economic conditions to force significant concessions out of Assad. It fits within a broader US goal of denying Russia and Iran a win in Syria and doing everything to “raise the cost and inflict maximum pain on them”, which European officials believe is the key factor driving US policy in Syria.<sup>[7]</sup> This approach forms part of the wider US-led maximum pressure campaign against Iran playing out across the region.

Within Syria, the December 2019 [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#) is the central thrust of this strategy, presaging severe sanctions to prevent all recovery under Assad’s leadership. This includes the use of secondary sanctions to block moves by other external players – be they Syrian allies such as Russia or Iran, or regional states such as the United Arab Emirates, to reintegrate Syria into the international community and start the process of economic redevelopment. Washington has threatened to impose sanctions on a close ally, the UAE, which re-established diplomatic ties with Syria in December 2018, in a bid to prevent Abu Dhabi moving back in with economic support. These sanctions are accompanied by other measures, including pressure on Europe to also increase sanctions, as well as continued US control of eastern Syria to ensure that the regime cannot secure the country’s oil fields. US officials have welcomed the crisis in Lebanon and the economic fallout in Syria as “an opportunity” to further squeeze the regime, as one European official reveals.<sup>[8]</sup>

In public, the US position is that this strategy aims to force concessions out of the regime, described as “behaviour change” rather than a transition. But, in truth, the strategy is geared towards regime collapse. This could potentially include an eventual push from Russia once Moscow concedes that the cost of maintaining the regime is too high.

“[Our requirements are] not unreasonable. They don’t require the overthrow of Assad. They require a change in that government’s behaviour,” [said James Jeffrey](#), the US special representative for Syria engagement, in February 2020. This mirrors the official position of the European Union, which now calls for a political “[solution](#)” rather than “transition”, a formulation intended to suggest a more realistic focus. Critically, however, as one senior European official who is largely supportive of the

hard-line US approach characterises it, this is “sleight of hand.”<sup>[9]</sup> Indeed, it is not hard to identify this underlying dynamic given that Jeffrey, like Europeans, **makes clear** that this “compromise” involves “the execution of **UN Resolution 2254**” – which foresees “free and fair elections” and a “political transition”. The US supplements this with a demand for the withdrawal of “Iranian-commanded forces”. These steps represent desired – and, for the most part, UN Security Council-mandated – end goals for most observers seeking to address the conflict’s root causes. But, as Jeffrey and others know, a transparent and fair political process, as well as the withdrawal of Iranian support, are existential threats to the regime. “We’ve never really given up on regime change,” acknowledges one senior European official.<sup>[10]</sup> Another puts it like this: “We say we just want a political process ... but the end of that process is really [transition].”<sup>[11]</sup>

The bottom line is that so long as the regime refuses to make significant concessions and the West does not accept the regime’s staying power, it is impossible to imagine any “**compromise political settlement**”, as publicly suggested by officials on both sides of the Atlantic. European officials know that Russia wants “guarantees” about regime security, which the West is not prepared to offer.<sup>[12]</sup> For their part, Russian officials and analysts maintain that the West’s talk of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the proposed “safe and neutral environment” is a back door to regime change.<sup>[13]</sup> The US position may be underpinned by an assumption that the regime and its backers will never engage in any meaningful behavioural change. But the reality is that – as European officials understand from discussions with their US counterparts – Washington’s strategy aims to squeeze Syria and stifle all recovery until the regime can no longer survive.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **The US approach: Pain but no gain**

There is no doubt that the Assad regime remains responsible for the country’s continued downward trajectory and the deepening suffering of the Syrian people. But the unfolding US maximum pressure campaign will not achieve its goal – and it will harm European interests in the process. The pressure strategy will exacerbate conditions on the ground and may even further fortify the regime’s redoubt, with the population becoming steadily less able to secure any independent space



needed to survive Assad.

The immediate danger relates to worsening conditions on the ground. These emerge first and foremost from the regime's sustained campaign of brutality, corruption, and mismanagement. But, as demonstrated by last winter's fuel crisis, US-led pressure – which will intensify as the provisions of the Caesar Act kick in – will increase the pain and risks, compounding destructive regime policies. This may be the intended US aim but it will come at a heavy price: more hunger in homes across Syria; more people having to flee abroad; more space in which extremist organisations such as the Islamic State group (ISIS) can recover. As one European official notes: “The US is happy to raise the cost ... to the point that it is willing to accept Syria's implosion ... whatever the collateral damage.”<sup>[15]</sup>

This campaign's function as part of a wider US pressure campaign against Iran has an impact not just on Iran but also Iraq and Lebanon at a time when these countries are suffering devastating political and economic crises, amplified by coronavirus and the collapse in oil prices. Washington is looking to exploit regional vulnerabilities for political gain against Tehran. And its policy could exacerbate instability across the Middle East. (For its part, Iran can be expected to survive the onslaught, having proven adept at [exploiting turmoil](#) to secure its regional position over recent years.)

As well as being dangerous, this approach is counterproductive because such ‘short-term pain’ is highly unlikely to deliver the desired ‘long-term gain’ represented by a stabilising transition away from Assad. Russia has no intention of bending to Western pressure to force an equitable political settlement in Syria. Russian analysts suggest that the greater the Western pressure exerted, the less likely it is that Moscow will shift position – out of fear of projecting a sense of weakness.<sup>[16]</sup> The past decade should also make it abundantly clear that the regime has no intention of entering into a meaningful political track and that it will not fold under strengthened forms of economic pressure. Not only has it overcome a serious military challenge to its rule, it has already withstood an intense range of US and European economic measures.

As one Arab diplomat argues, the West is misinterpreting regime vulnerability if it believes it is about to crack: “the Syrian state is not in good shape but when you

look at the situation of the regime today, it's actually above average compared to the past 50 years – not bad, it's been worse, and is going to get better. In Damascus, there is a sense that it is going to get better.”[17]

As has often been the case in Syria and other warzones, the regime is, in fact, likely to exploit sanctions to reinforce its own control, including by channelling the pain onto its own people and the blame for state failure onto the West. Damascus has long set itself up to benefit from whatever circumstances it finds itself in. One Syrian economist explains that there is now “a state in a state, with the Syrian regime benefiting from smuggling and trafficking” networks that have emerged due to sanctions.[18] “The regime will always have the first slice of the pie, with or without sanctions,” believes a Syrian businessman still working in the country.[19] If anything, rather than leading to sharpened domestic discontent that could eventually pierce the regime’s armour, the further hollowing-out of state institutions – as the regime concentrates available resources on security agencies and away from residual public service – will only impede societal resilience against the regime. One European diplomat expresses it thus: “the regime will be the last small light that stays on.”[20]

In the end, the notion that intensified short-term pain will lead to progress is a dangerous bet. Iraq in the 1990s is a model of what this approach might actually deliver: a hollowing-out of the state, with longer-term negative ramifications. There, Saddam Hussein, like Assad today, had prime responsibility for the outcome. But Western actors should also shoulder responsibility for their unwillingness to factor in how they know autocrats will respond. Assad has the power to change direction, but it is clear that he will not do so. European governments should acknowledge this reality and factor it into their strategy if they are truly focused on making the situation better for both Syrians and Europeans. The US may appear unlikely to switch course at this time, but Europeans have it within their gift to design their own approach – and, potentially, to draw the US away from its current path too.

## **‘Society max’: A new European strategy**

The maximum pressure approach to Syria is causing growing concern in European capitals, including those long associated with the US stance. “Our critique of the

US position is ‘you can’t burn Syria to get rid of the regime’,” divulges one European official.<sup>[21]</sup> Of course, the Atlantic Ocean provides the US with considerable geographical protection to manage the downsides of its strategy – something that is not available to Europeans.

An alternative approach is possible – one that is politically feasible, and that will do more to constructively advance both European interests and those of the Syrian people.

European governments should now pivot to a strategy that has a longer-term vision of change, one that focuses on strengthening Syrian societal resilience and operates through an incremental, ground-up approach. First and foremost, this will aim to counter the Assad regime’s detrimental policies, but it will also seek to circumvent the destructive US approach. The central focus of this strategy should be finding ways, however small, to proactively protect and bolster, rather than squeeze and hollow out, those societal forces that are still standing. Only these groups will be able to rebuild Syria in a way that meets the needs of the Syrian people, from feeding the hungry in the short term to establishing some semblance of stability, and laying the groundwork for longer-term political change.

One European official makes the case effectively: “the only way to keep alive Syrian political ambitions of avoiding a return to the 2011 status quo is to support the Syrian civil society that has grown over the course of the conflict. You have plenty of actors who are independent and not controlled by state and security institutions, whether it be business associations, trade unions, or service deliverers.”<sup>[22]</sup> European officials now need to ask themselves how they can best protect and harness the independent human capital that has developed over the past nine years. As one Syrian opposition figure puts it: “we need to stay mobilised to fight for the middle ground.”<sup>[23]</sup> Crucially, this will mean not just moral support, but also directing European resources to Syrians on the ground.

Naturally, not everyone is convinced. “If we put money into Syria, this won’t have any impact at all except wasting money and contributing to making Assad powerful – the opposite of what the EU wants to see”, responds one European official.<sup>[24]</sup> According to this view, Europeans will end up strengthening the regime – not just through direct aid but by helping reconstitute state capacity that will relieve

Damascus of governance burdens.

But this approach fails to internalise that Assad is not going anywhere – with or without the pressure campaign – and ignores that Europeans can still take some careful steps to help secure a better outlook for Syrian society under Assad’s rule. While the room for manoeuvre on the ground is narrowing – and it will clearly not be possible to advance overtly political projects – it is wrong to assert that nothing can be done. Syrians themselves are the first to warn of the corrupt and malign hand of the regime but, nonetheless, many of them [call on Europeans to find careful openings to do more on the ground](#). Moreover, this approach is not about re-legitimising Assad or embarking on widespread reconstruction. It is about focusing maximum effort on expanding the space for ordinary Syrians to breathe and giving them the tools to make their own bulwarks rather than accepting the inevitability of the regime’s consolidation. Principled positions related to high-level re-engagement, targeted sanctions, and reconstruction support should remain tied to the implementation of a wider, albeit sadly unlikely, political process and as tools to maintain pressure in the face of egregious crimes.

To defend the integrity of this approach, European activities in Syria should align with key principles. This should include a focus on locally-based and -implemented projects. Those communities most in need should be the obvious focus of this approach. It should also include ex ante approval of action with implementing partners. Working with government institutions may sometimes be acceptable because there is still, at times, a valid distinction to draw between the regime and these bodies. But, fundamentally, Europeans should focus on the small, the local, and vetted Syrian partners. Where there are no adequate guarantees of its implementation principles, the EU can withdraw its support. And it should enhance its supervisory mechanisms to ensure that it can do so.

If anything, the regime will seek to frustrate this proposed approach, whether by manipulating it, blocking it – as it has done in the past by denying necessary visas, for instance – or trying to channel support to its allies on the ground. International NGOs working in Syria state that the regime makes their lives incredibly difficult, but they also note that they have mechanisms to ensure that projects are implemented in accordance with donor requirements, which they say are functioning.<sup>[25]</sup> While Europeans will need to tread very carefully, they should also

not ignore the collective weight of their assistance and the fact that the regime is not in absolute control of Syria or able to resist the need to lean on external support. The Syrian regime's capacity constraints have resulted in an increased dependence on local Syrian organisations to meet key needs, highlighting the fact that there is still space for some local autonomy, albeit strictly on non-political issues. The Syrian government also reached out to international NGOs in 2019 for support in north-eastern Syria, following the announced US withdrawal from the area.<sup>[26]</sup> Some Syrians believe that enhanced European support could strengthen their ability to deal with the government. As one Syrian NGO worker based in the country comments: "if Europeans are willing to provide finance, this might also help those having to engage with the government on the ground to make space."<sup>[27]</sup>

Here, European officials will need to take their duty of care extremely seriously, to ensure that they are not endangering individual Syrians. Nonetheless, the complexities of making a success of this should not distract Europeans from the ultimate goal, which is to strengthen societal resilience to help the Syrian people secure their own future.

## **Securing diplomatic alignment**

To prosecute this strategy, European officials will need to devote special attention to maintaining their own unity on Syria. This front is already weakening due to tensions between states that want to maintain the position that Assad should go and others that are pushing for re-engagement. This 'either-or' stance risks a deeper split that will hinder Europe's ability to make a difference and gives Russia the opportunity to play European capitals off against one another. This new approach can help unify the European front based on a strategy that accords with a desire by many states to not legitimise Assad's victory, while conceding that it is also in the European interest to widen on-the-ground engagement.

Given European discord on Syria policy – and the inability of the European External Action Service to play a consensus-building role in the face of strong national positions – it may also be time to consider the appointment of an EU special envoy for Syria. Such an envoy could focus on harmonising Europeans’ positions and use common tools more effectively.

Improbable as it may first seem, this is also a strategy that Europeans can sell to Washington. There are known differences between the approach of the Department of State and that of the White House and Department of Defence, which European officials could look to wedge open further. Indeed, European officials increasingly wonder about the extent to which Jeffrey’s hardline position really represents that of the White House.<sup>[28]</sup> They should make the case that accelerating the Assad-led trajectory towards state collapse in a bid to see the regime ousted and his backers bruised will not deliver a positive outcome for the US. This is, in fact, likely to be exploited by Iran and extremist groups such as ISIS, both of which thrive amid state breakdown and regional instability. To be sure, Assad is not the answer to this problem, but strengthening Syrian societal capabilities represents a smarter approach to addressing core US priorities. Given the unpredictability of Donald Trump, it is not entirely outlandish to believe that Europe could persuade the US to take an entirely new path in Syria. Indeed, Trump could suddenly push through a different approach if he succeeds in securing key bilateral demands of Syria, such as the release of US detainees.

Europeans should stress that, if it wants Europe’s support on the big-ticket items related to maintaining key sanctions and withholding wider reconstruction support, the US needs to give Europeans increased space to prevent further societal collapse. This could include, for instance, a widened and more effective implementation of US humanitarian sanctions waivers, a step for which Europeans should also look to secure congressional backing through increased outreach. Jeffrey has exerted considerable effort trying to rally European support for the US position and is anxious to avoid an unravelling of European unity on this question. Washington’s unwillingness to provide any leeway risks this very outcome, perhaps prompting the EU to allow sanctions on Syria (which it renews annually) to lapse.

## Recommendations

A ‘society max’ approach in Syria will be made up of several strands. To begin implementing it, European governments should now:

- **Increase ‘humanitarian plus’ assistance.** This relates to support that goes beyond pure humanitarian aid, moving towards early recovery and development aid and the provision of essential services. European governments remain wary of heading in this direction given that some fear this blurs the line with lower-level reconstruction assistance. But the current approach is clearly proving counterproductive for both Syrians and for European interests. Europeans need to grapple with the ramifications for ordinary people – those that they should now be looking to invest in. As one Syrian NGO worker explains: “there is now an absurd situation on the ground where the UN can only fix schools and only in certain places because [doing more] would be labelled as reconstruction. People are sending kids to schools in areas that aren’t safe. Boys are more likely to attend school as there is a bigger risk that something will happen to girls.”<sup>[29]</sup>

Here, Europeans should bend rather than cross their red lines, looking to strengthen local capacity in regime-controlled Syria in accordance with the principles outlined above. The education and medical sectors would be obvious places to embed this approach – by, for instance, supporting the construction of new schools and providing accompanying capacity to help the 2.8 million children in Syria who are not in education. Meanwhile, the spread of coronavirus is likely to expose gaping holes in the Syrian healthcare sector. To be sure, increased support will partly help reconstitute state-controlled infrastructure. But Europeans need to move beyond a strategically counterproductive dichotomy: Syrian society will also take independent advantage of improved services. Syrian interlocutors have identified the provision of water and electricity, demining, and small-scale infrastructure support as further areas for increased ‘humanitarian plus’ engagement.<sup>[30]</sup>

- **Channel support directly to Syrians in Syria.** Europeans should be more ambitious in finding means to channel support to Syrians living under

government control, many of whom say they are better equipped to navigate around the regime than the West believes.[31] This approach needs to translate into more creative, more direct, and more substantial support. For example, Europeans could provide enhanced assistance to Syrians on the ground – whether through direct financial support or digital engagement aimed at providing expertise and capacity support – to help them rebuild their homes, set up businesses, and re-establish their livelihoods.

This approach would also allow European governments to broaden their support for Syrian networks beyond traditional opposition channels, which are now largely based outside the country. “Syrians locked inside the country need to be connected to outsiders. We need capacity support and exposure,” says one Syrian NGO worker based between Syria and Lebanon, expressing concern that intensifying isolation would further harm the prospects of those Syrians caught in the regime’s brutal hold.[32] Other Syrian interlocutors have also identified the possibility of increased engagement with the Syrian business community, arguing that they are well placed to facilitate peace-building efforts, support civil society networks, help strengthen social cohesion, and even exert some pressure on the government, given its attempts to draw in funding from them and the diaspora.

- **Widen and ensure efficient implementation of EU sanctions exemptions.** There should be a renewed focus – led by the EU on behalf of member states – on [ensuring that EU sanctions are correctly implemented](#), and that “specific exemptions and derogations, including derogation for essential civilian needs and for humanitarian assistance” are accessible. This is currently not the case and should be urgently addressed given the effects of coronavirus. While medical equipment may be permitted under current exemptions, the bureaucratic and legal minefield is likely to prove too difficult to navigate. EU exemptions exist for a good reason: European officials intent on highlighting that these measures are smart should be doing far more, to not just facilitate their implementation but also identify areas where they need to be widened. This will help fight the narrative war with Assad, who blames all domestic woes on external pressure. To that end, and given the fear created by US measures (which will also diminish the impact of any European sanctions relief), the EU could also consider creating an independent financial channel



– potentially modelled on the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, if European efforts in Iran ever bear fruit – that could facilitate humanitarian inflows into the country, in line with European objectives.

- **Better deploy European access in Syria.** Europe needs to recalibrate its insistence that in-country engagement – such as a diplomatic presence – legitimises Assad. Full-scale political re-engagement with Assad should certainly not be granted without reciprocal measures, but careful, lower-level engagement is to the advantage of both EU interests and ordinary Syrians. This access is a means of engaging with Syrian society rather than the Syrian regime. It is partly for this reason that a number of European states, including some maintaining a principled stand on the need to see Assad removed, have continued to send diplomats to Syria over the course of the conflict. European states should consider how they can make better use of those member states with access to Damascus. They should also not block the access of European officials who habitually travelled to the country out of fear of legitimising Assad’s victory – as some have done over the past year.<sup>[33]</sup> These countries that maintain in-country access are well placed to monitor the situation on the ground – a critical imperative, especially in terms of mapping the possible space for wider support – as well as negotiate with government institutions on lower-level issues on the ‘humanitarian plus’ track.
- **Publicly outline a viable ‘more for more’ track.** The ‘society max’ approach, aimed at strengthening Syrian societal resilience, should be accompanied by increased European efforts to secure related gains through higher-level negotiations. European governments can continue to push for the implementation of a UN-led political process and tie high-level European re-engagement, the lifting of targeted sanctions, and wider reconstruction support to this outcome. But they should simultaneously focus on other important on-the-ground issues through a ‘more for more’ approach. Within this model, incremental steps by the regime would meet with reciprocal rewards. Some Western officials claim ‘more for more’ has been tried and that it failed due to the lack of Syrian and Russian buy-in.<sup>[34]</sup> But, as far as this author understands it, there has only been one serious European attempt, channelled via Russia – the demands of which were not seen as

realistic and for which no specific counter-incentives were laid out. “More for more’ has not been tried with sincerity,” is one Western official’s assessment.<sup>[35]</sup>

European governments should outline a clear and realistic set of benchmarks, tying them to an equally clear reward structure. There should be a focus on issues that are not overtly political, including the plight of detainees – which is of critical importance given the risk of coronavirus sweeping across prisons – humanitarian aid (such as cross-border access), and transparent stabilisation support mechanisms. Verifiable progress on these issues could be met with degrees of European financial support and possible sectoral sanctions relief. Here, Europeans need to be honest about what a real deal-making process looks like, most fundamentally by conceding to Russia – as the key interlocutor conceivably able to push Assad – its primary ambition: guarantees of regime security. The approach should, critically, be laid out publicly. This will force the regime to answer to its own domestic constituents and Russia as to why it is unwilling to engage in a pragmatic process that is manifestly not a threat to itself and that would make a noticeable difference on the ground.

## Conclusion

Assad will almost certainly prove adept at resisting rising external pressure not just to hold on to, but even to solidify, his hold on power. And he will do this at the expense of ordinary Syrians, whose lives will be wasted or outright destroyed if they are left with no relief of any kind. It has long been clear that neither the US nor European countries will adopt a military approach towards removing Assad. The American strategy – economic weapons wielded in a pressure campaign – will only make a bad situation worse. It may address the US aim of increasing the cost to Russia and Iran, if not forcing them entirely from the field. But it will do little to attend to the needs of the families stuck under Assad’s rule. It will also do little to protect European interests; in fact, it will harm them.

This paper has shown another way is possible: that European states can be a force for good even within government-controlled Syria – and that they can defend their

own interests at the same time. As they set about putting their new strategy into action, Europeans must accompany this with other policies for territories outside the regime's control, as well as those in the wider region. They must not forget to extend greater support to neighbouring states that are looking after large numbers of Syrian refugees and to universal jurisdiction mechanisms. But, making 'society max' a reality within Syria will help Europeans realise their goals much more powerfully than they are currently able to. And it will prove a compelling challenge to the misguided maximum pressure campaign the US appears determined to prosecute. The 'society max' strategy will strengthen those forces in Syria still surviving under the heel of the regime. Helping these individuals and these remnants of independent civil life survive is both vital for the future of Syria and entirely in the interests of Europe.

## About the author

Julien Barnes-Dacey is director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at ECFR, where he focuses on European policy towards Syria and the wider Mashreq. He was based in Syria from 2007 to 2011.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the many Syrians, policymakers, and experts who provided insights that fed into the paper. The author also thanks ECFR colleagues for thoughtful engagement with the paper and Adam Harrison, in particular, for excellent editorial support.

[1] Author interview with a European official, March 2020.

[2] Author interview with a Syrian businessman, November 2019.

[3] Author interview, November 2019.

[4] Author interview, November 2019.

[5] Author interview with a Syrian activist, December 2019.

[7] Author interview with a European official, March 2020.

[8] Author interview with a European official, February 2020.

[9] Author interview with a European official, February 2020.

- [10] Author interview with a European official, February 2020.
- [11] Author interview with a European official, December 2019.
- [12] Author interview with a European official, December 2019.
- [13] Author interviews with Russian officials and analysts, 2019-2020.
- [14] Author interviews with a European official, 2019-2020.
- [15] Author interview with a European official, March 2020.
- [16] Author interviews with Russian analysts, 2019-2020.
- [17] Author interview with an Arab diplomat, December 2019.
- [18] Author interview with a Syrian economist, December 2019.
- [19] Author interview with a Syrian businessman, October 2019.
- [20] Author interview with a European official, February 2020.
- [21] Author interview with a European official, February 2020.
- [22] Author interview with a European official, March 2020.
- [24] Author interview with a European official, December 2019.
- [25] Author interviews with representatives from international NGOs working in Syria, 2019.
- [26] Author interview with a European diplomat, October 2020.
- [27] Author interview with a Syrian NGO worker, October 2019.
- [28] Author interviews with European officials, 2020.
- [29] Author interview with a Syrian NGO worker, December 2019.
- [30] ECFR intra-Syrian dialogues drawing together a range of Syrian voices from inside and outside the country, 2019-2020.
- [31] Author interview with a Syrian activist, October 2019.
- [32] Author interview with a Syrian NGO worker, October 2019.
- [33] Author interviews with European officials, 2019.
- [34] Author interviews with European officials, 2019-2020.
- [35] Author interview with a European official, March 2020.

## ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu)

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR April 2020. ISBN: 978-1-913347-18-5. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.