

# The European response and strategies in the Middle East: Iraq and Syrian conflicts, Islamic Terrorism and Humanitarian Crisis

by Carlo Paternollo



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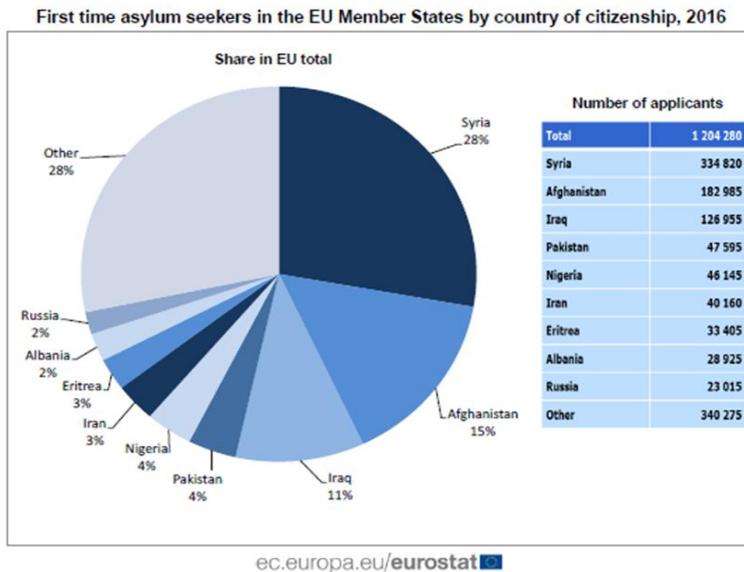
# The European response and strategies in the Middle East: Iraq and Syrian conflicts, Islamic Terrorism and Humanitarian Crisis

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The humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, arising from the Syrian civil war and exacerbated by ISIS actions in both Syria and Iraq, has significantly increased migration flows towards the EU. Furthermore, in addition to managing the migrants arriving in Europe, the Union also implemented political and humanitarian strategies towards the region. Action on field has been taken in different formats for the various affected countries. So far the EU political and aid measures implemented in the Middle East have helped in alleviating the humanitarian crisis *in loco* but have not solved the issue. Migrant flows from the area remain an element of massive concern for the European Union.

## Preamble

This paper aims to analyse and assess the European political approach and strategies towards the Middle East region, namely regarding the on-going conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the consequent humanitarian and political crisis. The Union is directly involved in providing humanitarian and economic aid not only towards the two countries, but also to other states in the region such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, that are struggling to cope with the effects of the nearby conflicts and the tremendous flow of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in desperate need of assistance. The neighbouring Middle Eastern receiving countries are the first stop of the journey that many Iraqi and Syrian refugees make on their way to Europe. The choice of focusing on these specific conflicts and their consequences on regional migration flows towards Europe comes in light of a number of factors. Firstly, as reported by the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat 2017) in 2016 the Syrians and Iraqis were among the most common citizenships of asylum seeker applicants in the EU. Syrians being first with 344800 applications in 2016 alone and Iraqis being third with 12700 applications in 2016 (Eurostat 2017). Of all of the asylum seekers applying to the EU in 2016, 28% were Syrians and 11% were Iraqis (Eurostat, 2017.)



A second reason that led to focus the analysis of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is the geographical proximity of the two countries that shared a common path. Both countries were subject to a devastating war that tremendously weakened state institutions and gave the opportunity to ISIS Islamic terrorist group to rise in Iraq and expand its agenda to Syria becoming an active actor in the conflict.

In order to address the EU European strategies towards the crisis in the two countries and the other neighbouring states in the Middle East, the article will be divided into four sections.

In the first section attention will be given to the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and how the group enhances the fluxes by being directly involved in refugee trafficking. The section will then provide a brief presentation of the Syrian civil war focusing on the causes, different actors involved and key events of the conflict. It should give us a clear picture of the devastation caused by the war to the civilian population that had to flee in mass to escape the violence.

The second section of the paper will start by addressing the political strategy taken by the EU in regard to the Syrian civil war. The section will not only focus on the Union's action in Syria but also Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey that had to deal with the humanitarian impact of the devastating conflict in their neighbour state. The Section will then look into the humanitarian aid and strategy provided by Europe to Syria and the neighbouring receiving countries and will look into the different forms of EU aid to each state.

The third section will deal with the European political strategy in Iraq and the relative programs of the Union to achieve a de-escalation of the conflict and favour the country's development. The analysis will then continue addressing the European humanitarian action in Iraq and the relative aid provided to the country. It will then consider the non-humanitarian aid and programs provided by the EU to the country.

The last section of the essay will firstly identify three main objectives of European intervention in the Middle East: the conflicts and instability arising from the Arab Spring, the fight against ISIS and the increase in the refugee fluxes. The intervention that the EU has taken to tackle the first two

will then be framed in a wider strategy that ultimately aims to diminish the refugee arrivals from the region to Europe.

## 1. Context: Rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, how the group is involved in the migration flux, cause and key actors of the Syrian civil war

### 1.1 Rise and fall of ISIS in Syria and Iraq

ISIS stands for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and is a Jihadist militarist group whose key objective is the creation of a Salafi caliphate (Cassman 2017). The group's history could be divided into four key phases. First the initial expansion under the leadership of Abu Mussad al-Zarqawi from 2002 to 2006. The second phase is characterized by an apparent decline from Zarqawi's death in 2006 until 2012 (Cassman, 2017). In the third phase, from 2012, we can witness an initial expansion of the group that continued until the recent defeat in Mosul, where ISIS lost one of its most important strongholds to the coalition.

al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian national who, after being radicalized in prison, decided to join the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan fighting against the Soviet invasion of 1980 (Cassman, 2017). After the conflict in Afghanistan al-Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden came into contact. Yet Bin Laden disapproved of al-Zarqawi's strategy of targeting the 'near enemies' (such as Israel and the Jordanian Government) as opposed to 'the far enemy' (the United States) and disagreed with al-Zarqawi's hatred for Shia Muslims. These tactical and ideological differences slowed Zarqawi's plan of joining Al-Qaeda, nevertheless Bin Laden provided Zarqawi with the funds to set up his organization in Herat, where the Jordanian terrorist managed to train over 2000 fighters (Cassman, 2017). The first act that gave the terrorist group media attention was the murder of American aid worker James Foley that occurred in Jordan in 2002. The next year the group became heavily involved in insurgency actions against the American occupation of Iraq. As opposed to conventional insurgency operations the men of al-Zarqawi adopted a brutal guerrilla tactic that mainly targeted civilian actors such as foreign aid workers and Iraqi civilians. The violence perpetrated by the terrorists was brutal, often characterized by beheadings and suicide bombings. Among the Iraqis the Shia population was the one that saw more violence. The targeted repression against them was part of al-Zarqawi's strategy of creating sectarian violence among Iraqis in order to make American counter-insurgency operations more difficult to conduct (Cassman, 2017). In 2004 the group joined Al-Qaeda under the name of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Regardless al-Zarqawi disobeyed the commands of Bin laden and the central bulk of the organization that wanted to put a stop to the sectarian violence since it was alienating potential recruits. al-Zarqawi was killed by an American drone strike in 2006 (Cassman, 2017). The death of the first leader did not put an end to the group, however the aftermath was characterized by several difficulties that heavily affected the terrorist cell. Firstly the group lost most of the initial popular support, as predicted by Bin laden the extreme violence against the civilian population alienated Iraqis. Furthermore, the population disapproved of the fact that the majority of the fighters and leadership in the organization were composed by foreigners lacking legitimacy in Iraq. The biggest setback came in 2007 with the rupture from the central bulk of Al-Qaeda. In addition to this the American and Iraqi coalition was inflicting heavy damage to the group (Cassman, 2017). Yet the situation changed drastically under the new leadership of Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi in 2010. Two main factors contributed to the resurgence of the terrorist organization. Firstly, the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 gave the group the oppor-

tunity to increase their attacks and influence in Iraq. Secondly the Syrian civil war offered territory for expansion and training ground for the organization that moved its headquarters to Syria and took the new name of Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) (Cassman, 2017). The first territorial offensives carried out by ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2014 were initially extremely successful since ISIS managed to conquer Falluja and Mosul and were also extremely fruitful thanks to the economic revenue arising from the illegal sale of oil and other criminal activities in the areas now controlled by the group. In June 2014, the caliphate led by al-Baghdadi was declared (Cassman 2017). The American air campaign, started in September 2014, and the efforts of the Kurdish fighters and the Free Syrian army weakened the group in Syria, whilst in Iraq the American backed Iraqi army and Shia militias started to make the group lose ground. Still, just like in the case of Syria, ISIS took advantage of the internal turmoil to affirm a stronger presence in Libya (Cassman, 2017).

Today, in July 2017, the group has lost most of its territorial gains. With the defeat in Mosul, the Iraqi hub of the Islamic State, Raqqa being under siege and al-Baghdadi claimed to have been killed by a Russian airstrike in the outskirts of Raqqa on the 28th of May 2017, the possibility of a unified caliphate controlled by ISIS seems more distant than ever. Yet despite the territorial losses the group could still spread its ideology among its followers and carry out 'lone wolf attacks' such as the ones Europe witnessed (Tim Lister, 2017).

## 1.2 ISIS involvement in the migration flux from the Middle East to Europe

The ISIS terrorist group plays a fundamental role in influencing the migration flux from the region towards Europe. The violence of the Jihadists has forced thousands of Syrians and Iraqis out of their homes. Furthermore, the group is directly involved in smuggling migrants towards Europe. Human trafficking from the Middle East and North Africa has been one of ISIS main sources of financing together with drug trafficking, kidnapping and the illegal sale of oil. In the paragraphs below attention will firstly be drawn to civilian displacement that the conflict and ISIS have caused both in Syria and Iraq. Secondly the direct involvement and profit of the Jihadis from illicit migration channels will be addressed.

The battle between the coalition and ISIS in Iraq and the Syrian civil war had devastating costs for the civilian population of the two countries. The terrorist group since December 2013 displaced over three million people in Iraq alone (Iomiraq.net, 2017). Whilst in Syria the war has caused 6.5 million internally displaced persons. ISIS does not only boost the migration flows with the violence and destruction caused in the region, but is also directly involved in the control of the migration routes to Europe, which has been one its biggest sources of profit.

Napoleoni's *Merchants of Men* offers a clear picture of the depth of ISIS direct involvement in migrant trafficking and the revenues that the jihadi group generates from such actions.

The author explains how in 2015 the group was in control of the crucial border area between Syria and Turkey, crossed by over 1.5 million refugees in order to continue the journey to Greece towards Eastern Europe. (Napoleoni, 2016). Through the taxation of the traffickers taking the route towards Turkey, ISIS in the summer of 2015 was able to earn approximately half a million dollars a day, more than the group was earning with its illegal sales of oil (one of ISIS most lucrative activities) (Napoleoni, 2016).

The control of the Jihadi group was not limited only to Turkey's route, but extended also to Libya. After the civil war and the collapse of state institutions in Libya ISIS managed to expand its influence over the country, ultimately being able to control the passage through the Libyan western shores, from where it regulates the trafficking of humans to the European coasts. ISIS involvement was such that they even controlled the number of migrants per boat and taxed the traffickers up to 50%. By knowing how many migrants per boat, the terrorists know exactly how much they need to ask each trafficker. Frontex (the European border protection agency) reports that in 2015 over 300,000 migrants accessed Europe through the Libyan route. ISIS managed to profit 20 Million dollars for every ten thousand migrants (Napoleoni, 2016 - Walt, 2015).

### **1.3 Causes and actors involved in the Syrian civil war explained briefly and consequent humanitarian crisis**

The violence in Syria that escalated to the devastating civil war, disintegrating state institutions and causing a humanitarian catastrophe was triggered by the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. In March of 2011, peaceful protesters started crowding the country's streets asking for more political and economic freedom from the dictatorship of Assad. In the same period a 13-year-old boy was tortured and killed by the regime for having made a graffiti in support of the protestors. These events resulted in enhanced protest on the streets that Assad responded to with a bloody crackdown, in which numerous protestors were either killed or imprisoned. After the regime brutal crackdown defectors from the military formed the Free Syrian Army with the goal of putting an end to Assad's dictatorship. The grounds for the civil war were now set (Fawcett, 2016-Aljazeera.com, 2017).

Although the events of 2011 could be considered the spark that lit the fuse leading to the conflict, there are other important 'structural' causes that played an essential role in the outbreak of the war. Religious and ethnic minorities played a key role in Syria's political history and continue to do so. The government of Assad is dominated by the Alawite ethnic minority whilst the rest of the country is for the majority Sunni Muslim. When looking at the Syrian regime, the echo of French colonial times is clearly noticeable. The way France controlled the country was by favouring and giving more power to certain minorities over others. This was the case for the Alawites that occupied important positions in the military sphere. Just like in colonial times, the favouring of the Assad regime of the Alawite ethnic minority created a huge divide from the Sunni majority. The violent response of Assad towards the protestors could therefore be seen as fear of being topped by the ethnic majority (Fisher, 2016).

A number of actors are involved in the conflict, each with individual interests and agendas. The Syrian government forces loyal to Assad, that aim to restore the regime authority are sided by several allies. The first are Iran and the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah. For Hezbollah, Assad control of Syria is essential, since it provides the group with the flow of arms arriving from Iran and training grounds for their operations. If a more hostile Sunni leader would take control the group's vital support from Iran would be at stake. Iran is one the main regional allies of Assad. For Iran, the fall of Assad could result in the rise of a Sunni state that could alight with rival Saudi Arabia and weaken Iran's sphere of influence in the region. The rivalry between the countries could be understood as a regional cold war, in which the two states aim to achieve hegemonic influence over the Middle East. Furthermore, Iran needs Hezbollah actions in order to retain influence in the

region and continue the asymmetrical conflict against Israel. Russia is the main external actor supporting the Assad regime. The support for Assad mounts to Russian diplomatic protection at the UN and a direct military intervention begun in 2015. Russia claimed that its air bombardments in Aleppo were targeting ISIS whilst much of the campaign was targeting rebel-held neighbours of the city. The main reason for Russian support of Assad is the Tartus military base, the only one that allows Russia naval access to the Mediterranean by passing the Bosphorus route controlled by Turkey (a member of Nato-Laub, 2017).

The coalition forces opposing the regime are made up by a multitude of actors. Apart from the Free Syrian army, the main Syrian actors opposing the regime are Nationalist Jihadists such as Jabhat al-Nusra. These groups started to emerge in 2012 after many FSA militants started to lose faith in the Free Syrian army capabilities. These Islamist groups tend to be better funded and organized than the FSA and receiving financial support from the gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Jabhat al-Nusra is a former affiliate of Al Qaeda and has been targeted by American air campaign. The group has been active in fighting both pro-Assad troops and ISIS after the Islamic state tried to place al-Nusra as its subordinate (Laub, 2017).

The United States have been an active player in the Syrian conflict. During the Obama administration, the main strategy was to carry out counter terrorism operations against ISIS, cover support for FSA and call for a de-escalation of the conflict. The situation changed under the Trump administration that in light of Assad's chemical attack launched Tomahawk cruise missiles against a Syrian army airbase on the 7th of April 2017. Today, besides counter terrorism operations, further direct American interventions are unpredictable (Laub, 2017).

Turkey is one of the earliest external actors that took part in the Syrian conflict. Turkey's strategy in Syria has two key objectives. Firstly, limiting Kurdish influence in the country. Turkey opposes the military success and affirmation of the YPG Kurdish fighters in Syria since the group has links with the Kurdistan workers party (PKK) in Turkey, which is considered an active terrorist organisation by Turkish authorities. Turkey's secondary objective is the support for the anti-Assad factions and counter terrorism operation against ISIS (Laub, 2017).

During the chaos and violence of the fight between the Assad regime and the opposing forces, the Kurdish democratic union party that administers the northern region of Rojava in Syria has deployed its militia (the YPG) in active fighting against ISIS. The YPG, supported by America, is one of the better equipped groups challenging the Islamic State. The Kurdish fighters ultimately seek to retain independence from Syria. The other group that took advantage of the internal unrest in Syria to fulfil its goal of a unified caliphate of Iraq and Syria is ISIS. The group has no allies and fought against all the parties involved in the conflict, it is now on the verge of territorial defeat since, just as Mosul, the Syrian hub of Raqqa is now under siege by the coalition (Laub, 2017- Aljazeera.com, 2017).

The conflict had tremendous consequences on the country. As of July 2017 the total death count is 470000 of which 55000 are children. The people that need humanitarian aid within the country are 13.5M. (I AM SYRIA. 2017).

## 2. The EU and Syria: European political strategy towards the Syrian crisis, Humanitarian aid provided by EU to Syria and Neighboring receiving countries, Non humanitarian aid directed to the Syrian regional crisis

### 2.1 EU political strategy to address the Syrian crisis

As mentioned above the impact of war had tremendous consequences on the local population. As of July 2017 the number of Syrian refugees according to the 'United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is 5,136,969 (UNHCR, 2017). The tremendous aftermath has effects not only in the country, but also in the middle east region as whole. Europe has to cope with the incredible flow of refugees trying to escape from the violence of the conflict. The European Union was already active in implementing a regional strategy for the fight against Da'esh (ISIS), but in 2017 saw the need for a country specific Syrian crisis strategy to deal with the adverse situation. Europe does not see military intervention as a viable solution for the de-escalation of the conflict. It proposes a strategy that aims to fulfill six key goals: reaching peace through political transition, promoting an inclusive transition in Syria, addressing the humanitarian needs, promoting democracy, promoting accountability for war crimes and supporting the resilience of the Syrian society and population. The first, is reaching an end to the war through political transition, in line with UNSCR 2254, negotiated by the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the UN special envoy for Syria, and with the support of key international and regional actors. (European council, a, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017). The Union intends to fulfill such objective by providing political support to the UN led process, promoting dialogue among the key parties and re- instating a cease fire in order to achieve full country wide humanitarian access.

The second objective of the EU is to promote a meaningful and inclusive political transition, by supporting the strengthening of the political opposition (European council, A, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017). The EU will continue its backing of Syrian political opposition and urges the Assad regime to provide its plans for an inclusive political transition. The third objective is addressing the humanitarian needs of the Syrian population as described more in detail in section 2.2.

As a fourth objective the EU intends to promote democracy, human rights and freedom of speech by strengthening Syrian civil society organization. In order to do so the EU will support civil society organizations such as Support Room and the Women's advisory role. The EU believes that civil society will play an essential role in the post-conflict phase and in helping the re-construction. The Union intends to support freedom of speech by funding independent media (European council, a, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017).

The fifth objective consists of promoting accountability for war crimes facilitating a national reconciliation process and transactional justice. The Council is still gathering information and is waiting for the International Criminal Court to take legal action (European council, a, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017).

The final and perhaps most important objective of the European Union in relation to the Syrian crisis is the support to the resilience of the population and Syrian society. The European Union will be active in providing education, job creation and support of local governance in opposition

held areas. It will also work with the Syrian interim Government in order to prevent the collapse of state institutions (Consilium.europa.eu, 2017) (Europa.eu, 2017). EU will assist the reconstruction process providing funds and cooperating with the trans-national authorities. The union will offer support to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan heavily affected by the crisis (European council, a, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017).

A Further essential political strategy of the European Union Syria and Iraq is to defeat ISIS. This called for 2016 adoption of EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISL/ Da'Esh threat' and since then has increased its involvement and cooperation with partners such as the UN, the Global Counter terrorism forum as well as the Global Coalition against Da'Esh. Key objectives of the EU are to suppress the flow of foreign fighters towards Syria, stabilize the areas that have been liberated from ISIS and, obstruct the group's financing. Ultimately, combating ISIS in the long term requires addressing the political and socio-economic factors that have allowed the group to gain power (European council, a, 2017- European Commission, a, 2017).

In order to achieve such goals the EU has taken a number of different regional counter terrorism actions. Firstly, counter terrorism experts have been deployed BY the European delegations supporting local authorities. Today's European Union total funding for its projects aimed at preventing/countering violent extremism is €300M. Such projects do not only finance actions in the middle east, but also in Western Balkans, Central Asia and Pakistan (European commission, B, EEAS - European External Action Service, 2017). Among the activities above, the EU actively collaborates with NGOs in identifying and assessing the causes of radicalisation and acts of terrorism. The Union also works closely with security agencies to assist operations of border management and counter terrorism. Second important action taken by the EU consists of preventing the exchange of arms and dual use goods that could fall into the hands of ISIS. This happens through European export-control rules and tracking of bomb-making materials. Furthermore, on a legislative level the EU has transposed into biding law UN resolution 2253 tackling financing to ISIS by prohibiting the direct or indirect sale of oil by the group. The EU supports the global coalition in fighting against ISIS in Iraq and Syria through non-military actions such as Counter terrorism, anti-money laundering, economic support to the coalition and a number of additional actions, such as the IcSP projects that will be described in a more detail in both sections 2.3 and 3.3. (European commission, B, EEAS European External Action Service, 2017).

In Syria the EU also implements specific actions to counter the terrorist threat. The EU since the beginning of the conflict has granted funds of more than €930M to assist the Syrian population. The union also allocated €234M to supporting Syrian civil institutions are devoted to stabilising areas under the controlled by the opposition, contrasting and preventing a possible expansion of Da'Esh. Within the strategic activity of promoting the resilience and stabilisation to which €13.7M have been provided, the EU pays particular attention to transnational justice and accountability. Human rights abuse and war crimes committed by different parties of the conflict are being tackled by the EU with a number of different interventions. Firstly, more than €65.2M have been devoted to support dialogue initiatives among the different parties of the conflict, implementing transactional justice and countering violent extremism. Furthermore, €2.5M are being used in order to promote mass media action with the aim of supporting social cohesion and preventing radicalisation. €1.5M will be allocated to the commission for international justice accountability in its investigation of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the parties involved in the

conflict including ISIS. The Union is also providing €8.8M for assisting the post conflict reconstruction phase in Syria (European commission, B, EEAS European External Action Service, B 2017).

## 2.2 Humanitarian aid provided by EU to Syria and Neighboring receiving countries

The humanitarian cost of the Syrian conflict has been tremendous and called for specific European commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) programs not only in Syria but also in neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey . The seven years of hostilities have created the worst humanitarian crisis that the world has ever seen since WW2. In Syria 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance among them 4.9 million are in hard to reach besieged areas, the estimated number of internally displaced people are 6.3 million people. The European Union have been the chief providers of international aid. Since the start of the conflict the contribution made by the European Union has been €9.4 billion for humanitarian and stabilization assistance with a further €3.7 billion planned for 2017 in light of the pledges of the member states at the Brussels conference in April 2017. The humanitarian aid provided by the union specifically to address the 13.5 million of Syrians in need amounts to €445 million in 2016 and an extra €280 million for 2017. Most of the humanitarian aid in Syria consist of immediate lifesaving and emergency actions. Yet the EU assistance also provides for access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, child protection activities and emergency items. Because of these interventions 2 million Syrians had access to safe water, more than 850,000 have received food 1 million non-food shelters and 350,000 children are now in protection programs. The main challenge faced by the Union in the provision of aid is the difficulties of access to areas of the nation were the fighting makes it impossible for Syrians to receive aid (- EEAS - EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE - EUROPEAN COMMISSION, F, 2017).

In Jordan the presence among others of over 655,000 Syrian refugees and 61,000 Iraqis called for a EU support of €657 million of which €271 million solely for humanitarian assistance. The biggest challenge in the provision of aid is the fact that Jordan has been over stretching its state structures in order to face the huge numbers of Syrian arrivals. As a consequence in 2016 Jordan increased the number of forced returns for Syrians together with the closure of the border in 2013. The two factors have a big weight on the Syrian population that seeks to enter the country looking for safety. The EU has tried to solve this problem with the allocation of €747 million as part of the EU Jordan compact agreement of 19 December 2016. Furthermore the EU agreed in 2016 to simplify the rules for Jordanian exports to the European Union with the hope of providing more job opportunities for both Jordanians and refugees. Jordan agreed to give the possibility to 165,000 Syrian children to access education and released 34,000 permits to Syrian refugees (- EEAS - EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE - EUROPEAN COMMISSION, C, 2017).

Among the neighboring countries the one that has been affected most by the events in Syria is Lebanon. The small state is now hosting more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees (of which 75% are women and children) together with 277,985 Palestinians and 6,000 Iraqis. Compared to the population size of Lebanon (4.4 million people) the flux of refugees makes it the country in the world with the highest per-capita rate of refugees, here one out four persons is a refugee. The huge influx of migrants had severe impacts on the Lebanese economy, furthermore violent incidents from the nearby conflict on the Akkar border with Syria have led to a military securitization of the area thus blocking access to refugees. The no camp policy of Lebanon makes Syrian refugee life hard since they have to pay for their own food, rent, clothes and medicines, scattered in different locations of

the country including the poorest and most dangerous areas. Most live below the Lebanese poverty line. A further issue is that the majority of refugees from Syria are Sunni Muslim and if they decided to stay and reside even after the hostilities cease the fragile balance among different religious communities in Lebanon could be at stake. From 2012 up to 2017 the EU provided €439 million in humanitarian funding as a contribution to economic assistance for the refugees, provision of secondary healthcare for critical cases and improvement of general living condition such as stable access to water (- EEAS - EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE - EUROPEAN COMMISSION, E, 2017).

Apart from influencing the conflict by being a key actor in Syria, Turkey is also massively involved in hosting Syrian refugees. The country has the overall highest number of refugees, over 3.2 million including among others Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, Iranians, and Somalis. Syrians are by far the most numerous group being close 3 million in total. Of all the Syrian refugees 90% does not live in camps and faces challenging living conditions. The EU since the start of the crisis has contributed €664 million for humanitarian aid, in addition to the Facility for Refugee fund in Turkey that amounted to €3 billion provided to the county in November 2015. In 2017 the Union launched the Emergency social safety program with a €348 million budget. The EU is also working with UNICEF 'Conditional Cash for Education' program in which €34 million will be funded monthly to help refugee families whose children are attending school as well to attendance to child protection programs (- EEAS - EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE - EUROPEAN COMMISSION, D, 2017).

### 2.3 Non humanitarian aid for the Syrian regional crisis

Humanitarian aid is not sufficient to face the long-term damage that the crisis has caused both within Syria and to the region. Therefore the EU also provides non-humanitarian aid through two different programs: these are the programs of the Instrument Contributing to stability and Peace (ICSP) both with regional actions and actions individual to each country, and the Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, the Madad Fund (EUTF) established in December 2014.

The main regional programs of the ICSP include EU/MENA Counter-terrorism Training partnership and Tahdir: Tutoring Syrian Talents to Tackle Transition. The first aims to support and increase the capabilities of the country's institutions and law enforcement allowing them to prevent and sentence acts of terrorism. The Union aims to achieve this first objective by improving knowledge gathering operations in order to unpack the links between criminal organisations and terrorist groups and the funding that is provided to the terrorists. Secondly the EU aims to create networks of exchange of professional information both across the region and within European member states. This will be made possible by staff exchange between law enforcement services of the European union and Middle East together with study visits to the EU and other security agencies. The European funding for the project amounts to €2,490,504.00 (Icsp.insightonconflict.org, 2017). The second regional project 'Tahdir: Tutoring Syrian Talents to Tackle Transition' aims to ease the transition towards democracy and simplify the post conflict recovery by supporting skilled Syrian professionals that are still in the country, refugees and returnees to become key actors in their work sector contributing to the reconstruction of their country. The European funding for the project amounts to € 1,767,81. (Icsp.insightonconflict.org, 2017)

The specific country projects of the ICSP in Syria concentrate in three macro areas: confidence building and mediation, trans national justice and countering violent extremism. The first themat-

ic area actions focus primarily on providing access to better security services and social empowerment together with supporting and consolidating local state institutions and connecting different actors. The projects in this thematic area are: firstly improving the Syrian assistance and structural support for Syrian communities- Political dialogue through the armed parties that received a €2M funding. Secondly 'Agreement in Syrian cities' €1.992M funded by the European Union, Peace Process Initiatives in Syria funded €8M. And thirdly Promoting moderate voices and social Cohesion in Syria' that the EU aims to fulfil through actions such as improving networks between Syrian civil society actors and providing Syrian society with peacebuilding skills. The funding for the project is of €1 million. The next thematic sections are the projects related to trans-national justice which include: 'Justice for the victims of war' and 'Strengthening the Analytical Capability of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability Contributing to International Security'. The total EU funding for the two projects, amounts to 3 million euro. The EU is also active in countering terrorism in Syria with the program of bridging Syria divides funded with €2,5 million by the European Union (Icsp.insightonconflict.org, 2017).

In addition to the ICSP projects, the EU in order to tackle the regional crisis has created the Madad fund that merges different EU financial instruments into a single more efficient body for distribution. The fund aims to provide a successful aid response to the Syrian civil war on a regional scale, providing both for humanitarian aid and long-term post conflict reconstruction actions (European Commission B, 2017). The fund relies on contributions from the EU and its member states. Since its creation in 2014 it has raised close to €1 billion. Among many other achievements thanks to the fund 2.3 million Syrian children now have access to education at both primary and secondary level, in addition to this the fund contributed to the creation of 11,367 job opportunities together with the allocation of numerous micro grants supporting existing Syrian business (European Commission B, 2017).

### **3. The EU and Iraq: political strategy, humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid provided to the country**

#### **3.1 Political strategy of EU in Iraq**

Europe's political interventions towards the Iraq internal conflict are less planned than the ones towards the Syrian conflict. This is also due to a mere temporal factor since the Syrian civil war started in 2011 whilst the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria began with the offensive and media actions by the group in 2014. Therefore, the main political strategy of the EU towards the latest Iraqi civil war has initially been set out in the 'EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as weak as the Da'esh threat' of 2015 and by the council conclusion of July 2017.

The main country specific objectives set out in 2015 regional strategy were aiming to support the Iraqi government in making an inclusive reality for the different ethnic groups and social classes by adopting a number of actions. The first objective is the engagement with marginalized Sunni groups to prevent radicalization. The second objective is the engagement with the Kurdistan region of Iraq by creating a local 'antenna' of the European Iraqi delegation and overall stronger presence in the region. Furthermore it aims to consolidate democratically run institutions and support political and legislative reform. The next goal is to restructure the security sector by provision of funds from the member states and training of Iraqi security forces. EU aims to encourage

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judicial reforms with more respect towards human rights and strengthening regional and local administration. The EU also aims to support basic economic development, fight corruption and support peace building. The Union aims to finance its actions through the Madad fund and the ICSP interventions in and in Iraq (EEAS - European External Action Service, B, 2015).

The recent council conclusions of 19 of June 2017 on Iraq highlight a number of European objectives and indications towards Iraq. Firstly the EU praises the Iraqi government for the progress and the way the fight against ISIS has been conducted by the Iraqi troops. A particular element of approval was the attention shown by the Iraqi security forces to avoid civilian casualties during the fight. Yet the Union is concerned by allegations that would suggest human rights abuses carried out by Iraqi troops and encourages the government to investigate the matter. The EU states again its support for Iraqi unity, national integrity and preservation of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature. To preserve such important characteristics the Union pressures Iraq to start a reconciliation program both at the local and at the national level, in order to achieve this objective the European Union sees International community long term and continual support as vital. The Union then urges the Iraq government and the Kurdistan regional government to engage in dialogue and seek common ground on issues of both political and economic spectrum. The EU calls on the Iraqi government to undertake political reforms aiming to achieve national reconsolidation, justice accountability for actions committed by the different actors in the conflict. Democratic principle enforcement of the rule of law and respect for human rights of Iraqi citizens favoring their involvement in the civil society must also be key pillars of the Government's development actions. The Council then urges international actors such the EU to assist Iraq in addressing the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict, verifying that the Iraqi authorities ensure security and asses the needs of the population in accordance with international law (European Council Council of the European Union, 2017, B).

The Union sees the introduction of measures to hold ISIS accountable for its crimes as essential in achieving long-term stability in Iraq. This can happen by documenting evidence of the terrorist group human rights violations. The return of Foreign fighters is also an issue that deserves special monitoring. Furthermore a program to re-integrate and educate children that have been radicalized is seen as essential for the EU. Europe is willing to support the Iraqi government in such process. In the economic sphere the European Union pushes Iraq to embark in economic reforms and is ready to support such process in accordance with the IMF and the World Bank. Such reforms should aim to achieve diversification and promote the return of displaced persons. Important action is being undertaken by the Union regarding the support towards Iraq's security sector. Actions such as police and military training, support to counter terrorism structures are being provided by the European Union on the ground. Furthermore the EU is considering the request of the Iraqi government of deploying an EU security sector advice and response team. The EU reiterates the importance of cooperation of the Iraqi government and the UN in facilitating the return of Iraqi refugees to their country. Strong support should also be given to Iraq diplomatic engagement with neighbours in the region (European Council Council of the European Union, B, 2017).

Among the interventions of the regional counter terrorism activities (explained in section 2.1) the European Union sees the fight against Da'esh as one of its key objectives in Iraq and is conducting a series of interventions to this aim. A stabilization of the ISIS liberated areas is one of the key priorities of such a project. The stabilization of such areas is essential both for preventing radicalization and in order to allow the United Nations Mines Action Service (UNMAS) to conduct its opera-

tions. The EU apart from providing €6.3M for UNMAS has also help to raise contributions of over €200M from external party donors. The EU also contributed 14€M towards the UN in its actions supporting national and local reconciliation in Iraq. Secondly the EU has been one of the key parties in supporting the security sector of Iraq. €16M have been devoted to police training carried out by the Italian Carabinieri in areas taken from ISIS control. Furthermore, the EU directs the security service funds towards the improvement of Iraqi counter terrorism units and a new system of human rights complaint counter terrorism program together with legislative and administrative measures. The EU is also contributing in stabilization efforts reducing tensions between the internally displaced persons and host communities providing €3.5M the Union also provides €14.4 to support national community reconciliation and €11.5M support to local reconciliation. (EEAS - European External Action Service, B, 2017).

### 3.2 EU humanitarian aid to Iraq

The fight between ISIS and the coalition has led to tremendous humanitarian consequences in Iraq. The figures help us to understand the sheer dimension of the humanitarian crisis within the country. The Iraqis in need of humanitarian assistance are 11 million whilst 3.4 million are currently displaced. In addition to the already complicated crisis within Iraq the presence of 242,558 Syrian refugees mostly concentrated in the Kurdistan areas further complicates the situation. In order to address the crisis the EU has committed €72.5M in humanitarian assistance in 2017 alone. This financed a range of activities such as food, health care, water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter and education services. Furthermore since 2016 the EU has allocated over €160M towards the humanitarian consequences in Mosul, Telafar and Hawidija. Humanitarian actors such as the World Health Care Organization have benefited from EU aid that enabled the treatment of over 15,000 wounded civilians in Mosul. The EU direct support resulted in 1 million Mosul residents being able to receive multi-sector emergency packages containing food hygiene kits and essential clothing. The funds granted by the EU were also able to provide for water resources (over 6500 cubic meters delivered daily). Mental health services were also provided by the EU assisting the families suffering from the devastating conflict. The EU is also active in addressing the immediate needs of the refugees fleeing the areas of ongoing fighting of Telafar and Hawidija. Just as in the Syrian case the conflict in Iraq made many flee as refugees to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey were the European funds provide aid not only to Syrians but also to Iraqi refugees (- EEAS - EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE - EUROPEAN COMMISSION, F, 2017).

### 3.3 Non Humanitarian Aid from EU to Iraq

As in the case of Syria, the main instrument through which the EU is able to provide non-humanitarian aid to Iraq is via the IcSP. In addition to the regional projects already described in section 2.3, the two main IcSP funded projects in the country are the project 'Contributing to Ongoing Stabilization Efforts in Iraq by helping to reduce tensions between IDPS and host communities members' and 'Development of a Human Rights-Complaint strategy, Legislation and Coordination Measures in Iraq'. For the first the EU allocated €3.5M. The overall aim of the project is to achieve ongoing stabilization in Iraq. The specific goals are to rehabilitate key Iraqi infrastructures such as schools and medical facilities. Further objectives are to help mitigate the tensions between IDPS and host communities by sports, training in mediation, media, social communication projects and investigation of the causes of radicalization among Iraq's youth, providing information re-

garding how the terrorist cells operate in such actions. The project's final objective is to provide access to mass information for 60,000 people developing better infrastructure for 32,000 people and community based activities for 4000 people. The second Project: 'Development of a Human Rights-Complaint strategy, legislation and Coordination Measures in Iraq' founded with €3,495M will enable the Iraqi government to respond coherently, inclusively and efficiently to terrorism threats while respecting human rights of its citizens. The project's specific objectives are a counter terror information and coordination body working with the Iraqi Security council able to supervise operations in an effective manner. Secondly, developing a counter terror strategy that follows the Rule of Law and address issues by following a national comprehensive strategy bridging Iraqi divides that often stop counter terrorism operations from being effective ([icsp.insightonconflict.org](http://icsp.insightonconflict.org), 2017).

#### **4. Section Four: general assessments and conclusions**

The European Union humanitarian action and presence in the Middle East has intensified in a significant manner since 2011. Imperative of the Union's strategy in the region was the fulfillment of three key objectives, to this end the EU had to become a much more present party in the Middle east. The First objective was assessing the 2011 Arab Spring events that took Europe by surprise. The decline of long time leaders such as Ben Ali and Mubarak or Assad was a shock for the International community including Europe. The dictator's violent response made EU intervention unavoidable. The EU in order to supervise the political transition was left with no choice other than developing a specific strategy which would consequently mount to a stronger presence in the region (Fawcett 2016). The second key objective was a coherent response to the challenges created by the rise of ISIS in 2014. The group directly challenged the EU with actions such as: the kidnapping of aid workers, terror attacks in European capitals, radicalization of thousands of Europeans into fighters and the groups exacerbation of migration fluxes towards the Union. Such challenges could not be overlooked by Europe and needed to be stopped with specific countermeasures. Apart from the damage to the EU the group was also threatening to change and destabilize the region's fragile geo-political balance with the forced violent creation of the caliphate that if allowed could have tremendous global political implications. Thirdly and perhaps more importantly the recent surge in the number of refugee's arrivals prompted the Union to take concrete action in the field in order to tackle the un-sustainable crisis. The first objective is being addressed by the European Union through a development of specific country strategies both in Syria and Iraq. The strategies share several similarities, in both instances the EU's ultimate objective is the creation of a more moderate government. Such Governments will undertake reforms more in line with European political standards promoting democratic values and economic reform. The fight against ISIS is being carried out by the EU in both countries in similar ways. In both cases the EU does not take a military approach either it supports the coalition and focuses on actions that concentrate on the 'long term' solutions to the issue. These long-term solutions undertaken by the union include actions such as reinforcing the police apparatus, addressing, identifying and preventing the key sources of radicalization. It then becomes clear how the first two European objectives are essential prerogatives to address the third one. The Interventions addressing the first two objectives through the Madadd fund and the IcSP programs are reducing the push factors (the reasons that make the refugee want to leave their nations). The measures taken to solve the first two objectives make up the long-term component of the EU strategy to limit the migration flows. The four imper-

atives are combined with the immediate assistance that the EU is offering through the provision of humanitarian and economic aid across the region, the short-term component of the strategy. Although the Eurostat Asylum quarterly report shows a 47% decrease in the 2017 first quarter compared with the first quarter of 2016, at this stage it is fair to say only that the short-term action could be evaluated as effective in achieving the reduction of fluxes and other key needs of to the Syrian and Iraqi population. Evaluating the long-term strategy today is impossible since it is not fulfilled yet. Still if the imperatives of long term component are accomplished they could both diminish the fluxes and encourage more voluntary returns by refugees to their home countries which would have achieved a level of greater develement, democracy and security, thanks also to the actions and strategy of the European Union.

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