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Letter from damascus

Strategic Europe is today launching a new phase of its Capitals Series, this time exploring how EU foreign policy is viewed by ten countries in Europe's Southern neighborhood. We have asked our contributors from each capital to give a candid assessment of the EU's approach toward their country, with a ranking on a scale from "irrelevant" to "helpful." We start with Syria.

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Despite a so-called truce signed under UN auspices last September, some 40,000 civilians have been besieged since December 2013 in the Syrian town of Madaya, near Damascus, by forces loyal to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. While efforts continue to dislodge the insurgents, the civilian population is suffering from a total lack of food, with people forced to eat stray cats and dogs as well as wild grass. Hundreds of severe cases of starvation and dozens of deaths are being recorded every day.

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How has the international community reacted? The UN secretary general did what he has done best over the last five years in response to the slaughter taking place in Syria: he expressed his concern. As for the European Union's approach to the country, it can best be described as confused and trying to be helpful.

The policy of starvation joins the long list of other tactics that the regime and its paramilitary allies have used unrelentingly since March 2011 against their opponents: systematic torture, which was detailed in a 2014 report; wide-scale barrel bomb attacks on Syrian towns and villages; the use of chemical weapons; and population displacements on a selective ethnic and sectarian basis with the consent of supposed UN mediators.

More than five years after the outbreak of the Syrian war, it may seem superfluous to reiterate the causes of the

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crisis, which started with a peaceful revolution that swelled and then morphed into war due to the indifference of some and the interference of others. But with Western observers lamenting that what is going on “over there” in Syria is so complicated and that it is so hard to choose between one evil and another, there is an urgent need to reestablish the chronology of events. Deliberate ignorance and selective incomprehension are fatal conditions.

After a long period of indifference, hesitation, and contradiction, Europe has just woken up to the alarming repercussions of the Syrian bloodbath: the refugee crisis, on the one hand, and the terrorist threat, on the other. The dizzying rise of extremism, together with the adoption by traditional political parties of the populist language of fear and security, heralds a European crisis that is making itself clearly felt.

In the face of these palpable threats, reinforcing internal security and tightening borders only takes Europeans back to their inadequate policies of the past. European governments used to regularly back pariah leaders in the Southern Mediterranean to ensure Europe’s security and stability. These often-bloodthirsty dictators would erect insurmountable walls in front of arriving refugees as and when they liked. This aggressive policy considerably increased the distress and disappointment of affluent people in North Africa and the Middle East, throwing a

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good number of them into the hands of extremists of all hues.

For Europeans to replicate such a deficient policy of building walls is proof of a lack of lucidity and understanding of the ramifications of the Syrian crisis. The reestablishment of relations with despots under the pretext that they represent the lesser evil demonstrates a shortsighted and misshapen view of the situation and its solution. An overreliance on air strikes against the self-proclaimed Islamic State only strengthens the group—or, at best, does not seriously degrade it—allowing the militants to maintain their positions in Syria.

What is more, Russia's intervention—which, despite rhetoric to the contrary, has been welcomed by a majority of European capitals for want of strategies or alternatives—targets first and foremost all those moderate forces with which the West could have found common ground to put an eventual end to the advance of radicalism.

The killing in Syria will stop only with a clear political willingness from the main actors who, together with (or despite) the Syrian people, made the first tentative steps toward resolving the crisis at peace talks in Vienna at the end of 2015. However, procrastinating while awaiting the consequences of the Russian military involvement and

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wishing, even implicitly, that this involvement will somehow help end the war will only prolong a bloody and deadly crisis.

The EU needs to take its place on the political stage of the Syrian conflict.

With the United States taking a neglectful attitude toward this dossier, the EU, with its 28 different foreign policies, is needed more than ever to take its place on the political stage of the Syrian conflict. A just peace is needed to put the brakes on the outflow of migrants but also to stop future generations from being radicalized by lifelong dictators and their barbarous methods.

Temporary solutions that aim to brush off past failures and ensure a certain level of security and a semblance of stability ahead of upcoming elections only aggravate the crisis. The peace negotiations scheduled to take place in Geneva in the coming weeks will not be useful or effective unless they include a clear road map underpinned by coherent diplomacy. The Russians are using the Syrian crisis to barter on other issues, and if the Europeans do not take the conflict seriously, other players will not take them seriously either.

After so much death and destruction, peace should not be rebuilt on false foundations. Otherwise, it will eventually

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crumble, and the highest price will be paid by the closest neighbor: Europe.

Salam Kawakibi is the deputy director of the Arab Reform Initiative. This letter is also available in French.

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