

Europe and the Syrian Crisis: Keep Calm and Clear-minded

by Maria Luisa Fantappiè

The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad took European capitals (and much of the world) by surprise. Europe will now have to work quickly to define its posture, role and tone as rebel groups backed by Turkey have taken over the capital and an uncertain transition is underway. Keeping calm and clear-minded while calibrating a posture and nurturing a common position with Arab partners will be crucial to keep the levers necessary to ensure a stable and inclusive Syria to which refugees can return. It will also help reinstate Europe's credibility in the region after its disastrous foreign policy performance over the Israel-Gaza war.

Europe's hopes and temptations

So far, Europeans have shared with Syrians and much of the region relief for the end of a decade-long authoritarianism. Images of prisoners being freed and statues of Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez falling across the country's main cities have evoked

strong emotions. Hopes have surged over the end of a conflict that had been stagnating for over a decade and that justice will be done for those opponents, prisoners and victims who suffered under Assad's authoritarian rule.

There is also a geopolitical dimension to this. For Europe, the capitulation of Assad has been read as an indication of Russia's weakness after almost three years of conflict in Ukraine. It also marks a clear setback in Iran's strategy of using Syria as a land-bridge between Iraq and Lebanon to arm Hezbollah and destabilise the region. Furthermore, European governments also eye the fall of Assad as an opportunity for Syrian refugees to return and freeze asylum-seeker procedures – something that European politicians want to deliver to gain constituencies.

A power transition – but what kind of?

Europe's first instinct may be to deal with whatever entity will emerge in

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Damascus that welcomes refugees back and diminishes Russia's and Iran's influence in the region. European leaders, however, should resist that temptation and exert caution instead. Caution will provide Europe time to monitor ongoing developments, as well as opportunities to coordinate with regional actors who want a stable and inclusive Syria and clarity to design a strategy for engaging with the actors on the ground and negotiating with the strongest regional player in the country, Turkey. Time will also allow European capitals to retain levers to steer the transition. Europe must remain committed to an inclusive political process and use the levers of reconstruction and only gradual political engagement to make sure that Syria's future won't be exclusively dominated by those rebel factions holding weapons in Damascus.

The fact that rebel factions have insofar shown signs of moderation in dealing with minorities is not, by itself, an insurance of their commitment to engage in a political transition that is open to power-sharing, provides representation to those secular voices that have been part of the opposition and carefully preserve continuity of the Syrian state institutions.

What we see insofar are rather signs that go in an opposite direction. Rebel factions seem to be determined to accumulate and monopolise coercive force by collecting weapons previously belonging to the Syrian officers and soldiers and use their military superiority to shape the post-authoritarian order on their own. Power has been transferred to a transitional

caretaker government led by Mohamed al-Bashir, a figure who was previously running an administration in the north-west of the country under rebel control. So far, there is no sign of openness to engage in a larger political process that would include representatives from other components of the Syrian opposition.

European priorities and partners

A single-minded focus on migration that will trade legitimacy to the rebels in exchange for Syrian refugees' return will further hurt Europe's foreign policy credibility – which has already suffered over the poor performance during the war on Gaza.

Europeans should be clear-minded that only an inclusive political process can create the conditions for minorities to remain in the country and refugees to come back. Few Syrians would want to return to a country that is exclusively run by a militarised political faction with a strong Sunni Islamist ideological leaning.

In parallel, Europe should keep its approach to Syria distinct from its priorities on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. European leaders should bear in mind that a weakened Russia and Iran in Syria also means an over-powerful Turkey in Damascus and across the Levant. To position itself vis-à-vis Ankara's reinvigorated negotiation power, Europe should reach out to those regional counterparts that have an interest in a stable Syria and can act as a counter-weight to Turkey. Jordan, Egypt, Iraq as well as the UAE and Saudi Arabia look with concern

at the rise of Sunni Islamism in Syria and the potential destabilising effect that this can have on their domestic politics. Europe can work together with these Arab states to steer the political transition and prevent power from being captured by a specific faction. Europe and Arab states have a common interest in supporting a pause in hostilities within Syria's borders, in the form of a multilateral ceasefire, at least until a political process is in place. That could help regulate the use of force and ambitions of land-grabs at a time of state vacuum, contribute to preventing a surge in inter-communal violence and insulate Syria from becoming a hotspot for regional powers' competition. A pause in hostilities, in the form of a ceasefire, could help rein in Turkey-backed groups, preventing them from making further inroads into north eastern Syria under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) thus unleashing political and communal tensions. It will also shed light and hopefully discourage Israel's unlawful incursions in Syria's south, Mount Hebron. At this uncertain time, Israel's operation only makes it more likely that Syria will become an arena of regional struggle rather than one of compromise and coexistence.

Finally, European countries and the United States, as members of the Coalition to fight against ISIS, should also focus on preventing a potential resurgence of international jihadism. Continued support for the SDF is crucial to ensure the security of the Iraq-Syria border and the management of the al-Hawl camp in the country's north, where people who fled ISIS as well as individuals and families

connected to the jihadi movement are currently hosted. At the moment, US commitment to keep troops in this area looks rather shaky. While President Biden has signalled continued support for the SDF, Donald Trump has already stated his unwillingness to engage with the Syrian "mess". An emboldened Turkey will also likely pressure the future US administration to disengage from partnering with the SDF over the security in this area, especially if links between this force and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) remain. Therefore, while keeping its support to the SDF, Europe should pressure its Kurdish leadership, which still holds ties to the PKK, to avoid being perceived as a threat to Ankara. A northeast Syria that poses no threat to Turkey is also a step forward to empowering the more pragmatic leaders in the movement and an opportunity to restart the peace process in Turkey.

To conclude, Europe should keep calm and clear-minded. Caution and commitment to genuine political processes should be the priority. Weapons should not lead: politics should. That is what will make it possible for Syrians in Europe to return, and regional stability to advance.

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