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**One year after: the impact of the EU Regional Strategy for
Syria, Iraq and against Da'esh**

On 16 March 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted the "Elements for an EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat" as guidance for the EU's engagement in dealing with the threat of Da'esh and the crises in the two countries. The situation in the region and in Syria has changed considerably since then, but the strategy has continued to be a useful guide for the EU practical response to the crises. One year after, this paper evaluates the implementation of the strategy's priorities based on the impact of ongoing actions and the current geostrategic context, in particular with regard to Syria and Da'esh¹.

This paper shows that EU actions in the region are consistent with the Regional Strategy's objectives and have contributed to supporting political solutions to the Syrian and Iraqi crises, as well as the degradation of Da'esh capacities, while playing an essential role in alleviating the dramatic humanitarian consequences of the crises. Substantial coordinated efforts have been made to defeating Da'esh with a large range of internal and external measures. The scale of the Syria crisis is such that efforts will never cover all needs but the London Conference in February 2016 confirmed the priority sectors where the EU should continue focusing its support: education, job opportunities and protection. Efforts will continue to be made on livelihoods and health, supporting also host communities who bear huge socio-economic pressure. On Iraq, the active support of the EU to the reform, governance, stabilisation and reconciliation agenda is key to the peaceful and democratic future of the country, as is the political will on the part of the Iraqis to achieve those aims.

The EU foresaw EUR 1 billion for the implementation of the Strategy for 2015-2016. This figure has risen to commitments of EUR 1.7 billion from the EU budget (as of 31 March 2016) drawing on a variety of EU instruments², of which the lion's share – around EUR 1.5 billion – has been

¹ The relative short timeframe for the full implementation needs to be taken into account, especially for longer term financing instruments and actions that will only achieve results over several years.

² Humanitarian Aid, European Neighbourhood Instrument, Development Cooperation Instrument, Instrument for Pre-Accession, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace.

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allocated to address the Syrian crisis. At the same time, the implementation continued in 2015-2016 on projects and actions committed previously to the Strategy but in line with its main objectives.

During the London Conference, EUR 2.39 billion from the EU budget has been pledged for the Syrian crisis for the period 2016-2017.

More than EUR 3.2 billion have been committed from the EU budget since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. Combined with the humanitarian assistance from Member States of EUR 2.5 billion, this brings the total EU support to EUR 5.7 billion.

I. Regional issues

The EU's actions are based on three strategic objectives: 1) addressing the political root causes of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, 2) mitigating the humanitarian consequences of the crises, and 3) reducing the terrorist threat from Da'esh and other terrorist organisations and avoiding contagion at regional level.

As regards the first objective, the creation of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), in which all key global and regional players - including the EU - participate, has generated a new dynamic towards finding a political solution in Syria. The EU has given its full support to the intra-Syrian talks led by UN Special Envoy de Mistura in Geneva and the HRVP has been active in regional and international diplomatic outreach. On Iraq, the EU has been encouraging Iraq's neighbours to support the government's reform and reconciliation efforts. More detail is provided in the sections on the country-specific objectives of the strategy. On the second objective, the EU has been the leading global donor in response to the unprecedented scale of needs created by the Syria and Iraq humanitarian crises. Thirdly, the EU has participated as a non-military partner in the Global Coalition against Da'esh and the increased cooperation with countries in the region on counterterrorism has led to the development of a large range of projects on counter radicalisation, domestic and border security.

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I.1. Providing life-saving humanitarian aid to people in need and building resilience

In Syria and neighbouring refugee-hosting countries, EUR 565 million have been committed in humanitarian assistance, all of which has been contracted. Inside Syria, where humanitarian needs are still the largest, the EU has thus far contracted EUR 196 million for humanitarian aid for 2015-2016. The EU has also developed a system of first line emergency response to be able to quickly react to sudden emergencies inside Syria. In order to support increased involvement in humanitarian aid deliveries inside Syria, the EU is reopening its ECHO office in Damascus. The EU has also stepped up its humanitarian diplomacy - as agreed in the FAC Conclusions of 12 October 2015- in the Syrian crisis and has played a key role in the ISSG Humanitarian Task Force to facilitate access and aid deliveries inside Syria, helping to reach almost 800 000 Syrians in besieged and hard to reach areas in 2016.

The EU and its Member States made commitments amounting to EUR 3.3 billion at the London Conference for 2016 in response to the Syria crisis. The Commission had previously established in 2014 the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syria crisis (Madad Fund). Since May 2015, the Madad Fund has attracted contributions from 21 Member States and Turkey. Its board has approved actions for a total amount of EUR 427 million including significant support to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq with a focus on increased access of refugees to education, training, livelihoods and healthcare – of which almost half is already contracted and under implementation. Commitments made in London for Lebanon and Jordan will enable a new focus on increasing the resilience of host communities and aim at enhancing the refugees' access to jobs, education, services and security. These are of utmost importance to ensure a dignified life for Syrians, some of whom have been refugees for almost five years. Consistent with the London Conference pledges, a new macro-financial assistance programme of EUR 200 million for Jordan, following up on the previous programme of EUR 180 million disbursed in 2015, will assist the country to address the spill overs caused at macroeconomic level. In addition, in November 2015 the Commission established a Facility for Refugees in Turkey as a mechanism to coordinate contributions from EU Member States and the EU budget amounting to EUR 3 billion to provide humanitarian and development assistance to refugees and host communities for 2016-2017.

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In Iraq, the EU has been at the forefront of the life-saving humanitarian response for both internally displaced persons and Syrian refugees in Iraq with over EUR 107 million committed and contracted in 2015. The EU has also actively advocated for the protection of civilians, respect of International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian access, which remain major challenges in the country. Thanks to its solid humanitarian field presence, the EU has played a key role in improving the quality and balance of the humanitarian response throughout Iraq and has been instrumental in reaching people in underserved/hard to reach areas, in line with the all-of-Iraq approach. The development of integrated systems of aid and promotion of multipurpose cash support, where appropriate, has led to a more cost-efficient response. EU assistance (development and crisis response assistance) also contributed to the resilience of IDPs and host communities in Iraq. In 2015 the EU committed 45 million EUR for education including structural reforms and immediate response to the educational needs of refugees and host communities.

I. 2. Countering the Da'esh threat

EU action has complemented counter Da'esh efforts by Member States and the international community in two ways:

Internal measures

The European Commission has adopted a wide and comprehensive range of measures to counter Da'esh. The Commission proposed a Directive harmonising the criminalisation of terrorist offences in line with the European Agenda on Security to fight against terrorism. In March 2016, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator set out a number of urgent measures to tackle the threat from Da'esh in light of the recent attacks in Paris and in Brussels.

On border management, the use of the Schengen Information System has been intensified and improved. In relation to radicalisation, the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) has assembled experts across the EU to develop and exchange best practices. The Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team (SSCAT) has provided demand-driven responses for Member States to counter the internal terrorist narrative. Through an Internet Forum, the European Commission is developing a partnership with key social media companies to look at how

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government and industry can work together to remove online terrorist propaganda and counter the appeal of Da'esh.

The European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) at Europol is bringing together existing monitoring and analytical capacities, including 'Check the Web' and 'Focal Point Travelers' integrating the Financial Intelligence Units network and creating new capabilities such as the Internet Referral Unit (IRU). Other measures cover the improvement of information exchange, interoperability of data bases, rehabilitation, risk assessment tools, training of professionals, education and youth outreach. The recent adoption of the EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) Directive is also an important measure as part of the response to returning foreign terrorist fighters. The Directive on preventing money laundering and terrorism financing (4th AML Directive) will make it ever more difficult for terrorists to use the financial system for funding their activities. The European Commission has also adopted an Action Plan to reinforce preventive measures tackling terrorist financing risks, strengthen controls on cash movements and enhance the legal framework on customs and trade in order to fight against illegal trade and trafficking of cultural goods. With regard to firearms and explosives an implementing Regulation on firearms deactivation standards was adopted. The implementation of these measures should contribute to further degrading Da'esh financial and operational capabilities

External action

The EU actions aim at preventing the spread of Da'esh franchises, while vigorously acting to uproot Da'esh inside Syria and Iraq by denying its access to funds, fighters and resources. The EU has considerably stepped up its counter-terrorism engagement with countries affected by Da'esh in North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey and the Western Balkans. Targeted and upgraded security and counter-terrorism dialogues have been undertaken with Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries and consultations are being conducted with other partners while CT (counter-terrorism) /security experts have been deployed in EU Delegations.

This has led inter alia to the adoption of a counter-terrorism (CT) assistance package for Tunisia and should lead to similar packages for Jordan and Lebanon. The EU has engaged in a structured cooperation with Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon based on clear roadmaps that focus on advice and

expertise, training, border security, legal reforms, aviation security and counter-radicalisation measures. Work is also ongoing to strengthen cooperation between the EU and MENA countries on fighting the illicit traffic of firearms following a kick-off conference that took place in October 2015.

The volume of counter-terrorism and security-related bilateral programmes with Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon stands currently at EUR 30 million, EUR 35 million and EUR 31.5 million respectively. Regional programming benefiting those countries and others in the region amounts to close to EUR 70 million. The EU is in the process of finalising a number of measures for joint action with Turkey at the CT dialogue on 8 June.

In order to counter Da'esh's ideological influence, the EU has dedicated resources to an 'Outreach and Communication with the Arab-speaking World' Strategic communications Task Force and is funding a EUR 3.3 million project aiming to strengthen local resilience to extremist recruitment in Tunisia, Lebanon and Morocco. The EU is also actively involved in the SSCAT. Moreover, a joint Communication on culture in external relations will be soon adopted and an initiative to listen to and engage with young European and MENA leaders aiming to build a consistent, positive and shared narrative is currently being prepared.

The EU has intensified its efforts to promote a criminal justice response to terrorism in the MENA region. For example it has developed actions such as CT MENA (a EUR 13 million project focused on support for the League of Arab States to improve rule of law based CT and Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts, establishment of a CT technical assistance facility and future resilience initiatives for MENA countries) and a EUR 4.5 million project implemented by CEPOL providing CT training to law enforcement agencies from MENA countries. Other EU funded actions in this field have focused on strengthening resilience to violent extremism in Jordan (EUR 10 million); strengthening the legal regime against terrorist fighters in MENA and Balkans (EUR 5 million); reinforcing Euromed Police IV (EUR 4.8 million); peace-building and conflict mediation programmes in Lebanon (EUR 3.7 million).

The progress of the Global Coalition to counter ISIL/Da'esh has been significant. In Iraq, Da'esh has been curtailed in terms of territory and financing, while in Syria, its access to manpower, funds and

resources has dramatically declined. The EU is participating in the Global Coalition's working groups on stabilisation, foreign fighters, counter financing and counter radicalisation, complementing the military and non-military contributions of a number of Member States. Internal and external counter-radicalisation, counter-recruitment and travel restriction efforts have contributed to a decrease of Europeans leaving for Syria and Iraq and in some Member States the number of returnees now exceeds the number of those still leaving for the conflict region. The EU needs to constantly adapt its action to respond to the enhanced versatility and resilience and geographical spread of Da'esh, including to Libya, and focus on tailor-made responses to the threat.

The EU has implemented restrictive measures in line with UNSCR 2253 (2015) on 17 December 2015 and discussions are ongoing concerning the imposition of additional "EU autonomous" restrictive measures.

II. Syria

II.1. Work towards a political transition

The situation in Syria has changed significantly since the EU Strategy was endorsed and EU action has therefore already gone beyond what was envisaged. In particular, the EU is playing an active part in the international efforts to resolve the crises through the HRVP's participation in the ISSG ministerial meetings and the EU's role in the humanitarian and ceasefire task forces.

The EU has reached out to key actors such as Russia, the USA, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in order to promote buy-in and support for the process, and actively supports the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva led by the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for the implementation of the UN Resolution 2254. It has also reached out to all Syrian actors, including civil society, minorities and women, to encourage their awareness, support for and participation in the political process through expertise, training and capacity building. The EU intends to fund retroactively the secretariat created in Geneva for the delegation of the Syrian opposition (EUR 400 000). An EU Comprehensive Syria Peace Initiative (EUR 8 million) has been created this year to fund support for the political process in areas such as mediation, intra-Syrian dialogue, expertise for constitutional and security sector reform and civil society platforms.

II.2. Strengthen the moderate opposition and the civil society actors

The EU has continued to provide support for the Syrian moderate opposition and contributed to increasing the cooperation between the Syrian National Coalition and the National Coordination Body to enhance unity of the opposition in preparation for Geneva talks. The EU has engaged extensively in support of Syrian civil society, women's networks and grass-roots initiatives working in the fields of local governance, women's empowerment, local mediation and peacebuilding, free media, human rights and transitional justice. The EU has funded over 100 local Syrian Civil Society Organisations (CSO) partners with EUR 12 million in 2015, to provide basic services, improve local administration and the rule of law and prepare the ground for a political transition. Many of the initial participants in the Geneva civil society room are EU-supported CSOs.

II.3. Provide basic services and contribute to rebuilding administration in areas of reduced violence

Beyond humanitarian aid, the provision of basic services in Syria has been developed following a "whole of Syria approach" that aims at bringing together operations conducted cross-border as well as from Damascus to maximise efficiency and reach out to all Syrians in need. Since 2011, the Commission has committed EUR 172 million in development assistance within Syria in the sectors of education, livelihood, local governance, civil society, media and health. The EU presence in Gaziantep has facilitated the cross-border work, including through a rapid reaction mechanism to respond to immediate needs.

The EU currently manages 32 development programmes (EUR 112 million) and funding is used to engage with the United Nations, International Non-Governmental Organisations and Member States' agencies in the fields where the most important needs for early recovery are identified. For example, with the resilience support of the EU, 115 tons of solid waste has been removed, 553 businesses have been restored and over 14.000 job opportunities created.

II.4. Promote human rights/international humanitarian law and ensure accountability

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The EU is at the forefront of international efforts to promote human rights and humanitarian law in Syria. It supports the work of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and also provides financial support to the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (EUR 1.5 million) for investigating and documenting war crimes in Syria. Furthermore the EU supports the efforts of Syrian lawyers and human rights activists based inside Syria and the region with EUR 5.7 million to promote respect of human rights, reach out to detainees in Syrian prisons and document human rights violations. In the ISSG humanitarian task force, a focus for the EU has been on trying to secure humanitarian standards in the implementation of aid deliveries.

II.5. Prepare the "day after"

The EU is already preparing the ground for a possible post-settlement phase by facilitating access to education, supporting rehabilitation and early recovery efforts where possible and building the capacity of civilian groups in service delivery and local governance. A study on needs/damage assessment in cities and neighbourhoods inside Syria is being conducted by UN-Habitat and the EU Joint Research Centre (EUR 2.2 million) and will be used for post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The EU will need to mobilise all available instruments, including the Regional Trust Fund, for a rapid and early involvement in rebuilding Syria as soon as a political solution is reached. Further financial support, in conjunction with other international institutions as appropriate, will also be envisaged. This will offer incentives for the Syrian refugees to return and participate in the stabilisation and reconstruction efforts. The EU has already held informal discussions with various IFIs and other donors to start preparations in this regard.

III. Iraq

III.1. The fight against Da'esh in Iraq

In Iraq, significant progress has been made in the military effort, thanks also to the military support that a number of Member States have been providing to the Iraqi security forces, including the Peshmerga. The appointment of a CT/security expert to the EU Delegation in Baghdad has

facilitated EU support to Iraq on a Counter Terrorism project (EUR 3.5 million) launched at the end of 2015 which has been well received even if it is too early to assess its impact. Support to counter-narrative efforts in Iraq has so far suffered from the lack of a clear Iraqi Counter Terrorism strategy and from the highly sectarian media landscape. The security crisis has reinforced sectarian and ethnic cleavages, with a number of armed groups engaging in sectarian retribution and "demographic engineering", thus damaging prospects for reconciliation. This carries risks for the future unity of the country and needs to be factored into the EU's engagement. The EU is currently running three projects promoting an alternative to the prevalent sectarian and violent discourse (EUR 3.6 million with further EUR 10 million envisaged in this area).

III. 2. Support for Stabilisation

The stabilisation of areas liberated from Da'esh has emerged as an important EU priority and is a key factor for the preservation of Iraqi unity as it fosters reconciliation at grass roots level and helps to restore public confidence in the state. From the EU's perspective it is also a key factor in discouraging migration. In 2016, the EU earmarked EUR 14 million for the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilisation (FFIS). The EU presence in Erbil since August 2015 has also contributed to EU stabilisation efforts and diplomatic engagement in Iraq. Within the Global Coalition's working group on stabilisation, the EU acts as the focal point for 'booby trap' (Improvised Explosive Devices - IED) removal through a EUR 4.5 million project. This has become a critical issue in enabling civilians to return to liberated areas. Support to police training for stabilisation purposes is an area where EU Member States are particularly active and is a key factor for reinforcing the rule of law in liberated areas. These efforts are appreciated by the Global Coalition, and could be scaled up. To ensure a longer term impact, the government needs to be encouraged to put in place structural measures to reduce staff turnover.

III.3. Helping to make political inclusiveness a reality

Another central plank of the EU's Iraq policy has been to support the government's efforts to achieve reform, inclusive governance and reconciliation, though so far success has been limited. The government's political reform programme has reached a stalemate and may be regressing on some issues as a result of political in-fighting. No sustained and publicly visible efforts at

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reconciliation have been initiated by any of the key Iraqi political players. The EU efforts in this area have centred on engagement through the *EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (PCA) and support to the government to develop a national reconciliation plan, due to be put forward in Spring 2016. EU-sponsored efforts (EUR 1 million through Crisis Management Initiative) have involved marginalised Sunni groups, including Iraqi Sunnis outside Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, in coordination with the UN (United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq - UNAMI). More time will be needed for this work to bear fruit. Further EU efforts to promote the domestic reform agenda are needed, focusing on high-level engagement. In view of the challenging internal political situation described above, the scope for peace-building and transitional justice are still limited. The EU has supported the December 2014 oil/revenue sharing agreement reached between the federal government and the Kurdistan region, which is not currently functioning. The EU will need to sustain its efforts to promote dialogue amongst the Kurdish parties, as well as between the Kurdish regional government and the federal government.

III.4. Support the consolidation of democratic institutions and economic development

The EU has been contributing to the consolidation of rule of law through support for democratically run state institutions, judicial reforms, and the mainstreaming of human rights issues (EUR 14.4 million). Support to the socio-economic development of areas affected by massive population displacement is envisaged in 2016. Measures have had some success but are hampered by limited Iraqi absorption, planning and prioritisation capacities, as well as sustainability and security issues. The option of the EU supporting a more comprehensive reform is excluded given the limited funding available and actions must be targeted at the reform of key areas of governance for which there are indicators of success.

The EU together with the UN have been major contributors to Iraqi efforts to strengthen regional and local administration with a longer term perspective (EUR 11.5 million for the EU Local Area Development Programme implemented by UNDP).. The EU, in close cooperation with the IMF and World Bank, has started working on support for improved public finance management, in order to preserve the Federal Government's and the Kurdistan Regional Government's crisis-coping capacities, not least in view of the further population displacements. The EU has initiated an economic dialogue with Iraq under the EU-Iraq PCA to help improve economic performance,

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public service provision and fiscal policy capacities, which is expected to gather momentum in 2016, as are preparations for EIB loan operations in Iraq. Outside support to Iraq, not least in the form of economic and financial advice, capacity building and concessionary financing, will be critical in the coming years as Iraq makes painful, long-term adjustments to re-establish its economic and financial health.

IV. Next steps

Based on the assessment in this paper and the forthcoming discussion in the Council, the EU will set out adjusted policy priorities under the strategy for the coming year through the adoption of Council Conclusions.