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Nation unbuilding

Europe and the US have failed in Syria

BY KRISTIN HELBERG

After almost nine years of civil war, the crisis in and around Syria has not been resolved. Nonetheless, it is clear who the winners and losers in the conflict are. Among the winners are the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran and even Turkey, to a certain extent. These countries have always known what they wanted, have proven ready to do anything to get what they want, and have been able to adapt their strategies to the dynamics of the war. Among the losers are the United States and Europe, who championed the desires of Syrians citizens for a life of freedom and dignity but did so in a half-hearted manner and without any tangible plan.

As this gap between its words and deeds grew, the West gambled away its credibility. With its system of international agreements, moral principles and democratically legitimized institutions, the West proved capable neither of helping the Syrians nor of ending the war. The reality we must now face in the case of the Syrian conflict is that liberal democracy has failed, and autocracy has triumphed. This outcome is destined to have far-reaching consequences – for Syrians, the Middle East, Europe and the world.

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad remains in power and is set to regain control of the entire country in the coming months. In Idlib, he will do so by force of arms, and in the northeast, he will do so by means of a gradual takeover of Kurdish self-government. In other words, the current state of affairs in Syria is as it always was, only worse.

Assad's reign hinges on loyalty to the regime, which he secures through a system of clientelism and enforces by means of fear. This results in his two strongest pillars of support coming from wealthy businessmen and a far-reaching intelligence apparatus. Simply put, those who support the regime are rewarded, and those who reject it are punished.

The country's secret services are more powerful than ever. Local militias are involved in a variety of illicit activities, which include bribery, blackmail, theft and threatening or kidnapping citizens. In the years before the war, Syrians were subject to the despotism of the state alone; today, they are at the mercy of non-state and foreign actors as well.

Syria's pseudo-socialist, neo-capitalist economic system has engendered a symbiosis of entrepreneurs and regime representatives. More specifically, the liberalization driven by Assad paired with the war economy of the past few years has created a merger of wealth and political-power structures. Crony capitalists loyal to the regime benefit from the privatization of public property, from smuggling and from monopolies in the service sector. In other words, power and money are bound to each other in modern Syria. This fact should be borne in mind when it comes to handing out humanitarian aid and supporting reconstruction efforts there.

While entire regions of Syria remain in ruin, the Syrian pound continues to lose value and UN figures show more than 80 percent of Syrians living in poverty, the Assad regime continues to focus exclusively on its followers and supporters in an effort to further secure its power. In the case of

The current state of affairs in Syria is as it always was, only worse

Aleppo, UN funds are not directed toward the most devastated residential areas in the east of the city, which used to be administered by opposition forces; instead, the money is flowing to areas populated by those loyal to the regime. In the south of Damascus, in an area marked by the ruins of bombed-out middle-class and working-class neighborhoods, the city administration is building luxury resorts rather than social housing. Former residents are being expropriated and/or compensated at ridiculously low costs by the government.

This kind of activity is immune to outside influence because the behavior itself guarantees the survival of Syria's rulers. After decades of being under the regime's thumb, society, state institutions and the private sector form a close-knit network of interdependencies. Any real concessions – such as depriving the secret services of power and ushering in freedom of expression, freedom of the press and an independent judiciary – would result in a system failure that would threaten the survival of the rulers in Damascus. By its very nature, the Syrian regime itself is incapable of instituting effective reforms.

This is an important insight for foreign actors seeking an effective approach to negotiations with Damascus. Since 2012, the US and Europe have tried to achieve a "credible political transition" in Syria that includes a transfer of power, a transitional

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Party crashing

Angela Merkel's CDU is in disarray

BY PETER H. KOEPF

Immediately following this year's Munich Security Conference, Stefan Kornelius, a commentator for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, reflected a growing concern felt by observers of Germany and many conference attendees regarding the political situation in Germany: "Is the anchor of Europe, the lighthouse of freedom, the savior of the West on the verge of becoming a new Trumpistan?"

Some spoke of what they saw as Weimar-era conditions on the horizon, that is, a further fragmentation of the party system similar to what occurred in Germany between 1919 and 1933. Following World War I, the country found itself in a situation that led to a string of new coalitions, followed by the rapid collapse of each new government alliance and, ultimately, to the fatal hope that an authoritarian, nationalist government formed by the Nazi party would be able to re-establish a sense of order.

Are these fears justified today? It would certainly appear that the last remaining *Volkspartei*, or big-tent party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is now heading for an implosion similar to that of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the past several years. The most recent evidence of this came last month in Thuringia, when CDU deputies joined with the right wingers from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to elect a 5-man faction from the liberal FDP party to the office of Minister President of that state. It was a regional political fiasco with far-reaching consequences for the whole country.

It has become clear that a small but potentially growing segment of the CDU has found common ground with the AfD, not only in the states of the former East Germany, and is now willing to engage in talks with their counterparts in the AfD as to where cooperation might be possible. In line with the AfD's parliamentary group leader in the Bundestag, Alexander Gauland, this small group of CDU representatives is of the opinion that it is "completely nonsensical and unrealistic not to want to work with the AfD in the long run."

In Thuringia, politicians such as the state's recently resigned CDU chairman Mike Mohring have openly considered the option of cooperating with the left-wing party, Die Linke. But the current

CDU party leadership at the federal level remains steadfast, insisting that both options are out of the question. In other words, the party is sorely lacking a compass.

In the wake of this embarrassment, the CDU's poll numbers have gone from bad to catastrophic. The federal party leader had to resign and the party seems to be breaking up into a Christian-liberal faction and a so-called conservative wing – the latter comprising those who, just like the AfD, reject Merkel's liberal politics, particularly with regard to the environment, refugees and gender policies.

Today, the number of voices insisting that Angela Merkel should be held responsible for this misery is on the rise. Calls for the chancellor to resign and for elections to choose a new candidate to take over the CDU party chairmanship and the chancellor candidacy in the next election are getting louder and louder.

How did it come to this?

Back in 2015, the AfD and its supporters were already chanting "Merkel must go!" At that time, the economy was stable, Merkel had stoically steered Germany through the financial crisis and

the CDU was polling at more than 40 percent. "Then came the refugee crisis, and with it, the beginning of the decline of the CDU," noted Nikolas Busse in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*. Merkel's successor, he argued, "would certainly not be able to avoid distancing themselves from Merkel on the issue of migration policy."

But this approach is too one-dimensional. The reasons why an apparently growing segment of the population no longer trusts Germany's more established parties are much more diverse.

Surveys have shown that roughly half of the citizens living in eastern German states are only "in part" satisfied with democracy; the rest indicate that they are much more dissatisfied than satisfied. And the cause of this goes far beyond the refugee policy.

Why does an increasing number of Germans refuse to trust the country's tried and tested political battleships? Their answers to this question are many, varied and have little to do with foreign policy.

First and foremost, citizens in the eastern states, that is, in the former GDR, sense that they were hoodwinked by the

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BY SYLVIA SCHREIBER

One image can speak volumes. The participants at the Libya summit in Berlin take their places on the podium for a group photo. Positioning themselves at the front are representatives of the proxy powers behind the Libyan civil war: Russia, Turkey and Egypt. Alongside them are the neutral conciliators, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres with summit host Chancellor Angela Merkel. The German chancellor sent out the original invitation as an honest broker for Europe, which has a vital interest in peace in neighboring Africa as well as in migration issues.

Merkel is not the only European head of government in the front row. Next to Merkel stands French President Emmanuel Macron, beaming at the photographers, and on the far right is the jovial Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, whose country has just left the European Union. All the while, the official representatives of the EU find themselves far from front and center. In the photo, it is not easy to make out EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, while High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell is also relegated to the second row – the courtesy seats for the also-rans.

The triumvirate of the EU's "big three" assembled in the front row has a name of its own: the E3 format, in the style of the G7. The world's seven major industrial nations act in formation, and so, too, does the E3. Future foreign and security leadership will be the task of the largest European states, with France and the UK as notable military and nuclear powers and Germany as the strongest economic nation and political constant on the continent.

A few days earlier in a speech at the London School of Economics, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer made clear that this current picture is more than a mere snapshot: "The E3 format is an important future link between the mindsets of the EU and NATO. It is more than just another format," she explained. "It is based on the fundamental conviction that working together makes us stronger. Each one of us is a strong, free and sovereign nation. We will remain free and sovereign, but we will only become stronger if we find more points of contact." The E3 stands for a European security partnership that enables "people with different national backgrounds to work together towards a common

goal. Like our soldiers do in training and on operations."

Is this the format by which a new European power geometry will come into focus? Could this be a format that exists in addition to the EU and as a force beyond NATO? German European policymakers are skeptical: "The E3 will not be able to replace the common EU foreign and security policy, as this represents all of the member states," said Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, vice-chairman of the Free Democratic Party (FDP)

the EU is an economic giant yet a political and military dwarf.

With no further steps toward political integration, the European community of states will struggle to free itself from this paradoxical situation. On the contrary, although the EU has enjoyed increasing global recognition as a trading power in recent years, it has also lost political influence. The rules-based EU system, which is tasked with substituting political power legitimization with treaties and negotiations, comes up against

this flaw. In Syria, Iran, Iraq as well as in the conflict in Libya, the EU has remained absent, leaving the field to new geopolitical players such as Russia and Turkey. "Here, Europe is a nothing, it is pointless," railed Joost Hiltermann, the program director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Brussels think-tank International Crisis Group, an NGO affiliated with Human Rights Watch. The EU has "neither the foreign policy backbone nor the will."

In an interview with the German

declared that the third major priority of her "geopolitical" Commission would be to carry greater weight in the world for the EU. "Credible military capacities" are needed, she said, as is "hard power," adding that they should also be coupled with "diplomacy, conflict prevention, reconciliation and reconstruction."

For French President Emmanuel Macron, however, this colorful Brussels wish list does not go nearly far enough. Macron, who launched what his advisors call his

first nuclear power station under French oversight, but also participation in Franco-German armaments projects such as joint tank construction.

These ideas had previously been rejected by Germany. In contrast to Berlin, Paris thinks in geopolitical categories; French foreign policy defines long-term interests and spheres of interest on the basis of geography and history.

Brexit will undoubtedly shift the foreign policy clout of the EU in favor of French influence. At the Libya Conference in Berlin, Macron cheerfully positioned himself under the E3 umbrella. Should the trio prove its potential as heavyweights in Europe, it will likely push the pallid EU foreign policy even further into the background. Unerring advocates of the French method of "variable geometry," in which changing political pairings are welcomed for their respective purposes, will barely intrude on Macron's visions.

In Warsaw, the French extended yet another invitation for bilateral cooperation, in this case a new configuration of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), a military cooperation of strong European states under French leadership. Since the commencement of the EI2 in summer 2018, the military general staff of nine EU countries plus the UK has adopted this formula as it works on a "strategic culture" and "military doctrine." The cooperation is aimed at a rapid military crisis response.

Creating a more robust Europe is the goal of the many initiatives that have emerged. But as long as these individual measures remain unbundled, the continent will remain unmanageable. The old US dream of a single telephone number for all of Europe could hardly be farther from reality.

Alexander Lambsdorff has some advice on whom to call: "Not a Berlin number in any case," joked the liberal politician. Germany's grand coalition was "worn out on the one hand, chaotic on the other," he noted, whereas a formative policy role and fresh ideas are clearly emanating from Paris at the moment. "Nevertheless, I would also advise US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to make a call to the EU High Representative in Brussels." According to Lambsdorff, this is the only place where one can find out what Europe is thinking "as a whole." After all, Europe and the EU are far more than just the big E3.

SYLVIA SCHREIBER is an EU correspondent who has written for *Der Spiegel*, *Handelsblatt* and *Les Européens* in Brussels.



A picture paints a thousand words: The EU's Michel, Borrell and von der Leyen were relegated to the back row.

Geometry class

The heads of government of major European nations are setting the tone in foreign policy, while EU High Representative Josep Borrell stands idly by

in the Bundestag and former member of European Parliament. "The joint policy of the Union takes priority. The UK will participate on a case-by-case basis."

The E3 group, which the Europeans used to successfully negotiate the first nuclear agreements with Iran in 2003 and 2004, may succeed in keeping the British on board the European ship following Brexit. While simultaneously anchored to NATO, the format allows the big three to demonstrate military, diplomatic and economic muscle; the proof that Europe has more to offer than an EU comprised of brokers and negotiators. "While others arm themselves, the EU believes in treaties and agreements," said one Brussels diplomat with regard to the decades-old dilemma that

its limits when there are fundamental differences of opinion.

The euro and migration crisis between 2008 and 2016 revealed fault lines and frailties within the community. Between north and south, the question of social cohesion remains unresolved. In attitudes towards migration and borders, there is a deep and as yet unbridgeable fissure between east and west.

In any case, the Union has precious little foreign policy credibility; the principle of unanimity and veto, which quickly leads to paralyzing logjams caused by individual states, adds to an overall picture of disharmony.

The newly created position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has done little to alleviate

weekly *Die Zeit*, former President of the European Commission and former Prime Minister of Italy Romano Prodi took the EU to task on the question of Libya: "If you turn yourself into a sheep, the wolf will have you for dinner." Today, he argued, the task is to "develop a vision for Europe's role."

However, such a vision already exists. During Prodi's time in office in Brussels, the decision was made to establish a European Defense Union, including a European Army. That was back in 2003. As of 2020, neither the defense union nor the European army has yet been implemented.

But there are prospects. In addition to the "Green Deal" for the climate and the digitalization of the European economy, Commission President von der Leyen

"disruptive strategy" last fall with the jolting description of NATO's "brain-death," is now embracing his role as Europe's "enfant terrible." He has drawn even more attention by calling for a renewed partnership with Russian President Vladimir Putin, thereby immediately alienating the Baltic EU states and NATO members, who see their solid borders with Russia as a guarantee of their existence.

Macron's most recent coup is the initiation of a "strategic dialog with EU members on nuclear deterrence" under the French nuclear shield. He had already campaigned for a new partnership with Poland in the past, in military terms as well. For his neighbors in the east, he proposed not only the construction of the

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government, a new constitution and democratic elections under UN supervision – none of which have come to pass.

The mantra repeated by heads of state and foreign ministers in the West – that is, their insistence that resolving the conflict requires a political rather than military solution – has become an embarrassing phrase. It exposes the West's lack of strategic vision and sheer inability to act.

This mantra disregards one of the most basic rules of diplomacy: that a negotiated solution is only possible when all parties to the conflict no longer see the point in continued fighting. The situation in Syria would have to reach a stage where none of the stakeholders see any benefit to military escalation; only then would we see genuine willingness to compromise, thereby providing the diplomatic leeway needed to negotiate an agreement.

The conflict in Syria never reached such a point. For Assad, it's always been worthwhile to fight for survival, and his regime had everything it needed to win the war in military terms: weapons of mass destruction and the readiness to use them against its own citizens; a supporting world power –

in this case Russia – that wanted to keep its last ally in the Middle East in power and was therefore willing to use its air force to destroy or expel all opponents of the regime; a regional power – in this case Iran – experienced in asymmetrical warfare and capable of organizing Shi'ite militias on the ground; a war-weary world power – in this case the US – that was cautious and in retreat; divided Europeans with no plan at all; a blocked UN Security Council; and, finally, the ignorance of the world community.

In contrast to the US and Europe, the Russian president has a functioning plan in Syria. It comprises three stages: rescue, recapture and rehabilitate. Today, we are moving through the transition to phase three, the aim of which is to make the Syrian regime an accepted member of the international community once again.

The logic behind this strategy seems plausible: Assad has won and remains in power, so it makes sense to acknowledge this reality, to work constructively toward rebuilding the war-torn country, to improve conditions for its poor and to allow Syrian refugees to return.

The only problem is that anyone who wants to actually help the people of Syria would be wise

not to support the Syrian regime. Indeed, every dollar and euro sent to Damascus with good intentions will only serve to further consolidate the very regime structures that led to the uprising nine years ago.

What unsuspecting politicians, journalists and bloggers perceive as stability in Syria is actually nothing more than what we would call *Friedhofsruhe* in German, namely that deathly calm felt in cemeteries. Assad needs the money to reward his cronies, to pacify the militias, to draw supporters closer to him through better living conditions and to maintain the secret service apparatus. He has no interest in the return of Syrian refugees from abroad; indeed, he deliberately drove most of them out of the country in the first place as a way of ridding himself of his enemies.

At the moment, Assad is delighted. After all, the UN has been working for years with government-related organizations, companies and individuals who continue to distribute aid money in a manner that suits his wishes. Some of these partners are even on US and European lists of sanctioned organizations; this is a true scandal, given that Washington and Berlin are the largest bilateral

donors of humanitarian aid to Syria.

While Europeans and Americans continue to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians, thereby relieving Assad of that burden and freeing him up to pursue his Idlib campaign, Russia, Iran and Turkey are working to safeguard their long-term presence and commitment in Syria. The autocratic leaders of each of these countries simply don't see foreign policy as a diplomatic negotiation of compromises; instead, they see it as the pursuit of a strategy of pure self-interest.

Of course, these leaders have no problem with Assad's authoritarianism, and this means that the Syrian regime can do whatever it wants on the domestic front. Not even the Kremlin can influence Assad's secret services. As a result, there can be no security guarantees from the Russian side for any Syrians wishing to return to their home country.

The efforts made by the three interventionist powers in the Syrian civil war have paid off. Although Ankara moved away from its original goal of regime change in Damascus, it is still able to use some of the Syrian insurgents as Islamist mercenaries to assert its own interests east of

the Euphrates against the Kurds and now also in Libya. With its offensive in northeastern Syria in October 2019, Turkey drove the Democratic Union Party (PYD) into the arms of Assad and Putin, thereby preventing the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state in the medium term.

A rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus is possible; their secret service chiefs met in Moscow in January. Russia maintains three military bases in Syria and will therefore remain a presence in the East Mediterranean for decades. In addition, Russian companies succeeded in signing largely one-sided contracts for the extraction of oil, gas and phosphorus there.

Moscow is eager to strengthen state structures and contain militias in Syria – in contrast to Tehran, which is working to create a state within the state in order to secure its own military, political, economic and social influence. The recently murdered General Qassim Soleimani was in the process of setting up Syrian paramilitary groups modeled after the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and fighting for Assad under local leadership. Iran's goal there is to repeat in Syria what it achieved

with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. This would complete the Shi'ite "axis of resistance" extending from Tehran via Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut all the way to the Mediterranean and to the borders of Israel. However, this would be quite difficult in Syria, which has a Shi'ite population of only 2 percent.

The US and Europe have lost the conflict in Syria. In the short term, they should stand firm against the Syrian regime and against Russia's attempts at "peacemaking." They should put pressure on the UN to ensure that any humanitarian aid is given to the neediest people and not to Assad's network of cronies. In the long term, Europeans can place their hopes on the desire of the Syrian people for change, supporting their quest for freedom, justice and reconciliation wherever they can.

KRISTIN HELBERG is a journalist and an expert on the conflict in Syria. She works for ARD, ORF and other broadcasters. Her book *Der Syrien-Krieg: Lösung eines Weltkonflikts* (The war in Syria: Solving a world conflict) was published by Herder in 2018.