



# Developments in security policy: European and US considerations regarding the war in Syria

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**Contents**

- 1. Introduction..... 2
- 2. France ..... 5
  - Political discourse..... 5
  - Goals and solutions ..... 7
  - Actions..... 9
  - Summary ..... 10
- 3. Germany..... 12
  - Political discourse..... 12
  - Goals and solutions ..... 15
  - Actions..... 18
  - Summary ..... 19
- 4. The UK ..... 21
  - Political discourse..... 21
  - Goals and solutions ..... 24
  - Actions..... 26
  - Summary ..... 28
- 5. The USA ..... 30
  - Political discourse..... 30
  - Goals and solutions ..... 31
  - Actions..... 32
  - Summary ..... 34
- 6. Conclusions..... 36
- 7. Bibliography..... 39

## 1. Introduction

This report is one of the reports for the project ‘Issues in contemporary transatlantic security policy’ that is funded by the Swedish Ministry of Defence. This part of the project aims to analyze European and American considerations with regard to the wars in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria. The analysis is undertaken in three different reports, one for each of these wars. This report covers the war in Syria. When studying European and American considerations we have paid particular attention to the national discourses, the goals and solutions presented, as well as the actions taken by France, Germany, the UK and the US. The analysis has primarily been undertaken from a national perspective; for each war, we study the countries separately, but the analyses also cover consequences for transatlantic relations in security policy and the role of NATO and other organizations. The analyses in this report cover the years 2013–2015; the analysis begins with 2013 because events of significance to the conflict took place in that year.

In a report written for the Swedish Ministry of Defence in 2013 a number of trends in contemporary security and defence policy were identified. The analysis made in this report will be discussed in relation to some of these trends. The first trend to be discussed again is insecurity about the change in US foreign and security policy after the so-called pivot towards Asia. However, this was before the war in Ukraine and before international re-engagement in Iraq and engagement in the war in Syria. The second trend to be discussed again here is the diverging pictures we found with regard to Russia, with Northern and Eastern Europe showing much more concern about actions taken by Russia than France and the UK. The third trend to be discussed again is that of increased bilateral co-operation, which was partially a consequence of another trend: that of the increased influence of the economy in defence policy. Increased bilateral co-operation was discussed in the report from 2013 as a functional trend aimed at increasing efficiency in defence co-operation that mainly had cost reduction as its driving force. The fourth trend to be discussed again in this report is the diversified role of NATO, which in addition to its traditional role as a regional security organization with territorial defence as its main function, has developed into a global security organization with international military operations as an additional function. In addition, the previous report also discussed the fact that these trends revealed challenges to political leadership in several ways. Domestically, because when aspects other than security and defence, such as the economy, become important for policy development more actors are involved in policy making. Internationally, one reason for the lack of leadership in international organizations could be that the cost of leadership has increased at the same time as trends have been to increase bilateral co-operations.

This report first analyzes the different countries' political discourse, goals and solutions, as well as actions taken with regard to Syria in 2013–2015. A short summary for each country is found on the last page of the respective chapter. In the concluding chapter a summary of the responses is presented. In this chapter the results are also discussed in relation to the trends presented above.

The conflict in Syria started with calls for democratization that were made during the Arab Spring in 2011. In June 2012 there was a UN-hosted meeting in Geneva which resulted in the Geneva Communiqué pushing for a political settlement of the conflict and suggesting key steps for the transition. In May 2013, the US and Russia decided to bring the opposing sides to a negotiation, although this did not succeed until 2014. Syria became an issue very high on the agenda of international politics when deadly chemical attacks took place on 21 August 2013 in Damascus. After a series of small attacks against the opposition forces by the Assad forces, the situation culminated in the use of chemical weapons against civilians on massive scale, resulting in more than 1400 casualties (The White House, 2013a).

This move received unanimous and often coordinated criticism. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, the US has been active in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic actions and has continuously encouraged international negotiations and diplomatic solutions to the conflict. In August 2012, Obama stated for the first time that the red-line issue which would make US military engagement in Syria possible was the use of chemical weapons (President Obama, 2012). German Chancellor Merkel and French President Hollande agreed after the chemical attacks in August 2013 that 'the inhumane gas attack on Syrian civilians constitutes a drastic violation of international law, which must not go without a response' from the international community (Die Bundesregierung, 2013b). In a conversation with British Prime Minister Cameron, Merkel agreed that there was sufficient evidence that sarin gas had been used against Syrian civilians. Initially it was not clear who was behind the attack but it was quite quickly agreed that the Syrian regime was most likely to be behind it, because it 'had at its disposal the agents needed, the know-how on their use, and the carriers for their delivery' (Die Bundesregierung, 2013c). The French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, together with the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and Turkey stated that the Assad regime was responsible for conducting the chemical attacks while describing them as 'the most massive and most terrifying use of chemical weapons' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Fabius, 2013a). France also congratulated Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov for his 'step in the right direction' (Fabius, 2013b) in recognizing the danger of the chemical weapons in Assad's possession and the need for them to be removed from the Syrian government's disposal.

A lot of pressure was put on the Assad regime to start negotiations on the removal of its capacity to use chemicals as weapons and the elimination of its chemical weapons. This resulted in an agreement in Geneva in September 2013 for gradual but complete removal of the Syrian chemical arsenal. These negotiations took place under strong pressure and close observation by the UN and the P3 partners – France, the United States and the United Kingdom – the role of Russia was also crucial (Fabius, 2013d). France left the door open for possible military attacks if there was no implementation of the agreement, which was described by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs as a ‘major step forward’ towards a chemical-free Syria and a restart of the political transformation process (Ibid). On 27 September 2013 the UN Security Council also adopted a resolution (2118) which forbade Syria (the government or any other party) to have anything to do with chemical weapons. In January 2014 the so-called Geneva II conference took place, aiming (without much success) to implement the Geneva Communiqué from 2012. However, as has been shown by developments since 2013, the chemical attacks were just the early days of the Syrian civil war.

## 2. France

### Political discourse

Following the Syrian regime's chemical attacks in Ghouta in August 2013, French President Hollande made a strong statement, saying it was a 'monstrous human rights violation' that could not be tolerated by the international community: the red line set previously was 'undeniably crossed' (Hollande, 2013). The French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, stated that inaction of the international community at this point would send a signal to the Assad regime and to the world that chemical attacks on civilians were tolerable and that action therefore was urgently needed. Action would both 'penalize and deter' the Assad regime from using chemical weapons in the future (Fabius, 2013a). Even though France was against Assad from the start of the conflict, the chemical attacks significantly contributed to an increased antagonism against him (and the Syrian regime), and French support of the efforts by the political and the armed oppositions to remove Assad from power and establish a democratic Syrian government was strengthened. To France, the situation in the aftermath of the gas attacks constituted the worst possible scenario as it contributed to the rise of jihadist groups (Hollande, 2013), destabilization and chaos in Syria and the region, and to the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction (Fabius, 2013a). It thus greatly worsened the instability and insecurity in region.

In October that same year, France, together with 10 other countries (including the US and the UK) took part in a summit meeting in London under the name of 'London 11'. The London 11 platform united behind a statement supporting the Geneva II peace conference (France Diplomatie, 2013b). France also welcomed the Syrian National Coalition decision to join the Geneva II conference as a 'major step toward the possibility of a political solution' showing the responsibility of the Syrian moderate opposition (Fabius, 2013e). At the Geneva II conference, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs reiterated support for the moderate opposition, and alluded to there being a coalition between Assad and the terrorists. He also stated that the Syrian government showed little willingness to engage in substantial negotiations (Fabius, 2014a). On several occasions France claimed that the Syrian government undermined the Geneva communiqué from June 2012 and the overall political transition by undertaking large scale violent attacks against the civilian population, especially in Aleppo (France Diplomatie, 2014a; France Diplomatie, 2014b; France Diplomatie, 2015a) and Homs (Fabius, 2014b), and by repeatedly using chemical weapons against civilians in May, 2015 (France Diplomatie, 2015b).

In July 2014, in a hearing before the National Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee, Minister of Foreign Affairs Fabius blamed the Assad government for the strengthening of

IS/Daesh by not making enough efforts to fight IS/Daesh. He also stated that he had evidence that IS/Daesh was selling oil to Assad (French Embassy US, 2014a). The French President described the Islamic State as a threat to countries like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (French Embassy US, 2014b) and the Minister of Foreign Affairs described it as a ‘threat to the whole region, to Europe and to the world’ (Fabius, 2014d). French President Hollande also said the advances by IS/Daesh in Syria were due to the inaction of the international community and the lack of international mobilization after the August 2013 major chemical attacks when he had called for immediate action: ‘Today we are seeing all the consequences: the Bashar al-Assad regime is relentlessly continuing its policy of repression; refugees, each day more numerous, are massing in neighbouring countries; and terrorist groups are gaining new footholds. Those are the results’ (Hollande, 2014a).

However, the rise of IS/Daesh in Syria did not change the French perception that Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the state of affairs in Syria. This perception influenced French plans and actions against IS/Daesh. According to President Hollande it was ‘inconceivable for any action to be taken in coordination with the Bashar al-Assad regime, because there can’t be a choice between a dictatorship of terror and a terror that wants to impose its dictatorship’ (Hollande, 2014b). The renunciation of the Assad regime was also made clear in the French reluctance to extend its air campaigns to Syria. Until September 2015 the French merely supported the US in their air raids because they feared that a French air campaign against IS/Daesh might serve the interest of Assad. Instead they supported the moderate opposition in their fight against IS/Daesh (French Embassy US, 2014c).

The role of Russia has been of considerable importance for France throughout the whole Syrian conflict. As an ally of Bashar al-Assad, Russia has supplied the Syrian regime with considerable amounts of weaponry and provided diplomatic support to his government. As a consequence France has been severely critical of Russia for not supporting the international efforts for peace in Syria (Fabius, 2015a). The Franco-Russian tension over Syria increased significantly after the start of the Russian air campaign. Russia started its air campaign in late September 2015 just two weeks after France decided to expand its air campaign from Iraq to also encompass terrorist targets in Syria. France immediately described the attacks as a pretext for military support of Assad, and not as a fight against IS/Daesh. Moreover, the French argued that the Russian attacks often targeted ‘population, civilians and opponents’ and not IS/Daesh sites and they were therefore unacceptable (Foreign Minister Fabius, 2015b).

After the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, President Hollande declared that France was at war, and when IS/Daesh took responsibility for the attacks, the French President

said Daesh should be destroyed. One of the immediate measures following the Paris attacks was to increase French military operations in Syria and Iraq. Hollande described Syria as ‘the largest breeding ground for terrorists that the world has ever known’ and criticized the international community for being divided and fragmented (Hollande, 2015a). France warmly welcomed the decision by Germany to participate with reconnaissance and logistics missions (France Diplomatie, 2015c) and the UK’s participation with the first British air operations over Syria (France Diplomatie, 2015d). France also recognized Iran as among the important regional powers, with Minister of Foreign Affairs Fabius describing Iran as a major player in the Syrian conflict, offering military support to the Syrian government. France, he said, would like to see Iran participating as a ‘force for peace’ (Fabius, 2015c).

In parallel with the military operation, France supported the Vienna negotiations as an important process to make progress ‘towards a political transition, the only solution for resolving the Syria conflict’ (Hollande, 2015b).

## Goals and solutions

France’s goals in relation to the Syrian conflict at the beginning of the crisis were to a great extent related to the unity of the Syrian state, political transformation of the Syrian state and the protection of minorities. They included:

- Departure of Bashar al-Assad in a framework of political transition (Fabius, 2013a);
- Protection of the civilian population (France Diplomatie, 2013a);
- Implementation of the Geneva agreement and the removal of Syrian chemical weapons (Fabius, 2013d);
- ‘Free, democratic Syria emerges, respectful of Syrian society’s diversity’ (Laurent, 2014).

However, as the crisis unfolded with the rise of IS/Daesh, the Paris terrorists attacks, and the refugee crisis, France came to place more emphasis on preventing Syria from becoming a new safe haven for terrorists and as such a major cause of the European refugee crisis. France set a clear goal to decrease the potential threat that these phenomena could exercise on the national security of France and on European security. For France it was important to:

- Defeat terrorism with commitment to ‘fighting jihadist networks and international terrorist networks and keeping young jihadists from departing for combat zones’ (Hollande, 2014a);

- Support the parties in favour of a solution based on a transitional government (Fabius, 2014a);
- Combat IS/Daesh and stop bombings of civilians (Hollande, 2015b);
- Stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria, cut the financial supplies of IS/Daesh and develop a strategic communication policy to counter IS/Daesh rhetoric (France Diplomatie, 2015e).

An additional goal for France was to decrease the humanitarian effect of the Syrian crisis by:

- ‘Providing civilians in Syria with the necessary protection in order to address the refugee crisis’ (France Diplomatie, 2015f);
- Helping the 7.6 million displaced people inside Syria;
- Helping the 3.8 million Syrian refugees that left Syria;
- Helping the host countries to tackle the consequences of the refugee crisis with emphasis on Lebanon because of the high humanitarian costs as well as the threat the refugee crisis poses to the regional security (Girardin, 2015).

Regarding solutions, France envisioned both diplomatic/political and military solutions to the conflict in Syria. However, as the conflict developed, ISIS advances and the hostile actions by this organization against France became part of the deliberation regarding the Syrian conflict. The French authorities gradually leaned towards solutions that involved the use of military power in order to create the necessary conditions for a diplomatic solution, and that was explicitly the case with the French approach towards IS/Daesh after the terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015.

Diplomatic and political solutions that were encouraged and supported by France included:

- A political transition (France Diplomatie, 2013c) which would eventually lead to establishing a transitional government capable of exercising full executive powers and control of the security apparatus based on mutual consent by all relevant Syrian stakeholders (France Diplomatie, 2013d) while involving ‘elements of the regime and the moderate opposition, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué’ (France Diplomatie, 2015f);
- Putting pressure on the regime to become aware that the ‘only option is the negotiation table’ (Fabius, 2013d);

- Ultimately excluding Bashar al-Assad from every solution;
- Promoting discussions and negotiations while avoiding military solutions if possible (Fabius, 2014a);
- Working together with Russia and the Arab countries for a political solution that would preserve Syrian unity and be respectful to all of the communities (Fabius, 2015d).

The diplomatic and political solutions became much less attractive to France after the terrorist attacks in Paris. After the attacks, France argued for military engagement in order for the situation on the ground to be significantly changed and to prevent threats to French national security. Furthermore, France actively advocated greater military engagement in Syria by the European Union, and expected increased engagement in military terms especially from its closest neighbours and allies such as the United Kingdom and Germany.

France regarded military action as the only way to shift the balance on the ground and to cut IS/Daesh from its oil revenues and hinder further expansion in Syria (France Diplomatie, 2015e). France was also open to the possibility of collaboration with Russia, but only if Russia would focus on IS/Daesh and would not exclude a political solution as a final option for Syria (Hollande, 2015c). However, later in December 2015, together with Russia, France agreed on three important points for the fight against IS/Daesh: to increase information and intelligence exchanges, to increase and coordinate attacks against IS/Daesh especially regarding oil transports, and to avoid attacks against groups that were fighting IS/Daesh and other terrorist groups (Hollande, 2015d).

## **Actions**

As an opponent to Assad, France was intensively active from the beginning of the conflict in supporting the moderate opposition in both diplomatic and military terms. With regard to diplomatic support, France was one of the first countries to recognize the Syrian National Coalition ‘as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people’ (French Embassy US, 2014b) and had regular diplomatic and consultative meetings with representatives from the moderate opposition, providing advice and support within the negotiations and the peace conferences (France Diplomatie, 2013e). France was diplomatically active and coordinated its diplomatic (and other) engagements in Syria through continuous communication with the EU, and also with other western and Middle Eastern countries such as the US, UK and Germany, as well as those in the Syrian region (Fabius, 2013d).

An additional important consideration for France was the denunciation of war crimes that took place in Syria (France Diplomatie, 2014c), and to that end France drafted a resolution in the UN Security Council in order to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court because of the atrocities committed by the Syrian government. This resolution was vetoed, however, by China and Russia (Security Council, 2015).

In addition to these diplomatic and political activities, France provided both lethal (France 24, 2014) and non-lethal (France Diplomatie, 2013f) military assistance to the National Syrian Coalition in order to support its fight against Assad.

France was at first hesitant to join the US-led military coalition in Syria, because it considered that military engagement might benefit Assad and that the only way of winning against IS/Daesh would be by supporting the Syrian opposition. However, on September 7, 2015, France stepped in and expanded its Operation Chammal to Syria against IS/Daesh targets. The intensity of these attacks was significantly increased (Hollande, 2015a) after the November terrorist attacks in Paris. France deployed its aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* in the region along with its naval strike group, thus considerably strengthening its military efforts against ISIS (Hollande, 2015b).

## Summary

With regard to French **political discourse**, it was clearly stated from the beginning that Assad was the main cause of the Syrian conflict, and that he did not want to negotiate a political solution. The opposition was seen as the reasonable alternative. In addition, Assad was more or less closely allied to terrorist groups and did not do enough to stop IS/Daesh, but was instead focusing on fighting the opposition. IS/Daesh was stated to be a threat not only to Syria but also to Iraq and Lebanon, which meant that the conflict in Syria became a regional threat and in the long run an international threat. For France, the role of Russia as a supporter of Assad was important, as were other actors such as Iran. The French approach and strategy vis-à-vis IS/Daesh and the Syrian conflict changed after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and became much harsher. It also meant political support for increasing the military operation in Syria.

France's **goals and solutions** at the beginning of the conflict were primarily to get rid of Assad and to create a transitional government so that there could be a free democratic Syria where minority rights would be protected. In the ongoing war the protection of civilians was a clear goal. When IS/Daesh became an important party to the conflict several goals with regard to them came into play for France: to stop the recruitment of terrorists, cut their financial

supplies and counter their rhetoric with strategic communication. Support to refugees inside Syria as well as in neighbouring countries was put forward as important, and on the diplomatic level, the goal was to force Assad to the negotiation table which also meant contacts with Russia and Arab countries.

French actions in the first years of the conflict consisted of support to the opposition both diplomatically and militarily. France was engaged in diplomatic talks and had continuous contacts with the EU and individual European states (primarily the UK and Germany). There were collective efforts made to bring the Syrian government to the ICC (but this was vetoed by China and Russia). France hesitated to participate in the military operation in Syria, but started airstrikes against IS/Daesh in September 2015. These were expanded after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November.

### 3. Germany

#### Political discourse

Germany denounced the use of sarin gas against civilians on 21 August 2013 and early on held President Assad accountable for it. The attack, which was described as ‘taboo-shattering even against the backdrop of the cruelties committed in the Syria war,’ was also considered a direct violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (Die Bundesregierung, 2013a). Foreign minister Westerwelle urged the international community to stand united, but simultaneously stressed that ‘evidence and serious consultations’ were needed before proceeding (Blasel, 2013). In early September, he called for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to initiate investigations into the alleged chemical weapons attack because ‘the international community cannot simply return to business as usual’ (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013a).

Germany worked hard towards forging a coherent European position on Syria. In an interview in September, Merkel stated that Germany had ‘successfully advocated a united European stance on the severe crime of using chemical weapons. As a big country in Europe, Germany has a special responsibility to involve smaller states and to try and agree on a common European position’ (Köster and Bock, 2013). At times, this European focus took precedence at the expense of cooperation in international formats. At the September G20 Summit, Germany was the only European state to not immediately sign the G20 resolution calling for international action on Syria, as Germany sought to first find a common European stance in the concurrent Vilnius summit (Die Bundesregierung, 2013d).

Meanwhile, Germany’s response to the Syrian civil war was on the domestic agenda. The government separated the war from the chemical weapons attack, and supported a political solution to the conflict where the conflict parties engaged in negotiations, since that was the only way to ‘bring durable peace and stability to Syria’ (Gaugele and Jungholt, 2013). In August, the possibility of delivering weapons to the Syrian opposition was debated, and despite the French and UK governments’ positive stance on the issue, the German government resisted. The arguments were legal and practical. It was widely accepted that the German constitution limits the room for manoeuvre, because it prohibits the delivery of weapons to conflict areas. In addition, Westerwelle warned of the risk of weapons ending up in the hands of terrorists and extremists, who then might direct them ‘against us or Israel, our closest ally in the region’. The minister also called for caution when dealing with the conflict, as it could easily escalate and spread to the whole region (Gujer, 2013).

Germany manifested its position at the international level when signing the Petersburg declaration on the Syria conflict at the G20 summit in September, recognizing that the UNSC was blocked but that ‘the world cannot wait for endless failed processes that can only lead to increased suffering in Syria and regional instability. We support efforts undertaken by the United States and other countries to reinforce the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons’ (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013b).

Although Germany seemingly manifested its position at the international level, German foreign policy remained unclear. In a September interview, the minister refused to clarify a German strategy prior to the UN inspectors presenting their final report. In sharp contrast to this, the German opposition and public debate appeared to have a more proactive idea of a Syria policy, highly critical of the government’s alleged inaction. Arguing along the same lines, Steinmeier criticized German foreign policy for not rising to the situation. According to Steinmeier, the freeze in US-Russia relations was key to the international deadlock on Syria, and a thaw in relations posed the biggest threat to Assad’s position. He therefore suggested that Germany should act as a mediator between these countries (Steinmeier, 2013a). The criticism of the lack of a clear foreign policy culminated in the G20 summit, when Germany signed the resolution a day later than the other signatories. In the media it was suggested that Germany’s reluctant foreign policy stemmed from election tactics and worries that taking international responsibility would affect election results negatively (Ulrich, 2013).

This critique was accompanied by a broader media debate on German responsibility versus the consequences of German involvement in the Middle East. Throughout the autumn, there was discussion on whether German action in Syria would alter the situation of German military forces stationed in Turkey as part of a NATO mission to secure the Turkish-Syrian border.

When the new government took office in December following the autumn 2013 elections, some clarity was brought to German foreign policy on Syria. In his inauguration speech in December the new Foreign Minister, Steinmeier himself, pointed out that in addition to a civil war, the Syrian war also was a proxy war about spheres of influence: ‘If that is true, it means that the debate on a military solution to the conflict we saw a few weeks ago was simply absurd,’ as the greatest threat to the Assad regime was ‘not the bombs on Damascus’, but overcoming the US and Russian disagreement on a Syria policy. Steinmeier also stressed the need for negotiations, since otherwise the ‘dissolution of Syria and the collapse of the entire Middle East order would barely be preventable’ (Steinmeier, 2013b). In January 2014, the minister again made the case for a political solution to the war, since ‘the suffering of Syrians will end only when the spiral of violence is broken and the will to peace and freedom takes root’. The efforts

in chemical weapon destruction had offered ‘a shimmer of hope’, he insisted, since they marked a step towards overcoming the paralysis of the UNSC and US-Russia disagreement (Steinmeier, 2014a).

Even so, in the beginning of 2014 German responsibility appeared as an important element in German foreign policy. When addressing the Bundestag in early January, Steinmeier linked German efforts in Syria to German responsibility. Hence, chemical weapon destruction, humanitarian assistance, supporting negotiations, as well as assisting Turkey in dealing with the refugee situation and securing its territorial defence, were all aspects of German responsibility in finding a political solution to the conflict (Steinmeier, 2014a). When talking about chemical weapons, Steinmeier declared that ‘responsibility in foreign policy means that Germany, as one of the biggest countries in Europe, takes responsibility in such situations. If we have the possibility to create a basis for future political negotiations, we have to show availability and readiness to contribute our share’ (Steinmeier, 2014b).

However, Germany continued to reject involvement in a military solution to the war, and the government was criticized for not doing enough to help end the war in Syria. In the autumn of 2014, Steinmeier argued that there was a division of labour, where Germany focused on Iraq and Arab states supported the moderate opposition in Syria. Steinmeier also argued against deploying ground forces or air strikes, since there was no clear front line and it was hard to decide on which groups to support (Nass and Thumann, 2014).

Increasingly, IS/Daesh was regarded as the main problem and the civil war dimension of the conflict in Syria gained less attention. Instead, the wars in both Syria and Iraq were overshadowed by the extremist threat posed by IS/Daesh. Contrary to Germany’s position on the Syria war, it was recognized that an effective countering of IS/Daesh needed to involve military action, though combined with a political solution to the Syria war (Malzahn et al., 2014). In a July 2015 interview, Steinmeier stated that only if IS/Daesh was halted would there be a chance for a peaceful solution to the war in Syria and to break the vicious circle of religious confrontation throughout the Middle East. Further, Merkel argued that the areas of domestic, foreign, and development policy had become intertwined to such an extent that refusal to act within the latter two might impact domestic politics negatively (Merkel, 2015a).

The 2015 Iran deal was considered to provide the momentum needed to also deal with Syria. Merkel argued in favour of an encompassing approach, involving Assad, the US and Russia, as well as regional partners such as Iran and Saudi Arabia (Merkel, 2015b). According to Steinmeier, there were political reasons and, above all, moral grounds to use this momentum. For that reason, Steinmeier was dismayed at the news of increased military involvement in

Syria by France, the UK and Russia: ‘In a situation when we might have the first opportunity to deal differently with the Syria conflict, it cannot be that important partners, whom we need, play the military card and destroy the first ever possibility of negotiated solutions’ (Steinmeier, 2015a).

When peace negotiations were resumed in the autumn of 2015, Germany emphasized the importance of international unity. In October, Steinmeier argued at the UN that the UN played a central role in peace talks, and that ongoing negotiations had a basis for common action since they were an implementation of UNSC resolution 2139 (Steinmeier, 2015b). Addressing the European Parliament days later, Merkel argued that securing humane living conditions for people in the Middle East was a European and global task: ‘The solution to these crises will need a determined contribution by Europe in countering wars and displacement, terrorism and political repression, poverty and lack of perspective’ (Merkel, 2015c). Despite an increasing emphasis on Europe, relations with the US were important. Speaking at the University of Pennsylvania in November, German Federal President Gauck stated that continued engagement with Europe was the best US investment in stability (Gauck, 2015).

When Germany decided to participate in military action in Syria after the attacks in Paris in November 2015, this was presented as a step towards a political solution. Ahead of the Bundestag vote, Steinmeier stressed the importance of momentum and outlined that ‘unless we stop ISIS from conquering even bigger parts of Syria, there will be nothing left for us in Syria to pacify and turn into a better future through a political process’. Therefore, he argued, military involvement would support the prospect of a political process. Furthermore, military participation was legal since it fulfilled the EU principle of solidarity evoked by France, and action was in accordance with international law. Germany’s action was considered support for France and Iraq in their fight against ISIS, and action was thus in line with UN article 51 on collective self-defence (Steinmeier, 2015c).

## **Goals and solutions**

In dealing with the Syrian war, the German government initially distinguished between the chemical attack and the civil war. In response to the chemical attack, Germany sought a ‘unified and clear reaction from the international community’, including that UN inspectors gained access to the affected sites in Syria (Bundesregierung, 2013a, 2013b). When coordinating action with French, American, British and Russian counterparts in August, Merkel urged that the case be referred to the UNSC once the UN inspectors’ report was published (Bundesregierung,

2013b, 2013c, 2013g, 2013h). In early September Westerwelle advocated that the UNSC referred the case to the ICC (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013a).

Regarding the civil war, Germany promoted a political solution to the conflict. This political solution was oriented toward the Geneva Conference outcome and comprised negotiations between the conflict parties and the establishment of a transition government (Gaugele and Jungholt, 2013). Germany also supported plans to hold another Geneva Conference and seek a solution through an international framework. However, at times the civil war in Syria was described as an internal matter that needed to be solved by the Syrians (Die Bundesregierung, 2013g).

The new government stuck to the Syria policy of its predecessor, but took on a more active role in finding a political solution. In his inauguration speech in December, new Foreign Minister Steinmeier expressed the need for relieving the conditions for civilians by establishing humanitarian corridors and facilitating negotiations. As part of that, Steinmeier stressed the need to engage the conflict parties as well as their neighbouring states in negotiations, as well as bridging the disagreements between the US and Russia to find a common position in the Syria war (Steinmeier, 2013b).

Ahead of the second Geneva Conference in 2014, Steinmeier acknowledged that an eventual peace agreement would only be one step in a longer process, and emphasized the need for helping Syrian civilians and increasing support on the ground by increasing humanitarian assistance. He also urged the international community to provide support for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts (Steinmeier, 2014c).

In the second half of 2014, the focus of the agenda was on how to counter IS/Daesh. Addressing the UNSC, Steinmeier said that there were three priorities. First, humanitarian aid was needed ‘to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced’. Second, military assistance was needed to stop violence; and third, these needed to be embedded in a political strategy addressing the wars in Iraq and Syria, as well as IS/Daesh. When outlining this strategy, Steinmeier recognized the interconnectedness of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, but emphasized that the Syrian war was more complex. For Syria, Germany’s aims were to strengthen ‘moderate voices and structures’, support the UN Secretary General’s Envoy for Syria, de Mistura, in his efforts to bring about peace in Syria, and support the host countries of Syrian refugees. In the effort to counter ISIS, Steinmeier stressed that the flow of fighters to and financial backing of ISIS needed to be stemmed (Steinmeier, 2014d). Within the global coalition against ISIS, Germany, together with other signatories, committed itself to ‘supporting military operations, capacity building, and training; stopping the flow of foreign

terrorist fighters; cutting off ISIL/IS/Daesh's access to financing and funding; addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises; and exposing ISIL/IS/Daesh's true nature (ideological delegitimization)' (Department Of State, 2014).

Simultaneously, German foreign policy focus shifted away from solving the conflict to addressing related topics. Germany's main aims remained to address the root causes of the conflict and relieve the suffering of people in need (Steinmeier and Nahles, 2015). A political solution to the war was highlighted, but Germany left it to regional and international actors to eke it out. As part of this effort, in November 2014, Steinmeier called for efforts with conflict relief and reconstruction in Syria, and outlined humanitarian assistance along with cultural and educational policies as the main tools of German foreign policy (Steinmeier, 2014e). In July 2015 Steinmeier suggested the Middle East needed a new security order to enable a viable long-term solution to the instabilities in the region (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014b).

In November 2015, von der Leyen laid out a six point plan to counter ISIS: first, create a long-term political alliance against ISIS; second, counter ISIS with military force; third, fight ISIS on all levels, including stemming its financial flows and stabilizing states bordering ISIS territory; fourth, involve Muslim forces on the ground; fifth, ensure broad participation in the 2016 conference on Syrian reconstruction and reconciliation; and sixth, initiate a debate on extremism (von der Leyen, 2015a).

With the new attempts to solve the Syria conflict in the autumn of 2015, Germany promoted a political solution with no role for Assad. In September 2015, Steinmeier outlined to the UN General Assembly that the long-term goals were to restore the territorial integrity of Syria and enable peaceful coexistence between all religious and ethnic groups. To achieve this, the short-term aims were to remove Assad, defeat ISIS, bring about a ceasefire and enable humanitarian assistance. A crucial part of these efforts was to show a united stance against ISIS and include regional partners, including Iran, as well as Russia in the process (Steinmeier, 2015b). The nine point final communiqué of the October Vienna talks reflected these goals: first, ensure Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character; second, maintain state institutions; third, ensure protection of the rights of all Syrians; fourth, accelerate diplomatic efforts to end the war; fifth, ensure humanitarian access throughout Syria; sixth, defeat ISIS and other terrorist groups; seventh, start a political process aiming at new elections; eighth, Syrian ownership of the political process; and ninth, implementation of a nationwide ceasefire. These points were reiterated at the November foreign minister meeting in Vienna. (Auswärtiges Amt, 2015).

## Actions

German actions focused on supporting the Syrian moderate opposition. In early September 2013 Germany, together with the United Arab Emirates, the Syrian National Coalition, and the KfW bank<sup>1</sup>, signed a framework agreement for the Syria Recovery Trust Fund for emergency aid and reconstruction in the areas controlled by the moderate opposition. Germany contributed €10m to the fund (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013c).

Germany contributed to the OPCW-UN Joint Mission<sup>2</sup> on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons by hosting a course for participating civilian inspectors in October (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013d). Further, Germany contributed financially to the OPCW mission with €5m, and pledged to dispose of leftover materials from chemical weapons destruction (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014c). When the new government took office, one of its first decisions was to allow for destruction of chemical weapons in Germany (Steinmeier, 2014b).

The biggest contribution, however, was in the field of humanitarian assistance, where Germany represented one of the major bilateral donors. German aid was channelled both through international institutions and on a bilateral basis, and German efforts focused on supporting the host countries of migrants and meeting the basic needs of refugees there. In June 2015 German humanitarian assistance to Syria exceeded €1bn (Steinmeier and Nahles, 2015). Germany also initiated a programme which enabled the absorption of 10,000 particularly vulnerable Syrian refugees (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014d). Related to this, the German government also supported a project establishing a catalogue of Syrian cultural assets in order to ease restoration work once the civil war ended (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014c).

Starting in 2014, Germany increased its efforts within an international framework and emphasized the humanitarian situation as well as measures aimed at countering the spread of IS/Daesh expansion. Within the EU, Germany supported stronger sanctions against the Syrian regime (Council of the European Union, 2014). In October 2014 Germany hosted a conference on the Syrian refugee situation, seeking to increase financial support for the host countries of Syrian refugees (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014a). Following the steep increase in immigration in 2015, Germany worked to increase EU spending on humanitarian aid in Syria (Merkel, 2015f). Within the EU, Germany, along with the UK and France, promoted tightening of legislation on international terrorism (Merkel, 2015e).

Germany undertook a number of efforts to counter IS/Daesh. In September 2014 Germany banned ISIS and any association with it, and by December 2014 Berlin had joined the global

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<sup>1</sup> Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, a German government-owned development bank.

<sup>2</sup> Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)

counter-ISIS coalition. Within that setting attention was drawn to the overall refugee situation in the Middle East (Department of State, 2014; Die Bundesregierung, 2014b). Within the framework of the global coalition's work, Germany hosted the first meeting of the working group on stabilization in Syria in March 2015 (Steinmeier, 2015d). In the autumn of the same year, Germany participated in international talks on Syria, including the Syria talks in Vienna in October and the foreign minister-level meeting in November (Auswärtiges Amt, 2015; Steinmeier, 2015e). Further, German counter-IS/Daesh efforts continued. In November von der Leyen presented a strategy to combat IS/Daesh (von der Leyen, 2015a). In December 2015, the Bundestag voted in favour of German military participation in Syria. The German deployment included a frigate for the protection of a French aircraft carrier, aircraft for in-flight refuelling, as well as aircraft and French-German satellites for military reconnaissance in Syria and Iraq. However, German deployment comprised a maximum of 1,200 military personnel, including personnel on the ground and personnel stationed at the headquarters of international partners (von der Leyen, 2015b).

## Summary

German **political discourse** strongly condemned the gas attacks in 2013, blaming Assad and trying to bring together a united European position also involving smaller European states (Germany saw it as its responsibility as a big European state to involve smaller states). There was a domestic debate on whether or not Germany should deliver weapons to the Syrian opposition. There were also suggestions that Germany should mediate in US-Russia relations, based on the premise that this might be beneficial for the situation in Syria. The German sense of responsibility grew in 2014 (after the new government was elected in autumn of 2013), reflected in the intensified search for a political solution, and also in assisting the Turkish government with the refugee situation. Germany saw several reasons not to engage militarily: there was no clear front line on the ground, no legal base in German law, and widespread political and military risk. The government acknowledged a division of labour where it should focus on Iraq, and other states on Syria. The increased focus on IS/Daesh in mid-2015 was used to justify why there could not be a negotiated peace. The deal with Iran in 2015 was pointed to by German politicians as providing momentum for negotiations regarding Syria, which is why they were unhappy with the subsequent increased military engagement by the UK, France and Russia. In the autumn of 2015 Germany was still pushing for a political solution with international co-operation and a role for the UN. When France used the Lisbon Treaty to ask

for support in fighting IS/Daesh, the legal grounds had changed and Germany also decided to get involved with military means.

Even though the **goals and solutions** with regard to Syria were much like those of France, in seeking to achieve a political transition through negotiations and a transitional government excluding Assad, Germany was more distant from the civil war. From the second half of 2014 onwards the focus became fighting IS/Daesh. Two specific problems identified were the inflow of fighters and money to the terrorist group. Germany co-operated internationally to fight IS/Daesh but at the same time continued to focus on a political solution.

The **actions** undertaken were, until December 2015, mainly civilian in character. Germany provided funds for reconstruction and actively participated in various efforts, including the UN-led efforts to make sure Syria got rid of its chemical weapons. Bilateral humanitarian assistance, work to increase EU humanitarian aid, EU sanctions, support for the cataloguing of cultural assets, various international diplomatic efforts, and support for refugees. In December, after the terrorist attacks in Paris, the Bundestag voted in favour of military participation in support of France.

## 4. The UK

### Political discourse

In August 2013 the UK issued a statement announcing that the country had ‘drafted a resolution condemning the attack by the Assad regime, and authorizing all necessary measures under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter to protect civilians from chemical weapons’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2013a). In case action was blocked in the UN, the UK considered the conditions met for the country to take unilateral measures. The ‘UK would still be permitted under international law to take exceptional measures in order to alleviate the scale of the overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe in Syria by deterring and disrupting the further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2013b). The UK also promoted the implementation of the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), reminding the member states ‘that their first and foremost responsibility is to protect their populations, whether they are nationals or not, by preventing mass atrocities’, and that Syria was a clear example of a case where the state had failed to do so. Therefore, ‘all members of the Security Council need to shoulder their responsibility in taking decisive action to compel the Assad regime to cease the violence and engage in a political process’ (Wilson, 2013).

This harsh positioning changed, however, after Parliament’s August 30 rejection of UK military action in Syria, and instead a debate was sparked on the future of transatlantic relations. Defence Secretary Hammond said that he and the Prime Minister were ‘disappointed’ claiming ‘it would harm Britain’s “special relationship” with the US’, while Labour leader Miliband argued that UK–US ties remained strong despite the vote, and stressed that the UK needed to follow its own national interest instead of blindly following the US (BBC, 2013). In a conversation with Obama, ‘the President stressed his appreciation of his strong friendship with the Prime Minister and of the strength, durability and depth of the special relationship between our two countries’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2013c). Following a meeting with US Secretary of State Kerry, Foreign Secretary Hague stressed that ‘at its heart, the US–UK special relationship is an alliance of values: values of freedom, of maintaining international peace and security, of making sure that we live in a rules-based world. So the United Kingdom will continue to work closely with the United States taking a highly active role in addressing the Syria crisis and working with our closest ally over the coming weeks and months’ (Hague, 2013b).

The ‘no vote’ in Parliament also sparked a domestic debate on the UK’s role in world politics. It was suggested that the public’s weariness of wars had played in, and that the rejection

in Parliament served as a wake-up call to a government that was not enjoying public support, and had not restored trust in politics after the Iraq war (The Guardian, 2013).

As a consequence, policy focus turned to diplomacy, and the UK became a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition. The opposition was presented as the only viable option, and when meeting with the President of the Syrian National Coalition, Al-Jarba, Foreign Secretary Hague stressed that the opposition were ‘the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. They are the best possible hope for a political solution to the crisis and for a future Syria which is stable and democratic’ (Hague, 2013c). During the London Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of Syria held in late September, UK support for the opposition was also presented as a way of promoting an inclusive, democratic state: ‘The Syrian people are caught between a brutal regime on the one hand and extremists on the other. It is frankly an outrage and an insult to all of us here and most importantly to the Syrian people that a narrative has developed to contrast the regime of stability on one hand and the extremists and terrorists on the other. It is vital that we clearly and loudly support the moderate opposition we see before us today’ (Burt, 2013).

Although the debate for the domestic audience shifted towards humanitarian efforts, the critique against the Syrian regime remained unchanged. Ahead of the Geneva talks in January 2014, Hague expressed that the UK should ‘support a political settlement [to] end the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people’, while making a strong statement against the regime: ‘No one should underestimate the difficulty of the negotiations ahead, but we will not give up on diplomacy as the route to stopping the appalling bloodshed, nor will we waver in supporting the moderate Syrian opposition, for if there is only a murderous regime on the one side and extremists on the other, there can be no peaceful settlement in Syria’ (Hague, 2014a).

The Syria war was also linked to UK national security. As early as towards the end of 2013, Hague mentioned the upholding of national security as one of the objectives for supporting the Syrian moderate opposition, and further elaborated on this in early 2014. According to the minister, extremists fighting in the Middle East were a threat not only to the region, but also to UK security, and the best way to counter this threat was to support the moderate opposition, since ‘Assad’s brutality is the best recruiting tool the extremists have. Ultimately, the only long-term way to deal with the extremist threat is to reach an inclusive political settlement’ (Hague, 2014a, 2013d). In 2015 the UK government undertook measures to tackle extremism at home. After the launch of the counter-terrorism strategy, Foreign Secretary Hammond commented that henceforth all forms of extremism, not only the violent ones, needed to be addressed, since

‘to defeat Islamist extremism, we have to fight it at all points along the spectrum’ (Hammond, 2015a).

In 2014, the international fight against ISIS became part of the UK agenda. As outlined by Cameron: ‘If we do not act to stem the onslaught of this exceptionally dangerous terrorist movement, it will only grow stronger until it can target us on the streets of Britain’ (Fallon, 2014). The UK promoted the removal of Assad, and the fight against extremism only supported this argument. Addressing the Syrian National Coalition in September 2014, Foreign Secretary Hammond stated that Assad needed to go for moral and practical reasons. (Hammond, 2014a). In September 2015, the UK welcomed Russian actions against ISIS, but maintained that ‘it is not possible to be an effective part of the fight against ISIL and at the same time with the same force be attacking the moderate opposition resisting the oppression of the Assad regime’ (Hammond, 2015b).

The conduct of military strikes against ISIS in Syria was presented at the end of 2015 as a necessity, and part of a long-term strategy. In his opening statement to Parliament on December 2, 2015, Cameron argued that ISIS posed a threat to British security: ‘do we go after these terrorists in their heartlands from where they are plotting to kill British people, or do we sit back and wait for them to attack us?’ Thus, the question was not whether or not to fight the organization, but how to best do it. Therefore, Cameron’s central argument was that military action would not increase the risk to British security but protect the UK. Cameron also argued that British contributions in Syria would make a difference: not only were British capabilities needed by allies, but Cameron also made the case that it was useless to stop action at a border (Iraqi-Syrian) that the enemy did not respect. However, momentum needed to be used while the Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga were still strong: ‘we should be clear that there will be even fewer ground forces over time as IS/Daesh will get even stronger’. Further, British action was part of a broader strategy in which military action against ISIS helped to achieve a long-term goal, namely domestic safety and a settlement to the Syria war. The strategy also included post-conflict reconstruction measures (Cameron, 2015b).

In November, Cameron argued that there was a need to act immediately for the sake of safety: ‘we can’t wait for that political solution, we have to start acting now to keep our country, our people and indeed others in Europe safe’ (Cameron, 2015a). In his opening statement to the Commons debate on Syria a few days later, Cameron called for action since ‘the action we propose to take is legal, it is necessary and it is the right thing to do to keep our country safe. And my strong view is that this House should make clear that we will take up our

responsibilities rather than pass them off and put our own national security in the hands of others’ (Cameron, 2015b).

Reliability among international partners was a core argument for expanding military action to Syria. In his opening statement to the Commons debate on military action in Syria, Cameron also stressed the importance of joining vital UK allies in the fight against ISIS. The Prime Minister highlighted that allies, including France and the US, had asked the UK to join: ‘one reason why members of the international coalition – including President Obama and President Hollande who made these points to me personally – they believe that British planes would make a real difference in Syria’. (Cameron, 2015b). After the vote in Parliament, Secretary of State for Defence Fallon stated at an event at the Atlantic Council that ‘the US and the UK have always stood side-by-side against terror. Against Hitler; against Al-Qaeda; and as part of the anti-ISIL/IS/Daesh coalition. From the very start the UK’s been flying missions in Iraq. [...] And last month the UK Parliament voted decisively to answer our allies’ call and lift the shadow of the 2013 Syria vote’ (Fallon, 2015).

## **Goals and solutions**

In the days following the gas attacks, the UK’s goal was to find a solution to the conflict on an international level. In a policy paper issued in late August 2013, the government announced that its aim was to ‘relieve humanitarian suffering by deterring or disrupting the further use of chemical weapons’. Towards this end, the UK as stated above sought a UN resolution and promoted international intervention. After Parliament’s rejection of UK military action in Syria, however, the goal changed towards finding a political solution to the conflict, through a ‘tough and robust response’. As part of its effort to use diplomacy in order to establish a ‘stable, inclusive and democratic Syria’ (Cameron, 2013), the UK pledged to continue its diplomacy with Russia.

In addressing the conflict, cooperation with the US was vital to the UK. When meeting Kerry, Hague outlined all four aspects above; the Geneva II peace process, addressing the humanitarian situation, supporting the Syrian opposition, and mustering international response, as ‘objectives and efforts between the UK and the US’ where the two countries remained particularly closely aligned (Hague, 2013b). At the G20 meeting in November 2015, the UK and US agreed to deepen cooperation on fighting ISIS and supporting NATO ally Turkey (Cameron, 2015c).

When the destruction of chemical weapons started towards the end of the year, attention shifted to the political process. In the Friends of Syria group's London Communiqué issued in October 2013, it was stated that 'the Geneva II conference must lead to a political transition based on the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012, while preserving the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian State' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013a). In a November address to Parliament, Hague stated that UK objectives for Syria 'remain to reach a political settlement to the conflict, thereby also protecting UK national security, to alleviate the desperate humanitarian suffering, and to prevent the further use of chemical weapons' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013b). This continued to be the objective of UK policy in 2014.

In mid-2014, attention shifted away from the Syria war, as countering extremism, or defeating ISIS and fighting international terrorism, were presented as more pressing issues and more effective in addressing the situation in the Middle East. Simultaneously, the wars in Syria and Iraq were increasingly treated as one event under the umbrella of extremism.

The fight against extremism had both international and domestic aspects. When addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2014, Cameron stated that the international fight against extremism required a comprehensive, intelligent, inclusive, and uncompromising approach: comprehensive as it included both domestic and international action on a political and military level. However, Cameron ruled out Western troops on the ground as a way to defeat ISIS or 'pacify or reconstruct' Middle Eastern countries. Further, the strategy was intelligent as it required a political transition in Syria, as well as an end to Assad's rule; and inclusive as Iran's participation was recognized (Cameron, 2014a). 'Assad is not the way. Just as in Iraq the fight against ISIL must be led by the Iraqi government, so in Syria it must be led by the moderate opposition working together as one, with an agreed vision of a future for their country free of both the tyranny of Assad and the barbarism of ISIL' (Hammond, 2014a). 'The key point is that military force is just one element of what we can do. And we need a much wider approach, working with neighbours in the region, and addressing not just security but politics too' (Cameron, 2014b).

In April 2015, the UK policy was outlined as 'first, we must address the immediate financial requirements of humanitarian agencies and governments in the region. ... Secondly, we must do all we can to help those who remain in Syria, and work together to bring peace to the country so that refugees can one day return. ... So thirdly, we should consider what longer-term support we can offer the region. Establishing refugees' self-sufficiency, supporting their education and fostering social cohesion with host communities are important steps' (Lyall Grant, 2015).

On a domestic level, the aim was to tackle extremism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. In October 2015, the UK counter-terrorism strategy was launched, aiming at ‘countering the ideology of extremism; building social cohesion; supporting moderate mainstream voices; and disrupting the extremists’ (Hammond, 2015a).

In terms of the war in Syria, the UK’s goals remained to provide relief regarding the humanitarian situation, find a political solution to the conflict, and defeat ISIS (Department for International Development, 2015a). The UK’s goals were manifested in the nine point final communiqué of the October Vienna talks: first, ensure Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character; second, maintain state institutions; third, ensure protection of the rights of all Syrians; fourth, accelerate diplomatic efforts to end the war; fifth, ensure humanitarian access throughout Syria; sixth, defeat ISIS and other terrorist groups; seventh, start a political process aiming at new elections; eighth, Syrian ownership of the political process; and ninth, implementation of a nationwide ceasefire. These points were reiterated at the November foreign minister meeting in Vienna (Auswärtiges Amt, 2015; ISSG, 2015).

## **Actions**

Following the gas attacks in 2013, the UK took action on an international level. In late August, the UK drafted a UN resolution condemning the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian authorities, and enabling the member states to take all necessary measures (Prime Minister’s Office, 2013b). Resolution 2139 on Humanitarian Assistance was adopted in February 2014. The UK also coordinated action with international partners and raised support for international action within, among others, the EU and G20. In coordinating action, the US and France stood out as close partners in the UNSC framework and in the framework of the Geneva Conference.

After the ‘no vote’ in Parliament, the UK government saw its space to manoeuvre limited, and instead focused on diplomatic action, as well as non-lethal military and humanitarian assistance. The UK also directly supported the Syrian opposition with ‘political support, non-lethal equipment and technical advice and training’ (Cameron, 2013). In addition to humanitarian assistance, for example £52m donated as part of a G20 decision in September 2013, the UK donated £20 million worth of non-lethal support, including ‘vehicles, body armour, generators, communications equipment, water purification kits and equipment to protect against chemical weapons attacks’ (Hague, 2013a). The political assistance included practical efforts in Syria, where the UK supported opposition governance in areas controlled by the opposition (Hammond, 2014b).

The moderate opposition was also supported through UK international engagement. In addition to its active role in the UNSC, the UK encouraged international efforts related to the Syria war. In May 2014, the UK hosted the ‘London 11’ Friends of Syria Core Group Ministerial Meeting where Assad’s regime’s actions were denounced and a strategy was outlined for supporting the moderate opposition (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). In February 2015, the UK took part in a Five Country Ministerial Meeting on national security together with the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and agreed to ‘counter terrorism, foreign fighters, and in particular those travelling to participate in terrorist organizations in Syria and elsewhere’ (Home Office, 2015).

UK humanitarian engagement stayed high throughout 2013, and continued in 2014 and 2015. In December 2013, the UK ‘agreed to destroy 150 tonnes of two industrial-grade chemicals from the Syrian stockpile at a commercial facility’ (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013c). The UK also remained a major donor of humanitarian aid, which in February 2014 amounted to £600m, including ‘£241m allocated for humanitarian assistance inside Syria, £265m to support refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt; and £94m of allocations currently being finalized,’ and in November 2015 was increased by £275m in support for Turkey as part of a wider European effort (Department for International Development, 2015a; Hague, 2014d). In February 2014, Hague also announced the UK’s intention to contribute to the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, ‘focusing on healthcare, water supply, energy supply and food security’ (Hague, 2014d). In early September 2015, UK aid amounted to more than £1bn, and was later the same month increased by £100m in response to the Syrian refugee situation, thereby making it the largest ever UK response to a humanitarian crisis (Department for International Development, 2015b; Prime Minister’s Office, 2015a). In November 2015, the UK announced it would host a Syria Donors Conference in early 2016 with the aim of raising funding for those affected in Syria and in the neighbouring countries, as well as to identify long-term funding solutions. Within this context, the UK committed to assist in post-conflict reconstruction work (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015b).

Throughout 2014 and 2015, the UK government undertook measures to combat extremism and terrorism. On a European level, this included sending UK experts to an EU Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team, which supported EU member states in dealing with citizens travelling to Syria, as well as support for an Europol Internet Referrals Unit addressing extremist propaganda online (May, 2015). In October, the UK launched a counter-terrorism strategy to fight extremism at a domestic level. As part of this effort, the UK invested £5m to

build a national network of grassroots organizations to counter extremism and extremism ideology (Prime Minister's Office, 2015c, 2015d).

The UK continued its support for the moderate opposition, as well as for civil society in Syria. £2.1m was donated for 'Syrian civil defence teams to help local communities deal with attacks, and improve the (medical and humanitarian) capability of local councils', including training and '£700,000 of civil defence equipment including personal radios, rescue tools, fire-fighting clothing, fire extinguishers, stretchers and medical kits'. Further, the UK, together with the US and Denmark, proposed 'a £2m package of training, technical assistance and equipment support to build up the capacity of the Free Syria Police'. The support to civil defence teams continued in 2015, when further search and rescue equipment was donated, and support was extended to also include coordination between the Syrian Interim Government and civil defence teams (Hammond, 2015c).

UK support also comprised military assistance. In May 2014, the UK decided to give non-lethal equipment to the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (Hague, 2014e). In March 2015, the UK sent 75 military personnel to provide the moderate Syrian opposition with training in areas such as small arms, infantry and medical skills (Ministry of Defence, 2015a). In November, the UK, along with NATO partners, decided to base British aircraft at the Turkish Incirlik base to support Turkish air defence (Cameron, 2015c). In December, Parliament voted in favour of extending UK airstrikes to include Syria, and operations started immediately (Ministry of Defence, 2015b).

## Summary

In British **political discourse** the tone against Assad was very harsh after the gas attack in Damascus in 2013, and the British Prime Minister then argued in favour of a military operation in Syria. One line of argument was to try and evoke the principle of responsibility to protect. However, when first there was no UN mandate to intervene in Syria, and then the Prime Minister did not receive the support in Parliament he had asked for, no military operation was started. The UK was eager to take action, and when a military intervention was ruled out, the UK turned to humanitarian assistance and support for the Syrian opposition instead. For the UK it was important that there was a politically acceptable alternative to Assad, because, like France and Germany, the UK was also against Assad and did not want a solution where he was still in power. The situation in Syria was also explicitly linked to British national security. In addition to diplomatic support to the opposition, and humanitarian

support on the ground, an additional focus in 2014 became the fight against IS/Daesh. After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, military intervention in Syria was described as a necessity for stopping IS/Daesh on the ground, for British security and safety, and to show other countries that the UK was a reliable partner.

As with France and Germany, British **goals and solutions** emphasized the necessity of a political transition in which Assad would be removed from power. The British also invested a lot in the diplomatic process to support the opposition, with the goal that it should be possible to establish a democratic inclusive Syria. In addition, the fight against extremism was described as a goal in itself. To offer humanitarian aid was an important goal from early on in the conflict but in 2015 it was again emphasized that it was important to support humanitarian agencies financially, as well as countries in the region with large numbers of refugees.

The UK undertook a number of **actions** after the option of military intervention had been closed off. Early on, it sought international co-operation and made efforts in the UN and G20. The UK also focused hard on delivering humanitarian aid, giving more than it had ever donated to a specific country before. It was also active in various international co-operations to combat extremism and terrorism, including some EU projects. Eventually, it also gave military support, first to the opposition, then (as part of NATO) to Turkey, and after the terrorist attacks in Paris it became part of the international coalition that performed airstrikes in order to fight IS/Daesh.

## 5. The USA

### Political discourse

After the gas attacks in August 2013, the United States started to re-evaluate its approach towards the conflict in Syria, and President Obama for the first time explicitly asked for targeted strikes against the Syrian regime in order to prevent further use of chemical weapons, and also to send a signal that such actions would not be tolerated (President Obama, 2013a). According to the official statements by the President, the Presidents' press office, and other official US sources, the crisis in Syria was seen as a 'brutal civil war' (President Obama, 2013b) and consequently also as a threat to regional and international security. In addition, its direct and indirect implications were said to 'pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States' (President Obama, 2015a). Assad was described as an illegitimate leader and as personally responsible for the onset of the conflict.

The US President was deeply concerned about the use of chemical weapons and the official position was that the Syrian Government was the only entity able and willing to deliver a chemical attack. Together with the heads of state and governments of several traditional US allies such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Australia, Canada and Japan, the United States expressed 'grave concern' regarding the reported use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. It also agreed that the international community could not tolerate the use of chemical weapons (The White House, n.d.; The White House, 2013b). Two weeks later, the President stated that 'Russia indicated a new willingness to join with the international community in pushing Syria to give up its chemical weapons' and that there were some 'indications of progress' with Syria 'signalling a willingness to join with 189 other nations' in abiding by international agreements against chemical weapons use. (President Obama, 2013d). However, the United States joined the condemnation of Russia and China for their veto of the UNSC resolution that would allow the International Criminal Court to demand accountability for the crimes in Syria (The White House, 2014b).

It should be noted that the outcome of the Syrian crisis was also perceived by the United States as an important part of global counter-terrorism efforts. This focus on counter-terrorism came earlier for the US than for its European counterparts. The Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, Lisa Monaco, described it as a 'one of the most difficult counter-terrorism challenges on the horizon' (Monaco, 2013). When ISIS started to

advance rapidly in June 2014, the US described IS/Daesh as a ‘global threat that must be defeated by a global response’ (President Obama, 2015b).

When Russia started its air campaign in Syria in September 2015, the United States saw the campaign as an action on the part of Russia to defend Bashar al-Assad and as an indication that Russia was concerned about losing its influence over Syria, one of the few Russian allies in the region. However, an immediate priority for the United States was to coordinate with the Russian military staff and agree on practices to ensure that the military activities of the Coalition and Russia inside Syria were ‘properly de-conflicted’. The President’s Press Secretary John Earnest compared the situation with the Iraq war in 2003, claiming that for Russia it would be impossible to impose a military solution to the Syrian conflict because the example of the United States in Iraq shows that such conflicts cannot have military solutions only (Josh Earnest, 2015). Later on, the US stated that the Russian action in Syria increased the complexity of the Syrian situation and decreased the chances of a political transition (The White House, 2015a).

After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, France asked its neighbours and allies, the United Kingdom and Germany, to join the fight against IS/Daesh. When these countries decided to join the fight against IS/Daesh, the US welcomed their involvement in Syria and Iraq and described their efforts as a demonstration of ‘unity and resolve’ (President Obama, 2015b). Additionally, the United States thanked French President Hollande for sending the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* to the Persian Gulf (The White House, 2015b).

## Goals and solutions

The common denominator in all of the stated goals regarding the Syrian conflict is that they include a clause stating that Assad should leave the Syrian governing structures and be held accountable for his actions. This goal was repeated constantly throughout the official statements along with three other important general goals:

1. Deterring Assad from further usage of chemical weapons and degrading his capabilities for using them, while making clear that such actions will not be tolerated (President Obama, 2013c). There should be ‘[v]erification that the Assad regime and Russia are keeping their commitments: that means working to turn Syria’s chemical weapons over to international control and ultimately destroying them’ (President Obama, 2013d);

2. Making sure Syria will have a ‘future free of dictatorship, terror and fear’ (President Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address, 2014). This goal meant that Syria should be a ‘place for all people – Alawites and Sunni, Shia and Christian’ (Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast, 2014). Minorities’ rights should be protected so that Syria ‘once again [should become] the secular and unified state that it was, represented by a government of the people’s choice’ (Department Of State, The Office of Website Management, 2014b). This goal also included the isolation of extremists and helping Syria’s neighbours to defend their borders, and continued cooperation in the fight against terrorism (The White House, 2014a; The White House, 2014d; President Obama, 2015b; Office of the Vice President, 2015; The White House, 2015c);
3. Providing humanitarian assistance and ensuring the release of female and child prisoners (Department Of State, The Office of Website Management, 2013a).

## **Actions**

From the beginning of the conflict, the United States clearly supported the opposition by providing political, diplomatic and lethal and non-lethal assistance. The White House Press Secretary stated that the United States should pursue a ‘broader strategy of strengthening the opposition to hasten a political transition’ (The White House, 2013d) and create conditions for a negotiated solution (The White House, 2015d). They were also one of the international donors of humanitarian aid.

## **Military support**

Even though President Obama was arguing strongly in favour of airstrikes in 2013 (President Obama, 2013c), he did not receive the support he asked for in Congress, and then did not pursue that option again until 2014, in the latter case targeting ISIS instead of Al-Assad’s regime. Actions undertaken with military means included:

- Positioning military assets in the region in order to pressure the Assad regime to commit to agreements regarding the use of chemical weapons (Department Of State, The Office of Website Management, 2013b);
- Supporting Kurdish forces in their fight against IS/Daesh (NSC Spokesperson Meehan, 2014);

- Training and equipping the opposition in Syria so they could push back IS/Daesh (President Obama, 2014a); working on ‘establishing sites for training and equipping vetted, moderate Syrian opposition elements, to train approximately 5,000 troops per year for the next three years’ and the formalization of a ‘framework on Turkey’s support for the Department of Defense’s train and equip activities for the moderate Syrian opposition’ (General Allen, 2015);
- Starting airstrikes (September 22, 2014) and other necessary actions against IS/Daesh forces and against elements of al-Qaeda (Khorasan Group) (President Obama, 2014b) with occasional operations in Syria against ISIS personnel from Iraq (NSC Spokesperson Meehan, 2015).

### **Diplomatic measures**

The US was engaged in diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis and in 2013 the President carried out ‘consultation with Russia and China to put forward a resolution at the UN Security Council requiring Assad to give up his chemical weapons, and to ultimately destroy them under international control’ (President Obama, 2013b). In the end the US assured condemnation of the use of chemical attacks by a total of 37 countries around the world, including 10 from the Group of 20 (The White House, 2013e; The White House, 2013f). Other diplomatic measures were:

- High level bilateral meetings with engaged countries that are important stakeholders in the Syrian conflict such as Russia, Qatar, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon;
- Meetings with European allies, both bilaterally and within NATO;
- Diplomatic support to the Syrian opposition to negotiate in the Geneva II conference (The White House, 2013g).

### **Political support**

Activities to create political support for the opposition in Syria were undertaken both unilaterally by the United States, and multilaterally with US partners and like-minded countries. Regarding more long-term solutions, Secretary of State Kerry stated in 2014 that there was no military solution to the Syrian crisis and proposed the ‘creation of a transitional government with full executive authority by mutual consent’ without Bashar Al-Assad as part of that Government. (Department Of State, The Office of Website Management, 2014b).

A number of measures were undertaken in order to give political support to the opposition, including:

- Non-lethal support to the moderate Syrian opposition (Department Of State, The Office of Website Management, 2013c);
- Working with France to coordinate support to the moderate opposition within Syria (The White House, 2014a);
- Training and equipping of ‘1,500 local leaders and activists – including women and minorities – from over 100 Syrian opposition provincial councils’ (The White House, 2014a).

### **Humanitarian aid**

The US provided humanitarian assistance in Syria and the neighbouring affected countries including:

- \$2.3 billion (as of September 2015) in humanitarian assistance inside Syria since the beginning of the crisis channelled through UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (Department Of State 2013d; Department Of State 2015);
- Additional humanitarian assistance was provided to the countries most affected by the crisis: Lebanon (\$75 Million), Jordan (\$44 Million), Turkey (\$29 Million), Iraq (\$22 Million) and Egypt (\$4 Million) (Ibid);
- Medical care, food assistance, relief supplies and protection of vulnerable civilians were provided in Syria (Lindborg, 2013).

### **Summary**

In US **political discourse**, the civil war in Syria was seen from the beginning not only as a threat to regional and international security, but also to US national security. Assad was identified as being responsible for the situation and after the chemical attack in 2013, the US quickly found international allies in condemning the attack. The US also focused from an early stage on the importance of counter-terrorism. In 2015 the US was clearly against Russian involvement to support Assad, but also saw the need to co-ordinate military activity to avoid increased tensions between the international coalition and Russia. The US also stated that it appreciated the increased European engagement after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015.

US **goals and solutions** were similar to European ones: Assad was no longer to use chemical weapons, and there should be a transition to democratic inclusive government where

minority rights were protected, a transitional government without Assad. The US also focused on humanitarian support.

US **actions** were comprehensive from the beginning and took the form of various kinds of military support, diplomatic support to the opposition, political support to the opposition and humanitarian aid, both inside Syria and to countries in the region hosting Syrian refugees.

## 6. Conclusions

The main point of consideration regarding the war in Syria have gone through different phases, and reactions have differed over time. To begin with, there was a push for diplomatic and political solutions, but after the chemical attack in 2013, the countries studied showed political outrage and there were efforts in the US and UK to rally support for airstrikes. These were unsuccessful but Assad was still identified as the problem, and a political transition without him was put forward as the only solution. With the advances of IS/Daesh in 2014, the focus of political discourse shifted towards the threat that IS/Daesh posed, both to Syria and to the countries studied. The relationship to Russia was complicated because of Russia's support for Assad and its role in stopping a UNSCR resolution. The US and France were clear in their early criticism of Russia, whereas Germany wanted to see itself as a mediator between Russia and the US. In addition, Assad was accused of not focusing enough on fighting IS/Daesh. Despite an increased threat from IS/Daesh, nobody (except Russia) wanted to co-operate with Assad. It was difficult to find a common international position in the European (EU) or other (G20) organizations because to begin with, the countries studied had differing views on whether or not there was a military solution to the war. Despite this, the US worked to achieve common positions and statements on the situation with a number of allies from different parts of the world. At the beginning of the war the UK primarily relied on its relationship to the US but also cooperated with France. However there were signs of a closer relationship between Germany and the UK after the elections in Germany in 2013. In the spring of 2014 Steinmeier visited London, the first visit of a German minister there since the beginning of the war in Syria.

For both the UK and Germany, the war in Syria sparked substantial domestic debates, In the case of the UK it was the issue of airstrikes after the chemical attacks in 2013, and in Germany it was the question of whether Germany should increase its ambitions, become a more active country and perhaps participate in military actions in Syria. The European differences were significantly diminished after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. However, it was then claimed that it was IS/Daesh that should be fought with military means, it was not an issue of the Syrian government's failure to live up to its Responsibility to Protect. The latter argument was the UK's way of reasoning, but it did not receive domestic or international support in 2013. From an early stage, the US spoke of the outcome of the war in Syria as important for the global fight against terrorism. The country that changed its discourse the most in the time period studied was Germany, as the new government elected in the autumn of 2013 had higher ambitions with regard to playing a role in international politics than the previous government.

The UK was the European country with the harshest view of Assad and the only European country studied that was already making an argument in favour of airstrikes in 2013.

The goals and solutions presented were, as indicated above, at first primarily related to a political transition in which Assad would be removed from power. A related goal was the creation of a democratic Syria with an inclusive state, so that all religions and minorities would be part of the state. As the war continued, support on the ground to improve the humanitarian situation and help for refugees both in Syria and in neighbouring countries were emphasized. When IS/Daesh had become the main focus, different ways of fighting them became the focus for goals.

When it came to actions taken, both the US and the UK already wanted to start airstrikes in 2013 but were hindered by domestic policy. However, these countries engaged in military support of other kinds, such as the supply of weapons and training. Despite its very international engagement to help resolve the war in Syria, France hesitated to give military support, and it was not until after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 that it decided to begin airstrikes in Syria. All the countries studied participated in giving humanitarian aid and tried to support the opposition politically, for example with diplomatic support.

Going back to the trends discussed in the introduction, the first trend – insecurity about the change in US foreign and security policy after the so-called pivot towards Asia – in 2013 had partially domestic roots. Obama tried to get support for airstrikes but failed to do so. He was then, politically, forced to change his course of action. Later on, US airstrikes in Iraq were also extended to Syria but that decision was taken by the president himself.

The trend of increased bi-lateral co-operation is shown in this study to be not only a functional trend but also the dominant way in which international politics were carried out with regard to the war in Syria. The roles of the EU and NATO were very small in 2013–2015, whereas bilateral contacts were important. Of the European countries studied, Germany was the one to place the most emphasis on the EU. However, French use of the Lisbon Treaty after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 showed the importance of the EU as a new legal basis for international military operation. Using article 42.7 to ask for support for increased military operations to combat IS/Daesh made it possible for both Germany and the UK to participate in fighting the IS/Daesh in Syria with military means. This might prove to be an important new legal ground for military interventions when the UNSCR is unable to act due to differences primarily between Russia and China on one hand and the US and the permanent European members on the other. It might be asked why France used the EU as a legal basis to ask for support rather than NATO. There are two possible reasons for this: the first is that it did

not want to engage Turkey in a response in Syria and maybe Iraq; the second is that creating something that might be interpreted as a NATO operation in Syria would not serve their interests, given that Russia had already started their air campaign in Syria. Because NATO was not given a role in Syria at this time, its main focus was the territorial defence of its members. However, this also meant giving support to Turkey, which had begun in 2012. A new NATO operation in the eastern Mediterranean was also started in 2016 in order to help Greece and Turkey to survey the border.

The 2013 report also discussed the fact that the trends found challenged political leadership in several ways. Domestically, because when aspects other than security and defence, such as the economy, become important for policy development, more actors are involved in policy making. This was particularly evident in the case of the UK, where political leadership of international affairs became more complicated and the government could not initially pursue the policy it wanted to in Syria. Internationally, one reason for the lack of leadership in international organizations could be that the cost of leadership has increased, at the same time as trends have been to increase bilateral co-operations. In the case of Syria, the US exercised leadership in trying to get allies firstly to support political statements and then the military campaign. With regard to the European countries studied both the UK and France were very active but it is difficult to say that there was one European state leading the efforts.

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