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EU Action on Syria

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Introduction

The EU has had a co-operation agreement with Syria since 1995 and Syria is a signatory to the 1995 Barcelona Declaration on improving political and economic co-operation between the EU and the southern Mediterranean countries. More recently, Syria joined the EU's initiative to improve relations with and between Mediterranean countries, the Union for the Mediterranean. But relations have never been close because of concerns within the EU about Syria's human rights record, its controversial involvement in Lebanon and its relationship with terrorist groups.

The EU had begun a constructive dialogue with Syria in 2008/09 in response to the reform plans of the Assad government but the brutal repression of demonstrations in 2011 changed the situation and led to significant sanctions being adopted. This briefing paper explains the background to those sanctions. The UN and Arab League are working on a joint plan to bring peace to Syria led by the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. This process is fully supported by the EU and its Member States but the outcome of this process remains in doubt.

The Hariri Case

The EU first adopted sanctions over suspicions of Syrian involvement in the murder of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, despite Syrian denials of any involvement in his death. Following the decision of the UN Security Council to set up an investigation into Hariri's death the assets of a number of people were frozen and restrictions placed on their ability to visit the EU because of concerns that they had been involved in the assassination. The people targeted included the chief of the Syrian Republican Guard, Maher al-Assad, President Assad's younger brother.

Relations since 2008

Despite this development, Syrian-EU relations seemed set to improve as a consensus emerged within the EU in 2008/09 that a better relationship with Syria was in the interests of both sides and reflected Syria's importance in the Middle East. The EU hoped to sign an EU-Syria Association Agreement in 2009 but it had not been signed by the beginning of 2011 because of Syria's unwillingness to accept the sections relating to human rights and to weapons of mass destruction. An EU programme, forming part of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, provided support to the modernisation programme in Syria as the country sought to move from a command economy to a market economy.

However, the development of large-scale protests in Syria in March 2011 by people calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime and global outrage at the subsequent violent repression of those protests changed the situation entirely. Normal relations were

effectively suspended and the EU decided to freeze further discussions on the Association Agreement. The EU adopted an embargo on the sale of arms and other equipment that could be used for internal repression in May 2011 and placed restrictions on the assets and movements of named people involved in the repression in Syria.

The 13 sets of sanctions, known technically as restrictive measures, include:

- the freezing of the assets of 41 companies or other entities and of 126 people either responsible for associated with the repression in Syria;
- a ban on the sale of arms and equipment that could be used for internal repression;
- a ban on the sale of equipment to the oil and gas industry or the provision of technical assistance including the construction of new power plants;
- a freeze on the assets of the Syrian central bank in the EU and a prohibition on supplying notes or coins to the bank; and
- a ban on Member States making any loans or grants to the Syrian Government.

As there was no improvement in the situation in Syria after the first wave of measures, and President Assad's promises of reform were not honoured, the EU banned imports of Syrian oil into the EU from 2 September 2011. This was a significant development as a quarter of the country's income comes from oil and more than 90 per cent of its oil exports go to EU Member States.

Given the gravity of the situation in Syria, and the continuing international concern about it, the EU's action will continue to form part of that wider international response. If the Annan brokered ceasefire does not succeed in stopping the repression, further action cannot be ruled out.

April 2012



Senior European Experts

The Senior European Experts Group is an independent body consisting of former high-ranking British diplomats and civil servants, including several former UK ambassadors to the EU, and former officials of the institutions of the EU.

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