

Europe's gamble in Syria



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Almost four years ago, after it became crystal clear that the project to bring down Bashar al-Assad's government had fallen through and the state had taken back control of most of Syrian territory, with armed militants hemmed in under Turkish guarantee and Russian approval in the north-western region centered on Idlib, several key European states began quietly laying the groundwork to reopen their embassies in Damascus. They also sent in their intelligence and security delegations to Damascus for talks on cooperation and information-sharing with Syrian intelligence agencies. This was no closely guarded secret, as reports of these European efforts were occasionally picked up by the media.

At the time, Syria was sitting on a goldmine of intelligence regarding foreign terrorists operating within its borders, including those from Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia — data the European parties were eager to get their hands on. Syria welcomed this cooperation as it not only amounted to a form of implicit recognition of the Syrian government after years of international calls for regime change but also counted as a joint effort against a common enemy. This was happening even as political, economic, and trade sanctions on Syria remained firmly in place.

Now, with the sudden and unexpected collapse of Assad's regime, those very militants once targeted in intelligence coordination efforts have risen to power, taken the reins of Syria's executive, judicial, and legislative branches, and, to much astonishment, the same European countries are now rushing to recognize the new rulers and throwing their weight behind efforts to shore up the new regime, which

is defined more by ambiguity in form and composition than clarity.

It is perfectly natural for the new rulers to go after both domestic and international legitimacy. What is unnatural, however, is Europe's haste to prop up this government without adhering to even the most basic standards it has banged on about for centuries. Not only have the Europeans leaped at the chance, but they are also pushing others — including the United States — to follow suit. However, the US seems to be playing it cooler, taking a more measured approach.

The Americans have refused to be swayed by mere cosmetic changes — the militants' clean-shaven faces, suits and ties, and a rhetorical shift from extremist religious discourse to one of democracy, civil rights, and minority protection. Washington has openly stated that its stance will be built on the actions and conduct of Syria's new rulers, not their speeches and press briefings.

According to revelations by Professor Jeffrey Sachs at a recent Antalya conference, the plan to topple Assad's regime was initiated under the CIA's Operation Timber Sycamore in spring 2011,

at the behest of then-president Barack Obama and reportedly with Israeli knowledge and request. Within this framework, the CIA took charge of funding, organizing, equipping, and training the Syrian opposition — many of whom are now in power. Now, the US is treading carefully against the same people it organized and equipped, demanding concrete evidence and practical reasons for any shift away from extremist religious behavior and the abandonment of violent, discriminatory actions that violate the basic rights of religious and ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, Europe appears to be living in a different world.

It is highly unlikely that Europe can pull off legitimizing Syria's new leadership on its own without American backing and without Damascus achieving the bare minimum standards of legitimate governance. This is not to suggest Europe should go out of its way to undermine or sabotage the new Syrian government. Rather, there is a valid criticism to be made about its hurried approach and its failure to make the most of the current opportunity to steer Syria towards a military-political structure that at least resembles a civil govern-

ment.

At this critical juncture, as Syria's new rulers are crying out for legitimacy and external aid, Europe has the chance to lay down certain minimum conditions. Politics should not be built around lofty claims, speeches, and media interviews. For instance, the interim constitution approved by Syria's current government offers a revealing benchmark of their alleged ideological transformation. According to this document, the so-called president essentially holds onto the role of Islamic Caliph and Commander of the Faithful, with unchecked authority and no accountability mechanism in place.

The atrocities committed not long ago in Syria's western coastal regions — particularly the revenge killings of women, children, youth, and the elderly — driven by extremist Takfiri ideology, could serve as a telling barometer for shaping policy towards Syria's current rulers. Sadly, we are witnessing a weak and puzzling stance from the Europeans. Do they truly believe that a government that sent its own forces in to brutally crush and massacre civilians will now genuinely conduct a fair investigation

through a special committee?

The feeble statements and positions of European governments and the EU, regrettably, send the message that Syria's current rulers need not be held accountable for crimes against religious and ethnic minorities — particularly the Alawites. Historically oppressed under religious pretexts, the Alawites were labeled by armed extremists as the ruling sect and made scapegoats for all the government's actions. Over the years, they have repeatedly been threatened with revenge by the very militants now in charge — threats that are, tragically, being carried out today.

In any case, Europe now finds itself in the dock of history. What it does today will be recorded, and future generations will pass judgment on Europe's role in shaping Syria's fate. So far, it seems Europe has failed to settle on a coherent stance. European capitals and the EU continue to roll out the red carpet for Syria's current officials — many of whom once went by extremist noms de guerre starting with Abu. The frequent visits of top European officials to Damascus and their readiness to offer all kinds of assistance to Syria's new leadership flies in the face of the very standards Europe claims to uphold.

If this course of action continues, Europe could very well be playing with fire when it comes to its own future security. Have European officials really thought through the consequences of normalizing ties with a regime that might soon hand out Syrian passports to foreign fighters — fighters who belong to the most radical branches of Takfiri ideology and will be free to slip into Europe under the radar with new identities and legitimate travel documents?

Europe still has time to rethink its rushed game plan, to act in a way that aligns with its long-term interests. But if it doesn't, it may soon find that the clock has run out.

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German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (front-L) and her French counterpart Jean-Noël Barrot (C) walk with Syria's new ruler Ahmed al-Sharaa ahead of their talks in Damascus, Syria.

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