

## European - American Policy Towards the Syrian Refugee Issue 2014-2017

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### Abstract:

Within the EU, European countries pursue multiple policies on the issue of Syrian refugees without a coherent framework that brings together different political paths and makes them effectively support each other. The Syrian issue is a common factor in the foreign policy of the EU countries on one hand, and with the USA on the other, it turns out that it is complex to find solutions approved by all EU member states. Moreover, following the Lisbon Treaty providing the European Union with a new foreign policy structure, the result was that foreign policy issues fell under the control of the European superpowers, who in turn did not agree with each other on the same political approach. Given Germany's categorical rejection of the prospect of expanded military intervention to resolve this issue, and the British Parliament's vote against any military action in Syria, only France has the military potential. But France has found a pretext after the failure of the US in providing an appropriate solution to the on going situation in Syria, as the US has not provided any military action possibility. The result shows that European countries within the EU find themselves unable to make a decisive decision away from the US administration.

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### 1. Introduction

The 2011 Syrian crisis unveiled the shortcomings of the EU's crisis management approach and showed its tendency to react rather than be proactive. More importantly, the EU countries have tried to use the opportunity to activate diplomatic ways to resolve the Syrian issue, thus denying itself the possibility of using its instruments as a flexible force. This includes the absence of any effective initiative on The Shape of the political transition in Syria and the absence of any real interaction with Syrian opposition groups or dialogue with civil society components that would form a basis for future solutions. These flaws in European policy towards the Syrian issue further underscore the inability of both the Euro-Mediterranean policy (also known as the Barcelona process) and the European

Neighbourhood Policy to contribute to political reform or to sustainable socio-economic development in the Arab-Mediterranean countries.

There appears to be a failure in adopting a unified decision on the sanctions' implementation against the President Bashar al-Assad regime and to support large-scale humanitarian assistance efforts, there is no clear agreement on how best to arm the moderate opposition, whether EU countries should negotiate with the Syrian government or on the contours of a possible political settlement.

### 2. European countries efforts in supporting Syrian refugees issue

European countries come at the top list of donors, including more than 5 million € paid by

the EU member states collectively in humanitarian, development and economic stability. this support is granted to Syrians people who live in Syria as well as refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq<sup>(1)</sup>.

However, the stability of Syria considered a strategic importance for the EU countries, especially since the country has the potential to destabilize its neighbors (Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Turkey). For most of those countries the large and permanent influx of refugees from Syria would have caused them significant problems<sup>(2)</sup>. European countries are also worried that Syria may remain unstable for long time, as was the case in Lebanon during the 1975-1990 civil war<sup>(3)</sup> in the absence of a unified state and administration, a recognized power centre, and a plethora of internal borders between regions of different leaders . In such an environment, the smuggling of weapons and combatants, the availability of chemical weapons stockpiles, and the movement of combatants back and forth are major sources of concern<sup>(4)</sup>.

As a consequence, Syrian humanitarian refugee crisis has had a significant negative impact on the whole of Europe, which required an effective and unified policy on the part of the major European countries towards the Syrian crisis. The EU needs to adjust the new geopolitical map created by the Syrian conflict and reconsider its attitude towards other key actors, which contributes to regional security issues, and should use foreign policy methods in a better and more coordinated manner under the leadership of the Supreme representative of foreign and security policy<sup>(5)</sup>.

A number of internal and external factors led to the current miserable political and economical situations, and the sectarian and ideological conflicts led to the death of millions of Syrians and the displacement of a large number of Syrians to different countries of the world, which led to a change of world visions towards the Syrian issue, but also led to a reassessment of the position adopted by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition forces<sup>(6)</sup>.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring coincided with the implementation by the European Union of the Lisbon Treaty of 2007<sup>(7)</sup> and the establishment of a new foreign policy in the European Union<sup>(8)</sup>. Theoretically, the Lisbon Treaty was designed to

facilitate more consistent, efficient and effective EU foreign policy. In fact, the reality is very different, as the main effect of the Lisbon Treaty was that the EU's foreign policy-making process was concentrated on the Three Big (France, Germany and the United Kingdom)<sup>(9)</sup>.

The European Union responded to the unacceptable violence by Syrian military and security forces against peaceful demonstrators via suspending its cooperation with the Syrian government within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and gradually tightening restrictive measures against it. The policy was intended to pressure the Syrian government to stop the violence and to find a solution for the conflict. From the beginning, EU strongly condemned the violations against human rights in Syria<sup>(10)</sup>.

The EU's biggest challenge in providing aid is how to reach those affected by military operations inside Syrian, as the EU works with all parties to build closer relationships with local communities and councils to help meet basic needs such as medical assistance, food security, water and other services. Such assistance should be provided through all possible ways to ensure its access<sup>(11)</sup>.

### **3. The policy of EU countries towards Syrian refugees problem**

The Syrian refugee crisis overrun the EU is a new test for the work of the EU institutions, and the President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz was one of the most expressive in blaming the EU in his statement late of August 2015, noting in his statement that we are not dealing with failure The EU, but rather the blatant failure of some governments that do not wish to take responsibility and thus impede a common European solution<sup>(12)</sup>.

In many respects, the EU is a loose confederation when it comes to immigration and asylum policies. Despite the huge legislation in the EU, the provisions of the Lisbon Convention on common policies on migration and asylum (articles 78, 79 and 80) remain highly ambitious "The EU establishes a common policy on asylum ... and migration." There is no common list of safe countries that do not accept asylum applications<sup>(13)</sup>.

As a separate issue, the legal channels that lead to the EU are limited. The EU does not offer the possibility of applying for asylum in the country of origin, which calls for asylum seekers to make dangerous journeys and through Europe

with the help of traffickers and smugglers. It is worth noting that hundreds of thousands cross the borders of the EU irregularly in terms of law. The movement of refugees within the EU is also conducted in an irregular manner. In response, some member states choose not to cooperate. One example is the failure to consult a neighbouring country on the construction of a border fence or barrier or the transfer of refugees to the territory of neighbouring states without prior consultation, with or without first registering them as required by European Union law<sup>(14)</sup>.

EU states grant asylum on the basis of refugee status as provided by the Geneva Conventions in 1949, and this reflects in the EU asylum package and national legislation, and the EU Charter of fundamental rights reaffirms these obligations<sup>(15)</sup>.

Discussions continued on how to deal with the international situation of Syrian refugees in accordance with international humanitarian law standards, including the identification and treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. All EU member states have obligations towards asylum seekers, regardless of how or where they arrive, whether they arrive with or without a visa, and regardless of religion or ethnicity. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have shelter within the borders of the EU, and some have argued that the Geneva Conventions have been adopted at different times and circumstances that may not necessarily apply to the current refugee situation<sup>(16)</sup>.

The EU's economic and financial policy was governed by common institutions such as the European Central Bank, the Eurogroup and several directors from the European Commission. Added new institutions and policy instruments to the Union as a result of economic developments. In contrast, immigration and asylum policy involves only an inadequate support organization, the EU's Frontex agency (the European agency for external border control and protection), and the services body based in Valletta, Malta's capital, the European Asylum Support Office. The European Commission provides funds for Immigration and asylum purposes, but its powers to influence policy are strictly limited by treaties in accordance with the mechanisms of the Council of Justice and Home Affairs<sup>(17)</sup>.

The EU's asylum system is under severe stress, Europe facing the largest number of refugees in terms of humanitarian crisis since

World War II. At the end of 2014, the number of migrants worldwide was 59.5 million, the highest level recorded by UNHCR. People fleeing war and persecution, including those who leave their country in search of protection and a better life, mostly enter the European Union by crossing the external borders of Italy, Malta, Greece or Hungary<sup>(18)</sup>.

Syrians along with Afghans and Kosovars were the top three asylum-seekers in 2014, while Syrians, Afghans and Albanians were the top three asylum-seekers in the second quarter of 2015<sup>(19)</sup>.

The conflict in Syria has led to a humanitarian and political crisis, directly affecting Europe. As the Syrians arriving to Europe in search of international protection continues is increased. However, in Europe is low compared to the number of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries<sup>(20)</sup>.

Europe received 681,713 Syrian asylum applications between April 2011 and October 2015. The largest European countries receiving asylum applications are Germany, Serbia and Kosovo, with about 53%, followed by Sweden, Hungary, Austria, the Netherlands and Bulgaria (all receiving 34% of applications). It peaked in October 2015 when Europe received 143,355 requests for humanitarian asylum by Syrian citizens, according to a UNHCR report<sup>(21)</sup>.

The Syrian asylum claims in Europe show how desperate the Syrian regions are in armed conflict, high commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres saying: "This is the largest number of citizens from a single conflict ... "It is the deteriorating conditions that have driven increasing numbers towards Europe..". The analysis is based on the response of Italy, Germany, Hungary and Sweden to asylum requests<sup>(22)</sup>.

Italy and Hungary are countries of first entry located on the external borders of the EU, while Germany and Sweden receive the largest number of Syrian asylum applications. These four countries are working on ways to address the situation of Syrian refugees and burden sharing among EU member states. It also represents central and Northern Europe, and the analysis focuses on responding to the influx of Syrians, especially refugees<sup>(23)</sup>.

More than 487,000 people arrived on the shores of the Mediterranean in Europe in 2015, and the highest number since records began. The journey is fraught with dangers, as nearly 3000

people were killed across the Mediterranean in 2015, not counting those who lost their lives on their way, and for those migrants their future in Europe is very unknown <sup>(24)</sup>.

With unprecedented numbers of new arrivals, even the best prepared European countries have reached a breaking point in their ability to meet EU standards. For those with less experience managing immigration, the question of who is responsible for those arriving reignited deep internal divisions among member states. Negotiations over efforts to transfer tens of thousands of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy led to a vote on 22 September 2015 among EU interior ministers who agreed to move 120,000 refugees across the continent, overcoming objections to the redistribution plan in many countries. Eastern members, front-line countries such as Greece and Italy bear a disproportionate responsibility for receiving the new arrivals, although most of the newcomers move quickly to the wealthier EU countries including Sweden and Germany, in 2015 they received nearly half of all asylum applications. In this process, a new front line appeared in transit countries such as Hungary and Croatia, which suddenly face tremendous pressure on their borders, and in the case of Hungary the reaction was to erect barbed wires and try to contain them sometimes or return in most cases to asylum seekers<sup>(25)</sup>.

In light of the increasing number of refugees at the borders of Europe with the arrival of 4000 people daily to the Greek islands and the sufficiency of the refugee camps that have been established for them, the danger threatens the European destination countries that have been unable to take easy solutions, and it is clear that the effective response must be based on an understanding of the root causes. For asylum seekers, and addressing the causes that are likely to be a pressure point, as the costs of failing to contain refugees may be high. In the circumstances of confronting the immigrants, the political and economic measures will be difficult, and may cause a deterioration in confidence between the member states of the EU, and between the public and their governments, and within the framework of the global protection system as a whole <sup>(26)</sup>.

The Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 showed a divergence of opinions within the EU divided into three groups. The first was Germany, which was one of the only European countries that was able to accommodate large numbers of Syrian refugees.

Germany has a strong economic growth and full employment with budget surpluses, vacancies and a positive attitude of its citizens towards refugees (the culture of welcome)<sup>(27)</sup>.

The second group includes the UK and Denmark that refused to accommodate refugees, among the European countries that chose not to have a European Schengen, and then the countries in the third group that tried to show solidarity with Germany, but did not have a strong economy like Germany. Between April 2011 and September 2015, Germany received 125,441 Syrian refugees. This makes Germany the main destination in the EU for Syrian asylum seekers and it is also one of the largest donors of international aid to the Syrian people in Syria and neighboring countries. In 2012 and 2013, it contributed about 440 million euros, and Germany also has the largest humanitarian program to accept refugees from Syria <sup>(28)</sup>.

Germany is also the main and preferred destination for Syrian refugees among the rest of the EU, especially in 2015, the bloodiest year ever, and European countries witnessed the largest refugee crisis after the II World War. Statistics issued by the United Nations Refugee Agency indicate that during the first half of the year 2015, Germany received the largest number of asylum applications compared to 2014, and during this same period, the majority of them were from Syrian citizens<sup>(29)</sup>.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the door for asylum and said that Syrians and others in need of international protection are welcome in Germany. The open door policy in Europe has led to an increase in the flow of refugees, which made some countries of the European Union argue over Merkel's statement, which actually contributed to the increase in the flow of Syrian refugees <sup>(30)</sup>.

The German chancellor has been one of the leading figures in the political debate about how the EU is handling the ongoing refugee crisis. On August 21, 2015, Germany decided to suspend the Dublin Procedure, which stipulates that refugees must seek refuge in the first European country in which they applied for asylum. By doing so, Germany undertook efforts to aid overburdened countries at the external borders of the EU <sup>(31)</sup>.

Thus, all Syrian asylum seekers were welcome to stay in Germany, regardless of which EU countries they entered. Germany, along with Austria, also took responsibility when Hungary announced that its borders with Serbia were closed



and trains stopped hundreds of migrants from leaving the country <sup>(32)</sup>.

The British newspaper "The Guardian" confirmed that Merkel had undertaken an initiative that the whole of Europe should follow regarding the refugee crisis, declaring that all Syrian refugees in her country were entitled to obtain asylum in Germany. The newspaper pointed out that the German Chancellor took the lead regarding the protracted refugee crisis, which only resulted in disagreements among the members of the EU. She added that hundreds of thousands of people flee to Europe due to wars and executions, and they constitute today the largest refugee crisis in it since World War II <sup>(33)</sup>.

The newspaper quoted Merkel saying that "if Europe fails to handle the refugees issue, its strong human rights policy will lose its meaning." The newspaper pointed out the growing awareness in Europe about the need for these countries to work seriously with each other. Pointing out that the situation regarding the migrant crisis needs <sup>(34)</sup>.

Merkel explained that Germany's long and honorable history in dealing with refugees, and its strong economy, obliges Germany not to neglect the fact that it relies on immigration when explaining the country's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Germany has a GDP of US \$ 43,282 per individual in 2014, with an annual growth rate of 1.6 percent, an unemployment rate of 0.5 percent, and a debt equivalent to 82% of the country's GDP, in other words, there may be a long-term economic component to the German position as well <sup>(35)</sup>.

From the above, it becomes clear that Germany is able to deal with the numbers of refugees, and it appears that Chancellor Angela Merkel plays a major role.

Sweden is facing - according to its Prime Minister Stefan Lofven - one of the most difficult challenges in its contemporary history, as Swedish society is witnessing a severe state of polarization between supporters and opponents of refugees, while the center-left parties - headed by the ruling Social Democrats - in order to avoid a political crisis that may plague the country, it is noteworthy that the number of refugees to Sweden in 2016 and 2017 exceeded 250,000, which prompted parties to return from the usual policy of openness to impose measures and tighten border controls <sup>(36)</sup>.

The member of Swedish Parliament from the Social Democratic Party Jamal Mneimneh affirms that his party always stands by the side of

human solidarity and stated in one of his meetings that EU countries should take responsibility to face the biggest challenge facing the continent since the Second World War, he stressed the need to adopt quick and effective integration plans for the newly arrived, and Jamal Mneimneh expressed his concern about the increase in racist attacks, describing them as heinous acts that the Swedish society cannot accept or tolerate <sup>(37)</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the refugee shelters in different parts of the country were exposed during 2015-2016 to dozens of racist attacks and burning attempts, which spread an atmosphere of anxiety and fear among Muslim communities in particular. These crimes began to take the form of a political phenomenon, requires a political approach first, before imposing the rule of law <sup>(38)</sup>.

Analysts attribute the causes of political tension to the failure of the political forces to conduct transparent public discussions the values of ethics and they also link it to the size of the logistical and economic capabilities available, as well as unemployment rates exceeding 10% <sup>(39)</sup>.

The Swedish political expert Jonas Hinfoss (a professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg) says in this regard that the debate revolves around the challenges facing government agencies in providing housing for refugees and job opportunities, as all political parties agree that the country's capacity to receive refugees has reached its limits <sup>(40)</sup>.

Yvette Cooper, the UK's interior minister for the period 2011-2015, stressed the need to break down political barriers in order to respond to the refugee crisis, by hosting 10,000 refugees who fled political turmoil in the Middle East, and for consensus Britain, with its values and its history, and added: "Britain must respond to the humanitarian crisis that we have not seen on our continent since World War II." Cooper said, in statements published in the British newspaper, The Guardian, that Theresa May, Home Secretary 2010 - 2016, to put an end to the administrative paralysis in its government, and to hold a special press conference with local councils to discuss how many refugees can be accommodated by each town and city, Cooper suggested that if each city took 10 refugees, Britain could absorb 10 thousand refugees a month, not only from Syria, but also from Iraq and Libya <sup>(41)</sup>.

Cooper acknowledged that her call was likely to be seen as not being politically

supportive, but at the same time she assured that the British people would respond<sup>(42)</sup>.

The countries that are trying to show solidarity with Germany but did not support it economically nor politically. Refugees increasing quest to reach Europe to escape the wars in their countries or from poor living conditions. A day later, European interior ministers decided to hold an emergency meeting on 14 July 2015 in Brussels to discuss ways to confront the crisis of the flow of migrants to Europe, and in this regard, German Chancellor Merkel said that refugees should be distributed in the EU according to the ability of member states to receive them as part of a strategy to overcome this crisis. While the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls 2014-2016, announced the establishment of a humanitarian camp for immigrants who gathered in poor conditions heading to Britain, adding that Europe is concerned with the refugee crisis and that a distinction must be made between the right of asylum and illegal immigration<sup>(43)</sup>.

The French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius criticized the position of some Eastern European countries - members of the European Union - starting with Hungary and their lack of cooperation in solving the migrant crisis. This comes at a time when Switzerland announced that it intends to provide financial assistance to the Balkan countries to support it in confronting the influx of large numbers of immigrants trying to reach the European Union<sup>(44)</sup>.

After the failure of the previous meeting, as well as the failure of the Council of Ministers of the European Union to adopt policies to limit asylum and immigration in May 2015, which caused panic during the summer in many European Union countries, who refused to share the burden of refugees with Germany. As a result, and at the request of Berlin, European Union institutions began negotiating with Turkey regarding the possibility of refugees staying in Turkey in exchange for financial support and offering several concessions in other fields such as entry without visas for Turkish citizens wishing to travel to the EU countries<sup>(45)</sup>. If the EU wants to pursue more effective policies, it must focus on the central reasons that make its shores a destination for migrants, and then it must address those causes in the countries of asylum neighboring Syria.

On September 4, 2015, V4 - which was founded in 1991 - and included (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland)

announced its rejection of mandatory distribution of refugees to countries of the Union, which contradicts the position of Germany, France and Belgium, which pushed for the absorption of 160 thousand refugees. On October 16, Hungary closed its borders with Croatia, after 170 thousand of them had crossed through this road until mid-September 2015<sup>(46)</sup>.

Hungary completed the construction of its wall on September 15, 2015 and its adoption of laws criminalizing the refugee who crosses the border, the wave of asylum gradually shifted from the Serbian-Hungarian border in the north to the Serbian-Croatian border in the west, as the refugees continued their journey either to Hungary or Croatia to reach Slovenia and then Austria to Germany<sup>(47)</sup>.

In early November 2015, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia and Sweden took steps to re-impose border controls, or set up fences to control the flow of migrants, steps that alarmed the President of the European Council Donald Tusk and prompted him to warn the collapse of the Schengen Treaty, this came after the Minister of the Interior announced The German Thomas de Maiziere at the end of October 2015 re-entry into force of the Dublin 3 agreement, which had been suspended two months earlier, to allow refugees to arrive Germany<sup>(48)</sup>.

The solutions proposed by the European Commission in this regard included proposals, including the establishment of a fund to help the countries surrounding Europe to absorb refugees and relieve the burden of host countries by providing the opportunity for work to the asylum seeker while his application is being considered, and within the framework of implementing the first proposal, the leaders of the European Union and the Balkans held an emergency summit in Brussels on Sunday. October 25, 2015, a 17-point plan was added to an agreement to confront the influx of refugees, called the "Joint Declaration". Among the most important measures and items included in the declaration are the daily exchange of information, reports on movement on the Western Balkan route, and the prevention of the movement of refugees from one country to another without informing the second country<sup>(49)</sup>.

The Malta summit on November 11 2015 came after the European Commission announced the number of refugees likely to arrive in Europe until the end of 2017, estimated at three million people. All the aforementioned European Union

measures and endeavors remain without any effectiveness or effect if Turkey does not engage in it, because it has become a key key for the Europeans in dealing with the refugee crisis, and therefore they are considering holding an emergency summit on immigration in Brussels with Turkish officials on November 22, 2015, and to encourage Ankara, Germany announced At the Malta summit, its intention to provide 534 million euros in aid to Turkey as part of the aid package provided by the European Union to help it cope with the Syrian refugee crisis. The European Commission proposes to provide financial aid to Ankara with a total value of three billion euros between 2016 and 2017 <sup>(50)</sup>.

The European Union remained the largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian crisis, but the European Union's aid moved away from emergency aid and focused more quickly on sustainable assistance, specifically targeting the provision of education for Syrian refugees and the provision of work in their host countries (Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) <sup>(51)</sup>.

#### **4. The policy of the United States of America towards the Syrian refugee problem**

From the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 until the end of the fall of 2015, the United States of America agreed to seek asylum for 1500 Syrian citizens only, and this percentage is very small in light of the refugee crisis that is sweeping Europe daily, as it seems that the government of the United States of America does not have sufficient preparation for land The US government is a safe haven for the Syrians, as some Republican Party members in the US Congress explain that "allowing Syrian refugees to enter the United States would be a pipeline for pumping terrorism." American politicians are also trying to focus on economic aid more. In the summer of 2015, White House spokesman Peter Bogard said, "The United States has provided humanitarian aid of more than four billion dollars since the start of the Syrian crisis." <sup>(52)</sup>

In May 2015, fourteen members of the US Senate (from the Democratic Party) sent a letter calling on the administration of President Barack Obama 2009-2017 to allow no less than (65,000) thousand Syrian refugees to settle in the United States of America, and in the following month (June 2015) Republican member Michael Mccaul, head of the National Security Committee in the US House of Representatives, objected to the US

administration's plans to allow the entry of 2,000 Syrian refugees at the end of 2015, as he made it clear that he had listened to the US President's speeches on this issue, especially when Obama indicated, "We have a history of welcoming refugees. We are proud of it, because the Syrian conflict is a unique case that requires extreme caution and scrutiny." <sup>(53)</sup>

American policies remain shy about the Syrian refugee crisis compared to its political and economic capabilities, as the United States of America tried to place the brunt of this humanitarian crisis on the shoulders of the Europeans as they are the most solidarity with this crisis.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The major Western countries have not put in place a clearly planned strategy on the Syrian issue that would enable them to reach a political settlement with the humanitarian solution and the efforts of reconstruction and stability. All that some countries joining the European Union have done is to work through multilateral tools such as the United Nations and the Friends of Syria Group in an attempt to seek political cover in the aspects of the issue in which the European Union countries failed to reach its stated goals unilaterally. Consequently, the EU Council Conclusion of 16 March 2015 contained nothing but a repetition of the same goal of a comprehensive political transition with an expression of support for the efforts of the UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, to achieve a strategic halt to the escalation of violence. However, these calls did not have a significant impact on the ground, and there are no indications that the European Union policy was able to reduce the intensity of the conflict in any way.

The general picture of the European-American strategy towards the Syrian refugee crisis does not live up to the level of ambition, and the effectiveness of its participation in the joint efforts aimed at reaching an internal Syrian agreement does not go beyond the demand for peace and stability. And the strategy of using influence - such as imposing diplomatic and economic sanctions - does not exceed the limits of

close cooperation and coordination with regional or international organizations.

Although the European Union views its procedures as being issued by a unified and independent international organization, it is impossible to obtain unanimous approval in the European Council to intervene directly in the developments of the Syrian crisis. We also do not overlook that the European Union does not have a unified combat military army, but rather just a few security groups that have not been previously deployed to carry out a unified military mission.

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