

# 5 minutes with Salam Kawakibi on the Syrian crisis: “While we can see many political declarations, we cannot see any real action”

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*The crisis in Syria continues despite the efforts of Europe and the wider international community. In an interview with EUROPP editors Chris Gilson and Julian Kirchherr, as part of our coverage of the European neighbourhood, [Salam Kawakibi](#) of the Arab Reform Initiative discusses the roots of the conflict in Syria, its regional implications and the role that Europe might now be able to play.*



**The [ceasefire in Syria](#) brokered by Kofi Annan, an envoy and former secretary-general of the United Nations, is unravelling. Who started the [most recent surge of violence](#)?**

The same as who started the killing and violence in the beginning, the Syrian security forces and the paramilitary militia. Even the observers were targeted by the security forces. Unfortunately all of these details have not been mentioned by the observers, or those who represent them politically, because of Kofi Annan's diplomatic philosophy. He needed to reassure everyone as well as keep his position very neutral. But this neutrality is not respected by any member of the Syrian security authorities. And of course, no cease-fire was respected. We cannot talk about the violation of the cease-fire because it was not in place.

**What are the roots of the conflict in Syria, and how does it relate to the Arab Spring?**

There are many roots to the conflict and they are very complicated. They depend on four decades of authoritarianism and the monopolization of the public space from one clan. The Baath party has been used by those in power to take control over all of society. Since 2000, political opposition has asked for reform, and were very modest in their requests, never asking to replace the President or the regime. Their answer from the Syrian authorities was always arrest, trial, prison and greater and greater repression. This was until the Arab Spring when the Syrian people were in communication with other movements in the Middle East via social networks and satellite channels. This broke their fear from oppression and they decided to go into the street and ask for reform.

The beginnings of the Syrian contestation were

demonstrations asking only for political reform, modernity and more democracy. The demonstrations have continued but the militarisation of the movement came last June, four or five months after the demonstrations began. This was a reaction against repression, and the bloody way that the protests had been treated.

**What are the effects of the conflict on Syria's neighbours, especially Turkey?**

The refugees now are in all countries around Syria. In Kurdistan, in the north of Iraq, there are now 5,000, in Jordan there are 120,000, and now in Turkey, refugees are in the camps. It is very problematic for the Turkish, who are very concerned at what's happening in Syria for many reasons. The first is the Kurdish issue, because the Syrian regime uses Kurdish reunification to harass Turkey via the PKK party. There is also the economic issue for Turkey, because Syria represents a way for them to grow, with their trade and transportation links. The third very important issue is that for the first time in the history of the Turkish



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Republic, we can feel the divisions in Turkey regarding the Syrian issue. This is linked to divisions between the secular and Islamist groups in power. The secularists use the Syrian fight as a way to criticise and attack the policies of the government. We can also see the impact in the north of Lebanon, and we can also see the impact on the Iraqi issue. Unfortunately for the Syrians, the issue is very linked to all the regional conflicts and arrangements.

### **Do you think the European Union (EU) has a responsibility to help foster change in Syria? If so, what must it do now?**

First I don't believe in one foreign policy for the EU. I think that there are many policies for each country, each very different from one to another. The sanctions against Syria are not respected by some European countries for many reasons, and while we can see many political declarations, we cannot see any real action. When I say action, I don't mean military action, I mean real diplomatic action because the Europeans have a good relationship, at least economically, with Russia, and they can use diplomatic pressure. However, they have done very little. In terms of the humanitarian issue, European countries can help; they can send medicine. Civil society in European countries is more important for helping the crisis in Syria than countries' governments, because governments have complicated decision making mechanisms. Civil society in European countries can be far quicker and more efficient in addressing the Syrian issue.

### **Where do you think will Syria be 5 years from now?**

I think now after this path of destruction and division, there is a war against civilians, but it is not yet a civilian war. It will be very hard work to rebuild everything in terms of education, health and humanitarian issues. It is a very bad situation – the rebels are trapped between all members of society and will need to rebuild that society. But, civil society did not exist in Syria before; the regime monopolized every space, and put civil society under very close control. The opponents to the regime face very heavy work in the future. In 5 years there will be a political conflict between the different groups to decide the way we will rebuild the country. But this political conflict will be in the democratic way. It is the hope of all Syrians after a decade of authoritarianism to extend democracy.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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### **About the Author**

#### **Salam Kawakibi – Arab Reform Initiative**

Salam Kawakibi is a researcher in political and social science. He is Acting Director of the Arab Reform Initiative. His main interests are media, civil societies, international relations and human rights in Arab countries. He also has written many articles on European and Arabic media and books. He is formally educated in economics, international relations, international humanitarian law, international human rights and political science.



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