

Syria's Relations with the European Union under Barcelona Process:1995-2010

Akanksha Gupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India
Ranjith Rebello, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India,
Archana Gupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

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Abstract

International relations are becoming much more important towards achieving goal of sustainable growth and development for any nation. Syria- European Union (EU) relations has always been highly heterogeneous and dynamic and it became highly crucial thus Bashar al-Assad accessed power. The new successor of Syria was educated in London primarily and imprints of Western education has been very often in his policies. Experts believed that new President is Syrian by birth and in blood but Britisher in his work, class and culture. Therefore it was anticipated that Syria- EU bilateral is bound to go through remarkable transitions at the time of regime change. Relations with European Union are very much important for Syria at the time of Bashar succession as Syria was facing International isolation and many conflicts both internal security and external threats. Hence Syria renewed partnership with EU and became a member of Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

Bashar made central tenets of Syria's foreign policy to build a strong relationship with EU. Europe became a major alternate for Syria. It was quite clear that Syria was in need to strengthen its economy and protect it from international isolation and there existed an important reason for Syria's rapprochement with the EU first. One EU closer link will give economic benefits to the changing economy of Syria as the former has built its external policies on constructive engagement with countries in the region, as well as providing economic aid and technical assistance to create a free trade area in the Mediterranean region.

This paper is an attempt to analyze Syria-EU dynamics and engagement, interest and priorities during 1995-2010. It had instituted its multifaceted relations which were primarily guided by economic mutual benefits and political cooperation by EU member countries as well.

Keywords: Barcelona Process or EU-Mediterranean partnership, Syria, European Union, Economic-political relations.

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyze Syria's relations with the EU in the light of factors like globalization, economic liberalization and creation of free trade area, which aimed at promoting economic, political and socio-cultural relations. In the beginning, Syria and the European Economic Community (EEC) had very limited relations under the Cooperation Agreement which were fully based on technical and financial cooperations. In the era of economic liberalization, regional and international scenarios have completely changed. Under this circumstance, Syria objected US decision of imposition of numerous sanctions on it and the consequent international isolation. Therefore, Syria looked towards the EU as an alternative. This was true, at least till 2000, also due to disintegration of the Soviet Union which was Syria's most important ally during the Cold War era. To some extent, the EU not only helped Syria to come out of isolation but has also supported its economy towards gaining stability and financial growth through the Barcelona Process.

This paper focuses on Barcelona Process, under Hafiz al-Assad's period after 1995 because the Barcelona Process was established in that year and it will deal till 2010 under Bashar al-Assad because after March 2011 Syria witnessed its own popular uprising against the regime ushering in an entirely different phase in Syria's history. This period is very important to study because this unique transition in governance and the impact of economic reforms have not received adequate attention among the scholars. More importantly, many changes have been witnessed in Syria with regards to internal movements as well as external dynamics as, smooth transition of power from Hafez al-Assad to Bashar al-Assad, global war on terrorism, the US led invasion on Iraq, SALSA, and assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. These key developments need to be studied within the framework of the Barcelona Process, European neighborhood policy and Association Agreement, which guided Syria- EU relations.

This paper would highlight how the Syrian regime saved and survived in given time period, from the international isolations and brought economic stability by signing several agreements with the help of EU till the period of Syrian uprising.

Background

Syria and the European Countries shared very good economic relations with respect to agriculture sector and oil industries in the 1970s under President Hafiz al-Assad. This was based on the "Cooperation Agreement, 1977". This agreement gave concurrent definitions of the relationship between Syria and European Economic Community (EEC) and also promoted economic cooperation as well as trade between them with regard to upliftment of development in all sectors. During later phase, Syria also experienced many phases of economic reforms; foreign trade and exchange policies played a major role to accelerate these reforms. But after few years, the status of the Syrian foreign trade system became highly restrictive in nature and this approach reflected in various economic-

political constraints in the Syrian economic reforms which Syria faced. Consequently, Syria has shown its poor credibility both at home and outside. To get over from these backlashes Syria became a member of Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs) under **European Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or Barcelona Process** that began in 1995. It was an initiative between EU and Mediterranean countries which was greatly facilitated by the political atmosphere created due to the Oslo Process. Later, Syria negotiated with the EU on Association Agreement (AA) in 1998 as a last country of MPCs and initialed on AA in October 2004. Eventually the EU became Syria's main trading partner.

Syria is located at the very heart of West Asia and thus it enjoys exceptional geographic importance. Its geography has determined both the threats and the opportunities. Syria has relatively sizeable population with a limited manpower base and little strategic depth or deterrence to invasion. This is very clear for decision makers of Syria that Syria's natural and economic resources were too limited to support their policy ambitions without any external assistance. The geo-political condition of Syria opened so many doors and declared it as a dominant power in the Levant. After the establishment of Israel, the same geo-political situation has also made Syria and Israel natural competitors for the Levant.

The European Union (EU) is a group of 'multifaceted institutions' based on politico-economic interests primarily. After the Cold War, European countries collaborated and came under one umbrella known as the European Union. This era has been marked as very significant because of the dissolution of Soviet Union and the transition of the world from being bipolar to unipolar. International relations became much more pertinent towards achieving multi-dimensional goals of sustainable growth and development for any nation in the globe. As a result, the foreign policy of all countries changed and many countries became a part of the 'New World Order'. Syria had shared a very close relation with the Soviet Union, and its visible influence clearly reflected on Syrian's domestic as well as foreign policy. The United States (US) has assimilated a different policy for West Asian countries which became very much visible in the region since the establishment of Israel. After the Cold War, the US continued with its hostile policy towards Syria. As a result, Syria had to move closer towards the EU as a balancing mechanism. However, the dynamics of relations with each geographical region is guided by its specific needs as well as its capacities.

Practically, Barcelona Process was based on country's resources and its dominance in the region but overall its main ambition was to push forward all the partner countries towards the aimed development through security & political upliftment, common economic and financial policy and cultural as well as social measures. The Barcelona Process had brought twelve Mediterranean countries named as Syria, Algeria, Cyprus, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Malta, Morocco, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey under its provisions and moved ahead for the Association Agreement. There were some important factors which determined Syria's engagement with the EU. A closer link with the EU would give economic benefits to the stagnant economy of Syria, as the EU had built its external policies on constructive engagement with countries in the region, and

also on providing economic aid and technical assistance to create a free trade area in the Mediterranean region. Another objective was to restructure Syrian economy because Syria and United States relations deteriorated following the 2003 the US led invasion of Iraq.

Primarily, constructive relations with the EU provided the Syrian regime with the necessary legitimacy to achieve complete acceptance among the nations, despite its antagonistic stance on regional affairs. Syria assumed that the EU could be an important mediator to normalize relations with the US. Syria has ties with Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran at the same time its objections against war in Iraq affected its relationship with the US. Hence the strategic reorientation with Europe became an important part of the act of rebalance. The EU was aware of the compulsions behind Syria's inclinations towards it, which weakened Syria's bargaining position. Syria was in need of economic help in the form of investment, technical assistance and for development of strategic assets. However, the Barcelona Process started losing its credibility and feasibility as a multilateral platform after beginning of the second Intifada in 2000/2001. But the EU tried to maintain its partnership with bilateral and sub-regional initiatives. The EU took full advantage of Syria's situation and thereby pushed for an Association Agreement whose strict provisions, including military ones, went well beyond what the EU had demanded of other associated countries in the region. It seemed that the EU, while stopping short of advocating regime change in Syria, certainly aimed to bring the regime not only within the Mediterranean free trade area in which the EU is dominant by forcing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to accelerate the speed of market reforms, but also to make Syria accept a new order in the region. This meant withdrawal from Lebanon, unilateral arms reductions, reviewing ties with Islamist non-state actors and acting as a mediator with Iran. It was anticipated that in the exchange, EU would sign an Association Agreement which would bring economic benefits and would work as positive catalyst between Syria and the US and further 'put in a good word' for both the nations.

Syria-European Community relations under the Cooperation Agreement

Syria faced several regional and international changes under Hafiz al-Assad presidency. His primary aim was to bring back Syria at a dominant position and it had not been possible without economic liberalization. Consequently, he opened the gates of economy to allow more flexibility in the public and private sectors¹. Syrian economy was in transition because whole West Asian region was facing different phases of hike and drop in the oil prices. These changes pushed forward the whole region to create an investor friendly environment to attract foreign investors and it proved to be an eye opener for President Hafiz al-Assad. He understood the intricate relationship between economic prosperity and political stability².

¹ Lesch, David W.(1999), *Historical and political culture in Syria: obstacles to integration in Modern Syria from Ottoman rule to pivotal role in Middle East*, UK: Sussex Academics Press.

² Efrat, Moshe (1999), *Syria: Economic Development, Achievements, problems and prospects*, in "Modern Syria: from ottoman rule to pivotal role in the Middle East" edited by Moshe Ma'oz, Joseph Ginat and Onn Winckler, Brighton: Sussex Academic press.

Syria and EU (European Economic Community then) joined hands for cooperation in 1977 through the Cooperation Agreement for the first time. This treaty governed Syria-EU relation. The 'Cooperation Agreement' was based on agricultural and trade issues³. The Agreement provided duty free access to the EU markets for several Syrian industrial products, tariff concessions for some agriculture products and, it also encouraged economic dialogues between Syria and European community⁴. The Cooperation agreement was signed under the framework of community of Mediterranean policy. Later, some additional protocols were introduced to fulfill the aim of extending and enlarging the community on geographical basis.⁵ Consequently, amendments to the Cooperation Agreement were made in 1986 as well as in 1994.⁶ Until the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, the Cooperation Agreement was the source of funding for the EU's development cooperation with Syria⁷. Later, in a large number of cases, the Association Agreement replaced Cooperation Agreement thereby intensifying the relations between the partners.⁸

Syria and the EU Relations under the Barcelona Process or EMP

The EU observed that, the western powers were fighting for their dominance and control on production and consumption of oil in the region. As a result the EU approached all West Asian countries to sign 'Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)' in Barcelona. Syria participated in the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference on 27- 28 November 1995. The Barcelona Process was a multilateral initiative to connecting all members of the southern and eastern neighbors in the Mediterranean through political, economic and socio-cultural relations, in the hope of bringing stability, peace, coexistence and prosperity in the region.⁹ Syria and other regime of the southern Mediterranean region came under EU's engagement interest in the 1990s under Barcelona Process which was related to economic liberalization, political changes and security. But in case of Syria, EU's desire for this engagement could not reciprocated.¹⁰

³ European Commission (1996) Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Barcelona Declaration and Work Programme, Euro-Mediterranean Conference, Barcelona 27-28 November 1995, Brussels: European Commission, DG IB – External Relations.

⁴ Bechev, Dimitar and Nicolaidis, Kalypso (2008) "Integration without Accession: The EU's Special Relationship with the Countries in Its Neighbourhood", RAMSES Working Paper 10/08 February, European Studies Centre: University of Oxford.

⁵ Raddawi, Taysir (2007), 'Syria far from social market economy', 25 June, [Online: web] Accessed on 09 January 2014, URL: <http://www.alsafahat.net>.

⁶ European Commission (1994) 'Strengthening the Mediterranean Policy of the European Union: Establishing a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership', COM (94), 427 final, Brussels, 19 October.

⁷ European Commission (1996) Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Barcelona Declaration and Work Programme, Euro-Mediterranean Conference, Barcelona 27-28 November 1995, Brussels: European Commission, DG IB – External Relations.

⁸ Gillespie, Richard (2006), "Onward but not Upward: The Barcelona Conference of 2005", *Mediterranean Politics*, 11 (2), 271-278. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629390600683014>.

⁹ Winckler, Onn (ed) (1999), *Historical and political culture in Syria: obstacle to integration in Modern Syria from Ottoman rule to pivotal role in the Middle East*, UK: Sussex Academics Press.

¹⁰ Amin, Samir and Ali El Kenz (2005), *Europe and the Arab World: patterns and prospects for the new relationship*, London: Zed Books.

Hinnebusch (1997)¹¹ and Perthes (2011)¹² mentioned that the Barcelona Process established an elaborate institutional arrangement, which opened unilateral, bilateral and multilateral dimensions of negotiations and relationships. Also, EMP gave a platform to all West Asian countries to establish a peaceful and prosperous relation. Moreover, two years later in December 1997 the Council of Ministers gave mandate to the Commission to start the official negotiations on the conclusion of Euro-Mediterranean Agreement between EU and Syria. Subsequently, in the beginning of Barcelona process in 1995, the main action included the negotiation of new sets of bilateral agreements with the partner states and replacing the prior generation of cooperation agreements with much more widespread and ambitious Euro-Med Association Agreements (European Commission; Barcelona Declaration 1996¹³, Europa World 2004¹⁴) .

Dostal and Zorob¹⁵ discussed about the Syria and EU relations, under Euro-Mediterranean Partnerships general framework between the EU and Mediterranean countries including Syria. Euro-Mediterranean Partnership mentioned that in the Barcelona declaration, the Euro-Mediterranean partners established three main objectives for the partnership. First, the definition of a common area of peace and stability through the reinforcement of political and security dialogue under Political and Security Chapter. Second, the construction of a zone of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free trade area in Economic and Financial Chapter. Third and the last, the rapprochement between people through a social, cultural and human partnership aimed at encouraging understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies in Social, Cultural and Human Chapter.¹⁶

After readjustment of Oil prices in the region created a huge financial problem for Syria, therefore Syria opened its border for Free Trade and to stop migration and create employment to strengthen its economic, financial and political condition (Barcelona Process Online).¹⁷ One dimension of the Barcelona Process considered as failure because it used as a tool to integrate Israeli into the region with all levels of the West Asian countries as new markets with lesser restrictions and tariffs, open political dialogues and peace strategy (Youngs 2006).¹⁸ It was an alliance between two imperialist powers: first, Europe that hope for economic and financial benefits and second, Israel that looking for

¹¹ Hinnebusch, Raymond A.(1997), "Syria: The politics of economic liberalization", *Third World Quarterly*, 18(2), 249-65.

¹² Perthes, Volker (2011), Europe and Arab Spring, "*Survival*", 53(6), 73-84.

¹³ European Commission (1996) Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Barcelona Declaration and Work Programme, Euro-Mediterranean Conference, Barcelona 27-28 November 1995, Brussels: European Commission, DG IB – External Relations.

¹⁴ Europa World (2004) 'EU-Syria End of Negotiations for an Association Agreement', URL: <http://www.europaworld.org/week198/eusyria291004.htm>.

¹⁵ Dostal, Jorg Michael and Anja Zorob (2009), *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean relationship*, United States: Lynne Rienner.

¹⁶ European Commission (2004d) 'Euro-Med Partnership: Syria National Indicative Programme 2005-2006', URL: http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/syria/csp/syrie_nip05_06_en.pdf.

¹⁷ Barcelona Declaration, adopted at the Euro- Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995.

¹⁸ Youngs,R.(2006), *Europe and the Middle East*, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner.

recognition and normalization in the region. In totality, the Barcelona Process could be considered neither as a failure nor as a successful because it was one a largest cooperation agreement at the bilateral level and union level as well.¹⁹

Political and Security Aspects

Mohns and Cavatorta²⁰ argued that when Bashar came in to power in 2000, the EU tried to take advantage in the name of liberalization and started forcing for negotiating the 'Agreements'. As a result the EU put its effort to stabilize the region through the economic cooperation, aid for political reform and cultural exchanges (European Commission, Barcelona Declaration 2008).

After disintegration of Soviet Union, Syria lost its support and Syria completely shifted its relationship towards West and Europe. But, when Vladimir Putin became President of Russia, a new political and strategic relationship re-established with Putin's Russia by Hafiz al-Assad and this forwarded to Bashar. Damascus became seventh largest arms importer client of Russia²¹. It strengthened gradually, especially when Russia settled bilateral debt of Syria in 2005. In addition, Syria endeavored to improve the bilateral relationship with the US by joined its coalition forces against in Iraq during 'Iraq's occupation of Kuwait'. But it did not give any significant result and became an eye opener incident for Syrian regime. Hence, tactically Syria re-approached Iraq's president Saddam Hussein and relied some more years for oil deliveries from Iraq because Syria was a rent oil exporter and got Iraqi oil at subsidized prices. This helped Syrian economy as well as Iraqi economy, because Iraq was facing International isolation. When this rent oil (pipeline) was shut down by the US led invasion of Iraq in March 2003²².

Same time the US imposed harsh sanctions on the Syria, through the Syrian Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Act (SALSA) which was approved by Congress and signed by President Bush in May 2003.²³ Extended sanctions over accusing Syria for Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in July 2005. American sanctions worked to isolate Syria economically. As a result, Syria shifted its economic relations with the EU and eastward to Russia and Asia.²⁴

¹⁹ Zorob, Anja (2007a), 'The Potential of Regional Integration Agreements (RIAs) in Enhancing the Credibility of Reform: The Case of the Syrian-European Association Agreement', German Institute of Global and Area Studies Working Paper 51, May.

²⁰ Mohns, Erik and Francesco Cavatorta (2010), ""Yes, he can" A reappraisal of Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad", *Mediterranean Politics*, 15 (2), 289-298.

²¹ Hinnebusch, Raymond A. (2005), "Globalization and Generational Change: Syrian Foreign Policy between Regional Conflict and European Partnership", in, Gerd Nonneman (ed.), *Analyzing Middle East Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, New York: Routledge.

²² Zisser, Eyal (2003), "Does Bashar al-Asad Rule Syria?", *Middle East Quarterly Winter*, 10(1):11-17.

²³ Perthes, Volker (2004), *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of change*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Lawson, Fred H (ed.) (2009), *Demystifying Syria*, Beirut: The London Middle East Institute SOAS, Saqi.

Perthes²⁵ (2011) discusses how the new president Bashar al-Assad faced many potential risks internally and externally after his succession, he was looking for high economic, financial reform and less political reform, hence some particular provision of the agreement became a big hurdle to establish a healthy relationship with EU, even though EU continuously worked for economic liberalization and stability in the region. Zorob²⁶ argued that a small number of studies deal with complex and controversial relations between Syria and the EU. Rubin observed and defined EU's indulgence with Syria and other countries of the region with admittedly a considerable degree of exaggeration as 'an exemplar of a (new) sort of dictatorships which is the biggest threat to the peace, stability and democracy for the world at present'.²⁷

The EU's general objective for Syria and other partners was stated in the Barcelona Declaration which was to turn the Mediterranean basin into an area of dialogue exchange and cooperation guaranteeing peace. Stability and prosperity requires strengthening of democracy and respect for the human rights, sustainable and balanced economic and social development, measures to combat poverty and promotion (Barcelona Declaration 1995, online). The EU became more significant for Syria because of comprehensive reform of the political and economic system to bring Syria into line with the requirements of the global economy in which EU plays a primary role and with the values that the EU supports, namely political pluralism and respect for human rights.²⁸

Social, economical and cultural dimensions

Syria relations with the EU covered wide dimensions through the Euro- Mediterranean Partnership. Social, economic, cultural and human partnership one of the main objectives by this both were encouraging the understanding between cultural and exchange between civil societies. Cooperations also extended from education and culture to fight against crime, money laundering drugs, control and prevention on illegal immigration (European Commission 2008). The aims of the Barcelona Process was modernizing social and economic structures and promoting various programmes for the region and to developed the market economy, private sector, technology transfer, and the economic integration. Through this process, Syria was able to promote free trade area, harmonizing customs duty rules and procedures and eliminating unwarranted technical barriers to trade in agricultural products.²⁹

²⁵ Perthes, Volker (2011), Europe and Arab Spring, "*Survival*", 53(6), 73-84.

²⁶ Zorob (2007b), Reform without Adjustment: The Syrian Style of Economic Opening, in: Fuertig, Henner (ed.) *The Arab Authoritarian Regimes between Reform and Persistence*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

²⁷ Rubin, Barry (2007), *The Truth about Syria*, NewYork: Palgrave MacMillan.

²⁸ Hyde-Price, Adrain (2006), "Normative power Europe: a realist critique," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13 (2), 217-234.

²⁹ Cammack, Paul (2006), "The Politics of Global Competitiveness", Papers in the Politics of Global Competitiveness, No. 1, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

But the specific objectives to be attained vary from country to country.³⁰ The AAs and the wider EMP instruments are simply tools aimed at strengthening EU's economic interests in the region.³¹ The political dimension of the Agreements that it is irrelevant mainly when it comes for being serious about the promotion of human rights and the democracy. This supposedly occurs because the goals of the EU in the region are in conflict with each other. For instance, support for economic liberalization and institutional transformation can only be carried out with the accord of the ruling regimes and through the state's administration. Thus, the pursuit of economic liberalization contradicts the political pillar of this partnership, and that is the pursuit of democratic change and protection of human rights.^{32,33} To be blunt, the rise of political Islam has not been met by democratization, inclusion in the political process, and protection of the civil rights but with repression, human rights abuses, and *façade* political pluralism.³⁴

Syria has encountered the neo-liberal model in his way with the support of relative outsider capitalist economy and it has used his resources to construct national security of state to balance its opponent and recover Golan Heights. Historically, Syria has been a culturally rich, 'self sufficient' in economic fields such as agriculture production and energy supplies.³⁵ Later, various factors affected its economy in negative ways. So, regional liberalization with in West Asian counties was not sufficient to support economic conditions because it was too narrow on industrial basis as they all produce same commodities. Hence, EU has become a very crucial and Syria's relations towards the EU became strategic, political step to strengthen its economy and achieve some important objectives such as achieving a rapid and fast economic, financial and social development with help of public and private sectors.³⁶

Syria was facing the process of liberalization along with other West Asian countries and was ready to remove its border tariff for free trade in Mediterranean region (Parthes 2011). In Association Agreement the EU's approach towards Syria strongly modernization model, whereby market-oriented economic reforms and administrative restructuring of the state apparatus will inevitably be followed by more significant political reforms and protection of human rights. Such an approach suited the Syrian counter part because it privileged at the beginning of the relationship, economic and

³⁰ Brach,J. (2007), "The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: The Role and Impact of the Economic and Financial Dimension", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 10 (4), 555–579.

³¹ *ibid*

³² Bechev, Dimitar and Nicolaidis, Kalypso (2008) "*Integration without Accession: The EU's Special Relationship with the Countries in Its Neighbourhood*", RAMSES Working Paper 10/08 February, European Studies Centre: University of Oxford.

³³ Youngs,R.(2003), "Does Bashar al-Asad Rule Syria?", *Middle East Quarterly Winter*,10(1):11-17.

³⁴ Cavatorta, F. et al.(2008), "EU External Policy-Making: "Realistically" Dealing with Authoritarianism? The Case of Morocco", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 13 (3): 357–376.

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Efrat, Moshe (1999), Syria: Economic Development, Achievements, problems and prospects, in "*Modern Syria: from ottoman rule to pivotal role in the Middle East*" edited by Moshe Ma'oz, Joseph Ginat and Onn Winckler, Brighton: Sussex Academic press.

administrative reforms with political issues to later stage.^{37, 38}

Therefore, when one looks more closely at developments in the West Asian countries since the EU's engagement with it through the EMP, the AAs, and the ENP, it emerges that some positive changes reflecting the normative values of the EU have truly occurred. Syria has always been as a member in sharing complex relations with the European Union. These all agreements were only tools to impose neo-liberalism and benefited EU.³⁹ Even negotiations between Syria and the EU have started from Barcelona process and it could not ratify till 2010. It is imperative and clear that the EU has opted different policies with all countries of West Asia and pushing Syria ahead to sign it. In case of Association Agreements, EU has a long list of demands only for Syrians, which is a mix up of political and economical issues. Despite all, Syria has continued its relations with EU, because EU is not turning down its earlier economic cooperations and according to French president Sarkozy, "the Association Agreement should re-enter the agenda and should be ratified at some as yet unspecified point".⁴⁰

Conclusion

Syria (Mediterranean)–EU (Europe) relations highlight the seriousness and embedded relationship among two distinct geographic regions of the world. The EU's policy was an innovation in terms of its regional affairs so far as it demanded much from Syria and for a time this strategy appeared working with the EU freezing the cooperations over the assassination of Lebanese Prime minister Rafik Hariri, and by UNSC resolution 1559 which required Syria to fully withdraw its troops from Lebanon, though, the Syrian representatives were still being called for the continuation of negotiations with the EU. At a time when the US was putting pressure on Syria through the reinforcement of economic sanctions, Syria looked towards the EU to accelerate its domestic and economic reforms in order to be seen as a reliable partner. Syria fulfilled the demands of the international community and withdrew Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005. France saw this as an outcome of unfreezing the negotiations on the Association Agreement.

However, the regional dynamics began to change quite dramatically and Syria benefited from this change. A number of factors contributed to the strength of Syrian regime and its foreign policy. First of all, the US got entangled in Iraq and the fears that Syria could be the next target were assuaged. It had become evident that democracy by invasion was not a successful strategy for the international community to pursue. Secondly, the absence of Syrian troops in Lebanon was perceived as the reason that led to the *Tammuz* war (13 July 2006, Israeli- Hezbollah war) and also to the renewed fighting between the different

³⁷ Cavatorta, F. et al.(2008), "EU External Policy-Making: "Realistically" Dealing with Authoritarianism? The Case of Morocco", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 13 (3): 357–376.

³⁸ Hyde-Price, Adrain (2006), "Normative power Europe: a realist critique," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13 (2), 217-234.

³⁹ Hinnebusch, Raymond A. (2009), "Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, July 1(1) 15-26.

⁴⁰ Seale, Patrick (2010), *The struggle for Arab Independence: Riad al-Solh and the makers of modern Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lebanese factions. Thirdly, it became obvious again that without Syria there could be no successful peace process in the West Asian Region. Finally, the war in Gaza in 2006, a series of battles between Palestinian militants and Israel Defense Forces confirmed once more that there was indeed a solid constituency across the Arab world for the politics of resistance that Syria has openly subscribed to since a very long period. Further, at the international level, Syria was successful in building a new political and strategic relationship with Russia after Vladimir Putin came to power.

This led to a significant turnaround in Syria's international fortunes and it made western diplomats and thinkers realize that Syria was an unavoidable country in regional dynamics. Thus, in July 2008, a meeting was held in Paris to launch the 'Union for the Mediterranean' (UM), it was completely different from the Barcelona Process because it excluded non-Mediterranean states of Europe and there, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was probably the most important invited guest. Further, French President Nicolas Sarkozy had also invited Bashar al-Assad not only to attend the meeting on the UM, but also to participate in celebrations in Paris. This was considered as a very strong signal towards recognizing Syria's crucial role in West Asia and therefore, the beginning of Syria's recognition in the European region. After a long period, Syria has been re-considered as a dominant player in the international affairs.

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