



**Report on the CEIPA Round Table discussion:**

***“Syria: A Major Challenge for European and International Efforts  
towards Peace, Democracy and Human Rights”***

***25 January 2012***

***European Parliament, Brussels***

***Room PHS, A1E***

***From 2:30 to 5:30 p.m.***

*This Roundtable was one in the series of events organised by CEIPA (Centre for European and International Policy) since May 2011 in response to the ongoing uprising in the Middle East and North African countries. The round table was chaired by Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy, CEIPA Executive Director.*

This round table was particularly well attended given the importance of the subject. Present were the representatives of governments, European institutions, NGO's and academia. In his introduction Mr. von Bethlenfalvy explained that the purpose of the CEIPA Round table is to provide a platform for discussion, taking into account different views and opinions and not taking positions. Below is the short summary of the main highlights:

**Mr Todd Huizinga, Political Counsellor, United States Mission to the European Union** started his intervention by explaining the complexity of the present situation in Syria. The regime's security forces have unleashed armed forces against its own citizens, creating an unprecedented level of violence. The

international community and in particular the Human Rights UN Council already made clear that the crimes of the regime were unacceptable and would not be tolerated by the people. The European Union and the United States can add to the successful resolution of the crises by taking strong diplomatic action and putting further pressure to the regime, which seems to be stepping up the violence in spite of the presence of the Arab League mediators. The US supports the Arab League efforts to broker up a political solution through the implementation of the Transitional plan. The US would also support the UN Security Council resolution based on the Arab Leagues' mission report. In response to the international pressure the current regime had made clear that they keep minorities as hostages. Mr. Huizinga concluded by stressing how important it is that the revolution remains peaceful, as the objective must be a stable, democratic Syria with equality of all before the law.

**Ms Hivin Kako, Spokesperson of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights** accused the Syrian regime of following the strategy of oppression. Those who dare to challenge the regime are considered part of a conspiracy. She pointed to the growing number of victims as a result of grave violations of human rights, mentioning 4022 civilians reported to be killed, of which 229 children, 149 women and more than 203 who were submitted to torture, as well as 1672 members of the army, security forces and army defectors.. 30 000 people took to the streets in protest against the regime in the city of Homs, 70 000 in Duma on 31.12 2011, just two days after the arrival of the Arab League mission representatives. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights supports the mission of the observers who should be trained to perform an independent mission and not be taken by hand by the regime. The EU, which expressed its fears of the civil war, should put further pressure to the regime, as the sanctions introduced so far hurt ordinary people instead of the regime. Ms. Kako also pointed to the problem of fragmented Syrian opposition, which would benefit of EU support.

**Mrs Patsy Sörensen, Director of PAYOKE and CEIPA founding member,** recounted her own experience in Syria, when she was working there on a project related to human trafficking. She admitted that the question of Syrian uprising looked more complicated than the Libyan one. Speaking about the possible EU role, Mrs. Sörensen called for an approach based on values, not only money. Pointing to the complex and somewhat unclear situation, Mrs Sörensen suggested involving countries outside Europe such as India or Brazil, in the quest for possible solutions. She also underlined the European way that should be pursued as part of the EU policy and in cooperation with the people from Syria. Recalling the situations when she was visiting Syria from 2008-2011, she pointed to the progress that was achieved and expressed hope that the freedom of religion that reigned in that time would be preserved.

Several participants took the floor following the speeches of the main panellists.

**Mrs Anne - Marie Lizin, Honorary speaker and former President of the Belgian Senate** reported about her visit to Syria in December 2011, saying that the interior situation in the country bears little similarity with what is thought about it abroad. She pointed to the difficulty in identifying the opposition's common stance, due to differences attributed to the ethnic minorities and groups living in the country. The opposition in Turkey for example is more the problem than the solution, given the large Kurdish majority and their claims with respect to the future of the country.

**Mrs Lizin's guest, Mr Khaled Issa**, explained a complex ethnic configuration of the country and its particular regional situation with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Jordan (with its large Palestinian minority) and Israel in the neighbourhood. He also pointed to the presence of Islamic forces, some of them being part of the opposition, especially outside the country. What is needed is a unified opposition platform, including those who represent the "silent majority". However, military intervention seems to be brushed aside, as it would further complicate the already complex situation.

**Mr Atlerkawi Talal, President of the National Committee to Support the Syrian revolution** stressed the difficult situation of the Syrian people facing not only repression of the regime but the obstruction of Iran and Russia, the two countries which are said to provide support to the Syrian regime. As to the Arab League, he expressed his disappointment over their hitherto efforts which seem to produce more words than deeds.

In the discussion, the participants welcomed CEIPA initiative on Syria which provided an excellent opportunity to acquire better information on the development in this country. The issue of the gap between the Syrian opposition in and outside the county, as well as the effectiveness and tailoring of the sanctions were raised several times.

Some participants pointed to the risk of civil war if no action is taken quickly. People are dying every day and the official figure of 4000 victims is likely to be underestimated. The government is said to play the sectarian card, pitting one ethnic group against the other. A NATO intervention, like the one in Libya, is no option in Syria. Because of this, all diplomatic means should be used and stronger international pressure needs to be exerted to achieve peace.

Mr. Huizinga reiterated the multi faceted, complex situation in Syria and stressed the need for the Syrian people to freely choose their democratic government, so they can live in peace. He pointed to the good cooperation between the US and the European External Action Service in coordinating efforts against Syrian regime.

Concluding remarks were delivered by **Ms. Jelena von Helldorff, CEIPA Senior Policy Advisor**, who summed up the key conclusions of the meeting on the situation in Syria:

- Complex, multifaceted internal and regional situation

- The presence of ethnic minorities whose interests and claims must be taken into account in future decision process
- Divided opposition (inside and outside the country) and the absence of the coherent message
- The need for quick action, in the absence of which the risk of civil war becomes a real threat
- The Libyan scenario and the NATO intervention are excluded in the case of Syria
- More forceful EU action is required, the EU along with the US should increase the pressure on the regime
- Sanctions are not efficient enough, they hit people instead of hurting the regime
- The EU should open diplomatic dialogue with Russia, which allegedly provides support to the regime
- The official regime continues the killing, violating basic human rights principles
- Democratic solution is needed, the Syrian people should be able to choose their government

**Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy**, CEIPA Executive Director wound up the round table and thanked the speakers and participants for their valuable input and lively discussion.

### **Preliminary Conclusions and Recommendations for the EU policy in the region:**

The CEIPA Round table on the situation in Syria revealed the expectations for a bolder European Union action in the country. Stronger diplomatic action, greater pressure on Bashar al Assad and better visibility of the EU foreign action was pointed out as necessary to help resolving the present crisis. One way may be to expand the existing context for cooperation between Iran and the EU through the so called twin track approach, combining sanctions and deepening dialogue, to put further pressure on the Syrian regime to stop violence and comply with the human rights principles. The EU could also use the fact that Turkey, a major player in the region, is an EU candidate country, which can exert influence and use its leverage on its neighbours. The round table discussion made clear that sanctions, albeit necessary, are far from being a sufficient instrument to bring about peace. The EU, as a proponent of the soft power approach, should step up its diplomatic action and work on the opening up of a dialogue, in cooperation with EU member states and the US.