

Frequently Asked Questions on EU restrictive measures against the Syrian regime

1. Why has the EU introduced sanctions? What is the motivation?

The EU restrictive measures respond to the unacceptable repression perpetrated by the Syrian regime on the Syrian people. They are a reaction to the regime's policy of arbitrary killing, injury, detention and abuse of many peaceful protesters, and to widespread violations of human rights. They target those responsible for these acts and those who support them.

When popular protests erupted in Syria and the Syrian regime responded with violent crackdowns on protesters, the EU repeatedly called for an end to the violence, release of detained protesters, implementation of reforms and opening of a genuine and truly inclusive national dialogue. However, the regime's violence went on despite these repeated calls. Therefore, the EU introduced an embargo on arms and equipment that might be used for internal repression. The EU also suspended its financial cooperation with the Syrian government and started targeting individuals responsible for the repression with an asset freeze and a travel ban.

In the meantime President al-Assad made a number of promises to initiate reforms. Unfortunately, these promises never materialised and the announced reforms were never implemented. Instead, the repression escalated to unprecedented levels, including large-scale use of military force. At that point, the EU noted that Bashar al-Assad had lost all credibility and legitimacy, and made clear he had to step aside so that a way could be opened toward a peaceful transition to democracy. The escalation of repression also directly led to the broadening of EU restrictive measures.

2. Why has the EU introduced sanctions? What is the aim?

The EU restrictive measures aim to contribute to stopping the brutal repression. They will deprive the Syrian regime of financial revenues which it is using to maintain its violent crackdown. In this way the EU strives to assist the Syrian people in achieving their legitimate aspirations.

Among its first measures in May the EU adopted an embargo on arms and equipment that may be used for internal repression. The EU also froze the assets of those responsible for the repression and imposed a travel ban on them. Further individuals, institutions and companies were gradually targeted as their responsibility was revealed. Nevertheless, the violent campaign continued.

Seeing that the violence escalated the EU decided to introduce a ban on the import of Syrian crude oil. This measure is in force since 2 September, which means no new purchase contracts are allowed. The EU ban will strongly hit the regime's revenues as Syria exports more than 90% of its oil to EU countries. A further financial impact will follow from the suspension of cooperation projects that still remained in operation to this point and from the asset freeze of a number of individuals, organisations and companies that fund the regime.

A peaceful transition to democracy can only start in an environment free from violence and intimidation. That is impossible under a regime that has clearly shown its unwillingness to halt its violent campaign against peaceful protesters. In this sense, all EU measures aim at assisting the Syrian people to achieve their legitimate aspirations for a free, peaceful, pluralist and democratic Syria.

3. Whom does the EU target? Does the EU want to harm Syria and its people?

The EU targets the Syrian regime, which has lost legitimacy, and its supporters. By doing that the EU supports the Syrian people who have been suffering from the regime's recent crackdowns and long-term oppression.

The EU targets the Syrian regime for the reasons given above. This means, above all, targeting those responsible for or associated with the violent repression. But it also includes those who benefit from the regime or support it. Such individuals, organisations or companies have become directly or indirectly complicit in the repression because the regime has made it very clear that it will continue carrying out its brutal crackdowns.

The EU is interested in having a strong, stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Syria as its partner and neighbour. That is the reason why the EU proposed the strengthening of EU-Syria relations and negotiated with Syria an Association Agreement that was left open for the Syrian government's signature for almost two years, until the EU retracted the offer in the face of the regime's violent repression against the Syrian people. The EU has no interest in harming Syria as a country or its people. The EU restrictive measures are designed to have maximum impact on the regime while minimising any potential negative impacts on Syria's people.

4. How to avoid EU sanctions?

Those who stand with the people, refrain from supporting the regime and from reaping the regime's benefits will not be targeted. If those already listed can demonstrate that they have dissociated from the regime, their de-listing will be considered.

Individuals, organizations and companies are targeted and designated (listed) for an asset freeze and travel ban because they support the Syrian regime by their activity, funds or other resources. They might also be targeted because they directly benefit from the existence of the regime, from their affiliation with it or from its policies, while the regime has shown its continued determination to pursue its violent repression of peaceful protesters. Those who say "no" to the regime and "yes" to the people's legitimate aspirations will not be targeted by the EU measures.

De-listing is possible at any point. Those who can make the case that they no more have any activities of the aforementioned character can seek de-listing and their requests will be considered. In addition, since the EU is a community based on law, all EU legislation including decisions for listing can be legally challenged in court.

5. Does the EU only impose sanctions while doing nothing else?

The EU keeps open the door for communication with the Syrian government and is ready to engage with Syrian non-governmental partners. The EU will be prepared to offer broad support during and after a future transition in Syria, according to Syria's needs.

The EU continues to be open to good relations and cooperation with the Syrian people and any legitimate government according to the people's choosing. However, the EU has been very clear about its condemnation of the regime's action and will, therefore, not cooperate with the regime, the current government authorities, nor anyone supporting them. At the same time, the EU has maintained its communication channels with the Syrian government, notably its Delegation in Damascus. Cutting such channels would be counterproductive.

As far as there remain Syrian non-governmental partners, such as civil society, NGOs or individuals (e.g. activists, human rights defenders), the EU is ready to engage with them and consider possibilities for cooperation. During the Arab Spring, the EU offered generous support and assistance to Tunisia and Egypt with the aim to assist the many challenges that the transformation processes bring with them. The EU will aim at providing similar offers for Syria and the Syrian people when appropriate and in accordance with Syria's needs.

6. Will Syria be treated in a similar way to Libya? Is foreign intervention in Syria contemplated?

No one wants foreign military intervention in Syria. It is clear that developments in Syria are in the hands of the Syrian people and a future transition must be fully owned and led by them.

Unlike in the Libyan case, neither the Syrian people, nor the countries in the region have been requesting outside military assistance for their protection. Therefore, an intervention would be illegitimate, harmful and counter-productive. It would neither help the situation within Syria nor the relations and stability in the regional framework. In addition, as it was the case for Libya, a military intervention would require a mandate of the UN Security Council, which is neither on the table nor foreseen.

7. What gives the EU the right to target the government of a sovereign state?

The EU called on the Syrian regime many times to stop repression, implement reforms and address the legitimate aspirations of the people. Instead, the regime escalated its brutal violence, unlawful killings and grave human rights violations. That requires the EU to act.

The Syrian regime has shown that it is unable to change and unwilling to stop its violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters and Syrian people at large. On the contrary, the repression even escalated. Instead of talking with their people, the Syrian leadership simply continues to kill them. Over two thousand lost lives, thousands remain in detention and there are numerous reports of torture and other abuse. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights indicated these acts could amount to crimes against humanity. In the face of such violence, the EU cannot remain inert when it wields leverage against the perpetrators.