

## **Activists Question EU Human Rights Commitment**

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While European parliament president Hans-Gert Poettering's visit to Syria raises hopes of closer ties between Europe and Damascus, activists are concerned that human rights have slipped off the agenda.

Poettering discussed EU-Syrian relations, Middle East peace and human rights in Syria with President Bashar Al-Assad and other Syrian officials earlier this week.

The visit was a boost for Syria, which is keen to reach an EU-Syrian partnership agreement. This would strengthen political, economic and trade ties between EU nations and Syria, which is seeking international partners to help improve its stuttering economy.

The process to reach an agreement was stalled after the EU isolated Syria following the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. The United Nations implicated Syria in the murder.

Poettering told the German press agency DPA that he raised concerns about human rights issues with Assad, who, he said, "took notice" of the remarks.

"I hope that discussing the issue of human rights will have a positive effect," he said.

The two leaders also agreed that the EU partnership was very important, said Poettering.

Poettering's press office did not respond to an IWPR request for comment.

EU officials say they expect the partnership to be signed sometime this year.

However, the EU decision to engage Damascus without first placing conditions on it to improve its human rights record has irked Syrian activists, who argue that the bloc is not doing enough to pressure the government.

"It's good that human rights issues were raised by a high-level leader," said one attorney and human rights activist from Damascus. "But the question is: what's next"?

Activists are particularly concerned that economic interests could trump human rights concerns if the partnership is signed – despite a declaration by the European parliament that "respect for democratic values, human rights and civil liberties are prerequisites" for any partnership with Syria. The parliament has also insisted that the agreement's human rights clause include an "effective control mechanism".

“It will be very frustrating if the agreement is ratified before there has been any progress on human rights,” said a human rights attorney from the city of Homs.

“European countries only remember human rights when they have problems with the regime.”

A European diplomat in Syria who spoke on condition of anonymity – as did all of the sources for this article – said that if the partnership is ratified, the EU could exercise some influence over human rights issues in Syria.

The Syrian government currently rebuffs European attempts to address human rights issues, arguing that it is a domestic issue, said the source.

Syrian activists said they were divided over whether the EU should try to press Syria to make small concessions, such as releasing political prisoners in poor health, or lobby Damascus for strong legislation protecting rights.

But one human rights activist from Damascus expressed scepticism about the EU’s willingness to improve human rights in Syria, saying European civil society groups could provide more support.

“The EU has no strategy to deal with human rights issues in Syria,” he said. “It’s not even among their priorities.”

The European diplomat insisted that human rights were still on the European political agenda. “We’re doing our best, but our ability to make an impact on this issue is limited,” he said.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

**Location:** Middle East

Palestine

Israel

Syria

**Focus:** Syria

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