



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**Long-Term Implications of the Syrian Conflict on Türkiye-EU Relations
The Refugee Question as a Case Study**

Ph.D. Dissertation

**Student
Amir KAPLAN**

Ph.D. IN MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

December 2024



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**Advisor
Prof. Dr. Mesut ÖZCAN**

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Ethical Compliance Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation of my dissertation, titled "Long-Term Implications of the Syrian Conflict on Türkiye-EU Relations: The Refugee Question as a Case Study," has been carried out in full compliance with all relevant scientific and ethical standards. I affirm that all sources, references, and quotations used have been properly cited in accordance with established academic practices within the text, footnotes, and bibliography. No data has been altered or manipulated in any way, and this dissertation, either in part or in full, has not been submitted as a thesis to any other university. This work represents the outcome of my independent research and constitutes an original academic contribution to the analysis of the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations, with a specific focus on the refugee issue.

Amir KAPLAN
19.12.2024

Abstract

This dissertation examines the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis on Türkiye-EU relations between 2011 and 2024. The study hypothesizes that the Syrian conflict not only had direct impacts on these relations but also led to long-term bilateral consequences, playing a dual role by fostering cooperation on one hand and fueling tensions on the other.

Initially, the direct impacts were seen in the influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye and EU countries, followed by the signing of the 2016 EU-Türkiye agreement. This agreement served as a starting point for cooperation between both sides, contributing to enhanced diplomatic relations and opening the door for potential progress in Türkiye's bid for EU membership.

However, the conflict later became a source of growing tensions, particularly regarding Türkiye's military interventions in Syria, such as "Operation Olive Branch" (2018) and "Operation Peace Spring" (2019). While Türkiye viewed these operations as necessary for safeguarding its national security, several European countries expressed concerns about their impact on regional stability. Additionally, the 2020 Meric River crisis introduced new complexities to Türkiye-EU relations.

The dissertation employs multiple approaches from international relations theories to illustrate how these dynamics were influenced by national interests, security concerns, and identity politics. While cooperation on managing the refugee crisis represented a positive step in bilateral relations, differences regarding Türkiye's military interventions and their political and security implications have led to deepening tensions.

The study concludes that the Syrian conflict was not merely a humanitarian or security issue but has become a key factor in international relations, reshaping bilateral relations, including Türkiye's relationship with the EU, particularly regarding its EU membership bid.

Keywords: Syrian Conflict, Türkiye-EU Relations, Refugee Crisis, Refugee Crisis, Military Interventions, EU Membership

Özet

Bu tez, 2011 ile 2024 yılları arasında Suriye çatışması ve mülteci krizinin Türkiye-AB ilişkileri üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkilerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, Suriye çatışmasının bu ilişkiler üzerinde sadece doğrudan etkiler yaratmakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda uzun vadeli ikili sonuçlara da yol açtığını; bir yandan iş birliğini teşvik ederken, diğer yandan gerginlikleri körüklediğini öne sürmektedir.

Başlangıçta, doğrudan etkiler, Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye ve AB ülkelerine akını ve ardından 2016 Türkiye-AB anlaşmasının imzalanmasıyla görülmüştür. Bu anlaşma, iki taraf arasında iş birliğinin başlangıç noktası olmuş, diplomatik ilişkilerin geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunmuş ve Türkiye'nin AB üyeliği sürecinde potansiyel ilerlemelerin kapısını aralamıştır.

Ancak, çatışma daha sonra özellikle Türkiye'nin Suriye'deki askeri müdahaleleri, örneğin "Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı" (2018) ve "Barış Pınarı Harekâtı" (2019) ile artan gerginliklerin kaynağı haline gelmiştir. Türkiye, bu operasyonları ulusal güvenliğini korumak için gerekli görürken, bazı Avrupa ülkeleri bu müdahalelerin bölgesel istikrar üzerindeki etkileri konusunda endişelerini dile getirmiştir. Ayrıca, 2020 Meriç Nehri krizi, Türkiye-AB ilişkilerine yeni karmaşıklıklar eklemiştir.

Tez, bu dinamiklerin ulusal çıkarlar, güvenlik kaygıları ve kimlik politikaları tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini açıklamak için uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinden çeşitli yaklaşımlar kullanmaktadır. Mülteci krizinin yönetimi konusundaki iş birliği, ikili ilişkilerde olumlu bir adım olarak değerlendirilirken, Türkiye'nin askeri müdahaleleri ve bunların siyasi ve güvenlik açısından sonuçları üzerindeki farklılıklar artan gerilimlere yol açmıştır.

Çalışma, Suriye çatışmasının yalnızca insani veya güvenlik sorunu olmadığını, aynı zamanda uluslararası ilişkilerde kilit bir faktör haline geldiğini ve ikili ilişkileri, özellikle de Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği ile olan üyelik sürecini yeniden şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Suriye Çatışması, Türkiye-AB İlişkileri, Mülteci Krizi, Askeri Müdahaleler, AB Üyeliği.

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LIST OF KEY ABBREVIATIONS

AKP - JDP	AKP: Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)	ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
AMIF	Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund	KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation.	LAS	League of Arab States
CEAS	Common European Asylum System	MENA	Middle East and North Africa
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CNN	Cable News Network	NDF	National Defense Forces
COVID	Coronavirus Disease 2019	NEAR	Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations
CEECs	Central and Eastern European Countries	OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index	OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy	OPCW	Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
DEVCO	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development	PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
EC	European Commission	PYD	Democratic Union Party
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations	SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
EEAS	European External Action Service	SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
ENI	European Neighborhood Instrument	SNA	Syrian National Army
EU	European Union	SNC	Syrian National Council
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force	STJ	Syrians for Truth and Justice
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership	UAR	United Arab Republic
ENP	European Neighborhood Policy	UK	United Kingdom
EPA	The Environmental Protection Agency	UN	United Nations
EP	European Parliament	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
FRIT	Facility for Refugees in Türkiye	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
FSA	Free Syrian Army	UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
FRONTEX	European Border and Coast Guard Agency	UNSC	United Nations Security Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	US/USA	United States of America
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
IFC	International Finance Corporation	YPG	People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
IR	International Relations	YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	WBG	World Bank Group

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Contextual Framework

The Syrian conflict has profoundly impacted Türkiye-EU relations, positioning the refugee crisis as a crucial case study for understanding the long-term dynamics between these entities. As millions have been displaced by the conflict, the influx of refugees has demanded unprecedented cooperation and negotiation, straining resources and reshaping policies on both sides. The Middle East, with its deep historical roots and strategic geopolitical significance, has long been a focal point of international competition. Its vast energy resources and persistent security, economic, and political challenges make it an area of critical interest for both global and regional powers. However, the instability plaguing the region has repercussions that extend well beyond its borders, contributing to global security concerns, economic disruptions, and sociopolitical shifts. Within this context, Türkiye and the European Union's responses to the Syrian refugee crisis exemplify the complexities and interdependencies that define contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The Arab Spring, a series of uprisings that began in Tunisia in late 2010, rapidly spread across the region, with citizens demanding freedom from their regimes. These regimes, in their attempts to maintain power, responded with force, leading to civil unrest and, in some cases, long-standing conflict, as seen in Syria and Yemen. The resulting humanitarian, political, security and economic crises have had far-reaching implications, affecting neighboring countries and the EU, which has historical, political, and economic ties to the Middle East (Lynch, 2012, pp. 1-3).

The Syrian conflict, in particular, has had profound and multifaceted impacts on the region and international relations. The World Bank Group highlights the difficulty in fully capturing these effects, which range from infrastructural destruction and population displacement to economic consequences and human development implications. What began as peaceful protests, quickly escalated into a full-scale armed conflict, drawing in other countries either directly or indirectly and leading to spillovers in neighboring countries and Europe (The World Bank Group, 2017, p. 17).

The conflict started when the regime forces clashed with protesters demanding democratic, social and economic reforms and the release of political prisoners. The regime

responded with excessive military force against civilians, leading to a high number of casualties and injuries (Natil, 2016, p. 77). The demonstrations escalated into violent acts, with demonstrators calling for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. In response, the Syrian army launched attacks on civilians, leading to the formation of various rebel factions, including the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council, and a full-fledged rebellion against the regime.

The unrest was still ongoing, and several long-term outcomes along with political, social, security-associated, and institutional effects were barely noticeable, apart from isolated incidents. Given these limitations, the assessment emphasizes gauging the implications of the conflict in four principal domains: infrastructural devastation, mortality and population dislocation, economic ramifications, and implications for human development (The World Bank Group, 2017, p. iii).

Later on, the Syrian conflict had expanded into a full-fledged proxy war that has turned into a regional crisis (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The presence of conflicting factions fighting each other for power and the division of the Syrian army has complicated the situation and increased the levels of escalation and armament, especially with the intervention by international parties that turned it into a proxy war (Ekşi, 2017). Conflicts inflict immense damage; infrastructure is often destroyed as main sides target economic resources, leading to widespread disruption. Apart from the direct human loss, the country's growth and development suffer too. In Syria, where the conflict has taken a sectarian turn, the societal bonds of the country are further strained; these types of conflicts tend to drag on for years (Jenkins, 2014). The Syrian revolution, in particular, has not only resulted in physical damage but has also torn apart the social fabric of the country. The societal divisions they deepen tend to persist long after the actual fighting ends, making recovery and reconciliation much more difficult.

In 2013, the Syrian conflict escalated significantly with the direct involvement of Iran and Hezbollah, who allied with Assad's regime, offering military, financial, and strategic support. Conversely, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar began to lend their support to these opposition forces. The conflict broadened from a regional dispute to a global crisis as major world powers entered the fray, either supporting Assad's regime or the opposition. Syria became a battleground for proxy wars, reflecting the geopolitical competition among the world's most powerful nations (Ekşi, 2017, pp. 108-109).

As a result, this conflict resulted triggered sectarian divisions, also destabilized national structures, and supplanted them with regional and international affiliations. This has amplified internal rifts within the nation and consequently, diminished the likelihood of a peaceful

political resolution (Jenkins, 2014). The United Nations' characterization of the Syrian conflict as the "worst man-made disaster since World War II" underscores the magnitude and severity of the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Syria since the conflict began (Cheung, et al., 2020, p. 1).

The sectarian nature of the conflict has intensified, and the unity of the rebel groups remains fractious, making a political settlement increasingly unlikely. The involvement of extremist groups poses a future international terrorist threat that could be directed against the West and East (Jenkins, 2014). The movement of refugees, in particular, has been a significant issue, creating political strains in countries that have received large numbers of displaced Syrians.

According to the above-mentioned factors, the Syrian conflict exhibits several key features:

- **Prolonged Duration:** The conflict has continued for over a decade, making it one of the longest ongoing conflicts in recent history.
- **Multiple Actors:** The conflict involves numerous actors, including the regime, rebel groups, extremist organizations like ISIS, and foreign powers such as Russia, Iran, Türkiye, the Gulf countries, EU and the United States.
- **Humanitarian Crisis:** The conflict has resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of Syrians internally displaced or seeking refuge in neighboring countries and globally, especially in Europe.
- **Proxy War:** The conflict has been characterized by proxy war dynamics, with various regional and international powers supporting different sides.
- **Sectarian and Ethnic Divisions:** The conflict has exacerbated existing sectarian and ethnic divisions within Syria.
- **Destruction and Displacement:** The conflict has caused extensive destruction of cities, towns, and infrastructure, as well as displacement of millions of Syrians.

Given these multifaceted aspects, the Syrian conflict is eroding the country's institutional structures and simultaneously fostering ongoing localized disputes. The regime's severe tactics against insurgents, the widespread disorder resulting from the collapse of authority, and the establishment of rigid Islamic governance in some rebel-held areas are causing mass displacement. It remains uncertain as to which faction in the conflict can provide sanctuary for those wishing to evade Islamic autocracy yet unable to persist in sectarian districts supportive

of the regime. For a significant number of Syrians, the sole solution seems to be fleeing abroad with a bleak possibility of return. However, these very refugees may intensify existing sectarian strains in neighboring countries, serving as potential pools for extremist recruitment and as prey for their adversaries. This scenario could produce new waves of fighters and lawbreakers for use in Syria and beyond. The repercussions of Syria's strife will inevitably be something grapple with for many years ahead (Jenkins, 2014). The complexities of the Syrian revolution extend far beyond its national borders, affecting the geopolitical landscape of the entire region, and the global arena. These challenges necessitate the formulation of comprehensive, strategic responses that address the immediate needs for protection and relief, while also considering the long-term implications for stability and peace.

It is not only a physical fight, but also a contest that reshapes the social and political structures of Syria, as well as poses a long-term impact on its stability. Whereas institutions that kept the nation integrated and forged one single Syrian identity have disintegrated, local loyalties through sectarian lines and foreign influences have taken their place, further deepening the division of the country. This is a fractured landscape that, for the most part, makes the possibility of political resolution—one which could knit all parties together and therefore end the conflict—difficult or increasingly distant.

This is thus not a war in the pure sense but one that is multifaceted, focused on changing the social, political, and economic aspects of the country and its region. It is a proxy war that has drawn international actors who are both state and non-state and has had extensive effects beyond the borders of Syria. The humanitarian crisis caused by this conflict is immense, with millions of Syrians displaced and in dire need.

In related issue, UNHCR estimations show that the Syrian war displaced almost 13.5 million people. This put immense pressure on the neighbours of Syria, particularly Türkiye,¹ which initially followed an 'idealist policies' of "zero problems" with its neighbors. The beginning of the Arab Spring and the Syrian war compelled them to make an essential U-turn of this policy. The new developments have made the Turkish government to abandon its zero problems with neighbors' policy² and adopt new strategies in formulating its foreign policy goals and implementing them. Unlike the zero problems with neighbors' policy focused

¹ Lebanon and Jordan have also been significantly impacted due to the influx of Syrian refugees, coupled with some ensuing security threats. In addition, Iraq, another neighboring country, has received a smaller number of refugees. However, its significant challenge lay in the security threat it endured due to the control of ISIS over several of its cities.

² Under "zero problems with neighbors," Türkiye established economic and political alliances in the Middle East, forged strategic relationships with regional actors, took part in regional initiatives, and sought to play an active role in the resolution of regional conflicts. Türkiye's mediating role in regional conflicts won it favorable notice in the Arab world. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-search-zero-problem-policy>

primarily on the neighboring countries, the new approach is based on particular political and economic issues that offer some importance for the country, this approach might mean that Türkiye is willing to navigate complex political or economic dynamics even if it involves some risks or frictions with certain countries (Askerov, 2017, p. 162).



Figure 01 This figure is from the Shelter Box website on 02.07.2023, illustrating that the majority of Syrian refugees have stayed in the Middle East. Syria's neighbors, Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye are hosting over 90%, and it can be accessed through the following link: <https://shelterbox.org/syria/the-syrian-conflict-explained/>

Historically, Türkiye has considered its borders with Syria as a question of national security, one which affects its strategic depth' towards the Arab and Islamic worlds. Its idealistic zero problems' policy, therefore, shifted with the beginning of the Arab spring and the Syrian conflict, in particular, which posed a number of challenges to Türkiye both domestically and regionally (Natil, 2016, pp. 77-78). Türkiye saw the Arab Spring as a strategic opening to reassert its historical role in the Middle East, a region where its influence had declined over the past century. Its proactive and assertive foreign policy, which emphasized multilateral engagement, faced criticism for being perceived as a departure from its previous Western-centric priorities, leading to accusations of an "Axis Shift" towards the Islamic world and Asia (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 05). However, the Syrian conflict presented numerous challenges for Türkiye, leading to a reconsideration of its policies. This illustrates the adaptive nature of foreign policy, particularly in the face of unforeseen circumstances and regional instability. As such, Türkiye's response to the conflict underscores the necessity of flexibility in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

The conflict became one of the most influential developments on Türkiye's security and foreign policy. Initially, this crisis was perceived as a major influence on Türkiye's approach to

the Middle East. However, in recent years, it has evolved into a powerful force that shapes not only Türkiye's domestic policies but also its national security priorities (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p. 16). The influence of domestic politics, historical contexts, and leadership played a significant role in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Syrian issue. Several determinants are linked with Türkiye regarding the conflict, which affected Türkiye's dealing. These determinants are (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, pp. 13-18).:

1. **Importance of Syria to Türkiye as a bordering state:** "Taking into consideration the security concerns, improving relations with Syria became one of Türkiye's most important foreign policy objectives".
2. **Türkiye feared that violence that occurred in Syria might reach Türkiye, and threatens its internal stability.** In 2016, Türkiye started to prioritize the use of hard power in order to prevent the threats resulting from the civil war.
3. **Eliminating the threat of ISIS,** and preventing PYD/YPG from creating an area of dominance.
4. **The role of Iran in the region as a competitor.** "Iran and Hezbollah have aided in prolonging the crisis by mobilizing their vast resources to provide the Assad regime's forces with material, manpower, and military support".

With widespread displacement and the rise of extremist rule in certain regions, Syrians face a precarious future marked by escalating sectarian tensions and increasing radicalization. This had far-reaching implications for neighboring countries and beyond, due to the influx of refugees and the rise of new extremist groups. The effects of this conflict, therefore, will reverberate for years, shaping the political landscape of the region and necessitating a global response to address its complex challenges. The unrest in various regions has had a significant impact on Turkish security and foreign policy, making Türkiye approach the Syrian regime with caution (Natil, 2016, p. 77).

Since the onset of the conflict, Türkiye has reoriented its foreign policy towards Syria with a clear emphasis on ending the bloodshed, achieving a peaceful political transition, and preserving Syria's territorial integrity and unity. Türkiye aims to foster an environment that addresses and meets the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. Aspiring to serve as a regional role model, Türkiye has supported the transformation of authoritarian regimes into democratic ones across the Middle East and has actively opposed the Syrian regime.

Syrian Refugees in Türkiye-EU Relations

The refugee issue between Türkiye and the EU gained prominence around 2015 when a significant number of Syrian refugees started moving from Türkiye to the EU countries, primarily through the Eastern Mediterranean route (Lehne, et al., 2015). The main reasons for this influx were the ongoing conflicts in Syria, and other countries in the region.

The massive secondary movement of refugees strained the EU, fueling concerns that the union would be weakened "permanently and radically" (Kirişci, 2021). This led to an urgent need to find an arrangement with Türkiye to stop or slow down the flow of migrants.

However, the persistence of the Syrian conflict and the growing number of refugees created challenges, and since 2015, Türkiye has tightened its eastern borders (Al Jazeera, 2016). The crisis significantly influenced the relationship between Türkiye and the EU. Over the war period, Türkiye welcomed more than 3,000,000 Syrian refugees, providing them with basic services and necessities (Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, 2024). This makes Türkiye host the largest of refugees globally. Syrian refugees have become a common sight in nearly all Turkish cities. However, their presence has led to numerous political and economic issues. One of the major challenges, Türkiye faces is integrating these Syrian refugees into society. Despite the support they receive, most Syrian refugees aspire to move to EU countries such as Germany for better living standards and job prospects.

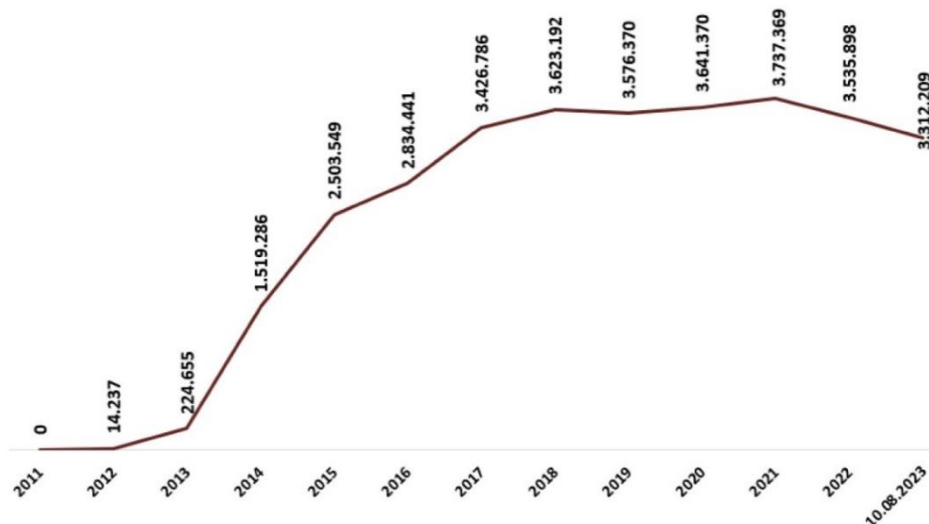


Figure 02 This figure is from the website of the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management on 19.08.2023, illustrating the official numbers of Syrians in Türkiye, and it can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

Many of these refugees risk their lives trying to reach the Greek Islands illegally across the Aegean Sea, often resulting in humanitarian disasters and an uncontrolled surge of refugees into the EU. This scenario has led to numerous losses of lives amidst the pursuit of national interests and conflict. The EU's primary concern is managing and regulating the influx of Syrian refugees to its borders. So far, both the EU and Türkiye have not been successful in establishing

legal and effective means to resolve the refugee crisis. This is mainly because of their differing views on the refugee situation. The EU views the massive influx of Syrian refugees as a potential threat to its unity, while Türkiye sees these refugees as a political new negotiating issue in its accession process to the EU. The refugee crisis has not brought the EU and Türkiye closer. Instead, it has created a rift, making them seem more like adversaries. Neither side has been able to view the refugee crisis from a wider perspective or find common ground on humanitarian terms (Sambur, 2021, p. 120).

The EU has begun to realize how critical a role Türkiye plays in the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis-as a neighbour of Syria, hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees, and being the main cross-country for refugees aiming at reaching Europe. The EU did something very pragmatic when it agreed on an Action Plan with Türkiye this last autumn of 2015. But this was no ordinary deal; it was a historic agreement, a step toward cooperation and collaboration in dealing with this extraordinary situation. In March 2016, the EU took it one step further when it issued a statement related to the cooperation deal. This open statement provided a preface to what had been agreed upon and recognition of the contributions by Türkiye in taming the refugee crisis. The statement, at its core, served as a In March 2016, there was an unparalleled agreement by the EU and Türkiye with the way forward in handling the increasing migrant crisis. The centerpiece of that agreement was irregular migrants crossing from Türkiye into Greece after March 20 were to be singly processed in Greece before being returned to Türkiye as a measure to try and stop undocumented immigration flow into the EU. Correspondingly, for every Syrian returning to Türkiye, another Syrian refugee on its territory was allowed legal resettlement into the EU, one-for-one. Though the plan gave priority to those who had not attempted an unauthorized entry into the EU, the number had a cap: 72,000 was the ceiling. The deal also encompassed what many consider to be the easing of visa restrictions on Turkish citizens; they would obtain visa-free travel in the Schengen area until June, although this privilege would not apply to the non-Schengen country of Britain. As a part of the agreement, the EU committed to accelerating the allocation of €3bn (\$3.3bn) in aid to Türkiye to assist with migrant-related issues. Finally, the deal agreed to "re-energize" Türkiye's bid for EU membership, with negotiations expected to occur by July. This agreement was considered a strategic move to manage the flow of migrants, while also reinforcing the ties between Türkiye and the EU (BBC News, 2016; Al Jazeera, 2016).

Timeline Diagram Syrian Refugee in EU-Türkiye Relations

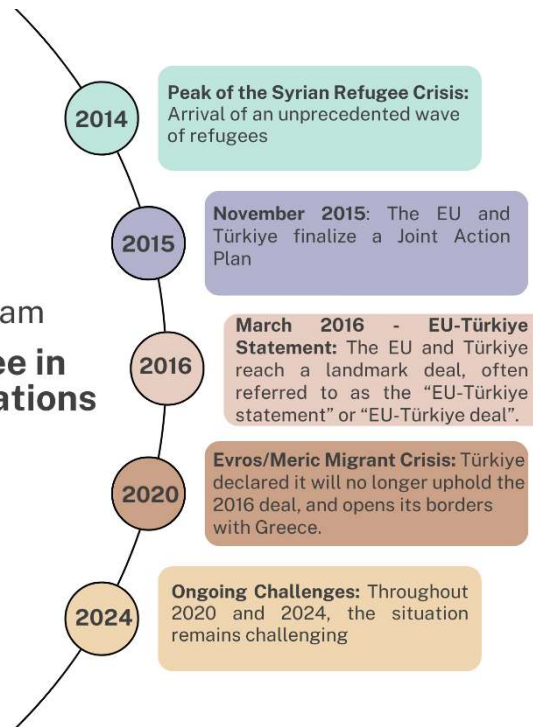


Figure 03 This figure and associated analysis were formulated by comparing the data available in the sources relating to my study achieved in part through the systematic use of primary and secondary data collection.

It is clear that Türkiye and the EU will continue to cooperate significantly on migration issues. This relationship influences the overall conversation about migration. Since the 18th March 2016 Türkiye-EU Statement and after the entire 6 billion euros aid package was pledged in December 2021, both parties have shown a willingness to revisit and renew the statement. EU and Turkish leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to the statement and expressed a positive attitude towards extra funding for Syrian refugees in Türkiye high-level discussions between the EU and Türkiye this period. Although there are complaints, critiques, and difficulties with the Statement, some view it as a model for how Europe manages migration through relationships with neighboring countries. It's viewed as a mutually beneficial strategic alliance, resulting in both normative and material concessions, rather than being linked to Türkiye's progress towards EU membership. So, it's unlikely that the main points of this deal will change soon (Ianni, Meral, & Giannotta, 2021, p. 48).

Years after the agreement, its transactional nature has been met with sharp criticisms. Both sides have complained about its implementation. The EU leaders were frustrated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's periodic threats to "open the borders" and let refugees stream towards Europe. Turkish officials found the funds inadequate, and complained about their slow disbursement. The Turkish side also did not miss an opportunity to bitterly criticize the EU for its failure to liberalize visas for Turkish nationals and re-energize Türkiye's accession process (Kirişçi, 2021).

Despite the criticisms, the agreement did result in a significant reduction in illegal crossings from Türkiye to the EU. Crossings across the Aegean Sea dropped dramatically, from 885,000 in 2015 to about 42,000 in 2017. In terms of support for refugees in Türkiye, the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT) has played a key role. As of December 2020, all of the 6 billion euros in that fund have been committed and contracted, and 3.9 billion euros disbursed. These funds support a variety of programs ranging from cash assistance for the most vulnerable refugees, to those aiming to improve refugee access to public health services and integrate refugee children into the Turkish national educational system (Kirişci, 2021).

It thus follows that the refugee crisis has brought not only political change within Türkiye but also holds much importance for the ambitions of accession into the EU. The management of the refugee crisis has become part and parcel of negotiations between Türkiye and the EU in accession processes to the latter. Considering this, the following few key points will go into further detail regarding how the refugee issue interlinks with the European accession talks of Türkiye. This interlinking of issues has brought another layer of difficulty on this already highlighted, multi-dimensionally challenged path towards EU membership for both Türkiye and the EU. The situation becomes more intricate when considering the difference in the vision of Türkiye and the EU regarding the refugee crisis, adding just another point of contention in their membership negotiations.

The conflict in Syria, with its consequent refugee flight, has left no doubt that its impact on the relations between Türkiye and the EU has been one of a deeply indenting imprint. In fact, the 2016 deal between Türkiye and the EU epitomized this impact in a way that showed the interplay of politics, humanitarian claims, and transactional diplomacy properly set in a tenor of complexity. Assuming full criticism, the agreement did spell a shift in the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU, underlining the need for cooperation against the challenges faced globally. The deal itself, in its reciprocity, geopolitical meaning, intent of unilateral management of one of the largest human migrations of our time, mirrors the evolving contours of international relations: how crises at an unprecedented scale and urgency compelled nations to negotiate and collaborate amid dissent and dissatisfaction.

More exactly, with the Syrian War and the agreed deal between Türkiye and the EU, it became so crystal clear that a crisis in one nation can be affecting many others besides its national boundary by forging or reshaping the relations and alliances. Lessons to be learned from how this deal was implemented serve as valuable insight into the strength of cooperation, the need for robust and fair asylum systems, and the requirement for global solidarity in the face of human displacement. In the complex tapestry of international relations, the Syrian crisis

and the deal between Türkiye and the EU weave a pattern that will, without doubt, continue well into the future to frame the dialogue between Türkiye and the EU.

It is in the labyrinth of an interdependent world that this case study calls upon us to reflect upon those lessons. It invites us to reflect critically on our responses to global challenges, underscoring the need for comprehensive, cooperative, and human-centered solutions. The refugee question emanating from the Syrian war would doubtless stay high on the agenda in the evolving narrative of the relations between Türkiye and the EU.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Syrian conflict has been a significant force in reshaping the dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations. Since its beginning in 2011, the escalating violence, the militarization of the conflict, and the involvement of various regional and international actors have introduced profound security challenges for both Türkiye and the EU. Military interventions by external actors have added layers of complexity to an already volatile geopolitical landscape. These interventions, coupled with the humanitarian crisis—particularly the large-scale displacement of refugees—have played a dual role in Türkiye-EU relations, functioning both as a driver for cooperation and as a source of significant tension.

On the one hand, the conflict has compelled Türkiye and the EU to engage in cooperative measures, most notably in addressing the unprecedented refugee crisis. Critical developments, such as the 2016 EU-Türkiye migration agreement and the standoff at the Greek-Turkish border in 2020, have underscored the necessity of collaboration in managing the humanitarian fallout from the conflict. Türkiye, as the primary host country for millions of Syrian refugees, has relied on the EU support, prompting increased diplomatic dialogue between Ankara and Brussels. The migration deal, in particular, represented a landmark effort to regulate refugee flows, placing the refugee crisis at the forefront of Türkiye-EU relations.

On the other hand, the conflict has deepened political rifts between Türkiye and the EU, particularly in relation to Türkiye's military interventions in Syria. Operations such as "Operation Olive Branch" (2018) and "Operation Peace Spring" (2019) were conducted with the dual objective of securing Türkiye's borders and establishing safe zones for refugees within Syria. While Türkiye framed these actions as necessary for national security and regional stability, several EU member states voiced concerns about their potential to exacerbate regional instability. Moreover, divergent approaches to key issues, such as the role of Kurdish forces in Syria, have strained Türkiye-EU relations, revealing deep-rooted differences in foreign policy strategies. These tensions have also affected Türkiye's long-standing EU membership

negotiations, which have been further complicated and, in many ways, stalled due to the complex dynamics created by the conflict.

The dual role of the Syrian conflict—serving both as a driver for cooperation and as a catalyst for friction—has profoundly shaped the trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations. While the refugee crisis has necessitated collaborative efforts, it has simultaneously exposed significant challenges within the EU, including internal divisions over migration management. At the same time, Türkiye’s military actions, despite being aimed at addressing legitimate security concerns, have strained its relations with several EU states, highlighting fundamental disagreements over conflict resolution strategies and regional security frameworks.

The long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations are thus multifaceted. The conflict has provided opportunities for cooperation in areas such as migration management, humanitarian aid, and security coordination, but it has also exacerbated existing political tensions and generated new fault lines, particularly concerning military interventions and foreign policy alignment. As Türkiye and the EU continue to navigate these challenges, the dual nature of the Syrian conflict—as both a unifying and divisive force—has critically influenced their diplomatic and political engagements and is likely to shape their relationship for years to come.

It is within this context that this dissertation seeks to explore the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations, with a specific focus on the refugee crisis. By analyzing the multifaceted nature of this relationship—marked by both cooperation and contention—this study aims to uncover the deeper consequences of the Syrian conflict on bilateral ties, with particular emphasis on the political, security, and humanitarian dimensions that will define the future trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations.

1.3 Research Questions

The Main Question:

❖ What are the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on the security and foreign policies of both Türkiye and the EU? And, in what ways has the resulted refugee crisis shaped the dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations from 2011 to 2024?

To address this main question, the research poses several critical sub-questions. What have been the key developments in the Turkish-EU relationship in response to the Syrian conflict and the escalating refugee crisis? How have negotiations and political discourses surrounding the Syrian conflict shaped the political, economic, and security dimensions of the Turkish-European relationship? What new aspects and dimensions have the Syrian conflict and

the related refugee crisis added to Türkiye-EU relations? Finally, what are the long-term implications of the refugee crisis on Türkiye-EU relations?

1.4 Methodology

Research Approach:

In the context of our study's theoretical framework, we will be utilizing a qualitative methods approach, this approach will be employed to shed light on the hypothesized long-term implications that are not readily quantifiable.

Additional Influencing Factors: While the research primarily focuses on the Syrian conflict's implications on Türkiye-EU relations, it acknowledges that these relations are influenced by a broad array of other factors. These include geopolitical, security, socio-economic, and cultural elements, which add layers of complexity to the research.

Ethical Guidelines:

Upholding ethical integrity is of utmost importance in this research. This includes ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of all primary sources and respecting the intellectual property rights associated with secondary sources.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

Based on the provided discussion above, the objectives of my study can be summarized as follows:

1. To examine the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations.
2. To explore the role of the refugee predicament as a focal point in Türkiye-EU relations.
3. To analyse the political, social, security, economic, and other repercussions of the conflict on Türkiye-EU relations.
4. To provide insights into the security and foreign policies of Türkiye and the EU in response to the Syrian crisis.

By pursuing these objectives, my study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on the long-term implications of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye-EU relations, provide a comprehensive analysis of the refugee predicament, and shed light on the political, social, and economic aspects of the bilateral relationship.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of studying Turkish-EU relations lies in the analysis of the complex nature of the Syrian conflict, particularly the refugee issue, and its long-term implications on

this relationship. The refugee crisis involves various local, regional, and international actors, each with their own agendas and objectives, creating a challenging environment that has affected Turkish-EU relations. This study holds substantial weight in academic, policy-making, and real-world spheres due to its extensive exploration of an understudied subject - the long-term implications of the Syrian refugee crisis on Türkiye-EU relations.

Academic Contribution: This study addresses a gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive examination of the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it goes beyond simple quantification of impacts and offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the refugee crisis and the complex dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations. This enriches the academic discourse by providing a multidimensional analysis that adds depth and perspective to the existing body of knowledge.

Policy Implications: The study provides an analysis of the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations. By examining the complex dynamics within the context of foreign policy, it enhances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities it presents. The findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of the factors shaping Türkiye-EU relations and inform strategic decision-making. This analysis serves as a foundation for ongoing academic research and encourages further exploration of the complexities of this relationship.

Practical Relevance: Given the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict, the research holds tremendous practical relevance. The knowledge it generates can influence public discourse and foster an informed and balanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges posed by the refugee crisis. It creates an avenue for promoting dialogue that considers the long-term effects on Türkiye, the EU, and the wider global community.

Methodological Significance: From a methodological perspective, the research highlights the utility of using qualitative data to gain a profound understanding of intricate international issues. This approach can serve as a benchmark for future studies in international relations, promoting a holistic method of investigation.

In addition, this research is critical because it addresses several key aspects:

1. **Addressing Security Concerns:** This entails examining the security implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations, including border security, terrorism, and regional stability.
2. **Examining the Evolving Nature of Turkish-EU Relations in the regard of the Syrian Refugee Crisis:** This involves analysing how the refugee crisis has influenced

the dynamics, cooperation, and conflicts between Türkiye and the EU, and exploring the changing nature of their relationship.

3. **Addressing the Dual Role of the conflict:** This entails exploring how the crisis has served as both a catalyst for cooperation and a source of tension between Türkiye and the EU, and investigating the factors that contribute to these dual roles.

By addressing these key aspects, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian conflict's long-term implications on Türkiye-EU relations, considering various perspectives and dimensions, and shedding light on the complexities of this relationship.

In essence, the significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a comprehensive, well-rounded exploration of a critical contemporary issue. The findings of this research are anticipated to shed light on effective policy responses and inspire further academic inquiry into this critical area of international relations.

1.7 Literature Review

Literature Review of Previous Research:

The Syrian conflict has been one of the most complex and far-reaching repercussions, which have significantly affected the relations between Türkiye and the EU. This multidimensional issue has attracted the attention of political scientists, sociologists, economists, and international relations experts, each offering unique insights, analyses, and policy recommendations.

Understanding the depth and nuances of the Türkiye-EU relationship in light of the Syrian conflict necessitates a comprehensive review of the existing body of literature. From the beginning of conflict in 2011 to 2024, various studies have delved into the political, socio-economic, and humanitarian aspects of this intricate relationship, with Türkiye often positioned at the epicenter of the diplomatic dialogues and policy formulations.

In this part, a meticulous review of an array of studies, categorized by methodology, thematic focus, or geopolitical interest, will be presented, shedding light on different perspectives that have explored impacts of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations. This examination not only underscores the importance of the subject but also aids in framing the current state of affairs, recognizing the gaps in existing research, and identifying potential pathways for future inquiry and collaboration between Türkiye and the EU. By elucidating a broad spectrum of academic thought on this critical matter, this literature review endeavors to

contribute to a richer understanding of a contemporary challenge that continues to shape not only regional but also global dynamics in international relations.

1. Thematic Focus: Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Türkiye-EU Relations Studies

Starting with the study titled "The Syria Conflict and the Euro-Med Refugee Crisis: An Opportunity to Enhance the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)?" (Mason, 2018), the author discusses the potential for the conflict to advance the EU's foreign and security policies. The Syrian conflict, which has caused the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II, has led to a new wave of refugees seeking asylum in the EU. The article highlights the EU response to the Syrian refugee crisis within the context of an evolving CFSP and how some revisions to it could address negative dynamics such as people trafficking, conflict, and a lack of development.

The EU's fears of negative spill over effects linked to the Arab Uprisings primarily consisted of uncontrolled waves of migrants and refugees entering the EU and internal security threats to EU Member States from 2013. These waves have often been facilitated by organized crime, including human traffickers. Internal EU fears continue to be implicitly linked to instability in the southern neighbourhood from weakened and conflict-ridden states. Mason's study suggests that the EU's refugee policy is insufficient in addressing the wider crisis in Europe and future flows likely to come from the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Sambur's research titled "The Effects of Syria War on Turkey-EU Relations" analyses the overall impact of the Syrian war on the interaction between Türkiye and the EU (Sambur, 2021). The Syrian conflict, which has significantly altered the political landscape of the Middle East, has had far-reaching implications on Türkiye-EU relations. He examines the shifting geopolitical dynamics, regional security concerns, humanitarian challenges, and economic interests that have shaped the relationship between Türkiye and the EU from the start of the Syrian crisis. The study may also explore how the handling of refugees, border security, and diplomatic engagements has evolved as the conflict has unfolded. By offering a comprehensive overview, Sambur's research provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of Türkiye-EU relations and the ways in which the Syrian war has influenced policy, cooperation, and tensions between these key actors.

2. Migration and Refugee Crisis Studies

Expanding on this theme, Benvenuti (2017) in his study: "Migration Paradox and EU-Turkey Relations", explores the complex relationship between Türkiye and the EU with regards to migration. The study highlights the significance of migration issue in EU-Türkiye relations,

particularly in relation to the irregular transit of third country nationals through Türkiye en route to the EU. It also discusses the 2013 Readmission Agreement and the 2015\16 EU-Türkiye deal on migration management, which have had a significant impact on migration control and management in the region.

Benvenuti identifies what he calls the "Migration Paradoxes", which include the fact that Türkiye is both a transit country and a destination for migrants, and that Türkiye is both a partner and a competitor to the EU in terms of migration management. The paper also explores the potential development of the EU-Türkiye relationship in light of the growing relevance of migration management in their cooperation and relations.

Following a similar line of inquiry, Talani (2020) in her paper: "The 2014/2015 Refugee Crisis in the EU and the Mediterranean Route", published in the Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, highlights the dangerous journey many Syrian refugees undertook to reach Europe. The refugee crisis of 2014/2015 put immense stress on the already controversial EU common approach to migration and asylum from third countries. The study demonstrates that the securitization of the European border increased after the refugee crisis.

Talani first analysis was the dynamics of regular and irregular migration to the EU by third country nationals in general. She then moves on to discuss the 2014/2015 refugee crisis, emphasizing the role that the Mediterranean route played in it. The article provides insights into the explanations proposed for the securitization of migratory policy and its externalization, especially after the refugee crisis.

The paper highlights the challenges faced by the EU in managing the refugee crisis, as well as the institutional crisis that arose from the widespread perception that the EU was unable to handle the situation in a consistent and coherent manner.

Adding a cultural dimension to this discussion, Goździak and Main in their study "European Norms and Values and the Refugee Crisis" explore the intersection of European norms and values and the refugee crisis. The authors critically analyse the notion of a 'refugee crisis' and argue that what is often referred to as a refugee crisis is, in fact, a deep European political crisis. They highlight the large numbers of asylum seekers and migrants reaching Europe, with over a million arrivals recorded in 2015, and compare the situation with historical events, such as the displacement after World War II. Goździak and Main examine the complex and often contradictory interpretations of 'European values,' including respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. They examine how these values have been invoked both to support and attack refugees and migrants. The study also highlights political statements that have been used to strengthen the discourse about the

Christian identity of Europe and portray refugees as threats, the authors provide a nuanced perspective on the alignment and tension between European norms and values and the challenges posed by the refugee crisis (Goździak & Main, 2020).

Building on the complex interactions between major global players in the Syrian conflict, Fisseha in "Syrian Refugee Crisis, From Turkey to European Union - Methods and Challenges" explores the intricacies of the refugee crisis, focusing on the methods and challenges from Türkiye to the EU (Fisseha, 2017). The paper critically investigates and examines strategies used by Türkiye and the EU in addressing the refugee influx, providing rapid humanitarian assistance. By shedding light on the underlying motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of the Syrian refugee migration to Türkiye and the EU, this work adds another dimension to the understanding of Türkiye-EU relations, encapsulating the humanitarian, political, and socio-economic facets of this significant global challenge.

3. Türkiye's Foreign Policy in the Context of the Syrian Conflict Studies

Transitioning to another perspective, Francesco Siccardi (2021) in his research "How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy" probes the reshaping of Türkiye's foreign policy due to the Syrian conflict. According to Siccardi, the Syrian civil war has had profound implications for the entire region, and Türkiye has been at the forefront of navigating these complex dynamics. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Türkiye's foreign policy has evolved to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the conflict, including the handling of refugees, border security, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic engagements with various regional and global actors. Siccardi's study explores these aspects in detail, examining how Türkiye's strategic interests, regional alliances, and domestic considerations have been influenced by the ongoing crisis in Syria. The paper also delves into Türkiye's relations with key international players, including the EU, Russia, and the United States, and how these relationships have been shaped by the Syrian context.

Taking a comprehensive approach, Demir and Yilmaz's study "An Analysis of the Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Turkey's Politic-Military, Social and Economic Security" assesses the Syrian conflict's impact on various aspects of Türkiye's security. Their study provides a detailed analysis of the impact of the Syrian Crisis on Türkiye's security, covering various aspects such as political, military, social, and economic security. The study examines the challenges that Türkiye faces as a result of the crisis, including the influx of Syrian refugees, the threat of terrorism, and the destabilization of the region. It also explores the measures that Türkiye has taken to address these challenges, such as conducting military operations and implementing policies to integrate Syrian refugees into Turkish society (Demir & Yılmaz, 2020).

Continuing to explore the complexities of Türkiye's foreign policy, Ataman and Özdemir in their paper: "Turkey's Syria Policy: Constant Objectives Shifting Priorities" (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018) focus on Türkiye's objectives and priorities regarding the Syrian conflict and how these have evolved over time, affecting Türkiye-EU relations. The authors examine Türkiye's approach to the Syrian conflict, identifying consistent targets while highlighting the changing strategies and priorities that have been shaped by the unfolding situation in Syria. They explore Türkiye's role as a key regional actor, its interactions with various international powers, and its diplomatic efforts to navigate the intricate web of alliances within the Syrian context. Furthermore, the study considers the implications of Türkiye's shifting stance on its relationship with the EU, looking at issues such as cooperation on refugee management, security coordination, and political alignment. By providing a nuanced analysis of Türkiye's Syria policy, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics that govern Türkiye's interactions with both Syria and the EU, emphasizing the fluid nature of international relations in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.

In their collective work, "Turkey's foreign policy and its consequences for the EU" Toygür, Tekin, Soler ILecha, & Danforth deep into an analysis of Türkiye's foreign policy, scrutinizing its actions and strategies in various geopolitical contexts, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria, and Libya. Türkiye's foreign policy, marked by both its regional ambitions and its unique geopolitical position, has significant implications for its relations with the EU (Toygür, Tekin, Danforth, & ILecha, 2022).

The authors dissect the complex dynamics of Türkiye's foreign policy, reflecting on how its involvement in these regions has affected EU-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's role in these geopolitical hotspots, whether as a conflict mediator or an active participant, has often put it at odds with EU policies. As a result, it has led to fluctuating tensions and negotiations with the EU, shaping a unique and complex relationship.

Understanding Türkiye's foreign policy approach in these regions is significant in predicting the trajectory of EU-Türkiye relations, allowing for more informed diplomatic strategies and decisions. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of Türkiye's foreign policy's intricacies and their ripple effects on its relationship with the EU.

4. Political, Security, and Humanitarian Perspectives on the Türkiye-EU Relations Studies

Building upon this, Kızılkın in her paper "Changing Policies of Turkey and the EU to the Syrian Conflict" offers a comparative analysis of the evolving policies of Türkiye and the EU regarding the Syrian conflict (Kızılkın, 2019). This paper meticulously analyses the complex

reactions of both entities to the Syrian crisis, beginning with the limitations of the institutional-legal structure of the EU in developing effective external relations. Kızılkın explores the coherence among the EU member states in terms of policy priorities and strategies towards the Syrian conflict, with specific references to regional setting restrictions. The study also evaluates Türkiye's priorities and strategies. A significant focus is placed on the Central Mediterranean route, evaluating the record number of arrivals during the refugee crisis, and the challenges faced by the EU in managing the crisis. Through this comparative lens, Kızılkın's paper sheds light on the intricate dynamics and evolving policies of both Türkiye and the EU, providing crucial insights into their multifaceted responses to the Syrian conflict.

In "Historical Institutionalism and EU–Turkey Relations: Path Dependence and Critical Junctures in the Accession Process" (Icoz & Martin, 2021), the authors employ a framework of historical institutionalism to analyse and explain the endurance of Türkiye's EU accession process despite the challenges posed by the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. Historical institutionalism emphasizes the importance of historical processes and events in shaping institutional development and change. In the context of EU–Türkiye relations, the authors identify critical junctures and path dependencies that have influenced Türkiye's EU accession process. Despite the enormous challenges posed by the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis, the path set by previous decisions and actions has ensured the continuation of the accession process. This perspective provides valuable insights into understanding the resilience of the EU–Türkiye accession process amidst geopolitical challenges.

Expanding this perspective, Akyesilmen, Tinker & Mohammed in their work "Turkey-US Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict: From Cooperation to Confrontation" consider the changing nature of Türkiye-US relations due to the Syrian conflict, and how these shifts potentially affect Türkiye-EU relations (Akyesilmen, Tinker, & Ishmeal, 2020). The authors analyse the multi-faceted relationship between Türkiye and the US, starting from a phase of cooperation and evolving into a confrontational stance in the context of the Syrian conflict. They explore the underlying political, military, and diplomatic factors that have led to this transformation, such as differing strategic interests, alliances with various factions within Syria, and broader geopolitical considerations. The study also delves into the ripple effects of this dynamic on Türkiye-EU relations, examining how the shifts in Türkiye-US relations have influenced the EU's engagement with Türkiye, particularly in areas such as security cooperation, refugee management, and regional stability. By offering a comprehensive view of the complex interactions between these major players, the authors shed light on the intricate web of relationships that have been shaped by the ongoing Syrian crisis.

The book chapter: "Unpacking the New Complexities of EU–Turkey Relations: Merging Theories, Institutions, and Policies" by (Reiners & Turhan, 2021, pp. 1-35) presents an analysis of the dynamic relationship between the EU and Türkiye. According to the authors, the relationship has been significantly affected by various factors, including the Syrian conflict and the resulting refugee crisis. The authors examine the intricacies of the relations, evaluating the interplay of theories, institutions, and policies that shape and define the EU-Türkiye relations. The Syrian crisis, in particular, has added a layer of complexity, testing the resilience and adaptability of these relations.

Most recently, Soler i Lecha's study, titled "Hope and Despair: Understanding Change in Turkey-EU Relations" provides a current evaluation of the Türkiye-EU relationship (Soler i Lecha, 2023). This work examines the multifaceted relationship between Türkiye and the EU, recognizing the continual evolution of policies, interests, and narratives that shape their interactions. Soler i Lecha employs a systematic analysis to understand the patterns of change and continuity, examining critical decisions justified based on utility, identity, or fairness. The study offers three categories inspired by Habermas that can be used to justify enlargement: pragmatic arguments, ethical-political arguments, and moral arguments.

The extensive body of research presented paints a multifaceted picture of Türkiye's engagement with the Syrian conflict and its complex relationship with the EU and other global actors. The studies analysed offer valuable insights into the policies, strategies, narratives, and challenges that have shaped this intricate landscape. They explore diverse dimensions, from security considerations to humanitarian concerns, from shifting priorities to evolving cooperation and confrontations. However, as rich and comprehensive as these analyses are, they may not fully capture the entire scope of the issue. The next section will delve into identifying the gaps and limitations in these studies.

Identification of Gaps in the Literature

The existing body of literature on the Syrian conflict, the ensuing refugee crisis, and its implications on Türkiye-EU relations undeniably offers valuable insights. However, it does have noticeable gaps, particularly concerning a comprehensive, long-term analysis of the situation. This research aims to bridge these gaps, striving to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics at play.

The first notable gap pertains to the limited scope of existing examinations. Despite numerous studies investigating the political, social, and security impacts of the Syrian conflict, there remains an inadequate appreciation of how these aspects are interlinked, often resulting in fragmented viewpoints. Consequently, this research intends to offer a comprehensive,

integrative analysis that captures the complex web of long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye and its evolving relationship with the EU.

Next, the time frame of current analyses constitutes another critical gap. Much of the research has focused on specific periods of the Syrian conflict, with many not extending their scrutiny to the most recent developments. In response to this, our study will extend its purview to encompass developments up to 2024, ensuring the relevance and timeliness of our findings.

The evolving dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations, particularly in the context of the refugee crisis, is another area that warrants more exploration. Our research aims to delve into this aspect, investigating the long-term role of refugees within this dynamic. Such a comprehensive analysis will necessitate an in-depth study of strategies and policies adopted by Türkiye and the EU towards refugees, and the potential future implications of these decisions.

Furthermore, the existing literature has not adequately addressed the duality of the Syrian conflict. It initially served as a driver for an agreement between Türkiye and the EU, paving the path for closer relations. Yet, this same conflict later morphed into a point of contention, epitomized in the 2020 Meric River crisis. This research aims to highlight these dual roles and their potential implications.

The final gap pertains to the focus on long-term implications, which are often indirect, unquantifiable, and may simultaneously pose opportunities and obstacles. These characteristics distinguish them from direct impacts, which tend to manifest as either an opportunity or an obstacle. Thus, our study seeks to elucidate both the challenges and opportunities presented by the refugee crisis, emphasizing its secondary role.

In addressing these gaps, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive, updated understanding of the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis on Türkiye-EU relations. We anticipate that this integrative approach will help fill the identified gaps in the literature, thereby offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders involved in Türkiye-EU relations and refugee management.

In sum, this literature review reveals the core focus areas and gaps within the current literature concerning the Syrian conflict, refugee crisis, and Türkiye-EU relations. This research, by striving to fill these gaps, aims to deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics underpinning Türkiye-EU relations within the context of the Syrian conflict and the resultant refugee crisis.

1.8 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework:

The conceptual and theoretical framework of this study provides the foundational lens through which the long-term implications of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye-EU relations can be comprehensively understood. This framework will anchor the exploration of key concepts and theories that are essential to analysing the multifaceted nature of the conflict and its repercussions on international relations. By integrating these concepts, the framework aims to provide a holistic understanding of the conflict's implications on Türkiye-EU relations. It moves beyond a simplistic cause-and-effect analysis to explore the deeper, systemic changes induced by the crisis. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how immediate impacts evolve into long-term implications, influencing various aspects of Türkiye-EU relations, including migration policies, humanitarian aid, and geopolitical strategies.

1.8.1 Key Concepts

This subsection explores key concepts that are fundamental to understanding the study:

Conflict and Related Concepts

The naming of what Syria has experienced over the past 13 years has been a subject of debate and differing viewpoints. The designation largely depends on the perspective from which the events are viewed, with each concept reflecting the political, military, humanitarian, and regional dimensions of the conflict. In my dissertation, I chose to use the term "conflict" because of its comprehensive nature and its ability to cover all aspects of the events that occurred in Syria from 2011 to 2024, from all angles, in addition to its implications. The term reflects the complex interactions between various local, regional, and international actors involved in the dispute. Thus, "conflict" is not merely a description of a popular revolutionary movement, a crisis, or even an internal civil war; rather, it covers multiple dimensions, including armed conflicts, regional interventions, and the humanitarian crises resulting from the conflict.

The term "Syrian conflict" is among the most accurate terms that reflect the complexity of the dispute and the overlapping interests of local, regional, and international actors involved. This term does not carry a specific political judgment; rather, it is used to describe the contention among the multiple parties involved, whether between the Syrian regime and the opposition or among the internal armed factions themselves, in addition to regional and international interventions. Furthermore, this concept encapsulates all the intertwined dimensions of the events and allows us to study the Syrian scene and its long-term implications on international relations, including Türkiye-EU relationship, from multiple perspectives, including:

- **Political conflict:** Between the Syrian regime and the opposition, which began as a protest movement demanding political change.
- **Military conflict:** Where confrontations developed between many different actors.
- **Regional and international conflict:** Military and political interventions by powers such as Russia, Iran, Türkiye, the Gulf, the EU and the USA.
- **Humanitarian crisis:** Represented by the displacement of millions of refugees and the destruction of Syrian infrastructure.

As "Ramsbotham" and "Woodhouse" (2016) point out in their book "Contemporary Conflict Resolution," complex conflicts, such as the one in Syria, often involve multi-party interventions and occur in politically, economically, and socially intertwined contexts, which aligns with the nature of the Syrian issue.

The Syrian Revolution: The "revolution" refers to the popular uprising that called for political reform, democracy, and the end of the authoritarian regime. This term would be appropriate if my study focused solely on the Syrian issue without discussing external actors. The concept "Syrian revolution" is similar to the other revolutions that occurred in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. While "revolution" reflects the popular movement that demanded political rights, it does not account for the later developments that included the transformation of the movement into armed confrontations among other internal parties and international interventions.

The Syrian Crisis: This term is used by the Syrian regime and some other powers, such as the EU, to refer to the humanitarian and economic consequences of the conflict. It focuses on the humanitarian aspects exacerbated by the development of the conflict, such as the displacement of millions of refugees and the destruction of infrastructure. The Syrian regime uses this term for political reasons. It downplays the significance of the popular movement, portraying it as a temporary internal "crisis" that can be contained, rather than a revolution or a deep political conflict. This portrayal presents the regime as a legitimate authority seeking to resolve the crisis and justifies its security and military interventions.

On the other hand, the EU prefers to use the term "crisis" to refer to the humanitarian consequences, particularly the refugee crisis. The EU focuses on the humanitarian side of the conflict, considering that calling the situation a "crisis" reflects international responsibility in addressing the displaced and providing support to them, without delving into the details of the political and military conflict.

Civil War: This term is used to describe the internal conflict that arose between different factions of society and reflects the division that occurred after the conflict shifted from peaceful protests to an armed revolution. The term "civil war" is appropriate for describing the fighting between groups like ISIS and the YPG, for example, but it does not reflect the popular revolution against the regime's authoritarianism nor does it cover the regional and international interventions that played decisive roles in the development of the conflict. Türkiye, which has been directly affected by the Syrian conflict, tended to use this term, as it views what is happening in Syria as an internal war between different armed forces, warranting intervention to protect its regional interests and ensure the security of its borders. Thus, it can be said that the choice of the appropriate term for what happened in Syria, especially in my dissertation, which revolves around the long-term implications for Türkiye and the EU, is the "conflict", because it encompasses all the intertwined dimensions of the dispute, from political to military to humanitarian, and reflects the complexity of the situation in Syria since 2011. The term "crisis" would be limited only to the refugee issue that resulted from the conflict. Terms like "revolution," "civil war," or "crisis" each reflect specific aspects of the conflict, but they do not cover all dimensions of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, the term "conflict" is the most appropriate for use in a comprehensive analysis of the dispute.

Implications / Impacts

"Implication" and "Impact" are two terms often used interchangeably, but they possess distinct meanings, as "Impact" refers to the direct effect of an action, while "Implication" refers to the broader, indirect consequences that may arise as a result. Therefore, it is essential to use these terms correctly to ensure clear and effective communication:

- **Impact:** The action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another, a marked effect or influence (Oxford Learners Dictionaries). The term refers to the direct, measurable, and immediate outcomes that an event, decision, or phenomenon has on something else (The Content Authority, 2023). For example, an increase in the number of refugees entering Türkiye from Syria would be a direct impact of the crisis. Similarly, changes in the EU's policies or attitudes towards Türkiye as a result of the crisis would also constitute direct impacts. These impacts are concrete and can be quantified or clearly described, such as changes in migration patterns or policy decisions.
- **Implication:** is the indirect outcomes of an action, event or a decision. In a broader sense, it can also refer to the long-term effects of an event. Often these effects may not be immediately apparent. It has many different senses. Usually, when used in the plural, implications are effects, repercussions or consequences that may still happen and result

effects (Vocabulary). The term often refers to the underlying, or inferred consequences of an event, decision, or phenomenon. These consequences are usually subtler and can be negative, positive, or a mix of both (Difference Between, 2016). For example, the Syrian refugee crisis has significant implications for Türkiye-EU relations. It initially led to increased cooperation between Türkiye and the EU, as exemplified by the 2016 refugee deal, which can be seen as a positive implication. However, over time, the crisis has become a source of conflict and tension between Türkiye and the EU, a negative implication. Furthermore, the crisis could have implications for how other countries view the EU's commitment to human rights or how they perceive Türkiye's ability to manage large-scale humanitarian crises. These implications are less tangible and difficult to be measured. They can be wide-ranging, affecting various areas or aspects related to the original event or decision resulting outcomes that can be drawn from something although it is not explicitly stated. In other words, they are not easily perceived or clearly defined and might not be directly observable or quantifiable. The implications are often subtler, abstract, and qualitative compared to impacts, so we used the qualitative approach as the research focuses on implications.

In the context of this study, it pertains to the implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations. The conflict overall, and the refugee crisis specifically, have generated long-term implications for Türkiye's relations with the EU. As previously mentioned in the introduction, these implications have served as both a driver for consensus and a point of contention between Türkiye and the EU. Moreover, the implications of refugees' crisis played a significant role in the matter of Türkiye's accession to the EU; they were a reason for agreeing to the abolition of visas for Turkish citizens in 2016. On the other hand, the same crisis later influenced the membership process and contributed to its delay. According to the previous definition of the term "implications", we arrive at an important conclusion. The issue of the Syrian conflict, particularly the refugee question, has not only yielded immediate short-term impacts but also long-term implications that necessitate an in-depth study in this research. The following table clearly illustrates the differences between these two important terms:

Table 01 The differences between Impacts and Implications

	<i>Impacts</i>	<i>Implications</i>
<i>Directness</i>	Direct results of policies or political actions.	Indirect outcomes that may not be immediately apparent.
<i>Measurability</i>	Can be quantitatively measured.	Might not be measure precisely.
<i>Timeframe</i>	Usually short-term or immediate.	Usually long-term
<i>Tangibility</i>	Tangible and concrete outcomes.	Less tangible, more abstract.
<i>Obviousness</i>	Obvious and clear.	Not always obvious, sometimes subtle.
<i>Vastness</i>	Specific, localized.	Wide-ranging, vast.

1.8.2 Application of IR Theories to the Research

In assessing the complex relationship between Türkiye and the EU, especially in the context of the Syrian conflict, different IR theories offer distinct, yet complementary, insights. Realist perspectives might highlight the centrality of national interests and power politics, arguing that both Türkiye and the EU are motivated by their own strategic advantages. Liberal viewpoints could draw attention to the importance of international institutions, focusing on collaborative efforts and rule-based actions.

Meanwhile, Constructivism brings another view by emphasizing the role of cultural perceptions, shared beliefs, and collective identities in shaping diplomatic interactions. In this view, the mutual perception and societal beliefs of Türkiye and the EU may play a significant role in shaping their policies and responses to the crisis. Unlike Realism and Liberalism, which focus on material and institutional aspects, Constructivism probes into the ideational elements that influence state behavior.

Realist Analysis

Realism, known as political realism, emphasizes the competitive and adversarial facets of international relations, focusing on states' inherent need for security and their guidance by national interests. In contrast, Liberalism leans towards cooperation and collective action (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). According to Mearsheimer, the primary entities on the global stage are states, driven by their inherent need for security, guided by their national interests, and constantly competing for power. This school of thought posits that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority to enforce rules or provide security. States, therefore, act rationally and egoistically to pursue their own national interests, often defined in terms of power and security. Consequently, conflicts are inevitable due to the scarcity of resources and competition among states (Stanicek, 2020). This theoretical underpinning offers a lens through which to critically analyse the complexities of regional conflicts and international relations.

Moving to an examination of the defining features of Realism in international politics, it is significant to recognize its emphasis on the competitive and adversarial facets of international relations. Despite not being universally accepted; Realism plays a central role in elucidating international interactions. One of its hallmarks is the stress on power in international relations, a principle that is both advocated and vehemently opposed by various scholars. In alignment with these principles of power and self-interest, the practice wherein states exercise power over one another is sometimes termed as *realpolitik* or simply power politics (Pearson, n.d., p. 43). It has been a prevailing theory profoundly influencing foreign and security policy formulation.

Typically, states are perceived as singular and rational entities, driven by decisions based on rational calculations to achieve outcomes that enhance their self-interest. The main objective for a state, under this perspective, is to accumulate power and forge alliances to prevent any disruption of the existing power equilibrium. Since there is no supreme authority to enforce commitments, regulate conflict, or ensure security, morality is often considered irrelevant in international relations (Al-Rodhan, 2013).

Strands of Realism: Realism is not a monolithic concept; rather, it is divided into various strands such as Classical Realism, Neorealism, and Neoclassical Realism. Each of these strands has unique characteristics, further complicating the theoretical landscape of realism. However, they also share some common elements and principles, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the theory.

The following table provides a concise summarized comparison of the three main strands of realism discussed in the text above: Classical Realism, Neorealism (Structural Realism), and Neoclassical Realism. Each strand has unique characteristics that contribute to the complexity and richness of the theoretical landscape of realism.

Table 02 Strand of Realism

<i>Strand of Realism</i>	<i>Key Characteristics</i>
Classical Realism	Rooted in human nature, focuses on the pursuit of power as an intrinsic aspect of humankind's self-interest and survival instincts. Emphasizes domestic politics and human flaws in explaining state behaviour. Morgenthau, a prominent classical realist, argues that these intrinsic flaws in human nature drive state actors to seek power as they interact in an anarchic environment, constantly striving to ensure their own survival (Patel, 2020). The emphasis on human nature and domestic politics as pivotal in explaining state behaviour and the causes of inter-state conflict is a cornerstone of classical realism. This strand of thought does not view humans as inherently benevolent but rather as self-interested beings who act out of fear or aggression (Pashakhanlou, 2009, p. 02).
Neorealism (Structural Realism)	Focuses on anarchy, disregards individualistic aspects of social life. Considers interstate conflict as rooted in the absence of central authority. Strategies inclined towards security. Though neo-realists acknowledge the importance of defining strategies to approach international conflicts, their strategies are more inclined towards ensuring security rather than other aspects. This distinction between classical realism and neo-realism highlights a different perspective on the nature of conflict and the dynamics of international relations (Koshal, 2011).
Neoclassical Realism	Focuses on the interaction between the international system and unit-level factors within states. Recognizes that states may not always perceive systemic stimuli correctly. Enhances existing methods in international relations. Unlike the neorealist model, neoclassical realism recognizes that states may not always perceive systemic stimuli correctly or that the international system may not always send clear signals regarding threats and opportunities. Proponents of neoclassical realism see their approach as a significant enhancement over existing methods in international relations and foreign policy (Ripsman, 2017, p. 01).

The Syrian Conflict: A Realist Perspective

The Syrian conflict, a multi-faceted and complex issue, exemplifies the principles of realism. Various international actors are involved in this scenario. The intricate web of motivations and actions makes the Syrian conflict a compelling case study for understanding how realism shapes international relations (ShelterBox, n.d.). Applying realist theory to the Syrian conflict, we can see that the involvement of various international actors is driven by their pursuit of national interests and power. For instance, Russia and Iran have backed the Syrian regime to maintain their influence in the region and counterbalance the power of the United States and its allies (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). On the other hand, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye have supported anti-regime rebel groups to counter the influence of Russia and Iran and promote their regional interests (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

The conflict in Syria also supports realist claims that the balance of power and threats in the international system affect the behaviour of states (Phillips, 2022, pp. 359-360). The involvement of major powers like the United States and Russia has shaped the course of the conflict, with each side trying to maintain or increase its influence in the region (ShelterBox, n.d.). Moreover, the absence of a central authority in the international system has allowed the conflict to persist, with no effective mechanism to enforce a resolution (Antunes & Camisão, 2018, p. 01).

The following table provides a concise overview of the Syrian conflict, the refugee crisis, and the implications for Türkiye-EU relations, highlighting how realist theory viewed the crisis:

Table 03 A Realist Perspective of the Syrian Conflict

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Sub-Topics</i>	<i>Realist Perspective</i>
<i>Syrian Conflict</i>	Involvement of International Actors	Pursuit of interests and power
	Balance of Power	Influence of major powers,
	Neorealism Realism	Absence of central authority
<i>Refugee Crisis</i>	Actions of International Organizations	Realpolitik
	Nationalism	Rise in nationalist sentiment, framing refugees as a threat
<i>Implications Türkiye-EU Relations</i>	Tensions between Türkiye and the EU	Handling of the refugee crisis, underlying tensions
	Complex Relationship between Türkiye and the EU	Tensions, contradiction
	Refugee Crisis: a Lens for Analysis	Power dynamics, limitations
	Political Implications	Interests between Türkiye and the EU

It is an evident that the Syrian conflict can be analysed through the lens of realist theory in its strands: classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism, which highlight the role of states acting in their own self-interest and the competitive nature of international relations. The involvement of various international actors in the conflict, driven by their pursuit of power and national interests, exemplifies the key tenets of realism. The realist lens can be further applied to the specific dynamics of the refugee crisis, revealing additional complexities in international relations.

Moreover, the applicability of Neorealism appears particularly when examining the Syrian conflict and its key players, including Russia, the United States, Iran, Türkiye, the EU countries, the Arab Gulf states, the Syrian regime, and the armed opposition. These entities play important roles in the conflict, with their behaviours aligning closely with the tenets of the neorealist school. The core principles of Neorealism encompass the anarchic nature of the international system, balance of power, state security, and the rationality of states.

The Refugee Crisis: Power and National Interests

Realism can help examine the complex relationship between Türkiye and the EU countries in the context of the refugee crisis. The crisis has emerged as a significant aspect, illustrating the intricate balance of power and interests between Türkiye and the EU. From a realist perspective, this balance manifests as states primarily concerned with their own security and interests. Such concerns lead them to adopt policies that prioritize their well-being over the needs of refugees, resulting in various actions. These actions can include states tightening their borders, implementing restrictive asylum policies, or engaging in burden-shifting to other countries. Similarly, the realist perspective offers key insights into the general refugee crisis, demonstrating how states prioritize self-interest and security, further emphasizing the complex nature of international relations in the face of humanitarian challenges (Rösch & Lebow, 2018, pp. 01-02; Betts & Loescher, 2010).

Realism can also help explain the actions of international organizations, such as the EU, in response to the refugee crisis. For example, the EU has sought cooperation from Türkiye to manage the flow of refugees across the Aegean Sea, offering concessions in return for Türkiye's assistance (Stanicek, 2020). This can be seen as an example of *realpolitik*, where the EU prioritizes its own interests and security over concerns about human rights and democracy in Türkiye (Rösch & Lebow, 2018). In addition, The influx of refugees has led to a rise in nationalist sentiment in some European countries, with right-wing parties gaining support by framing refugees as a threat to national security and identity (Rösch & Lebow, 2019). This can

be seen as a manifestation of states prioritizing their own interests and security over the needs of refugees.

Türkiye and the EU have pursued their own interests, leading to a relationship characterized by cooperation, tension, and contradiction (Rösch & Lebow, 2018). The 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee deal has been a significant turning point in their relations, but it has also raised concerns about human rights and the sustainability of their relationship (Mencütek, Aras, & Coşkun, 2021). Realism highlights the role of self-interest and power in shaping these responses, which can help explain the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the relationships between various actors involved in the crisis.

Furthermore, the handling of the Syrian refugee crisis, according to the cooperation and tensions between Türkiye and the EU, has revealed a complex and often contradictory relationship between Türkiye and the EU, characterized by both cooperation and tension. As millions of Syrians sought refuge from the conflict, Türkiye became a primary host nation, shouldering significant responsibilities that required extensive resources and strategic planning. The EU, recognizing Türkiye's critical role in managing the refugee flow across the Aegean Sea, sought cooperation by offering financial support, visa liberalization, and a revival of Türkiye's EU membership prospects. This conditional partnership created a mutual dependency, with Türkiye's EU accession progress increasingly tied to its role in handling the refugee crisis (Martin, 2019, pp. 1359-1361). However, from Türkiye's perspective, ongoing regional instability and perceived isolation from the EU deepened pessimism regarding future relations, as Turkish officials grew concerned that the EU was benefiting from Türkiye's strategic importance without adequate reciprocity (Çetin, Turan, Çetin, & Hamşioğlu, 2017, p. 16).

Meanwhile, the emphasis on power dynamics, national interests, and the inherent competitive nature of international relations is reflected in the actions of both Türkiye and the EU. Turkish President Erdoğan's repeated threats to "open the gates" to refugees and the subsequent opening of borders with Greece in February 2020 highlights the intricate power balance at play (Sadık & Zorba, 2017). The crisis also reveals the limitations of realism, as it does not fully engage with the humanitarian dimensions of the situation (Rösch & Lebow, 2018, p. 04).

In light of the realist perspective, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU can be best understood as a strategic engagement guided more by national interests than shared values. While the 2016 agreement brought a semblance of cooperation, underlying tensions have increasingly overshadowed consensual arrangements, especially in the wake of the 2020 Meric

River crisis. For realists, such a landscape of intermittent cooperation and enduring tensions is not an anomaly but a reflection of the inherent competitive nature of international relations, where alliances are temporary and conflict is inevitable.

The refugee crisis has precipitated a rise in nationalist sentiment in some European countries, with right-wing parties framing refugees as a threat to national security (Rösch & Lebow, 2019). The realpolitik involved in the EU's deals with Türkiye illustrates a prioritization of interests and security over concerns about democracy and human rights in Türkiye (Rösch & Lebow, 2018). The ethical considerations underlying these dynamics present a complex challenge, revealing tensions between national interests and universal moral principles.

- **Long-term Implications**

The Syrian refugee crisis continues to shape Türkiye-EU relations, posing ongoing political challenges that have had significant long-term implications. Both parties prioritize security and self-interest, failing to offer a comprehensive solution to the crisis. This situation necessitates further cooperation and dialogue. While the realist perspective provides valuable insights into the dynamics at play, it also highlights the need for more nuanced and innovative approaches. Traditional power dynamics must be transcended, and solutions must foster mutual understanding and collaboration in order to effectively address the challenges posed by mass migration (Rösch & Lebow, 2018; Mencütek, Aras, & Coşkun, 2021).

The complex dynamics of power, interest, and ethics in international relations are underscored by the Syrian refugee crisis, particularly in the context of Türkiye-EU relations. Examining the crisis through the lens of realism illuminates how this theory shapes the responses of states and international organizations, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of international politics in the face of humanitarian challenges. While providing key insights, realism also challenges scholars and policymakers to consider ethical aspects and cooperative solutions. The intricate interplay of power and interests in the international arena requires a delicate balance; acknowledging inherent tensions while aiming for a more just and stable world order.

Liberal Analysis

Liberalism, a political and moral philosophy, emphasizes individual freedom, equality, democracy, and human rights. Its historical roots can be traced back to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment periods, marked by the contributions of eminent philosophers such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith. Originating during the Age of Enlightenment, the core principles of liberalism include individualism, liberty, universalism, moral equality, and pluralism (Yayla, 2024). Driven by these foundational beliefs, liberalism

underwent significant transformations, adapting to new social realities and challenges. As it evolved, it continued to champion the principles of individual freedom and equality, leading to its role in shaping modern governance and international relations (Ibid).

The above mentioned principles laid the groundwork for liberalism's transformative role throughout history, especially in Europe during the 19th century. Here, it sought to supplant hereditary privilege, state religion, and absolute monarchy with representative democracy, rule of law, and equality under the law (Ball, Dagger, Girvetz, & Minogue, 2024). These core beliefs would come to shape liberal perspectives on international cooperation, conflict resolution, and human rights. The landscape of liberalism continued to evolve, responding to societal changes.

The close of the 19th century marked a significant turning point. The unforeseen consequences of the Industrial Revolution led to disillusionment with classical liberalism's emphasis on a market economy. This spurred the emergence of modern liberalism, advocating government intervention to overcome obstacles to individual freedom, such as poverty and disease. This shift recognized the need for government-promoted public welfare, seen in the creation of public schools and hospitals (Britannica Encyclopaedia, 2024). These developments signified a departure from previous principles, aligning liberalism more closely with realism in IR.

This alignment paved the way for the liberal school of thought in IR, championed by figures like German philosopher Immanuel Kant and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. They contended that the realist perspective was inadequate in explaining the evolution of international relations. Unlike realists, liberals believed in a gradual shift away from chaos, strengthening global ties through trade, finance, and democratic values. They posited that democracies were less prone to conflict, as elected leaders were accountable to citizens bearing the conflict's consequences. This perspective also emphasized the rule of law and transparency in fostering international cooperation (Snyder, 2009).

The liberal approach to international relations was not merely a counterpoint to realism; it sought to transcend its limitations. Emphasizing principles such as individualism, freedom, universalism, equality, and pluralism, liberalism's key objectives included enhancing individual freedom, fostering peace, and combating poverty. It envisioned a world where these principles fostered broader harmony and prosperity, contrasting sharply with realism's perspective of power struggle and anarchy (Yayla, 2024).

Liberalism and the Syrian Conflict: Challenges and Implications:

Liberalism stands as a beacon for cooperation, mutual respect, and the continuous growth of freedom and well-being. Its historical evolution and adaptation to societal changes

demonstrate its resilience and relevance in shaping international relations, transcending the confines of realism to promote a more harmonious global order. However, the Syrian conflict has challenged principles of international cooperation and interdependence from a liberalist perspective. This complex and multifaceted phenomenon has implications for relations between Türkiye and the EU, as well as for the broader international community. This breakdown of cooperation and collective action in the Syrian case has tangible impacts on relations between key players like the EU and Türkiye.

Liberalism, as a framework in international relations, champions ideals of cooperation, mutual respect, and the promotion of human rights and democratic values. Rooted in a belief in the shared interests and interdependence of states, liberalism envisions a world where nations work collaboratively to address common challenges, transcending self-interest in favor of a more stable and harmonious global order. Historically, liberalism has evolved to adapt to shifts in societal values and global dynamics, demonstrating its resilience as a guiding ideology in diplomacy and governance. Unlike realism, which prioritizes power and security above all, liberalism places emphasis on collective action, institutions, and shared norms, with the belief that interconnectedness can reduce the likelihood of conflict and improve the welfare of all nations. However, the Syrian conflict represents a profound challenge to these liberal principles, exposing the fragility of international cooperation and interdependence in the face of deep-seated geopolitical rivalries and diverging national interests.

The Syrian conflict's progression from a local uprising to a regional and international crisis has underscored the limitations of liberalism's promise of collaborative solutions. In theory, the global community—especially key liberal actors like the EU—might have engaged in a coordinated response to prevent or mitigate the violence, preserving Syria's sovereignty while addressing the grievances that sparked the protests. Instead, the conflict devolved into a proxy war, with external actors supporting different factions, thereby intensifying divisions. For Türkiye and the EU, the Syrian crisis has had direct and severe repercussions, affecting security, migration, and diplomatic relations. Türkiye, bearing the brunt of the refugee exodus, found itself at odds with the EU, which struggled to unify its response to the humanitarian crisis. The breakdown in EU-Türkiye cooperation over the refugee issue highlights the erosion of trust and collective action, as each actor prioritized its domestic political pressures over a cohesive strategy. This failure to uphold liberal values of cooperation and mutual support in a time of crisis not only strained EU-Türkiye relations but also questioned the liberalist notion that states will, in the face of shared challenges, act in a manner that transcends narrow self-interest. The Syrian conflict thus serves as a stark reminder of the challenges liberalism faces in addressing

real-world crises, where national interests, security concerns, and geopolitical rivalries often eclipse the pursuit of a common good.

EU-Türkiye Relations and the Liberalist Perspective:

Although liberalism posits that individuals and states can cooperate for rational purposes, leading to the development of interdependent relationships and eventually a peaceful global system, the Syrian conflict has exposed the limitations of liberal interventionism and the need for reform. The situation has escalated despite international organizations' efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully, due to the involvement of various nations supporting different factions in the conflict (Anık & Şimşek, 2022), rather than a liberal peace, challenging liberal principles both domestically and internationally (Kuchling, 2020, pp. 04-06).

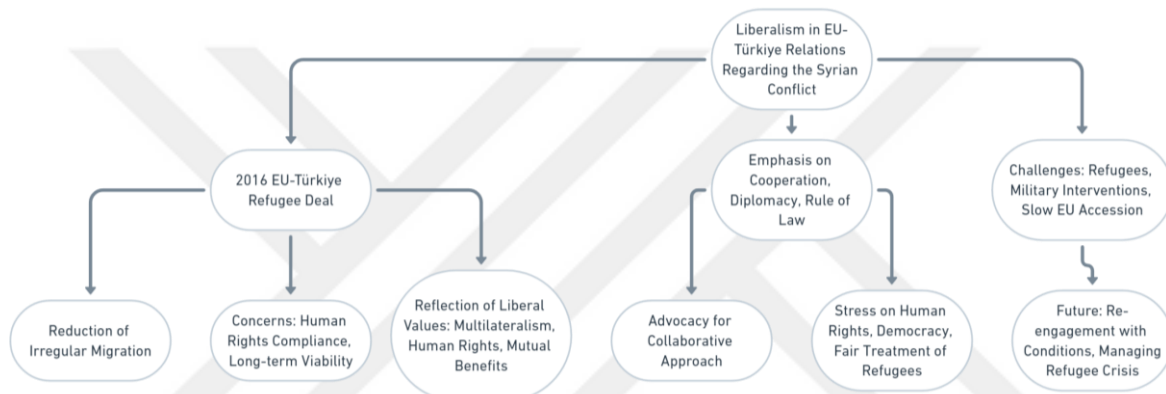


Figure 04 Liberalism in EU-Türkiye Relations Regarding the Syrian Conflict

This diagram illustrates the complex dynamics of EU-Türkiye relations through a liberal perspective, emphasizing the impact of the 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Deal and broader challenges related to the Syrian conflict. At the core of their relationship is the mutual effort to manage irregular migration, achieved through cooperation and shared responsibilities that successfully reduced the influx of refugees into Europe. However, this arrangement also sparked concerns around human rights compliance and the sustainability of such measures, highlighting the EU's ongoing struggle to balance security needs with humanitarian obligations. Beyond the immediate goals of the deal, the EU's engagement with Türkiye is guided by principles of multilateralism, human rights, and mutual benefits, demonstrating a commitment to diplomacy and the rule of law as foundational elements in their partnership. This liberal framework fosters a collaborative approach, urging both parties to address shared concerns constructively while stressing the importance of democracy and fair treatment of refugees.

Despite this emphasis on liberal values, the EU-Türkiye relationship faces significant challenges. Türkiye's military interventions in Syria and its role in hosting large numbers of refugees place strains on alignment with the EU's diplomatic priorities. Moreover, the prolonged and stalled process of Türkiye's EU accession has created friction, as differing

political and social objectives complicate deeper cooperation. Nevertheless, the diagram suggests a path forward, where re-engagement might be possible under certain conditions, allowing both parties to collaboratively address the refugee crisis and other regional concerns. In sum, while this partnership is grounded in shared liberal values, it is continuously tested by real-world challenges, reflecting the nuanced interplay between ideals and practical constraints in international relations.

In the context of the EU and Türkiye, a liberalist perspective would emphasize the role of international institutions, values, and cooperation in addressing the challenges posed by the conflict. The EU and Türkiye have a long-standing partnership based on shared interests (Stanicek, 2020). Their cooperation extends to various issues, including counter-terrorism, energy security, migration, and visa liberalization.

The 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Deal: A Turning Point

The 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee deal emerged as a significant turning point in relations, aiming to reduce irregular migration to Europe. While it brought Türkiye and the EU into closer alignment, it also raised concerns about human rights compliance and the long-term viability of their partnership (Bossu, 2022, pp. 07-08). The deal has drastically altered the dynamics between the EU and Türkiye and has become a model for future European cooperation with third countries.

As liberalism emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, diplomacy, and the rule of law (Meiser, 2018, p. 01), the deal between Türkiye and the EU can be seen as an opportunity for cooperation and dialogue. In this context, liberalism would advocate for a collaborative approach between Türkiye and the EU to address the challenges posed by the crisis.

Liberalism also stresses the importance of human rights, democracy, and the fair treatment of refugee (Meiser, 2018). In this case, it would prioritize the safety and integration of refugees into society (Anık & Şimşek, 2022). Despite the liberalist ideals of cooperation and protection of individual rights, the practical implementation of the deal has faced challenges and criticism.

Although these challenges, a liberalist perspective would suggest that there is still chance for dialogue and cooperation. This approach would advocate for strengthening existing institutional frameworks, such as the EU-Türkiye Association Council, the High-Level Political Dialogue, and the High-Level Economic Dialogue (Stanicek, 2020). It would also encourage enhancing civil society engagement and people-to-people contacts between the EU and Türkiye.

The Syrian conflict has tested the resilience and solidarity of EU-Türkiye relations. Both sides have faced different challenges and pressures, such as Türkiye's military interventions in Syria, and frustrations over the slow progress of Türkiye's EU accession process (Stanicek, 2020). The refugee crisis triggered by the Syrian conflict has been one of the most contentious issues in their relations.

Despite the challenges, Türkiye remains a candidate for EU accession, and in July 2023, EU foreign ministers agreed to re-engage with Türkiye, setting some conditions but not endorsing Ankara's calls to revive its membership bid (Strupczewski & Gray, 2023). As a result, the future of EU-Türkiye relations will likely be influenced by how both sides address the ongoing refugee crisis and manage their differing interests in the Syrian conflict.

Constructivist Analysis

Constructivism, another key IR theory, brings a different perspective. It emphasizes the importance of social constructs, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior. In the context of the Syrian conflict and Türkiye-EU relations, constructivism might highlight how perceptions and identities influence the handling of the refugee crisis. For instance, how the EU perceives its identity as a defender of human rights could affect its approach to the refugee question.

At the intersection of these theories, the refugee question emerges as a significant point of discussion in the context of the Syrian conflict and its implications on Türkiye-EU relations. It underscores the challenges and complexities of addressing such a large-scale humanitarian crisis within the framework of international politics. The long-term implications of this situation are still unfolding, with potential repercussions for regional stability, Türkiye-EU relations, and the broader international order.

The study of IR has been significantly shaped by a series of intellectual dialogues, known as the 'Great Debates'. These debates have deepened our understanding of global politics and have provided contrasting views on state behavior and the international system. The fourth debate, which emerged in the 1980s, saw the rise of constructivism, offering novel, ontologically-oriented interpretations of traditional IR issues. Constructivism diverges from the neorealist and neoliberal perspectives in its distinctive interpretation of anarchy and hegemony, thus contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in international relations (Şakrak, 2019, pp. 05-07).

The constructivist perspective presents an intriguing approach to understanding international relations, particularly when applied to identity and Türkiye-EU relations. This perspective suggests that the identities, interests, and behaviours of states, including the EU,

are products of social construction. This means that they are shaped not just by objective material conditions such as state, military, and power, but also by subjective factors such as norms, values, and identity considerations. Consequently, the EU's relations with all actors, including 'Muslim' Türkiye, are influenced by these elements, challenging the assumption that these relations are solely driven by rational utility or predetermined by civilizational differences (Turhan & Reiners, 2021, p. 65).

Shifting our attention to the perception of Syrian refugees under the constructivist perspective reveals further nuances. The issue of migration, particularly involving non-western identity, Middle Eastern identity, Muslims, or Arabs, tends to provoke socio-economic concerns in Europe. However, this issue is further complicated by prevalent prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims, which has exacerbated the refugee crisis. The reluctance to accept refugees, especially Muslims, often stems from the perception that they pose a danger. This perspective is often voiced by nationalists, who fear that religious and cultural disparities may pose a threat to their identity (Ademi, 2022).

Building on this issue, we are able to examine how the Syrian refugee crisis has put significant pressure on a specific country, Türkiye, and how the EU has committed to assisting Türkiye in dealing with this challenge. However, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU has been strained by the refugee crisis, with disagreements over burden-sharing, migration management, and the broader political context of Türkiye-EU relations (Aydın-Düzgüt & Rumelili, 2021; International Rescue Committee, 2023).

Applying the constructivist perspective to the Syrian crisis and Türkiye-EU relations allows for a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play. The identity incompatibility between the EU and Türkiye, based on cultural and religious differences, is socially constructed and cannot be assumed as a given (Aydın-Düzgüt & Rumelili, 2021). This perspective can help explain the reluctance of some EU countries to be supportive and accepting of refugees and the openness of others (Ademi, 2022).

It is important to note that this issue has many dimensions according to the previous argument as following:

1. The role of identity and norms in shaping Türkiye-EU relations, with a focus on the constructivist perspective (Aydın-Düzgüt & Rumelili, 2021).
2. The dynamics of resistance and acceptance of refugees in the EU, as analyzed through the constructivist lens (Ademi, 2022).

3. The impact of the EU-Türkiye deal on refugees, migration management, and the broader political context of Türkiye-EU relations (International Rescue Committee, 2023).
4. The challenges faced by refugees in Türkiye and the EU, including access to education and socio-economic support (USA for UNHCR, 2023).
5. The potential for constructivist approaches to inform policy responses and promote a more inclusive and cooperative approach to addressing the Syrian refugee crisis is immense (Şahin, 2012).

Expanding on this potential, we examine the Syrian conflict and Türkiye-EU relations through the lens of constructivism. This approach will allow us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of identity, norms, and interests that shape state behavior and the international system.

Constructivist Analysis of Turkish-EU Relations

A constructivist analysis of Turkish-EU relations regarding Syrian refugees and the Syrian conflict can be in this regard, approached by examining the social constructivist approach and realist constructivist analysis of migration.

1. **Social Constructivist Approach:** Social constructivism argues that theories based on rational choices are misguided and that reality can be constructed. Moreover, the reality is man-made, not an imposed one. There is not an objective reality, but it is what we make of it. Similarly, in international relations, the states behave as they choose to behave, and the social facts that are understood are the result of human interaction. As stated by social constructivism, IR is the product of the social construction of reality. The primary concern of social constructivists is to bring the social dimensions back into the discipline; they emphasize norms, shared understanding, and the relationship between agency and structure. In social constructivism, Alexander Wendt is a prominent scholar in his work “Anarchy is what states make of it” is developed on the foundations of constructivism. The major criticism done on social constructivism is that it is not a single theory of IR but a composition of various approaches (Steans, Pettiford, Thomas, & Imad, 2010). The Effects of Syrian Refugee Crises on Europe from the Lens of the Social Constructivist Approach analyzes the differing attitudes of various EU countries, such as Germany and Hungary, towards the Syrian refugee crisis. This approach emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior and international relations (Büyüktanir Karacan, 2019).

Key aspects of Social Constructivist approach include:

- The importance of shared norms and values in shaping state behaviour.
- The role of identity in shaping state interests and actions.
- The influence of international institutions and organizations on state behaviour.

Given the complexities of state behaviour, as highlighted by constructivism, we can now turn our attention to a real-world scenario that puts these theoretical considerations into practice: The Syrian refugee crisis has led to varying responses from EU countries, with some, like Germany, adopting a more welcoming stance towards refugees at the early stages of the conflict, while others, like Hungary, taking a more restrictive approach (Büyüktanır Karacan, 2019). These differing attitudes can be understood through the lens of social constructivism:

- a. **Norms and Values:** The varying responses to the refugee crisis reflect the different norms and values held by EU countries. For example, Germany's welcoming stance at the early stages of the conflict can be attributed to its commitment to human rights and humanitarian values, while Hungary's restrictive approach may be driven by concerns about national security and cultural preservation.
 - b. **Identity:** National identity plays a significant role in shaping state responses to the refugee crisis. For instance, Germany's historical experience with forced migration and its identity as a responsible global actor may contribute to its openness towards refugees, while Hungary's identity as a homogeneous nation-state may lead it to prioritize cultural preservation over humanitarian concerns.
 - c. **International Institutions:** The EU, as an international institution, has played a role in shaping member states' responses to the refugee crisis. The EU's emphasis on solidarity and burden-sharing has influenced some countries to adopt more welcoming policies, while others have resisted these norms and pursued more restrictive approaches.
2. **Constructivist Analysis:** The Constructivist Analysis of Türkiye–EU Relations and the Migration Issue examines the extent to which the EU adheres to its own standards by looking at EU–Türkiye cooperation on refugee issues (Ademi, 2022). This approach combines elements of realism and constructivism to analyze the complex interplay between power politics and normative considerations in shaping state behavior. In the Turkish foreign policy dimensions, the article "Türkiye's Response to Syrian Mass Migration: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis" by Şahin Mencutek, Gökalep Aras, &

Balamir Coşkun (2021) examines the foreign policy dimensions of refugee migration and its implications for international relations. The authors adopt a realist constructivist perspective, emphasizing the centrality of state interests and power dynamics in addition to identity in shaping policy responses. Through this lens, the response of Türkiye to the Syrian mass migration is not merely a humanitarian one; it is also a strategic calculation influenced by both domestic and international power dynamics. Understanding Türkiye's response to the crisis requires considering how the state's foreign policy has been influenced by systemic pressures and its own pursuit of power, security, and identity within the international system.

Perceptions of Syrian Refugees under the Constructivist Lens

In the perception of Syrian refugees under the constructivist lens reveals further nuances. The issue of migration, particularly involving non-western identity, Middle Eastern identity, Muslims, or Arabs, tends to provoke socio-economic concerns in Europe. However, this issue is further complicated by prevalent prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims, which has exacerbated the refugee crisis. The reluctance to accept Muslim Middle Eastern refugees, often stems from the perception that they pose a danger. This perspective is often voiced by nationalists, who fear that religious and cultural disparities may pose a threat to their national identity (Ademi, 2022).

The constructivist perspective also provides a unique viewpoint on the concept of European identity. According to this perspective, identity is not determined solely by inherent traits such as race, ethnicity, religion, history, culture, or political systems. Rather, it is seen as a self-presentation that is acknowledged by others and the significance and interpretation of these traits are subject to negotiation and contestation among political actors. For example, while the nominal adherence to Christianity among Europeans is acknowledged, constructivism contends that its role in shaping European identity is not fixed but a subject of ongoing discourse. Similarly, other aspects of European identity, like history, democracy, and market economy, are considered products of continuous construction and negotiation within Europe and between European actors and the rest of the world (Turhan & Reiners, 2021, p. 66). In the same vein, the evolving relationship between Europe and Türkiye amid the refugee crisis further illustrates the fluid nature of European identity, reinforcing that it is not a static construct, but a constantly negotiated one.

Constructivist Theory and State Actions

It is clear that Constructivist theory posits that state actions are influenced by their belief systems, which are embedded in historical, cultural, and social complexities (Ademi, 2022). In

the context of Turkish-EU relations regarding Syrian refugees and the Syrian conflict, constructivism can help explain the divergent attitudes and responses of the involved parties.

1. **Perceptions of refugees:** The quality of camp living conditions in Türkiye for Syrian refugees may be influenced by Türkiye's perception of Syrians or refugees in general (Ademi, 2022). The inclusive or exclusive reactions of host countries can impact the conditions experienced by refugees.
2. **Divergent attitudes among EU member states:** Constructivist theory can help comprehend the varying attitudes of EU member states towards the Syrian refugee crisis (Büyüktanır Karacan, 2019). The different responses can be attributed to the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of each member state.
3. **Norms and values in the EU-Türkiye cooperation:** Analysing the extent to which the EU adheres to its own standards its cooperation with Türkiye on refugee issues can provide insights into the role of norms and values in shaping their relationship (International Rescue Committee, 2023).
4. **Weaponization of Syrian refugees:** Türkiye has been accused of manipulating the Syrian refugee crisis to obtain leverage in its relations with the EU (Jennequin, 2020). Constructivist theory can help understand how Türkiye's strategic use of refugees is influenced by its identity and interests in the international arena.

In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, constructivism proves particularly illuminating. This conflict has significantly altered the socio-political dynamics within the EU, and constructivism provides a framework to understand these changes. The interaction between the 'agent' (refugees) and the 'structure' (European societies and institutions) not only reveals the interests and identities of the refugees, but also reshapes the structure itself. This reciprocal relationship has instigated changes at both domestic and EU levels, influenced not only by economic considerations but also by identity, norms, and ideas. The contrasting responses of EU nations to the Syrian refugee crisis underscore the relevance of social constructivism as a theoretical lens for analysis (Büyüktanır Karacan, 2019).

Continuing with this line of thought, we can consider Türkiye-EU relations in the context of the refugee crisis and explore the valuable insights offered by the constructivist lens. Türkiye's pursuit of EU membership, which began in 1959, is often seen as part of its broader Westernization project. However, today's relations are largely shaped by the refugee crisis, particularly in the wake of the Syrian conflict. The controversial EU-Türkiye Deal of 2016 is often criticized for prioritizing border security over humanitarian concerns. At the same time, Türkiye's open-door policy for refugees is indicative of its identity as a humanitarian actor and

its regional ambitions. Nevertheless, the financial and societal costs of hosting a large refugee population, coupled with insufficient support from the EU, have led to growing resentment among the Turkish public towards both refugees and the EU (Mencütek, Aras, & Coşkun, 2021). From a constructivist perspective, the EU-Türkiye agreement can be seen as a reflection of the social identities and interests of the actors involved. Türkiye had an urge to use the crisis to revive the sagging EU accession process and resolve the long-standing visa liberalization issue.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the EU's enlargement to include Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), while simultaneously sidelining Türkiye, sparked scholarly discourse, primarily centred on the role of identity dynamics in EU-Türkiye relationships. This discourse reached its zenith during Türkiye's accession negotiations between 1999 and 2005, as discussions within the EU on the merits of Turkish membership became more contentious. As the prospect of Türkiye's inclusion became increasingly plausible, opposition intensified, predicated on the notion that Türkiye, given its distinct democratic, geographical, historical, cultural characteristics, and the mindset of its political class and populace, might pose a substantial challenge to the European project. This sentiment was amplified by influential voices, such as former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who openly posited that Türkiye's unique constellation of characteristics might disqualify it as a 'typical' European state, thereby rendering it incompatible with the EU membership (Aydın-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2021).

Currently, the EU's stance towards Türkiye is heavily influenced by concerns over security and migration, as well as strategic interests in the region. However, Türkiye's accession negotiations have hit a stalemate, and the EU's enlargement policy has been subjected to criticism for its lack of credibility and effectiveness (Gürkan & Coman, 2021). Reform is a crucial element in moving forward. The EU's enlargement policy requires an overhaul to enhance its credibility and effectiveness. More support from the EU is needed to manage the refugee crisis and promote burden-sharing among the EU member states (Aybet & Müftüler-Bac, 2000). The necessity for comprehensive reform in the EU's enlargement policy towards Türkiye is clear, aimed not only at invigorating the stalemate in accession negotiations, but also to establish a fairer more effective system of refugee management and burden sharing. A credible and efficient approach can forge a more harmonious relationship between the EU and Türkiye, contributing to regional security, stability, and overall development.

EU-Türkiye Relations and the Impact of the Refugee Crisis

The constructivist lens allows us to predict that the evolution of the EU-Türkiye relations will hinge on identity shifts within both entities. A more strategic partnership is urgently needed. The EU-Türkiye Deal can be seen through a constructivist lens as a reflection of the EU's identity as a 'Fortress Europe', where border security is prioritized over humanitarian concerns. The EU's response to the refugee crisis, which has been criticized for its lack of solidarity and burden-sharing, has placed the majority of the burden on Türkiye (Mencütek, Aras, & Coşkun, 2021). Notably, the EU's approach towards Türkiye has been shaped by its concerns over security and migration, as well as its strategic interests in the region (Ibid).

The EU-Türkiye relations continues to hinge on identity shifts within both entities, necessitating a more strategic partnership. The EU's enlargement policy needs to be more credible and effective. Further, the EU must extend more support to Türkiye to manage the refugee crisis and promote burden-sharing among the EU member states. The refugee crisis has highlighted the limitations of the EU's current approach towards Türkiye, emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive and strategic partnership.

It is an evident that the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis have had significant implications for Turkish-EU relations in many shapes:

Cooperation: The refugee crisis has led to increased cooperation between Türkiye and the EU, particularly in the areas of border control, migration management, and humanitarian assistance (International Rescue Committee, 2023). This cooperation has been driven by shared interests in addressing the crisis and preventing further destabilization in the region.

Tensions: Despite increased cooperation, the refugee crisis has also exposed tensions and disagreements between Türkiye and the EU. For example, Türkiye has criticized the EU for not providing sufficient financial and logistical support to help manage the refugee crisis, while the EU has expressed concerns about Türkiye's human rights record and its handling of the crisis (Toygür, Tekin, Danforth, & ILecha, 2022).

Impact on Accession Process: The refugee crisis has also had implications for Türkiye's EU accession process. While the crisis has led in some times to increased cooperation and dialogue between Türkiye and the EU, it has also highlighted the challenges and obstacles that remain in Türkiye's path towards the EU membership, such as concerns about human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Icoz & Martin, 2021) especially during the military interventions.

Overall, the Syrian refugee crisis has significantly altered the socio-political dynamics within the EU. However, the rationalist approach, which primarily focuses on the economic

benefits of hosting refugees, fails to adequately explain the complex agent-structure interactions that have unfolded. While it is true that refugees can potentially boost aging economies, the varied responses across the EU indicate that social factors play a crucial role. A social constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the social relations between state and society, provides a more comprehensive understanding. Attitudes towards refugees are shaped by historical experiences, societal tolerance, and perceived threats to security, culture, and identity. As agents and structures interact, interests and identities are revealed, potentially leading to structural changes. Therefore, the Syrian refugee crisis in the EU context underscores the importance of social constructivism in international relations, highlighting the socially constructed nature of these interactions (Büyüktanir Karacan, 2019, p. 162).

To sum, the constructivist perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of international relations, particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict and its implications for Türkiye-EU relations. It underlines the role of social relations, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour and the international system. It also underscores the importance of historical experiences and the socially constructed nature of interests and identities. Thus, the constructivist perspective offers valuable insights into the dynamics of national interests, international security, and foreign policy, and their implications for the future of international relations.

To conclude, the relations between Türkiye and the EU have been complex and multifaceted, especially in the light of the Syrian crisis. Understanding the dynamics between the two required the application of different theories of International Relations. This complexity is embodied in the 2016 agreement regarding refugees, the subsequent tensions, and the evolution of cooperation and conflicts over time. The three prominent theories of Liberalism, Realism, and Constructivism offer unique insights into these phases, as the following figure shows.

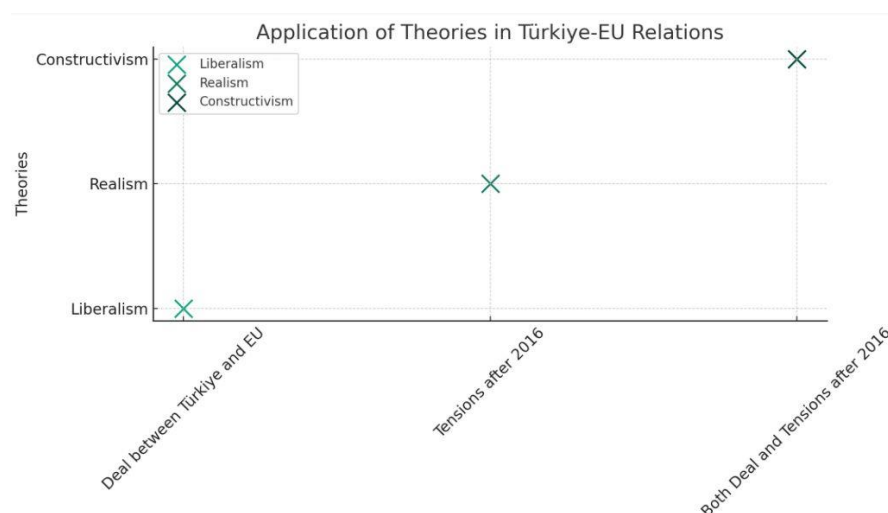


Figure 05 Application of Theories in Türkiye-EU Relations

The 2016 deal between Türkiye and the EU can be seen through the lens of Liberalism, which emphasizes cooperation, rule of law, and international organizations. This agreement was formed to address the refugee crisis stemming from Syria. Both parties sought to uphold humanitarian principles and shared benefits, with Türkiye agreeing to contain the flow of refugees in exchange for aid and other concessions. The deal reflected liberal values of multilateralism, human rights, and mutual benefits, aiming to create a win-win situation.

The period following the 2016 deal witnessed growing tensions and can be analysed through the lens of Realism, as it focuses on power politics, interest, and competition. In 2020, the tensions escalated, particularly during the Meric River crisis. The failure of the deal to fully materialize, coupled with underlying political and territorial conflicts, led to a Realist struggle for power and dominance. Each side prioritized its interests, leading to friction and a re-evaluation of commitments.

Constructivism offers an overarching framework to understand the entire spectrum of Türkiye-EU relations during the Syrian crisis. Unlike the other theories, it places significant emphasis on the role of ideas, norms, perceptions, and identities. Constructivism explains how the cooperation and tensions were shaped by shared and conflicting values, historical narratives, and mutual perceptions. This perspective allows for an understanding of how the parties' interactions were not just based on material interests or power but were deeply rooted in their identities and ideologies.

The Syrian conflict and the Türkiye-EU relations provide a vivid example of how different IR theories can be applied to dissect complex international scenarios. Liberalism sheds light on the principles behind the cooperative 2016 agreement, Realism offers insights into the tensions and power struggles that emerged afterward, and Constructivism enables a deeper understanding of how the relations were shaped throughout the crisis by shared and conflicting values. Together, these theories offer a nuanced understanding of a dynamic and multifaceted relationship. It is important to note that these theories provide different lenses through which to analyse and understand international relations. They offer different insights into the motivations and actions of states, but they are not mutually exclusive. In practice, multiple theories may interact and influence the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU.

At the end, Realism is the most accurate lens through which to analyze the Türkiye-EU relations following the 2016 refugee deal due to its emphasis on power dynamics, self-interest, and competition. While the initial agreement reflected elements of Liberalism, the subsequent breakdown and tensions that emerged align more closely with Realist principles. Additionally, the lack of mutual trust and the failure to fully implement the provisions of the 2016 deal further

validate the Realist framework. Both sides perceived each other's actions with suspicion, interpreting them as power plays rather than genuine efforts at collaboration. The EU's reluctance to fulfill certain promises, such as visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, reflects its cautious approach to preserving internal cohesion and minimizing risks. Realism provides the most pragmatic and comprehensive explanation for the evolving dynamics post-2016. The persistence of national interests, competition for influence, and the strategic manipulation of the refugee crisis align closely with the Realist paradigm, making it the most accurate theoretical framework to interpret this period of Türkiye-EU relations.

As a Middle Eastern individual living amidst the region's chaos and challenges, I have always felt a personal responsibility to understand the root causes of these crises and contribute to developing solutions. This sense of responsibility was the driving factor behind my decision to register in the Middle East Studies Ph.D. program at the Social Sciences University of Ankara. I saw this program as an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the region's history and analyze its complex issues, particularly the Syrian conflict, which I have witnessed since its beginning. This conflict has not only affected regional relations but has also become a critical element in global political interactions.

The choice of my dissertation topic, which centers on the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations with a focus on the refugee issue, emerged naturally from the growing significance of this subject and its far-reaching consequences. The conflict has become one of the most significant factors complicating Türkiye-EU relations, introducing new dynamics at both the regional and international levels.

Throughout the writing process, I encountered several challenges, the most prominent of which was analyzing the rapidly shifting policies of the actors involved in the conflict and identifying patterns in their responses to these changes. It was often difficult to keep pace with the fast-evolving developments and to interpret the disparate political decisions.

Additionally, the plenty of actors in the conflict, both internal and external, added complexity to analyzing the overlapping roles and interests. I had to navigate through varying internal and external reactions and adapt to the intricate political landscape surrounding the conflict. However, with the continuous guidance from my supervisor and committee, I was able to overcome these challenges. By relying on precise academic direction and reputable scholarly references, I developed a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the conflict's implications on Türkiye-EU relations. Ultimately, I transformed these obstacles into opportunities to enrich my research, culminating in an academic contribution that I regard as a significant addition to the field of Middle Eastern studies and international relations.

I structured my research into five interrelated chapters, starting with the theoretical and analytical framework that sets the stage for understanding the dimensions of the Syrian conflict and its evolution, leading to an exploration of the key findings. These findings focus specifically on the long-term implications of the conflict on Türkiye-EU relations.

Moving on to the second chapter, "The Syrian Conflict: Factors, Actors, and Peace Initiatives," the study delves into the historical roots of the conflict and the immediate causes of its escalation. This chapter begins by analyzing the internal and external factors that fueled the conflict, including the roles of key domestic actors, such as the Syrian regime and opposition forces, as well as external regional and international actors. Additionally, the chapter explores the international efforts to resolve the conflict, focusing on the Geneva and Astana processes as major peace initiatives, highlighting the complexity of the conflict and the intertwined interests of the involved parties.

The third chapter, "Türkiye and the Syrian Conflict," provides a comprehensive analysis of Türkiye's role in the conflict since its outbreak. This chapter traces the historical background of Türkiye-Syria relations and examines how these relations evolved following the start of the conflict. Moreover, this chapter discusses how the Syrian refugee crisis became an integral part of Türkiye's foreign policy toward the EU.

In the fourth chapter, "The EU's Response to the Syrian Conflict," the study examines the EU's evolving response to the crisis across different phases. Furthermore, the chapter reviews the strategic and institutional frameworks employed by the EU, such as the European Council and the European Commission, with a focus on the close cooperation between the EU and Türkiye as a key player in addressing the crisis.

Finally, the fifth chapter provides a comprehensive outcomes of the study's findings. It begins with a discussion and key findings of analysis of the Syrian conflict and its implications on Türkiye and the EU. The discussion centers on the long-term implications, including the realignment of international alliances and the diplomatic consequences of Türkiye's military interventions.

Regarding the conclusion, it provides comprehensive summarize about the profound and multifaceted implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations, highlighting the emphasize key findings, policy implications, and future prospects for this complex relationship, offering insights into how regional conflicts reshape international partnerships and dynamics.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: FACTORS, ACTORS AND PEACE INITIATIVES

The Syrian conflict and the subsequent refugee crisis have their roots in a combination of political, social, and economic factors. The conflict began when the Syrian regime violently cracked down on public demonstrations in support of teenagers arrested for anti-regime graffiti in the southern town of Daraa (USA for UNHCR, 2023). The protests were part of the larger uprising movement that swept across the region, toppling dictatorial regimes in countries like Egypt and Tunisia (Lacour, 2017). In other words, this wave of protests was influenced by the Arab Spring, which had already affected several countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The protests targeted Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime, which prioritized the interests of a small elite. Assad had been in power since 2000, succeeding his father who had ruled since the 1970s (The Guardian, 2016). The violent suppression of protests in Syria led to nationwide demonstrations, which eventually escalated into a full-scale proxy war (USA for UNHCR, 2023).

In response to the initially peaceful demonstrations, Assad's forces violently suppressed the protesters, resulting in over a hundred deaths. This led to the formation of rebel groups, escalating the conflict between them and the regime's security forces. Within the first 18 months, the conflict resulted in an estimated 60,000 deaths (The Guardian, 2016).

The conflict has been characterized by a struggle between the Syrian regime, led by Bashar al-Assad, and various anti-regime rebel groups (Faham F. , 2024). The regime has been backed by Russia and Iran, while the rebels have received support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and other regional powers. The conflict has been further complicated by the involvement of the Islamic State, which began seizing control of territory in Syria in 2013 (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

The conflict is driven by three campaigns: violence between the Syrian regime and opposition forces, coalition efforts to defeat the Islamic State, and military operations against Kurdish armed groups by Turkish forces. ISIS began seizing control of territory in Syria in 2013, and after a series of terrorist attacks coordinated by ISIS across Europe in 2015, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, with the support of Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab partners, expanded their air campaign in Iraq to include Syria. With Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian regime has steadily regained control of territory from opposition

forces, including the opposition's stronghold in Aleppo in 2016 (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). As the conflict has progressed, sectarian divisions have hardened, with the predominantly Sunni opposition pitted against the Alawite-dominated government (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The war has caused immense suffering for the Syrian people, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced both within the country and as refugees since the beginning of the conflict. The crisis has put immense pressure on neighbouring countries, which host the majority of Syrian refugees, and has also had significant political and social impacts on European countries that have taken in large numbers of refugees. The humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire, with many people lacking essentials such as food, clean water, and healthcare. The ongoing war has led to immense human suffering and has created one of the largest displacement crises in modern history (Bishara, 2013, pp. 23-24).

The deeper roots of the conflict can be traced back to the post-World War I period. The borders of Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, were drawn by France and Britain, grouping together diverse ethnic and religious communities. The population of Syria comprises approximately 12% Alawites, 8% Christians, 3% Shiites, and 74% Sunnis (The Guardian, 2016).

Syria has experienced a turbulent history since the rise of the socialist Baath Party in 1963, which initiated land reforms, nationalizations, and aimed for Pan-Arabism. Internal divisions and losses in conflicts like the Six-Day War with Israel created political instability. Hafez Al-Assad's regime (1970-2000) restored order but faced economic and political challenges, including strained relations with the West. His son, Bashar Al-Assad, continued with economic liberalization policies from 2000, seeking a balance between socialism and market economics. However, the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war have put these efforts on hold, shifting Syria's alliances towards Iran, Russia, and China, and leaving the country's future uncertain (Syrian Law Journal, 2023).

2.1. Contributing Factors to the Syrian Conflict

2.1.1. External Factors

To thoroughly examine the intricacies of the Syrian conflict, including its dynamics and implications, it is imperative to examine its historical context, revealing both its direct and indirect antecedents. For instance, the dynamics of the Cold War and its aftermath, coupled with the repercussions of the 9/11 attacks and other related shifts and turning points, played a significant role in shaping alliances that may have laid the foundation for new conflicts in the region. The Syrian unrest stands out as one such conflict profoundly influenced by the events preceding it.

Historical Context

To fully comprehend the intricacies of the Syrian conflict and its far-reaching implications, it is imperative to explore its historical underpinnings, focusing especially on the indirect factors that have profoundly influenced its trajectory. While internal political unrest and social upheaval within Syria are immediate triggers often cited, external influences have played an equally pivotal role in shaping the groundwork for conflict in the region. Collectively, these historical context influences, created a volatile environment within which internal grievances in Syria could escalate into a full-scale crisis. Understanding these historical dynamics is crucial for unpacking the complexities of the Syrian conflict, revealing how global and regional forces intertwined to shape events and laying bare the enduring geopolitical implications that continue to resonate across the Middle East and beyond.

1. The Aftermath of the Cold War

For several decades, Syria has stood at the crossroads of Arab politics, emerging as a touchstone for prevailing ideological currents. Its pivotal positioning between Egypt and Iraq, the historic epicentres of Arab power, coupled with its perceived status as the bastion of Arab nationalism, places Syria at the heart of the Arab world's political pulse (Şerif & Carmen, 2013, p. 57). In general, the Arab region witnessed major transformations in the aftermath of World War II, with the emergence of the Cold War between the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union and the Western bloc led by the United States. This global conflict cast its shadow on the Middle East and shaped the foreign policy orientations of the newly independent Arab states, including Syria, which gained independence in 1946 coinciding with the onset of the Cold War (Khoury, 2016). It is important to examine the impacts of the aftermath of the Cold War superpower rivalry on Syria's domestic politics and foreign relations, demonstrating how these Cold War dynamics contributed to the conditions that led to the uprising in 2011.

During the Cold War, some Arab governments maintained stronger ties with the Soviet Union. Syria, for instance, relied heavily on Soviet backing in both military and diplomatic spheres until the dissolution of the USSR (Halliday, 2005, p. 120). With the end of the Cold War in 1991, Syria found itself in a position of international isolation, bereft of its Soviet ally. Nonetheless, Hāfiz Assad³ managed to maintain his grip on power throughout the 1990s, striking a balance between minor political liberalization and strict control (Phillips, 2020).

According to Podraza, the end of the Cold War shifted the Middle East's alignment from global politics, as the strategic rivalry between the superpowers dissipated. With the end of the

³ Hāfiz al-Assad, President of Syria (1971–2000). For more details please visit the Oxford Reference in this link: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095429412>

East-West rivalry, new divisions arose between pro-Western authoritarian regimes and reactionary Islamists who sought to eradicate Western influence (Podraza, 2018, pp. 74-75). This created a power vacuum⁴ in the Middle East that allowed new conflicts to emerge without the moderating influence of the superpowers. Syria was deeply impacted by this shift. During the Cold War, Syria was a Soviet client state that relied on military and economic aid from Moscow. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended this patron-client relationship. Syria lost its superpower sponsor and the stability this provided. In the post-Cold War era, Syria was fundamentally involved in geo-political balancing, particularly as the US was establishing itself as the unchallenged global hegemon. The diplomatic reliance of Syria on the US necessitated that it persuades Washington to overlook past hostilities and recognize Syria as a responsible entity contributing to regional stability (Hinnebusch, 2003, pp. 213-214).

However, Trenin⁵ argues that during the 1990s and 2000s, the relationship with the Russia grew more distant yet remained amicable (Trenin, 2016, p. 03). However, during the post-Cold War phase, the United States intensified its engagement in the Middle East, which consequently spurred nations like Syria and Iran to bolster their security collaboration. The US's pro-Israeli positioning during the Arab-Israeli talks, its backing of a Turkish-Israeli alliance post-1996 aimed at marginalizing Iran and pressuring Syria, along with its strategy of capitalizing on Iran-Gulf Arab discord to justify its military foothold and substantial arms dealings with regional allies, all played a part in rejuvenating the Syrian-Iranian cooperation post-Cold War (Wallsh, 2013, p. 112). The collapse of the Soviet Union left a geopolitical vacuum in the Middle East, which had been a significant sphere of influence for Moscow. The absence of Soviet support for ally states in the region led to a reconfiguration of alliances and a power imbalance, which the United States sought to fill (Phillips, 2020). Syria, losing its Soviet ally, balanced relations with the US and Iran amidst a changing geopolitical landscape. As the US deepened its Middle East involvement, Syria and Iran bolstered their alliance, navigating new regional dynamics and the emerging power vacuum.

The Syrian conflict of 2011 can be viewed as a manifestation of the complex geopolitical shifts in the Middle East following the end of the Cold War (Sayigh, 2014). Syria, a nation

⁴ This vacuum that contributed to significant policy shifts not only in the Middle East but globally. We cannot analyze Syrian policy in isolation from global policies, especially with regional actors like Türkiye, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, significantly affecting the onset of conflict in Syria in 2011. The repercussions of each turning point endure for decades, sometimes centuries, as deduced from the chapter "The Middle East in a decade of globalisation (1991-2001)" by Raymond Hinnebusch in his book "International Politics in the Middle East". This chapter explores crucial dynamics significantly influencing subsequent conflicts. The stance of the US, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia supporting the Syrian opposition, and Russia and Iran supporting the Syrian regime, is not recent but a result of events and dynamics that significantly influenced these active states' positions, transforming it into a proxy war within Syria. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35008>

⁵ Trenin was director of the Carnegie Moscow Center from 2008 to early 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/experts/287>

historically mired in political and sectarian complexities, was compelled to navigate an altered regional landscape post-Cold War. The geopolitical environment during the Cold War had a profound impact on Syria's political structure, particularly under the Baathist regime, which had solidified its authoritarian rule through its alliance with the Soviet bloc. In the post-Cold War era, the ascendancy of the United States as a predominant global power and its increased involvement in Middle Eastern affairs led to significant realignments in regional alliances, notably between Syria and Iran, as they sought to adapt to the changing geopolitical context.

These shifts, deeply rooted in the legacies of the Cold War, played an instrumental role in the genesis and development of the 2011 conflict. This underscores the complex interplay between historical geopolitical dynamics and contemporary regional politics. The pattern of international involvement in the 2011 Syrian conflict mirrored the geopolitical rivalries characteristic of the Cold War period. The United States and its regional allies, which were traditionally aligned with the Western bloc during the Cold War, supported the Syrian opposition. In contrast, Russia, along with nations like Iran, provided support to the Syrian regime (Ting, 2024). This external intervention in the conflict indicates that a critical factor in both its escalation and persistence was its transformation into a proxy arena for these global powers.

2. The 9/11 attacks

The 9/11 attacks further intensified global focus on the Middle East, but U.S. invasions post-9/11, especially in Iraq, exacerbated the region's instability. Key missteps, like dissolving the Iraqi army, birthed extremist factions. The claiming of U.S.'s endeavour to instil democracy in Iraq was marred by an insurgency, sectarian conflicts, and regional resentment. This turbulence was amplified when the U.S. retreated from Iraq in 2011, only to re-enter due to the rise of ISIS (Podraza, 2018, pp. 74-75).

The attacks in the United States had profound geopolitical consequences that reverberated well beyond the borders of the US. While the attacks themselves were planned and carried out by Al-Qaeda, the US response and ensuing War on Terror ultimately destabilized the Middle East and laid the groundwork for the Syrian conflict that emerged years later.

Within weeks after 9/11, the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 with the goal of overthrowing the Taliban government that had been harbouring Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden⁶ (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). This war in Afghanistan also gave impetus to the

⁶ Also known as: Osama bin Mohammad bin Laden, Usāmah bin Lādin, Usama bin Laden, founder of the Islamist organization al-Qaeda: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Osama-bin-Laden>

Bush administration's plans for regime change in Iraq based on dubious claims of weapons of mass destruction (Dodge, 2013, pp. 10-15). In March 2003, the US invaded Iraq and quickly toppled Saddam Hussein's government. However, the US occupation of Iraq then sparked an insurgency and sectarian civil war between the country's Sunni and Shia factions (Bilmes, 2013).

The power vacuum in Iraq was especially consequential for the conflict in Syria. In 2003, the Bush administration had hoped that toppling Saddam Hussein would inspire democratic revolutions across the Middle East (Dodge, 2013, pp. 172-179). However, Iraq collapsed into insurgency and sectarian war after Hussein's fall from power. For Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, this served as a cautionary tale. Geopolitically, the US invasions of Iraq caused American influence in the Middle East to wane while benefiting rivals like Iran (Parsi, 2017). The fall of Saddam Hussein removed Iran's biggest enemy and allowed Tehran to empower Shia allies in Iraq. Iran also supported its long-time ally Assad against the rebels in Syria, sending money, weapons and later deploying Revolutionary Guard troops. Russia also viewed the US-led regime change efforts in Iraq as threatening, making Moscow more determined to protect its classic ally Assad once Syria erupted in civil war.

While there is no direct link between the 9/11 attacks and the Syrian conflict, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent US-led global war on terror have had a profound impact on the Middle East region. The US invasion of Iraq, in particular, had a deeply destabilizing impact on the region, leading to a strong wave of anti-Americanism. Overall, we can say that the 9/11 attacks set in motion a series of events catalysed by US military interventions in the Middle East that ultimately created the chaotic conditions enabling Syria's descent into civil war and takeover by groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The Iraq War especially drove the rise of extremism that spilled over into Syria's conflict.

3. Iraq's Conflict

Syria strongly opposed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Bashar al-Assad feared long-term U.S. occupation of Iraq would strengthen U.S. influence in the Middle East at the expense of Syria. Syria opened its borders for foreign jihadists to transit into Iraq to fight U.S. troops, a policy Phillips argues was a principal enabler for the birth and growth of al-Qaeda in Iraq (Phillips, 2020, p. 23).

The insurgency that erupted against U.S. forces had complex effects for Syria. It bogged down the U.S. in a bloody conflict that damaged U.S. regional standing. But the insurgency also empowered extremist groups like al-Qaeda, contributed to massive Iraqi civilian deaths, and increased instability on Syria's border as refugees and militants streamed across (Ibid

pp.24-25). Syria attempted to balance these effects by continuing to support some anti-American groups while cooperating with the U.S. against more radical elements (Salloukh, 2017).

Phillips also noted that, "The Middle East in 2011 was a region in transition. The perceived dominance of the United States, already more limited than assumed, was ebbing after 2009 and a nascent multipolar regional order was emerging. The Syrian civil war must be understood within the context of these regional shifts⁷, as both a symptom and a subsequent reinforcer of them. The US⁸ was still the most powerful, but now other powers were independently asserting or reasserting their influence" (Phillips, 2020, p. 25). Syria's Iraq policy exemplified what Hinnebusch terms the contradictions of Syria's foreign policy in the 2000s – attempting to both resist and cooperate with the U.S., indirectly supporting groups that exacerbated regional instability Syria also wished to avoid (Hinnebusch, 2015).

The conflict in Iraq had significant repercussions in Syria, with regime-controlled media outlets exploiting the situation to stoke fears of sectarian violence and position the regime as a safeguard against such unrest. From a geopolitical perspective, President Assad sought to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq by facilitating the movement of Sunni jihadist fighters across the Syrian-Iraqi border. This strategy had unforeseen consequences: these fighters eventually turned against Syria, and their ideology found a foothold, albeit in isolated areas. Concurrently, the conflict in Iraq emboldened the Kurdish population in Syria to demand increased autonomy, mirroring their Iraqi counterparts. This rising Kurdish nationalism was met with severe repression by the Syrian regime. This response aimed to deter nationalist aspirations but inadvertently deepened the resentment among the Kurds. It also heightened tensions with local Arabs who supported the regime's actions (Phillips, 2015, p. 368).

Most analysts concur the Iraq War had multiple damaging impacts on Syria. Phillips argues that the war was an essential catalyst for unrest in Syria for several reasons:

⁷ This factor will be discussed later in this study in a section titled "External Intervention" as a cause of the Syrian conflict and will also be analyzed in more detail in a section entitled "Foreign Actors in the Conflict."

⁸ An in-depth examination reveals the pivotal yet often overlooked roles played by the United States and other countries in influencing the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. While many narratives of the Syrian conflict start as an internal strife from 2011 that later escalated with international involvement, Christopher Phillips, in his book titled: *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, suggests that external influences were always a significant factor. He emphasizes that the perceived retreat of American influence in the Middle East created a power void, leading to a new regional dynamic. In this dynamic, six key international players—the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar—have been actively involved in Syria, which has become a major arena for their competing interests. Phillips supports his revised perspective with numerous first-hand interviews, providing a different viewpoint on the war in Syria. He does not exonerate the Assad regime's atrocities but seeks to clarify the major international actions that have contributed to the conflict's intensification and persistence.

- **First**, the war empowered sectarianism and extremist groups that spilled over Syria's porous border (Ibid).
- **Second**, the war discredited secular Arab nationalism and Baathism, undermining Syrian ideology (Ibid).
- **Third**, the war strengthened Iran's influence, as Syria grew reliant on Iranian support while Arab states aligned with the U.S. This shifting balance of power left Syria feeling isolated and encircled by hostile forces (Hinnebusch, 2015).
- **Forth**, in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the oil pipeline transporting crude oil from Kirkuk to Banias was closed. Concurrently, the implementation of free trade policies by the occupying powers facilitated the diversification of Iraq's trade relations. This economic shift enabled Iraqi traders to engage with alternative and competitive markets, notably those in China and Iran, thereby reorienting Iraq's international trade dynamics (Raphaeli, 2007).
- **Fifth**, the influx of over one million Iraqi refugees (Ibid).

In addition, the Iraq War demonstrated the limits of Syrian power, as Syria was unable to affect Iraq's fate despite the deep links between the two countries (Heydemann, 2013). Syria asserted itself through backing anti-U.S. forces in Iraq. However, the regime also grew more insecure and risk-averse domestically after seeing Iraq's Baathist regime rapidly collapse in 2003, making Assad less willing to enact meaningful reforms requested by the Syrian public (Hinnebusch, 2015).

Phillips argued that the Iraq War also impacted Syria's economic troubles in the 2000s. The war contributed to declines in trade, foreign investment, tourism revenue, and oil production that left Syria struggling economically prior to 2011 (Phillips, 2015). Finally, the plight of displaced Iraqis – with over one million Iraqi refugees in Syria by 2011 – placed strain on Syria (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016).

Overall, Syria's deep involvement in Iraq conflicts during the decades prior to 2011 significantly impacted its regional standing, ideology, economy, security, and sectarian balance in ways that helped set the stage for unrest. Syria's policy in Iraq demonstrates how involvement in neighbouring conflicts can reverberate back upon a country in complex ways to fuel domestic challenges down the line. Regional disputes like Syria's tensions with Iraq rarely stay confined; instead, they unleash transnational forces with lasting unintended consequences.

Foreign Intervention

External intervention was one of the major causes that helped spark the uprising in Syria. In examining the origins of the conflict, analysts point to several factors that created conditions ripe for unrest, including economic stagnation, ideological reasons, and political authoritarianism under Bashar al-Assad's rule (Fahd, 2014, pp. 5-6). However, the early, peaceful protests were largely driven by domestic Syrian grievances. Foreign powers helped escalate these initial demonstrations into a full-fledged proxy war by providing material support to the opposition and helping militarize the conflict (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 95; Rammal, 2023). Foreign intervention significantly contributed to the escalation of the Syrian conflict, transforming it from a domestic unrest into a protracted internationalized crisis. The involvement of external actors, both regional and global, introduced complex dynamics that exacerbated existing tensions and prolonged the conflict (Al-Banna, et al., 2023).

1. Regional

The first phase of foreign intervention came from regional powers who saw strategic interests in undermining the Assad regime. Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed opposition groups, providing funding and weapons that allowed the protest movement to form armed rebel brigades (Phillips, 2015, p. 370). Türkiye⁹ also provided safe havens for the Syrian opposition to organize across the border, hosting and supporting the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council (Stein, 2014). These actions helped transform the conflict from isolated protests into an armed insurgency against the regime by the end of 2011.

2. International

The second phase of foreign intervention came from Western powers who imposed economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure on the Assad regime. In August 2011, the U.S. called for Assad to step down and later imposed broad sanctions on Syria (Lesch, 2012). The EU also imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime, and "recognized the Syrian National Council as the principal opposition framework and a legitimate representative of the Syrian people on April 2012" (Sayigh, The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem, 2013, p. 05). This international isolation gave hope to the opposition that the regime would collapse. However, it also spurred increased support from Russia and Iran, who backed Assad militarily and economically as a counterbalance (Allison, 2013, p. 799).

⁹ Many determinants are linked with Türkiye regarding the Syrian conflict, which affected Türkiye's dealing: Importance of Syria to Türkiye as a bordering state, Türkiye feared that violence that occurred in Syria might reach Türkiye, and threatens its internal stability, and the role of Iran in the region as a competitor.

In examining the timeline of events, it is evident external intervention served as an accelerant that helped a domestic Syrian uprising morph into a regional proxy war and full-scale civil war. The early protests were largely non-violent and driven by local grievances against Assad. However, the combination of funding and arms from regional powers, diplomatic pressure and sanctions from Western powers, all helped militarize the conflict and intensify the violence (Mukhaimer, 2015).

Without the full military might of Assad regime harshly putting down the initial protests, It is unlikely there would have been foreign intervention in Syria. However, Scholars like Christopher Phillips argue the civil war was not inevitable, but rather was sparked by the interference of foreign powers pursuing their own geopolitical interests in toppling the Assad regime, concluding that the external backers of the armed rebels share considerable responsibility. In different ways the key regional anti-Assad powers came to actively support the armed rebellion (Phillips, 2020, p. vii). Similarly, Joshua Landis¹⁰ contends the militarization of the uprising began with money and arms flooding into Syria by the summer of 2011 (Landis, 2012, p. 78).

While domestic discontent created the conditions for unrest, foreign intervention from regional and Western powers contributed to turn the Syria's uprising into an intractable civil war. Once the protests widened and the violent cracking down of the regime on protests happened, then the foreign and regional intervention occurred. By providing material support to rebels, and legitimizing the opposition, external actors exacerbated Syria's internal tensions and helped rip the country apart. The devastating outcome stands as a stark example of how foreign meddling can escalate civil unrest into a bloody regional proxy war. However, the degree to which external actors exacerbated the conflict is a matter of contention. Supporters of this argument may point to instances where foreign powers provided material support to rebel groups and legitimized opposition forces, arguing that such actions heightened internal tensions and fuelled the escalation of the conflict (Haniyeh & Bin Al-Ahmad, 2020). They may also highlight the geopolitical interests of external actors in the region, contributing to the complexity of the Syrian conflict.

It is crucial to emphasize that the internal and external factors of the Syrian conflict have synergistically contributed to the current crisis. These are cumulative issues that have developed over decades, leading to the present situation in Syria. However, detractors might argue that the roots of the Syrian conflict are deeply embedded in longstanding domestic grievances,

¹⁰ Associate professor and director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/authorized-by/Landis/Joshua>

including political repression, economic challenges, and sectarian tensions. They may contend that attributing the entire escalation to foreign intervention oversimplifies the complex web of factors contributing to the conflict. Additionally, some may argue that the notion of foreign meddling transforming civil unrest into a regional proxy war oversimplifies the motivations and actions of various actors involved. Geopolitical interests, regional rivalries, and ideological considerations may have influenced foreign involvement in different ways, making it challenging to characterize the conflict solely as a result of external interference.

The Arab Uprising as a Catalyst for the 2011 Syrian Conflict

The Arab Uprising played a significant role in shaping the specific timing and motivation behind the protests that started in Syria. Beginning in late 2010, the wave of uprisings across the Arab world, triggered by socio-economic grievances, political repression, and calls for democratic reforms, reverberated strongly within Syria. The Arab Uprising provided a critical catalyst for Syrians to challenge entrenched power structures and demand change. It unified diverse segments of society, including youth, activists, and marginalized communities, behind a common call for dignity, democracy, and social justice. The movement's momentum underscored the interconnectedness of regional events and their impact on domestic politics, amplifying pressures for reform that the Syrian regime ultimately failed to address effectively. In essence, the timing and motivation of the Syrian protests can be directly attributed to the broader regional context of the Arab Uprising. This factor not only illuminated shared grievances across the Arab world but also highlighted Syria's unique socio-political landscape and the regime's inability to manage demands for reform, ultimately leading to the escalation of protests into a full-scale conflict.

"Would the Syrian uprising have occurred in 2011 without the Arab Spring? Probably not. Political repression, corruption, and the regional upheavals were sufficient to motivate people to take to the streets. "

(Daoudy, 2020, p. 12)

"Although many complicated motives led to the Syrian civil war, one event, known as the Arab Spring, stands out as perhaps the most significant trigger for the conflict...these successful revolts, dubbed the Arab Spring, served as an inspiration for pro-democracy activists in Syria. "

(Marks, 2023)

The eruption of the Arab Spring served as a catalytic backdrop for the Syrian conflict, a context that cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging the intricate tapestry of emotions that permeated these revolutions. Sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation

in Tunisia, which shattered "the barrier of fear" or (*kasar hajeز el khawf*, in Arabic). The Arab Spring generated a collective emotional resonance that transcended national borders. This emotionally charged atmosphere effectively galvanized a myriad of long-suppressed nationalistic and religious sentiments, providing the essential emotional currency for revolts against authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa, including Syria. Thus, the Arab Spring did not merely set a template for civil resistance; it activated an emotional cascade that, when intersected with existing nationalistic and religious fervours, dictated the timing and nature of the Syrian revolution, transforming it from a possibility into an inevitability (Coşkun, 2019, p. 1201). The regional instability and motivation for regime change or overthrowing the regimes inspired by the Arab protests and their initial successes in Tunisia and Egypt acted as a catalyst for the outbreak of conflict in Syria between pro-democracy protestors and the Assad regime.

In February 2011, the ousting of ruler of Egypt for decades showed that entrenched despots could be challenged through mass mobilization. For repressed Syrians, the Arab Spring signalled that similar results could be achieved through protest in their own country (Ok, 2021).

In mid-March 2011, a group of young boys were arrested and tortured by security forces in the city of Daraa for scrawling anti-regime graffiti, sparking local demonstrations demanding their release. Instead of releasing the boys, security forces opened fire on protestors, killing several and radicalizing the local population. Outrage quickly spread across Syria and descent into violent conflict rapidly followed (Bakkour, 2022, p. 232). The timing aligns closely with the acceleration of Arab Spring momentum, signalling its role as a regional trigger event.

In addition to inspiration, the Arab Spring also significantly weakened Syria's regional allies. Unrest in Egypt eliminated a crucial ally for Damascus (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). Meanwhile, unrest in Libya diverted resources from another Syrian ally. The regime's perceived vulnerability encouraged protestors to mobilize en masse. Therefore, while domestic tensions predated the Arab Spring, the timing and escalation of conflict directly stemmed from the regional demonstrations effects and weakness of the regime's allies caused by the Arab Spring uprisings. This represented a paradigm shift from previous localized protests, directly leading to the descent into civil war.

There are dissenting perspectives on the role of the Arab Spring in Syria that should be addressed. First, some argue that sectarian tensions between Sunni protestors and Alawite elites meant conflict was inevitable regardless of external factors (Phillips, 2020). However, this perspective does not account for the decades of stable Baathist rule prior to 2011.

Some argue the drought from 2006-2011 and resulting economic grievances sparked unrest independently of the Arab Spring (Bakkour, 2022, p. 232). While economic and environmental pressures did help fuel anti-regime resentment, they do not fully explain the timing and escalation in 2011 specifically. These views were discussed in detail in the "Local Challenges". Others highlight the inspiration of violence and radicalization from the Iraq War as a contributing factor (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). As we explained above, it is only one of the factors that had an indirect effect, but it was not one of the main reasons.

Ultimately, none of these factors fully and convincingly explains the specific timing, motivation, and escalation of the Syrian protests. The Arab Spring remains the most compelling regional catalyst. An analysis of the historical timeline demonstrates that while domestic grievances predated 2011, the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests were a major regional factor that acted as the trigger for converting Syria's tensions into outright violent conflict. The Arab Spring provided inspiration, motivation, and opportunity for mobilization through the weakening of the Assad regime's allies. Thus, the Arab Spring represented the regional proximate cause that tipped Syria from static tension into devastating civil war that still rages over a decade later. Understanding these regional protest dynamics and diffusion effects remain essential for explaining Syria's descent into conflict in 2011 as well as the wider reverberations still felt today.

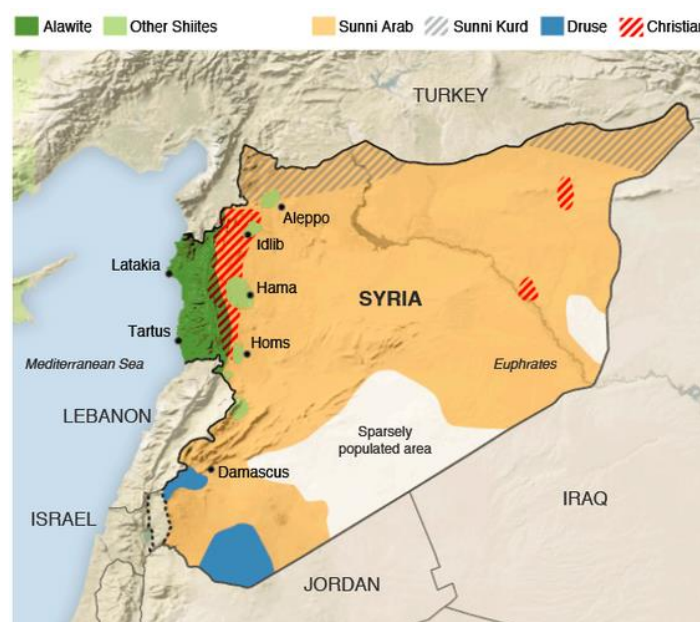
2.1.2. Domestic Factors

The Syrian conflict has complex factors, with scholars pointing to a variety of driving factors behind the outbreak of unrest and violence. While some emphasize the role of regional and international dynamics in Syria's descent into conflict, a number of local factors also created conditions ripe for civil war. Furthermore, the underlying causes of the Syrian conflict are multifaceted, encompassing political, social, and economic factors, in addition to the environmental conditions that significantly contributed to the genesis of the conflict. The intertwined factors—historical grievances with Islamist groups, environmental stresses, economic decline, and systemic corruption—created a volatile environment ripe for social unrest and political mobilization. The convergence of these motives, amplified by regional and international dynamics such as the Arab Uprising and external interventions, ultimately transformed Syria's internal turmoil into a devastating civil war. Understanding these multifaceted motives is essential for comprehending the complex origins and enduring impact of the Syrian conflict on regional stability and global geopolitics as complicated motives led to the Syrian civil war.

Rule of the Ba'ath Party as a root factor

The Ba'ath Party's authoritarian governance in Syria indeed generated a host of grievances that fuelled discontent and contributed to the escalation of protests and subsequent conflict. Since seizing power in 1963, the Ba'ath Party, under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar al-Assad, implemented policies that centralized authority, suppressed political dissent, and maintained tight control over society. One of the primary grievances stemmed from political repression and the lack of political freedoms. The Ba'ath Party monopolized power through a single-party system, stifling opposition parties and independent civil society organizations. Political dissent was met with harsh repression, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, creating a climate of fear and intimidation. Collectively, the grievances—political repression, economic mismanagement, sectarian favouritism, and cultural suppression—undermined the legitimacy of the Ba'ath Party's rule and fuelled widespread discontent. When coupled with broader regional and international influences, such as the Arab Uprising and global shifts in governance expectations, these grievances played a critical role in mobilizing Syrians to protest against the regime and ultimately contributed to the escalation of the Syrian conflict into a multi-dimensional crisis.

After independence in 1946, Syria experienced political instability and frequent military coups. The Ba'ath party, founded on principles of Arab socialism and nationalism, took power in 1963 through a coup. Under Ba'ath rule, the Alawite minority gained influence in the military and government. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite air force officer, seized power and brought stability through authoritarian rule (Salik, 2014). The Assad regime brought some economic development and middle class growth, but also suppressed political dissent through an extensive security apparatus.



The Ba'ath party implemented a socialist economic system with substantial state control and central planning. This allowed some improvements in areas like education and healthcare, but the economy remained dominated by inefficient state-owned enterprises and susceptible to corruption. Private enterprise was constrained, discouraging innovation and limiting job creation. Land reform policies disrupted traditional social structures in rural areas. These economic policies generated resentment among some segments of society.

Politically, the Ba'ath party restricted organized opposition and enforced one-party rule. Media and civil society were strictly controlled to prevent challenges to the regime. The security services infiltrated society through an extensive informant network, stifling dissent. Leaders relied on appeals to Arab nationalism and “resistance” against Western imperialism to legitimize their rule. This propaganda aimed to deflect demands for political reform and greater freedoms (George, 2003, pp. 64-81). The regime’s authoritarian nature gradually alienated many citizens.

While the regime's practices and propaganda mechanisms effectively stifled internal dissent and maintained a façade of unity, they also set the stage for the disillusionment that would follow under Bashar al-Assad's tenure. As Mercan argues, the ascent of Bashar al-Assad to the Syrian presidency was initially greeted with widespread optimism. Both within Syria and on the international stage, there was a prevailing belief that Assad would serve as a catalyst for reform and democratization (Mercan, 2010, p. 115). However, despite the initial enthusiasm, the political landscape in Syria remained largely static, failing to meet the high expectations for change. A short period of limited reform known as the “Damascus Spring” ended as Bashar reasserted control. The economy liberalized slightly, but cronyism and corruption persisted, concentrating wealth in the hands of elites. Drought and inadequate policies worsened living conditions for many (Châtel, 2014, p. 526). Repression of dissent continued, although less brutally than under Hafez.

This was confirmed by William R. Polk, in a report titled 'Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad, *"The (Bashar) al-Assad regime began when Hafez al-Assad died in 2000. Like his father had done after the Battle of Hama, Bashar initially made conciliatory moves to his opponents, including allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to resume political activities and withdrawing most of the Syrian troops that had occupied strife-torn Lebanon. But, while he legitimized his position through an election, he quickly showed that he was also*

¹¹ Source: William R. Polk (Dec. 2013), “*Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad*”, The Atlantic, Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>

following his father's path: 'Run your own lives privately and enrich yourselves as you wish, but do not challenge my government' (Polk, 2013). This approach was considered as one of the key factors contributed to the uprisings.

These unresolved tensions provided fuel for the protests that erupted in 2011. Decades of one-party rule had generated deep wellsprings of discontent. The immediate spark was provided by the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Syrian opposition activists were inspired to organize similar protests to demand political freedoms. When the regime used violence to suppress the protests, more citizens turned against it, igniting the conflict.

Socially, the Ba'ath party aimed to promote secular Arab nationalism and reduce sectarian identities. In practice, however, Alawites were favoured for military and government leadership. This bred resentment among the Sunni majority. The regime sought to manage such tensions through patronage networks and fear of the security services (George, 2003, pp. 06-09). But as economic troubles mounted, resentments could no longer be contained. Additionally, cultural and religious conservatives saw the regime's secularism as an attack on traditional values. This opposition was previously kept under tight control, but it contributed to unrest when given an opening in 2011.

As history has shown, Syria's authoritarian governance and flawed economic policies under Ba'ath rule generated deep grievances over time. Dependence on repression and propaganda rather than genuine reform stifled dissent temporarily, but did not resolve local challenges. When the Arab Spring created an opportunity, these unresolved tensions and resentments fuelled expansive protests and ultimately civil war. The historical legacy of Ba'ath party rule was thus a significant long-term contributor to the Syrian conflict.

Conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood

One major local factor that contributed to the unrest was Syria's long history of ideological tensions, especially with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹² In the 1970s and 1980s, the Syrian government under Hafez al-Assad cracked down violently on the Brotherhood, culminating in the 1982 Hama massacre where thousands were killed. This set the stage for decades of animosity between the Syrian government and Brotherhood sympathizers. According to historian Nikolaos Van Dam, the bloody events of the early 1980s have not been forgotten and

¹² For a more detailed understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood's activities in Syria and its historical clashes with the Baath party, the publication "A Brief History of Syria and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood" by Dara Conduit, published by Cambridge University Press in 2019, is a recommended source. This work delves into the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria from its inception in the 1930s, providing context for their ideological differences and confrontations with the ruling Baath party. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/muslim-brotherhood-in-syria/brief-history-of-syria-and-the-syrian-muslim-brotherhood/6CD455531E0388695618C2AE4B78FACB>

contributed to the fact that in 2011, both sides were soon extremely suspicious of each other (Van Dam, 2011).

"One of the many sources of tension between the Baath and the religious opposition was Assad's Alawi background¹³. Assad tried to pre-empt attacks on his sectarian background by bolstering his Muslim identity through appearing with Sunni Ulama at major Islamic holidays and the like. This did little to silence critics of the Brotherhood and other parties, as the sectarian issue was but one of a series of problems, including single-party rule through the monopolization of power, Assad's blocking of other parties from participating in politics, and the increased securitization of society through the secret intelligence (mukhābarāt)" (Qureshi, 2018, p. 11). This set the stage for an inevitable clash between the two sides.¹⁴ Although no longer an organized political force, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained sympathizers in towns across Syria in subsequent decades. Memories of Hama persisted and fuelled distrust of the Assad regime. Hama represented a "turning point" that politicized many conservative Sunnis and bred opposition toward Assad. When anti-regime protests broke out in 2011, Brotherhood sympathizers were among the early joiners. As historian David Lesch describes, "The Muslim Brotherhood hoped to use the growing momentum to exact revenge for the brutal campaign waged by the al-Assad regime against it in 1982" (Lesch, 2012, p. 102). The Brotherhood played a role in forming umbrella opposition groups like the Syrian National Council.

Overall, Syria's history of repression of the Muslim Brotherhood played a major role in shaping the contours of the 2011 protest movement and subsequent conflict. It contributed to breeding long-term dissent against the Assad regime, especially among Sunni communities where the Brotherhood held sway. The legacy of tensions since the 1970s and particularly the Hama massacre therefore helped lay the groundwork for Syria's descent into prolonged civil war.

¹³ The variety of religious identities in the country, combined with the government being dominated by the Alawite minority, contribute to the particular dynamics of this conflict, as different religious groups align with different factions in the civil war. <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/news/publications/1/protection-of-minorities/2/>

¹⁴ The conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood movement and the Baath party in Syria marked a significant turning point in Syrian domestic politics. This significant factor, the Syrian regime's actions, and the movement's reaction occupy a broad space in Syrians' memory, as the conflict appeared to be between the Sunni sect and the Alawite sect, which is close to Shia. This matter was recently explained by the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center. Detailing on this subject, it said: "In 1979, the Combatant Vanguard defected from the Brotherhood to take up arms against the regime, and it launched an attack in which eighty-three Alawite student officers were killed at the military artillery school in Aleppo. These events prompted then president Hafez al-Assad to issue, in 1980, Law 49 banning the Muslim Brotherhood and imposing the death penalty on its members. Violence continued until the launch of a large-scale military operation by the regime against the Combatant Vanguard in Hama in February 1982 in which 10,000 to 25,000 of the city's inhabitants were killed. The Brotherhood then withdrew from political life in Syria; its surviving leaders and many of its members were exiled." <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48370&lang=en> As Middle East historian Albert Hourani described it, after Hama the Brotherhood ceased to be an active political force inside Syria (Hourani, 2013).

Desertification and Drought

The environmental conditions has also significantly contributed to the genesis of the conflict. By the late 2000s, Syria was facing an acute water crisis exacerbated by climate change and environmental mismanagement. Before the Syrian uprising, the broader region of the Fertile Crescent endured its most intense drought as documented in historical records. In the context of Syria, characterized by deficient governance and unsustainable practices in agriculture and environmental management, this drought served as a critical catalyst. It exacerbated underlying societal tensions and contributed significantly to the emergence of political unrest (Kelley, Mohtadib, Cane, Seager, & Kushnir, 2015, p. 01).

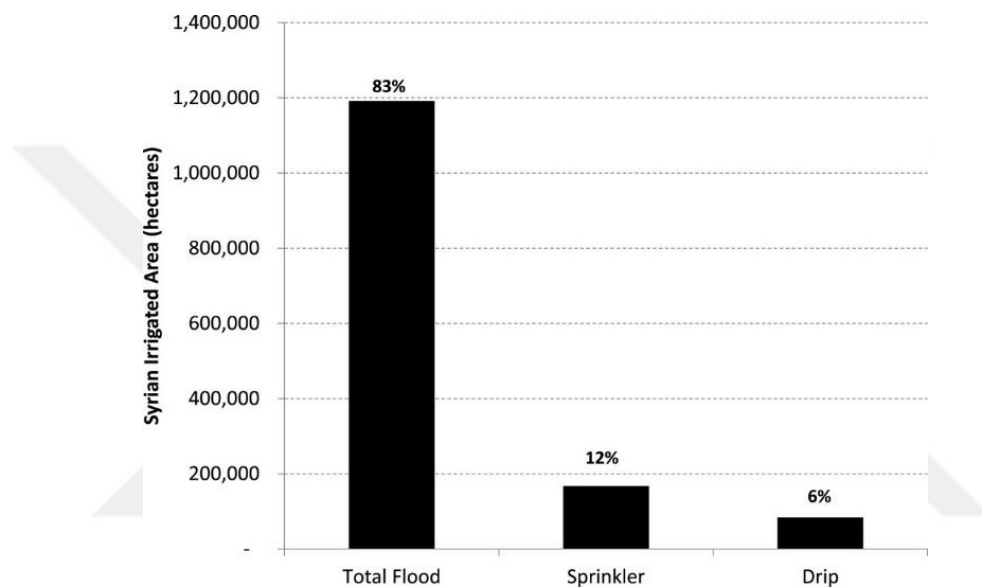


Figure 07 Syrian irrigated area (ha) by traditional flood, sprinkler, and drip systems. Prior to the civil war, over 80% of irrigated lands used traditional and often inefficient flood irrigation (FAO, 2012).

Daoudy also argued that the acute strain on water and land resources amplified existing disparities, creating a precarious situation akin to a latent bomb (Daoudy, 2020, p. 12). Although these environmental and resource-related stressors alone may not have been the direct catalysts for the Syrian uprising, they contributed to laying the foundational groundwork for conflict. This was largely due to the regime's long-term engagement in unsustainable policies, which exacerbated poverty and food insecurity, thereby fuelling societal discontent and unrest (Ibid).

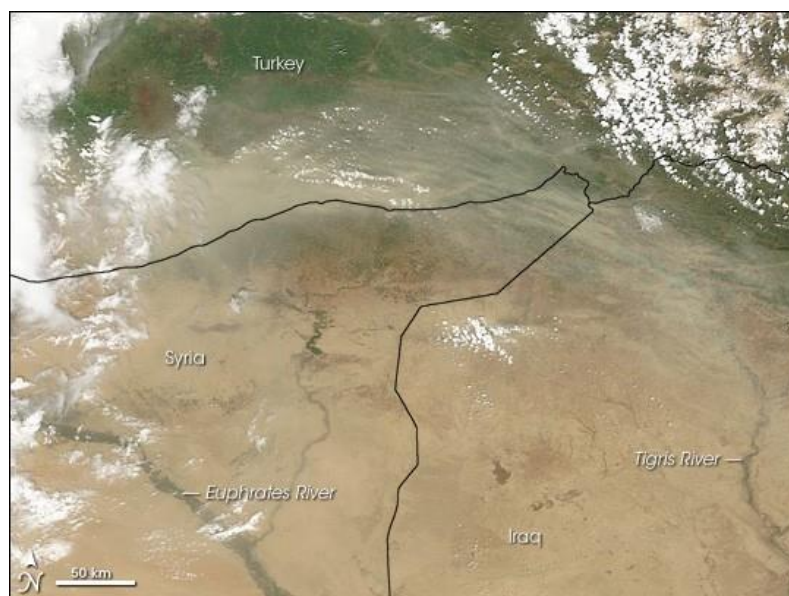


Figure 08 In this 2010 NASA satellite image, vast dust storms can be seen dispersing the light soils of Syria (NASA).¹⁵

As Kelley et al describe, in the years before the uprising in Syria, large parts of the country faced serious water scarcity, precipitated by drought, crop failures, economic mismanagement, and rapid population growth. They assure that: "The 2007-2010 drought contributed to the conflict in Syria. It was the worst drought in the instrumental record, causing widespread crop failure and a mass migration of farming families to urban centres. Century-long observed trends in precipitation, temperature, and sea-level pressure, supported by climate model results, strongly suggest that anthropogenic forcing has increased the probability of severe and persistent droughts in this region, and made the occurrence of a 3-year drought as severe as that of 2007-2010 2 to 3 times more likely than by natural variability alone. We conclude that human influences on the climate system are implicated in the current Syrian conflict."

Table 04 Total irrigated area (ha) in Syria, in 2011, by traditionally irrigated methods and modern methods (Gleick, 2014).

Flood: Traditionally irrigated area								
Region	Pumped		Gravity	Total flood	Modern irrigation area			Grand total irrigated area
	Private wells	Government projects	Rivers and springs		Sprinkler	Drip	Total	
Daar'a	13 075	20 992	—	34 067	5 116	16 891	22 007	56 074
Damascus	44 543	—	16 665	61 208	3 329	18 062	21 391	82 599
Homs	22 655	27 518	2 693	52 866	6 198	13 259	19 457	72 323
Hama	55 798	7 979	5 001	68 778	32 464	3 803	36 267	105 045
Idleb	44 515	11 164	3 013	58 692	28 839	10 377	39 216	97 908
Aleppo	101 213	89 358	27 732	218 303	34 478	14 503	48 981	267 284
Al Raqqa	51 407	93 128	43 968	188 503	4 715	1 351	6 066	194 569
Deir Ezzor	25 420	38 173	86 967	150 560	137	1 143	1 280	151 840
Al Hassake	313 248	—	45 303	358 551	51 925	4 412	56 337	414 888
Totals	671 874	288 312	231 342	1 191 528	167 201	83 801	251 002	1 442 530

Many scholars have explored social turbulence in the Arab region and Syria through the lens of climate change. Through a number of scholarly and academic journal publications, Syria

¹⁵ Polk (2013). Opt. Cit.

emerged as a case study for "climate-induced" displacement and unrest, igniting a discussion regarding the extent to which climate change played a role in the conflict (Daoudy, 2020, p. 11).

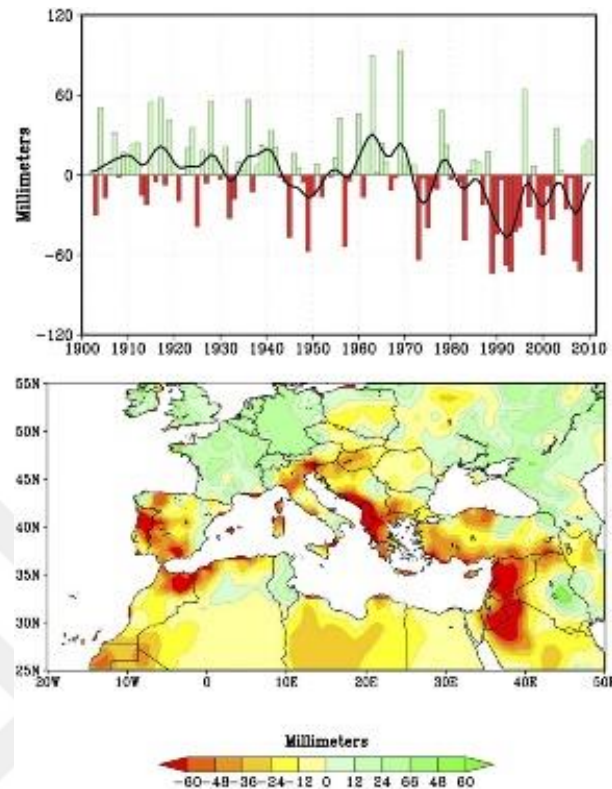


Figure 09 Decline in Winter Rainfall in the Mediterranean Region¹⁶

- (a) The graph representing millimetres of rain during the winter period from 1902 to 2010 illustrates a notable decline in rainfall in the latter segment of 1971–2010.
- (b) The color-coded map, with areas in reds and oranges, emphasizes regions around the Mediterranean that witnessed significantly drier winters during the 1971–2010 period compared to the broader timeframe of 1902–2010 (Hoerling, et al., 2012, p. 2147).

The effects of this water crisis fell heaviest on Syria's rural farmers and herders, driving a wave of urban migration right before the 2011 uprisings began. As Châtel explains: *"The drought led to total crop failure in the north-eastern region and put immense pressure on the country's other resources, already strained by an influx of refugees from the war in Iraq. This led to the internal displacement from rural to urban peripheries"* (Châtel, 2014, pp. 523-528). This analysis shows how desertification and drought in Syria's rural countryside pushed a massive population into cities, exacerbating economic and social strains.

¹⁶ Hoerling, et. al. (Mar. 2012), *"On the Increased Frequency of Mediterranean Drought"*, Journal of Climate 25(6), Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1175/JCLI-D-11-00296.1>

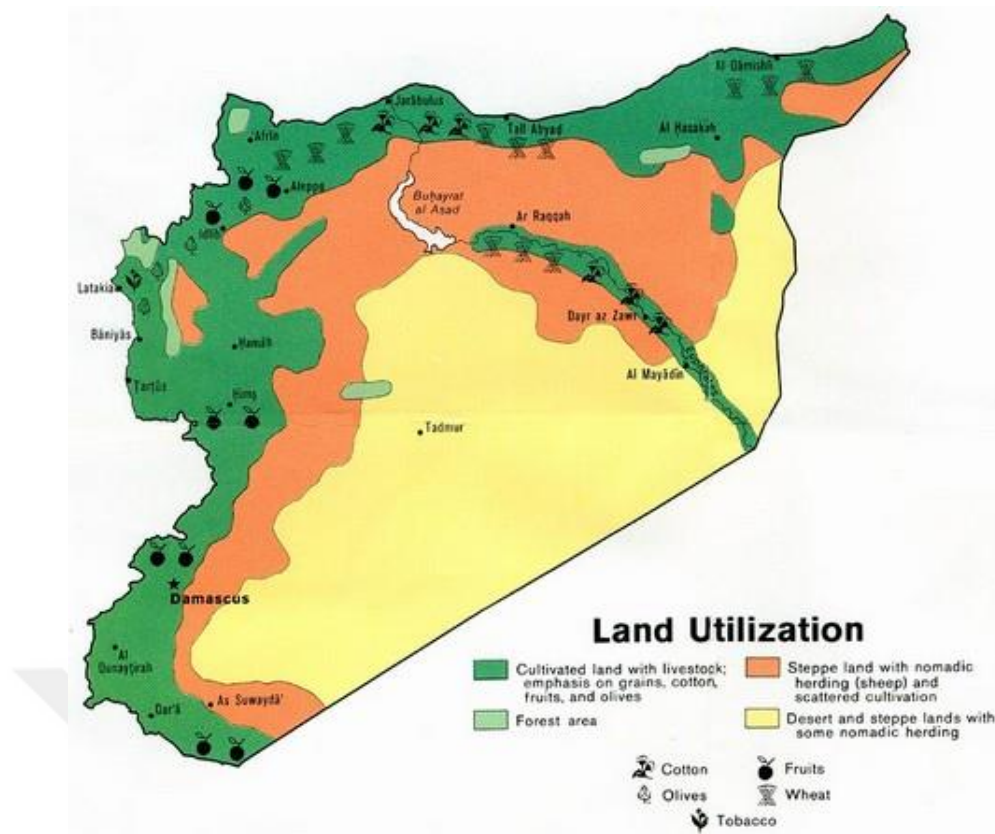


Figure 10 Syria's land utilization before the conflict¹⁷

This map also provides a clear representation of Syria's land utilization before the conflict, highlighting the varying patterns of agriculture, herding, and desertification:

a) Green Regions (Cultivated Land with Livestock):

- These areas, predominantly in the western part of Syria, show regions with fertile land suitable for agriculture and livestock. Given their proximity to the Mediterranean, these regions benefit from more favourable rainfall patterns and are less prone to desertification.
- Major crops like grains, cotton, fruits, and olives are cultivated here, indicating a well-irrigated and fertile region.

b) Orange Regions (Steppe Land with Nomadic Herding):

- The central to north-eastern parts of Syria are characterized by steppe lands. These semi-arid regions have sporadic cultivation and are mainly utilized for nomadic sheep herding.

¹⁷ Juan Cole (2010) "Map: Syria Land Use", Retrieved from <https://www.juancole.com/2010/12/map-syria-land-use.html>

- Being transitional zones, these areas are particularly vulnerable to desertification. Overgrazing, unsustainable agricultural practices, and water scarcity can easily tip these regions into full desert conditions.

c) Yellow Regions (Desert and Steppe Lands with Some Nomadic Herding):

- Covering the most eastern and southern parts of Syria, these areas represent desert lands and steppes. The sparse vegetation and limited water availability make these regions naturally prone to desertification.
- Nomadic herding is practiced here, but the land's carrying capacity is lower due to inherent aridity.

Desertification in Syria, even before the conflict, was a growing concern. Factors like overgrazing, unsustainable agricultural practices, and water mismanagement had been exacerbating the desertification process, especially in the transitional steppe regions. The orange and yellow zones on the map, which are already semi-arid and arid respectively, were at the forefront of this environmental challenge.

The drought in 2000s exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities in Daraa in the southern parts, pushing thousands into the city and leading to slum formations that accounted for 12% of its area. The ineffective response of political authorities, exemplified by the withdrawal of rural subsidies for diesel fuel used in irrigation, only worsened the situation. Stagnant economic growth and high levels of unemployment and poverty, especially among young people, further strained the social fabric. While religion is often cited as a key factor in the Daraa uprising, underlying socio-economic factors aligned with the "greed vs. grievance" thesis proposed by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler were also significant. The uprising occurred when the regime failed to adapt to these complex challenges, thereby creating a vacuum filled by social actors such as Daraa's clans, who rose against injustice and corruption (Bakkour, 2022, p. 232).

This contextualization sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how regime failures to address the cascading effects of climate, water, and food insecurities led to a resource crisis in Syria. These failures had real-world repercussions, including widespread crop failures and livestock mortality. This, in turn, forced as many as 1.5 million rural inhabitants to migrate to urban peripheries. Compounding the issue, long-standing regime policies had been promoting unsustainable agricultural practices, such as subsidies for water-intensive crops like wheat and cotton, further depleting Syria's already scarce groundwater reserves (Châtel, 2014, p. 528).

In this context, those who have been forced to abandon their livelihoods due to drought and subsequent resource depletion are not just environmental refugees. Rather, they are

individuals left disillusioned by a litany of failed regime rhetoric, policy missteps, and development projects that had promised much-needed reform but instead fuelled the existing resource crisis (Saleeby, 2012).

Building on the aforementioned discussion about regime policy failures and their real-world repercussions in Syria, it is important to consider that the nation's political difficulties and ongoing civil war do not stem from isolated causes. Rather, they are the outcome of a web of complex, interrelated factors that include not only religious and socio-political tensions but also the progressive erosion of the country's economic vitality. This is further influenced by broader political reform movements sweeping across the MENA and Levant regions. Within this intricate mix, water scarcity and adverse climatic conditions have played a critical role, contributing significantly to the deteriorating economic landscape of Syria (Gleick, 2014, p. 331).

Continuing from the previously highlighted complexities—ranging from failed regime policies and resource depletion to the broader socio-political issues affecting Syria—it stands to reason that the escalating pressures on urban centres, exacerbated by internal migration and increasing food insecurity, have contributed to surging unemployment rates. This has, in turn, catalysed a public expression of political grievances among many Syrians (Saleeby, 2012).

It is imperative to recognize that the Syrian uprising of 2011 was not solely precipitated by environmental factors like the 2006-2010 drought. Rather, it was the culmination of a host of deeply rooted social, economic, and political grievances. Years of resource mismanagement and regime negligence set the stage for the crisis. While the drought exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, attributing the uprising to climate change not only oversimplifies the complex interplay of causes but also conveniently diverts attention away from the Assad regime's own failings and inability to reform (Châtel, 2014, p. 532).

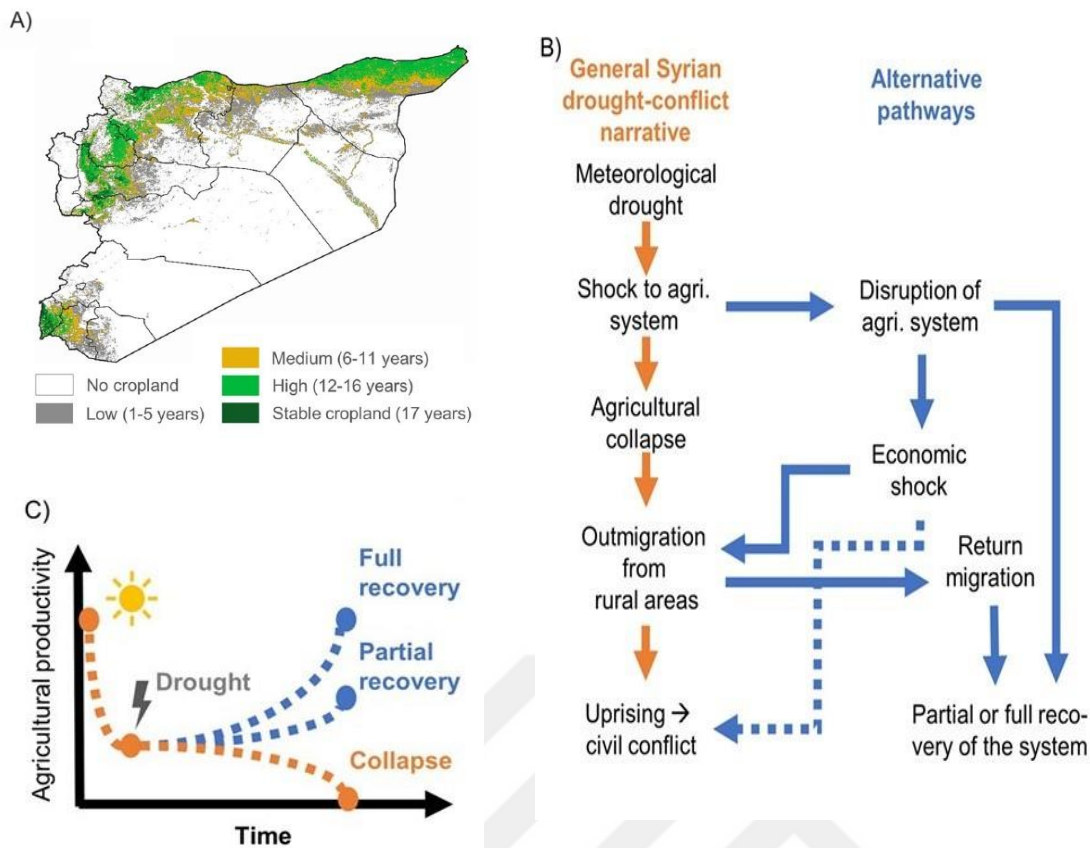


Figure 11 A) Cropping frequency in Syria 2000–2016. B) Conceptual model of the Syrian drought-conflict narrative and some alternative pathways discussed in this paper. C) Conceptual chart of different drought outcomes on the agricultural system.¹⁸

Economic Decline

While the spark that ignited protests was the arrest and torture of youths for anti-regime graffiti, scholars agree that long-simmering economic grievances created the conditions for unrest. As summarized by Christopher Phillips, the economic roots of Syria's uprising have been largely ignored in favour of geopolitical factors and the role of political Islam (Phillips, 2015, p. 360). By the year 2011, although there was an increase in the outputs of sectors other than agriculture to compensate for the agricultural decline, the extended period of drought had significant social and demographic impacts. It caused many people to migrate within the country and led to widespread poverty among rural populations.

Economic growth, primarily fuelled by escalating consumption and the exportation of oil and services, led to an augmentation in the country's official foreign currency reserves. However, pervasive tax evasion substantially reduced the revenue from direct taxes, specifically taxes on income and profit. This led to a decline in their contribution to total fiscal revenues from 31% in the year 2000 to a mere 14% by 2010 (UNESCWA, 2016, p. 13).

¹⁸ Source: "Societal drought vulnerability and the Syrian climate-conflict nexus are better explained by agriculture than meteorology" (Eklund, et al., 2022).

Decades of economic mismanagement had left Syria's economy stagnant and unable to provide jobs for its growing young population (Daher, 2019). "On the eve of the 2011 unrest, Syria was categorized as a lower-middle-income country. During the 2000s, the Syrian economy was on an upward trajectory, even if it started from a less favourable base. From 2000 to 2010, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) experienced an average real growth of 4.3 percent per year, which was primarily fuelled by the non-oil sectors. Inflation remained relatively manageable, averaging around 4.9 percent during the same period. The country's current account was largely balanced, and by the end of 2010, Syria had amassed international reserves sufficient to cover more than nine months of imports. However, it's important to note that despite these economic gains, Syria's GDP per capita in 2010 stood at US\$2,949, which was significantly lower than that of its neighbouring countries—US\$4,521 for Iraq, and US\$8,846 for Lebanon" (The World Bank Group, 2017, p. 08).



Figure 12 Unemployment, total (% of total labour force) (modelled ILO estimate)¹⁹

Before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the unemployment rate in 2010 stood at 8.6%, as per the Central Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey. This is corroborated by the World Bank data in the figure. This pre-conflict period is significant because economic factors, among other reasons, play a role in understanding the broader context of what led to the conflict. This shows the declined Syria's labour force and economy caused the conflict.

Furthermore, state planning had focused on traditional heavy industry, neglecting newer high-tech sectors. Meanwhile, population growth remained high. The number of Syrians entering the workforce each year exceeded the number of new jobs created, even factoring in Syrian migrant workers abroad (Sottimano, 2016). Sottimano added that, "*at the onset of the Syrian uprising, 70% of the Syrian economy was controlled by the private sector. Early expectations that big business could shift side, paralyze the economy and spell an end to the regime were soon frustrated*". In May 2011, the participation of business figures in one of the earliest opposition conferences, which was funded by two businessmen - 'Ali and Wasim Sanqar (luxury car dealers in Damascus) - who had been personally 'burned' by the regime's preferential treatment of Rami Makhluf, was hailed as "a significant development". But it was

¹⁹ The World Bank, Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/SY>

mainly expatriate businessmen - not dependent on the Syrian market or regime continuity - who publicly aligned themselves with the opposition."

Furthermore, the labour force participation rate dropped from 50.2% to 43.5%. By 2010, Syria had one of the lowest rates globally and in the MENA region (Châtel, 2014). With labour markets failing to absorb the growing size of the labour force, from 2001 to 2010, the aggregate labour force participation rate decreased by about 7 percentage points (from 50.2 to 43.5 percent). By 2010, Syria had one of the lowest LFPs in the world; low even by regional standards (Egypt and Tunisia had 49 and 47 percent LFP rates, respectively)" (The World Bank Group, 2017, p. 09).

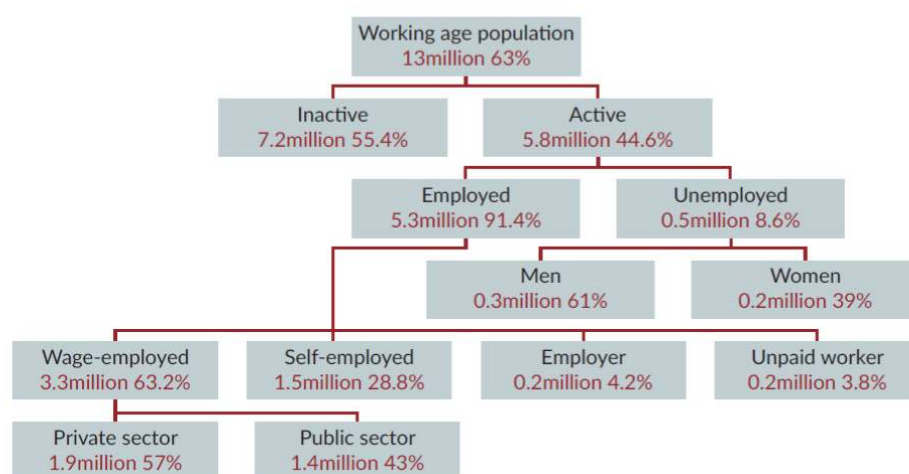


Figure 13 Structure of the Working-Age Population in Syria, 2010²⁰

This figure, sourced from the Central Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey 2010, delineates the structure of the working-age population in Syria for the year 2010:

- **Working Age Population:** Out of Syria's working-age populace, there were 13 million individuals, which constituted 63% of the total population.
- **Inactive vs. Active:** 7.2 million (55.4%) were inactive, meaning they were not part of the labour force, either by choice or circumstance. 5.8 million (44.6%) were active, indicating they were either employed or seeking employment.
- **Employment Status:** Among the active population, 5.3 million (91.4%) were employed. The unemployment rate stood at 8.6%, with 0.5 million individuals unemployed.
- **Gender Disparity:** Men constituted a larger portion of the employed population at 61% (0.3 million), while women made up 39% (0.2 million).

²⁰ The World Bank, Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria>

- **Employment Type:** Wage-employed individuals, those who work for a wage or salary, numbered 3.3 million, accounting for 63.2% of the employed population. 1.5 million (28.8%) were self-employed. Employers, those who hire others to work for them, numbered 0.2 million, or 4.2%. There were also 0.2 million (3.8%) unpaid workers.
- **Sector of Employment:** The private sector employed 1.9 million individuals (57% of wage-employed). The public sector employed 1.4 million (43% of wage-employed).

Before the 2011 conflict, Syria had a significant inactive portion of its working-age population. Among the active segment, the majority were wage-employed, with the private sector being a dominant employer. There was also a noticeable gender disparity with men making up a larger percentage of the employed population than women.

High unemployment and poverty were concentrated outside Damascus and Aleppo. The eastern rural regions had poverty rates double the national average (UNESCWA, 2016, p. 15). These rural residents depended on agriculture, herding, and subsistence jobs. Infrastructure and social services were lacking, while corruption and tribalism dominated local administration.

Moreover, a severe drought from 2006-2011 exacerbated poverty in the northeast. Crop failures led to an exodus of small farmers to urban peripheries ill-equipped to receive them. Herders lost 85% of their livestock, their main source of income (Châtel, 2014). The Assad regime provided minimal aid, further angering citizens. The drought has contributed to social dislocations that are themselves part of the general context in which the civil unrest in Syria has come about.

One sector acutely impacted by this discrepancy was agriculture, which saw its share of employment plummet from 32.9% in 2000 to a mere 13.2% by the year 2011. This contraction can be partially attributed to a series of droughts occurring between 2006 and 2011, which induced a considerable demographic transition from rural to urban locales. Consequently, employment shares in the services and industrial sectors rose to 55.3% and 31.4%, respectively. The drought period from 2006 to 2009 and the subsequent internal migration are often cited as contributing risk factors to the socio-political unrest that erupted in 2011. Concurrently, the labour market exhibited signs of saturation, particularly with respect to female labour. Between 2001 and 2010, the overall labour force participation rate experienced a decline of approximately 7 percentage points, falling from 50.2% to 43.5%. The decline was more pronounced among women, whose labour force participation rate contracted by over 10 percentage points during the same period, from 20.4% to 13.2%. By 2010, Syria's labour force participation rates were among the lowest globally and substantially lower than regional

counterparts such as Egypt and Tunisia, which had rates of 49% and 47%, respectively (The World Bank Group, 2017, p. 09).

After decades of Soviet-style central planning, the Assad regime initiated tentative economic liberalization in the early 2000s. While these reforms boosted growth rates, they were poorly planned and implemented, benefiting only a small elite segment of society (Daher, 2019). Privatization deals rewarded regime cronies and worsened corruption. Subsidies on basic goods were reduced, disproportionately impacting the poor (Phillips, 2015). Wealth inequality widened as a class of regime-linked entrepreneurs amassed fortunes through monopolies and regime ties.

As Aurora Sottimano²¹ described, these uneven reforms created social polarization in Syria, as a small fraction of people have monopolized the wealth of the country, while the middle class disappears, and society breaks down between rich and poor. The reforms enriched the elite while squeezing the impoverished masses (Sottimano, 2016). This bred resentment that would explode in 2011.

The Rating of Syria on Various Indexes

Another way of looking at the Syrian politics and economy, as Nimrod Raphaeli²² noted, is by looking at the various indexes, which rate Syria within a cohort of other countries (Raphaeli, 2007).

- **The Human Development Index:** According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) before the conflict, Syria rated 107 among 177 countries (Ibid).
- **Index of Economic Freedom:** According to the Annual Index of Economic Freedom published by the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation, with a score of 48.2, Syria falls under the category of "repressed," followed by Iran, and North Korea, and last) In the Middle East, Syria is ranked 15th out of 17 ranked countries (Ibid).
- **Business Index:** The International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private business arm of the World Bank Group, also rated countries on the ease of doing business. Syria was ranked 130 out of 175 countries rated by the program (Ibid).

²¹ Aurora Sottimano is a Senior Fellow of the Centre for Syrian Studies (St Andrews University, UK) and a Visiting Lecturer at the Centre for International Studies of the University Institute Lisbon (CEI-IUL, Portugal). <https://syriauntold.com/writer/aurora-sottimano/>

²² Nimrod Raphaeli is Senior Analyst of MEMRI's Middle East Economic Studies Program. https://www.memri.org/reports/political-economy-syria-under-bashar-al-assad#_edn19

- **The Corruption Perception Index:** In its Corruption Perception Index, which scores countries on a scale from zero to 10. Syria received a low level below 03, only Iran, Libya and Yemen scored lower than Syria (Ibid).

The economic framework of Syria before 2011 conflict can be characterized as a form of crony capitalism rife with predatory practices. This structure was marked by the prevalence of illicit trade networks, preferential monopolies, unauthorized capital flows, and a skewed competitive landscape, all of which defined the relationship between the state and the business sector. The advent of a war economy has exacerbated these existing malpractices, intensifying their exploitative and violent nature (Sottimano, 2016). Syria's economic troubles created the conditions for unrest. Yet the system endured for decades without mass revolts. The spark came from the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2010-2011. Syrian opposition figures drew inspiration from the ouster of entrenched dictators through mass mobilization. They saw an opportunity to challenge the Assad regime. As noted by Phillips, the Arab Spring gave Syrians the confidence to believe the regime was vulnerable to mobilised pressure from below (Phillips, 2020). The success of Arab Spring rebellions shattered the aura of regime invincibility (Heydemann, 2013, p. 62). The Arab Spring provided the spark while economic grievances gave fuel to the fire.

Syria's economic troubles were a critical driver of the grievances that boiled over in 2011 after the Arab Spring shattered the barriers of fear. Decades of mismanagement and cronyism meant stagnant wages, job shortages, severe poverty and crippling inequality. The devastating 2006-2011 drought further immiserated the rural poor. These economic factors created fertile ground for rebellion when the Arab Spring uprisings gave optimism that victory over tyranny was possible. While ethnic and religious schisms contributed, the economic roots of Syria's uprising should not be overlooked. This suggests the Assad regime's economic legitimacy was already tenuous before the Arab Spring. Had reforms targeted inequality and poverty reduction rather than elite enrichment, the descent into conflict may have been avoided.

Corruption

"Corruption has never been a stranger to the Syrian state, as it exists in every state sector, institution, ministry and especially in its judicial sector. It has reached the point that Syrian citizens consider bribes to be at the core of every law, and that they cannot get their rights without bribes. One judge has expressed the state of the judiciary in Syria by saying: Whoever pays more wins the case".

(Bitar, 2017)

One major factor that contributed to the descent into civil war was widespread corruption under Assad's rule. Syria is listed as the fourth most corrupt country globally, making job acquisition in Damascus progressively challenging without the aid of (wasta) nepotism or influencer. One disillusioned loyalist wrote on his Facebook account, "Without wasta in this country, we might as well just all stop living" (Makki, 2018). The Syrian regime has been known to condone corruption and profiteering even within its armed forces (Batravi, 2020, p. 12). Moreover, as per the Global Corruption Perceptions Index of 2010, which is prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict, Syria received a score of 25 out of 100, positioning it at 127 out of 178 nations. This prevalent corruption and nepotism were among the catalysts for the widespread protests that engulfed the nation in 2011 (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2022, p. 05). The corruption had many forms including embezzlement of public funds, bribery to access basic services, nepotism in appointments of family and friends to key positions, and profiteering by regime insiders.

In 2010, as per the data from the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, Syria was ranked 15th regionally with a CPI score of 2.5. This score places Syria in a category that perceives it to have significant levels of public-sector corruption. Specifically, the 90% confidence interval for Syria's score ranged between 2.1 to 2.8, with data being derived from 4 different surveys. This information provides a comprehensive view of Syria's perceived corruption status within the regional context, especially notable given the impending political changes and conflicts that would soon envelop the country.

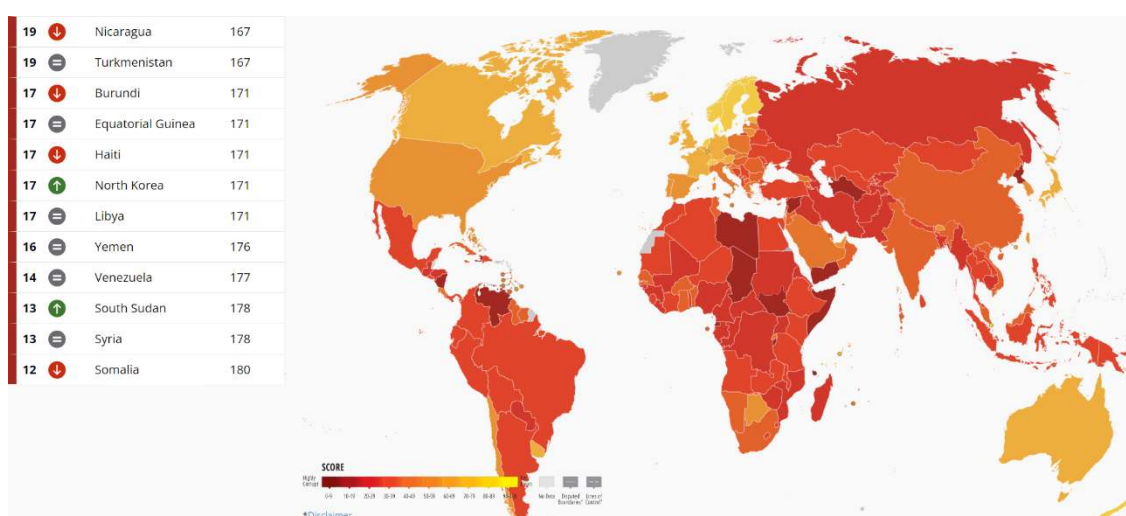


Figure 14 Corruption Perceptions Index 2010 ²³

This map by Transparency International represents that Syria was perceived to have notable levels of public-sector corruption. The colour gradient spans from yellow, indicating

²³ Corruption Perceptions Index, Retrieved from <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2010>

'Very Clean' countries with scores between 9.0 to 10.0, to a dark red, signifying 'Highly Corrupt' countries with scores between 0.0 to 0.9. Syria was shaded in a hue, placing it among countries with relatively high perceptions of corruption prior to the onset of 2011 conflict.

As Heydemann noted, during the 2000s, the Assad regime, through a form of corrupt economic liberalization, managed to amass wealth, fostering new alliances between state-run and private enterprises. This action, albeit aimed at bolstering the regime's economic foundation, marginalized and estranged significant portions of the Syrian populace that previously enjoyed favourable positions within state institutions and the Ba'ath Party. These alterations in economic governance and patronage systems were pivotal in precipitating the conflict in 2011. They instigated a surge of economic discontent and grudges among erstwhile regime beneficiaries, triggering widespread demonstrations. Even the broader private sector in Syria has retracted its political and financial backing, compelling the regime to adopt an increasingly rapacious approach to revenue generation (Heydemann, 2013, p. 68). As was explained previously, the Syrian conflict's current crisis is a result of the synergistic interplay between internal and external factors. These contributing elements have accumulated over several decades, culminating in the present situation in Syria.

According to Primoz Manfreda²⁴, in Syria, strategic payments could easily facilitate processes like obtaining a small business license or registering a car. Those lacking financial resources and connections harbored strong resentments against the regime, contributing to the onset of the uprising. Individuals with ties to the Assad regime exploited the pervasive corruption to expand their enterprises. Illicit markets and smuggling operations thrived, often with the regime turning a blind eye. This led to the erosion of middle-class income, exacerbating the conditions that fuelled the Syrian uprising (Manfreda, 2020).

Clearly, the Arab Spring uprisings in neighbouring countries like Tunisia and Egypt provided inspiration that non-violent resistance could succeed in bringing reform and regime change. However, Assad's violent crackdown and refusal of genuine concessions is considered a basis for popular anger towards the Syrian regime. Years of corruption had undermined the regime's legitimacy, and decades of Assad regime insiders enriching themselves through bribery, embezzlement, and monopolies fuelled resentment among ordinary Syrians. Which was fuelled by foreign temptations and interventions that together formed the Syrian conflict, which developed into a civil war that resulted in thousands of displaced people and refugees.

²⁴ Primoz Manfreda is a researcher and political risk analyst who covers political and economic trends in the Middle East. <https://www.thoughtco.com/primoz-manfreda-bio-2352728>

2.2.The Key Actors and Their Roles in the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict has evolved into a complex conflict with many domestic and external actors pursuing competing interests. This section of the dissertation examine the key actors involved in the conflict, classifying them into domestic, regional and international. The domestic actors include the Syrian regime, the Syrian opposition and rebel groups, Kurdish groups, and extremist groups and organizations. The major regional players are Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The main international actors are Russia, the US and the EU.

2.2.1. Internal Actors

The Syrian Regime

The Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad has been a central actor in the Syrian conflict since its outbreak in 2011. The regime's violent crackdown on initially peaceful anti- regime protests sparked the descent into civil war, and its resilience and determination to hold onto power has been a key driver of the conflict's intractability (Phillips, 2015).

The Syrian uprising erupted in March 2011, as mentioned before, mainly inspired by the Arab Spring protests sweeping the region. Peaceful demonstrations calling for democracy, human rights, and jobs broke out in cities across Syria. The Assad regime responded with brutal force, subjecting protesters to live fire, mass arrests, torture and sexual violence. By the summer of 2011, with the death toll mounting, segments of the opposition began to take up arms to defend themselves. The Free Syrian Army (FSA)²⁵ formed from defected soldiers and armed civilians (Lister C. , 2016, p. 02). As armed resistance grew, the regime escalated violence further rather than pursuing reforms that could quell unrest. This indicated the determination of Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle to maintain their authoritarian grip on power at all costs.

Totalitarian regimes are known for their repressive tactics in dealing with demonstrations and protests, often resorting to intimidation and fear to deter protesters. This was precisely the approach taken by the Syrian regime during the outbreak of protests in 2011. In a statement issued by the Syrian Ministry of Interior on Monday, March 28, 2011, and reported by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the ministry warned against calls and leaflets spreading via mobile phones that urged people to gather in Umayyad Square, under the pretext of

²⁵ The Free Syrian Army (FSA) initially served as the official armed force of the opposition during the Syrian civil war, actively engaging on all fronts in the country. However, its influence waned due to external support favoring the Assad regime. Subsequently, it reemerged as the Syrian National Army (SNA) and regained strength. The origins of the FSA trace back to the peaceful protests in March 2011, evolving into conflict due to the violent response of the Assad regime. Pro-change officers separated from the army, forming a defensive stance to protect the opposition. This group, eventually known as the FSA, became the local defense forces. Positioned as the military wing of the Syrian Provisional Government established in March 2013, the FSA operated across various fronts, including Aleppo-Idlib, Raqqa-Deyrizor-Haseke, Hama-Latakia, Homs, and Damascus-Dera-Kuneytra-Suveyda until 2015. For more information, look: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/free-syrian-army-transforms-into-syrian-national-army/1607384>

"ensuring their safety." This warning came just hours after the announcement by the Syrian President's adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, on Sunday, March 27, 2011, that the Syrian authorities had decided to lift the state of emergency that had been in place since 1963. This law, imposed after the Ba'ath Party came to power in March 1963, imposed strict restrictions on the freedom of assembly and allowed for the arrest of suspected individuals (Matar, 2012, pp. 31-34). On Wednesday, March 30, 2011, President Bashar al-Assad delivered a speech to the People's Assembly (parliament), his first since the start of the Syrian uprising two weeks earlier. He spoke with a tone of confidence and indifference towards the ongoing protests, stating, "The conspiracy is great, and we do not seek battles. The Syrian people are peaceful and friendly, and we have never hesitated to defend our causes, interests, and principles. If the battle is imposed on us today, then welcome it" (Ibid).

The regime propagated fears of sectarian bloodletting and extremist takeover to retain the loyalty of Alawites and some minority groups. But its violent crackdown fuelled the conflict's escalation into civil war (Phillips, 2015, p. 369). Through these actions, it becomes clear that the Syrian regime was one of the main reasons behind the Syrian revolution. The regime's policy of repression and intimidation, its disregard for popular demands, and the imposition of harsh emergency laws significantly contributed to escalating tensions and sparking the uprising against the regime. These methods only deepened public anger and expanded the scope of protests, making the Syrian regime a central factor in igniting the flames of the Syrian revolution (Matar, 2012, p. 34). The Syrian conflict, initially rooted in peaceful calls for democratic reforms, rapidly transformed into a brutal civil war, reflecting the Assad regime's prioritization of power over peace and the tragic consequences of a regime's choice to suppress rather than listen to its people's demands.

After the FSA gained footholds in parts of Syria in late 2011-early 2012, the regime mobilized for a full-scale military confrontation. It implemented a counterinsurgency strategy combining heavy bombardment of opposition-held areas with ground offensives, sieges, economic blockades, intense intelligence operations and sectarian militias. These tactics inflicted enormous civilian suffering aimed at depopulating rebel enclaves and turning the population against the armed opposition (Todman, 2017, pp. 13-14).

The Syrian Army provided the backbone for major combat operations and sieges, supplemented by the National Defense Forces (NDF) militia. The regime fostered loyalist militias like the Shabiha to aid in paramilitary operations and sectarian cleansing campaigns. Intelligence agencies like the notorious Air Force Intelligence Directorate managed detention centers for forced disappearances and torture (Lund, 2015). The regime bolstered its capabilities by recruiting foreign Shia militants, facilitated by Iran (Saban, 2020).

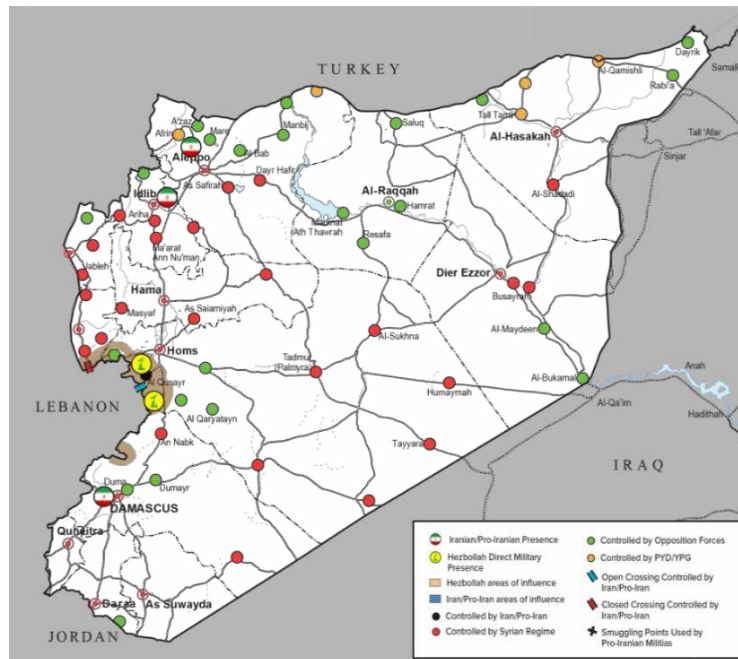


Figure 15 Iranian and Pro-Iran militaries presence and influence in 2013 ²⁶

On the political front, the regime refused meaningful reforms that could satisfy opposition demands and stem unrest. In response to the ongoing Syrian conflict, President al-Assad commissioned the drafting of a new constitution, leading to a constitutional referendum conducted on February 26, 2012, in Syria. It is noteworthy that the referendum did not undergo monitoring by foreign observers. In addition, 2014 presidential election²⁷ were held under sham conditions (Tabler, White, & Zelin, 2014). The regime claimed to support the Geneva peace process initiated in 2012 (Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014), but obstructed substantive negotiations (Phillips, 2015).

Instead, Assad doubled down on the military solution while trying to retain a veneer of legitimacy through tightly managed elections. Regime officials framed the conflict as a war against terrorists and sectarian extremists, denying legitimate grievances that sparked protests. They exploited fears of Sunni Islamist forces to retain minority and elite support (Lister C. , 2016, pp. 3-4). Moreover, the regime cultivated allies in Iran and Russia to provide vital military, economic and diplomatic backing (Borshchevskaya, 2023). This enabled the regime to resist mounting internal and external pressures including military defeats, loss of territory, economic collapse and international isolation. Tehran helped mobilize Shia foreign fighters while Moscow vetoed anti-Assad UN resolutions. Their support was crucial to the regime's survival.

²⁶ Source: "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria" by Navvar Saban

²⁷ The Syrian presidential elections took place on June 3, 2014, and a scholarly consensus has emerged asserting their lack of democratic credentials. Multiple academic analyses agree on the non-democratic nature of these elections. Despite this, Bashar al-Assad secured a resounding victory, garnering more than 90% of the valid votes. Subsequently, he was inaugurated for a third seven-year term on July 16 in a ceremony held at the presidential palace in Damascus.

The Assad regime's tactics of indiscriminate violence and refusal to offer meaningful political concessions fuelled the conflict's escalatory spiral. Its actions strengthened radicals while undermining moderates who still sought dialogue. With peaceful dissent met by brutal repression, many Syrians saw no alternative but taking up arms, enabling rebel groups to gain ground (Lister C. , 2016). The regime's collective punishment campaigns against majority civilian populations where rebels operated spurred further radicalization. In areas subjected to years of siege and bombardment, residents increasingly embraced extremist factions as the only defenders against the regime's atrocities (Todman, 2017, pp. 13-14). Furthermore, the regime's successful resistance against pressures to compromise politically convinced the opposition that only decisive military force could precipitate Assad's downfall. It can be considered that this pushed the conflict into a prolonged stalemate. The Syrian regime's actions ensured its own survival in the short-term but profoundly shaped the conflict's destructive dynamics. Its reliance on unrestrained violence and refusal to reform catalysed radicalization among opponents and communities, fuelling cycles of atrocity and extremism that devastated Syria.

This reaffirms the discussion in the previous section about the nature of the Syrian Ba'ath regime, which was a primary factor in escalating the conflict and plunging the country into a civil war. The regime's anticipated use of excessive force was expected by its historical precedent, notably the Hafez Assad handling of the Hama uprising. However, the context of the 2011 conflict differed significantly. The advent of social media, the inspiring successes of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, combined with the Syrian regime's harsh speech, emboldened the opposition to continue escalating.

The Syrian Opposition and Rebel Groups

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, which rapidly escalated into a full-fledged proxy war, a range of Syrian opposition groups and rebel factions have emerged that have played critical roles in the conflict. The opposition landscape remains complex and fragmented, comprising of various political and armed groups with different ideologies, aims and foreign backers.

Table 05 The Main Opposition Blocs

<i>Name</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Formed Date & Place</i>	<i>Objective and Details</i>
The Syrian National Council	SNC	Istanbul, October 2011	The SNC was the first major opposition umbrella group that aimed to represent the Syrian uprising on the international stage and lobby for foreign support. Its founders were mainly exiled Syrian opposition figures, academics and Muslim Brotherhood members based abroad. The group's primary objectives were the overthrow of the Assad regime and establishment of a democratic, civil state in Syria (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012). However, ideological divisions, personal power struggles and the influence of Islamists undermined its effectiveness and legitimacy (Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013).
The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces	SOC	Doha, November 2012	To gain wider domestic legitimacy and serve as an alternative to the Assad regime. Its founding members incorporated a broader spectrum of opposition groups, including the SNC and domestic armed factions. Headed by the independent opposition activist Moaz al-Khatib, the National Coalition sought to gain formal international recognition and increase financial and military assistance to the rebellion from foreign governments (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012). While over 100 countries recognized it as the legitimate representative of Syria, the body also suffered internal divisions over ideology and control of foreign funding. The Muslim Brotherhood and externally-based factions maintained outsized influence compared to groups within Syria. The National Coalition lacked domestic credibility and failed to act as an effective, unified political leadership for the opposition (Pierret, 2015).
Local Coordination Committees	LCCs	Syria, 2011	Were grassroots activist networks that emerged to organize and report on local protests and civil disobedience against the regime. Based underground inside opposition-held areas, the LCCs were dominated by youth activists and reflected a diverse, secular-nationalist orientation (Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). They played a vital role in mobilizing the early protest movement and communal self-organization in rebel areas through media campaigns, medical and relief services, local governance and civil administration. However, regime repression, co-option by Islamists and loss of external support reduced their influence over time.
Free Syrian Army	FSA	Syria, July 2011 by Colonel Riad al-Asaad	Emerged as a loose network of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers aiming to remove Bashar al-Assad from power. Growing civil unrest and the Syrian regime's violent crackdown precipitated increased defections, as soldiers refused orders to fire on unarmed protesters. The FSA aimed to protect the protest movement and civilians by evicting Assad's government from power (Lister C. , 2016, p. 5). As the conflict progressed, the FSA's composition grew increasingly diverse. From its initial core of defected soldiers during 2011-2012, over time it encompassed armed civilians unaffiliated with the military and even autonomous Islamist brigades (Lund, 2013).
Syrian National Army	SNA	Syria, 2017	Created as an umbrella grouping the Free Syrian Army factions, The SNA grew out of Türkiye's desire to unite the various Syrian opposition factions under one umbrella group that would be a more effective fighting force against the Syrian regime as well as the SDF/YPG forces.

The observer of Syrian conflict landscape clearly notes that the Syrian opposition comprises diverse political organizations and armed groups with competing ideologies, foreign sponsors and power struggles. Key bodies such as the SNC, National Coalition, FSA and SNA have all played significant roles, but remain divided and constrained. Disunity and disconnect between external political entities, grassroots civilian networks and local armed groups has severely hampered the emergence of a cohesive Syrian opposition and alternative to the Assad regime. External state sponsors have contradictory agendas that fuel conflict between rebel factions. These internal divisions continue to hamper opposition efforts to achieve their aims after over a decade of devastating civil war.

The Kurdish Groups

The Syrian conflict also created an opportunity for Kurdish groups to advance their objectives amid the distraction of the regime and devastation in Arab-majority areas. As the civil war unfolded, Kurds managed to establish autonomous zones, leading to a process of 'de facto decentralization' from Damascus.

Table 06 Examining key Kurdish political and military groups
Involved in the conflict provides insights into their roles.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Objective and Details</i>
The Democratic Union Party	PYD	Established in 2003 as the Syrian arm of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) based in Türkiye. The PKK has waged a decades-long insurgency against Türkiye over Kurdish rights and is designated a 'terrorist' group by Türkiye, and the EU (Federici, 2015, p. 83). As the conflict erupted, the PYD quickly took control across much of northern Syria. In 2012, President Assad handed over security and governance of Kurdish areas to the PYD to free up forces to fight rebels elsewhere (Federici, 2015, p. 84). This mutually beneficial arrangement enabled the PYD to consolidate territorial control. Moreover, the PYD established a political coalition called the Movement for a Democratic Society which governs the de facto autonomous area in northern Syria known since 2013 as Rojava (meaning 'West' in Kurdish).
The People's Protection Units	YPG	It's the armed wing of PYD, formed from the Popular Defense Committees, local Kurdish militias that took up arms during early clashes between Kurds and Syrian security forces. It grew rapidly into the main Kurdish fighting force in Syria. It successfully repelled an Islamic State (ISIS) onslaught against the border town of Kobane (officially named Ayn Alarab) in late 2014, bolstered by US airstrikes, which marked a turning point in the group's meteoric rise (Netjes & Veen, 2021). This victory won praise internationally and the Kurds became the main partner for the US-led Global Coalition against ISIS. Backed by US weapons, funding and air cover, the YPG spearheaded operations liberating vast territory from ISIS control across northern Syria.
The Syrian Democratic Forces	SDF	In 2015, the YPG, under pressure from the US to broaden ethnic representation, joined forces with Arab and other ethnic groups to form the SDF. Tasked with supporting the US-led coalition against ISIS, the SDF governs Arab-majority areas alongside Kurdish regions. While its inclusiveness has been questioned, the SDF remains under PYD control,

		with the YPG as its primary military force. Concerns exist about authoritarian tendencies and unease among the Arab population under its rule.
Rival Kurdish Groups		Rivalries among Kurdish groups, particularly between the PYD and those affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani, have shaped the Kurdish political landscape. The Kurdistan National Council (KNC), linked to Barzani's KDP, emerged as a political rival to the PYD, but internal divisions limited its effectiveness. The broader struggle for the Kurdish national movement spans Syria, Iraq, Türkiye, and Iran, with the PYD and KNC representing competing models of Kurdish nationalism. Türkiye's perspective further complicates the situation, viewing the Syrian Kurdish movement, especially the PYD, as an extension of the PKK.

Extremist Groups

A critical factor that has intensified and prolonged the conflict is the rise of extremist groups, mainly radical Islamist movements, within significant factions of the anti-Assad opposition. These groups' severe tactics and extreme ideologies have overshadowed more moderate factions, leading to substantial humanitarian distress and complicating peace talks. Throughout the war, the main radical Islamist organizations have emerged as influential forces is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh, originated from al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), formed by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004. After a period of decline post-2007 due to the U.S. military surge in Iraq, the group resurfaced in 2011, exploiting the escalating instability in Iraq and Syria. It officially became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013. In Syria, ISIS capitalized on the chaos of the civil war to expand its territory and influence. In June 2014, ISIS aggressively took over Mosul and Tikrit, and later that month, its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared a caliphate extending from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq, renaming the organization as the Islamic State (Wilson Center, 2019).

From its Syrian capital in Raqqa, ISIS enforced a harsh interpretation of Islamic law and launched international terror attacks. The group gained notoriety for its exploitation of social media for recruitment and its filmed beheadings of hostages (Anti-Defamation League, 2014). This radical group emerged as a pivotal and destructive force. It exploited the power vacuum and the chaos of the civil war to establish a stronghold, particularly in Raqqa. By implementing a brutal regime based on an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, ISIS attracted global attention and condemnation. Its military campaigns in Syria not only intensified the conflict but also reshaped the regional dynamics, drawing in international military interventions. ISIS's actions in Syria, marked by severe human rights abuses and terrorist activities, significantly contributed to the complexity and the prolongation of the Syrian civil war (Lister C. , 2016).

Their Roles and Impact on the Conflict:

- The prominence of extremist groups like ISIS has dramatically shaped both the military situation and diplomatic efforts:
- Prolong fighting by acting as leading anti-Assad forces – Extremists emerged as the most effective opposition on the battlefield with abundant foreign funding and fighters (Lister C. , 2016). Regime victories over mainstream rebels enhanced Islamist dominance of the armed opposition.
- Undermined moderate, negotiated settlement – Their maximalist goals for Islamic rule and use of terrorism made compromise with Assad untenable (Phillips, 2020). Their prominence splintered and marginalized moderate opposition groups more open to negotiations.
- Created humanitarian catastrophes – Besieges and brutality towards religious minorities and civilians by Islamist groups, especially ISIS, led to mass displacement, as well as documented atrocities and war crimes (Lister C. , 2016). The largest refugee wave was during the period in which ISIS strengthened, from the end of 2013 until the beginning of its end in 2016, and this was an important factor that made the EU and Türkiye conclude the refugee agreement. It is noted that most of the areas controlled by ISIS were close to the Turkish border, and this is what made the EU go to negotiations with neighbouring Türkiye and not the other neighbours.
- Drew in and complicated foreign military intervention – As the conflict progressed, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and the U.S. directed efforts towards defeating groups like ISIS rather than fighting solely against the regime (Phillips, 2020). Competition to shape post-conflict outcomes influenced who outside states backed.

The figure below shows the shifts in the dominance of forces and militias inside Syria over the years, affected by changes in the balance of power, varying proportions of control, and the complexity of the field situation. This control did not remain constant due to regional and international military interventions that changed the power equation on the ground. These transformations are a natural consequence of a multidimensional conflict that continues to shape Syria's future on a daily basis.

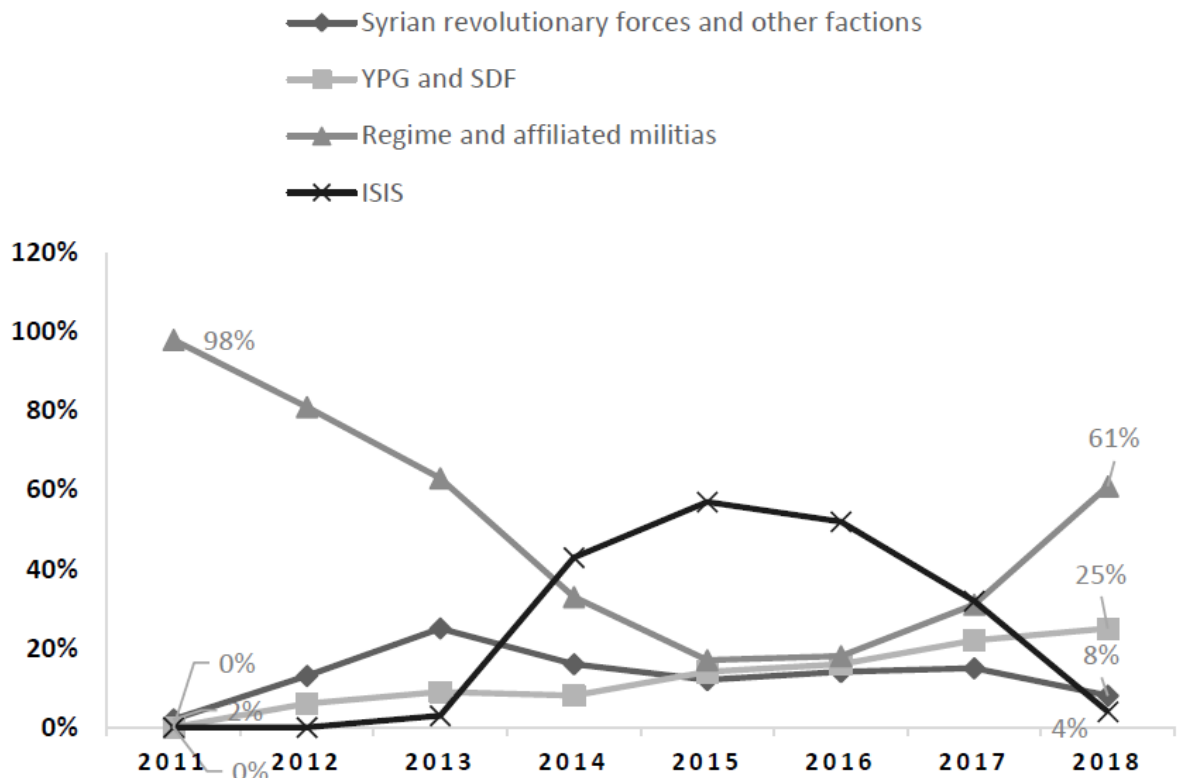


Figure 16 Variation in control ratios between 2011-2018²⁸

However, it is essential to consider that the most prominent groups in Syria began organizing early, just a few weeks after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis and before it escalated into militarization (Ali, 2016, pp. 170-171).

In essence, the Syrian conflict, deeply mired in intractable violence, saw the hijacking of the initial uprising against Assad by extremist groups such as ISIS. This not only suppressed moderate voices but also escalated violence against civilians, leading to a more complex and prolonged war. The prominence of these radical elements drew in counter-terrorism efforts from international powers, further complicating the conflict. The chaotic conditions of war allowed these extremist groups to thrive, overshadowing moderate anti-Assad forces and exacerbating conflict dynamics.

2.2.2. External Actors

The Turkish government initially took a supportive position toward the Arab revolutions in the hope of bringing about democratic change and promoting economic prosperity that might

²⁸ Source: (Şaban, Narsh, Tallaa, & Hammadi, 2018, pp. 113-114)

strengthen Türkiye's political and economic standing and increase its influence in the region (Kaddorah, 2021, pp. 74-75). Türkiye has played a pivotal role in the Syrian civil war since its outbreak, with its involvement evolving significantly over the years from initial diplomatic opposition to direct military intervention. In the early stages of unrest in Syria, Türkiye was quick to condemn the brutal crackdown on protestors by the Assad regime (Omar, 2019, pp. 145-146). Türkiye's engagement in the Syrian conflict is driven by multiple goals, including ensuring border security to prevent spill-over effects on its Kurdish issue and restoring its pivotal role in Middle Eastern trade. Ankara is also focused on managing the challenges posed by Syrian refugees, balancing economic and social implications. The movement of Islamic extremists and the prevention of Kurdish autonomy in Syria are key security concerns. Additionally, Türkiye seeks to use the situation to strengthen its position as a regional power and maintain its economic ties within the Arab world, with Syria acting as a crucial gateway (Zulham, Saragih, Thamrin, & Silitonga, 2020, pp. 89-90).

Türkiye's strategic involvement in the Syrian conflict reflects a complex interplay of national security interests, regional power dynamics, and humanitarian considerations. The Syrian crisis holds significant importance for Turkish national security because its outcomes could directly threaten the integrity and territory of Türkiye. Firstly, the long border between the two countries has become vulnerable to threats due to its easy penetration by hostile organizations or individuals, following the weakening or absence of regime forces or Turkish-backed opposition forces along parts of the border. Secondly, the threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to the division of Turkish territory remains a critical issue. The PKK has threatened the security and unity of the southeastern regions of Türkiye since the 1980s. With the rise of Syrian Kurdish organizations linked to it in northern Syria, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), this threat has been amplified. Thirdly, the establishment of an independent entity in northern Syria, in light of the weakened Syrian central authority, poses a threat to Türkiye comparable to that of the PKK. Such an entity could inspire and fuel nationalist sentiments among Kurds, even those who have never believed in separatism or autonomy within Türkiye (Kaddorah, 2021, p. 182).

Anchoring its policy on the imperative to safeguard its borders, Ankara has been particularly focused on the Kurdish issue, viewing the rise of Kurdish militia groups in Syria as a direct threat to its internal stability. This concern is compounded by the necessity to manage the influx of Syrian refugees, which has significant socio-economic implications domestically. Concurrently, Türkiye's actions in Syria are part of a broader strategic objective to bolster its role as a key player in Middle Eastern affairs. By navigating the multifaceted aspects of the conflict, including military interventions and diplomatic maneuvers, Türkiye aims to strengthen

its regional influence and maintain critical economic ties, notably within the Arab world. This multifaceted approach underscores Ankara's pursuit of a delicate balance between its internal security priorities, regional ambitions, and humanitarian responsibilities in the context of the Syrian civil war. This intricate involvement has manifested in various forms, ranging from diplomatic support and assistance to the formation of the Syrian National Army and strategic realignments in the region:

1. **Diplomatic support:** In the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye condemned the brutal crackdown on protestors by the Assad regime and provided support to the Syrian opposition (Zulham, Saragih, Thamrin, & Silitonga, 2020).
2. **Military assistance:** By July 2011, Türkiye began providing military assistance to the FSA, which represented the armed wing of the Syrian opposition (Phillips, 2020).
3. **Supported for the emergence the Syrian opposition:** Türkiye has actively supported endeavours aimed at fostering the emergence of a robust and inclusive Syrian opposition, poised to assume responsibility for the transition process in accordance with the authentic aspirations of the populace. In pursuit of this objective, Türkiye endorsed the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative body of the Syrian people during the gathering of the Friends of the Syria Group convened in Marrakech in December 2012. Notably, the National Coalition is headquartered in Istanbul. Furthermore, Türkiye provided backing for the Riyadh Meeting held from 8th to 10th December 2015, which facilitated the establishment of the Syrian Negotiation Commission (formerly known as the High Negotiations Committee).²⁹
4. **Military operations:** Türkiye has launched multiple military operations in northern Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019) (Khayrallah, 2021). These operations have been driven by domestic politics and have helped Türkiye gain a seat at the negotiating table.
5. **Strategic realignment:** Türkiye's involvement in Syria has led to a strategic realignment with Russia, (Dalay, 2021, p. 09) as the Turkish government has used the question of Syria as a tool to improve its relations with other international actors, such as the EU³⁰ (Stanicek, 2020).

²⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa>

³⁰ The dissertation primarily focuses on examining the significant long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU, highlighting how this issue has evolved into a key topic of negotiation between the two entities. This exploration probes into the complexities and implications of the conflict within the broader context of Türkiye-EU relations, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping diplomatic and strategic

6. **Refugee crisis:** Türkiye has been hosting millions of Syrian refugees who fled the Syrian Civil War. According to Turkish Presidency of Migration Management³¹, It now hosts the largest refugee population in the world, with over 3.2 million registered refugees. The Turkish government has provided temporary protection to these refugees, and there have been discussions about granting citizenship to some of the refugees.

To encapsulate, Türkiye's multifaceted involvement in the Syrian conflict, encompassing both military operations and diplomatic maneuvers, reflects a strategic calculus driven by national security concerns, regional power aspirations, and humanitarian obligations. The Syrian crisis has not only tested Türkiye's foreign policy agility but has also positioned it as a key regional actor with substantial influence over the evolving dynamics of Middle Eastern politics. Particularly, the handling of the refugee crisis and the balancing of interests with the EU illustrate Ankara's complex role as both a buffer and a bridge in the geopolitics of migration. This intricate involvement, while underscoring Türkiye's regional ambitions, also highlights the challenges Ankara faces in navigating its internal security priorities and humanitarian responsibilities. The Syrian conflict, thus, serves as a critical case study in understanding the long-term implications of regional crises on Türkiye-EU relations, offering a unique lens through which to assess the interplay of geopolitical strategy, humanitarian response, and regional stability, and providing invaluable insights into the broader dynamics of international relations in the context of protracted conflicts and their far-reaching implications.

In the context of Türkiye's role in the Syrian conflict, the realist perspective aligns with the notion that states act in their own self-interest to maximize security and power. Türkiye's initial condemnation of the Assad regime's crackdown and subsequent support to the Free Syrian Army can be interpreted as a response driven by the perceived threat to its national security. The rise of Kurdish militia groups in Syria is viewed through the lens of internal stability, and Türkiye sees it as a direct challenge to its territorial integrity, reflecting a core realist concern.

Iran

Since its commencement in 2011, Iran has been a central actor in the Syrian conflict, exerting a pivotal influence throughout its duration, emerging as one of the Assad regime's staunchest allies and most vital sources of political, economic, and military support (Al-Jubouri, 2021). As part of its broader regional strategy aimed at expanding its influence and establishing a "Shiite Crescent", (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2013) Iran has adopted a

dialogues. This discussion will occupy a substantial portion in the following chapters.

³¹ <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

multifaceted approach in Syria encompassing extensive diplomatic, advisory, financial, and military intervention to ensure the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime (Goodarzi J. , 2013, pp. 49-51). Tehran's massive intervention has been critical in enabling Assad's forces to make significant battlefield gains and regain control over much of Syria's urban centers and strategically vital territory. Iran's extensive involvement in Syria has been driven by a combination of strategic interests related to ideology, geopolitics, and national security. These include:

1. **Safeguarding an Ideological Ally:** As Iran's closest Arab ally, Syria holds special ideological importance for Tehran as a vital link connecting Iran to Lebanon's Hezbollah and anchoring the "Axis of Resistance" against Israel and Western powers (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2012). Preserving Assad's rule ensures the perpetuation of this alliance structure.
2. **Maintaining Strategic Depth:** Iran views influence over Syria and Lebanon as providing "strategic depth" against threats from rivals like Israel and America (Goodarzi J. , 2013, p. 43). Losing its foothold in Syria would undermine Iran's ability to deter or counter adversaries.
3. **Countering Gulf States:** Iran also aims to curb the influence of hostile Sunni Gulf states seeking to displace Assad with a Sunni, pro-Saudi government (Goodarzi J. , 2013, p. 06). Rolling back Gulf power in Syria is thus both ideological and geostrategic.
4. **Building a Land Bridge to Hezbollah:** Securing overland access through Iraq and Syria to supply Lebanon's Hezbollah with weapons and other aid has also factored heavily in Iran's calculations (Phillips, 2015).
5. **Combating Sunni Extremists:** Iran has sought to portray its intervention as combating sectarian Sunni jihadist groups like ISIS that pose an ideological and security threat (Goodarzi J. , 2013, p. 50). This enables it to claim broad counterterrorism goals rather than solely propping up Assad.

Capitalizing on these varied strategic motivations; Iran has mobilized a massive level of political, economic, military, and advisory support to shore up Assad's regime through key methods of assistance. This multifaceted support has included the provision of extensive financial aid and critical oil shipments (Phillips, 2015; Ghazal, 2024), which have been fundamental in sustaining the Syrian regime's operations. Iran's commitment is further evidenced by the deployment of military personnel, the training of pro-regime forces, and the supply of arms and equipment, all of which have significantly strengthened Assad's military position. The presence of Iranian military advisers has also been a key factor, underscoring

Iran's strategic investment in the stability of the Assad regime (Lund, 2015). Alongside these robust measures, Iran has provided unwavering diplomatic support (Goodarzi J. , 2013), offering an international layer of protection for the Syrian regime and thus playing an indispensable role in the complex dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

Iran's extensive intervention has been widely viewed as important to Assad's regained momentum since 2015, demonstrating the vital role played by foreign patrons in civil wars (Phillips, 2015). However, Iran's policies have also fuelled further sectarian radicalization and conflict prolongation while incurring major costs in blood and treasure. Additionally, Iran's entrenched military position in Syria may increase prospects for escalation with Israel and other adversaries, while constraining Assad's autonomy and binding him closer to Tehran's agenda (Oğuz & Çelik, 2018). This underscores the geopolitical risks of extensive external sponsorship in civil wars. Iran's deep ties with Assad seem poised to shape Syria's future political landscape for years to come.

In aggressively moving to shore up Assad militarily, economically and diplomatically since 2011, Iran has secured what it views as vital strategic interests in retaining its vital Levantine ally while simultaneously emerging as the world's leading state sponsor of authoritarian regimes aiming to quash popular uprisings through brutal force. However, Tehran's policies have also played a central role in fuelling Syria's transformation into a heavily internationalized, multi-actor conflict zone plagued by a disastrous humanitarian crisis and dim prospects for reconciliation among deeply fractured communities. Iran's tying of its regional legitimacy so closely to defending a regime responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens may ultimately prove strategically short-sighted and morally indefensible.

In the context of Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict, Constructivism would highlight the importance of ideational factors in guiding Tehran's actions. The concept of a "Shiite Crescent" and the ideological alignment with the Assad regime are central components. Iran's commitment to preserving an ideological ally, such as Syria, demonstrates the significance of shared beliefs and identities in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Gulf Countries (Saudi Arabia & Qatar)

Two of the most prominent regional actors that have played influential roles are Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Both Gulf monarchies have actively backed rebel forces seeking to overthrow the Assad regime, driven by both geopolitical interests as well as ideological motives. However, there have also been divergences in the Syria approaches between Riyadh and Doha. This analysis will examine the key interests, policies and impacts of Saudi and Qatari involvement in Syria throughout the protracted crisis (Abu Khalil, 2018; Al-Rashed, n.d.).

Saudi policy in Syria has primarily been driven by the overarching regional rivalry with Iran. Syria under Assad represents a vital pillar of Iranian influence, providing strategic regional allies and proxy groups (Al Jazeera Staff, 2023). Toppling the Syrian regime is thus seen as a means for Saudi Arabia to weaken its primary geopolitical foe. However, beyond realpolitik considerations, Saudi support for Syrian rebels also stems from broader worries about Iranian-led Shiite ascendancy across the region, threatening Saudi Arabia's claim as leader of the Sunni Muslim world (Ighani, 2016, p. 04).

Consequently, Saudi Arabia has provided extensive financial and military assistance to various Sunni Syrian rebel factions since 2012 to gain influence among fighters on the ground (Al Jazeera Staff, 2023). The regime change efforts were coordinated with Qatar and Türkiye under a joint operations room from 2012-2014 (Lister C. , 2016). Specific rebel groups backed by Riyadh included formations like Jaysh Al-Islam, reflecting the Saudi monarchy's ideological sympathies.

Saudi Arabia's policy towards Syria has been significantly influenced by its broader regional rivalry with Iran. Riyadh has a vested interest in limiting Iran's influence in the Levant, particularly in Syria (Mabon, 2015). This stance is reflective of Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives in the region, which include countering Iran's presence and influence, not only in Syria but also in other neighbouring countries like Iraq (Nasr, 2016). In response to the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia took decisive steps to oppose the Assad regime, which is closely aligned with Iran. This included withdrawing its ambassador from Syria in 2011 and calling for an end to the violence against the Syrian people. The Kingdom's actions were part of a proactive foreign policy aimed at building alliances within the Gulf region to suppress Iranian influence (Aldardari, 2020). Saudi Arabia's efforts to undermine the Assad regime, a key ally of Iran, align with its broader regional policy objectives. However, this approach also poses risks, particularly in terms of its potential impact on U.S. interests and the broader stability of the region (Mirkow, 2012).

However, Saudi Arabia moderated its aggressive stance after it was evident their proxies could not overwhelm the Syrian regime militarily. From 2015, improving relations with Russia led Saudi Arabia to pressure opposition negotiators to make concessions during fraught Geneva peace talks. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia maintained ties with a range of rebels today to secure long-term influence (Al-Kassim, 2021). The Kingdom also hosted Syrian opposition conferences and supports interim governance bodies like the Syrian Opposition Coalition to retain leadership over regime change efforts.

Qatar has adopted similarly supportive policies backing regime change efforts. Analysts attribute this to both Qatar's drive for enhanced regional influence under former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani as well as ideological affiliations with Muslim Brotherhood associated groups. Consequently, Qatar leveraged its financial wealth to sponsor Islamist militants and political factions inside Syria (Ghaddar, 2013).

The primary recipients were forces in the Islamic Front umbrella factions like Ahrar Al-Sham, with Brotherhood ties. Qatar also wielded soft power through broadcast media, with Al Jazeera television staunchly. It endorsed for armed uprising against Assad during its public address through media channels. There have however been tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over their proxy choices. Differences emerged during negotiations over unifying command structures (AbuKhalil, 2018). But despite diverging interests, both Gulf states demonstrate parallel aims of gaining long-term influence through anti-Assad rebel forces.

It is significant to mention that both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have played substantial roles supporting regime change efforts in Syria for overlapping geopolitical and ideological reasons. Their extensive sponsorship of Sunni rebels and opposition political bodies makes Gulf intervention a defining dynamic of Syria's regionalized civil war. While their level of backing has fluctuated, Riyadh and Doha retain ties with proxies to wield influence during an eventual settlement. Thus, engaging the interests of both states will remain key milestones for resolving the Syrian crisis in the long run.

European Union

Before 2011, the diplomatic relations between Syria and the EU were primarily focused on enhancing political dialogue to encourage mutually beneficial trade and investment, alongside collaborative efforts in social and democratic reforms. During this time, the EU's projects in Syria, include initiatives to improve infrastructure, promote sustainable agriculture, and encourage private sector growth, initiatives to enhance administrative efficiency, encompass healthcare, education, and social welfare programs to improve the well-being of the population, especially after 2004, were implemented under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and financed through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). In response to the Syrian conflict, the EU adopted a comprehensive institutional strategy. This strategy included a mix of sanctions aimed at limiting the Syrian regime's influence, diplomatic efforts towards conflict resolution through platforms like the 'Friends of the Syrian People' and the 'Geneva process', and provision of temporary humanitarian assistance to those severely affected by the regime's repressive measures (Veen, Ezzeddine, Napolitano, & Pellise, 2021, p. 23).

The EU's role³² in addressing the Syrian conflict, a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions, is multifaceted and comprehensive. The EU has vehemently condemned the ongoing violence, which has led to widespread human suffering, infrastructural devastation, and cultural heritage damage (Al-Quran D. , 2023). Emphasizing the impossibility of a military solution, the EU advocates for a political resolution to eradicate ISIS and other terrorist groups as recognized by the UN. Central to its strategy are six key objectives: facilitating a genuine political transition in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254,³³ bolstering the political opposition to enable an inclusive transition, effectively and timely addressing humanitarian needs of the vulnerable Syrian population, promoting democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression through the support of Syrian civil society organizations, pursuing accountability for war crimes to aid in national reconciliation and transitional justice, and enhancing the resilience of the Syrian people and their communities. This approach underscores the EU's commitment to a sustainable political solution and the long-term stability and rebuilding of Syrian society (European Union, 2021). The EU's approach to the Syrian conflict reflects a strategic blend of diplomatic, humanitarian, and political interventions. The EU's efforts, ranging from targeted sanctions to advocacy for political resolution and humanitarian aid, demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of the conflict. Its strategy not only addresses the immediate repercussions of the conflict but also considers the long-term reconstruction and reconciliation, highlighting the EU's role as a pivotal actor in international relations (Maklad H. , 2017).

Russia

Russia has been the Syrian regime's most vital ally, shielding it from international pressure and providing decisive military support that saved Assad from defeat (Momani, 2012). Russia vetoed condemnatory UN Security Council resolutions against Syrian atrocities and rejected the ousting of Assad as a precondition for resolving the conflict (United Nations, 2012; Al

³² The EU's involvement in the Syrian conflict is intricate and multi-dimensional. A significant portion of my dissertation is devoted to a thorough analysis of the EU's role, its responses, and the various initiatives it has implemented in this context. A focal point of the subsequent chapters will be the EU's interactions with Türkiye, a nation that shares an extensive border with Syria and has hosted the largest contingent of Syrian refugees. Concurrently, Türkiye harbors aspirations for EU membership. This nexus forms the crux of my research, which aims to scrutinize how the Syrian conflict, particularly the refugee crisis, has influenced EU-Türkiye relations, with a focus on the implications for Türkiye's EU membership aspirations.

³³ Adopted during its 7588th meeting on December 18, 2015, the Security Council reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as to the principles outlined in the Charter of the United Nations. The Council underscores the necessity of a sustainable resolution to the ongoing Syrian crisis through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process, aligning with the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. This approach aims for the comprehensive implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012, as endorsed by Resolution 2118 (2013). The envisioned outcome involves the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body, endowed with full executive powers. Formation of this body is to be achieved on the basis of mutual consent, all while ensuring the continuity of governmental institutions. For more information: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf

Jazeera Media Network, 2017). In 2015, Russia directly intervened into the conflict that turned the tide of the war in the regime's favour, enabling the recapture of opposition strongholds. One of the most significant aspects of Russia's support has been its military intervention. This marked the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia had engaged in a major military operation outside its borders. The Russian military intervention, characterized by airstrikes and the deployment of ground forces, has been pivotal in helping the Syrian regime regain control over major cities and territories lost to various opposition forces. Russia's intervention has often been framed as a "war against terrorism," particularly against ISIS, but it has primarily aimed to support the regime and suppress opposition groups (Daher, 2018). According to various reports, the catalyst for Russia's military intervention in Syria was a secret meeting in Russia between President Putin and Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in that period.³⁴ During this confidential visit, Soleimani conveyed to the Russian leadership the precarious state of the Assad regime, emphasizing its dire straits yet potential for recovery. He proposed a collaborative intervention, a tripartite alliance involving Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, as a strategic measure to bolster the Assad regime and stabilize the situation. This suggestion underscored the critical juncture at which the Syrian conflict stood and highlighted the need for a concerted effort by these allied forces to alter the trajectory of the conflict (Valenta & Valenta, 2016, p. 12).³⁵

³⁴ In the referenced interview, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah, provides a detailed account of the meeting between Russian President Putin and Iranian General Soleimani. Nasrallah's narrative sheds light on the complex dynamics and strategic discussions that characterize the involvement of these influential figures in the Syrian conflict. He articulates the intricate geopolitical interactions and the roles played by these non-state and state actors, offering insights into their objectives and the broader implications of their strategies in the regional power landscape. This account is particularly significant in understanding the multifaceted nature of the Syrian conflict and the interplay of regional and international influences shaping its course. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbZFEpnZHhM>

³⁵ The Russian military intervention in the Syrian conflict, notably marked by its timing, significantly influenced the EU's expedited negotiations with Türkiye. This agreement, materializing mere months after the commencement of Russia's intervention, was predicated on several critical considerations. Foremost among these was the strategic establishment of Russia's military foothold in the Mediterranean, specifically at the Syrian port city of Tartus, presenting a potential future challenge to Western hegemonic interests. Additionally, the agreement was catalyzed by the substantial influx of refugees into Türkiye, a key transit nation for those seeking asylum within the EU. The escalation in refugee numbers can be attributed to the Syrian regime's successful reclamation of territories previously under opposition control, most notably the city of Aleppo, which shares a border with Türkiye. This development in the Syrian conflict significantly exacerbated the refugee crisis, compelling the EU to quickly engage in diplomatic negotiations with Türkiye to address the unfolding humanitarian and security challenges. In contrast, Iran occupies a pivotal position in Russia's strategic landscape, not only as a purchaser of Russian defense systems and collaborator in pipeline ventures but also as a client for Russian nuclear power technology. The consummation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, on July 14, 2015, in Vienna, marked a significant turning point. President Putin, who played a facilitating role in the negotiations alongside President Obama, strategically deferred any decisive action on Syria until the culmination of this agreement. The successful conclusion of the JCPOA, anticipated to lead to the relaxation of sanctions against Tehran, positioned Iran to finance the acquisition of Russia's advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile system. Additionally, Putin harbored aspirations that the deal would catalyze a thaw in Iran-U.S. relations, thereby creating a more conducive environment for Russia to collaborate with Iran and Hezbollah in bolstering Assad's regime. In this context, the covert visit of Qasem Soleimani to Russia assumes critical importance. The secrecy of this visit was ostensibly maintained due to the ongoing negotiations of the JCPOA. The timing was crucial; Russia was awaiting the finalization of the nuclear agreement, which would not only impact regional dynamics but also

In pursuit of advancing its strategic objectives, the Russia has positioned itself within three distinct yet interrelated spheres of influence: the intricacies of the Syrian conflict, its role within the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and, on a more expansive scale, its involvement in the ever-evolving architecture of global order (Charap, Treyger, & Geist, 2019, pp. 03-11). These spheres, while distinct in their immediate objectives and operational dynamics, exhibit a degree of interconnectivity that serves Moscow's larger strategic ambitions. The assertive stance adopted by Russia in the Syrian theatre is not merely a regional endeavour but a critical component of its wider foreign policy calculus (Jaber, 2015). This manoeuvring within the Syrian conflict extends Russia's geopolitical reach across the Middle Eastern expanse, thereby reinforcing its status as a key player on the international stage. Concurrently, this approach underpins Russia's broader strategy aimed at gradually undermining the current U.S.-centric, rules-based international system, thereby paving the way for a new global paradigm more aligned with Moscow's vision and interests (Yacoubian, 2021).

Russia expanded military bases in Syria and gained greater influence in the Middle East. Propping up Assad also serves Putin's goals of stymying U.S. policy in the region (Bagdonas, 2012, pp. 61-63). Russia has sponsored ceasefire deals and the Astana peace process, attempting to side-line Western powers in shaping the conflict's endgame (Ramani, 2019). This constitutes one of the primary objectives of Russian diplomacy, aimed at undermining the Western-led global order (Trenin, 2013).

The strategic alliance between Russia and the Syrian regime has significantly altered the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Russia's intervention, primarily characterized by military support and political backing in international forums, was pivotal in preventing the defeat of the Assad regime. This support entailed vetoing the UN Security Council resolutions critical of the regime's actions and rejecting the removal of Assad as a precondition for conflict resolution. Russia's military intervention, particularly its air campaign and ground support, was a decisive factor in enabling the Syrian regime to regain control over territories lost to opposition forces. The intervention, while framed as a campaign against terrorism, particularly ISIS, primarily aimed to bolster the Assad regime and counter opposition groups. The strategic collaboration between Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, initiated by a pivotal meeting with Soleimani, underscored the critical juncture of the Syrian conflict and the necessity of a concerted effort to alter its course. Furthermore, Russia's actions in Syria reflect a broader strategy that extends beyond the immediate context of the Syrian conflict. By establishing itself in three interconnected spheres – the Syrian conflict, regional dynamics in

potentially facilitate greater financial and military cooperation between Iran and Russia. Thus, Soleimani's clandestine visit was intricately linked to the broader geopolitical shifts anticipated from the successful negotiation of the JCPOA (Valenta & Valenta, 2016).

the Middle East, and the global order – Russia has pursued a multifaceted approach to advance its strategic interests.

This approach serves to reinforce Russia's position as a significant global actor, challenging the U.S.-led international order and shaping a new global paradigm more aligned with Moscow's vision. The expansion of military bases in Syria and the sponsorship of ceasefire deals and the Astana peace process further illustrate Russia's commitment to enhancing its influence in the Middle East, counteracting U.S. policies, and shaping the outcome of the Syrian conflict. These actions, while serving immediate tactical purposes in Syria, are part of Russia's larger objective to assert its influence and reshape the international geopolitical landscape.

United States

The role of the United States in the Syrian conflict has evolved over time and has impacted dynamics on the ground. It has played an especial crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the conflict through a variety of policies and actions. Its interests in Syria have shifted over time but can be broadly characterized into a few key areas: primarily claiming regional stability (Brandenburg, 2013), counteracting extremist groups (Gadalla, 2019), and containing Iran's influence in the region (Rabinovich, 2018). The specific weighting of priorities between these interests has fluctuated from administration to administration (Phillips, 2020). However, degrading terrorist groups active in Syria and countering Iranian regional influence have remained highly salient priorities in driving U.S. policy.

Early U.S. Policy 2011-2014 under Obama Administration

During the early years of the conflict under the Obama administration, U.S. officials frequently called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down from power (Ukman & Sly, 2011). The U.S. policy towards Syria during the early stages of the conflict was characterized by hesitation to directly intervene.³⁶ This cautious approach, influenced by previous experiences in the Middle East and skepticism about the capabilities of the Syrian opposition, led to a policy focused more on containing the conflict than actively supporting the opposition or confronting the Assad regime (Itani & Rosenblatt, 2018). As a result, this opened the door for Russia to later intervene militarily in a more direct manner. The U.S. reluctance to become deeply involved in the conflict and the subsequent Russian intervention had significant

³⁶ From a liberal perspective, the Obama administration's decision not to directly intervene in Syria can be attributed to a preference for multilateralism and international norms, which prioritize diplomacy and coalition-building over unilateral military actions. This approach reflects liberal values that emphasize the importance of international institutions and cooperation, seeking to avoid the pitfalls of unilateral interventionism that could lead to long-term regional instability and further conflict. Additionally, the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan likely influenced this cautious stance, highlighting the complexities and unintended consequences of military interventions. For a detailed read, visit the Brookings article: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-the-united-states-hasnt-intervened-in-syria/>

implications for the wider region and the West (Charap, Treyger, & Geist, 2019, p. 23). The prolonged and intensified Syrian conflict, compounded by the rise of ISIS and the displacement of millions of refugees, had a profound impact on European security and politics. This in turn affected Türkiye's relations with the EU, as Türkiye became a key transit and host country for refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict, leading to complex diplomatic and political challenges between Türkiye and the EU.

The U.S. foreign policy toward Syria during the early stages of the conflict (2011-2014) reflected a nuanced balance between promoting democratic values and prioritizing national security interests. While Syria was not seen as a critical asset for U.S. national security in the Middle East, this stance created a paradox. The U.S. advocated for democracy globally but responded cautiously to the conflict between Syrian opposition forces and President Bashar al-Assad's regime, supported by Russian military power. This paradox became more pronounced following the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in August 2013. The incident marked a potential turning point, as it prompted the Obama administration to consider direct military intervention in Syria. However, this consideration was balanced against the broader implications of such an action in the region and the potential risks involved. The U.S. ultimately chose a more restrained approach, opting not to engage in direct military intervention, despite the moral outrage and international condemnation of the Assad regime's actions (Awal & Agoes, 2017, p. 181). This decision underscores the complexity of U.S. foreign policy decision-making, where ideals such as the promotion of democracy and human rights are weighed against strategic interests and the potential consequences of military action (Rosenblatt & Kilcullen, 2022, pp. 47-72). The U.S. response to the Syrian crisis, particularly after the chemical weapons incident, reflects the intricate interplay between moral imperatives and national security considerations in shaping foreign policy.

Regarding the above mentioned factors, the U.S. policy towards Syria during Obama's presidency was marked by a reluctance to intervene militarily. This approach stemmed from scepticism about the Syrian opposition's effectiveness, an underestimation of the conflict's regional impact, and a desire to avoid another Middle East quagmire. Key decisions included not striking Assad after the sarin gas attack in 2013 and focusing on containing ISIS rather than the broader Syrian conflict. This led to a lack of decisive support for non-extremist opposition forces and opened a strategic space for Russian intervention, which further complicated the conflict (Itani & Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 15).

Trump Administration Policy 2017-2021

President Trump placed a high priority on neutralizing the ISIS, which, at the time, exerted control over approximately one-third of Syrian territory. His strategy entailed combating terrorism in a collaborative effort with Russia. This partnership was noteworthy considering Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and the Shiite militias, which receive backing in the forms of funding, training, and organization from Iran. Concurrently, President Trump expressed a commitment to counter Iran's expanding influence in the Middle East, a region where Iran's activities in Syria play a crucial role. Additionally, President Trump initiated plans to establish safe zones within Syria, aiming to provide civilians with opportunities for safety and stability. This policy reflects a multifaceted approach to the Syrian conflict, balancing counterterrorism objectives with geopolitical considerations in the region (Tabler, 2017, p. 02).

The Trump administration's Syria policy, as outlined in Robert Stephen Ford's³⁷ report "*What is Trump's real policy in Syria?*" (Ford, 2018) as follows:

- During its tenure, the Trump administration's approach to Syria was predominantly centered on counterterrorism, with a special focus on combating ISIS. This policy eschewed broader objectives of regime change or a comprehensive strategy for the Syrian civil war. Key milestones, such as the liberation of Raqqa, were highlighted as critical achievements in the fight against ISIS, indicating a significant dent in the group's stronghold. Concurrently, the U.S. sought to prevent Syria from becoming a strategic base for Iranian operations.
- The administration's strategy, however, was marked by the absence of a cohesive, long-term plan for Syria. Efforts were concentrated on defeating ISIS and deterring the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, yet these were tactical responses that did not constitute a comprehensive strategy for resolving the Syrian conflict or curbing extremist influences effectively.
- The Trump administration executed limited military strikes against Syrian regime targets in response to chemical attacks. Nonetheless, there was a lack of clarity in articulating long-term goals in Syria, with no specific timeline or criteria set for mission accomplishment. The emphasis was on short-term tactical responses rather than a strategic, long-term approach.
- Support was extended to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias, in their battle against ISIS. However, Trump's indications of potential

³⁷ the U.S. Ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014: <https://www.mei.edu/profile/robert-s-ford>

troop withdrawals raised concerns about the possible resurgence of ISIS and the stability of regions under SDF control.

- Trump also critiqued the approaches of previous U.S. administrations in the Middle East, especially interventions in Iraq and Syria, which he perceived as creating power vacuums that facilitated the rise of groups like ISIS.

Overall, the focus on counterterrorism under Trump's policy did not significantly progress other U.S. objectives in Syria. The administration periodically criticized Assad's regime and expressed aspirations for a political transition but shied away from direct confrontation or active pursuit of regime change. This restrained U.S. involvement, while avoiding major escalations with Assad or his Russian and Iranian allies, also did not create conducive conditions for negotiations or a political resolution in Syria.

In essence, the Trump administration's policy in Syria was primarily driven by counterterrorism objectives, particularly against ISIS, and paid less attention to the broader conflict and political complexities in Syria. This approach yielded certain counterterrorism successes but fell short of addressing the deep-seated issues of the Syrian civil war or paving the way for a lasting resolution.

Biden Administration 2021-2024

The Biden administration has not drastically altered U.S. Syria policy priorities and posture but has faced growing complications as the long-running conflict enters a new phase. With ISIS diminished as an active threat controlling territory, counterterrorism alone no longer occupies such an oversized role directing U.S. policy. Biden officials have been more vocal than Trump in criticizing Assad's government as an enduring obstacle to peace if left intact. However, the administration still judges outright war against Damascus to be contrary to U.S. interests, despite instituting additional sanctions against Syrian officials. Here are some important points that may clarify US policy in Syria during Biden's term:

1. Strategic Focus and Restraint:

- Biden's passive approach to Syria reflects a broader strategy of limited engagement and diplomacy in the Middle East, with a shift in focus to the Indo-Pacific and a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran (Stein, 2021; Katulis, 2023).
- The administration aimed to avoid overextension by prioritizing diplomatic efforts and relying more on regional partners, navigating the complex post-

Turkish intervention environment in northeast Syria (Stein, 2021; Katulis, 2023).

2. Policy Challenges and Shifts:

- Biden's past involvement in Syria under Obama and subsequent changes posed challenges to implementing new policies (Oudat, 2020).
- The withdrawal from Afghanistan and decreased U.S. troop presence in the Middle East reflected broader shifts in America's strategic posture (Katulis, 2023).

3. Diplomacy, Military Strategy, and Sanctions:

- The administration maintained a diplomatic stance towards Russia and provided military support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), while the Caesar Act imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime, shaping U.S. policy towards a political solution in Syria (Oudat, 2020; Stein, 2014).

4. Domestic and Regional Political Dynamics:

- Biden's policy approach, including towards Syria, was influenced by domestic political divisions and considerations of Republican perspectives (Oudat, 2020).
- Biden's Middle East policy involved recalibrating relationships with key countries like Saudi Arabia and reengaging Iran in nuclear talks (Katulis, 2023).

5. COVID-19 Impact:

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly compounded challenges faced by the Biden administration in Syria, requiring attention to immediate health impacts while navigating broader complexities of the conflict and humanitarian needs (International Rescue Committee, 2020).

All things considered, the Biden administration's approach to Syria has been characterized by a strategic recalibration of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. This shift, while continuing to address the enduring complexities of the Syrian conflict, reflects a broader realignment towards diplomatic engagement and regional partnership. The administration's cautious stance, evident in its response to the Syrian regime and the broader geopolitical challenges in the region, underscores a commitment to avoiding overextension while still maintaining a presence in key areas of strategic interest. This approach, influenced by both

domestic political considerations and global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, marks a nuanced departure from previous administrations' policies. It illustrates an effort to balance the demands of international diplomacy, regional stability, and U.S. national interests in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

In wrapping up, the web of competing interests and intervention of external powers in Syria has exacerbated and prolonged the conflict. The alignment of Russia and Iran behind Assad contrasts with fractious and divided opponents. Absent shifts in the calculus of key actors regarding costs and benefits of sustaining the current impasse, the conflict looks likely to persist at lower levels of intensity amid deadlocked peace efforts. Resolving such an intractable civil war requires diplomatic perseverance and skilful statecraft, but has remained elusive in the Syrian context. Incorporating the impact of each actor's intervention on Turkish- EU relations into the analysis of the Syrian conflict further enriches our understanding of the intricate interplay of regional and global politics. The Syrian crisis, far from being an isolated conflict, has significantly influenced Türkiye-EU relations, underlining how localized conflicts can have wide-reaching international ramifications.

The Assad regime's actions, notably its aggressive response to the uprising, catalyzed a humanitarian crisis that directly impacted Türkiye. As a neighboring country, Türkiye became a primary destination for Syrian refugees, creating socio-economic and political challenges that necessitated engagement with the EU. This situation not only tested Türkiye's domestic policies but also positioned it as a critical partner for the EU in managing the refugee crisis. The influx of refugees into Türkiye and their potential movement towards Europe became a pivotal factor in the evolving relationship between Ankara and Brussels, leading to negotiations and agreements aimed at controlling migration flows.

The involvement of regional actors such as Iran and Gulf countries, each pursuing their respective agendas in Syria, indirectly impacted Türkiye-EU dynamics. Iran's support for the Assad regime and the participation of Gulf countries in backing various opposition groups contributed to the prolongation and intensification of the conflict. This, in turn, exacerbated the refugee crisis and heightened security concerns, factors of utmost importance in Türkiye-EU discussions. Russia's intervention, aimed at supporting the Assad regime, also had implications for Türkiye's relationship with the EU. Russia's military presence in Syria and its role in shaping the conflict's trajectory indirectly influenced EU policy considerations regarding Türkiye, particularly in terms of security and regional stability. Additionally, Türkiye's own military operations in northern Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, were closely monitored by the EU, considering their impact on regional stability and refugee flows.

The U.S. policy in Syria, varying across administrations, has also influenced Türkiye-EU relations. American support for Kurdish forces in Syria, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been a contentious issue for Türkiye, given its concerns over Kurdish autonomy and potential implications for its own territorial integrity. This aspect of U.S. involvement in Syria has often required delicate diplomatic navigation in Türkiye-EU dialogues, as it intersects with broader concerns about regional security and counterterrorism efforts. Conclusively, the Syrian conflict demonstrates how domestic upheavals can transform into complex international crises, influencing not only immediate neighbours like Türkiye but also shaping relationships with broader entities like the EU. Each actor's intervention in Syria has had a deep effect, impacting Türkiye's domestic and foreign policies and, by extension, its interactions with the EU. This dynamic interplay underscores the need for holistic and cooperative approaches in international relations, where understanding and addressing the interconnectedness of regional conflicts and global politics is paramount for achieving sustainable stability and peace.

2.3. Peace initiatives for the Syrian conflict

2.3.1. The Geneva Process

The Geneva Process refers to a series of peace talks aimed at resolving the Syrian civil war, which has been ongoing since 2011. The process was initiated by Kofi Annan, UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria, with the announcement of the Geneva Communiqué on June 30, 2012, under the umbrella of the "Action Group for Syria" (Ziadeh, Syria Peace Talks in Geneva: A Road to Nowhere, 2017). The negotiations have not made significant political progress, and the talks have been postponed or cancelled at various points (Pedersen, 2022). The following table summarize the key points of each round of Geneva Conferences.

Table 07 Geneva Conferences (Al-Jazeera, 2018)

<i>Conference</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Key Points</i>
Geneva 1	June 2012	The United Nations General Assembly and Security Council report "Syria S2012 522" details the proceedings of the Action Group for Syria. The Conference, attended by high-level representatives from the UN, the League of Arab States, and several countries, was convened in response to the dire situation in Syria, marked by violence, destruction, and human rights abuses. The Action Group emphasized its commitment to Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity, aiming to end violence and facilitate a Syrian-led political process. Key actions included implementing a cessation of violence, adhering to the six-point plan and Security Council resolutions, and outlining principles and steps for a Syrian-led political transition. These steps highlighted the need for a democratic system, human rights adherence, equality, transitional governing body establishment, national dialogue, constitutional review, fair elections, and women's full representation. The importance of safety, disarmament, protection of vulnerable groups, and maintaining public services was underscored. Additionally, the need for accountability, transitional justice, and national reconciliation was emphasized. The Group members agreed to support the objectives by applying pressure to Syrian parties, opposing further militarization, and backing the Joint Special Envoy's efforts. This meeting represented a significant effort to resolve the Syrian crisis through dialogue, political settlement, and an inclusive, Syrian-led transition (General Assembly Security Council, 2012). Looking critically at the decisions made during the Action Group for Syria Conference, it is evident that while they aimed to resolve the conflict through dialogue and political transition, they appeared overly idealistic and detached from the actual complexities of the situation. The conflict in Syria was not only escalating but had also evolved into a proxy war, deeply entrenched in various regions like the Damascus countryside and cities such as Daraa, Homs, and Aleppo, each exhibiting unique conflict characteristics. In Homs, the conflict had a pronounced sectarian dimension, characterized by the involvement of the Iranian-backed Syrian regime and Hezbollah, notably in the battle of Qusayr. Conversely, in Aleppo, the conflict dynamics were distinctly different, highlighting the diverse and multifaceted nature of the Syrian crisis. This complexity, marked by local, regional, and international interests and the involvement of various factions, made the situation increasingly difficult to address through the idealistic framework proposed in the Geneva meeting.
Geneva 2	February 2014	Supervised by Lakhdar Brahimi³⁸, the talks reached a deadlock, primarily due to the divergent focuses of the involved parties. On one side, the Syrian regime, led by President Bashar al-Assad, centered its arguments and concerns on the issue of terrorism. This focus was not just a matter of security concerns but also a strategic stance, as the regime sought to position itself as a pivotal force against terrorist groups, thereby legitimizing its continued hold on power and attracting international support against a common enemy. On the other hand, the opposition's primary focus was on the formation of a transitional government. This stance stemmed from their view that the root cause of the conflict was the authoritarian regime itself. The opposition saw the establishment of a transitional government as a critical first step towards a more democratic and inclusive Syria. This government, in their view, would be a cornerstone in rebuilding the nation and moving away from the Assad regime's authoritarian rule (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2014). This fundamental disagreement created an impasse that proved insurmountable during the talks. Brahimi's role as a mediator was challenging, as he had to navigate these diametrically opposed positions, each backed by different international and regional powers with their vested interests in the Syrian conflict. The regime's focus on terrorism and the opposition's insistence on a transitional government reflected not only the internal Syrian divide but also the broader geopolitical contest in the region. The deadlock in the talks was a clear indication of the deep-seated issues within the Syrian conflict, where political, ideological, and sectarian divisions had become deeply entrenched. The inability to reconcile these divergent focuses underscored the complexity of the conflict and the monumental challenge of finding a peaceful resolution that would satisfy all parties involved.

³⁸ 2012-2014 Special Joint Envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League for Syria. Retrieved from: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep09643.8.pdf](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep09643.8.pdf) & <https://theelders.org/profile/lakhdar-brahimi>

Geneva 3	February 2016	Scheduled for January 2016 but postponed and officially launched in February. Failed due to disputes over implementing UN Resolution 2254 and opposition's formation of a negotiating delegation.
Geneva 4	February 2017	Followed the achievement of a ceasefire agreement in Syria in late Dec. 2012 and two rounds of negotiations between the regime and the armed opposition in Astana. The participants, led by Staffan de Mistura³⁹, succeeded in agreeing upon an agenda comprising four main "Baskets": ▪ The First Basket: This focused on the establishment of non-sectarian governance that would include all parties within six months. ▪ The Second Basket: Pertaining to issues related to setting a timeline for drafting a new constitution, achieved within six months. ▪ The Third Basket: Concerning the conduct of free and fair elections post-constitution, within an 18-month timeframe, under the supervision of the United Nations. This would also encompass Syrians residing outside their home country. ▪ The Fourth Basket: This entailed strategies for counter-terrorism, security governance, and building medium-term trust measures. The round had not witnessed substantive discussion regarding a presumed transition of power in Syria, particularly in light of the Syrian regime's refusal to implement the Geneva 1 Communique. This stance was reinforced following significant territorial gains by the regime in 2016, notably in the city of Aleppo and other areas, at the expense of the opposition.
Geneva 5	April 2017	Detailed discussions on governance, constitution, counter-terrorism, and elections. Accusations of lack of progress were exchanged between the regime and opposition.
Geneva 6	May 2017	Lasted four days without tangible progress. A technical consultation mechanism proposed by De Mistura was rejected by the opposition.
Geneva 7	July 2017	No progress on the four main agenda items. The UN envoy requested the opposition to unite their delegations for future talks.
Geneva 8	November 2017	Deemed a missed opportunity by the UN envoy, with no direct meetings achieved between the negotiating parties. The opposition insisted on political transition and transitional governance as priorities.
Geneva 9	January 2018	Held in Vienna not in Geneva due to logistical reasons. The US, UK, France, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia presented a non-official paper to revive the political process based on Resolution 2254, which was rejected by the Syrian regime.

³⁹ Former Under-Secretary-General and Special Envoy of the United Nations for Syria. <https://www.interpeace.org/member/staffan-de-mistura/>

The Geneva Talks' inefficacy in resolving the Syrian crisis stems from divergent priorities on the issue below among key international players (Ziadeh, Syria Peace Talks in Geneva: A Road to Nowhere, 2017):

- **Terrorism:** The United States aims to eliminate ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Türkiye classifies Kurdish militias as terrorist groups. Conversely, Russia and China have their own geopolitical interests, often diverging from the other actors' stance.
- **Refugees:** The EU is primarily concerned with the influx of Syrian refugees into neighbouring countries and Europe.
- **Political Transition:** The Syrian opposition's main priority is to achieve political stability through a transition that enables Syrians to elect their leadership and establish a new political system. Meanwhile, Gulf countries, along with Iran, have distinct regional and religious interests influencing their positions on Syria's future.

These Geneva conferences, while significant diplomatic efforts, largely failed to achieve substantive progress in resolving the Syrian conflict due to deep-rooted disagreements between the Syrian regime and the opposition, and conflicting international interests (Al-Jazeera, 2018).

2.3.2. The Astana Platform

The Astana Platform, encompassing 22 rounds of talks, represents a significant effort to address the Syrian conflict. The 22th round, held on 11-12 November 2024, marked a pivotal moment in the series of negotiations. This last round stood out as it was the first since the latest development in the region. It reviewed the most recent international and regional developments, highlighting the pivotal role of the Astana Process in advancing a sustainable resolution to the Syrian crisis. (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The following table summarize the key points of each round of Astana Talks.

Table 08 Astana Process

<i>No</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Key Points</i>
Astana 1 unto Astana 8	During 2017	In a significant diplomatic development, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran have jointly established a trilateral monitoring body aimed at enforcing a ceasefire in Syria. The armed opposition and government delegates engaged in face-to-face discussions for the first time, resulting in the adoption of a document formalizing the monitoring of the December ceasefire. Despite the progress, challenges persist, including the opposition's refusal to attend due to perceived government failures in upholding the ceasefire. Attempts to implement 'de-escalation zones' in rebel-held territories faced setbacks, with the opposition suspending participation in response to government bombardment. While agreements on de-escalation zones in specific Syrian regions were reached, the failure to finalize details regarding boundaries and policing led to ongoing negotiations. Notably, a focus on stabilizing the ceasefire and facilitating a political resolution of the Syrian crisis marked the discussions, aligning with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The meeting also set the stage for the "Syrian National Dialogue Congress" in Sochi, scheduled for January 29-30, 2018, highlighting a key milestone in enhancing coordination among the guarantor states.
Astana 9	May 2018	The ninth round focused on monitoring de-escalation zones, addressing cease-fire violations, and discussing the plight of those displaced to northern Syria from East Ghouta and Homs. A significant topic was the process for releasing captives and hostages. The talks, observed by delegations from Jordan and the United Nations, did not include U.S. participation. This round of talks built on the previous agreements from December 2017, which included detainee releases and demining historical sites (Temizer, 2018).
Astana 10	July 2018	The tenth round of the Astana-format negotiations, a significant step in addressing the Syrian conflict. This round, marking a departure from previous meetings, was hosted in Sochi instead of Astana. A key focus of these talks was the establishment of the Syrian Arab Republic's constitutional commission. The participants also discussed potential civil society representatives for the commission. Moreover, UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura presenting preliminary member lists and proposing methodologies for member selection to the guarantor nations. Additionally, the negotiations dealt with crucial issues such as broadening and extending the ceasefire across Syria, strategies for the release of prisoners and kidnapped individuals, and addressing the complex situation in the Idlib province. These discussions highlighted the international community's ongoing efforts to find a peaceful and sustainable resolution to the Syrian conflict (Nabiev & Nafikov, 2021, p. 206).
Astana 11	November 2018	Involving officials from Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, as well as representatives from the Syrian regime and opposition, the 11th round of the Astana Peace Process held in Astana. This round aimed at addressing Notably the Syrian Kurdish factions were excluded due to Türkiye's objections. The UN and Jordan participated as observers. The talks also covered the formation of a constitutional committee. The outgoing UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, expressed disappointment over the lack of progress in forming this committee, a process he has strongly supported. Meanwhile, Yahya Al-Aridi, a spokesman for the Syrian opposition, criticized Russia and Iran for their waning commitment and deemed de Mistura too accommodating (European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2018).
Astana 12	April 2019	In the twelfth round of discussions in the Astana format, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran collectively issued a joint statement underscoring their ongoing support for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity, aligning with the objectives and principles outlined in the UN Charter (Nabiev & Nafikov, 2021, p. 207). Despite this reaffirmation, the situation remained largely unchanged, revealing a persistent stagnation in resolving Syria's multifaceted crisis. This continuity in approach, while seemingly committed on paper, has yet to translate into tangible progress on the ground. The repetitive nature of

		these declarations, without substantial shifts in strategy or concrete outcomes, underscores a critical gap between diplomatic rhetoric and the complex realities of the Syrian conflict. This gap highlights the need for innovative solutions and more effective engagement to address the deep-rooted issues plaguing Syria, beyond mere restatements of commitment.
Astana 13	August 2019	The 13th round of the Astana peace talks concluded without the anticipated formation of a constitutional committee, a key objective that had been expected to materialize before the talks commenced. Notably, the final statement did not address the ceasefire agreement in Idlib, which had been preliminarily reached. This development reflected a persistent impasse in the Syrian peace process, particularly regarding the formation of the constitutional committee. The absence of concrete progress on this front, despite numerous rounds of discussions, underscored the complexity and deep-seated nature of the Syrian conflict. The failure to mention the Idlib ceasefire agreement in the final statement was also indicative of the challenges in achieving sustainable peace. These outcomes from 13th round the Astana talks highlight the difficulties in reconciling the diverse and often conflicting interests of the involved parties, further complicating the path towards a lasting resolution in Syria.
Astana 14	December 2019	The 14th round of Syria peace talks focused on developments in the east of the Euphrates River and the Idlib de-escalation zone in Syria. During the meeting, discussions centered around the situation on the ground, especially in the eastern Euphrates region and Idlib, as well as the ongoing state of the political process. The parties involved rejected any separatist agendas that threatened the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria, as well as the national security of neighboring countries. They reiterated their commitment to restoring peace in northwestern Idlib and preserving the area's de-escalation status. The parties also expressed satisfaction with the convening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva and reaffirmed their support for its continued operation. The Syrian Constitutional Committee, consisting of members from the opposition, civil society, and the regime, had commenced its work on November 20 in Geneva, under UN facilitation. The committee's mandate, within the UN-facilitated Geneva process, was to prepare and draft constitutional reforms for popular approval, paving the way for a political settlement in Syria (Mehr News Agency, 2019). This round of talks occurred after significant regional developments. On October 9, 2019, Türkiye had launched Operation Peace Spring to remove terrorists from northern Syria, east of the Euphrates River. This operation aimed to secure Türkiye's borders, facilitate the safe return of Syrian refugees, and ensure Syria's territorial integrity. Following this, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an agreement on October 22. According to this deal, YPG/PKK terrorists were to withdraw 30 kilometers (about 18.6 miles) south of Türkiye's border with northern Syria. Additionally, security forces from Türkiye and Russia were to conduct joint patrols 10 kilometers (approximately 6.2 miles) from the Turkish border, further solidifying this initiative (Anadolu Agency, 2019).
Astana 15	February 2021	According to the joint statement of the 15th round of the Astana talks, held in Sochi, the guarantors had emphasized the importance of adhering to the principles of the UN Charter and united against terrorism in all its forms. The discussions also involved the Idlib de-escalation area, where they stressed the need to maintain calm and fully implement existing agreements. The situation in northeast Syria was addressed, with a consensus on rejecting illegitimate self-rule initiatives and emphasizing the preservation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Notably, this round had resumed after a pause in 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19. Also, this round was after the tension that arose between the guarantor countries behind of the bombing by the forces of the Assad regime, supported by Russia and Iran, on Turkish army units in the Syrian city of Idlib, which claimed the lives of 33 Turkish soldiers and injured 36 others. As a result of this incident, the Meric River crisis occurred between Türkiye and Greece, a member of the EU, an event considered a major turning point in Turkish relations with the EU, indicating a complex interplay of regional politics and international relations. This incident not only reflects the ongoing challenges in Syrian conflict zones but also underscores the delicate balance in Turkish-EU relations, affected by

		geopolitical strategies and alliances in the Middle East. The repercussions of this event extend beyond immediate diplomatic strains, potentially reshaping long-term political alignments and strategies in the region.
Astana 16	July 2021	In the 16th round of the Astana Talks, the focus was on socioeconomic and health issues, international humanitarian aid, prospects for resuming the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva, and confidence-building measures including prisoner exchanges, the release of hostages, and the search for missing persons (MENA Affairs, 2021). As it is noted that the discussions of this round shifted to focus on socioeconomic and public health issues, with Russia advocating for increased international assistance to the Syrian regime led by Assad, in spite of existing UN sanctions.
Astana 17	December 2021	The communique of the 17th round included 18 points, most of which did not differ from the ones in the previous rounds. These points reiterated the commitment to maintaining Syria's political unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. They emphasized the importance of combating terrorism and the support for a political solution, particularly through the work of the Constitutional Committee (Jusoor for Studies, 2021).
Astana 18	June 2022	According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the 18th round brought forth critical discussions and declarations. The participants rejected any attempts to create new realities on the ground. Concerns were raised about the oppressive actions of separatist groups in East of the Euphrates, including the suppression of peaceful protests, forced conscription, and discrimination in education. The meeting underscored the belief that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict and reaffirmed a commitment to a Syrian-led and owned, UN-facilitated political process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The necessity for the Constitutional Committee to work without bureaucratic and logistical obstacles was emphasized. The need to facilitate the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their original homes in Syria, in compliance with international humanitarian law, was highlighted, calling on the international community to provide necessary assistance and reaffirming cooperation with the UNHCR and other international agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).
Astana 19	November 2022	The delegates involved in the 19th Astana process meeting collectively voiced their opposition to any agendas that promote separatism and emphasized the importance of persisting in the battle against terrorism (Nova Agency, 2022). The nineteenth meeting proved to be repetitive, covering no new ground. This stagnation was attributed to several factors, such as the lack of Western involvement and the significant divergence in perspectives among the guarantor countries. As a result, this lack of progress made Türkiye think about normalizing its relations with the Syrian regime.
Astana 20	June 2023	In the 20th round, as outlined in the joint statement, the parties reviewed recent global and regional events, highlighting the Astana Process's pivotal role in addressing the Syrian crisis. The statement also noted that the June 20 consultations involving the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria, and Türkiye were conducted in a constructive manner. During these talks, they explored a strategy for re-establishing relations between Türkiye and Syria (The Astana Times, 2023). Kazakhstan has declared its intention to cease hosting the talks, as they have fulfilled their objective, according to a statement from the Kazakh Foreign Ministry. According to an official comment from the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, “initial goals of creating de-escalation zones, stopping bloodshed between the conflicting sides and preventing a large-scale humanitarian crisis have been achieved” (Ibid). In contrast to this statement, the Syrian scene has not witnessed any progress. Rather, we are observing a stagnation of fighting only without finding a sustainable solution.

Astana 21	January 2024	Despite the official announcement of stopping the Astana talks, the reality on the ground forced the parties to continue consultations, especially with the escalation of tensions in the Middle East region, as a result of the devastating war launched by Israel on the Gaza Strip (Aljazeera, 2024). Discussions encompassed several critical areas, including current situation on the ground, counter-terrorism efforts, regional developments, political processes, repatriation of Syrians and humanitarian assistance (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Representatives of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, as guarantors of the Astana Format, reaffirmed their commitment to the sovereignty of Syria and the UN Charter. They highlighted the Astana Process's role in addressing the Syrian crisis and expressed concerns over regional conflicts, including the Palestinian-Israeli situation, affecting Syria's stability. The meeting concluded with plans to continue dialogues and cooperation (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Looking at the outcomes of the this round, it is clear that the round also failed to find sustainable solutions. Maintaining the current reality means reducing escalation (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2024) and freezing the conflict at its current borders. We can note that the guarantor countries in the Astana process seek to preserve the areas of influence and military federations that were imposed on Syria without new penetration (Muhammad, 2024). This confirms the fact that the Astana process cannot find a sustainable solution for Syria. If we return to the goal of its establishment, we see that it was primarily created to reduce escalation and share influence. Therefore, the Syrian conflict needs a new peace process in which other powers participate to completely end the conflict and begin reconstruction.
Astana 22	November 2024	The representatives of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, as guarantor states of the Astana Format, convened to address key regional and international developments, reaffirm their commitment to Syria's sovereignty, and emphasize the Astana Process's role in resolving the Syrian crisis. They condemned Israeli military actions in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, urging the international community to secure ceasefires, provide humanitarian aid, and uphold relevant UN resolutions, including the rejection of the Syrian Golan's occupation. Concerns were raised over the humanitarian impact of escalating violence, emphasizing the need for UN-led emergency responses and the facilitation of refugee returns. The discussions underscored the importance of stabilizing Idlib, addressing separatist activities in Syria's northeast, and ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. The representatives condemned unilateral sanctions, resource exploitation, and external support for terrorism, advocating for increased humanitarian assistance and early recovery projects. They reiterated the need for a Syrian-led political solution under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, including revitalizing the Constitutional Committee's work and facilitating the return of refugees. The guarantor states emphasized cooperation to combat terrorism, condemned attacks on civilians and infrastructure, and supported ongoing efforts to release detainees as part of confidence-building measures. The meeting also acknowledged the participation of regional observers, reaffirmed Kazakhstan's pivotal role in hosting the process, and agreed to convene the next meetings in Russia and Kazakhstan to continue advancing solutions for Syria's crisis. (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

The Astana process, spanning over seven years and encompassing 22 rounds of negotiations, served as a pivotal platform for addressing the complex and multifaceted Syrian conflict. Primarily spearheaded by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, this diplomatic initiative played a critical role in shaping discourse and actions regarding the Syrian crisis. Notably, while the efforts contributed to freezing hostilities and de-escalating violence, they fell short of achieving a sustainable solution. Despite its ambitious agenda and the participation of numerous regional and international actors, the process encountered several challenges and limitations. These complexities highlight the intricacies of diplomatic negotiations and the enduring quest for peace in regional conflicts.

The Astana process initially convened at close intervals, with merely a month separating the early rounds, while later meetings extended to approximately six-month gaps. This pattern indicates a strong initial desire among all parties for consultation, especially given each guarantor's authority over a faction or region it sought to stabilize. Notably, the process commenced following the success of Türkiye's first military intervention in Syria, "Operation Euphrates Shield" against ISIS at the end of 2016, providing Türkiye with a new leverage point in negotiations. Additionally, the Turkish-Russian-Iranian consensus to embark on a new peace trajectory emerged following a period of preceding tensions among them.

Türkiye's pivot away from the West, particularly the United States and the EU, whom it accused of supporting the failed coup attempts, played a significant role in its increased engagement with Russia. Furthermore, revelations of covert support for the coup by certain Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, prompted Türkiye to strengthen its ties with Iran, thereby fostering the trilateral path. Another impetus was Türkiye's impending constitutional referendum, necessitating a resolution to the refugee issue to ensure a favorable outcome for the desired changes. Moreover, Türkiye's ambition to establish safe zones materialized through multiple military interventions between 2018 and 2021 against Kurdish separatist groups, intending to disrupt the American-supported corridor from Northern Iraq to the Mediterranean. These operations, met with less resistance from Russia and Iran and more from the United States, achieved tactical successes. These dynamics formed a solid foundation for Türkiye's engagement in the Astana peace process with Iran and Russia, distancing itself from Western influences.

Throughout its course, the Astana Platform has made some notable achievements, such as establishing de-escalation zones and initiating dialogues between the Syrian regime and opposition groups. However, the process has also faced criticism for its inability to secure a

lasting peace or address the root causes of the conflict effectively. The repeated rounds of talks, while valuable in maintaining a channel of communication, have often resulted in statements and agreements that lacked substantial progress on the ground.

The 20th round, significant for its timing amidst the Syrian regime's return to the Arab League and the initiation of normalization processes with Türkiye, brought renewed attention to the Astana Process. Yet, this round, like many before it, highlighted the enduring challenges in achieving a comprehensive resolution. The statement from the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, declaring the fulfilment of the talks' initial objectives, contrasts starkly with the ongoing realities in Syria, where conflict persists and a sustainable solution seems distant.

While the Astana Process has contributed to some de-escalation and provided a forum for dialogue, its overall impact on resolving the Syrian conflict remains limited. The stagnation of progress and the absence of a clear pathway towards peace reflect the intricate and deeply entrenched nature of the Syrian crisis. The cessation of the Astana talks in Kazakhstan marks an end to this phase of diplomacy, leaving the international community with the imperative task of finding new and more effective approaches to address the enduring conflict in Syria.

As part of diplomatic efforts to address the Syrian crisis, a trilateral meeting was scheduled to be held in Doha, Qatar, on December 7th and 8th, 2024, bringing together the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The meeting was planned within the framework of the Astana Process and on the sidelines of the Doha Forum. However, its announcement came amidst escalating developments on the ground in Syria, positioning it as a key platform to discuss the rapidly changing dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

The meeting coincided with significant military advances by Syrian opposition forces toward the capital, Damascus, after securing control over the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. These battlefield gains highlighted the structural weaknesses of the Syrian regime's military, which appeared unable to repel the opposition's progress despite continued military and logistical support from Russia and Iran.

The trilateral meeting in Doha marked a critical juncture for reevaluating regional strategies, as the regime's backers faced a new reality threatening to shift the balance of power and undermine their collective efforts to sustain the regime's stability.

CHAPTER THREE: TÜRKİYE AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

3.1. Background and Historical Narrative

The relations between Türkiye and Syria have gone through various complex phases in the modern period, shifting from solidarity to strain and back again. Geographic proximity, ethnic and religious ties, shared Ottoman legacy, the political and the economic dynamics have shaped the trajectory of bilateral ties. This section introduces the evolution of Türkiye-Syria relations from the early 20th century decline of the Ottoman Empire through the ascent of the Ba'ath party in Syria in mid of 1900's, and the emergence of JDP in Türkiye in the early 2000s. It analyses key events and drivers in the relationship, examining cordial and antagonistic periods and the factors underlying them, by recalling the narrative of historical relations between the two countries, especially the key issues between them, that includes expanding the analysis of relations during the conflict and the refugee crisis, to explore the implications that the Syrian conflict had on relations between both states, which also cast a shadow on Türkiye's relations with the EU.

The historical backdrop of Türkiye-Syria relations is deeply rooted in the complex legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which laid the groundwork for contemporary dynamics between these two nations. As outlined by Shaw and Shaw (2010) the transition from the Ottoman Empire's broad dominion to the modern Republic of Türkiye involved significant reforms, the rise of nationalism, and profound societal transformations. This period saw the Ottoman Empire grappling with modernization and the spread of nationalism among its subjects, leading to its eventual disintegration and the emergence of new national identities, including that of modern Türkiye.

In a broader context, the post-World War I era as not merely the end of empires but a transformational phase that led to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of new mandates and territories, underscoring the lasting impacts of these historical shifts on regional relations and conflicts. The narrative of nation-state is complicated by the legacy of these transformations, suggesting that the roots of contemporary Türkiye-Syria relations are entangled with these broader historical trajectories (Burbank & Cooper, 2019). This paint a

picture of Türkiye-Syria relations as being shaped by the legacies of empire, nationalism, and the reconfiguration of territories and identities in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's decline.

Syria had been part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, but growing nationalist sentiments brought tensions between Arab provinces and the Ottoman centre. As the empire faced external threats in World War I, an Arab uprising erupted demanding independence. The Arab Uprising was initiated at Mecca in 1916, and the primary goal of the Arab rebels was to establish an independent and unified Arab state stretching from Aleppo to Aden, which the British government had promised to recognize. The Sharifian Army, led by Hussein and the Hashemites, fought the Ottoman military presence from much of the Hejaz and “Transjordan”. By 1918, the rebels had captured Damascus and proclaimed the Arab Kingdom of Syria. However, following the terms of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British and French later partitioned the Middle East into mandate territories. There was no unified Arab state, much to Arab nationalists' anger.

The successful Turkish War of Independence, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against the occupying Allies, led to the emergence of the Republic of Türkiye in the Anatolian heartland and the abolition of the Ottoman monarchy (Stephanov, 2016). France took control of Syria in 1920 and instituted the French Mandate. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk meanwhile led Turkish nationalists in repelling the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, establishing the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 after the Ottoman collapse (Ahmad, 1993, pp. 8-9). As Türkiye and Syria embarked on separate national journeys, relations during this period remained largely secondary and indirect via European imperial overseers. There was little direct bilateral linkage or affinity between Ankara and Damascus.

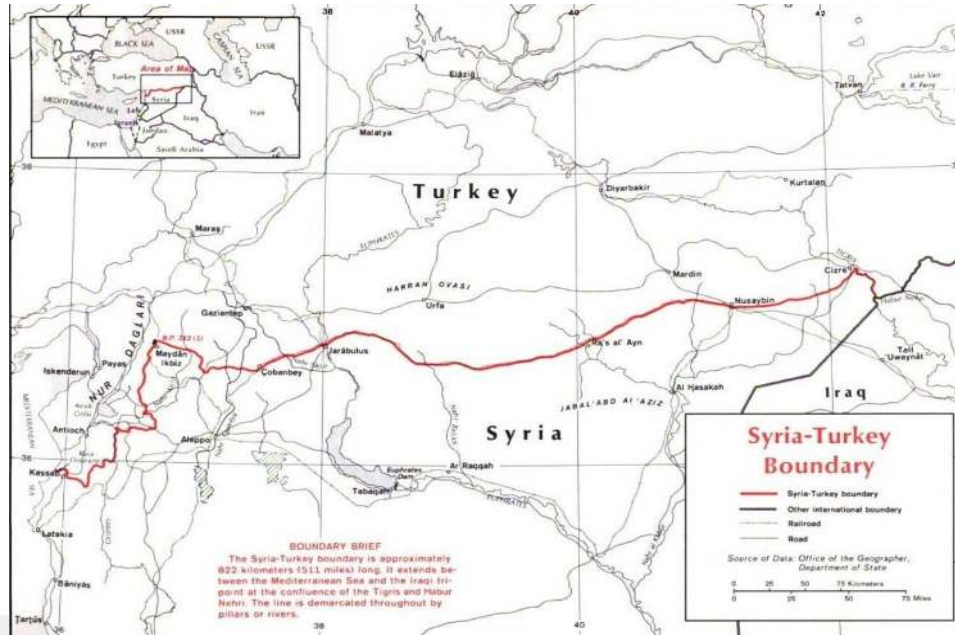


Figure 17 Syria-Türkiye Boundary⁴⁰

After the independence of the two countries, the forms of the relationship between them varied and were influenced by many international factors in the region. Therefore, studying the historical context of the relationship between them will be divided into several periods as follow:

3.1.1. Post-Independence: United by Regional Politics

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Allied partition of its territories led to the creation of the modern nation-states of Türkiye and Syria. The Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920 initially dismembered the Ottoman Empire (Zurcher, 2004, p. 147), but the Turkish War of Independence resulted in the rejection of the treaty and the establishment of Türkiye in 1923 (Ibid; p. 167). After its independence, Türkiye pursued a more secular and nationalistic path under the leadership of Atatürk, who sought to establish a modern, “westernized nation-state distinct from” its Ottoman past. This divergence in ideological orientation initially created a divide between Türkiye and its Arab neighbours, including Syria (Zurcher, 2004, pp. 186-187) which gained its independence from French mandate rule in 1946, marking the beginning of its modern nationhood (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p. 230).

⁴⁰ Source: International Boundary Study, page .179
<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=5lhYwZ10uFIC&pg=GBS.PP6&hl=en>

During the onset of the Cold War era and the growing tensions between the Western and Eastern blocs, regional alliances emerged as a means of promoting stability and countering the spread of communism in the Middle East. For instance, in 1955, Türkiye joined the Baghdad Pact ⁴¹ (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p. 277). Syria, initially invited to join the pact, declined due to its pan-Arabist leanings and its opposition to Western interference in the region (Seale, 1986) (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p. 309). Nevertheless, the 1956 Suez Crisis reinforced Turkish-Syrian solidarity against imperialism. Ankara and Damascus jointly condemned the Tripartite Aggression by Britain, France and Israel (Bishku M. B., 2012) .

Through the late 1950s, Syria under President Shukri al-Quwatli and Türkiye under Prime Minister Adnan Menderes drew closer, engaging in high profile state visits and pledging non-interference in each other's affairs. Officially, relations were marked by harmony and mutual interests during this early post-independence period, which can be attributed to the right-wing background of the then Prime Minister of Türkiye, Adnan Menderes (Bishku M. , 2012). Which was also a contributing factor of Türkiye's formal recognition of the UAR⁴² in March 1958 (Bishku M. B., 2012, p. 40). This development brought the relationship between Türkiye and Syria closer, although they were on the opposite sides of the regional divide, with Türkiye aligned with the West and Syria aligned with the pan-Arabism movement.

3.1.2. 1960s-1980s: Türkiye's NATO Ascent, Syria's Socialist Turn

The period from the 1960s to 1980s witnessed significant changes on the foreign policy orientations and ideological outlooks of both countries, as Türkiye became further integrated into the Western alliance system while Syria embarked on a path of Arab socialism. After the 1960 military coup in Türkiye, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel began expanding trade and investment ties with Western Europe. Türkiye also moved firmly into the NATO sphere militarily and politically throughout the Cold War (Zurcher, 2004). Meanwhile in Syria, the Ba'ath party gained power via coup in 1963. Under Hafez al-Assad's leadership from 1970, Syria allied with the Soviet bloc as a key Arab socialist state opposing Western imperialism (Seale, 1989, pp. 72-75), the relations with Türkiye lukewarm during this period (Bishku M. B., 2012, p. 41). This contradictory positioning in the alliances between the two neighbouring countries made the relationship between them constantly volatile, and despite some minor

⁴¹ A defensive alliance that included Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, with the primary aim of containing Soviet influence in the region.

⁴² In 1958, Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic, a short-lived political union that sought to promote Arab unity and counter the influence of the Baghdad Pact (Podeh & Winckler, 2004).

developments, it remained cool. The contrasting geopolitical and ideological postures Türkiye and Syria adopted from the 1960s severely strained bilateral ties and overturned previously cordial relations.

As NATO's southeast anchor bordering the USSR's key regional ally Syria, Ankara became monitor of Damascus and repeatedly raised alarms to its Western partners over Syria's role as a conduit for Soviet influence into the eastern Mediterranean. Likewise, Syria's state-controlled press denounced Türkiye as an imperialist puppet subservient to Western interests over those of the Arab world and lambasted its reluctance to confront Israel (Seale, 1989, pp. 292-293). Border tensions also erupted over Turkish concerns of Kurdish separatists finding safe haven in Syria amidst the chaos of the 1960s-70s (Karaca & Akgün, 2020, p. 44).

The adage that friends of our enemies are our enemies rang true for both sides as nationalist anxieties fed mounting mutual suspicions between the two neighbours now oriented towards opposing power blocs.

By the late 1970s, Turkish-Syrian ties were virtually non-existent, although Ankara made repeated proposals for cooperation on water usage and electrical grids, which were rebuffed by a distrustful and obdurate Assad regime (Robins, 2003). Nevertheless, Syria's socialist orientation did not preclude occasional tactical attempts to split Türkiye from NATO using shared cultural and ethnic bonds as leverage, thereby illustrating the complex layers of tension underlying bilateral affairs. Thus, despite their proximate location and shared Ottoman lineage, the politics of the Cold War ultimately superseded other considerations driving Türkiye and Syria down radically divergent paths.

Moreover, a multitude of contentious issues further complicated the relationship between the two nations. Notably, the annexation of the Hatay to Türkiye in 1939, following a referendum, emerged as a significant point of contention (Fisk, 2007, p. 335). Additionally, Syria's support for Armenian claims and its backing of Greece during the 1974 Cyprus conflict underscored the deep-seated tensions. These issues were compounded by the political instability prevalent in both countries at the time, particularly the occurrence of military coups, adding layers of complexity to their bilateral relations.

Overall, the 1960s-1980s meant divergent alliance structures for Türkiye and Syria. Türkiye and Syria's regional orientations during this period lay at the heart of dramatic shifts in their bilateral relations. Türkiye's firm embedding into NATO and the Western strategic architecture was perceived as a betrayal of its Islamic and Middle Eastern heritage by Syria's

Arab nationalist and socialist leadership. These clashing visions heralded a low in relations with few communicating channels. Nevertheless, the underlying interdependence binding the two suggests that even at the height of geopolitical tensions, their destinies remain intertwined by historical bonds not easily unravelled. Ultimately, both countries' choices arose from and contributed to the ideological bifurcation that may defined the now vanished Cold War milieu, but whose shadows continue being felt to the present day.

3.1.3. Rapprochement: Alignment in the 1990s

The 1990s marked a significant decade for Türkiye-Syria relations, as both states overcame decades of hostility to develop closer ties. This rapprochement was driven by changing regional dynamics after the end of the Cold War and the II. Gulf War (Sayari, 1997, p. 46). However, tensions persisted over issues such as water, terrorism, and relations with Israel prevented a full normalization of relations.

In the early 1990s, the Middle East entered a new era following the end of the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and United States (Altunışık & Tür, 2006, p. 230). This changing landscape created an opportunity for Türkiye and Syria to re-evaluate their relationship independent of the interests of global superpowers. Both countries sought to expand relations with their neighbours. This encouraged cooperation over past tensions. Syria under Hafez al-Assad and Türkiye under Turgut Özal made moves to put aside past animosities and strengthen economic ties (Maden, 2017). This growing cooperation was driven by changing regional dynamics, shared concerns over Kurdish separatism, and an eagerness on both sides for increased trade.

A key milestone was the signing of the 1991 Security Protocol, which established cooperation against terrorism and drug trafficking. The protocol also "stating that neither country would support any anti-Turkish or anti-Syrian movements within their bounders." This addressed Türkiye's concerns about Syria harbouring PKK militants, which had carried out attacks in Türkiye. In return, Syria benefited from intelligence sharing to monitor Kurdish groups agitating against the Assad regime. The Security Protocol marked an important shift towards mutual understanding after decades of tension over the Kurdish question (Ibid). Despite this protocol, the PKK continued its activities in Syria.

Economic interests also brought the two countries together, Özal pursued a "business-centered" foreign policy vision in the Middle East, (Tovsultanov, Tovsultanova, & Galimova, 2022, p. 636). Assad also wanted to court Türkiye's private sector to boost Syria's economy.

While economic ties drove warmer relations in the early 1990s, tensions continued around the issue of water. The Euphrates River has been a source of conflict between the riparian states of Türkiye and Syria for decades. In the 1990s, the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) envisioned the construction of 22 dams in southeast Türkiye to generate hydroelectricity and aid regional development. Syrian experts raised concerns about how GAP could reduce water flows into Syria deal a blow to Syrian agriculture (Erdem, 2003). In response to these escalating tensions and the broader implications, the formulation of Articles 5 and 7 in the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses,⁴³ aimed to provide a framework for equitable and reasonable utilization and participation, as well as the obligation not to cause significant harm (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1997), potentially offered a diplomatic path forward for Türkiye and Syria to address their water-related disputes.

"In the first half of the 1990s, as clashes with the PKK reached the level of a 'low-intensity war', relations between Ankara and Damascus became more strained" (Özkan, 2019, p. 21). Just as economic interests and UN Convention brought Türkiye and Syria together, security threats drove further cooperation. The PKK insurgency in southeast Türkiye escalated dramatically in this period, with rising casualties among Turkish security forces. The Turkish military blamed Assad for allowing PKK militants to train and organize in Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (The Washington Institute, 2002). However, in October 1998, under pressure from Ankara, Damascus finally gave in to long-standing Turkish requests to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria. As part of this deal, Syria also cracked down on PKK activities on its soil. Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz hailed this as a turning point in bilateral ties. The expulsion of the PKK leadership marked an unprecedented level of counterterrorism coordination. Building on momentum from security cooperation against the PKK, Türkiye and Syria signed the Adana Security Agreement on 20 Oct 1998.⁴⁴ This landmark deal established security coordination mechanisms including intelligence sharing, hot pursuit rights for Turkish forces across the border, and Syrian measures to curb PKK military capabilities (Altunışık & Tür, 2006, p. 238). The Agreement reflected a high-point in the two countries relations, and this proves that security problems generated an opportunity for cooperation between the two countries.

⁴³ For more information, look: https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8_3_1997.pdf

⁴⁴ Studying the historical background of Syrian-Turkish relations is important to understand the political reality. Under the Adana Agreement, the entry of Turkish forces into northern Syria was achieved, as this agreement gives Türkiye the right to enter Syria soil in case of a critical situation. In the second section of this chapter, we will study the Turkish operations in Syria after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, which President Erdoğan sees as a legitimate right under the agreement. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RloZ2a-AdE>

However, tensions around PKK violence and water sharing remained just below the surface even after the Adana Agreement. When the Atatürk Dam again cut Euphrates flows in 1999, Syrian Information Minister Mohammed Salman warned relations could return to “square one” if Türkiye continued unilateral water projects. Occasional PKK attacks also continued. The interdependence of security and economic cooperation meant that progress in one area did not necessarily carry over into others.

In reviewing Türkiye-Syria relations in the 1990s, one sees significant cooperation around security and economics but enduring tensions on regional issues like water and Kurdish separatism. Bilateral ties saw major progress during the early and mid-1990s driven by strategic economic interests and shared counterterrorism imperatives. Milestones like the 1991 Security Protocol and the 1998 Adana Agreement indicated robust cooperation. However, the Euphrates water issue was a constant sticking point as Türkiye pushed ahead with GAP. PKK violence also continued to flare up despite some progress. Thus, while the 1990s saw warmer ties than prior decades, a full normalization of relations remained elusive due to regional disputes carrying over from the Cold War era. The future trajectory of Türkiye-Syria relations in the 21st century would be shaped by how the allies and adversaries of the 1990s managed these ongoing conflicts.

3.1.4. Normalization in the 2000s

The 2000s period witnessed a significant shift in the dynamics of this relationship, characterized by a move towards normalization and increased cooperation between the two countries. This era represents a crucial juncture in the analysis of Türkiye-Syria relations, shedding light on the underlying motivations, challenges, and implications of their evolving ties.

The turn of the century marked a significant shift in Türkiye-Syria relations, characterized by a thaw in tensions and a concerted effort towards rapprochement. Several factors contributed to this changing dynamic:

1. The JDP's Rise to Power and Foreign Policy Shift (Tür, 2010, p. 06): The electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in Türkiye in 2002 ushered in a new era of foreign policy approach (Tovsultanov, Tovsultanova, & Galimova, 2022, p. 642), known as "Strategic Depth". This doctrine, articulated by the former Prime Minister of Türkiye Ahmet Davutoğlu, emphasized

Türkiye's pursuit of a more proactive and multidimensional foreign policy, focused on improving relations with neighbouring countries, including Syria.

2. Bashar al-Assad's accession to power: It was also a significant factor in normalizing relations between both countries, as he worked to build good relations especially with regard to the economy with the neighbours and was less harsh than his father was. The both sides wanted to deepen "trust-building" their relationship, led with the signature of both parties a security cooperation agreement in September 2000 (Tür, 2010, p. 05).
3. Economic Incentives: Both countries recognized the potential economic benefits of increased cooperation. Türkiye sought to expand its influence in the region and access new markets, while Syria aimed to attract foreign investment and alleviate the impact of international sanctions. This has led to increased economic cooperation between the two countries, with bilateral trade and investments growing significantly since the 2000s. Joint projects in the water, electricity, and gas sectors have also been established.⁴⁵
4. Security Considerations: Both parties shared concerns over the Kurdish issue and the potential implications of Kurdish autonomy for their territorial integrity. This common security threat incentivized cooperation and coordination between Türkiye and Syria.
5. Regional Power Dynamics: The shifting power dynamics in the Middle East, particularly the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent regional power vacuum, created an environment conducive to Türkiye-Syria rapprochement. Both countries sought to assert their regional influence and leverage their improved relations for strategic advantage.

The rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria during the 2000-2010 period manifested in several tangible developments, includes high-level diplomatic engagement with meetings between the leaders of the two countries, including the historic visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Türkiye in 2004.⁴⁶ The signing of the Türkiye-Syria Free Trade Agreement in 2004 and the subsequent lifting of visa requirements for citizens of both countries facilitated increased economic and commercial ties.⁴⁷ From 2004 to 2010, the trade volume between the

⁴⁵ For more information, look: <https://syria-report.com/product/report-syria-Türkiye-economic-relations/>

⁴⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/01/06/Türkiye.syria.reut/>

⁴⁷ Entered into force on 1 January 2007. The Joint Economic Committee was formed that sponsored trade agreements and events such as the industrial exhibition in Damascus in January 2004 where 300 Turkish companies received \$250 million worth of Syrian contracts. The Turkish-Syrian Regional Cooperation Program

two countries experienced significant growth, reaching nearly \$2.5 billion in 2010 (Bishku M. B., 2012). The security cooperation and engaged in joint military exercises and intelligence sharing, particularly concerning the Kurdish issue and the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Ibid). This period marked a significant shift in Türkiye-Syria relations, characterized by a move towards rapprochement and increased cooperation. This era was driven by a confluence of economic incentives, security considerations, and regional power dynamics, facilitated by the JDP's foreign policy shift in Türkiye. The rapprochement manifested in high-level diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, security cooperation, and cultural exchanges.

However, this period was not without its challenges and limitations, stemming from ideological divergences, regional dynamics, water disputes, and the ongoing Kurdish question. Nonetheless, the 2000s period stands as a testament to the potential for improved relations between Türkiye and Syria, offering valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of their evolving ties.

As the Syrian conflict unfolded in the subsequent years, the dynamics of Türkiye-Syria relations underwent further transformations, with far-reaching implications for regional stability and the broader geopolitical landscape. This period serves as a crucial backdrop for understanding the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye's relations with the EU, particularly in the context of the refugee question.

The 21st century decade of Turkish-Syrian entente came crashing down rapidly however with the turmoil of the 2011 Arab protests. Initially, the JDP government in Ankara tried persuading Bashar al-Assad to pursue democratic reforms as demonstrations escalated (Islam, 2016, p. 23). But brutal crackdowns instead sparked a full blown civil war pulling in regional powers. Türkiye eventually facilitated Syrian opposition groups, hosting rebels and providing vital sanctuary to anti-Assad forces like the Free Syria Army starting in summer 2011 (Ibid).

As thousands of Syrian refugees poured into Türkiye escaping violence, this sparked new tensions and costly long term burdens. Türkiye now hosts over 3 million Syrian refugees,⁴⁸ straining national resources and infrastructure (European Commision, n.d.). There are also

was created to develop technical, economic, cultural and scientific cooperation. With FTA, both the countries agreed to reduce customs taxes until gradually they would disappear. Syria's exports to Türkiye rose from \$187 million in 2006 to \$630 million in 2010. Turkish exports rose from \$608 million in 2006 to \$1.64 billion in 2010 with a trade volume of \$1.84 billion. In 2011 alone, Turkish companies invested a total of \$223 million in different Syrian industries (Islam, 2016). For more information, look: <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/syria>

⁴⁸ Türkiye is home to one of the largest refugee populations globally, comprising over 3.1 million Syrians and nearly 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers from various other countries (European Commision, n.d.).

threats of Syrian regime-backed militia attacks along the Türkiye's southern border, raising security fears.

In recent years, Turkish cross-border operations have sought to counter Syrian Kurdish expansion near frontier zones (Akca, 2020). But Ankara has otherwise adopted a more passive stance regarding determining Syria's future as negotiations sputter on in fits and starts. Overall, the civil war rupture means relations today are polarized and fragile at best.

3.2.The Conflict Period

It is debatable that Türkiye's relation with Syria is one of the most unstable relations in Turkish foreign policy history. Like, Raymond Hinnebusch pointed out that relationships shifted from high-level "tension" in 1990 to cooperation during 2003 to 2010 and then again back to high-level hostility in the Arab Spring period. The structural context of the Middle East had been changed significantly due to two main events: The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring of 2011. During the war in Iraq, the role of Iran had been significantly increased in the Middle East. Türkiye in that time kept itself away from Israel and focused on containing Iranian influence in the Middle East in the eyes of Arabs. This strategic realignment was further leading to an immediate and profound impact on Türkiye-Syria relations. Ankara's initial support for the Syrian opposition and its subsequent direct military involvement reflected Türkiye's broader regional ambitions and security concerns. Studying Türkiye's role and policy in the Syrian conflict and the implications of this conflict and its relationship with the EU requires dividing the period into three main stages: the first is the "Political-Diplomatic" stage, which lasted from 2011 to 2016, the second is the "Political-Military" stage, which lasted from 2016 to early 2020, and the third stage from late 2020 until 2024. However, the observer can see a political side during the second stage through the Astana process, which we wrote about in the previous chapter.

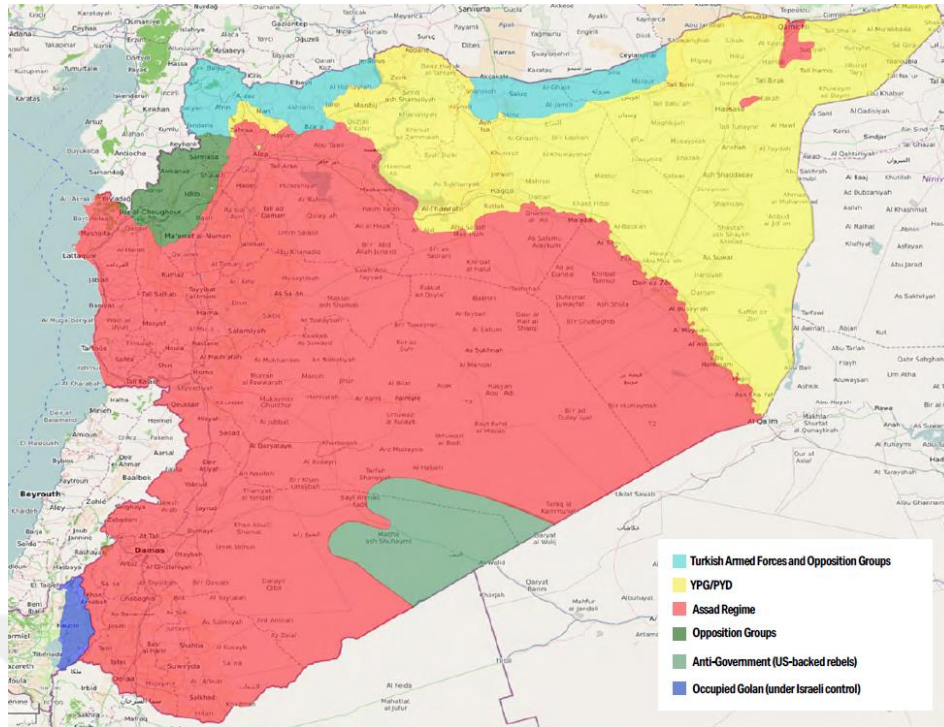


Figure 18 Türkiye's cross border operations and the situation in Syria in 2020 ⁴⁹

3.2.1. Türkiye's Syria Policy and Relations: The 2011-2016 Period

Initial Response: Oscillating between Accommodation and Confrontation

"... the Arab Spring intervened, Türkiye embraced change, the region became increasingly divided, and Ankara discovered that it could not be a friend to everybody. It had to make choices. In this new calculus, Syria shifted from being a close partner to a highly problematic neighbour whose regime Türkiye could no longer tolerate, let alone befriend."

(Balcı, 2012)

Similar to other countries, the Arab Spring events took Türkiye by surprise. At first, Türkiye's reactions were inconsistent and exhibited bewilderment, particularly the abrupt policy shift regarding the situation in Syria (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p. 09). Ankara's evolving policy toward the conflict in the initial years reflected a complex interplay of domestic, regional, and international dynamics, shaped by its geostrategic priorities, security concerns, and ideological leanings. During the initial years of the crisis, Türkiye adopted a proactive stance, seeking to influence the trajectory of events in Syria while navigating complex regional dynamics. This period witnessed a significant shift in Türkiye's approach toward Syria, marked by a deterioration of bilateral ties and Türkiye's active involvement in the conflict (Tumen, 2023, p.

⁴⁹ Source: TRT World Research Centre

02). Before 2011, Türkiye truly believed in the possibility of a “zero problems with neighbours” policy, Syria was one of its success stories. However, times changed quickly when Türkiye turned to the Syrian opposition in an attempt to remove President Bashar al-Assad from power. However, this new approach of relationship is also full of challenges. It is clear that regional relations are complex and constantly changing, even with the closest neighbours (Balcı, 2012).

The resurgence of the Kurdish issue has raised concerns for Türkiye regarding domestic political developments in Syria. Moving away from the personal rapport between al-Assad and Erdoğan, the Justice and Development Party demand for immediate political reforms in Syria has heightened the strain in bilateral relations between Türkiye and Syria (Magued, 2021, p. 02). Moreover, when the popular uprising against the Assad regime erupted, Türkiye's initial response was characterized by a cautious approach, seeking to maintain its strategic ties with Syria while advocating for political reforms and a peaceful resolution to the crisis. However, as the Syrian regime's violent crackdown on protesters escalated, Türkiye's position began to shift toward a more confrontational stance.

The shift in relations became evident in August 2011 when the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, visited Damascus to propose a solution for the uprising by engaging in a genuine process of dialogue and reform, which firmly rejected by the Syrian regime. Consequently, Türkiye positioned itself as an adversary of the Assad regime and began supporting the Syrian opposition forces (Balcı, 2012). In a pivotal move, Türkiye imposed nine-point sanctions on Syria⁵⁰ and began to provide support to the opposition forces (Özden, 2016, p. 1035). The factors influencing Türkiye's policy shift towards Syria during the initial years of the conflict can be categorized as follows:

Table 09 Türkiye's policy shift towards Syria

<i>Category</i>	<i>Factors</i>
Security	– Türkiye feared that violence that occurred in Syria might reach Türkiye, and threatens its internal stability, specifically the approaching of ISIS towards Türkiye's border and the territorial gains of the PYD/YPG, which pose direct threats to it's national security, (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, p. 19). – Preventing the establishment of a governing system that would grant the Kurds enhanced autonomy and control over territories (Okyay, 2017, p. 830; Magued, 2021).
Ideological	– There exist deep-rooted cultural and historical bonds between Türkiye and the northern regions of Syria (Tumen, 2023). – Opposition to Assad's nationlist authoritarian regime

⁵⁰ Türkiye has implemented measures to increase pressure on Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus, including freezing financial assets and severing strategic ties. Additional sanctions involve prohibiting transactions with Syria's government and central bank, as well as taking action against influential businessmen who back the regime (Black, 2011).

	– The role of Iran in the region as an Ideological “pan-Shi’ism” competitor (Ataman & Özdemir, 2018, pp. 23-24).
Political	– Desire to play a leading role in shaping post-Arab Spring Middle Eastern order (Kirişci, 2013). – To facilitate a restructuring of power in post-conflict Syria, where the Assad regime would be supplanted by a new governing body composed predominantly of "moderate Islamist" forces, with the Muslim Brotherhood playing a prominent role (Okuy, 2017, p. 830). – Changes in regional alliances and dynamics.
Economic	– Matters pertaining to geopolitical concerns, such as securing oil supplies, navigating tensions in the eastern Mediterranean region (Tumen, 2023). – Disruption of trade routes and economic ties with Syria – Impact on energy security and projects in the region
Diplomatic	– Pressure from NATO and EU countries to align with their stance against Assad (Kiraz, 2020). – Leading to diplomatic isolation of Syria and achieving harmony with the positions of the international community (Fayad, 2022). – Efforts to maintain influence and relations with Arab League and other regional actors by navigating the intricate web of alliances within the Syrian context.

All things considered, we can mention that Türkiye's foreign policy approach at first was more liberal, with a focus on humanitarian intervention in Syria and the eventual fall of the Assad regime. However, as the situation evolved, Türkiye's priorities shifted towards a more realistic and pragmatic approach. This change was driven by the need to prevent the threats arising from the conflict, such as the empowerment of Kurdish groups, which Türkiye believed could pose a threat to its territorial integrity.

Türkiye's involvement in Syria has given it new leverage over the EU when it comes to the management of refugee flows, which has been a priority of the Turkish government since the early stages of the Syrian conflict. Overall, Türkiye's policies towards Syria have been a source of conflict and rapprochement with its traditional partners and neighbours across the region, and have equipped Türkiye with new tools for conducting a more aggressive, nationalistic foreign policy.

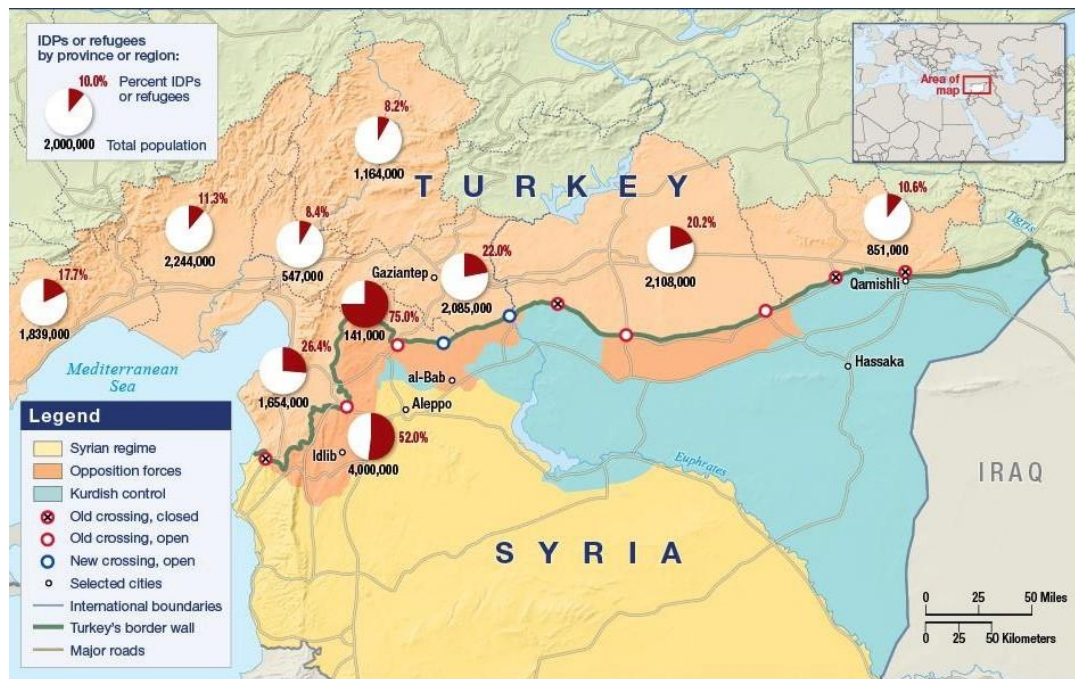


Figure 19 Crossing borders after 2011 between Syria and Türkiye.⁵¹

Shift in Policy and Support for the Opposition

As the situation deteriorated, Türkiye became increasingly vocal in its condemnation of the Syrian regime's brutality and its commitment to facilitating a transition of power. Türkiye's policy towards Syria evolved into a multifaceted approach, encompassing support for the opposition and the management of the refugee crisis. Ankara emerged as a key backer of the Syrian opposition, providing safe haven and logistical support. This stance was underpinned by the JDP's ideological alignment with factions within the opposition ranks and the desire to counter the influence of Kurdish militias in northern Syria. Its involvement in Syria has also given the country new leverage over the EU when it comes to the management of refugee flows. Solving the question of Syrian refugees in Türkiye has been a priority of the Turkish government since the early stages of the Syrian conflict, and a main driver of Ankara's policies towards both Syria and the EU.

The speech of then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 16 November 2011 translated Türkiye's definitive stand with the Syrian opposition:

- **Condemnation of Assad's Oppression:** "The future cannot be built on the blood of the oppressed; otherwise history will remember leaders fed on blood. You too, Assad, are now on your way to opening that page" (BBC News, 2011).

⁵¹ Source: (Tokmajyan & Khaddour, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2022)

- Fraternal Ties with the Syrian People: "But when a people is persecuted, especially a people that are our relatives, our brothers, and with whom we share a 910 km border, we absolutely cannot pretend nothing is happening and turn our backs" (France 24, 2011).
- Justification for Criticizing Assad: "Criticising a dictator who persecutes and turns his weapons on his own people is not interfering in internal affairs, it is not a call to the world for a military intervention." (Ibid)
- Expression of Solidarity with the Syrian People: "We want nothing more than peace and welfare for a people who are our brothers." (Ibid)

Erdogan's words clearly condemned Assad's oppressive actions against his own people, whom Erdogan referred to as "brothers" and "relatives." Erdogan's statement that Türkiye cannot "turn its back" on the persecuted Syrian people demonstrates a departure from neutrality and an alignment with the opposition forces. His justification for criticizing Assad as not being an interference in internal affairs or a call for military intervention suggests that Türkiye was taking a more assertive diplomatic stance against the Assad regime. This rhetoric signified a definitive break from Türkiye's previous efforts to maintain ties with both sides of the conflict. Türkiye's support for the opposition took various forms, ranging from diplomatic and political initiatives to logistical and operational assistance. The following actions illustrate Türkiye's multifaceted approach during this period:

1. Diplomatic Pressure and Sanctions: Türkiye imposed a series of sanctions⁵² on the Syrian regime in response to the violent crackdown on protests. These measures included the suspension of bilateral agreements, travel bans, and the freezing of Syrian assets in Türkiye. In November 2011, Türkiye also joined the Arab League's call for President Assad to step down, further solidifying its opposition to the regime (A. Kennedy & Fraser, 2011). The sanctions were extended annually and targeted individuals and entities responsible for the violent repression against the Syrian population, as well as those associated with them. In addition to these measures, Türkiye halted joint oil exploration with Syria and threatened to cut power exports. The country also distanced itself from the Syrian regime, stopping just short of recognizing the

⁵² We point out here that the sanctions imposed by Türkiye on the Syrian regime were part of a collective move in agreement with the Arab League and the EU as well as USA, with the exception of those related to the visas and the bilateral agreements between the two countries.

Syrian National Council as the nation's legitimate authority (France 24, 2011). Türkiye's actions were part of a broader international response to the Syrian conflict, with the EU and other countries imposing targeted sanctions against the Assad regime and its supporters. Consequently, the sanctions were intended to prevent the regime from employing violence against its citizens and to motivate political reforms that could solve the root causes of the conflict (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). The sanctions had humanitarian consequences, with many aid efforts towards Syria being blocked due to the effects of sanctions.

2. **Hosting and Supporting Opposition Groups:** Türkiye's role in supporting the opposition can be traced back to the early stages of the Syrian uprising, when Ankara allowed opposition groups to coordinate their activities from Turkish territory. This support continued throughout the conflict, with Türkiye hosting opposition meetings, providing sanctuary to opposition leaders, and facilitating the establishment of the Free Syrian Army that had significant impacts on the Syrian conflict and the region as a whole (Spyer, 2012, p. 47). Moreover, as it was established in Istanbul, Türkiye developed a special relationship with the Syrian National Council, the major civilian coalition based in exile seeking the overthrow of Assad. This relationship was characterized by Türkiye's significant role in helping to usher Syria toward a post-Assad era, hosting the majority of Syrian opposition conferences on its soil, and cultivating the SNC as an alternative to the Assad regime (The Atlantic , 2011). The SNC was recognized by Türkiye as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and Türkiye has continued to support the Syrian Revolution and the SNC in political, economic, and diplomatic forums regionally and internationally (Syrian National Council, 2011). In the aftermath of the FSA and SNC formation, Türkiye raised the proposal of creating a "safe haven" in Syria. This proposal was driven by concerns over the influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye, which had then reached 25,000 for the first time. Türkiye warned that if the situation remained unresolved, the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye could surpass 100,000, and argued that stability needed to be established (Erkmen, 2022, p. 41). On April 1, 2012, Istanbul hosted the second⁵³ conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People. The conference witnessed a diverse attendance, with representatives from 83 countries and international organizations, including the United Nations, the

⁵³ The first conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People was held in Tunis on February 24, 2012, and its primary goal was to form an international political front to pressure the Assad regime. <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48418>

League of Arab States, the EU, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the African Union. Additionally, the Syrian National Council, a prominent opposition group, participated in the meeting (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). Consequently, Türkiye's active support for Syrian opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council has been a major factor in shaping the dynamics of the Syrian conflict since its early stages, Türkiye has positioned itself as a major external backer of forces seeking to overthrow the Assad regime. However, this made it face many challenges, including the influx of refugees and the deterioration of relations with some global powers such as Russia.

3. Humanitarian Aid and Refugee Support: As the conflict intensified, Türkiye became a major host for Syrian refugees fleeing the violence, providing humanitarian aid and establishing refugee camps along the border. This humanitarian response aimed to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian population.⁵⁴
4. Cooperation with Regional and International Actors: In the first stage of the conflict, Türkiye worked closely with regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as Western powers like the United States and EU,⁵⁵ to coordinate efforts and exert pressure on the Assad regime. This cooperation included joint diplomatic initiatives, intelligence sharing, and the imposition of sanctions.

The Challenges of the first stage 2011-2016:

Türkiye has clearly begun to engage in a policy of force since 2016, through external military activity of various types, including the deployment of military forces and the establishment of bases, carrying out direct military operations, and demonstrating military power accompanying searches and exploration for oil and gas. As we showed in the introduction, the new behavior is compatible with the realist approach to international relations; The state's inclination towards power politics increases with the increase of its material, economic and defensive capabilities, and the strengthening of its internal political authority, and sometimes as a result of the failure of the alliances to which it belongs to respond to its security needs at a time when it is exposed to increasing threats, or the balance of power tilts in favor of its opponents. Intervention is based usually abroad, through the means of soft and hard

⁵⁴ There is a special section in this chapter on Türkiye's refugee response. This will serve as a case study to learn how Türkiye's response to the refugee crisis has affected its relations with the EU

⁵⁵ In the next chapter, we discuss the European Union's response to the Syrian conflict in general and the refugee crisis in particular, and how it dealt with Türkiye regarding this crisis.

powers, or combining them in what is called “active policy” or “assertive policy” (Kaddorah, 2021, pp. 177-178).

After the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkish foreign policy was in a situation of crisis. There was also a test for the effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish actions towards Syria were limited, since Türkiye was a bordering state the neighboring revolution affected Türkiye internally and externally and posing challenges to Türkiye. These challenges are:

1. The Rise of the Kurdish Role in Northern Syria:

One of the most significant consequences of the Syrian conflict has been the rise of the Kurdish role in northern Syria. As the Syrian regime faced intense opposition from various rebel groups, the Kurds, a minority group within Syria, seized the opportunity to assert their autonomy and establish de facto control over large swaths of the country's northern regions. In 2012, the PYD, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, declared the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northern Syria. This move was facilitated by the withdrawal of Syrian regime forces from the area, allowing the Kurds to fill the power vacuum and consolidate their control (Kızılkaya, Hamdi, & Salman, 2021, p. 07). The Kurdish forces, primarily consisting of the YPG and the YPJ, effectively fought against ISIS. Their strategic alliances with the United States and other international actors further strengthened their position in the region (The Economist Group, 2019).

During the initial period of the conflict, from 2011 to 2014, the Kurds exploited the political and military vacuum in northern Syria to consolidate their position and establish self-administration in the region. This development came at a time when Syria was plunged into a state of chaos and turmoil due to the ongoing armed conflict, which allowed the Kurds to establish a strong base to defend their interests. This move marked an important turning point in the conflict, as new alliances began to form and regional tensions escalated, paving the way for other battles and new challenges in 2015.

In 2015, The Kurdish forces, aided by U.S. airstrikes, managed to repel the ISIS offensive and defend the Kobane city, marking a significant victory for the Kurdish movement (Kızılkaya, Hamdi, & Salman, 2021, p. 07). However, the conflict also had severe repercussions within Türkiye. The Suruç bombing, which occurred on July 20, 2015, and targeted Kurdish activists, was a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities faced by the Kurdish communities on both sides of the border. The attack, claimed by ISIS, killed more than 30 people and exacerbated

tensions between Türkiye and the Kurdish forces in Syria and inside Türkiye (Tuysuz & Hanna, 2015).

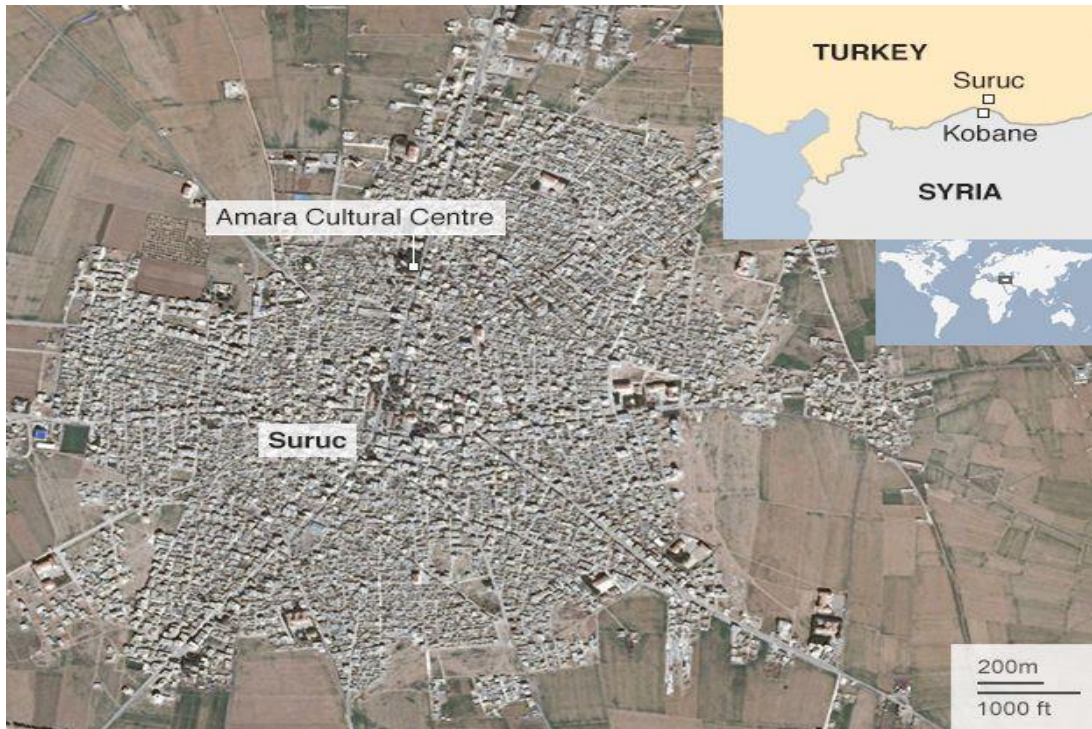


Figure 20 Suruc Massacre 2015 ⁵⁶

Türkiye's stance towards the Kurdish forces in Syria has been shaped by a complex set of security concerns and geopolitical considerations. Initially, Türkiye viewed the conflict as an opportunity to weaken the Assad regime, a long-standing adversary. However, the rise of the Kurdish forces, perceived as an extension of the PKK, posed a direct threat to Türkiye's national security interests. Türkiye's primary fear was the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region along its southern border, which could embolden the Kurdish separatist movement within its own territory. Consequently, Türkiye adopted a multifaceted approach, involving military interventions,⁵⁷ economic sanctions, and diplomatic efforts, to contain the Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria.

As the conflict unfolded, the Kurdish forces in Syria pursued a strategic objective: establishing a continuous territorial corridor connecting their enclaves along the Turkish border to the Mediterranean Sea. This aspiration, known as the "Corridor to the Mediterranean," posed a significant challenge to Türkiye's territorial integrity and regional influence (Kızılkaya,

⁵⁶ Source: BBC

⁵⁷ Türkiye launched several military operations in northern Syria to confront the threat of Kurdish groups, and in the next section in which we discuss the second phase (2016-2020) of Türkiye's policy towards Syria during the conflict period, there is a special section on Turkish military operations inside Syria.

Hamdi, & Salman, 2021, p. 07). Turkish officials were adamantly opposed to the establishment of what President Erdogan called a "terror corridor" along Türkiye's border with Syria. From Türkiye's perspective, such a development would pose a grave security threat, as it could embolden Kurdish separatist aspirations within its own borders and provide a safe haven for the PKK, which Türkiye considers a terrorist organization. Consequently, Türkiye's policy was geared toward preventing the formation of this perceived "terror corridor" at all costs, even if it meant military interventions and clashes with the Kurdish forces in northern Syria (Presidency of Turkish Republic, 2016).

Türkiye's concerns were further exacerbated by the perceived support from the United States and other Western allies for the Kurdish forces. This perceived divergence of interests between Türkiye and its Western partners added another layer of complexity to the already strained relations.

2. Economic Challenges:

The diminished physical capital and compromised infrastructure in countries embroiled in conflicts can debilitate production capabilities and hinder trade activities in neighboring nations. The conflict has severely disrupted these economic relations, leading to substantial losses for Türkiye. The conflict has had a profound impact on various aspects of Türkiye's economy, particularly in terms of trade, investment, and the influx of refugees (Rother, et al., 2016, p. 08). Türkiye's position in the crisis, coupled with its geographical proximity to Syria, has resulted in significant economic challenges and losses.

As the conflict escalated, many Turkish companies withdrew their investments or suspended their operations in Syria due to security concerns and economic instability. The costs imposed by the Syrian war on the commercial side of the Turkish economy have formed a parallel pattern with rising costs of hosting Syrian refugees and rising military spending. Trade relations between Türkiye and Syria deteriorated by up to 70% as a direct impact of this war. In 2010, Türkiye's exports of goods to Syria amounted to \$1.8 billion out of its total exports of \$113 billion. However, in 2012, trade volume between the two countries declined significantly to only \$497 million (Akmehmet, 2015).

One of the most significant economic challenges also faced by Türkiye as a result of the Syrian conflict is the influx of refugees. The influx of refugees has placed a significant strain on Türkiye's public resources and infrastructure. The Turkish government has allocated substantial funds for the provision of basic services, such as healthcare, education, and housing.

According to Erdogan's statement at the United Nations, Türkiye has spent more than \$40 billion on Syrian refugees.⁵⁸ This has put pressure on the country's budget and diverted resources away from other areas of public spending.

The influx of refugees has also had an impact on the Turkish labor market. While some Syrian refugees have found employment in various sectors, their presence has increased competition for jobs, particularly in low-skilled sectors. The number of Syrians working in Türkiye is more than 30% of the total of their population, that is, at least 1.2 million Syrians are working, and only 31,195 of them were registered and obtained work permits, according to data from the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies. Considering the Syrians actually working in Türkiye, these numbers clearly show that more than 95% of working Syrians were still working unregistered (Erdogan M. M., 2019, p. 11). The unregistered work is an undesirable reality of the Turkish economy (Ceritoglu, Yunculer, Torun, & Tumen, 2017).

According to a study by the World Bank Group, the influx of Syrian refugees has led to a decline in informal employment opportunities for Turkish workers, particularly in the construction and agriculture sectors (Carpio & Wagner, 2015, p. 03). This has contributed to tensions between the refugee and host communities and has raised concerns about the long-term implications for the Turkish labor market. The Turkish government has invested in the construction of refugee camps and the expansion of public services to accommodate the needs of the refugee population (Kirişci, Brandt, & Erdogan, 2018). However, the scale of the challenge and the prolonged nature of the conflict have made it difficult to sustain these efforts without external support.

In line with the above mentioned factors, the conflict has had far-reaching economic implications for Türkiye, posing significant challenges in terms of trade disruptions, investment stagnation, and the burden of hosting a large refugee population. The disruption of trade routes and the breakdown of economic ties with Syria have resulted in substantial losses for Turkish businesses, particularly in sectors that relied heavily on the Syrian market or transit routes. Furthermore, the instability and uncertainty caused by the conflict have deterred Turkish investments in Syria and affected Syrian investments in Türkiye, hampering economic cooperation and growth. The influx of Syrian refugees has also placed a significant strain on

⁵⁸ Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Suriyeli sığınmacılar için 40 milyar dolar harcama yapıldığını açıkladı: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7lod35>

Türkiye's public resources, labor market, and infrastructure, necessitating substantial government spending and investment to address the needs of the refugee population.

To mitigate these economic challenges, the Turkish government has implemented various measures, such as seeking alternative trade routes, providing support to affected businesses, and cooperating with international organizations to address the refugee crisis. However, the prolonged nature of the conflict and the scale of the challenges underscore the need for sustained efforts and international cooperation to address the economic implications of the Syrian crisis on Türkiye and the broader region.

3. The Revival of the Russian Role in the Region:

Russia is one of the important international influential determinants in the Syrian issue. Therefore, Russia opposed the overthrowing of the Assad regime and rejects military intervention. Also, provided the regime an immunity in UN Security Council as Russia holds veto power (Allison, 2013, p. 800). Russia's involvement in Syria has indeed had significant geopolitical implications, especially in relation with Türkiye. One of the significant consequences, for instance, the downing of a Russian jet in November 2015. The incident resulted in the death of one of the two pilots, while the other was rescued by regime forces. The downing of the jet was met with strong reactions from both sides, with Russian President Vladimir Putin calling it a "stab in the back", and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stating that it was fully in line with Türkiye's rules of engagement (Ellyatt & Rosenfeld, 2015). The incident highlighted the complex geopolitical situation in the region and the potential for further escalation between Russia and Türkiye.

In response, the Kremlin imposed a series of sanctions on Türkiye, including halting all commercial flights between Russia and Türkiye, restrictions on the travel of Turkish citizens to Russia, a ban on Russian companies to employ Turkish citizens, and restrictions on the import of goods from Türkiye to Russia. The Kremlin's sanctions had cost Türkiye up to \$3.7 billion economically. The main impact is estimated to be a loss of \$2.5 billion from 3.3 million Russian tourists, a decrease in Türkiye's exports to Russia by \$400-900 million, and the multi-billion-dollar "TurkStream gas pipeline" project being put at risk due to the sanctions (Akmehmet, 2015).

The events that took place in Russian-Turkish relations during the first years of the Syrian conflict revealed complex and changing dynamics. Despite the severe tensions, the relations between them were able to overcome this crisis in a period not exceeding six months. This shift

came as a result of growing Turkish concern about the threats of Kurdish groups that were planning to create a “terror corridor.”. In addition, the threat of ISIS, which was active during that period. Sensing these threats, Erdogan visited Moscow after the attempted coup in Türkiye in July 2016, to strengthen the alliance with Russia to confront the threat of terrorist organizations along its borders. This rapprochement has led to increased cooperation and strategic coordination, evident in Türkiye's launch of its first military operations in northern Syria in late 2016, which paved the way for a new phase of multidimensional cooperation that included direct military intervention and political discussions within the framework of the Astana talks.

4. Fighting Against Terrorism Emanating from Syria:

ISIS and other groups found Syria as a fertile land for their activities. The hazard posed by ISIS to regional and international peace and security required a collective and effective global countermeasures, lead to a global coalition against ISIS. Türkiye called it a national priority to fight against ISIS. As an active member of the Global Coalition, Türkiye has contributed to its operation “Inherent Resolve”. Türkiye also carried out three counter-terrorism operations Operation Euphrates Field, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring in the territories of Syria neighboring its borders under international law, following its self-defense under article 51 of the UN charter relevant to Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism.⁵⁹ In response to the ISIS threat, Türkiye adopted a multi-pronged approach:

1. Military Operations: Türkiye launched military operations against ISIS targets in Syria, conducting airstrikes and ground offensives to degrade the group's capabilities. These operations aimed to disrupt ISIS's strongholds and supply lines, as well as prevent the group from establishing a presence along Türkiye's border with Syria (Outzen, 2022).
2. Border Security Measures: Türkiye intensified its efforts to secure its border with Syria, deploying additional security forces and implementing stricter border controls. These measures aimed to prevent the infiltration of ISIS fighters and disrupt their logistical support networks (Vugteveen & Farrell-Molloy, 2022).
3. International Cooperation: Türkiye participated in the US-led coalition against ISIS, contributing military assets and intelligence sharing. This cooperation included hosting

⁵⁹ These processes will be discussed in the next section

coalition forces at Turkish bases and facilitating the transit of supplies and personnel (Ibid).

4. Combating Radicalization and Financing: Türkiye implemented measures to counter the spread of ISIS propaganda and curtail the financing of the group's activities. This included cracking down on recruitment networks and disrupting financial channels used by ISIS operatives (Outzen, 2022).

Throughout this period, Türkiye's policy towards Syria remained multidimensional, encompassing support for the opposition forces, humanitarian aid, and a concerted effort to counter the threat posed by extremist groups like ISIS. This approach reflected Türkiye's complex strategic calculations, which aimed to address security concerns, and maintain its regional influence.

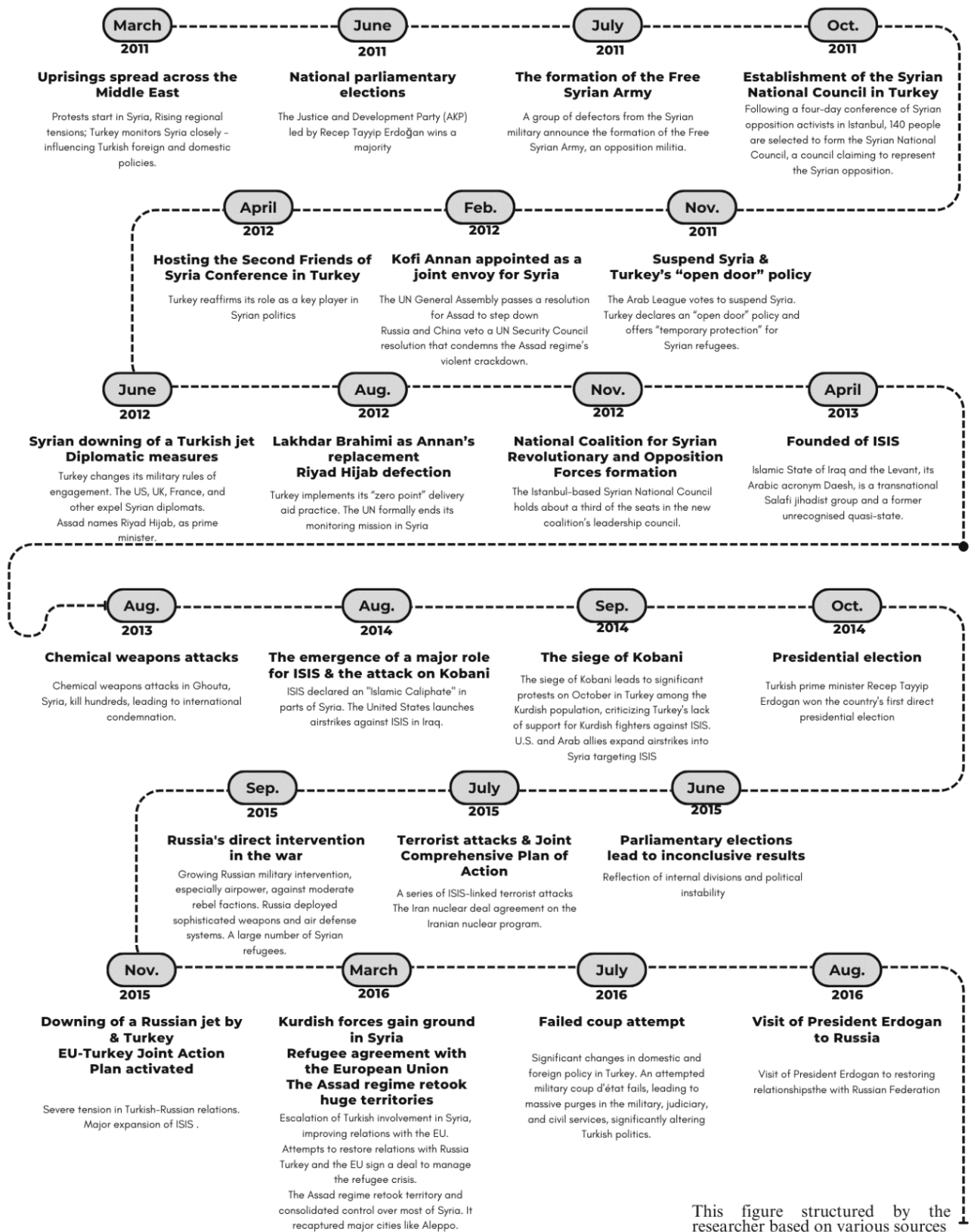


Figure 21 Overlapping of events on Turkish policy towards Syria

3.2.2. The 2016- early 2020 Period: The “Buffer Zones” Stage:

The year 2016 is considered an important turning point in Turkish policy towards Syria, which established a new stage with different methods. This year, Türkiye witnessed a number of events that made it to change the policy it had followed since the beginning of the conflict:

1. Signing the Refugee Agreement in March: Türkiye signed a refugee agreement with the EU, which promised financial support to Türkiye in exchange for its efforts to prevent refugees from entering Europe. However, Türkiye later announced that the Union had not fulfilled its promises (Irish Independent, 2016), leading to strained relations between the two parties, as Türkiye has begun to feel that it bears the burdens of the refugee crisis alone. This made Türkiye reconsider its political approach and plan to create a safe zone south of its borders to ensure that no more refugees flow. According to breaking news, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs said in a program on CNN TÜRK,⁶⁰ "If Türkiye had not carried out cross-border operations; the number of Syrians currently in Türkiye would have reached 10 million" (Hürriyet, 2022).
2. Coup attempt in Türkiye (in July): The failed coup attempt in Türkiye led to internal instability and affected its foreign policy priorities, including its approach towards Syria. The focus shifted towards border security and the need to maintain stability within the country⁶¹ (Siccardi, 2021, p. 01). Moreover, in light of the silence from its NATO allies, especially the United States, there was a doubt about trusting the NATO allies. This expanded the idea of the need to diversify its relations with other powers, and in particular seek to deepen relations with other important countries, including Russia and China (Sofuoglu, 2019). This might explain Erdoğan's first foreign visit after the coup attempt was to Moscow on August 9, 2016, and this would be due to the fact that the hostility of both parties towards their Western counterparts that outweighs their differences over the Syrian conflict (Vidal & Redondo, 2017).
3. The escalation of the role of Kurdish militias (over the course of 2016): Kurdish militias, particularly YPG, made significant territorial gains against ISIS in Syria, aiming to create a corridor connecting eastern Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. This development raised concerns in Türkiye about Kurdish independence and national security,

⁶⁰ The full video of the interview on YouTube via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUDAbtsOFEs>

⁶¹ One of the major reasons is to play a major role in rebuilding the credibility of the Turkish Armed Forces while redrawing the balance between civilian and military power.

prompting a reassessment of its position on Assad and the prioritization of these concerns. Amidst the shifts of 2016, the Kurdish question remained a persistent underlying theme influencing Türkiye's foreign policy decisions (Vidal & Redondo, 2017). The success and growing strength of the Kurdish forces, owing to their role in the anti-ISIS coalition, significantly reshaped Türkiye's foreign policy priorities. Especially with the Assad regime reclaiming territory with support from Russia and Iran.

All the reasons mentioned above made Türkiye act decisively and launch military operations in northern Syria, and demonstrated that its entry was legitimate in accordance with UN Charter Article 51⁶² and the 1998 Adana Agreement (Duran, 2019). Below we discuss the Turkish military operations, which bore different names and objectives. Türkiye conducted four military operations in Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield.

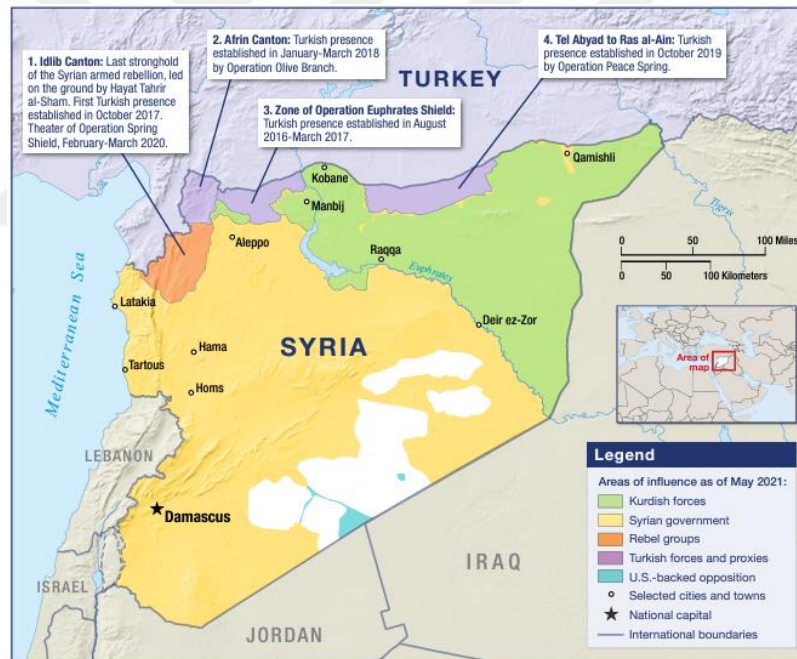


Figure 22 Türkiye's Presence in Syria, May 2021 ⁶³

⁶² The United Nations resolutions on the fight against ISIS strengthen Türkiye's position to conduct cross-border operations. In resolution 2249, unanimously adopted on November 20, 2015, the 15-member Security Council unequivocally condemned DAESH's (ISIS) "gross, systematic and widespread abuses of human rights, as well as its destruction and looting of cultural heritage." <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/811987?v=pdf> Turkish officials asserted that Türkiye's actions constitute an act of legitimate self-defense, which is one of the two exceptions to the principle of national sovereignty inviolability enshrined in the UN Charter, the other being a UN Security Council mandate for military action. According to Article 51 of Chapter 7, in the event of an armed attack against a member state, that state has the right to self-defense or collective defense until the UN Security Council takes measures to maintain international peace and security, and no UN article can nullify this inherent right. <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/turkey-using-right-to-self-defense-in-euphrates-shield-171382>

⁶³ Source: Carnegie Europe

1. Operation Euphrates Shield

The first military operation was launched on August 24, 2016, and according to the Turkish Ministry, the primary objective was to secure the Turkish border by eliminating the presence of ISIS in the region bordering Syria (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). This operation was a critical step for Türkiye's aim to secure its border areas, as it showed the terror groups that they could not hold significant territory in the region (Stein, 2017). The military intervention was conducted under the UN Charter Article 51, which allows for self-defence, and was supported by the US-led anti-ISIS coalition (Anadolu Agency, 2017). The military campaign was proven effective in terms of operational tempo and military-geostrategic progress, with Türkiye capturing operational targets swiftly and securing a wide area.



Figure 23 The Manbij Saga ⁶⁴

The campaign, especially in its initial stages, advanced rapidly towards achieving its operational objectives starting from Jarablus. The Operation succeeded in liberating an area of 1,100 square kilometers within its first 50 days, and subsequently secured an area of 2,000 square kilometers. In October-November 2016, the control of the territories to the east of Azaz and Mare, and Dabiq - a center of resistance for ISIS and a source of its moral support - played

⁶⁴ Source: Atlantic Council

an important role in paving the way towards Al-Bab (Anadolu Agency, 2017). Gaining this depth was very important for Türkiye's defense and preventing ISIS's rocket attacks.

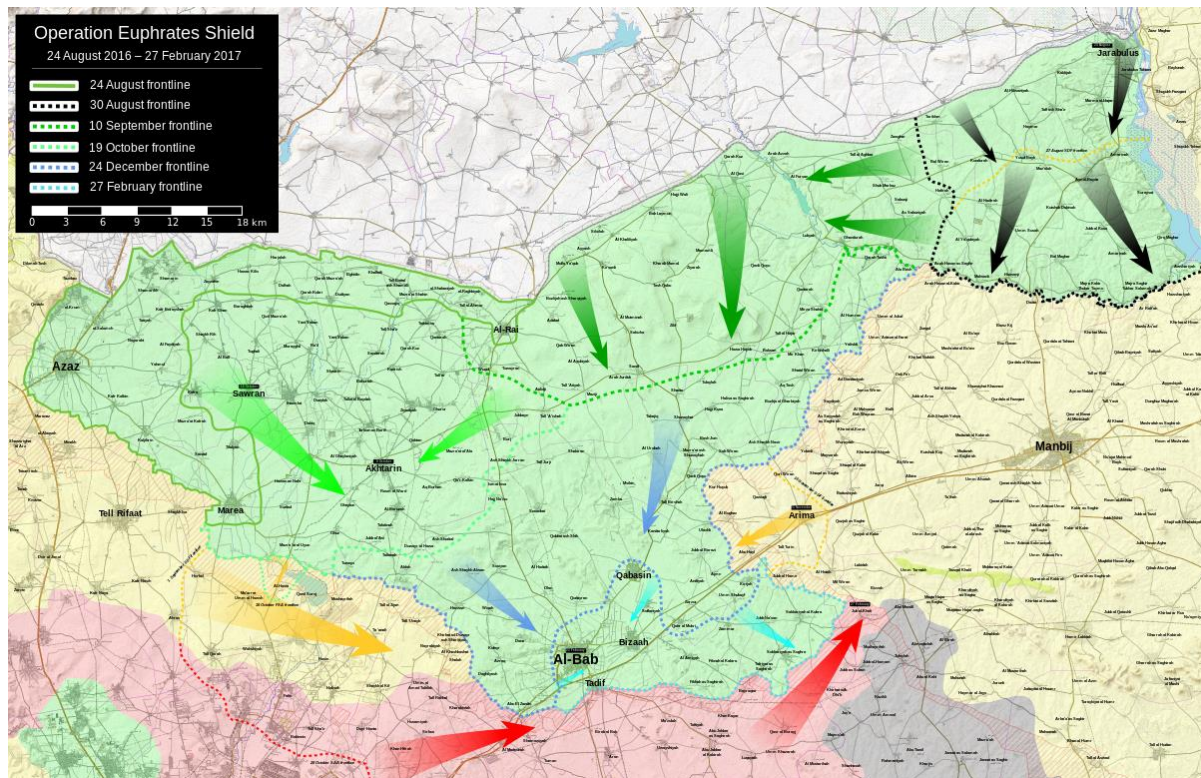


Figure 24 The Operation Euphrates Shield ⁶⁵

In February 26, 2017 Turkish forces took control of Al-Bab. The Operation was officially completed on March 30, 2017, by pushing ISIS elements 40 kilometres south and forming a buffer zone between the Turkish border and the corridor dreamed up by the YPG (Seren, Yeşiltaş, & Özçelik, 2017, p. 31). The success in securing a large area of territory in northeastern Syria, and dismantling the presence of ISIS and YPG in the region greatly strengthened Türkiye's position in the political process, especially the Astana process, which initially coincided with this success.

Box01: Summary of Operation Euphrates Shield ⁶⁶

Operation Euphrates Shield

Date: August 2016 to March 2017

Location: Northeastern Turkish-Syrian border between the Euphrates River and the Afrin Canton

Description: The Turkish Armed Forces quickly took possession of the town of Jarabulus on the Euphrates River, then moved westward to secure the strip of land up to the border of Afrin

⁶⁵ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Operation_Euphrates_Shield.svg

⁶⁶ Source: Siccardi, Francesco (2021) "How Syria Changed Türkiye's Foreign Policy", Carnegie.

Canton.³ To the south, Turkish troops advanced 19 miles into Syria to take control of the town of Al-Bab in February 2017. Objectives Achieved:

- Remove the forces of the self-proclaimed Islamic State then located east of the Euphrates River
- Take control of a strip of territory linking Kurdish cantons to the east and west of the Euphrates River
- Rebuild the Turkish army's morale and restore Türkiye's confidence in its military

The Operation was an important step taken by Türkiye in the fight against terrorism. It resulted in a reduction in terrorist attacks against civilians and security forces inside Türkiye (Akca, 2020, p. 7). Through this operation, Türkiye was able to gain the support of the international community, which was unanimous in fighting ISIS, and it was able to professionally establish a military presence in northern Syria, opening the way for it to confront the expansion of Kurdish groups. Türkiye maintained its firm stance in order to protect its security, combat terrorism, and pave the way for other counter-terrorism operations in the region. In addition, this operation was a significant strategic step for the following reasons:

- National Security: Preventing ISIS terrorists from infiltrating the country.
- Preventing the expansion of Kurdish influence: blocking any attempt to connect the Kurdish regions east and west of the Euphrates River.
- Military confidence: rebuilding the morale of the Turkish army and raising the confidence of the Turkish people in the capabilities of their armed forces after the failed coup attempt in 2016.
- Political will: Türkiye has demonstrated its determination to address security threats on its borders itself if necessary, despite criticism from the international community.

Regarding for the EU's stance, messages of support for Türkiye were issued from European capitals. The German Foreign Ministry said that Operation Euphrates Shield is part of international efforts to defeat ISIS in the region. On the other hand, France, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, welcomed in a statement in which it announced "the intensification of the efforts of Türkiye, a coalition partner in the war against ISIS" (Daily Sabah, 2016). The success of Operation Euphrates Shield not only achieved its stated objectives but also strengthened Türkiye's strategic position in the region. Encouraged by this achievement, Türkiye began planning another cross-border military intervention, this time targeting areas further south along its Syrian border. Erdoğan signalled to that by saying that the Euphrates

Shield is not going to be Türkiye's final operation in the region (Gurcan, 2017). Nearly a year after the conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield, Türkiye launched Operation Olive Branch in 2018. This shift in Türkiye's foreign policy approach signals its willingness to use hard force to address perceived threats to its national security emanating from Syria. This proactive stance was a departure from Türkiye's previous reluctance to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict, reflecting Ankara's changing strategic calculations in response to the evolving situation on the ground.

2. Operation Olive Branch

This military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and SNA⁶⁷ against PYD/PKK and ISIS in the Afrin region of Syria. The operation took place from January 20 to March 24, 2018. According to the Turkish presidency, the operation aimed to: First, establish security and stability in the Turkish-Syrian border region. Second, protect Syrian civilians from the crimes of terrorist groups, Final, provide appropriate conditions for the safe return of displaced Syrians to their homes (Guder & Akan, 2018). It can be noted that the Turkish presidency's statement added a significant element to the objectives of the operation, which is establishing a safe region for refugees to return to. This goal appears to have had several main motivations: First, an attempt to gain the support of the EU for this operation, as the Union was seeking to stop the flow of illegal immigration through Türkiye as a major transit country. Second, to gain internal popular support for the operation, especially from the opposition blocs in Türkiye. It was also noted that the Turkish statement placed ISIS alongside PYD/PKK as a target of the operation, perhaps to ensure that there was no firm position against the operation or any interference from the USA. It also stated in the same statement that its operation is legally in accordance with international law through UN Security Council resolutions; the right to self-defence as enshrined by the UN charter; and respect for Syria's unity and territorial integrity (Kaddorah, 2021, p. 186).

⁶⁷ Syrian National Army was established in 2017 as an umbrella body for the Free Syrian Army factions.

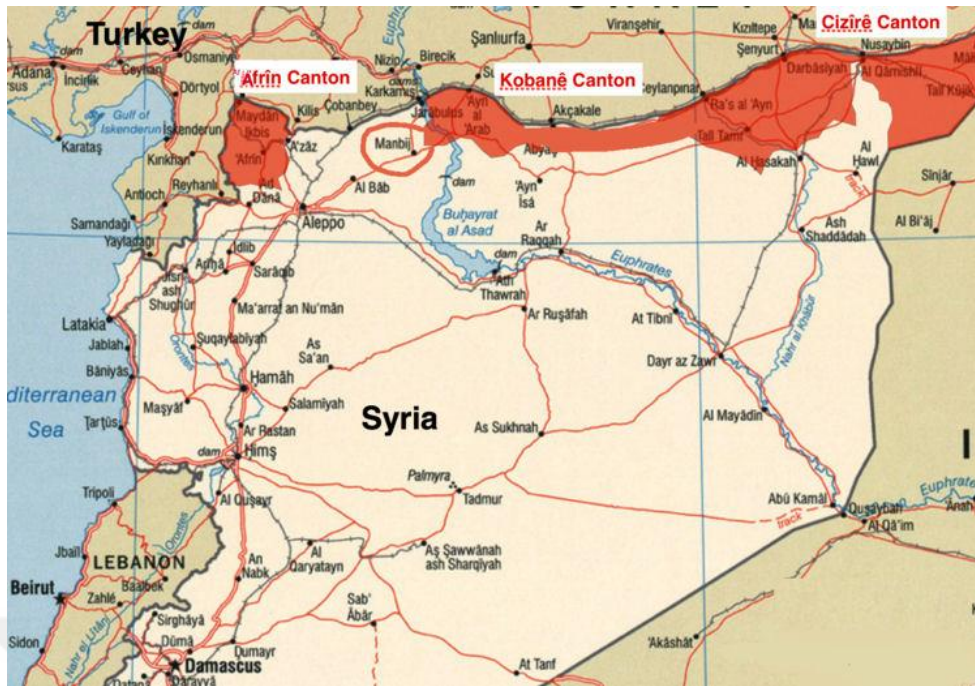


Figure 25 The Operation Olive Branch⁶⁸

Moreover, Türkiye did not mention anything related to fighting the Assad regime, and this approach, supported by hard force, aimed to strengthen Türkiye's role in the negotiations regarding Syria, especially in the Astana process after participating in 8 rounds in it until the date of the start of the operation, as Türkiye wanted, after dropping the regime change agenda, Primarily to restrict the territorial ambitions of Kurdish militias (Ülgen & Kasapoğlu, 2018). This is what President Erdogan confirmed when he said:

"We do not have any negative thoughts on Syria's territorial integrity and its independent, prosperous future. On the contrary, we are taking these steps to ensure our own national security, as well as of our 13 million Syrian brothers and sisters -- who have been displaced -- [their] security, peace and future."

(Kutlugun, 2018)

It is also noted that the operation came directly after the popular referendum held by the Northern Iraqi Regional Government for independence in September 2017, which Türkiye strongly opposed through a statement issued by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which stated: "We have been conveying for some time Türkiye's concerns about the independence referendum, which the KRG has been planning to organize, to the Government of Iraq and the KRG as well to the leading members of the international community...an independence

⁶⁸ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Operation_Euphrates_Shield.svg

referendum is contrary to our advice and warnings, within the context mentioned above, and we consider that it would be a grave mistake" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

Moving to review the EU's position on Operation Olive Branch we can note that although the EU acknowledged Türkiye's right to self-defense under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, it adopted a political stance supportive of the PYD forces in Afrin. This highlights the classic contradiction between the EU's "rhetoric" and "practice" regarding PKK and its Syrian offshoot, PYD, despite the causal link and close connection between them, which has been documented through data and evidence.⁶⁹ Despite the EU's opposition to the operation, it did not express this "acutely," as its responses were limited to statements by the European Commission for Foreign Relations, which emphasized not exacerbating the situation in the region and focusing on combating terrorist organizations listed by the United Nations, while avoiding interference in Türkiye's domestic affairs (Ayhan, 2018).

Moreover, France called for an emergency meeting at the United Nations Security Council, while German politicians discussed halting the refurbishment and export of weapons to Türkiye if those weapons were to be used against certain actors (Aydin & Ucar, 2017). This reaction illustrates the strong concerns voiced by France and Germany regarding the implications and potential targets of Türkiye's military intervention. By calling for an emergency meeting, Paris seeks to bring this crisis before the Security Council. As for Berlin, by threatening to restrict its arms sales, it is attempting to exert pressure on Ankara to limit the scope of its military operation. The opposition of some EU members to the operation appears to be connected to Türkiye's growing influence in the Middle East.

In the same context, the USA's stance had been critical expressing concern over the operation and its potential impact on the stability of the region. Its skepticism towards the operation was due to its established relations with groups affiliated with the PKK in Syria, starting from the onset of the battle against ISIS. This is in spite of the PKK being labeled as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the USA. Essentially, the USA collaborated with one terrorist group to defeat another, leading to a somewhat contradictory approach to terrorism (Aydin & Ucar, 2017). Consequently, this has made their position on terrorism appear rather perplexing.

⁶⁹ The European Parliament (EP) focused its resolutions on the use of the term "Kurdish" in a striking manner, in an attempt to undermine Türkiye's legitimacy in combating terrorism and create the impression that the operation was targeting Kurds in Afrin. The EP also called for the operation to focus solely on terrorist organizations listed by the United Nations, ignoring the links between the PYD and the PKK terrorist organization (Ayhan, 2018).

Despite Western positions opposing this operation, Türkiye had agreed with Russia, which had great power in the conflict arena at that time, and succeeded in controlling the city of Afrin by Turkish-backed forces. It also led to the establishment of a safe-zone in which the Turkish Armed Forces have conducted humanitarian missions. In addition, new observation points were established through negotiations in the Astana process (Ibid). The following map shows that by April 1, 2018, the Turkish forces were able to connect the Afrin region to the Euphrates Shield region, which border Idlib in the west and Manbij in the east.

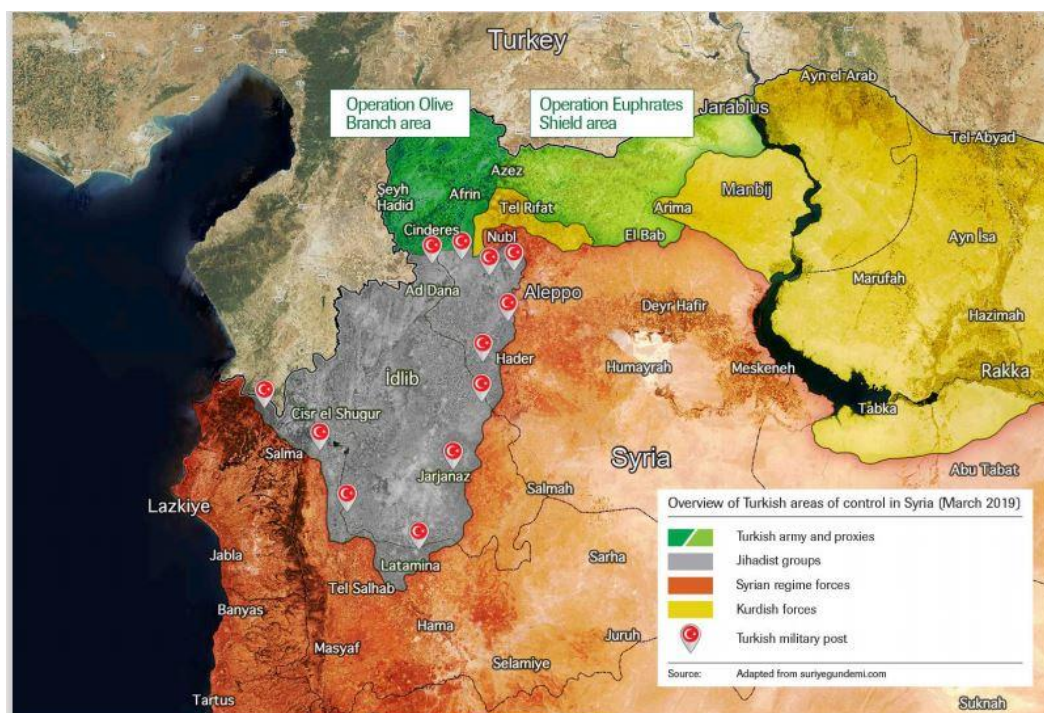


Figure 26 Overview of Turkish areas of control in Syria in March 2019 ⁷⁰

Box02: Summary of Operation Olive Branch ⁷¹

Operation Olive Branch

Date: January to March 2018

Location: Afrin Canton

Description: After an intense Turkish air campaign in the first days of the operation, Turkish forces employed a mix of traditional military techniques, counterterrorism tactics, and advanced military technology, including the first use of Bayraktar TB2 drones in Syria. After clearing the rural areas north of Afrin of any presence of YPG, a Syrian Kurdish militia, the Turkish Armed Forces took Afrin in less than a week in March 2018. Objectives Achieved:

- Remove the YPG presence from Afrin Canton and deter the United States from pursuing further cooperation with Kurdish forces
- Find a possible destination for relocating Syrian refugees hosted by Türkiye
- Further improve Türkiye's confidence in its army

⁷⁰ Source: ACAPS

⁷¹ Source: Siccardi, Francesco (2021) "How Syria Changed Türkiye's Foreign Policy", Carnegie.

The outcomes of the operation:

1. The establishment of a “safe zone” in Afrin.
2. New Turkish military observation points were established in the region through negotiations within the framework of the Astana Process on Syria.
3. Connecting the Afrin region to the Euphrates Shield region that created continuous territory under their control directly on its borders.
4. The operation allowed Türkiye to strengthen its role and influence in the negotiations on the situation in Syria, especially the Astana process, with the aim of limiting the regional ambitions of the Kurdish militias after abandoning its previous goal of regime change in Syria.

3. Operation Peace Spring

This operation was a significant military intervention in Northeastern Turkish-Syrian border between the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain that aimed to establish a safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border and address the perceived security threats posed by Kurdish forces in the region. To carry out this operation, Türkiye also relied on Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and the decisions of the Governing Council, and began its operations on October 9, 2019 (TRT World, 2023).

The military operation culminated in the establishment of Turkish control over a strategically significant border strip extending for more than 100 kilometers between the cities of Tel Abyad in northern Raqqa and Ras al-Ain in Hassakah province. The announcement by former US President Donald Trump regarding the withdrawal of American forces from the region precipitated a geopolitical realignment, prompting the "Syrian Democratic Forces" to seek assistance from Russia.

Seizing this opportunity, Russia promptly bolstered its military presence east of the Euphrates River. On October 22nd, 2019, a presidential summit held in Sochi, Russia, between Presidents Erdogan and Putin led to a pivotal agreement. This agreement facilitated the withdrawal of the "Syrian Democratic Forces" to a depth of 33 kilometers inside Syrian territory, away from the Turkish border, while simultaneously enabling the conduct of joint Turkish-Russian military patrols along the border, extending to a depth of 5 kilometers, with the exception of the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, which remained under Turkish control (The Political Committee in the SWPM, 2023) .

The process represented a greater strategic separation for Türkiye from its Western allies, the EU and the USA, and a rapprochement with Russia (Stanicek, 2019, p. 01). The implications of this operation have been far-reaching, impacting not only the dynamics of the Syrian conflict but also Türkiye's relations with various international actors, including the EU.



Figure 27 Operation Peace Spring ⁷²

The operation, which involved both air and ground offensives, targeted areas in northern Syria controlled by the YPG and its allied forces. Türkiye's military operation was swift and decisive, with the Turkish Armed Forces and allied Syrian rebel groups making significant territorial gains in the initial phases of the operation.

Box03: Summary of Operation Olive Branch ⁷³

Operation Peace Spring

Date: October 2019

Location: Northeastern Turkish-Syrian border between the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain

Description: The Turkish forces and their proxies in the Syrian National Army, a coalition of armed opposition groups, swiftly moved into Syrian territory and pushed Kurdish forces away from the border. The hostilities ended ten days later when Türkiye reached separate ceasefire agreements with the United States and Russia.⁵ The Kurdish forces, without the support of U.S. troops, turned to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to seek protection from the Turkish advance. Objectives Achieved:

- Prevent the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity along the Turkish-Syrian border
- Find another possible relocation destination for Syrian refugees hosted by Türkiye

⁷² Source: newarab.com

⁷³ Source: Siccardi, Francesco (2021) "How Syria Changed Türkiye's Foreign Policy", Carnegie.

This military operation has yielded significant outcomes. The withdrawal of US troops from the region paved the way for Türkiye to eliminate the so-called "terror corridor" along its border with Syria. Key towns and territories were captured, allowing Türkiye to establish a safe zone along the border area. Furthermore, Türkiye has taken steps to restore infrastructure and provide essential services in the captured areas, facilitating the safe return of refugees. The operation successfully addressed Türkiye's security concerns while also laying the groundwork for the potential repatriation of displaced Syrians and the reconstruction of the region (TRT World, 2023). However, Türkiye was unable to fully accomplish its objective of linking the eastern and western regions of the Euphrates, as the YPG continued to control the Manbij area.

Operation Peace Spring sparked a range of international reactions, highlighting the complex geopolitical dynamics at play. The United States initially expressed concerns about the operation. However, later on President Erdogan received the green light for the military operation from USA President Trump in a phone conversation on October 6, 2019 (Pusane, 2020), just one day before it started.

The EU, on the other hand, strongly condemned Türkiye's military intervention. Several EU member states, including Germany, France, Sweden and the Netherlands, imposed arms embargoes on Türkiye, straining relations between Ankara and Brussels (Weise, 2019). Although it reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining an open and frank dialogue with Türkiye, this time the European Council expressed its appreciation that Türkiye's accession negotiations had reached an impasse (Ianni, Açıkgöz, & Giannotta, 2021, p. 18). Following strong criticism of the operation from the EU countries, Turkish President Erdogan warned that Türkiye would open the gates and send millions of refugees if European leaders continued to describe the attack as an occupation⁷⁴ (Weise, 2019).

⁷⁴ One of the most significant long-term implications of Operation Peace Spring has been its impact on Türkiye-EU relations, particularly concerning the Syrian refugee crisis. The operation reignited tensions between Türkiye and the EU, as the latter expressed concerns over the potential displacement of refugees and the potential for further humanitarian crises. A few days after the start of the operation, during the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on October 14, the European Union condemned the Turkish military action, claiming that the operation would further undermine the stability of the region as well as exacerbate the displacement of civilians. It was also recalled "the decision taken by some member states to immediately halt arms export licenses to Türkiye." On the same occasion, the European Union stressed the need to resolve the unstable situation in northeastern Syria through diplomacy, and stressed the importance of Türkiye "as a major partner of the EU and a very important actor in the Syrian crisis and the region." At the end of October 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that the military operation in northeastern Syria "is a violation of European values." The EU's response embodied its concerns about the potential repercussions of the operation while at the same time emphasizing the strategic importance of Türkiye as a regional partner and contributor to the Syrian conflict (Ianni, Açıkgöz, & Giannotta, 2021, pp. 18-19).

Scholars and analysts have highlighted the potential long-term consequences of this rift on Türkiye-EU relations. Branislav Stanicek warned that the strained relations could undermine the EU's leverage in addressing the refugee crisis and potentially lead to a breakdown of the refugee deal between Türkiye and the EU (Stanicek, 2019). Furthermore, the tensions arising from Operation Peace Spring have reignited debates surrounding Türkiye's potential accession to the EU. While Türkiye's EU membership process has been stalled for years, the operation has provided critics with ammunition to further oppose Türkiye's bid, citing concerns over human rights violations and regional destabilization.

Beyond the impact on Türkiye-EU relations, the operation has had broader implications for regional stability and security. It has altered the delicate power dynamics in northern Syria, with Türkiye asserting its influence in the region and potentially paving the way for the resettlement of Syrian refugees within the established safe zone (Kabalan, 2019).

Türkiye achieved its main goal in the operation, clearing its border areas of the YPG, but this time it faced obstacles regarding its relations with world powers. Before the operation, although Turkish policymakers were in close contact with both the United States and Russia, the level and scope of negative international reaction to the operation turned out to be much greater compared to previous operation (Pusane, 2020). Operation Peace Spring has undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the Syrian conflict and the broader regional dynamics. While Türkiye's motivations were rooted in national security concerns and the desire to address the refugee crisis, the operation has had far-reaching implications that extend beyond its immediate objectives.

4. Operation Spring Shield

Among the most significant escalations in the Syrian conflict was Operation Spring Shield, a Turkish military operation that unfolded from February to March 2020. This offensive marked a turning point in the conflict, involving direct clashes between Turkish and Syrian forces backed by Russia. The operation had far-reaching consequences, exacerbating tensions between major powers, intensifying the humanitarian crisis, and reshaping the dynamics of the conflict. The operation took place in Idlib,⁷⁵ which is located in northwestern Syria, had become the last

⁷⁵ Idlib was the last remaining de-escalation area designated during the Astana talks in May 2017, after the Syrian regime regained control over Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs, and Daraa-Qunaitra regions in 2018. On September 17, 2018, President Erdogan of Türkiye and the Russian President met in Sochi to discuss the situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area. As a result, Türkiye and Russia signed a Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area. Iran, the third Astana guarantor, later expressed its support for the Memorandum. <https://premium.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-spring-shield.htm>

remaining stronghold of opposition forces, including jihadist organizations such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Before the operation, particularly with the late of 2019, the Syrian regime, backed by Russian air support, launched a major offensive to regain control of Idlib, resulting in significant civilian displacement and a humanitarian crisis. Türkiye, which had established observation posts in Idlib as part of the Astana peace process seek to prevent a further influx of refugees and safeguard its interests in the region (Siccardi, 2021).

Türkiye was betting on cooperation with Russia in Syria. But the situation worsened in Idlib after the governor of Hatay Province, close to the Turkish border with Syria, announced on February 27, 2020, that 33 Turkish soldiers were killed as a result of an air strike in Idlib, Syria. This was the largest death toll for Türkiye in one day since its first military intervention in Syria in 2016 (Euronews, 2020). On February 28, 2020, Türkiye began Operation Spring Shield against the Assad regime, after the then Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that "Türkiye has no intention or purpose of confronting Russia in Syria, and that Türkiye's target within the scope of self-defense will only be the regime soldiers and elements attacking its troops. But we want to stop the massacre committed by the Assad regime against civilians" (Ibid). The operation led to a ceasefire agreement between Türkiye and Russia on 5 March 2020, which marked a step towards de-escalation in the region.

Türkiye's Operation Spring Shield had multiple objectives:

- First, the operation sought to halt the Syrian regime's offensive in Idlib and prevent a further influx of refugees into Türkiye, which already hosted millions of displaced Syrians (Jones, 2020).
- Second, "to draw a line against further regime advances that might jeopardise Turkish territorial gains across northern Syria" (Veen E. V., 2021, p. 01).
- Third, the operation was a means for Türkiye to assert its influence in the region and maintain leverage in the Syrian conflict, countering the growing dominance of Russia and Iran (Daily Sabah, 2020).
- Fourth, to ensure a permanent ceasefire and stability (Euronews, 2020).
- Fifth, "Preventing conflict externalities from spilling over into Türkiye" (Veen E. V., 2021, p. 06).

From a conflict prevention and mitigation perspective, it can be viewed as having a positive short-term impact. By halting the advance of Syrian regime forces in Idlib, the operation managed to prevent a potentially catastrophic humanitarian crisis and a new influx of refugees into Türkiye (Veen E. V., 2021, p. 09). Furthermore, Türkiye's decisive military action and the deployment of advanced weaponry, such as drones and air defense systems, demonstrated its resolve and ability to shape events on the ground, creating a new, albeit fragile, balance of power between Türkiye and Russia, the primary backer of the Syrian regime. However, the long-term implications of the operation continued to be reason of tensions between Türkiye and EU, as the underlying issues driving the Syrian conflict remain unresolved, and the geopolitical interests of the various actors involved continue to diverge.

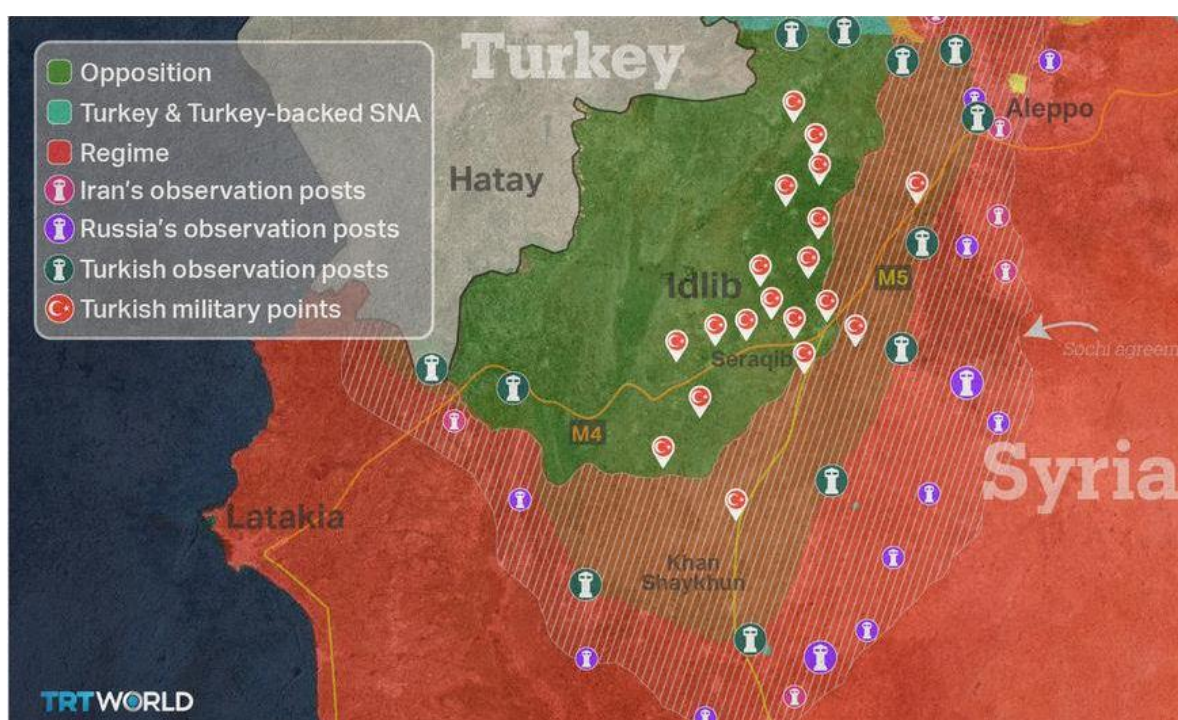


Figure 28 The continued presence of Turkish observation points in different areas in Idlib⁷⁶

To ensure that European countries do not ignore the situation, Türkiye opened the borders to allow the flow of Syrian refugees to flee into Europe, which greatly exacerbated regional tensions (Global Security, 2020). Although the EU did not take a position against the operation in its political discourse, instead, no more concrete support was provided. Türkiye wanted to pressure the EU to assume its responsibility regarding the Syrian issue by opening the borders,

⁷⁶ Source: <https://premium.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-spring-shield.htm>

which created tensions between the two parties in what is known as the Meric River crisis. This considered as blaming the EU for its stance as it opposed the previous military operations.⁷⁷

Box04: Summary of Operation Spring Shield ⁷⁸

Operation Spring Shield

Date: February to March 2020

Location: Location: Idlib Governorate

Description: A series of Turkish drone strikes halted the Syrian regime's advance to take Idlib, the last pocket of Syrian territory controlled by rebel forces. The operation ended within a week when Erdoğan flew to Moscow to sign one of many agreements to guarantee a ceasefire in the governorate. In doing so, he maintained a Turkish presence there and prevented refugees from crossing the border into Türkiye. Objectives Achieved:

- Halt the advanced of Syrian Arab Army toward Idlib and stop the massacre of civilians.
- Prevent an influx of refugees into Türkiye

The following are some of the key areas of contention and potential long-term implications between Türkiye and EU:

1. Refugee Burden and Responsibility-Sharing: Türkiye has long criticized the EU for not doing enough to share the burden of the refugee crisis, both in terms of financial support and resettlement efforts (Terry, 2021). The Meric River crisis has further exacerbated this tension, with Türkiye accusing the EU of failing to uphold its commitments under the 2016 refugee deal.

⁷⁷ The Operation and the Meric River crisis have had significant implications for the already strained relationship between Türkiye and the EU. In this regard, Turkish media outlets broadcasted visuals depicting refugees making their way towards the Greek border, leaving approximately 14,000 refugees stranded in the territory between the two countries (Yacoubian, 2021), which marked the start point of tensions between the parties. "Greek security forces and unidentified armed individuals at the Greece-Türkiye land border had been detaining, assaulting, robbing, and stripping asylum seekers and migrants, before forcibly pushing them back into Türkiye," stated Nadia Hardman, refugee rights researcher and advocate at Human Rights Watch. Rather than assisting Greece in protecting asylum seekers and facilitating their safe relocation throughout the EU, top EU officials have instead praised Greece's border control measures and provided support through the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). The EU is effectively hiding behind a veil of abusive practices by Greek security forces against these vulnerable populations, instead of upholding its responsibility to protect those in need (Human Rights Watch, 2020), and communicate with Türkiye in order to solve the dilemma from its roots.

⁷⁸ Source: Siccardi, Francesco (2021) "How Syria Changed Türkiye's Foreign Policy", Carnegie.

2. **Security Concerns and Border Management:** The influx of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border has raised concerns about border security and the potential for terrorist infiltration, further straining the relationship between Türkiye and the EU. The EU has criticized Türkiye's actions as a form of "weaponizing" migration, while Türkiye has accused the EU of failing to adequately address the root causes of the refugee crisis (Duncan & Levidis, 2020). The manipulation of migration as a strategic tool also involves the utilization of hybrid warfare tactics. Türkiye is leveraging its significant refugee population to exert pressure on Europe, aiming to rally support for its military endeavors to prevent Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, supported by Russia and Iran, from expanding their control within Idlib. Through this approach, Türkiye advances its geopolitical interests while pursuing military actions aimed at addressing perceived challenges in eastern Anatolia and Syria, particularly concerning the Kurdish population (Gerani, 2023).
3. **Geopolitical Tensions and Regional Influence:** The Operation and the broader Syrian conflict have highlighted the divergent geopolitical interests of Türkiye and the EU in the region. Türkiye's military intervention in Syria and its support for rebel groups have been viewed with skepticism by some EU members, who perceive it as a challenge to their influence and interests in the region (Gerani, 2023). The pivotal moment occurred in Syria in February 2020 when Syrian regime and Russian forces launched air strikes, resulting in the deaths of 34 Turkish soldiers during an offensive to reclaim the rebel stronghold of Idlib. In response, Türkiye initiated a drone campaign against Hezbollah militias, aligned with the Syrian regime and supported by Iran. This event marked the beginning of the weaponization of migration, with Türkiye opening its borders to Syrian migrants heading towards Europe, leveraging this move to gain support for its military operation in Idlib. Türkiye's increasingly assertive foreign policy contrasts with the EU's priorities outlined in the CFSP (Ibid). The EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan of 2015 aimed to curb irregular migration, prevent loss of life, and dismantle migrant smuggling networks. However, cooperation between Türkiye and the EU on migration has deteriorated due to various factors, including Türkiye's military involvement in Libya, its criticism of the EU's Operation IRINI,⁷⁹ and its support for militias in

⁷⁹ The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini was launched on 31 March 2020 with the primary mission to enforce the United Nations arms embargo to Libya due to the Second Libyan Civil War.

Northern Syria, along with the resettlement of Syrian refugees in former Kurdish areas.

4. **Human Rights and Humanitarian Concerns:** The treatment of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border has raised concerns about human rights violations and the upholding of international humanitarian law. Both Türkiye and the EU have accused each other of failing to properly address the humanitarian needs of the refugees, further straining the relationship. Türkiye's recent decision to permit refugees and migrants to head towards the EU has led to a significant buildup at the Greek border, sparking concerns reminiscent of the 2015 refugee crisis. German Chancellor Angela Merkel criticized Türkiye's action as "unacceptable," while EU migration commissioner Margaritis Schinas emphasized that the EU cannot be coerced or intimidated. However, Türkiye, home to around four million refugees, is attempting to prevent another large-scale influx from Syria, where regime forces, supported by Russian air power, are advancing into the final rebel stronghold of Idlib (FranceE 24 with AFP, Reuters, 2020).
5. **EU Cohesion and Decision-Making:** The refugee crisis has exposed divisions within the EU, with member states holding divergent views on how to address the issue especially after the Brexit. Türkiye's actions have further tested the EU's ability to respond in a unified and effective manner, potentially undermining its credibility and decision-making processes.

The EU's response to the refugee crisis at the Greek-Turkish border had been marked by a concerning rhetoric and policy approach that misrepresents the reality of the situation. Instead of addressing the root causes of displacement, EU leaders have openly supported Greece's hostile and deterrent measures, pledging financial and material support, including border guards, to fortify the borders. This stance not only undermined the EU's legal and moral obligations under international refugee law but also propagated a narrative that dehumanizes and delegitimizes the plight of these vulnerable individuals seeking safety and protection (Amnesty International, 2020).

Türkiye's choice to open its borders to refugees stemmed from multiple factors. Primarily, it aimed to draw attention to Türkiye's substantial international responsibilities in hosting over 3.7 million Syrian refugees and to highlight the worsening humanitarian crisis in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib. This decision sought to underscore the burden Türkiye was carrying and

to press the international community to fulfill its obligations in addressing the refugee crisis. Additionally, the perceived lack of intervention by the international community amid escalating violence in Idlib, including attacks by the Assad regime with Russian military support, further motivated Türkiye to open its borders in response to the dire situation in the region (TRT World, 2020).

Many challenges for Türkiye in its new approach of establishing safe zones along its southern border. During this period, Türkiye got closer to Russia and Iran and moved away from Western powers, including the USA and EU countries, unlike the first stage. This stage witnessed many tensions with the EU, especially during the periods when it carried out its four military operations to create safe zones, the last of which was the Meric River crisis.

The Syrian conflict and the rise of the Kurdish role have had profound implications for Türkiye's relations with the EU. Several factors have contributed to the strain in these relations. Türkiye's security concerns regarding the Kurdish forces in Syria have been at odds with the EU's approach, which has prioritized the fight against ISIS and viewed the Kurdish forces as valuable partners. This divergence in security perceptions has led to disagreements and strained diplomatic relations.

The legitimacy of buffer zones formed a significant challenge for Türkiye. Because most of the time it has been criticized by the EU states on the legality of these zones. But certain norms in international law supported Türkiye in the legality of these zones. For an intervention in Syria to seem benefits for Türkiye, it had to cooperate with the actors in the conflict (Onis, 2014). Türkiye showed an alert in keeping away from one-sided activity and emphasized international law, Türkiye may apply some effect on the impression of the authenticity of its protected region plan, yet it for the most part depended on international law, norms, and the position of the UN Security Council to persuade its allies to intervene. Türkiye's target was to preserve its interest which forced it to fight Kurdish separatists, ISIS, and faced atrocities conducted by the Assad regime. In the ongoing conflict, Türkiye, in the first stage, proposed various times the creation of buffer zones in Northern Syria, based on humanitarian assistance and due to the threat of terrorism. A buffer zone appeared attractive to its proponents in Ankara because of its strategic and legal flexibility.

The establishment of buffer zones west and east of the Euphrates River has effectively undermined – and to some extent undone – the political and territorial progress of the Syrian Kurdish militaries. Türkiye's private-public reconstruction model helped Türkiye to dampen its

recession. A stable, safe and reconstructed northern Syria ultimately facilitated the return of the significant number of the Syrian refugees that Türkiye hosts.

The long-standing conflict has become the main point of interest of the Turkish government, changing the environment and creating serious issues and complications for the Turkish foreign policy. The conflict between the Assad regime and the opposition left a fertile land for terrorist's organization ISIS to flourish and opened the doors for Russia to expand its influence in the region after its intervention in the conflict. Similarly, the Kurdish separatists and their allies in Syria initially managed to establish their footholds on the southern border of Türkiye, enjoying the support of Türkiye's old ally the United States. In response to these developments, Türkiye changed its stance against the Assad regime in 2016 and adopted a preventive stance against the Kurdish state as a core objective in its foreign policy. Türkiye conducted risky operations inside Syria to counter this threat. In a true sense, Türkiye returned to its old traditional policy which was adopted by Türkiye in the past. In the meantime, with the return of Turkish-Russian relations, Türkiye moved to protect its national interests by distancing itself from its old traditional allies the USA and Europe, because Türkiye saw the United States as a close ally towards PYD and moved closer to Russia to obtain maneuvering room in Syria.

The results of the Turkish intervention operations may be considered encouraging for Ankara if the following aspects are taken into account (Kaddorah, 2021, pp. 189-190):

- First, on the regional level, Türkiye was able to form a center of power competing with the Syrian regime and its allies in Idlib, despite the regime's control over the regions of Aleppo and most of Syria and the influence of Russia and Iran. Idlib includes large opposition military forces, and is the headquarters of the Syrian opposition government supported by Türkiye, and the lands remained, according to an official agreement with Russia and with implicit American and Iranian recognition, a place for a Turkish military presence inside Syria. This would enhance Ankara's influence inside Syria when taking into account the other presence in northeastern Syria, which would put it in a position of strength in any negotiations regarding Syria.
- Second, Ankara was able to keep the conflict away from within Türkiye, and keep the threats away from its borders. It has begun to negotiate on matters outside its territory, and on a regional issue.
- Third, at the domestic level, all Turkish interventions have strengthened the political power of the AKP and President Erdogan, by mobilizing political and military support.

The government has strengthened its alliance with Turkish nationalists who encourage the use of force to confront threats to national security and Turkish interests. Although the last confrontation was almost with Russia, with which the nationalists are looking to strengthen relations, the killing of dozens of Turkish soldiers has created justification for the government and a strong motivation for the nationalists for the necessity of responding and launching the operation, even if the confrontation harms the relationship with Moscow. As for the relationship with the Turkish army, a great deal of disagreement has emerged between the president's policy and the army leaders. Defense Minister Hulusi Akar played a major role in internal political-military coordination due to his experience and previous position within the army and his closeness to Erdogan. Perhaps all of these operations enhanced Erdogan's fortunes within the armed forces, as his policy centered around national security gave momentum and a major role to these forces in the eyes of the Turks. After its image and symbolism were damaged as a result of the failed coup attempt.

3.2.3. The late 2020-2024 Period: Balancing Relations

During the 2020-2024 period, Türkiye's policy towards the Syrian conflict underwent significant changes, marked by a shift from direct military intervention to a more diplomatic approach. This shift was influenced by several factors, including the changing regional dynamics, the evolving relationship between Türkiye and its allies, and the domestic political situation in Türkiye. Its approach towards the conflict during this period was distinguished by its complexity and continuous evolution, shaped by various factors. These included the continuation of diplomatic talks, the absence of significant military operations, and attempts to contain the influence of the Assad regime. These factors can be explained as follows:

- Continuing of Astana talks: At this stage, the Astana process continued, despite being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Türkiye played a significant role in these talks, as it sought to maintain its influence in Syria while addressing its security concerns regarding Kurdish militias (Daily Sabah, 2023). The Astana process facilitated the establishment of de-escalation zones and the deployment of Turkish forces in northern Syria to prevent the expansion of Kurdish-controlled areas.
- Semi-normalization with the Assad regime: One of the most important developments during the period 2020-2024 was Türkiye's shift towards semi-normalization of relations with the Assad regime (Tokmajyan & Al-Wahibi, 2023). The move was

motivated by several factors, including the desire to secure its interests in Syria, the need to address the refugee crisis, and the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the region.

- **High Coordination with Russia:** Türkiye's coordination with Russia in Syria came mainly due to Russia's military intervention in Syria since 2015 and the steps it has taken since then, making it the most influential foreign actor in Syria. This prompted Türkiye to deal with Russia to address the security threats arising from the situation in Syria. The US alliance with the SDF also pushed Türkiye to work with Russia. In addition, Europe's neglect and ineffectiveness in dealing with the Syrian conflict has motivated Türkiye to search for alternatives to the solution (Orhan, 2024).
- **The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Economic Crisis:** The period was also marked by the global COVID-19 pandemic and its economic ramifications, which had a significant impact on Türkiye's policy towards the Syrian conflict. The pandemic exacerbated the already fragile economic situation in Türkiye, with the country facing soaring inflation, a weakening currency, and a growing public debt (Uras, 2022). This economic strain led to increased public discontent and calls for a resolution to the conflict.
- **Balancing Relations with the East and the West actors:** Throughout this period, Türkiye sought to balance its relations with key regional and global players (Glinski, 2023). This reflects Türkiye's desire to remain a power that has one foot in each camp (the USA, the EU, Russia, and China) - neither East nor West, nor Transatlantic, nor Eurasian (Shumilin, 2020, pp. 08-09). Türkiye's strategic interests in Syria, as well as its broader regional and global ambitions drove this delicate balancing act.
- **The outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian war:** This war changed the attention of the great powers towards it, and the Syrian crisis became a non-priority issue. The truth of the matter is that neither Türkiye nor Russia, as they are key actors in the Syrian conflict, had an interest in a military escalation in Syria during that period. Türkiye was moving very cautiously and trying as much as possible not to provoke Russia because it was aware of the extent of the latter's ability to harm it in Syria. On the other hand, Russia also avoided tension with Türkiye and the focus of a new crisis with the West in Syria at this stage (Merhej, 2023). Therefore, the Syrian conflict has stabilized within what can be called acceptance of the "status quo", but with the balance of power and interests remaining a fixed option, which has entered the Syrian issue into a state of stagnation, while the maps of military influence remain unchanged.

- Earthquake February 6, 2023: After the earthquake, Russia renewed talks on Syrian-Turkish reconciliation, while emphasizing the temporary nature of the Turkish military incursion into northern Syria. A rapprochement between Erdogan and Assad, after a stalemate, became more likely than ever before (Hilani, 2023). The earthquake had a major impact on the political landscape in the region for Türkiye, opening up new possibilities for diplomacy, but the challenges and complexities of the situation were far from that. Türkiye took a pragmatic approach in coordinating the cross-border flow of humanitarian aid in the wake of the earthquake. However, its fundamental opposition to Assad's continued rule has remained unchanged, although it no longer explicitly calls for his departure. The earthquake has created new diplomatic dynamics, but Türkiye still faces difficult choices in how to deal with the complex Syrian conflict while balancing humanitarian concerns, security interests, and its stance against the Assad regime's violent repression of the opposition.
- The normalization movement: In August 2022, after a series of reconciliation moves involving Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Erdogan finally put forward a reconciliation agenda with Assad. However, while Türkiye's reset of regional relations with other Middle Eastern countries has had geopolitical and economic dimensions, its Syria policy is generally shaped by domestic political calculations (Çevik, 2023). On December 28, 2022, the defense ministers of Türkiye and Syria met for the first time in Moscow, in an important indication of normalization between Ankara and Damascus (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2022). On 10 May 2023, the foreign ministers of Syria and Türkiye as well as the ministers of Iran and Russia also met in Moscow for high-level talks on normalization between Ankara and Damascus after years of hostility during the Syrian conflict (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2023). This was a few days before the elections, which indicates the Justice and Development Party's desire to win votes calling for a solution to the Syrian conflict and reconciliation with the Assad regime.

In the second half of 2024, official statements began to indicate a move towards full normalization of relations with Syria. This started with a statement from the Foreign Minister, followed by several official statements from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In one of his statements, Erdoğan said: "We have now reached a point where, once Bashar Assad takes a step towards correcting relations with Türkiye, we will reciprocate. Because we were not enemies with Syria yesterday; we dealt with Assad as a family" (Abdulrazek, 2024). Erdoğan added:

"We will extend our invitation. We hope to bring Türkiye-Syria relations back to the same point as in the past with this invitation. Our invitation can happen at any moment. Regarding a meeting in Türkiye, Mr. Putin has approaches on this matter. The Iraqi Prime Minister has approaches on this issue as well. We talk about mediation everywhere, so why not with our neighbour on the border?" (BBC News Türkçe, 2024).

These statements reflect a significant shift in Türkiye's policy towards Syria, showing Türkiye's readiness to restore relations with Assad if he takes the initiative. These statements illustrate a new approach in Turkish foreign policy, focusing on increasing the number of friends and balancing power between East and West, as Erdoğan clarified in his speech to government members: "Türkiye is a country that cannot be confined to a single bloc" and "We do not turn our back on the East for the West, nor do we neglect the West for the East" (Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2024). This approach strengthens Türkiye's regional and international influence by adopting a balanced policy that ensures the preservation of its political independence. Such a policy positions Türkiye to engage with all parties, including the EU, in a way that serves its national interests and enhances its role as a key player in the region. This direction provides Türkiye with a greater opportunity to act as a mediator in the Syrian conflict, further amplifying its influence on the regional stage and contributing to stability in Syria by effectively engaging with various parties.

In other developments, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan made several significant statements regarding Syria. Fidan said: "The region has now entered a climate seeking peace and stability. The spirit of the times compels us to seek peace and stability", (Tekin, 2024) this can be considered as a call for a unified stance in Syria to achieve these goals.

In other statements, Erdoğan emphasized that Türkiye desires to see a democratic and prosperous Syria, free from terrorism and instability. Erdoğan stated: we will not hesitate to talk to anyone necessary, as we did in the past, to achieve this. Of course, we will take Türkiye's interests as a reference in doing so, but we will not allow anyone who trusts us, seeks refuge with us, or cooperates with us to be harmed. Türkiye is not a state that leaves its friends halfway (Gazete Duvar). This reflects a pragmatic shift in Türkiye's policy towards Syria, emphasizing the country's desire for a stable neighbor and its readiness to engage in diplomatic dialogue with all parties including the regime. It is a sign to a more flexible approach than before, aimed at finding a sustainable solution to the conflict. Türkiye's desire to normalize its relations with the Syrian regime can be attributed to several factors:

- **The Kurdish threat:** Kurdish groups, particularly the SDF, have planned to hold elections and establish a self-administration government in the areas they control (Iddon, 2024), which Türkiye considers a threat to its national security. Türkiye believes these steps could strengthen separatist movements along its southern borders. Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler has labelled the elections as impermissible, asserting that they threaten both regional stability and Türkiye's national security. He emphasized that such electoral efforts could exacerbate Syrian Kurdish nationalism, which Ankara views as a destabilizing force in the region (The Media Line, 2024). The elections were postponed after Ankara announced its intention to normalize relations with the regime (The Washington Kurdish Institute, 2024), which indicates that one of the main reasons for normalization is to confront the establishment of a new entity that threatens Türkiye's national security, as well as having a significant impact on Syria's sovereignty and unity.
- **Stalemate in the Syrian peace process:** The Syrian peace process has reached a deadlock, with no significant progress in political negotiations, even within the framework of the Astana process⁸⁰. This impasse pushes Türkiye to review its foreign policies, seeking to break the political stalemate and achieve greater stability in the region through re-engagement with the Syrian regime.
- **The refugee crisis:** The Syrian refugee crisis places significant pressure on Türkiye, especially domestically. Türkiye seeks sustainable solutions to this issue, including the return of refugees to safe areas within Syria (Iddon, 2024). Reopening communication channels with the regime could help achieve this goal, particularly for those who arrived after 2017 from regime-held areas.
- **Security considerations:** Türkiye seeks to bolster its national security by curbing the expansion of groups it designates as terrorist organizations along the Syrian border. (Hatahet & Özkizilcik, 2024). This strategy aims to foster security collaboration between Türkiye and Syria, enhancing efforts to combat terrorism and secure their shared border. The Turkish government has expressed a strong interest in forging a strategic partnership with Syria, centered on shared security challenges and promoting regional stability. Cooperation with the Syrian regime could open avenues for more effective security coordination between both nations, addressing mutual concerns.

⁸⁰ As explained in the previous chapter, the Astana process made important steps in de-escalation; however, it contributed to a stagnation of the conflict, resulting in the creation of areas governed by different internal forces, which could lead to division in the future.

- **Reaction to Arab Normalization with Syria:** In recent years, many Arab countries began the process of rapprochement with the Syrian regime, culminating in Syria's return to the Arab League in 2023. This shift in regional diplomacy influenced Türkiye's decision to continue normalizing relations with Syria (Önhon, 2024). As Arab states resumed engagement with the regime, Türkiye recognized the changing geopolitical landscape and sought to align its foreign policy accordingly (al-Radad, 2024). Türkiye viewed this shift as an opportunity to enhance its influence in Syria, adapt to the broader Arab world's re-engagement with Damascus, and promote long-term regional stability
- **Russian influence:** Russia holds a pivotal position in the Syrian conflict and is a key ally to both Türkiye and the Syrian regime. Moscow's influence may be an important factor pushing Türkiye towards normalization (Hatahet & Özkizilcik, 2024), as Russia seeks a resolution to the Syrian conflict through cooperation with Türkiye as a key player in this conflict. With its focus remaining on the war in Ukraine, Russia benefits from Türkiye playing an active role in stabilizing Syria, allowing Moscow to concentrate on its broader geopolitical priorities. This strategic alignment encourages Türkiye to work more closely with the Syrian regime under Russia's guidance. As Hatahet & Özkizilcik point out, Moscow is leveraging the 1998 Adana Protocol, which would formally legitimize Türkiye's military presence in Syria, to foster alignment between Ankara and Damascus. Russia's proposal for an official and internationally recognized military presence is designed to provide Türkiye with a sense of security and legitimacy in its operations, thereby creating a conducive environment for diplomatic negotiations. This approach aims to ease tensions and facilitate dialogue between the two countries under Russia's mediation.
- **Internal pressures:** The Turkish government faces growing internal pressures, particularly from opposition parties that demand solutions to the refugee issue and reduced foreign interventions in Syria (Önhon, 2024). Restoring relations with the regime could help calm public opinion and achieve domestic political gains, especially after some opposition parties announced their intention to meet with the Syrian regime in Damascus.
- **Economic interests:** Normalizing relations could open the door for economic projects, such as the reconstruction of Syria, as well as the restoration of the main trade routes connecting Türkiye, Syria, Jordan, and the Gulf countries (The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, 2024).

- **Regional dynamics:** Regional developments, particularly the war in Gaza, drive Türkiye to secure additional allies to counter Israeli expansion (Gazete Duvar). Normalizing relations with Syria could help in achieving this goal.

In the Türkiye-EU relations context, from late 2020 to 2024, the relationship between the two parties was profoundly affected by the Syrian conflict that continued unresolved, demonstrating a complex interplay between geopolitical maneuvers, humanitarian issues and regional security concerns. The context of this relationship is multifaceted and involves many dimensions that have created tension and necessitated cooperation between them in more than one aspect:

1. **Geopolitical and Military Dimensions:** Turkish military interventions in Syria continued to be a major point of contention during the 2020-2024 period. Entering northern Syrian territory and attacking Kurdish forces was viewed with concern within the EU (Sambur, 2021, p. 120). These operations that Türkiye positioned as necessary for national security, were often at odds with EU priorities, which emphasized the stability of civilian populations in conflict zones.
2. **The Human Side:** The Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the most pressing issues in Türkiye-EU relations. With millions of Syrian refugees residing in Türkiye, the EU has been an important partner in providing financial assistance to help manage this humanitarian burden (Zahra, 2017, p. 38). However, the phase faced funding challenges. These interactions reflect a broader struggle to balance humanitarian responses with political and security concerns within the region.
3. **Economic and Energy Considerations:** Economic and energy interests have also shaped the dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations, especially with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean region. The discovery of large gas reserves has led to disputes involving Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus - member states of the EU (Shumilin, 2020). Türkiye's assertive stance in demanding rights to explore and exploit these resources has led to escalating tensions, complicating its relationship with the EU, which supports member states' arguments of sovereignty over these resources.
4. **Cultural and Social Impacts:** From a cultural and social perspective, the integration of refugees into Turkish society has posed great challenges, with consequent implications for relations between Türkiye and the EU. Issues such as social cohesion, employment

and integration into the education system are critical areas where EU cooperation and support can play an important role. However, the EU's approach to Türkiye, which focuses on upholding human rights and supporting integration, contrasts with Turkish policies that often focus on security (Freyberg-Inan, Bardakci, & Leïße, 2016).

The late 2020-2024 period witnessed a significant shift in Türkiye's policy towards the Syrian conflict, marked by the continuation of the Astana peace process, a quasi-normalization of relations with the Assad regime, and efforts to balance its ties with Russia, Iran, the EU, and the United States. Türkiye's approach was driven by a complex web of strategic interests, security concerns, and regional dynamics, as well as domestic pressures arising from the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic challenges. As the Syrian conflict enters a new phase, with the prospect of reconstruction and the potential for further shifts in regional alliances, Türkiye's policy continue to evolve and adapt to the changing landscape. However, its actions during the 2020-2024 period have solidified its position as a key player in the region and have demonstrated its ability to navigate complex geopolitical challenges while pursuing its national interests. This period was also characterized by a complex web of interactions between Türkiye and the EU, with the Syrian conflict acting as a backdrop affecting and being affected by these bilateral relations. The relationship, which is dynamic in nature, continues to evolve based on shifts in political, humanitarian and geopolitical factors.

On December 8, 2024, Syria experienced a pivotal shift marked by the fall of the Assad regime and the successful rise of the Syrian revolution to power. This event represented a turning point not only in Syria's internal political landscape but also in its regional relations, particularly with Turkey, which played a crucial role in supporting the Syrian opposition throughout the years of conflict. This development is seen as a reshaping of regional balances, with the new Syrian leadership seeking to strengthen ties with Ankara, aiming to benefit from Turkey's experience in reconstruction and stabilization. For its part, Turkey views this victory as a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in Syria in line with its security and political interests. While cautious optimism surrounds this new phase, internal and external challenges remain, making it essential for the new Syrian leadership to adopt a balanced and flexible approach in its regional and international relations.

3.3. Türkiye and the Refugee Crisis

Initially, Türkiye adopted an 'open-door' policy towards Syrian refugees from 2011 to early 2016; this is the period, which we previously referred to as the first stage. During this stage, most of the refugees arriving in Türkiye in the last two years were the result of ISIS violence in the region bordering Türkiye, in addition to Russia's intervention in Syria and its retrieval of the city of Aleppo, which is also close to the Turkish border. The adoption of such a policy was motivated by a combination of humanitarian concerns and geopolitical considerations. Rooted in their geographic proximity as neighbouring nations as well as shared religious and cultural identities, Türkiye embraced this policy towards Syrians driven primarily by humanitarian motives and a sense of responsibility. Drawing from intertwined regional and Islamic identity, Türkiye's initial open-door approach emerged as a noble policy shaped by cultural affinities - aiming to provide sanctuary to its Syrian brethren escaping the escalating conflict. However, despite these well-intentioned humanitarian underpinnings rooted in Türkiye's geographic and religious links with Syria, maintaining such an open-door stance proved tremendously challenging as the refugee crisis persisted and realities on the ground evolved (Suryantama, 2021, p. 65). Moreover, Türkiye's early stance was significantly influenced by its desire to see a regime change in Syria, which led to a welcoming policy towards the refugees fleeing the Assad regime. Türkiye's leadership perceived the crisis not only as a humanitarian responsibility but also an opportunity to exert influence in Syrian internal affairs (İçduygu, 2015, p. 06).

Consequently, Türkiye's open-door policy at that time prompted the EU to enhance the security of its borders to confront the internal security threats to the Union countries resulting from the influx of Syrian refugees. This is what made the EU consider Türkiye a pivotal country for addressing the refugee crisis and stopping their flow to European countries. The EU's reliance on Türkiye in this regard gave hope at the time to continue the process of Türkiye's accession to the EU (Agestia, Aruni, & Nau, 2023, p. 05).

Furthermore, Türkiye had provided Syrians with temporary protection and unlimited duration of stay. Initially, Türkiye rejected international assistance for its humanitarian efforts, as it wanted to prove that it could deal with the situation on its own. Internationally, accommodating the refugee flow was supposed to be a sign of Türkiye's strength and its status as a model country in the Middle East. However, the demands quickly became "Not continuous". Still, the government sought to avoid the perception that all Syrians presented a

threat, with Erdoğan and Davutoğlu calling them "guests", "Muhajeer" or "brothers" who would one day return to their homeland (İçduygu, 2015, p. 07).

The shift from a security-centered approach to a rather humanitarian one seemed related to its assertive foreign policy as well as to the JDP's Muslim character, which resonated throughout the region. This allowed Türkiye to assert a leadership role in the neighborhood, where it could play mediator and position itself as a force able to confront humanitarian problems through diplomacy (Kaya, 2020). However, Turkish leaders mistakenly assumed that the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad would soon collapse and refugees would quickly return to Syria (İçduygu, 2015, p. 07). During the early days of the open-door policy, Turkish officials estimated that at most 100,000 Syrians would come to Türkiye (Kaya, 2023). As the conflict escalated and stretched on for years, the government was forced to confront a new reality in which Syrian refugees were a permanent fixture.

Türkiye's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis stands out from many other refugee-hosting countries in several key aspects. The World Bank (2015) highlights the characteristics of Türkiye's response, stating: "There are two key characteristics of the Turkish response effort -1) that it adopts a non-camp; and -2) government financed approach—which strongly differentiates the response from many refugees hosting countries, where the tendency is to direct the refugees into camps supported by humanitarian agencies". The implications and challenges associated with this distinctive approach have been significant and multifaceted, shaping the overall refugee crisis response in Türkiye.

Also, Türkiye's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis placed immense strains on its resources and infrastructure. As the refugee inflows grew rapidly from a trickle to a massive influx, the challenges of providing adequate services and support multiplied exponentially. In 2011, the first batch of Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict and escalating violence in their country began arriving in Türkiye. What started with small numbers quickly turned into a massive influx that Türkiye was not prepared to handle. With an overwhelming majority of 98.5% of Syrian refugees under temporary protection now living outside camps, spread across different cities and towns that were already facing significant development challenges, providing adequate services and support – such as infrastructure, education, housing and employment opportunities - for millions of additional people was a difficult task, especially since refugees gathered densely in certain cities, which caused a demographic crisis (The World Bank, 2021), as the following map shows:

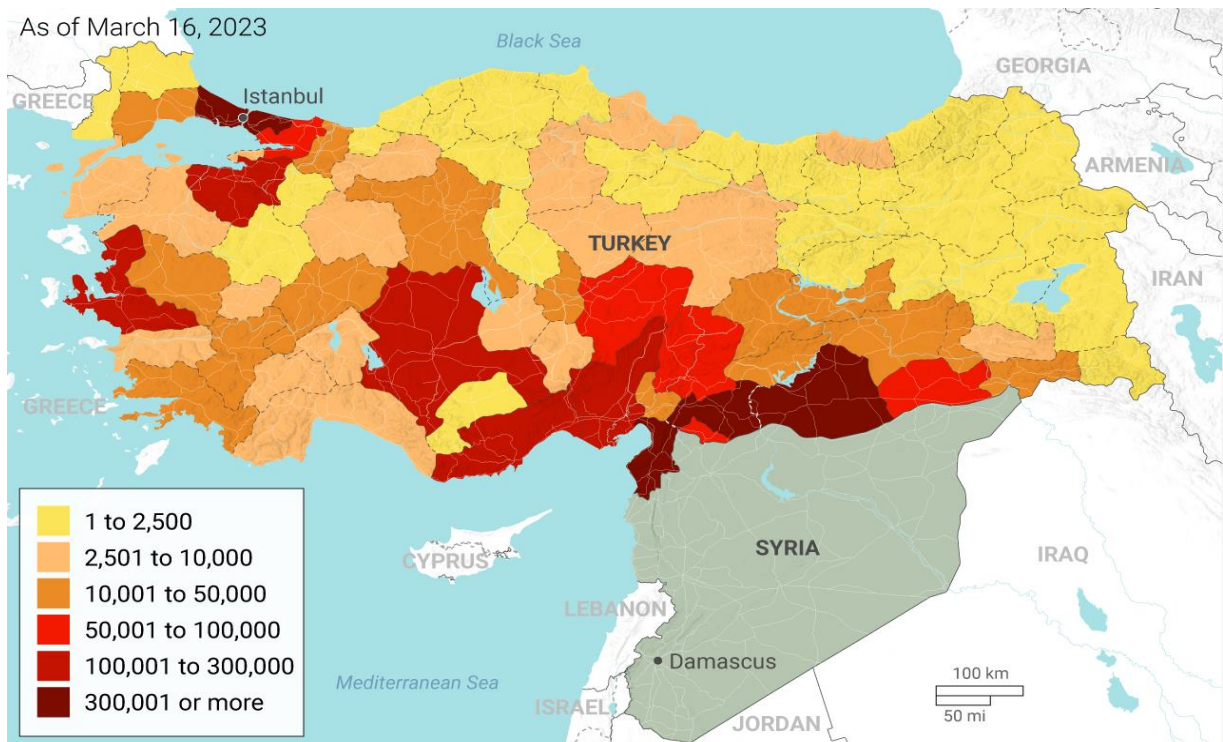


Figure 29 Syrian Refugees in Türkiye – March 2023 ⁸¹

According to the UNHCR in 2022, Istanbul, Hatay, Ankara, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa are among the provinces where most Syrians reside, as the number of Syrian refugees there is more than 300,000 people. While Konya, Izmir, Mersin, Adana, Bursa and Kilis each host between 100,000 and 300,000 Syrians. These provinces are followed by Mardin, Kahramanmaraş, Kocaeli, and Kayseri, where between 50,000 and 100,000 Syrians reside. According to the map, the states of Diyarbakir, Elazig, Malatya, Adiyaman, Mugla, Manisa, and Sakarya host between 10,000 and 50,000 Syrians.⁸²

Contrary to what has been confirmed by the Turkish government about the cultural and religious ties with Syrian refugees, the Turkish citizens “in general” perceives a significant cultural and social distance with them. This has been underscored by several tensions between refugees and local residents, making it difficult for the government to move towards an integration strategy that recognizes that Syrians are unlikely to return to their homes any time soon. The government promised to provide appropriate conditions in the areas it controls inside Syria for voluntary return, and this has become the government's current approach to dealing with Syrian refugees (Kirişci, Brandt, & Erdoğan, 2018).

⁸¹ Source: The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

⁸² For more information, See: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92743>

According to Kemal Kirişci (2013), Türkiye's "open door policy" towards Syrian refugees faced several limits and challenges:

1. Financial strain: The growing financial burden made maintaining the quality of protection and services difficult.
2. Registration challenges: While Türkiye registered refugees in camps, there were difficulties registering those living outside camps, whether they entered legally or illegally.
3. Slowing admission rate: Due to the sheer numbers, Türkiye had to slow down the rate of admitting new refugees into camps, leaving many stuck in makeshift camps inside Syria where their protection and humanitarian assistance were harder to ensure.
4. Security concerns: There were fears that opposition fighters could move relatively easily across the border, potentially spilling the Syrian conflict into Türkiye and aggravating sectarian tensions.
5. Public sentiment: While refugees largely felt welcome, there were reports of rising rents and depressed wages in border areas.

A profound shift occurred in late 2015 and early 2016. This pivotal change appears by a conflux of events - internal riots against the backdrop of the Suruc bombing, the ISIS onslaught on Syria's Kobani region near the Turkish border, the ruling party's inability to form a government after the June 2015 elections, escalating tensions with Russia due to its major military intervention in Syria, and fears of terrorist infiltration among refugee inflows after several bombings shook Turkish cities. Consequently, Türkiye's approach transitioned from an overtly humanitarian stance to a more nuanced strategy that interwove elements of security and containment alongside efforts to provide refuge. This marked a recalibration spurred by domestic upheavals, regional instability risks, political uncertainties, and heightened security imperatives in managing the massive refugee crisis while grappling with its spillover effects. The change was to confront the aforementioned factors, as well as its need to comply with pre-accession requirements to the EU. This made it rush to sign the November 2015 EU-Türkiye joint action plan and the March 2016 EU-Türkiye Deal (İçduygu, 2015).⁸³

⁸³ The European-Turkish summit and the adopted agreement confirmed Türkiye's key role in European affairs, the European Union's need for its cooperation, and the possibility of Türkiye using pressure cards on the Europeans

The Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis undoubtedly played a significant role in bringing the EU and Türkiye closer together, as evidenced by the inclusion of specific provisions in the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan that address issues beyond the immediate management of migration flows. For instance, the plan included provisions related to the acceleration of the visa liberalization roadmap for Turkish citizens (point v) and the welcoming of ongoing work on upgrading the Customs Union (point vii). Furthermore, the plan explicitly mentioned re-energizing Türkiye's accession process to the EU (point viii). These points highlight the shared interests and potential mutual benefits that drove the EU and Türkiye to strengthen their cooperation in the face of the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees. As discussed in the theoretical chapter, the factor of self-interest is a significant driving force in such agreements, and both parties likely saw the potential for leveraging their collaboration to advance their respective agendas.

Table 10 EU-Türkiye agreements

<i>The Agreement</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Kay Points</i>
2015 EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan	The EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan was a significant progress aimed at addressing the refugee crisis and managing migration flows between the EU and Türkiye. This plan was activated during the EU-Türkiye summit on 29 November 2015. Its primary objectives were to support Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Türkiye, prevent irregular migration flows to the EU, and enhance cooperation between the two entities to manage the migration crisis effectively (European Commission, 2015).	1. Returning irregular migrants from Greece to Türkiye under EU financing. 2. Resettling one Syrian to the EU for each Syrian returned to Türkiye. 3. Preventing the opening of new illegal migration routes to the EU. 4. Establishing a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme. 5. Accelerating the Visa liberalization roadmap for Turkish citizens. 6. Disbursing financial aid under the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye. 7. Welcoming the ongoing work on upgrading the Customs Union. 8. Re-energizing Türkiye's accession process to the EU. 9. Committing to improving humanitarian conditions in Syria, especially in bordering areas with Türkiye.

to meet its demands. But on the other hand, it has raised the economic, political and security concerns of the European Union countries about Türkiye's ability to influence important issues related to the countries of the Union, including, for example, concern over its identities, which was expressed recently by Hungary's sharp European positions on refugees. It was also demonstrated by the wave of xenophobia and the rise of the right in some countries (Kaddorah, 2021, p. 84).

2016 EU-Türkiye Deal	The EU-Türkiye Statement of 18 March 2016, often referred to in discussions about migration outsourcing, was a significant measure taken to address the migration crisis in Europe. The agreement also advanced Türkiye's long-standing aspirations for deeper integration with Europe, including progress towards EU accession (Terry, 2021). The statement outlined a series of actions to address the migration crisis. It stipulated that all new irregular migrants crossing from Türkiye to the Greek islands from March 20th onward would be returned to Türkiye, with the EU resettling one Syrian refugee from Türkiye for every Syrian returned under a 1:1 arrangement. Türkiye agreed to prevent new irregular migration routes opening and allow implementation of a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme once crossings are reduced. In return, the EU would accelerate the visa liberalization process for Turkish citizens, expedite disbursement of €3 billion in refugee aid with another €3 billion mobilized by 2018, re-energize Türkiye's EU accession negotiations including opening new chapters, upgrade the EU-Türkiye Customs Union, and collaborate to improve humanitarian conditions in Syria (European Commission, 2016).	1. Readmission of Irregular Migrants: Commitment to readmit irregular migrants not in need of international protection, back to their countries of origin or to Türkiye. 2. Activation of the Action Plan: Agreed to activate the action plan, enhancing their cooperation on the return of migrants not in need of protection and preventing their travel to and from Türkiye and the EU. 3. Financial Support and Incentives: including revitalization of the accession process and visa liberalization discussions, provided certain benchmarks were met. 4. Innovations and Operational Scheme: Introduced a new scheme where for every Syrian migrant returned to Türkiye from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled from Türkiye to the EU, adhering to UN vulnerability criteria. This mechanism aimed to deter dangerous crossings and replace them with organized, legal pathways for asylum seekers.
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By addressing not only the immediate humanitarian and migration challenges but also broader issues of economic and political integration, the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan underscores the complex interplay of interests and the recognition that addressing the refugee crisis could serve as a catalyst for deeper cooperation between the two entities. The statement generated considerable debate among academics, legal scholars, and policy analysts, with discussions focusing on its legality, effectiveness, and ethical implications, especially in the context of the Syrian conflict.

This conflict, which spurred a significant refugee crisis, undeniably influenced EU-Türkiye relations, pushing both entities toward more collaborative yet contentious interactions. Here is an overview of how various experts have analyzed the agreement:

According to Margot Garcia and John Cerrone, the legal identity of the EU-Türkiye statement has been a subject of controversy, due to its ambiguous nature as drafted by its authors. Initially viewed as a non-binding agreement, a closer analysis suggests it functions as a binding international agreement, although in 2017 the General Court rejected cases challenging it on the grounds that they were written by EU member states, not the EU as an institution, thus eluding EU jurisdiction. This raises legal complexities, as member states should not independently engage in agreements on matters where the EU has already exercised competence. Additionally, the deal's alignment with the EU Asylum Procedures Directive is questionable, given Türkiye's limited obligations under the Geneva Convention due to its geographical limitation clause, which does not cover non-European asylum seekers returned under this deal, although Türkiye maintains some non-refoulement protections through other national mechanisms (Garcia & Cerone, 2021).

Many discussions illustrate the complex interplay of legal, ethical, and political factors in the EU-Türkiye agreement, all of which are magnified by the backdrop of the Syrian conflict and its ramifications for regional stability and international law.

On one side, Elif Demirbaş and Christina Miliou also critique the EU-Türkiye deals, highlighting that while the agreement has effectively reduced migration flows to Europe by designating Türkiye as a 'safe third country,' it has simultaneously allowed EU states to evade their responsibilities under the 1951 Geneva Convention. They argued that by outsourcing the burden of protection to Türkiye, the EU is sidestepping its obligations to refugees⁸⁴ (Demirbaş & Miliou, 2023).

⁸⁴ Greece, in particular, uses the 'safe third country' concept to externalize migration, refusing refugee statuses and effectively shifting the responsibility of protection to neighboring countries, thus neither fully fostering nor forsaking the lives of refugees. In the context of the effectiveness of the EU- Türkiye deal, research by Ilse van Liempt at Utrecht University indicates that the deal has fallen short of its intended goals. This underscores that the agreement should not be viewed as a definitive solution to the intricate and multi-faceted migration issue. Despite the extensive measures implemented and significant financial expenditures, migrants, particularly Syrians who represent the majority of new arrivals, continue to reach the Greek islands, though in reduced numbers. This persistence of arrivals suggests that Türkiye does not effectively function as a safe third country for them. Additionally, the deal has led to migrants taking greater risks and finding alternative routes to circumvent the controls established by the agreement, further highlighting its limitations in managing migration effectively (Liempt, 2017).

Also a research by Ilse van Liempt at Utrecht University indicates that the deal has fallen short of its intended targets. This underscores that the agreement should not be viewed as a definitive solution to the intricate and multi-faceted migration issue. Despite the extensive measures implemented and significant financial expenditures, migrants, particularly Syrians who represent the majority of new arrivals, continue to reach the Greek islands, though in reduced numbers. This persistence of arrivals suggests that Türkiye does not effectively function as a safe third country for them (Liempt, 2017).

EU political figures have also voiced additional criticism of the EU-Türkiye Agreement. Notably, José Manuel García-Margallo, the then Spanish Foreign Minister, stated that Spain would only accept an agreement that exhibits coherence, complies with international law, and demonstrates extraordinary respect for the human rights of those compelled to flee their home countries (Leming, 2018, p. 06).

On the other side, then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated, "The EU-Türkiye deal respects international norms, and the plan is starting to work." He also expressed his discontent with critiques suggesting that the EU was "abandoning its values" due to the multi-billion deal with Türkiye (Anadolu Agency, 2016).

The Syrian conflict has been central to the discussions surrounding the EU-Türkiye deal. It has significantly affected the dynamics of EU-Türkiye relations, providing both challenges and opportunities:

- The influx of Syrian refugees: This was a direct result of the ongoing conflict and dramatically increased the urgency for an EU-Türkiye agreement. Türkiye, hosting millions of Syrian refugees, found itself in a pivotal position to negotiate terms that could benefit its geopolitical and economic interests.
- Leverage in accession talks: The critical role Türkiye played in managing the refugee crisis provided it with leverage in its long-standing bid for EU accession, reviving discussions and promises from the EU side, though with mixed results and continued challenges.

Based on what we have presented, we can reach the conclusion that initially the agreement between the EU and Türkiye was welcomed as a practical solution to managing the refugee crisis. However, the dynamics of EU-Türkiye relations have evolved since then, particularly in response to Turkish military operations in Syria and other regional political moves. The EU

viewed with concern the Turkish military interventions in Syria, starting with Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 and followed by other operations such as Olive Branch in 2018 and Peace Spring in 2019, which it viewed as an escalation that could destabilize the region and exacerbate a new refugee crisis.

In early 2020, Türkiye announced that it would not prevent refugees from crossing into Europe, and effectively opened its borders on February 28. This decision came after the escalation in the Syrian governorate of Idlib led to an increase in the number of Syrian refugees heading towards the Turkish border. Türkiye's move to open the border near the Meric River was seen as an attempt to pressure the EU for more support, financially and politically, in dealing with the refugee situation and in response to the lack of tangible support for its military actions in Syria. These developments led to tension in the relationship between Türkiye and the EU:

- Humanitarian and security concerns: The EU has criticized Turkish military operations in Syria due to their humanitarian impact and their ability to spark more refugee flows towards Europe.
- Negotiations and accession to the EU: Türkiye's actions in Syria and the opening of borders in 2020 greatly influenced EU accession talks. The EU has consistently expressed concerns about its adherence to European standards, with these events further complicating the accession process.
- Political influence and deterrence: While the 2016 agreement gave Türkiye political influence over the EU regarding migration management, subsequent military operations turned into a deterrent against its EU aspirations. The EU views these actions as a departure from the founding values and legal standards of the Union, thus affecting the prospects of Türkiye's accession.

In light of the evolving and intricate challenges posed by the refugee crisis, Türkiye and the EU have continued their cooperation through the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRiT) program. This initiative plays a critical role in managing the allocated 6€ billion directed toward various sectors essential for improving the lives of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye. These funds are dispersed across humanitarian assistance, education, healthcare, municipal infrastructure, and social and economic support initiatives. The World Bank, serving as one of the key implementing agencies, significantly contributes by providing financing that supports the Turkish government's efforts to effectively address the refugee challenges. By

focusing investments on critical areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, the FRiT program aims to enhance the living conditions and opportunities for both refugees and their host communities, thereby attempting to bridge the gap between immediate humanitarian needs and long-term social integration (The World Bank, 2021).

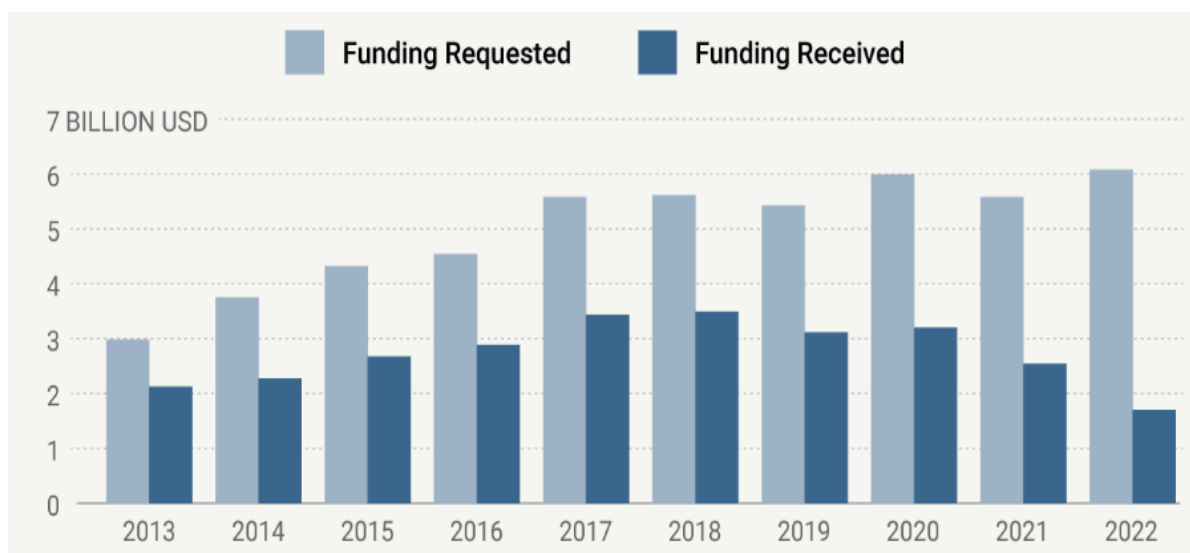


Figure 30 UN Funding for Syrian Refugees, Requested vs. Received ⁸⁵

Despite facing significant internal and external pressures, Türkiye has continued to extend considerable rights to Syrian refugees within its borders. This commitment persists amidst ongoing domestic opposition within Türkiye itself, and strained relations with the EU. The figure below illustrates the range of rights that Syrians have been granted in Türkiye as of 2023. These rights are part of Türkiye's broader approach to managing the refugee crisis, which reflects a complex balancing act between regional diplomacy and internal political dynamics.

⁸⁵ Source: The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy



Figure 31 What Rights Do Syrians Have in Türkiye? ⁸⁶

Türkiye has implemented programs aimed at enhancing the economic self-sufficiency of Syrian refugees through various social and economic support measures. Moreover, Türkiye's policies towards Syrian refugees are shaped by its geopolitical strategy, humanitarian considerations, and the need to maintain stability both within its own borders and in the region.

After the presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye in 2023, there was directly a renewed focus on improving relations between Türkiye and the EU, particularly regarding the issue of Syrian refugees. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu revealed a detailed "roadmap" for the return of Syrian refugees, which includes creating safe zones and coordinating with Syria's neighboring countries.⁸⁷ This initiative marks a significant shift towards practical solutions rather than populist approaches previously criticized by opposition groups within Türkiye (Middle East Monitor, 2023). This development indicated a potentially transformative phase in Türkiye-EU relations, leveraging Türkiye's strategic position and the EU's policy objectives to address one of the region's most pressing humanitarian issues.

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ This plan emphasizes voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, aligning with the broader goal of reviving the political process in Syria, combating terrorism, and ensuring safety for returnees.

To sum up, the Syrian refugee crisis has significantly shaped the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU, leading to both collaborative efforts and points of tension. The 2016 EU-Türkiye deal emerged as an attempt to manage the massive influx of refugees, offering Türkiye economic incentives and prospects of deeper integration with the EU in exchange for controlling irregular migration flows. While the agreement initially reduced crossings into Europe, it faced criticism regarding its adherence to international laws and human rights principles. Türkiye's subsequent military operations in Syria and the temporary opening of its borders in 2020 strained relations with the EU, which viewed these actions as destabilizing forces that could exacerbate refugee movements. Despite these challenges, cooperation has continued through initiatives like the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye, aimed at improving the living conditions and integration of Syrian refugees within Turkish communities. As the Syrian conflict persists, managing the refugee crisis will continue to shape the intricate relationship between Türkiye and the EU, underscoring the intricate interplay of humanitarian concerns, security imperatives, and geopolitical interests in this crisis.

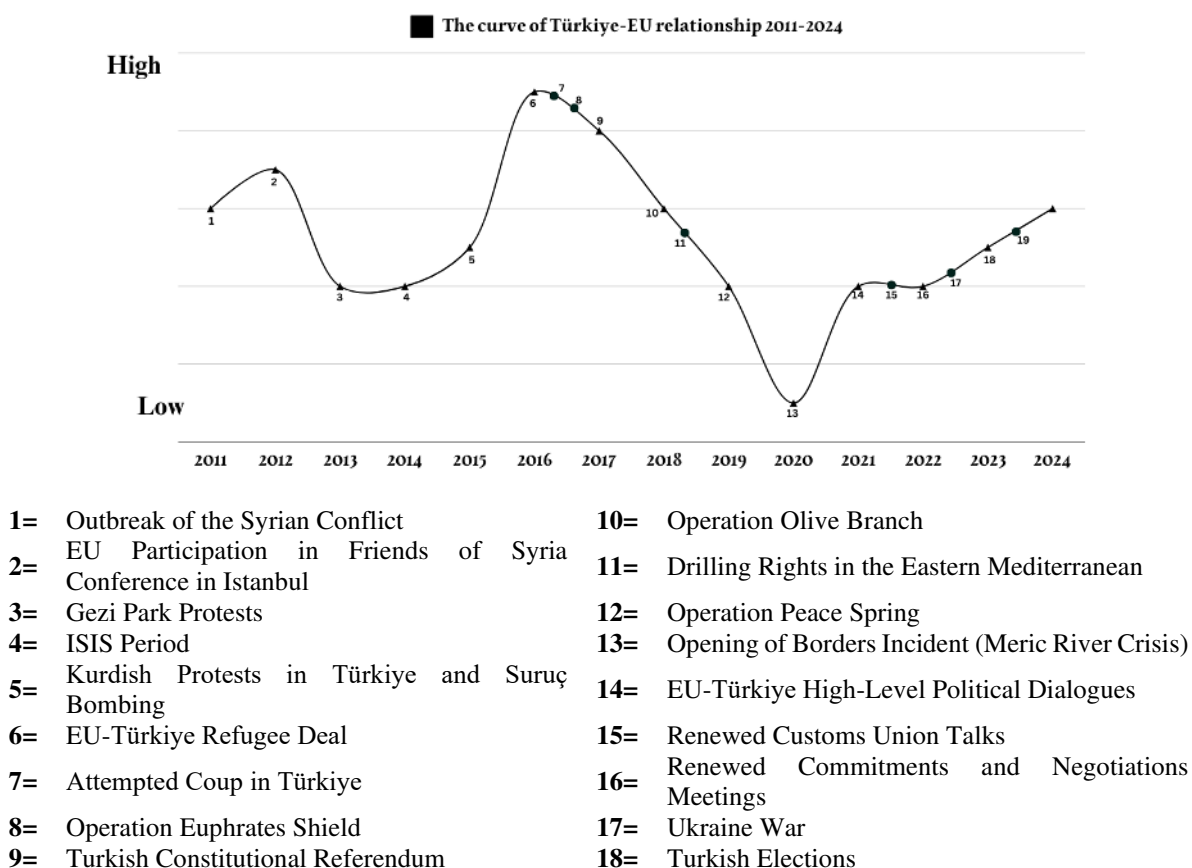


Figure 32 The curve of Türkiye-EU relationship 2011-2024

The figure prepared by the researcher based on data analysis during the mentioned period

CHAPTER FOUR: THE EU RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

4.1. Phases of the EU's Policy: Key Events and Shifts in Priorities

Before the conflict, the EU's policy towards Syria focused on enhancing political and economic cooperation through initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy (Cavatorta & Arana, 2010, p. 631). These initiatives, as announced, aimed to promote stability and regional integration and included supporting economic and social reforms in Syria and encouraging political dialogue between the two sides. Despite these targets, relations were complicated due to the nature of the Syrian regime and its tense relationship with the West, as Syria was formerly aligned with the Soviet Union. This historical context led the EU to adopt a policy of critical engagement, attempting to promote European values and democracy in the region.

Despite the challenges, there were efforts to enhance cooperation in various fields such as the economy, energy, and infrastructure (Ibid). Agreements were signed to facilitate trade and investment between the two sides, and the EU supported some developmental projects in Syria to promote economic stability. However, political tensions and the strained relations between the Syrian regime and Western countries made tangible progress difficult in some areas. Nevertheless, the EU continued its attempts to foster cooperation with Syria and achieve regional stability through dialogue and joint initiatives.

Notably, the Syrian conflict emerged as a critical turning point in this landscape. The EU stands among the principal international actors that have actively engaged with the conflict from its onset driven by several reasons. Firstly, the scale of the humanitarian crisis is unprecedented, with millions of people displaced and in need of urgent assistance. Secondly, Syria's geographic proximity to Europe has heightened the EU's concern, as the instability has direct implications for neighboring regions and potential spillover effects (Faham A. , 2024).

Additionally, the complexity of the conflict, involving multiple internal and external actors with varying interests, has made it particularly difficult to address. Some scholars have even characterized the conflict as the most challenging crisis the EU has encountered (Serra,

2023), highlighting the immense difficulty in managing such a multifaceted and enduring conflict. Consequently, the EU's response to the conflict was shaped by a mix of humanitarian, political and social imperatives. Unlike other international actors like Türkiye, Iran and Russia, the EU has avoided military intervention, instead prioritizing diplomatic engagement, humanitarian aid and creating frameworks to manage the resulting refugee crisis. An important aspect of EU policy has been the management of the refugee crisis, which has had profound impacts on the EU's internal dynamics and its external relations, in particular with Türkiye. The 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement embodies the EU's strategy to tackle irregular migration by strengthening cooperation with Türkiye, which hosts millions of Syrian refugees.

The situation in Syria has witnessed increasing violence that has made the desire for stability, rather than support for reform, the dominant logic of the EU again, as it was before 2011. This has caused a shift in the EU's discourse, from a focus on values immediately after the so-called Arab Uprisings to the speech of "political realism" a few years later (Khatib, 2017). This shift weakened the credibility of the EU.

In order to understand response of the EU towards the conflict, it was necessary to divide its practices into five distinct chronological phases, although the exact timing of these phases is not entirely clear due to the absence of a comprehensive policy change. This division was based on specific points, events, trends, and shifts in the priorities of the actors that influenced the approach taken. Through this, we can examine the EU's policy towards the Syrian conflict across these phases, analyzing how its humanitarian, political, and social dimensions have evolved over time. In addition, we gain a comprehensive understanding of its policies and their long-term implications on its relations with Türkiye.

4.1.1. First Phase: Initial Response (2011-2012)

The EU's relations with the Middle East entered a new phase following the Arab Uprisings in 2010, which triggered significant transformations and heightened instability across the region. Concurrently, the financial crisis dominated the agenda of the EU and its member states, relegating other issues, including relations with the Middle East, to the periphery (Hollis, 2016, p. 394). At the onset of the Syrian conflict, the EU faced a complex and challenging political and diplomatic landscape that demanded a careful and coordinated response to navigate the rapidly evolving situation. However, the Union lacked such a response, leading many scholars and researchers to criticize its initial approach to the conflict as lacking a clear political strategy.

Yırcalı (2017, p. 12), for instance, notably remarked, "The EU has no Syria policy", reflecting the widespread perception of the EU's inadequate handling of the crisis.

The EU's initial response to the Syrian conflict exposed significant weaknesses within its foreign policy apparatus. Despite early attempts to present a united front, such as the imposition of sanctions and calls for Assad to step down, the lack of a cohesive strategy and the presence of divergent national interests among member states resulted in a fragmented approach. This disunity was further exacerbated by the financial crisis, which shifted the focus of the EU's agenda away from foreign policy concerns. Consequently, the EU's influence in the region diminished, as individual member states began pursuing their policies, highlighting the Union's inability to formulate a unified and effective response. The internal divisions and inconsistent actions not only weakened the EU's position but also complicated its diplomatic efforts and undermined its credibility as a key player in resolving the Syrian conflict (Hollis, 2016).

In May 2011, the EU issued a strong statement condemning the suppression of peaceful demonstrations in Syria, calling for the immediate release of political prisoners (Bouris & Nacour, 2016, p. 92). This was followed by the imposition of the first set of sanctions that included asset freezes and travel restrictions against individuals linked to the Syrian regime. In this context, in a statement supported by Member States, the then High Representative of the EU, Catherine Ashton, called on Al-Assad to step down, effectively excluding the EU from any active political role in the Syrian crisis, for several reasons:

- **Alienation of the Assad Regime:** By calling for Assad to step down, the EU positioned itself as an adversary to the Syrian regime. This stance made it nearly impossible for the EU to engage in any direct negotiations or diplomatic efforts with the Assad regime, which was important for any political solution in Syria.
- **Loss of Leverage:** The EU's strong condemnation and subsequent sanctions reduced its ability to influence the Syrian government. With Assad's regime viewing the EU as hostile, the Union lost its leverage to mediate or play a constructive role in the conflict. Other international actors, such as Russia and Iran, who maintained relations with Assad, filled the vacuum left by the EU.
- **Internal EU Divisions:** The EU's decision to take a hardline stance was also influenced by internal divisions among its member states regarding how to address the Syrian conflict. While there was consensus on condemning the violence and imposing

sanctions, there were differing views on the extent of intervention and the approach to the Syrian government. These divisions weakened the EU's ability to present a unified and effective diplomatic strategy.

- **International Context:** The broader international response to the Syrian conflict, particularly the role of the United States, Russia, and other regional powers, also influenced the EU's position. The EU's call for Assad to step down aligned with the position of the United States and its allies but alienated Russia, a key supporter of Assad. This further marginalized the EU's role in the peace process, as Russia and Iran became later on the dominant external actors in Syria.
- **Focus on Humanitarian Aid:** As the conflict escalated, the EU increasingly focused on humanitarian aid and supporting Syrian refugees, rather than playing a direct role in the political resolution of the conflict. This shift in focus further diminished the EU's political influence in the Syrian crisis.

Instead of acting unified, EU member states began to implement their individual policies towards the Syrian conflict without any joint coordination, revealing clear internal divisions. During the Foreign Affairs Council meetings, tensions emerged as a result of conflicting interests between member states over how to manage the crisis. In August, member states renewed their calls for Assad to step down, and took the decision to suspend all European operations in Syria and withdraw European expatriates working on Syrian projects. This decision came as result of strong pressure from countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, despite clear recommendations from the EU mission in Damascus that called for caution (Ibid).

According the above mentioned information, we can reach the result that the EU found itself paralyzed in the first phase by a noxious combination of strategic incoherence. This critical inability to rise to one of the seminal regional challenges of the decade undercut the EU's leverage and influence, rendering it largely impotent as the conflict metastasized into a multidimensional proxy war of catastrophic proportions. From the beginning, haphazard reactionism rather than coherent strategy-making marred the EU's approach. Its first substantive actions centered on rhetorically condemning the Syrian regime's violent crackdown and imposing targeted sanctions (Veen, Ezzeddine, Napolitano, & Pellise, 2021, pp. 23-27).

The swiftness with which the EU took an uncompromising stance demanding President Assad's departure by May 2011, just two months into the unrest, revealed a startling lack of strategic patience. Rather than prudently exploring tracks for mediation and negotiating an end to hostilities, the EU's maximalist rhetoric calling for regime change swiftly shut off this crucial political option. Scholars like Pierini have critiqued the EU's initial response to the Syrian conflict. "The EU ...reacted rapidly with a straightforward position—that Assad must leave office—based on an early (and mistaken) assumption that the regime would fall in short order. Although this position never translated into swift action in the military or diplomatic field, for several years it remained the EU's sole mantra" (Pierini, 2016, p. 05).

Kızılkın further underscores this point by noting that the EU's initial response to the Assad regime was characterized by a lack of concrete action. The EU issued declarations expressing concern and condemning the Syrian regime's repression but focused on promoting democratic transition, similar to its approach in Libya and Egypt. This strategy highlighted the observation that the EU's response was mostly rhetorical, lacking significant diplomatic interventions (Kızılkın, 2019, p. 323). Baucher adds that the EU failed to establish a significant political role in the Syrian conflict. Despite its 2009 ambition to enhance global conflict mediation, the EU has not taken assertive stances regarding the conflict and the Assad regime. The strategic guidelines on conflict mediation and the strengthening of the European External Action Service (EEAS) conflict mediation capacities provide the EU with the tools and institutional framework necessary to find a comprehensive resolution (Baucher, 2021, p. 05). However, these efforts have not yielded substantial outcomes.

Bedin et al. expand on these criticisms by illustrating that at the outbreak of the conflict, the EU and its member states initially united on a policy of non-recognition of Assad, engaging in multilateral conflict resolution and supporting the Syrian opposition. The EU promptly suspended bilateral cooperation programs, froze negotiations for an EU-Syria Association Agreement, and expelled Syria from the Union for the Mediterranean. However, the member states struggled to fully align with other countries opposed to Assad, particularly Türkiye, due to coordination challenges stemming from differing views on groups like the YPG, which Türkiye classified as a terrorist organization while the EU saw some Turkish-supported groups as extremists (Bedin, Guendouz, & Levallois, 2023, pp. 82-84).

Michael emphasizes the broader implications of these internal divisions. Despite an initial unified stance among EU countries in the early stages of the conflict on condemning the Assad

regime's policies towards demands for freedom and democracy, the EU appeared weak and ineffectual in addressing the Syrian crisis. This ineffectiveness extended to prominent member states such as France and Britain, which initially believed they could manage the Syrian crisis both politically and militarily, similar to their intervention in Libya, but subsequently re-evaluated and withdrew their active involvement (Michael, 2012, p. 05). This situation highlighted that the failure of member states to reach a consensus had profound negative implications for the EU as a whole.

Contrarily, Al-Quran (2023) presents a more favorable view, the EU initially adopted a robust and committed position, collaborating with international actors to seek political solutions aimed at stability and democratic aspirations in Syria. These varying scholarly perspectives collectively illustrate the complexities and challenges in the EU's approach to the Syrian conflict, underscoring both its initial ambitions and subsequent shortcomings (Al-Quran D. , 2023, p. 242).

Beyond such policy inconsistencies, a deeper quandary precipitating EU paralysis was the entrenched divergence in threat perceptions and favored strategies among member states towards Syria. Heavyweights like France and Britain pushed for intensified pressure including potentially arming rebel forces (Stankov, 2019, p. 1033), while economically-exposed states vehemently, such as Greece, resisted any escalation. This gap consistently stymied development of unified EU policy beyond limited half-measures. Unable to overcome this strategic incoherence stemming from fragmented national interests, the EU could only resort to limited common denominators like sanctions and humanitarian aid. Crucially however, it failed to formulate substantive incentives, and leverages to facilitate conflict resolution through a negotiated political transition before Syria descended into all-out proxy war. What makes this failure all the more consequential is that the EU possessed considerable theoretical policy instruments and leverage that could have been deployed more adeptly during this fluid early phase. As a major trade partner of Syria, provider of development assistance, and proponent of regional integration through instruments like the European Neighborhood Policy and Union for the Mediterranean, the EU held economic and diplomatic tools that could have been leveraged.

However, the structural deficiencies and political constraints of EU foreign policymaking inhibited this strategic creativity and rapid consensus-building. With unanimity required among 27 divergent states, the EU's capacity for nimbly formulating contextually-appropriate policies calibrated to rapidly shifting events was severely lacking. As Michael incisively criticized, the

EU suffered from "institutional paralysis" that prevented deft policy delivery despite its expansive capabilities on paper (Michael, 2012). This lack of strategic foresight and institutionalized unwieldiness meant the EU also failed at preparing for and responding to the cascading humanitarian catastrophe triggered by Syria's descent into civil war.

Perhaps one of the most damning indictments of the EU's response, however, was its absence from diplomatic engagement to shape the trajectory of the Syrian conflict. Apart from futile rhetorical demands for Assad's departure, the EU was absent from Syrian diplomacy, ceding decisive influence to powers like Russia and Iran who could proactively outmaneuver it (Pierini, 2016). This represented a dereliction by an international actor that styles itself as a crisis manager and promotor of regional stability. With the Syrian conflict rapidly metastasizing into a geopolitical maelstrom implicating the interests of global powers and extremist groups, the EU's lack of diplomatic engagement constituted a huge missed opportunity to leverage its historical ties to foster dialogue and de-escalate hostilities.

Ultimately, the EU's cumulative policy failings in this 2011-2012 period stemmed from multiple institutional deficiencies and underlying constraints. The prioritization of the Eurozone debt crisis on the EU's agenda induced a severe bandwidth deficit, relegating the Syrian crisis to peripheral status despite its acute volatility (Hollis, 2016). Limited institutional flexibility and over-centralization at the Brussels level also inhibited the EU's capacity for rapidly calibrating context-appropriate policies and interventions. Most fundamentally, however, this conflict exposed the structural impediments inhibiting development of a robust CFSP for the EU to cohesively wield its immense economic and political leverage. With unanimity requirements paralyzing strategic consensus, the EU's foreign policy decision-making defaults to the lowest common denominator, held hostage by national self-interests and threat perception asymmetries among member states.

By the end of 2012, the Syrian conflict had rapidly evolved into a multidimensional proxy war, causing widespread civilian suffering and massive population displacement while creating power vacuums exploited by extremist forces like ISIS. In retrospect, this period represented a critical window when more cohesive and farsighted EU engagement could have helped shape a less destructive trajectory and mitigated the humanitarian catastrophe. However, during this time, the belief in the need for a political solution, the inevitability of Assad's fall, and the feasibility of a political transition led the EU institutions to adopt a patient wait-and-see approach. This resulted in a lack of proactive efforts, such as dedicated mediation or greater

diplomatic engagement with Iran, Türkiye and Russia, which might have brought the violence to an end sooner (Veen, Ezzeddine, Napolitano, & Pellise, 2021, p. 25). Instead, plagued by its internal contradictions and deficiencies, the EU remained a largely impotent bystander, relegated to the sidelines as other global powers asserted their agendas and deepened their interventions to shape Syria's brutal conflict.

4.1.2. Second Phase: Escalation and Regional Impact (2013-2014)

The period from 2013 to 2014 marked a significant escalation in the Syrian conflict, resulting in profound regional impacts and further complicating the EU response. This phase was characterized by critical events such as the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, the rise of ISIS, an increasing refugee crisis, and the EU's intensified humanitarian and security efforts.

- **The Use of Chemical Weapons**

In August 2013, the Syrian conflict took a horrifying turn with the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. This attack, which killed hundreds of civilians, was met with international outrage and condemnation (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The EU, in a strongly worded statement, denounced the use of chemical weapons as a grave violation of international law and human rights. It underscored the urgent need for a coordinated international response to the escalating violence in Syria (European Parliament, 2013).

The then EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, issued a statement condemning the attack and calling for accountability. "Any use of chemical weapons, by any side in Syria, would be totally unacceptable"⁸⁸ Ashton stated (European Union, 2013). The EU also supported UN Security Council Resolution 2118⁸⁹, which called for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and welcomed the involvement of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in overseeing the disarmament process. In addition, the EU provided financial and technical

⁸⁸ For more information, kindly see: "Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the latest reports of use of chemical weapons in Damascus" (European Union, 2013)

⁸⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2118, adopted unanimously on September 27, 2013, addresses the use and destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. The resolution condemns the use of chemical weapons, mandates Syria to destroy its chemical weapons program under international supervision by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and calls for full cooperation with the OPCW and the UN. It emphasizes accountability for those responsible, threatens enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter for non-compliance, and calls for the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to affected populations in Syria. Kindly find the full text of the resolution in this link: <http://unscr.com/files/2013/02118.pdf>

assistance to support these efforts, reflecting its commitment to upholding international norms and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (OPCW, 2015, p. 08).

Despite these actions, the EU's response to the event was criticized for lacking a cohesive strategy and being largely reactive. This was evident in the Union's statements, which mainly condemned the situation and urged both the Syrian authorities and other actors in Syria to support and cooperate with the UN mission's operations. It was unable to take a decisive position regarding the use of chemical weapons. However, France unilaterally declared its approval of Bashar al-Assad's suspension more than ten years later, on June 26, 2024 (Odeh, 2014). This indicates ongoing disagreements within the EU about the Syrian conflict and the use of internationally banned chemical weapons. This fragmentation diminished the EU's credibility and effectiveness, posing significant challenges for its collective foreign policy strategy in addressing similar crises.

- **The Emergence of ISIS**

The rise of ISIS in this phase represented a significant turning point in the Syrian conflict, exacerbating the situation and posing new challenges for the EU. ISIS's rapid territorial gains, brutal tactics, and ideological appeal attracted thousands of foreign fighters, including individuals from Europe. The group's rise not only intensified the conflict in Syria but also had significant security implications for Europe.

In response to the growing threat of ISIS, the EU updated its Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2014 to address the evolving nature of the threat⁹⁰. This included specific measures to counter online propaganda and disrupt terrorist use of the internet. Enhancing government communications to challenge extremist ideologies and supporting counter-terrorism messages became central components. Additionally, the EU focused on training first-line practitioners, such as teachers and social workers, to recognize and respond to early signs of radicalization. The strategy also supported civil society initiatives to build resilience against extremist narratives and promoted disengagement programs for individuals leaving terrorist groups. These efforts aimed to create a comprehensive and coordinated approach, reflecting the EU's commitment to combating radicalization and recruitment effectively (Council of the European Union, 2014). Moreover, to address the persistent threat posed by ISIS, the EU has adopted a

⁹⁰ For more information, see: "The EU counter-Terrorism Strategy 19 May 2014 " <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9956-2014-INIT/en/pdf>

multi-faceted counter-terrorism strategy. This strategy includes enhancing intelligence sharing, border security, and initiatives to prevent radicalization and recruitment. Specific measures involve disrupting terrorist financing, improving cyber security, and strengthening law enforcement cooperation. The rise of ISIS also had broader regional implications, destabilizing neighboring countries and creating power vacuums that were exploited by extremist groups. This development further complicated the EU's efforts to address the Syrian conflict and highlighted the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach (Cerulus, 2014). However, this strategy remained defensive rather than offensive, failing to take decisive action to stop these threats. This, in turn, supported the Syrian regime's narrative that it was fighting terrorist organizations.

The fight against ISIS has gained particular prominence on an agenda previously dominated by issues such as immigration, drugs, and human trafficking. As the policies and measures within the EU were not sufficient to confront risks of this magnitude, the Union cooperated closely with neighboring countries, particularly Türkiye. This cooperation was a crucial aspect of the Union's external counter-terrorism policy during this period. Türkiye's efforts in combating ethnic, separatist and jihadist terrorism granted it a special status concerning its candidacy for membership in the EU (Öztürk, 2022, p. 214).

Building on this context, the EU pursued a neoliberal economic and non-interventionist policy during the 2013-2014 phase (Khatib, 2017), even as security risks escalated sharply due to the rise of ISIS. It is noteworthy that the largest wave of refugees occurred in 2014, coinciding with the emergence of this extremist group (UNHCR, 2014). The rise of ISIS also exposed the divergent threat perceptions and strategic priorities among member states. Countries like France and the United Kingdom advocated for more aggressive measures, including military intervention and arming opposition groups, while others favored a more cautious approach focused on diplomacy and humanitarian assistance. These divisions hampered the EU's ability to formulate a unified and effective strategy to address the threat posed by ISIS. In this regard, France strongly criticized the EU's stance, arguing that the union's passive approach to the protracted Syrian conflict encouraged disorder and allowed the situation to take a more radicalized path (Alhurra, 2014).

In fact, EU discourse of regime change in the early stages gave places to the struggle against terrorism, the migration crisis and the security threat (Özcan, 2017, p. 11). Consequently, the emergence of ISIS in Syria shifted the EU's focus from supporting reform

to a desire for stability, reflecting a return to pre-2011 priorities (Nas, 2019, p. 63). This transition from a values-driven approach at the conflict's outset to a "realpolitik" stance in 2014 undermined the EU's credibility (Bouris & Nacrour, 2018, p. 91). Despite its transition in focus, the EU's counter-terrorism strategy faced significant implementation and coordination challenges among member states, whose internal divisions and varying threat perceptions impeded a unified response. The complexity and fluidity of the threat landscape necessitated continuous adaptation and innovation in counter-terrorism measures. This lack of strategic focus and coherence undermined the EU's ability to effectively leverage its economic and diplomatic tools. Consequently, the EU's diplomatic engagement in the Syrian conflict remained limited, often ceding influence to global powers such as Russia and Iran. This lack of proactive diplomacy represented a missed opportunity for the EU to use its historical ties and economic influence to foster dialogue and de-escalate hostilities.

In retrospect, the 2013-2014 period represented a critical window when more cohesive and farsighted EU engagement could have helped shape a less destructive trajectory and mitigated the humanitarian catastrophe. However, the EU's lack of strategic foresight and institutional constraints prevented it from seizing this opportunity. The period marked a significant escalation in the Syrian conflict, with profound regional impacts and critical challenges for the EU. The use of chemical weapons, the rise of ISIS, the security responses all highlighted the complexity of the situation and the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach. The EU's limited diplomatic engagement and missed opportunities for proactive diplomacy allowed other powers to shape the conflict's trajectory, underscoring the Union's marginalization in the diplomatic arena. This period serves as a critical lesson in the importance of strategic foresight, unity, and decisive action in addressing complex international conflicts. The lessons learned from this period underscore the need for a more realistic proactive approach to foreign policy, one that leverages the EU's considerable economic and diplomatic tools effectively to address regional crises and promote stability and peace.

4.1.3. Third Phase: Refugee Crisis and Russia Intervention (2015-2016)

The 2015-2016 period marked a significant intensification of the Syrian conflict, resulting in a deepening humanitarian crisis and an increased involvement of external powers. This phase witnessed critical developments such as the Russian military intervention, the refugee crisis reaching unprecedented levels, the Paris attacks, the 2254 Resolution and the EU-Türkiye deal.

These trends and events shaped the EU's policies and responses to the Syrian conflict during this period.

- **Russian Military Intervention in Syria**

Russia's direct military intervention in Syria, which began in late 2015, established a new diplomatic and military landscape to which the EU had to adapt. This event achieved four key goals for Russia. Firstly, Russia rescued the Assad administration from imminent collapse, signaling to EU leaders that Russia, too, had allies it was willing to protect, countering the notion that Western powers could unilaterally oust them. Secondly, Russia established a forward military base in the Middle East. Thirdly, Russia asserted that from then on, it would be a key player in shaping the world order, alongside the United States and its European allies. Lastly, Russia demonstrated its military capability to swiftly address significant crises, challenging previous analyses that underestimated its power (Pierini, 2016, pp. 06-07). This intervention significantly altered the dynamics of the conflict, bolstering the Syrian government's position and complicating the efforts of opposition forces. The Russian intervention also had profound implications for the EU, as it underscored the increasing complexity of the conflict and the involvement of major global powers.

The EU condemned Russia's military actions, expressing concerns over the escalation of violence and the impact on civilian populations. It called upon Russia to cease its intervention, cautioning that such actions may extend the duration of the conflict and hinder the political process necessary for its resolution, despite significant divergences in opinion regarding the means to achieve this end (The Guardian, 2015). Federica Mogherini, the then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated, "It is for sure a game-changer, it has some very worrying elements... it has to be coordinated, otherwise it risks being extremely dangerous, not only from a political point of view but also military" (NDTV Channel, 2015). This statement shows the EU's concerns about Russia's military presence in its Mediterranean neighborhood. Another statement approved by the foreign ministers of the 28 EU countries in Luxembourg stated that, "this military escalation would prolong the conflict, undermine the political process, deteriorate the humanitarian conditions, and increase extremism" (France24, 2015; Tejero, 2022).

The EU found itself in a complex and challenging position following Russia's direct military intervention in Syria. This intervention not only rescued the Assad regime from

imminent collapse but also established Russia as a significant player in the Middle East, necessitating a strategic recalibration from the EU. The EU's initial response was marked by strong condemnation. To address the new geopolitical reality, the EU adopted a new strategy on Syria in 2016 (European Council, 2016). It also intensified its diplomatic efforts within international platforms such as the UN and the Geneva peace talks. Furthermore, within two months, the EU declared its cooperation with Türkiye regarding the refugee issue, indicating its inability to address the new dynamics alone. Türkiye also perceived the Russian intervention as a threat and condemned it, leading to heightened tensions in November 2015.

The EU's ability to influence the situation on the ground remained limited during the 2015-2016 phase. The Union lacked the military presence and strategic leverage that Russia possessed, rendering it largely a spectator to the unfolding events. This highlighted the constraints of the EU's foreign policy apparatus and its reliance on diplomatic and humanitarian tools in a context where military power of other actors played a decisive role. The multifaceted nature of the Syrian conflict, compounded by the direct involvement of Russia, underscored the limitations of the EU's influence in the region. The EU's efforts, while significant, were often overshadowed by the actions of more directly involved military powers. This reality highlighted the need for the EU to adapt its strategies to remain relevant and effective in such complex geopolitical landscapes.

- **The Refugee Crisis**

The refugee crisis in this period posed important strategic dilemmas for the EU, resulting from the accumulation of layers of conflict that intensified during this stage. The refugee crisis reached unprecedented levels in 2015 and 2016, with millions of Syrians fleeing the conflict and seeking refuge in Europe and neighboring countries⁹¹.

4.1.4. Fourth Phase: The New Strategy and the Turkish Military Developments (2017-2019)

The EU's engagement with the Syrian conflict from 2017 to 2019 reflects a complex interplay of geopolitical, security, and diplomatic dynamics. This phase was marked by significant events, including Turkish military interventions in Syria, the Astana process, and multiple Brussels conferences organized by the EU to address the broader implications of the

⁹¹ The EU's response to the refugee crisis and its impact on relations with Türkiye will be addressed in the third section of this chapter.

conflict. The following paragraphs examine the EU's new strategy, its diplomatic stance on Turkish interventions, and the nuances of the Astana process. The EU's actions during this period highlight its efforts to navigate the intricate landscape of Middle Eastern politics and its attempt to assert influence amid internal and external challenges.

- **The 2017 EU Strategy on Syria⁹²**

The EU's new strategy on Syria, as detailed in the Council conclusions adopted on 3 April 2017, aimed to address the escalating Syrian conflict, which took on a new dimension following the Russian intervention and the rise of terrorist groups posing significant threats. Additionally, the strategy responded to the refugee's crisis and the Turkish military intervention. This approach was designed to navigate the complex geopolitical, security, and humanitarian challenges, while underscoring the importance of a coordinated international response.

The EU reaffirmed its commitment to a political solution to the Syrian conflict, in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, emphasizing the importance of a Syrian-led, inclusive political transition negotiated by all parties under the UN auspices. It also supported international mechanisms to gather evidence for future legal proceedings, stressed the importance of transitional justice, and condemned systematic violations, highlighting the need for sufficient resources for the international, impartial, and independent mechanism established by the UN General Assembly. Additionally, the strategy underscored the importance of alignment and cooperation with international partners, although effective collaboration was often hampered by divergent interests and priorities among global and regional actors.

The strategy revealed the challenges related to the extent of the EU's influence in the Syrian conflict compared to other powers such as Russia, Türkiye and the United States. The differing positions and opinions among member states weakened the ability to make effective decisions regarding the Syrian conflict. This was evident in the strategy text, which did not include any decisive measures or comprehensive changes in foreign policy.

- **Turkish Military Interventions**

Türkiye's military interventions in Syria significantly influenced regional dynamics and the EU's policy responses. These operations, including Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016-

⁹² The full text of the strategy: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03/fac-conclusions-syria/>

2017, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, aimed to counter the Kurdish YPG and ISIS, which Türkiye viewed as threats to its national security. The EU, while recognizing Türkiye's security concerns, maintained a cautious stance regarding the implications of these operations on regional stability and humanitarian conditions. These military interventions also negatively strained EU-Türkiye relations, particularly due to divergent views on the Kurdish issue.

According to the 2019 statement from the European Parliament, Türkiye had been a long-standing partner of the EU, but accession talks had stalled since 2016,⁹³ as Türkiye moved further away from European standards of rule of law and fundamental rights. The Parliament urged the European Council and the European Commission to suspend Türkiye's accession talks, stating that despite positive cooperation on migration and the EU-Türkiye agreement, which allocated €6 billion for around 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Türkiye's intervention in northeast Syria jeopardized its EU membership prospects. It added that this intervention led to a new wave of internally displaced persons and refugees, as well as security threats linked to ISIS foreign fighters in Syria. The statement also noted: "In light of the Trump administration's withdrawal from Syria, Türkiye's military move might also be perceived as an attempt to fill a power vacuum in the region and jointly consolidate its influence there with its new ally, Russia" (European Parliament, 2019, p. 01). This underscores the realist perspective by highlighting how Türkiye's military intervention, driven by national security concerns and strategic interests, and its cooperation with Russia, which became a significant player in the Syrian conflict, negatively impacted Türkiye's relations with the EU. This clearly demonstrates how the Syrian conflict played a role in EU-Türkiye relations; this demonstrates how the intervention altered the situation., the situation changed from 2017 to 2019 due to the military operations, becoming a source of tension between the two parties.

What further distinguished this period was not the fight against the PKK itself, but rather Türkiye's strategic decoupling from the EU as its ally. This decoupling began in 2016 when the failed military coup in Türkiye prompted President Erdoğan to reinforce his ties with Moscow (European Parliament, 2019). Since then, Türkiye used anti-Western rhetoric. In light of the Trump administration's withdrawal from Syria, Türkiye's military move could also be perceived

⁹³ It was stalled due to the failed coup attempt.

as an attempt to fill a power vacuum in the region and consolidate its influence there with its new ally, Russia (Ibid).

The EU's reactions to Turkish military actions were characterized by a cautious balance between recognizing Türkiye's security concerns and emphasizing the need for regional stability and adherence to international law. Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, often expressed this balance in her statements. Following the launch of Operation Olive Branch, Mogherini stated that Türkiye has legitimate security concerns, but it is essential that all military action is proportionate and avoids civilian casualties (Nas, 2019, p. 57). This reflects the principles of neorealism, as Türkiye's military interventions, aimed at mitigating perceived threats, often lead to friction with allies like the EU. Meanwhile, the EU's supportive stance towards the PYD-YPG, which is affiliated with the PKK, despite recognizing it as a terrorist organization, reveals the EU's double standards.

This period saw further complications in EU-Türkiye relations due to differing views on Kurdish groups such as the YPG. Türkiye classified the YPG as a terrorist organization because of its links with the PKK, a designated terrorist group in Türkiye and several other countries. In contrast, the EU viewed the YPG as crucial partners in the fight against ISIS (Kizilkaya, Hamdi, & Salman, 2021, p. 244). This fundamental disagreement frequently surfaced in diplomatic dialogues and influenced overall coordination on Syria. Consequently, the EU found itself in a delicate balancing act: it had to address Türkiye's security concerns while maintaining its own principles on human rights and international law, ensuring that its actions did not undermine the broader objective of achieving a political solution in Syria.

Furthermore, Türkiye's launch of operations caused a significant shock in relations with the West, particularly the EU. Ankara's stance towards the Kurdish groups is rooted in its long-standing conflict with the PKK, viewing the SDF and YPG as extensions of the PKK and thus a severe threat. This fundamental disagreement on the Kurdish issue heightened tensions between Türkiye and the EU, with Erdoğan repeatedly threatening to withdraw from the 2016 migration agreement in response to EU criticism. In addition, Türkiye accused the EU of ignoring PKK activities within Europe. Consequently, Türkiye's actions and threats to unlock migratory routes to Europe escalated political tensions within the EU during this period (Chudziak, 2019).

According to the previous discussions, the EU's response to Türkiye's military interventions in Syria from 2017 to 2019 was complex, characterized by the recognition of legitimate security concerns and management of internal diplomatic divisions. The divergence in views on Kurdish groups, the need for humanitarian considerations, and the overarching goal of regional stability framed the EU's cautious and often reactive stance. The EU's foreign policy during this period exemplified the challenges of balancing realist security imperatives with the ideals of neoliberal institutionalism, highlighting the intricate dynamics of international relations and foreign policy decision-making.

- **The Astana Process and EU's Position**

The 2016 Euphrates Shield operation was instrumental in initiating the Astana process, a diplomatic effort involving Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to establish a *modus vivendi* in Syria (European Parliament, 2019, p. 02). Despite the significance of the Astana process in capturing diplomatic momentum and contributing to the establishment of a ceasefire—an objective that the EU also sought—the EU neither participated in nor supported this initiative (Siccardi, 2021, p. 21). This lack of involvement underscored the EU's peripheral role in this key diplomatic endeavor, despite its alignment with the ceasefire goals pursued by the EU.

This development laid the groundwork for a growing divergence between Türkiye, which began to coordinate more closely with Russia and Iran, and the EU, which remained focused on the Geneva process characterized by its Western orientation. The Astana process stood as a critical juncture in Syrian diplomacy, showcasing the collaborative efforts of regional powers while highlighting the absence of direct EU engagement. This dynamic reflected broader geopolitical shifts and the complex interplay of interests in the Syrian conflict, where the EU's aspirations for peace and stability intersected but did not align in practice with the mechanisms that drove ceasefire agreements.

Building on this, the EU did not formally endorse the Astana process, as it believed the process lacked inclusivity and transparency. Instead, the EU remained committed to the Geneva process as the primary forum for negotiating Syria's future, emphasizing that any agreement must be inclusive and respect Syria's territorial integrity. The EU's support for the Astana process was contingent on its alignment with international efforts and adherence to humanitarian principles, viewing the de-escalation zones as a temporary measure that could pave the way for a sustainable political resolution (Yırcalı, 2017, p. 21).

The EU viewed the guarantors in the Astana process—Türkiye, Russia, and Iran—as the "other" because they belonged to a different political camp with distinct interests and political visions (Siousiouras & Chourdakis, 2017, p. 06). This perception influenced the EU's cautious stance towards the Astana process, which it saw as lacking the inclusiveness and transparency essential for lasting peace. Although the process achieved some progress in de-escalation, the EU believed it did not align with its values and principles focused on inclusiveness, transparency, and international legitimacy.

Thus, the EU preferred the Geneva process, led by the United Nations and involving broader international participation. The EU believed that sustainable solutions to the Syrian conflict had to be based on international consensus that included all concerned parties and respected human rights and state sovereignty (Yırcalı, 2017, p. 42).

The EU has navigated a complex landscape in addressing the Syrian conflict from 2017 to 2019, employing a multi-faceted approach that encompasses diplomatic engagement, and security measures in its new strategy. This period was marked by significant events including Turkish military interventions in Syria, the establishing of Astana process, and multiple Brussels conferences organized by the EU. The EU's policy towards the Syrian conflict during this phase was defined by its commitment to humanitarian aid, diplomatic efforts to achieve a political resolution, and managing the implications of the conflict on its borders. The EU's stance oscillated between supporting a political transition in Syria and protecting its member states from the spill-over effects of the conflict, such as the refugee crisis and terrorism.

4.1.5. Fifth Phase: Multi-Dimension Dynamics (2020-2024)

At this phase, the EU was also unable to achieve any influence on the political landscape, and was unable to influence the diplomatic situation as a result of the cessation of the Geneva Peace Process. However, it played an effective role in providing humanitarian assistance to Syrian civil society and Syrian refugees. Moreover, this phase witnessed the normalization of relations with Syria by the Arab League, as well as a Turkish normalization discourse, but the Union's stance remained strict towards the Syrian regime, and it warned against the wave of normalization, explaining that the conditions that contributed to the crisis still existed. As for the Union's relationship with Türkiye regarding the Syrian conflict, the phase began with tensions and ended with an optimistic improvement. The refugee issue was an important factor in changing the shape of relations between them, in addition to other factors. Nevertheless, it received the most attention from both parties.

Four years after the EU-Türkiye refugee agreement, Europe's strategy of externalizing migration responsibility to its neighbors, especially Türkiye, has become increasingly prevalent (Terry, 2021). This strategy persisted amidst ongoing disagreements among EU member states on how to manage refugee flows. In response to this approach and to their condemning regarding the Turkish military presence northern Syria, President Erdoğan repeatedly threatened to "open the gates" to Europe for the millions of Syrian refugees residing in Türkiye. These threats materialized in February 2020, shortly after renewed violence in Idlib and the death of 33 Turkish soldiers in an airstrike, when the Turkish government opened its borders with the EU (Kizilkaya, Hamdi, & Salman, 2021, p. 244). This led to the gathering of thousands of migrants and refugees at the Turkish-Greek border, the strongly rejected Türkiye's use of migratory pressure for political purposes, and insured that the two parties stand to benefit from the continuation of the cooperation and commitment (Council of the EU, 2020), these tensions are known as the Meric (Evros) River crisis.

Later in March, Erdoğan visited Brussels to discuss bilateral relations with EU leaders, focusing on migration. The primary goal was to clarify mutual positions on the EU-Türkiye migration agreement. The EU reaffirmed its financial commitments under the agreement and expressed concern about the humanitarian situation on the Türkiye-Syria border, with the President of the European Council affirming the EU's readiness to provide support. Moreover, to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Turkish authorities transported migrants and refugees away from the Greek border and closed borders with Greece and Bulgaria, except for commercial

traffic (Ianni, Meral, & Giannotta, May 2021, p. 20). The EU welcomed Türkiye's more constructive approach but maintained a cautious stance. During the March 2021 European Council meeting, European leaders emphasized that Türkiye needed to sustain its de-escalation efforts to initiate the positive agenda they had promised. They also agreed to revisit and reassess the state of relations with Türkiye at a later date (Scazzieri, 2021, p. 06).

Türkiye's decision to open the borders served as a powerful reminder to European leaders, as president Erdoğan articulated in a March 2021 article for Bloomberg. He stated, "The surest path to achieving peace and stability runs through Ankara" concerning the Syrian conflict. He also suggested that Türkiye might adopt a similar action when facing future challenges in its Syria policy (Erdoğan R. T., 2021). This crisis compelled the EU to reaffirm the importance of its partnership with Türkiye as a critical part of the EU's external action (European Council, 2021). This dynamic undoubtedly enhanced Türkiye's leverage over the EU and its member states, granting Ankara a strategic advantage in this regard (Siccardi, 2021, p. 21).

Analyzing this event from neorealist perspective, is most applicable in this context⁹⁴, Türkiye's decision to open its borders leveraged this anarchic environment, utilizing its geographical and political significance to pressure the EU into reaffirming their partnership. This maneuver not only underscored Türkiye's pivotal role in managing the refugee crisis but also illustrated how states navigate and exploit the anarchic nature of international relations to achieve strategic advantages. By leveraging its control over refugee flows, Türkiye aimed to balance power dynamics with the EU, seeking to assert its influence and gain strategic advantages. This strategic use of migration flows served to enhance Türkiye's leverage, positioning it as an indispensable player in regional stability and security discussions.

Türkiye's exploitation of this crisis not only highlighted the importance of the EU assuming its responsibilities towards the ongoing Syrian conflict but also demonstrated how refugee flows can be used as a political pressure tool, including exerting pressure on Russia over tensions in certain areas of Idlib. The escalation at the Turkish-Greek border in February 2020 underscored the complex tensions between the EU and Türkiye and revealed the ongoing challenges in developing a cohesive and comprehensive approach to managing the refugee

⁹⁴ Neorealism is the most appropriate theoretical framework for analyzing Türkiye's decision to open its borders during the refugee crisis because it focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system, state-centric power dynamics, and strategic decision-making, which are key elements in understanding Türkiye's actions and objectives in this context. Other theories would offer different lenses, but they might not capture the strategic, power-oriented behavior that is central to neorealism.

crisis. It also showed how neighboring countries could capitalize on the weaknesses in European migration policies to achieve their objectives.

In 2021, the EU continued its soft power policy towards Syria, renewing economic and financial sanctions on the Syrian regime due to human rights violations and the ongoing-armed conflict, while emphasizing support for the UN efforts to achieve a comprehensive political solution (Hallergard, Daher, Altalli, & Veen, 2021). The goal of the sanctions, according to the EU, was to put pressure on the Syrian regime to halt repression and negotiate a lasting political settlement of the Syrian crisis in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (European Council, 2021). The EU also rejected the Syrian presidential elections held in May 2021, considering them neither free nor fair, and refused to fund reconstruction until a genuine political transition is achieved, also rejecting any normalization with the Syrian regime while affirming the right of refugees to voluntarily and safely return to their homes (Hamidi, 2021).

Regarding the relations between Türkiye and the EU in 2021, they continued to be strained due to the ongoing Syrian conflict and the influx of refugees. The management of refugee flows and Türkiye's geopolitical maneuvers played a significant role in shaping these dynamics. Despite continuous criticisms, the agreement between the EU and Türkiye on managing refugee flows persisted.

To open a new chapter in relations, Erdoğan proposed two options to the EU: The first was a complete 180-degree shift involving full engagement using military, economic, and diplomatic tools. However, this scenario seemed unlikely due to the EU's stance on the Syrian uprising over the past decade and its focus on a soft foreign policy approach. The second, more viable option was for the EU to support Türkiye and become part of the solution in Syria, achieving maximum impact at minimal cost (Erdoğan R. T., 2021). Theoretically, this proposal reflects a strategic attempt to leverage Türkiye's military and geopolitical significance by offering the EU a pragmatic choice. As the first option did not align with the EU's soft foreign policy approach, he directly aimed to gain the second, which is full support of the EU in accordance with the Turkish vision. This pragmatic approach sought mutual benefits, leveraging Türkiye's existing capabilities and minimizing the EU's direct involvement, thus addressing power dynamics and managing risk effectively.

The geopolitical scene in Syria remained turbulent and unstable, with profound repercussions in Europe, particularly concerning the refugee issue. Its policy continued to focus

on renewing sanctions and holding Brussels Conferences on the Future of Syria and the Region. In addition, the union reiterated its call for sustainable political solution for Syria. From 2020 to 2024, the EU was unable to influence the military dynamics or significantly influence diplomatic developments in Syria. However, it played a significant role in supporting Syrian civil society and refugees, contributing substantially to ongoing humanitarian efforts (Hallergard, Daher, & Altalli, 2021).

In this context, the EU and Türkiye strengthened their dialogue and cooperation in foreign policy and security. However, this cooperation faced challenges, notably Türkiye's declining alignment with the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), dropping significantly from 97% in 2007 to 7% in 2022 (European Commission, 2022), and its refusal to participate in EU sanctions against Russia. Because of these dynamics, the relationship between the EU and Türkiye shifted towards competition, moving away from the previous cooperation pattern (Lesser, Levin, Taştan, & Ünlühisarcıklı, 2024, p. 03). This competition drew Türkiye closer to Russia. The Transatlantic Trends survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) revealed that Türkiye was perceived as the least reliable ally by participants from all other countries included in the survey (GMF, 2021).

Considering these interactions, the Syrian complex conflict was existential crisis resulting in long-term implications on Türkiye–EU relations. Regarding the membership, "as of June 2022, 16 of the 35 negotiating chapters have been opened and only one chapter has, provisionally, been closed (İçener, 2022, p. 72)", reflecting slow progress influenced by various political factors, the Syrian conflict has gained the great importance. On the other hand, Erşen and Köstem argue that, "although Ankara's EU accession process currently seems stalled, it is nevertheless an official candidate country and enjoys significant political and economic links with the EU countries" (Erşen & Köstem, 2020, p. 242).

Later on February 6, 2023, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck vast areas of southern Türkiye and northern Syria, causing significant destruction and loss of life. In Syria, EU-funded humanitarian partners conducted search and rescue operations and continued to provide shelter, water and sanitation services, healthcare, and essential needs (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2023). Additionally, the EU committed to funding human security and resilience post-earthquake. In the latter part of 2023, the EU adopted a non-humanitarian aid package worth €57 million for the Syrian people, focusing on earthquake-affected areas (EEAS, 2024). In 2024, the EU planed to partner with local and international

civil society organizations to encourage children in the affected areas to reintegrate or remain in schools, and to provided farmers in these regions with inputs, infrastructure, and equipment (Ibid). Considering this, the EU has been at the forefront of international efforts to assist the Syrian people in the wake of this devastating natural disaster by providing urgent humanitarian aid and committing to long-term reconstruction and recovery.

In Türkiye, the EU immediately mobilized support for the Turkish people following the earthquake. Its humanitarian partners on the ground responded by providing shelter, water, sanitation, hygiene services, healthcare, and distributing food supplies and relief items such as blankets, winter clothing, and other essential aid. The international community pledged a total of €7 billion at the "Together for the People of Türkiye and Syria" donor conference to support humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in the affected areas €6.05 on the amount was for Türkiye (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2023). The funds allocated to Türkiye covered humanitarian needs and aid in rebuilding the damaged regions, ensuring all international building standards in seismic areas are met.

After the devastating earthquake that struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria in February 2023, Türkiye managed to hold presidential and parliamentary elections amidst difficult conditions and significant challenges. Despite the substantial impact of the earthquake on infrastructure, the economy, and society, the authorities organized the elections on time, reflecting relative political stability and organizational capability. The challenges also included the refugee issue, which was one of the key topics in the election campaigns (Kanlı, 2023). The fierce competition between the main alliances revealed a deep division in Turkish public opinion, making the elections crucial in determining the country's political direction. Erdoğan's victory reinforced the continuity of his domestic and foreign policies, especially with the EU.

In late 2023, the EU issued the seventh annual report of the facility for refugees in Türkiye, emphasizing the need for enhanced coordination with Türkiye. The report underscored the critical importance of building a strategic partnership with Türkiye to achieve stability in Syria and the region (European Commission, 2023). This is a positive indicator of improved relations between them, and recognition of Türkiye's importance in preventing the influx of refugees and supporting stability in Syria (DG NEAR, 2023; The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, 2023). If we want to characterize the EU-Turkish relations after the elections, we can say that it is fairly stable, yet there are some dynamics influencing these relations:

- **Common Security Challenges:** Shared security threats, especially the risk of terrorism and instability in Syria, were a key factor in driving cooperation between the EU and Türkiye (Triantaphyllou, Filis, & Aydin, 2021). Both parties recognized the importance of joint coordination to address these challenges.
- **Economic Pressures:** Economic pressures resulting from the ongoing Syrian crisis increased the need for economic cooperation between the EU and Türkiye (Adar & Püttmann, 2022, p. 01). Both parties sought to develop joint initiatives to support the Turkish economy and alleviate the financial burden of hosting Syrian refugees.
- **Regional Geopolitical Competition:** Geopolitical competition in the region, especially with the increasing Russian influence in Syria, continued to affect EU-Turkish relations. Köstem pointed out that "the current cooperation in Syria have offered both Ankara and Moscow the opportunity to display strength to the West and demonstrate that they can work towards accomplishing strategic tasks without support from the U.S. or the EU" (Köstem, 2020, p. 08). This reality pushed the EU towards more coordination with Türkiye to balance this influence.
- **Developments in Türkiye's EU Accession Process:** Despite the continued suspension of Türkiye's EU accession negotiations (Ianni, Açıkgöz, & Giannotta, 2021, p. 18); this period saw some attempts to revive this process, linking it to cooperation on the Syrian issue.

Based on the aforementioned sentences, the period 2020-2024 between the EU and Türkiye can be described as one of "cautious cooperation and strategic manoeuvring". During this time, tensions and challenges related to the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis persisted, but were also accompanied by efforts to collaborate in addressing humanitarian crises following the devastating 2023 earthquake. Despite the necessary cooperation in certain issues, the relations remained fraught with competition and political manoeuvring, with Türkiye striving to achieve strategic gains through its geopolitical position, while the EU aimed to maintain regional stability, along with strategic interests.

In 22nd of July 2024 European countries, including Romania and Austria, called, prior to the meeting of EU foreign ministers, for a re-evaluation of relations and communication with the Syrian regime. According to a report by the British Financial Times newspaper issued, the foreign ministers of Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia sent a message to the chief diplomat in the EU that stated: "Our goal is a more active,

outcome-driven, and Syria operational policy. This would allow us to increase our political leverage [and] the effectiveness of our humanitarian assistance." In the letter, they suggested ten areas that should be discussed "frankly and without bias," which were outlined in a separate non-paper. The 10 areas include strategic exchange with Arab partners, further developing the EU approach to early recovery, dealing with unintended negative impacts of EU sanctions, and creating conditions for the return of migrants to Syria. They also proposed the establishment of an EU-Syria envoy, who would be tasked with re-engaging the Syrian ambassador in Brussels and liaising with Syrian and regional actors. Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg said: "After 13 years of war, we have to admit that our policy towards Syria has not matured well. Despite the bitterness of the situation, with the help of Iran and Russia, the Assad regime remains in power and the Syrian opposition is fragmented or completely in exile - the EU can no longer turn a blind eye to this reality" (Brzozowski, 2024). This call to re-evaluate relations is a sudden change in the EU's policy, which shifted from calling for the overthrow of the regime in 2011 and committed to UN Resolution 2254 since 2015. Recognizing the status quo according to this call takes a new direction that may lead to normalizing relations in the future. The year 2024 will be the beginning of a new phase in relations between the EU and Syria.

After reviewing the Union's response during all phases, we can reach the conclusion that it tackled new realities through old means, so the logic of protecting European hegemony faced major challenges after 2011, especially with the violent transformations that Syria witnessed. During this conflict, the EU was almost completely absent, although the significance of the Syria for it, as we referred at beginning of this section. Many European countries were keen to call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down. However, this speech was not met with sufficient support for the Syrian opposition from Europe. European governments have not made serious efforts to end the Syrian conflict, choosing instead to pursue a soft power policy. When the conflict developed into a civil war, even those countries that provided military support to opposition groups, such as the United Kingdom and France, did not provide sufficient support to enable these groups to win. The EU did not offer political alternatives to resolve the conflict. Instead, the Union limited its activities to providing humanitarian aid to Syria, treating the symptoms while ignoring the root problems.

The lack of political action and insufficient military support for the Syrian opposition tarnished Europe's and the West's reputation locally in Syria. It also paved the way for ISIS to present themselves as alternative to the Syrian opposition, which was seen as conspiring with the West without achieving tangible results. The rise of these groups in Syria is partly due to

Europe's lack of foresight, as groups like ISIS emerged from local grievances such as a noticeable lack of political alternatives. This also opened the way for direct Russian intervention and the establishment of a military base in the Mediterranean. In addition, the EU left Türkiye, the country nominated for membership in the Union, facing security risks, which prompted it to ally with Russia for its military intervention to protect its southern borders, and to establish coordination with Russia and Iran on the Astana process.

On the other hand, the EU's policy towards the conflict has not undergone any obvious changes, as it has remained committed to calling for the change of the Assad regime and the implementation of UN Resolution 2254. It has also continued to oppose normalization movements with the Syrian regime. Its policy also focused significantly on addressing the refugee crisis resulting from this conflict, indicating that it deals with the outcomes of the conflict rather than its roots. From a realist perspective, it can be said that the EU is dealing with the outcomes of the Syrian conflict because this poses a direct threat to its security and stability, while addressing the roots of the conflict may be more complex and require strategies that were not available due to many reasons, the most important one was the internal division.

From a constructivist perspective, the EU's focus on the refugee crisis rather than the conflict itself can be interpreted as a reflection of concerns about the impact of the refugees' identities on the cultural and social identities of member states. The fear of potential security challenges and demographic changes has significantly influenced decision-making within the EU. To further explore the EU's policy towards the conflict in general and the refugee crisis in particular, we allocate a dedicated space to study its response through its institutions, bodies, and other forums, as well as the involvement of key actors in the conflict, such as Türkiye. The following section discusses the Institutional and Strategic Frameworks of the EU's Response.

4.2. Institutional and Strategic Frameworks of the EU's Response

EU Policy towards the Conflict through its Central Institutions

The EU's response to the conflict is shaped by its intricate institutional and strategic frameworks, reflecting the roles and decisions of its central bodies. Four main decision-making institutions, each playing distinct roles in the law-making process, guide the administration of the EU. These are the European Council; the Council of the EU;⁹⁵ the European Commission,

⁹⁵ The European Council sets the EU's overall political direction and is composed of the heads of state or government of member states, along with the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission.

and the European Parliament, which convenes in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg. Together, these institutions provide the EU with policy direction and governance (European Union). The conflict has led to catastrophic humanitarian consequences, substantial geopolitical ramifications, and a significant refugee crisis, compelling the EU institutions to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the conflict through its diverse institutions. Here, we focus on two key EU institutions: The European Council and the European Commission, to explore their roles and decisions in response to the Syrian conflict, which are particularly important for our study.

4.2.1. The European Council

The European Council,⁹⁶ is the highest level of political cooperation among EU member states, which compose the heads of state or government of EU member states, the European Council President, and the President of the European Commission (European Council, 2024). The Council sets the EU's political agenda by prioritizing key issues and guiding policy direction. The President prepares the meeting agenda, and leaders engage in discussions and negotiations to reach consensus. This decision-making process requires compromise and balancing diverse member state perspectives, ensuring unified and balanced decisions (Faster Capital, 2024). Therefore, it played a significant role in shaping the EU's strategic direction regarding the Syrian conflict. Its conclusions and statements provided the overarching framework for the EU's approach, emphasizing the condemning of violence, the importance of diplomatic engagement, and the necessity of a political solution.

Its involvement in defining the EU's foreign policy framework on Syria was important regarding harmonizing diverse national perspectives and ensuring a unified EU policy. This

It does not pass laws but provides strategic guidance and resolves complex issues. The Council of the European Union (Council of the EU) is a decision-making body that, along with the European Parliament, adopts EU laws and coordinates policies, composed of government ministers from each member state depending on the policy area. The European Council focuses on high-level political priorities, while the Council of the EU handles specific legislative and policy decisions.

⁹⁶ The European Council is the strategic decision-making body that sets the overall direction and political priorities for the EU. It deals with complex or sensitive issues that cannot be resolved at lower levels of intergovernmental cooperation. The Council is responsible for establishing the EU's common foreign and security policy, taking into account the EU's strategic interests and defense implications. Additionally, it nominates and appoints candidates to certain high-profile EU-level roles, such as the European Central Bank and the European Commission. In addressing each issue, the Council can request the European Commission to make a proposal, pass it on to the Council of the EU for further action, or make decisions directly. The Council usually meets four times a year, but the President can convene additional meetings to address urgent issues. It generally decides issues by consensus, but in some cases, decisions are made by unanimity or qualified majority voting. Only the heads of state or government have the right to vote. For more information, please visit https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies/european-council_en.

consensus was significant in presenting a cohesive political stance to the international community amid the ongoing conflict. Politically, its conclusions on Syria frequently underscored the necessity of achieving a political solution, deemed essential for attaining lasting peace and stability in the region. Its diplomatic efforts were concentrated on fostering a political transition in Syria that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people while preserving the country's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. However, despite its efforts, the European Council remained indecisive and did not implement measures capable of achieving a radical solution to the conflict. Below is an analysis of the most significant decisions, statements, and meeting conclusions related to Syria from the onset of the conflict in 2011 until 2024.



Table 11 Analysis of the most significant decisions, statements, and meeting conclusions of European Council

<i>Year</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Main Focus</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
2011	<u>24-25 March</u>	The focus was on calling for dialogue and expressing concern about escalating violence (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2011).	The European Council's response to the Syrian conflict in 2011 demonstrated a strategic evolution from diplomatic engagement to support for political transition and opposition forces. It began by focusing on dialogue, reflecting an approach aimed at reducing violence and promoting internal political solutions, but this approach contributed the escalation. This was clear in the October Conclusions "The Syrian people must be able to define the future of their country without the fear of repression", this speech considers as a call for more uprising. As the situation deteriorated, the approach shifted to addressing the escalating humanitarian crisis, imposing sanctions, and ultimately endorsing the Syrian political opposition and calling for Assad to step down. The strengths of this policy included the gradual escalation, reflecting a response to the conflict's developments. However, there were weaknesses such as the delay in taking strong measures immediately, the reliance on sanctions, which faced criticism regarding their effectiveness, and the risk of escalating the conflict due to explicit support for the opposition.
	<u>23-24 June</u>	The focus shifted to the humanitarian situation and the urgent need for international action, and the statements addressed military activity near the Turkish border and emphasized the need for new sanctions (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2011).	
	<u>23 October</u>	The emphasis was on supporting political opposition and calling for Assad's resignation as part of a political transition, highlighting the importance of the Syrian people being able to define their own future without fear of repression. The Council also commended the political opposition's efforts to create a unified platform, viewing the formation of the SNC as an important advancement (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2011).	
2012	<u>1-2 March</u>	The Council emphasized the need for accountability for those responsible for atrocities and supported efforts to document these crimes. It also reaffirmed its commitment to increasing pressure on the Syrian regime and called for further targeted restrictive measures. The Council stressed the necessity for Assad to step aside to allow for a peaceful transition, with the EU ready to develop a new partnership and provide assistance once the democratic transition begins (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012).	Through the review of its statements in 2012, it is evident that the Council was active in condemning violence and supporting international efforts to find a political solution. However, it did not take any new steps or significant decisions that could stop the conflict or address its root causes. The measures mainly focused on dealing with the consequences of the conflict, such as supporting the opposition and increasing sanctions, without providing fundamental solutions to end the conflict. This approach indicates that the European Council was more
	<u>28-29 June</u>	Reaffirmed the implementation of Kofi Annan's six-point plan,	

		including the ceasefire. It encouraged Syrian opposition groups to agree on shared principles for achieving a peaceful transition and called for unified action by the UN Security Council to increase pressure, including the adoption of comprehensive sanctions (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012).	concerned with addressing the new symptoms of the conflict rather than finding definitive solutions to stop the violence and address the underlying causes, reflecting the challenges of diplomatic efforts in facing complex and intractable crises.
	18-19 October	The Council supported Lakhdar Brahimi's efforts to find a political solution. It called on regional and international actors to support these efforts, and condemned the shelling of Turkish territory by Syrian forces and called for the respect of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of neighboring countries (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012).	
	13-14 December	Welcomed the results of the Friends of the Syrian People meeting. It tasked the Foreign Affairs Council with exploring all options to support the opposition and protect civilians. The Council reiterated the necessity of a political transition towards a future without Assad, with full support for human rights and minority rights. The Council confirmed that addressing the Syrian crisis remains a top priority (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012).	
2013	7-8 February	The focus was on the urgent need for a political solution by supporting and recognizing the Syrian National Coalition (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2013).	The European Council's focus on supporting and recognizing the Syrian National Coalition in February 2013 underscores its commitment to finding a viable political solution to the conflict. By endorsing the Coalition, the Council aimed to empower a unified opposition capable of leading a transition away from Assad's regime, which was seen as illegitimate due to its widespread human rights violations. This move was intended to provide a clear alternative to the Assad regime, thereby facilitating a pathway towards peace and stability in Syria. The shift in emphasis towards preparing for the Syria conference, as outlined in the December 2013 statement, signifies the Council's dedication to a diplomatic and
	19-20 December	The emphasis shifted towards preparing for the Syria conference ⁹⁷ in January 2014, aimed at achieving a democratic transition as outlined in the Geneva communiqué (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2013).	

⁹⁷ For more details about the Geneva II conference on Syria visit: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24628442>

			internationally supported approach to resolving the conflict. The Geneva communiqué provided a framework for a democratic transition, and the 2014 conference represented a crucial step in implementing this framework.
2014	26-27 June	The focus was on addressing the root causes of irregular migration as a key aspect of EU migration policy. This included enhancing cooperation with countries of origin and transit like Türkiye, strengthening their migration and border management capacities, and integrating migration policies with the EU's external and development policies. The Council underscored the importance of expanding Regional Protection Programmes, particularly near regions of origin, and increasing contributions to global resettlement efforts, especially in light of the Syrian crisis. Additionally, the Council called for a more forceful approach to combating smuggling and trafficking, establishing an effective common return policy, and fully implementing the Task Force Mediterranean's actions to manage migration flows and protect migrants' lives (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2014).	The transformation into a focus on the issue of refugees and its emphasis on the Protection System was clear in the statement of the European Council in 2014. Notably, Türkiye established the Temporary Protection Regulation ⁹⁸ in that year. This shift signifies that 2014 was a significant year in which the EU's attention moved from solely addressing the conflict in Syria to also tackling the resulting refugee crisis.
2015	15 October	Emphasized the need for a coordinated strategy to combat ISIS and other terrorist groups. It called for a political process based on the Geneva Communiqué. In addition, highlighted cooperation with the UN and regional countries to find a political solution (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2015).	It obvious that the 2015 European Council statements reveal a marked shift in focus from addressing the broader Syrian conflict to specifically targeting the radical organizations that emerged as a consequence of it. Additionally, these statements underscored the necessity for cooperation with regional countries neighboring Syria, notably Türkiye. The EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan established in November 2015 exemplified this shift.
	17-18 December	Reaffirmed its support for the Global Coalition's efforts against ISIS, and its active engagement in the International Syria Support Group (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2015)	
2016	18-19 February	Supported the commitments of the International Syria Support Group and urged swift and full implementation by all parties. It stressed the urgent need for a nationwide ceasefire, except for UN-designated	The Council's approach in 2016 showed a lack of clear enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient emphasis on accountability for attacks. Additionally, The statements

⁹⁸ In 2014, Türkiye established the Temporary Protection Regulation, which provided protection and assistance to Syrian nationals, stateless persons, and refugees from Syria who came to Türkiye. Kindly visit: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2014/en/108062>

	terrorist groups. Called the Syrian regime and allies were stop attacking non-terrorist opposition, which hinders peace, benefits ISIS, and worsens the refugee crisis. Raised concern about military escalation and condemned civilian infrastructure bombings, calling for an immediate halt, especially in the Aleppo-Turkish border corridor (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2016).	underscored its growing concern over Russia's pivotal role in the Syrian conflict and its impact on the crisis.
<u>28 June</u>	The focus was on the significant reduction in crossings from Türkiye to the Greek islands, the implementation of legislation in Türkiye regarding the treatment of migrants, and the progress made in implementing the action points outlined in the EU-Türkiye statement (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2016).	
<u>20-21 October</u>	Condemned the Syrian regime and Russia's attacks on civilians in Aleppo, call for an end to the violence, and emphasize the need for humanitarian access and accountability. It demanded a cessation of hostilities and an UN-led political process, highlighted EU cooperation with regional actors like Türkiye, and included a strategic debate on relations with Russia, as it was very active at then (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2016).	
<u>15 December</u>	Called for four emergency measures: safe evacuation of Aleppo residents under UN supervision, immediate aid and protection for all inhabitants, genuine protection for medical personnel and facilities, and adherence to international humanitarian law throughout Syria. The Council insists that hostilities must cease immediately and supports a UN-led transition as per UNSC Resolution 2254 (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2016).	

2019	17-18 October	The statement condemned Türkiye's unilateral military action in North East Syria, emphasizing the unacceptable human suffering it caused, its undermining of the fight against ISIS, and the significant threat it posed to European security. The Council acknowledged the US-Türkiye announcement of a pause in military operations and called on Türkiye to cease its military activities, withdraw its forces, and comply with international humanitarian law. It also noted that Member States had decided to stop issuing arms export licenses to Türkiye (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2019).	The Council's statement and its condemnation of Turkish military intervention in northeastern Syria confirm its inability, especially after a two-year absence from addressing the Syrian issue. Regarding that, its statements in 2017 and 2018 did not include anything related to Syria, but rather entrusted the task to the Council of EU, which began holding conferences on the future of Syria from 2017. The condemnation and criticism of Türkiye marked the beginning of tensions between the EU and Türkiye, which ultimately led Türkiye to open its borders in the following year, 2020. However, Türkiye views the presence of Kurdish militias, particularly the People's Protection Units (YPG), in northeastern Syria as a direct threat to its national security. Türkiye considers the YPG an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the US, and the EU. The primary goal of Türkiye's military intervention was to eliminate this perceived threat and establish a "safe zone" along its border. From Türkiye's perspective, the EU's condemnation of its military operations without offering viable alternatives or support for Türkiye's security concerns and refugee burden is seen as unbalanced and unfair.
2020	21 February	The Council condemned the renewed military offensive in Idlib, Syria by the Syrian regime and Russia. It called for an immediate end to hostilities, respect for international humanitarian and human rights laws, and unimpeded humanitarian access. The Council again supported a political solution per UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and stressed accountability for international law violations, calling for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court (European Council, 2020).	It is noteworthy that this statement came just a few days after the forces of the Syrian regime and Russia killed 33 Turkish soldiers. From this, it is evident that the Council did not support Türkiye's position in its statement; instead, it solely condemned the actions of the Syrian regime and Russia without offering any support for Türkiye. Consequently, within days, Türkiye opened its borders, leading to the Meric (Evros) River crisis, which considers an important turning

	<u>10-11 December</u>	The European Council reaffirms the EU's strategic interest in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye. The offer of a positive EU-Türkiye agenda remains on the table, provided Türkiye shows readiness to promote a genuine partnership with the Union and its Member States and to resolve differences through dialogue and in accordance with international law. Such an agenda could cover the areas of the economy and trade, people to people contacts, High level dialogues and continued cooperation on migration issues. The European Council stresses the importance of keeping channels of communication between the EU and Türkiye open. The EU will also be prepared to continue providing financial assistance to Syrian refugees and host communities in Türkiye and to cooperate on the responsible management of migration flows towards all Member States and on stepping up efforts in the fight against migrant smuggler networks (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2020).	point in the Türkiye-EU relations.
2021	<u>24-25 June</u>	The Council called on the Commission to promptly propose continued financing for Syrian refugees and host communities in Türkiye. It reiterated the EU's openness to selective engagement with Russia on areas of mutual interest, inviting the Commission and High Representative to develop options with conditionalities for topics security policy, and multilateral issues like Syria (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021).	It primarily focuses on the continuation of financial support for refugees, without addressing the ongoing conflict in Syria. The emphasis is solely on refugees and the communities, including those in Türkiye. This statement was mainly directed at supporting refugees.
	<u>21-22 October</u>	Reiterated its expectation that the financing for Syrian refugees and host communities especially in Türkiye (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021)	

2023	29 November	The statement mentioned that in 2022, facilitated by Russia, Türkiye resumed high-level contacts with the Syrian regime, which contrasts with EU policy due to the lack of a political solution to the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, Türkiye remains a key player in Syria and shares the EU's goal of a stable and prosperous Syria. Türkiye maintains a significant military presence in northern Syria and conducts cross-border anti-terrorism operations against the PKK. Resettlement from Türkiye to the EU continues to exceed returns to Türkiye, with around 40,000 Syrian refugees resettled in the EU compared to 2,140 irregular migrants and asylum seekers returned to Türkiye from the Greek islands. Twenty EU Member States participated in the resettlement effort, supported by funding from the Commission and operational assistance from the EU Agency for Asylum (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2024).	The focus was on the importance of addressing the refugee crisis and finding solutions to the Syrian conflict in coordination with Türkiye. This statement was made in the context of a wave of normalization between several regional countries and the Syrian regime. The Council emphasized Türkiye's significant role in the conflict and the need for cooperation with Türkiye to achieve a viable solution.
2024	17-18 April	The Council reaffirmed the need to achieve conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified returns of Syrian refugees, as defined by UNHCR. It invited the High Representative and the Commission to review and enhance the effectiveness of EU assistance to Syrian refugees and displaced persons in Syria and in the region (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2024).	Its call for the safe return of refugees to Syria appears to be at odds with the current reality on the ground. While the Council advocates for creating safe conditions for refugees to return, the situation in Syria remains in a state of frozen conflict rather than moving towards a final resolution. This ongoing instability does not facilitate the safe return of refugees. Despite this, the European Council continues to push for their return, which seems impractical under the current circumstances.

In fact, the European Council's approach to the Syrian conflict has undergone significant evolution and transformation from 2011 to 2024. Initially, the Council focused on diplomatic engagement and dialogue called for the Assad to leave, emphasizing the need for political solutions and condemning violence. This approach gradually shifted towards addressing the escalating humanitarian crisis and supporting opposition forces, reflecting a strategic response to the conflict's developments.

Throughout the years, the Council's statements and decisions highlighted its commitment to finding a political solution, promoting accountability for atrocities, and increasing pressure on the Syrian regime through sanctions and international cooperation. However, the effectiveness of these measures often faced criticism, and the Council struggled to implement decisive actions that could achieve a radical resolution to the conflict. By 2014, the focus expanded to include the refugee crisis, with significant attention given to enhancing cooperation with regional countries like Türkiye and addressing irregular migration. This marked a pivotal shift in the Council's priorities, integrating migration policies with the EU's external and development strategies. In 2014, the Council's emphasis shifted towards combating terrorist organizations emerging from the conflict, exemplified by the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan (2015). This shift underscored the necessity for regional cooperation and targeted efforts against terrorism. In subsequent years, the Council's focus continued to adapt to the evolving dynamics of the conflict. The condemnation of Türkiye's military actions from 2016 to 2020 and the subsequent tensions between the EU and Türkiye highlighted the complexities of regional geopolitics. Despite these challenges, the Council maintained its emphasis on supporting refugees and addressing the humanitarian crisis.

Notably, most of the European Council's statements have consisted of condemnations and underscored its role in providing financial support to refugees, as well as the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254⁹⁹. This can be described as a soft policy approach, lacking any firm stance or practical action capable of stopping the conflict and finding a sustainable solution.

The most recent statements in 2023 and 2024 revealed an ongoing concern for the safe return of refugees, despite the persistent instability in Syria. The Council's call for creating

⁹⁹ For more information, see: "Resolution 2254 (2015)" https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf

conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns appears increasingly at odds with the reality of a frozen conflict. This disconnect underscores the limitations and challenges faced by the European Council in navigating the intricate and protracted Syrian crisis.

The European Council's evolving focus from diplomatic engagement to addressing humanitarian issues, combating terrorism, and managing the refugee crisis reflects its adaptive response to the multifaceted nature of the Syrian conflict. However, the Council's inability to achieve a definitive resolution highlights the enduring complexities and the need for sustained international cooperation and innovative diplomatic efforts.

4.2.2. The European Commission

It, as the EU's executive branch, is responsible for initiating and enforcing EU laws, managing policies, and drafting budgets. It consists of 28 commissioners¹⁰⁰, one from each member state, who operate independently. Each commissioner, approved by the European Parliament, has a specific field of responsibility rather than representing their home country. The Commission proposes legislation, implements Council decisions, ensures member state compliance with EU laws, and represents the EU in international negotiations¹⁰¹, making it crucial in shaping the EU's response to global issues like the Syrian conflict.

Its response in the initial stages of the Syrian conflict was multifaceted. Key measures included imposing comprehensive sanctions, such as a full arms embargo to prevent the supply of arms and military equipment to the Syrian government, travel bans restricting key Syrian officials from traveling to the EU or using its airspace and ports, and freezing the assets of these officials to limit their access to financial resources (Official Journal of the European Union, 2011). Additionally, the EU provided significant humanitarian aid, focusing on critical needs such as healthcare, food assistance, water, sanitation, and hygiene services. In 2024, the European Commission allocated over €149.3 million in humanitarian aid to assist millions of people inside Syria (European Commission, 2024). These measures were proposed and implemented by the European Commission through the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (European Commission, 2024).

¹⁰⁰ For detailed information, please see: <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/european-commission/44388>

¹⁰¹ The roles of the European Commission comprises for key areas: Firstly the strategy and policy, secondly the EU law, thirdly the budget and funding and fourthly the international relations: https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/role-european-commission_en

The Commission also worked to address the growing refugee crisis. In 2015, the Commission proposed a series of measures to address the crisis, including the relocation of 120,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other EU member states, increased support for frontline countries, and the establishment of hotspots for the registration and processing of asylum applications (European Court of Auditors, 2019). While these proposals faced resistance from some member states, they demonstrated the Commission's efforts to develop a coordinated and compassionate response to the humanitarian challenges posed by the Syrian conflict.

The Commission also supported diplomatic efforts to broker a political solution. The Commission consistently emphasized the need for a negotiated settlement based on the principles outlined in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, which called for a transitional governing body with full executive powers (European Commission, 2013). In addition, it supported the UN-led peace talks in Geneva, which aimed to bring together the Syrian regime and opposition to negotiate an end to the conflict.

On 14 March 2017, the Commission unveiled an EU strategy for Syria¹⁰², aimed at fostering a peaceful and stable Syrian nation characterized by a pluralistic and tolerant civil society. This strategy, endorsed in April 2017 and 2018, underscores the EU's dedication to Syria's unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence, advocating for a Syrian-led political transition in line with the 2012 Geneva communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Initially outlined within the EU regional strategy for Syria, Iraq, and the ISIS threat in 2015, the specific strategy for Syria was adopted by the European Parliament in May 2017 (European Parliament, 2019). The strategy also adopted by the Council of the EU, and depending on that the EU chaired of the Brussels Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" following up the London conference of February 2016, the Kuwait pledging conferences of 2013-15, the Berlin and Helsinki Conferences of 2014 and 2017 (Council of the EU, 2017). Since 2017, the main EU institution directly responsible for organizing these conferences has been the European Commission, working closely with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and other relevant bodies. The Commission has held eight rounds of this annual conference, each chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission.

¹⁰² For more information, see: "Council adopts EU strategy on Syria" <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03/fac-conclusions-syria/>

This annual conference aimed to provide ongoing support to the Syrian population and neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees, while mobilizing the international community to back a comprehensive and credible political solution to the Syrian conflict. The conferences facilitated and deepened dialogue with Syrian civil society, including representatives from Syria, neighbouring countries, and the diaspora, as well as key UN stakeholders, EU member states, representatives from more than 70 countries, and international NGOs. These events reaffirmed the efforts to achieve a negotiated political solution in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Below is the table summarize the eight rounds of the Brussels Conferences, including their dates, pledges, objectives and outcomes.



Table 12 Brussels Annual Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region

<i>Date</i>	<i>Pledges (€ Billion)</i>	<i>Main Objectives</i>	<i>Outcome and Analysis</i>
April 4-5, 2017	5.6	Tightening support for a sustainable political solution to the Syrian crisis through an inclusive political transitional path led by Syria under the supervision of the United Nations, while discussing the prospects for assistance that will follow that agreement after the start of the real political transition with the participation of all parties.	Successful mobilization of international support, highlighting the EU's leading role in addressing the Syrian conflict. Noting that its timing was immediately after the success of the first Turkish military operation in northern Syria. After three rounds of the Astana process were held, led by Russia, Türkiye and Iran
April 24-25, 2018	3.5	Emphasizing an inclusive political process for Syria, per UNSCR 2254, addressing dignity, freedom, and preventing ISIS resurgence.	Continued strong financial commitments despite geopolitical challenges, reflecting the EU's sustained focus on humanitarian needs.
March 12-14, 2019	6.2	Focus on education, health, economic development, and support for Syrian civil society and regional stability.	Increased financial pledges underscore growing international concern and commitment to long-term stability and development in the region.
June 22-30, 2020	5.5	Emphasis on humanitarian aid amid COVID-19 pandemic and continued support for UN-led political process.	Adaptation to new global challenges (COVID-19) while maintaining commitment to political and humanitarian goals in Syria.
March 29-30, 2021	5.3	Focus on resilience, education, economic opportunities, and support for displaced Syrians and host communities.	Demonstrates ongoing international support and the importance of resilience-building in post-conflict recovery and stability.
May 9-10, 2022	6.4	Prioritization of humanitarian assistance, health, economic recovery, education, and protection services.	Reflects comprehensive approach to addressing multifaceted humanitarian and developmental needs in Syria and surrounding regions.
June 14-15, 2023	6.2	Emphasis on sustainable development, education, livelihoods, and political solutions, with focus on peace building.	Reinforces long-term commitment to sustainable development and peace, recognizing the need for holistic approaches to regional stability.
May 27, 2024	5.8	Focus on humanitarian aid, economic development, health, regional stability, and support for refugees.	Continued emphasis on balancing immediate humanitarian needs with long-term developmental and political goals to ensure comprehensive support.

The Commission has played a significant role in shaping the EU's response to the Syrian conflict through its legislative proposals, policy management, humanitarian aid efforts, and diplomatic engagement. While the Commission has consistently condemned the violence and human rights abuses perpetrated by the Syrian regime and its allies, its impact has been limited by the presence of other regional and global powers, internal divisions among EU member states, and the intransigence of the Syrian regime. However, the Commission faces the challenge of adapting its approach to address the changing dynamics on the ground and the long-term needs of the Syrian people. This may require a more proactive and assertive stance, as well as greater coordination and cooperation with other international actors. Ultimately, the success of the Commission's efforts will depend on its ability to balance competing interests and priorities, while remaining committed to the principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Despite the EU's significant efforts to advocate for Assad's departure in the interest of Syria's unity, democratic values, and human rights, it faced substantial challenges. The EU struggled to persuade the international coalition to undertake a large-scale military operation to change the regime. Alternatively, the EU could have enhanced its collaboration with regional countries and forces involved in the conflict, employing non-military measures to de-escalate tensions. Leveraging its foreign policy strengths, the EU had the potential to initiate the establishment of a Crisis Management Centre to coordinate the diplomatic efforts and humanitarian operations of both Member States and other regional actors (Stankov, 2019, p. 1033).

To navigate these challenges effectively, the EU recognized the necessity of a more integrated and comprehensive approach to its foreign policy. Consequently, it faced significant difficulties in implementing a cohesive policy response, both at the European Council and Commission levels. This initial failure highlighted the need for a more integrated approach to its foreign policy.

To effectively address the complexities of the Syrian conflict, the EU has used a comprehensive foreign policy strategy⁷. This strategic framework involves policies and forums designed to maximize the EU's diplomatic influence and operational effectiveness. By categorizing its efforts into Executive Bodies and Strategic Organizations, the EU aimed to create a multifaceted response that addresses the varied dimensions of the conflict. The Organizational and Executive Bodies include the European External Action Service (EEAS)

and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which aims to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries to the east and south, promoting regional stability, security, and prosperity. Meanwhile, the Strategic Organizations for Engagement involve leveraging international platforms such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Political Dialogue with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Strategic Dialogue with the League of Arab States (LAS) and the United Nations (UN). These forums are significant for addressing the conflict and its repercussions through coordinated diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. In addition, the EU cooperated and coordinated with non-member states like Türkiye. In the following, we detail the specific roles and impacts of these policies, organizations, actors and forums in shaping the EU's approach to the Syrian crisis:

4.2.3. Organizational and Executive Bodies

1. European External Action Service (EEAS)

Several bodies play specialized roles in helping the EU fulfil its tasks, particularly in responding to the Syrian conflict, including the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions that contribute to this effort, while others, such as the European Ombudsman and the European Data Protection Supervisor, ensure that the institutions comply with EU rules and procedures. The most significant body for our study is the European External Action Service (EEAS), which supports the EU in foreign affairs matters.

The EEAS represented a significant advancement aimed at streamlining and enhancing the EU's external action capabilities (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013, p. 1321). However, it did not consolidate all centres of foreign policy-making within the EU bureaucracy. Various internal actors, such as the Directorate-Generals for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO)¹⁰³, The Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR)¹⁰⁴, and The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and

¹⁰³ It is a branch of the European Commission responsible for designing European international cooperation and development policy and delivering aid worldwide. See: https://ec.europa.eu/dgs/human-resources/seniormanagementvacancies/CV_Encadext/act/act_getAvis.cfm?dossier=416366&langue=EN

¹⁰⁴ It plays a significant role in fostering stability, security, and prosperity in regions surrounding the EU, as well as preparing candidate and potential candidate countries for EU membership. See: https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/european-neighbourhood-and-enlargement-negotiations_en

Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO)¹⁰⁵, operate with their own distinct timelines, mechanisms, and procedures. While the European Council and the EEAS make efforts to coordinate these activities, the complexity and lack of uniformity among these actors can impede the overall effectiveness of EU foreign policy interventions (Veen, Ezzeddine, Napolitano, & Pellise, 2021, pp. 09-12). As a result, the establishment of the EEAS was important in providing a more cohesive and strategic approach to the EU's foreign policy, aiming to unify and strengthen its international presence.

Regarding the EU's actions during the Arab Uprisings in general, and the Syrian conflict in particular, they were significantly influenced by the institutional structures established by the Lisbon Treaty¹⁰⁶. This treaty created a balance between the EEAS and the European Commission on one hand, and between Brussels and third countries on the other. Additionally, the Lisbon Treaty established new institutional frameworks, such as the EU Special Representative and various Task Forces for certain member states (Bicchi, 2014, pp. 320-321). The announcement of the EEAS¹⁰⁷ coincided with the beginning of the Syrian conflict, adding complexity to the situation. The increase in the number of institutional actors led to a degree of fragmentation, allowing member states the opportunity to not comply with EU decisions in the field of external action (Smith, 2014, p. 45). This fragmentation was evident in the EU's response to the Syrian conflict, where some countries advocated for stronger intervention and support for the opposition, while others focused on humanitarian aid and diplomatic solutions, highlighting the challenges in achieving a cohesive foreign policy. Baucher suggests that the EU's involvement in the Syrian conflict is driven by three key factors: (1) the direct impact on the EU from the influx of refugees and the necessity to combat regionally-established terrorist groups like ISIS, (2) humanitarian considerations as the EU and its member states are the leading international aid donors to Syria, and (3) the EU's enhanced capabilities to act in conflict settings abroad. Since the creation of the EEAS, the EU has significantly improved its conflict mediation capacities, further explaining its interest in the Syrian conflict (Baucher, 2021, p. 04).

¹⁰⁵ It aims to provide rapid and effective assistance to victims of disasters and conflicts worldwide, ensuring that EU humanitarian aid is delivered efficiently and effectively. See. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/index_en

¹⁰⁶It amends the Treaty on EU and the Treaty establishing the European Community, was signed in Lisbon on December 13, 2007. see the full text on: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:FULL>

¹⁰⁷ It is responsible for implementing the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Since its establishment in 2011, the EEAS has been tasked with advancing global peace, prosperity, security, and safeguarding the interests of European citizens around the world through diplomatic efforts. See <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/en>

The EU's approach to formulating its policy towards Syria has primarily involved leveraging the competencies of the European Commission, while simultaneously operating 'under the radar' through the EEAS. This dual approach has significantly hampered the EU's ability to act decisively and has highlighted a disconnect between the EU's ambitions and its actual capabilities (Baucher, 2021, p. 13). The absence of a comprehensive strategy for Syria has led to the EU's conflict mediation efforts being deemed relatively ineffective (Maklad H. T., 2017, p. 30).

While the establishment of the EEAS marked a significant step towards a more cohesive and strategic EU foreign policy, the complexity and fragmentation within the EU's institutional framework continue to pose challenges. The response to the Syrian conflict exemplifies the difficulties in achieving a unified approach, highlighting the need for further integration and coordination among EU actors to enhance the effectiveness of its external actions.

To build on this context, the EEAS is paradoxically responsible for overseeing the CFSP, but faced significant challenges in taking substantial action due to the politically sensitive nature of the Syrian conflict. The intergovernmental decision-making process of the CFSP often leaves the EEAS constrained, especially when member states are divided (Baucher, 2021, p. 14). Despite these limitations, the EEAS has shown ingenuity in its diplomatic engagements, leveraging its extensive network of EU Delegations to communicate and represent EU positions internationally, thereby maintaining a degree of influence and involvement in the Syrian issue.

Further enhancing these diplomatic strategies, the CFSP is primarily associated with the EEAS. The EEAS supports the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who oversees the CSDP, coordinating and implementing the EU's external policies, including security and defence initiatives. The European Council and the Council of the EU also play significant roles in decision-making processes related to the CSDP (European Parliament, 2017, p. 02).

Building on the diplomatic groundwork laid by the EEAS, the CSDP has emerged as a pivotal component in the EU's comprehensive approach to crisis management, with an emphasis on enhancing the union's defence and crisis management capabilities (Borrel, 2021, p. 01). The CSDP's significance is evident in its multifaceted contributions to regional stability and security, especially within the volatile context of the Mediterranean region, a focal point exacerbated by the Syrian conflict. It aimed to strengthen the EU's ability to respond effectively

to crises and conflicts, thereby contributing to international peace and security. It encompasses a range of missions and operations, which include military and civilian initiatives designed to manage crises, support post-conflict reconstruction, and enhance the security capabilities of partner countries (EU Strategic Communications, 2021). The policy's operational scope includes peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter.

While the CSDP did not engage directly in the Syrian conflict, its role in the broader regional security environment has been significant. The Syrian conflict triggered a massive displacement of people, leading to a refugee crisis that heavily impacted the Mediterranean region. In response, the CSDP was instrumental in addressing the secondary effects of the conflict, particularly through operations aimed at maintaining regional stability and security. (European Union Military Staff, 2016, p. 03) One of the most notable CSDP operations in the context of the Syrian conflict is Operation Sophia, officially known as the EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med). Launched in 2015, Operation Sophia was primarily aimed at disrupting human trafficking networks and combatting the smuggling of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea (Latici, 2024, s. 01-03).

This operation represented a key element of the EU's broader efforts to manage the refugee crisis precipitated by the Syrian conflict. Operation's mandate included the identification, capture, and disposal of vessels used by smugglers and traffickers, training of Libyan Coast Guard and Navy personnel, and contributing to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya. By targeting the infrastructure of human trafficking and smuggling networks, the operation sought to reduce the flow of irregular migrants and improve maritime security in the Mediterranean (Tardy, 2015, p. 02). The success of Operation Sophia can be measured through various metrics, including the reduction in the number of smuggling boats departing from Libya, the apprehension of traffickers, and the rescue of migrants at sea. According to reports, the operation resulted in the arrest of numerous traffickers and the destruction of hundreds of smuggling vessels (UK The European Union Committee, 2016, pp. 20-22). Additionally, it contributed to saving thousands of lives through search and rescue missions conducted in the Mediterranean (Kinacioglu, 2023, p. 2435). The operation, despite its efforts, failed to significantly deter the flow of migrants, disrupt smuggling networks, or impede the business of people smuggling along the central Mediterranean route (UK The European Union Committee, 2016, p. 03).

Regarding the relations with Türkiye, the operation significantly influenced the relationship between the EU and Türkiye in several ways. One of the key impacts was the enhancement of cooperation and security dialogues. The EU and Türkiye engaged in more intensive discussions and negotiations regarding border security, migrant management, and regional stability (UK The European Union Committee, 2016, pp. 29-32). This increased cooperation was exemplified by the EU-Türkiye Statement of March 2016, which aimed to stem the flow of irregular migration through the Aegean Sea and improve the conditions of refugees in Türkiye (MFA, Directorate for EU Affairs, 2022).

However, Operation Sophia also introduced strains in the relationship between the EU and Türkiye. Türkiye expressed concerns over the operation's scope and the implications for its sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction in the Eastern Mediterranean (Ergün, 2021, p. 150). The operation's mandate to board, search, and seize vessels suspected of human trafficking and smuggling raised issues related to jurisdiction and the enforcement of international maritime law. These apprehensions were rooted in Türkiye's complex geopolitical and security interests in the region, including its disputes over maritime boundaries and interests in regional stability (UK The European Union Committee, 2016, p. 32).

The operation indirectly impacted Türkiye by influencing the broader EU approach to migration management and humanitarian assistance. The EU's efforts to disrupt smuggling networks and manage migration flows through maritime operations highlighted the need for comprehensive solutions that included countries like Türkiye. Consequently, the EU increased its financial and logistical support to Türkiye to help manage the large influx of refugees, particularly Syrians. This support included funding for refugee camps, humanitarian aid, and development projects aimed at improving the livelihoods of refugees and host communities in Türkiye. While CSDP of the EU made substantial strides in crisis management and enhancing regional security, its flagship operation, Sophia, highlighted the challenges inherent in addressing complex, multifaceted crises, particularly those exacerbated by the Syrian conflict. Operation Sophia's achievements in search and rescue missions and its contribution to regional stability through training initiatives were notable. However, its limited success in deterring human smuggling and irregular migration demonstrated the need for more comprehensive strategies that addressed both the symptoms and root causes of such crises. The persistent instability in the region, compounded by the displacement and refugee crisis triggered by the Syrian conflict, and the adaptability of smuggling networks underscored the necessity for a multifaceted approach that included political stabilization, economic development, and

enhanced intelligence capabilities. Therefore, as the EU continued to refine its CSDP, a broader, more integrated approach was essential to effectively manage and resolve the intricate security challenges that faced the Mediterranean region and beyond.

2. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)

It plays a significant role in shaping and implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy. As part of the European Commission, DG NEAR is tasked with fostering closer ties between the EU and its neighbouring countries, promoting stability, security, and prosperity through a variety of programs and initiatives. DG NEAR oversees the policy framework, financial instruments, and strategic partnerships that underpin the EU's efforts to support political, economic, and social reforms in neighbouring regions. This Directorate-General also manages the EU's enlargement process, working with countries aspiring to join the EU to meet accession criteria and integrate into the Union. Through its comprehensive approach, DG NEAR seeks to enhance the EU's influence and foster positive developments in its neighbouring regions, aligning closely with the overarching goals of the ENP.

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)¹⁰⁸ represents a cornerstone of the EU's strategy for fostering closer ties with surrounding countries through a blend of bilateral and regional engagements. Launched in 2004, the ENP was initially envisioned as a mechanism to extend the EU's influence and stability beyond its borders by promoting political, economic, and social reforms in adjacent regions. The policy underwent significant revisions in 2011 and 2015 to address the changing geopolitical landscape, particularly in response to the Arab Uprisings and escalating migration crises. As (Kiarie, 2020) highlights, these revisions underscored the EU's adaptive approach to its external relations, aiming to remain relevant and effective amid evolving challenges.

¹⁰⁸ The policy shifted from a focus on liberal values such as democracy and stability to a more pragmatic approach emphasizing security interests and bilateral relations. The EU increasingly leans towards "Realpolitik," leading to fragmented relations with neighboring countries. The legal and institutional tools created to support this policy, such as Association Agreements, and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs), have not achieved the desired outcomes due to a lack of political will and strategic vision. There has been a shift in priorities from liberal values to security interests, which has marginalized the core values of the EU in its dealings with its neighbors. This policy now relies more on fragmented and individualized relationships with each neighboring country, reducing its impact and effectiveness. The Syrian conflict exemplifies these challenges, as the ENP has struggled to address the complexities and humanitarian crises resulting from the ongoing war. The EU's inability to effectively influence the situation in Syria highlights the limitations of the ENP in dealing with severe security and political crises. Given these challenges, understanding the difficulties facing the ENP and why it has not been effective is crucial (Blockmans, 2017).

Despite these efforts to adapt, the ENP has faced substantial criticism and there an ongoing debateregarding its effectiveness, the EU's response to the Arab Uprisings was initially hindered by the unexpected nature of these events, which limited its ability to navigate the region's uncertain democratic trajectory. Consequently, the EU employed various tools, including normative assertions, humanitarian assistance, and revised long-term policies, to promote its political, economic, and security interests in the Mediterranean. The 2011 ENP revision focused on deepening democracy, economic development, and fostering people-to-people contacts, emphasizing civil society involvement and "more for more" incentives. However, the practical implementation of these democratic goals faced significant challenges due to the unfamiliar and often confrontational nature of civil society actors, as well as the complex dynamics involving governments allied with foreign aid providers. In 2015, the ENP shifted from a "ring of friends" to a "ring of fire," prioritizing security concerns over democratic promotion amidst regional crises like the rise of the Islamic State. (Hatab, 2019, pp. 33-34) This revision highlighted the EU's increased focus on stability, influenced by migration, energy, and radicalism threats, often at the expense of democratic aspirations.

One of the most complex and tumultuous contexts within which the ENP has operated was Syria. Initially, the EU-Syria Association Agreement under the ENP framework was designed to promote democratic reforms and economic development in Syria (Kızıllkan, 2019, p. 322). This agreement outlined a comprehensive approach encompassing economic, political, and social dimensions, with the ultimate goal of integrating Syria more fully into the ENP. The onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 necessitated a fundamental reassessment of the EU's strategies and priorities. In response, the EU launched the "SPRING Programme," an initiative specifically aimed at supporting democratic transitions, promoting fundamental freedoms such as freedom of assembly, and fostering economic development. According to the European Commission (2011), this initiative was envisioned as a catalyst for creating a more stable and prosperous environment in Syria and the broader region.

The Syrian conflict marked a significant turning point, dramatically altering the context of EU-Syria relations. The conflict precipitated a shift in the ENP's focus towards addressing the immediate and severe consequences of the war, particularly the burgeoning refugee crisis that began impacting Europe (Kızıllkan, 2019, p. 323). As Kıldıř notes, the EU's external policy and actions were redirected to implement a variety of measures aimed at managing this new situation. These measures included imposing comprehensive sanctions on Syria, such as the suspension of bilateral cooperation programs, halting loan operations, and ceasing technical

assistance by the European Investment Bank to Syria (Kıldıř, 2020, pp. 202-204). Furthermore, the EU imposed a ban on the importation of oil and petroleum products from Syria and froze the draft Agreement on the EU-Syrian Association (Kiarie, 2020).

The security dimension of the ENP was also profoundly affected by the Syrian conflict. The EU's response included measures to curtail the flow of weapons and military equipment to the Syrian government, culminating in a total arms embargo on Syria. Koenig describes in detail the stringent measures implemented, such as the requirement for EU member states to inspect their airports and seaports to ensure no armaments were being shipped to Syria (Koenig, 2017, p. 35). While the EU's CSDP focused on maintaining stability in the Mediterranean region through various operations, the ENP played a crucial role in addressing the Syrian conflict by implementing sanctions and shifting its focus towards regional stabilization efforts.

Criticisms of the ENP also included its initial response to the Syrian conflict. Scholars have pointed out that while the ENP has been effective in addressing some of the symptoms of the Syrian conflict; it has not adequately tackled the root causes. The EU's actions had often been reactive rather than proactive, focusing more on containment and crisis management rather than on long-term solutions that address the underlying issues driving the conflict. This criticism is underscored by the fact that the ENP, despite its ambitious goals, has struggled to achieve substantial and lasting reforms in its partner countries, particularly in the face of entrenched political and social challenges. Furthermore, the extreme political measures taken by the EU after the beginning of the Syrian civil war led to a complete loss of political leverage, undermining the EU's ability to achieve its self-proclaimed goals (Fröhlich, 2016, p. 01).

Moreover, the ENP's reliance on sanctions and punitive measures has been contentious. While these measures are intended to pressure regimes like that of Bashar al-Assad into compliance with international norms and human rights standards, the sanctions have often resulted in significant economic hardships for the civilian population, potentially exacerbating the very conditions they are meant to ameliorate (Mehchy & Turkmani, 2021, pp. 32-35). This approach can undermine the EU's credibility and moral authority, as it prioritizes political objectives over humanitarian concerns. This was clearly noted in the EU Commission Joint Consultation Paper: Towards a new European Neighborhood Policy: "The ENP has not always been able to offer adequate responses to these recent developments, nor to the changing aspirations of our partners. Therefore, the EU's own interests have not been fully served either." (European Commission, 2015, p. 02)

Another significant perspective from scholars highlights that the ENP's framework is fundamentally Eurocentric, imposing Western values and norms on countries with distinct political, cultural, and social contexts. This imposition can lead to resistance and backlash from local populations and governments, who may perceive the ENP as a form of neo-imperialism (Jagiello, 2014). Consequently, the effectiveness of the ENP, particularly in the context of the Syrian issue, lack of sensitivity to local realities and failure to adapt to the specific needs and circumstances undermine the policy's goals. In addition, the ENP's approach has faced significant challenges due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of the conflict, including the involvement of various regional and international actors with conflicting interests. This has led to a fragmented and inconsistent application of ENP principles, ultimately limiting its ability to contribute meaningfully to conflict resolution and stability in the region.

The Syrian conflict highlights the limitations and challenges of the ENP. The Syrian conflict has proven to be an intractable issue with deep-rooted political, social, and sectarian dimensions that are not easily addressed through external interventions. The EU's initial approach, focusing on promoting democratic reforms and economic development, proved insufficient in the face of the brutal and protracted civil war. The subsequent shift towards sanctions and containment measures, while necessary in some respects, has not led to a resolution of the conflict and has often exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. The ENP's overarching goal of fostering stability and prosperity in Syria might be indeed noble, but the realities on the ground often complicate its implementation. For instance, the EU's approach to democracy promotion through the ENP has been fraught with challenges. Promoting democratic governance in Syria with a deeply entrenched authoritarian regime requires more than just policy frameworks and financial incentives. It necessitates a profound understanding of the local political dynamics, cultural contexts, and historical legacies that shape the landscape. The EU's efforts in this regard have been perceived as superficial or overly simplistic, failing to address the complex realities that impede democratic transition.

The economic dimension of the ENP has faced significant hurdles. Economic development is a key pillar of the ENP, with the EU providing substantial financial assistance to partner countries. However, the impact of these economic initiatives has often been limited by systemic issues such as corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and lack of infrastructure. In Syria, for example, the initial economic cooperation under the ENP was hampered by the country's deeply entrenched patronage networks and lack of transparency (Turkmani & Haid,

2016, p. 05). These challenges have made it difficult for the EU to achieve its economic objectives through the ENP.

The social dimension of the ENP, which includes promoting human rights and social development, has also encountered obstacles. Human rights violations and social inequalities are pervasive in many of the ENP partner countries, and the EU's efforts to address these issues have often been met with resistance. In Syria, the human rights situation has deteriorated significantly since the beginning of the civil war, with widespread reports of atrocities committed by various factions (Nas, 2019, p. 51; Kiarie, 2020). The EU's attempts to promote human rights through the ENP have been undermined by the complex and volatile nature of the conflict, as well as by the limitations of its own policy tools. The ENP's regional dimension has encountered significant challenges. The efforts of their regional cooperation have often been undermined by political rivalries, conflicts, and a lack of trust. The EU's initiatives to enhance regional integration through the ENP have frequently been obstructed by these complex dynamics, especially concerning the Syrian conflict (Kirişci, 2012, pp. 04-06).

4.2.4. Strategic Organizations the EU that dealt with in Responding to the Conflict

In responding to conflicts, the EU collaborates with various strategic organizations to enhance its effectiveness in crisis management, humanitarian aid, and conflict resolution. Here are some key organizations the EU has worked with:

1. **Union for the Mediterranean (UfM):** The UfM was established in 2008 to enhance cooperation between European and Mediterranean countries. Its primary goals include promoting regional stability, economic integration, and sustainable development. The UfM provides a platform for dialogue on various issues, including environmental protection, energy, education, and socio-economic development (The Union for the Mediterranean, 2024). The EU utilized the UfM to address the Syrian conflict, given its mandate to promote stability and cooperation in the Mediterranean region. The conflict's impact on regional security, refugee flows, and humanitarian crises necessitated a comprehensive response from the UfM. The EU focused on the humanitarian aspects of the Syrian conflict through the UfM. With millions of Syrians displaced, the UfM worked to coordinate humanitarian aid and support for refugees in neighbouring countries. This included facilitating partnerships between member states and international organizations to provide essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing (Stankov, 2019, p. 1033). In addition, the UfM, supported by the EU,

engaged in dialogue aimed at enhancing regional stability and security. This involved discussions on counter-terrorism, border management, and the prevention of radicalization. It facilitated cooperation among member states to address security threats stemming from the conflict, such as the spread of extremist ideologies and the movement of foreign fighters. In addressing the socio-economic impacts of the conflict, the UfM promoted projects aimed at fostering economic resilience and development in affected regions. Initiatives included vocational training programs for refugees to stimulate local economies and create job opportunities.

The joint conclusions from the UfM Regional Forums¹⁰⁹ emphasized the continued need to push for a political solution to the Syrian conflict through the full implementation of all aspects of UNSC resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva communiqué. The aim is to achieve a sustainable, genuine, and inclusive political solution that preserves Syria's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, restores peace and stability, and creates conditions for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees. The 2022 forum expressed full support for UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and his steps-for-steps¹¹⁰ approach. Additionally, there was a renewed commitment to supporting the Syrian people by providing humanitarian aid to those in need within Syria and supporting Syrian refugees and their host countries and communities (The European External Action Service, 2022).

The events of the conflict in Syria and its sudden rapid armed development have drawn the attention of the EU. Because of this, the Union was unable to have a decisive impact on events and was powerless in the face of these accelerating events and the crises that resulted from them. Therefore, it was important for it to cooperate with formations such

¹⁰⁹ The eight Regional Forums of the UfM have consistently seen active participation from the EU, utilizing the UfM platform to enhance regional cooperation and address conflicts and crises, particularly the Syrian conflict. Most of these meetings have included substantial discussions on the situation in Syria, with their final statements often emphasizing the need for political solutions and humanitarian support. <https://ufmsecretariat.org/>

¹¹⁰ The "steps-for-steps" approach mentioned in the joint conclusions from the 2022 UfM Regional Forum refers to a diplomatic strategy aimed at achieving incremental progress in resolving the Syrian crisis. This approach involves reciprocal, confidence-building measures where each party takes verifiable steps to meet specific commitments, which then leads to the other party taking corresponding steps. The idea is to create a gradual and mutually reinforcing process that builds trust and reduces tensions, ultimately paving the way for a comprehensive and sustainable political solution. This strategy is designed to ensure that progress is made through a series of small, concrete actions rather than attempting to solve all issues at once, which can be overwhelming and often unproductive in complex conflicts like that in Syria. The Arab League's approach to normalization with the Assad regime in 2023, following the 2022 UfM forum, employed the same "steps-for-steps" strategy. This method involved reciprocal, confidence-building measures where each party takes verifiable steps to meet specific commitments, leading the other party to take corresponding steps. <https://sydialogue.org/en/the-features-of-the-step-for-step-approach/e>

as the UfM, which was established shortly before the beginning of the conflict. While the UfM made significant contributions to humanitarian assistance and regional cooperation, it faced several challenges. The protracted nature of the conflict, varying political stances among member states, and limited financial resources hindered the UfM's ability to implement large-scale interventions. Nevertheless, the UfM's efforts in fostering dialogue and cooperation laid the groundwork for future engagement and support for Syria's reconstruction.

2. **Political Dialogue with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (2014/15):** The OIC has played a significant role in addressing the Syrian conflict, in coordination with the EU. Established in 1969, the OIC is the second-largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations, with the aim of safeguarding the interests of the Muslim world and promoting international peace and harmony (The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2023; The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, n.d.). In 2014/15, the EU initiated a Political Dialogue with the OIC to engage with Islamic countries on shared priorities and enhance collaborative efforts on common issues, including conflicts in the Muslim world (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2021). Recognizing the OIC's influence among Muslim-majority countries and its capacity to foster dialogue and mediate disputes, the EU leveraged the organization as a platform to address the Syrian conflict (Anadolu Agency, 2019). The EU supported the OIC's diplomatic efforts to mediate the Syrian conflict. The OIC facilitated dialogue between conflicting parties and sought to promote a political solution to the crisis. This included organizing high-level meetings and summits where member states could discuss the situation and propose solutions (Ibid). However, the OIC faced significant challenges, such as internal divisions among member states and the complexity of the conflict (Sharqieh, 2021, p. 231).

Recognizing the severe humanitarian impact of the conflict, the EU collaborated with the OIC to coordinate relief efforts among its member states. The OIC's humanitarian agencies worked to deliver aid to affected populations, including food, medical supplies, and shelter. The organization also launched appeals for international assistance to support its humanitarian initiatives in Syria (Anadolu Agency, 2019). The EU and the OIC jointly advocated for the rights and protection of civilians affected by the Syrian conflict. They called on the international community to take decisive action to end the violence and support humanitarian efforts. The OIC also collaborated with other

international organizations, including the United Nations, to amplify its advocacy efforts and enhance the coordination of aid (Ibid).

Despite the challenges faced by the OIC, its diplomatic and humanitarian efforts, supported by the EU, contributed to alleviating the suffering of Syrians and promoting dialogue for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The EU's engagement through the OIC resulted in increased international awareness and support for humanitarian initiatives in Syria.

3. **Strategic Dialogue with the League of Arab States (LAS):** A regional organization comprises Arab countries established in 1945, the LAS aims to strengthen ties among member states and coordinate their policies to achieve cooperation and development (League of Arab States). The LAS has played a significant role in addressing regional and international issues, including the Syrian issue. The EU supported the LAS's political and diplomatic initiatives to address the Syrian conflict. The LAS suspended Syria's membership in 2011 in response to the government's violent crackdown on protesters, signalling a strong stance against the actions of the Assad regime. The LAS also facilitated peace talks and supported international efforts to mediate the conflict. As a result of the close cooperation between the EU and the LAS in addressing the Syrian conflict, efforts were coordinated between both parties to impose stringent and impactful sanctions aimed at increasing pressure on the Syrian regime. These sanctions, which were part of a comprehensive and coordinated strategy, were not limited to economic measures but also included political actions (Küçükkeleş, 2012, p. 08). However, these sanctions ultimately did not achieve the desired success for several reasons, the most significant being the Russian military intervention that changed the course of events, as well as the security threats posed by ISIS, which made it difficult to achieve the intended objectives of the international sanctions imposed.

The 2014 Athens Declaration established the "Strategic Dialogue between the EU and the LAS," creating a regular dialogue on political and security issues related to the Syrian conflict at the Peace and Security Council level and among experts. These issues included crisis management, early warning, crisis response, weapons of mass destruction, arms control, counter-terrorism, and migration (EEAS, 2014, pp. 07-08).

This dialogue began in November 2015 in Brussels, enhancing cooperation between the two organizations through regular Senior Officials Meetings (SOM) between their representatives. In 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation was signed between the EEAS and the General Secretariat of the LAS, enabling practical cooperation and the exchange of diplomats, particularly in dealing with the Syrian crisis (European External Action Service, 2016). The EU regional project "Training and Information Course on Euro-Arab Diplomacy" (Dialogue) facilitates information flow and enhances dialogue and cooperation between officials from both sides to anticipate and mitigate the effects of regional crises including Syria (College of Europe, 2024).

By its involvement in the Syrian conflict, the LAS tried to demonstrate the organization's commitment to regional stability and cooperation. However, the LAS faced significant challenges, including political divisions among member states and the complex dynamics of the conflict. Despite these difficulties, the LAS's efforts in diplomacy and humanitarian assistance, supported by the EU, have been important in addressing the multifaceted impacts of the Syrian conflict. Recently, the return of the Syrian regime to the LAS after normalizing relations with most Arab countries added another layer of complexity. The EU did not agree with this move, emphasizing the necessity of not normalizing relations with the regime.

4. **United Nations (UN):** The partnership between the EU and the UN is grounded in several foundational agreements and frameworks that outline the principles and areas of cooperation. The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in December 2009, significantly enhanced the EU's capacity to act as a unified external actor, enabling more effective collaboration with the UN (Briasco, Capuano, Gianniti, Olmeda, & Usiello, 2009, p. 42). The EU-UN Partnership¹¹¹ on Crisis Management, established in 2003 and regularly updated, is a key framework that facilitates cooperation in various areas, including peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and development aid (Federal Foreign Office, 2024).

¹¹¹ Since May 2011, the EU delegation in has held observer status at the UN: <https://unric.org/en/how-the-eu-and-un-cooperate/>

The EU and the UN have collaborated extensively on humanitarian assistance and relief efforts in response to the Syrian conflict. The EU, through its Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), has been one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to Syria (UNICEF). This aid is channelled through various UN agencies, including the UNHCR, and the UNICEF, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement (European Commission, 2024).

The Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), is a key initiative supported by the EU. The HRP aimed to provide life-saving assistance to millions of Syrians affected by the conflict, focusing on food security, health, water, sanitation, and protection services (European Commission, 2024, p. 10). The EU's financial contributions have been significant in sustaining these efforts, ensuring that essential services reach the most vulnerable populations.

On the political front, the EU and the UN have worked together to facilitate dialogue and negotiations aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict. The EU has supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, providing diplomatic backing and resources to the peace process. This includes the Geneva Process, which aims to bring together various Syrian factions to negotiate a political settlement (Ziadeh, 2017). However, they did not show any real intention to support the political transition process, and the negotiations of Geneva did not achieve any real political progress at all.

The Brussels Conferences on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region¹¹², co-chaired by the EU and the UN, have been important in mobilizing international support for addressing the humanitarian needs of Syrians. These conferences have brought together representatives from over 80 countries and international organizations, raising billions of euros in pledges and reaffirming the international community's commitment to supporting Syria (OCHA, 2023).

The EU and the UN have also cooperated on development and reconstruction efforts in Syria, although these initiatives face significant challenges due to the ongoing conflict and political instability. The EU's funding supports UN-led programs aimed at rebuilding infrastructure, restoring basic services, and promoting economic recovery in areas where security conditions permit. The United Nations Development Programme

¹¹² This conference series is detailed within the European Commission section in this chapter.

(UNDP) has been a key partner in these efforts, implementing projects that focus on community resilience, livelihoods, and local governance. The EU's contributions have enabled the UNDP to expand its reach and impact, providing critical support to Syrian communities recovering from the devastation of war and host communities like Türkiye (UNDP, 2018). The EU-UN partnership has undoubtedly saved lives and alleviated suffering for millions of Syrians. However, the scale of the crisis and the ongoing violence mean that much more needs to be done.

4.2.5. Cooperation between the EU and Non-Member States: Türkiye as a significant actor

The cooperation between the EU and non-member states, particularly Türkiye, has been a cornerstone in responding to the Syrian conflict. This collaboration has been marked by a blend of consensus and contention, reflecting the intricate web of international politics and diverse interests. The Syrian conflict has profoundly influenced the geopolitical landscape, compelling the EU and Türkiye to navigate a complex relationship shaped by humanitarian, security, and political challenges. Both parties experienced significant cooperation with the signing of the Refugee Agreement in March 2016. This agreement initially represented a diplomatic success, highlighting the potential for collaboration between them in addressing a major humanitarian crisis. However, this cooperation unraveled a few years later, primarily due to many reasons including lack of enough financial support for Türkiye by the Union, differing views regarding Türkiye's military intervention in northern Syria, as well as Turkish cooperation with Russia for its military operations and entry into the Astana political process with Russia and Iran. In addition to the factors above, the EU's lack of interest about the Turkish concerns of terrorist threats along its borders from Kurdish groups was also an important reason. The EU's criticism of Türkiye's actions in the second military intervention in 2017 marked the beginning of a new phase of tensions between the two entities. While the Syrian conflict initially brought Türkiye and the EU closer together, leading to shared objectives and strengthened diplomatic ties, it eventually exposed deep-seated differences. Türkiye's military operations were seen by the EU as destabilizing and contrary to international law, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and undermining regional stability. This divergence in approaches led to a growing trust deficit and conflicting strategies, with Türkiye adopting a military stance and the EU favoring diplomatic and humanitarian interventions. Thus, the Syrian conflict, which was initially a reason for convergence, ultimately added a new layer of differences between Türkiye and the EU, highlighting the complexities and evolving nature of their diplomatic engagement.

Furthermore, the Syrian conflict has exacerbated security threats, including the rise of ISIS and other violent non-state actors. In response, the EU and Türkiye have cooperated on security issues, particularly in counter-terrorism efforts and border management. This cooperation has involved intelligence sharing, joint operations, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at countering terrorism and preventing the flow of foreign fighters (Nas, 2019, p. 46).

However, the relationship between the EU and Türkiye has been fraught with tensions. Disagreements over differing approaches to regional security and mutual accusations of insufficient commitment have sometimes hindered effective cooperation. Therefore, the political relations between Türkiye and the EU are intricate, particularly concerning Türkiye's accession process to the EU. Broader Middle Eastern issues, notably the situations in Iraq and Palestine, which hold significant positions on Türkiye's foreign policy agenda, have historically influenced these relations. As a neighboring country and EU candidate, Türkiye considers these issues critically significant (Özcan, 2007, p. 309). The outbreak of the Syrian conflict introduced long-term implications on Türkiye-EU relations, differing from the impacts of previous regional issues. The effects of the Syrian conflict are not easily measurable in the short term, as they involve complex, intertwined problems such as the refugee crisis and shifts in international alliances, exemplified by Russia's strategic presence in the Mediterranean through its Hmeimim base in Tartous, Syria. In addition, the 2020 crisis over the Meric River further strained relations. The river, which forms part of the border between Greece (an EU member) and Türkiye, became a flashpoint when Türkiye announced it would no longer prevent migrants from crossing into the EU, leading to a surge of migrants at the Greek border. This move was seen as a response to perceived EU failures to meet commitments under the refugee deal and exacerbated existing tensions.

The EU and Türkiye's strategies and actions are influenced by the geopolitical dynamics, which add new complexities to their bilateral relationship. As mentioned above, Türkiye's relationship with Russia has significant implications for its interactions with the EU. While Türkiye and Russia have cooperated in some areas, such as managing the Syrian conflict, they have also had conflicting interests, particularly in regions like Idlib (Sambur, 2021, p. 121). The EU's stance on these issues often intersects with its broader strategic goals and alliances, creating a multifaceted and sometimes contradictory policy landscape. The domestic political dynamics in Türkiye also play a significant role in shaping its foreign policy and its cooperation with the EU. The refugee issue, in particular, has been a significant point of contention within Turkish politics, influencing public opinion and electoral outcomes.

Despite all tensions, the EU and Türkiye have engaged with various international and regional organizations in addressing the Syrian conflict and its repercussions. The UN, the LAS, and the OIC have been key platforms for dialogue and coordination. These organizations have facilitated diplomatic efforts, provided humanitarian assistance, and offered forums for negotiating political solutions. The UfM and the ENP have also played roles in shaping the EU's approach to the Syrian crisis and its cooperation with Türkiye. These frameworks aim to promote stability, security, and prosperity in the region through partnership and cooperation (Stankov, 2019, p. 1033). The ENP, in particular, has sought to align the EU's policies with those of its neighboring countries, including Türkiye, to address shared challenges such as migration, security, and economic development.

The cooperation between the EU and Türkiye in response to the Syrian conflict is a multifaceted issue, reflecting the intricate interplay of humanitarian, security, and political dimensions. While the EU-Türkiye refugee deal has been a pivotal element in managing migration flows and providing financial assistance, it has also faced significant criticism and challenges. Effective cooperation requires ongoing dialogue, mutual understanding, and a commitment to addressing both the immediate and long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on regional stability and humanitarian needs. The conflict has underscored the need for comprehensive and collaborative approaches to global challenges, highlighting the importance of solidarity and shared responsibility. The future of their cooperation will depend on the ability of both sides to navigate these complex dynamics, to find common ground, and to work together towards sustainable solutions that benefit all stakeholders involved.

4.3. The EU and the Refugee Crisis

The EU's approach to asylum and refugee protection is firmly rooted in international legal frameworks, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol¹¹³. In response to the obligations outlined in the Refugee Convention, the EU has developed the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which aims to standardize asylum procedures across member states. Established in phases since 1999, CEAS seeks to ensure that asylum seekers are

¹¹³ The 1951 Refugee Convention is a key international treaty that outlines the definition of a refugee, their rights, and the legal obligations of countries to protect them. Central to the Convention is the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to places where they face threats to their life or freedom. The Convention also sets minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, including rights to housing, work, and education, ensuring they can lead dignified lives while displaced (The European Council on Refugees and Exiles). The 1967 Protocol expands the scope of the Convention by removing geographical and temporal restrictions, thus allowing for a broader application to refugees displaced by conflicts occurring after 1951 (UNHCR).

treated fairly and that their applications are processed uniformly across the EU. This system includes several legislative instruments designed to create minimum standards for asylum procedures, reception conditions, and the qualification of asylum seekers (European Commission). Key Components of CEAS include:

- A. **Legislative Framework:** CEAS comprises various regulations and directives that set out the procedures for asylum applications, including the Dublin Regulation, which determines the member state responsible for processing an asylum claim.
- B. **Shared Responsibility:** Member states are expected to share the responsibility of hosting asylum seekers, ensuring that no single country bears an undue burden. This is particularly relevant during periods of high migration pressure, as seen during the refugee crisis in 2015.
- C. **Ongoing Reforms:** The EU continues to adapt CEAS in response to evolving challenges, proposing reforms to enhance efficiency, solidarity, and partnerships with third countries. Recent proposals include the establishment of an EU Asylum Agency to improve cooperation and support among member states.

The Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU) established a cornerstone in the EU's approach to refugee protection, setting out minimum standards for granting refugee status or subsidiary protection. This directive encompassed crucial rights related to employment, education, and social welfare (Official Journal of the European Union, 2011). However, despite this ostensibly common framework, the practical implementation of these standards has revealed significant disparities across member states, leading to inconsistent treatment of Syrian refugees throughout the EU.

The limitations of this framework became glaringly apparent during the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015. This unprecedented influx of refugees put immense pressure on the EU's asylum systems, exposing the gaps between policy and practice. The situation reached a critical juncture when more than a million individuals irregularly crossed Greece's borders from Türkiye on their way to Europe (Keridis, 2018, p. 70). This period, often referred to as the "European migrant crisis," saw over 1.2 million first-time asylum seekers applying for international protection in the EU, with Syrians constituting the largest group (Eurostat, 2016). The sheer scale of this sudden surge overwhelmed many EU countries, particularly those at the

external borders of the Union, highlighting the inadequacies of existing policies and infrastructure.

This crisis not only tested the practical application of the Qualification Directive but also brought to the fore the broader challenges of harmonizing asylum procedures across diverse national contexts. The stark reality of managing such a large-scale humanitarian crisis revealed the tensions between EU-wide directives and national interpretations, further complicating the already complex landscape of refugee protection in Europe.

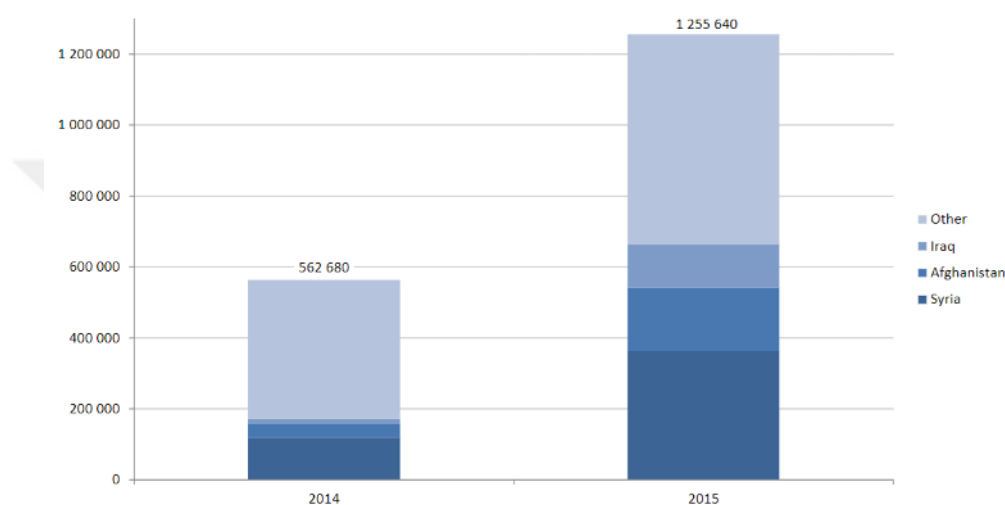


Figure 33 First time asylum applicants in the EU member states, 2014-2015¹¹⁴

The data indicates that in 2015, Syrian comprised the largest group of first-time asylum seekers in EU member states, with 362,775 individuals, accounting for 29% of the total asylum seekers as the following chart shows.

¹¹⁴ Source: European Commission (2016)

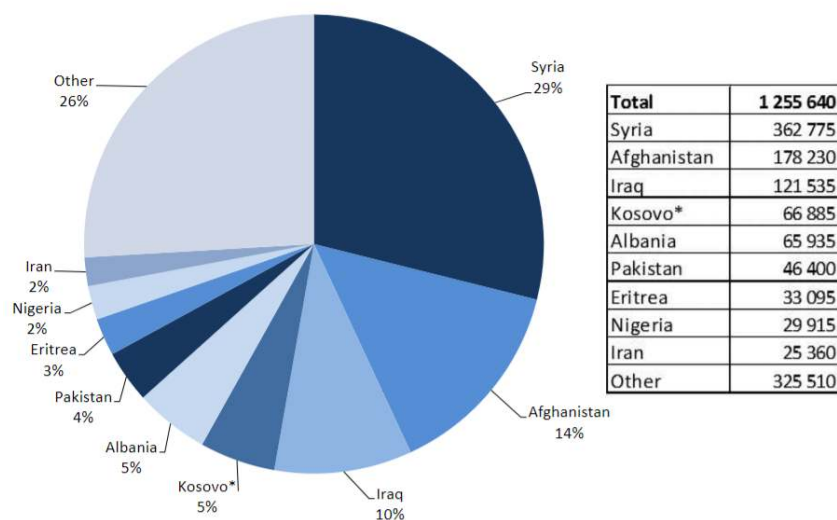


Figure 34. First time asylum seekers in the EU member states by country of citizenship, 2015¹¹⁵

Moreover, in 2016 the Syrian asylum seekers sharply increased, 51% of all applicants in the EU were Syrians as the following Figure shows.

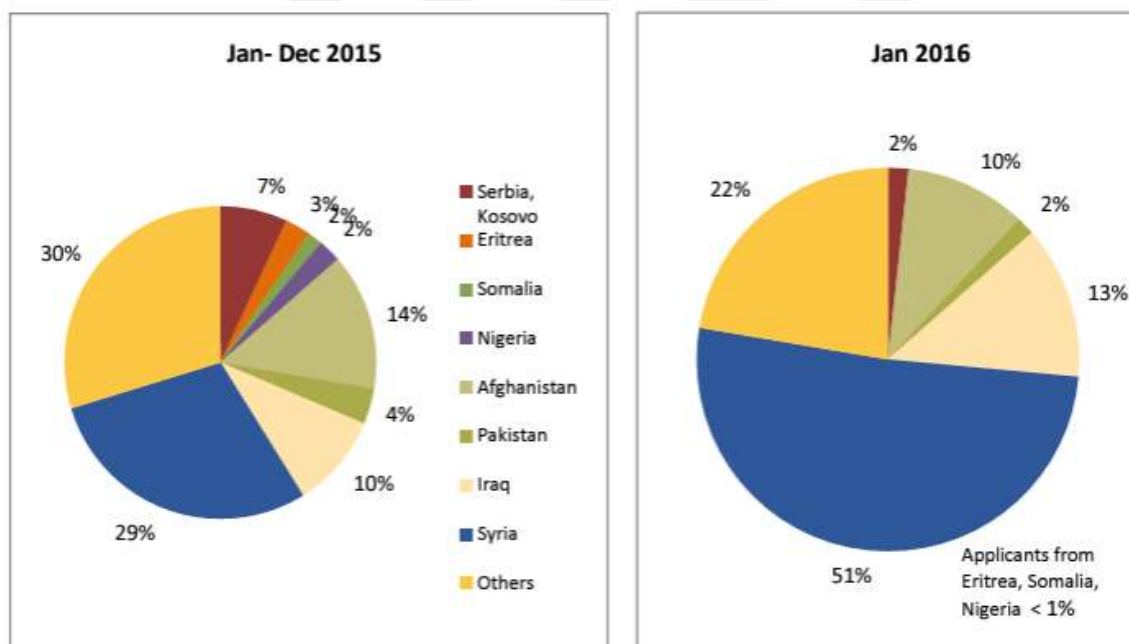


Figure 35 First time asylum seekers in the EU member states by major countries of origin, Jan-Dec 2015 and Jan 2016, in % of all applications¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Source: European Commission (2016)

¹¹⁶ Source: European Parliament (2016)

4.3.1. Policy Developments

To respond effectively to this new situation, the EU began to develop more coherent and comprehensive policies to address the influx of refugees and the broader implications of the Syrian conflict. These policies aimed to ensure a more organized response to the refugee crisis, while also addressing security concerns and maintaining social cohesion within the EU. The key policy developments included:

- A. The European Agenda on Migration (2015):** This comprehensive plan aimed to address immediate challenges and establish a long-term strategy for migration management. It proposed measures such as relocation and resettlement schemes, strengthening border control, and enhancing cooperation with third countries (Mallia & Pîrvulescu, 2016). This agenda provided the basis for signing the refugees deal with Türkiye. Realism emphasizes the pursuit of national interests and the balance of power, and the massive influx of refugees disrupted this balance, turning European integration upside down. Faced with this challenge, the EU's decision to cooperate with Türkiye as a transit country was a pragmatic move to manage the crisis and protect its own security and stability. This cooperation was particularly crucial for Greece, which was already suffering from an economic crisis and lacked the resources to handle the additional strain of the refugee influx.
- B. Cooperation with Türkiye (2016):** In addition to The European Agenda on Migration, the EU also sought to address the refugee crisis through diplomatic and political measures to reduce the number of refugees coming from Syria via Türkiye. One of the key initiatives during this period was the EU-Türkiye deal. The agreement was a controversial measure, receiving both praise and criticism. Supporters argued that it was a pragmatic solution to manage the refugee crisis and reduce the strain on EU member states' asylum systems. Critics, however, contended that the agreement compromised human rights and placed an undue burden on Türkiye. The agreement is also a clear illustration of liberal principles at work, as it was designed to manage the refugee crisis through collaboration, demonstrating the two parties' commitment to humanitarian principles and cooperative problem solving. The European Commission claimed that the deal showed that international cooperation can succeed and that its elements inspired cooperation with other key third countries. (Amnesty International, 2017, pp. 06-07). This underscores the liberal belief in international cooperation in addressing global challenges, which was achieved in the cooperation with Türkiye to administrate the new arisen dynamic. The deal can be seen as a manifestation

of liberal institutionalism, where both the EU and Türkiye sought to create a framework for cooperation that would benefit both parties. The EU aimed to reduce the strain on its asylum systems, while Türkiye received financial support and political recognition for its role in hosting a large number of refugees, in addition to three main points related to its membership in the Union and the cancellation of the visa. After this cooperation, the data showed a sharp decline in asylum seekers numbers in EU following the adoption of the deal.

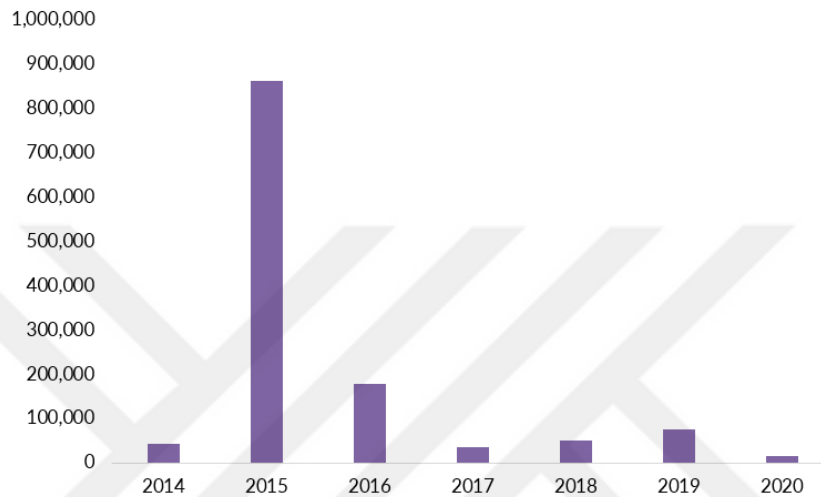


Figure 36 Migrant Arrivals in Greece, 2014-2020¹¹⁷

The above figure illustrates a significant decrease in the number of Syrian asylum seekers in the EU following the adoption of the cooperation deal. Before the deal, the number of asylum seekers was extremely high. However, after the deal was implemented, this number sharply declined to around 200,000, highlighting the effectiveness of the cooperation in mitigating the influx. Given this decline, it is clear that cooperation with Türkiye was an important step for the Union in the context of developing its policies to respond to this crisis.

C. Reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS): In addition to the relocation and resettlement schemes, strengthening border control, and enhancing cooperation with third countries, the EU applied reforms to harmonize asylum procedures across member states and ensure a more equitable distribution of responsibility (European Commission, 2016). There were five priority areas where the Common European Asylum System structurally improved. First, establishing a sustainable and fair system for determining the

¹¹⁷ Source: “The EU-Türkiye Deal, Five Years On: A Frayed and Controversial but Enduring Blueprint” (Terry, 2021)

Member State responsible for asylum seekers. Second, reinforcing the Eurodac system¹¹⁸. Third, achieving greater convergence in the EU asylum system. Fourth, preventing secondary movements within the EU. Lastly, a new mandate for the EU's Asylum Agency (Ibid p. 06). In 2020, the European Commission also proposed a comprehensive reform of the migration and asylum policy, focusing on three main pillars: enhancing the efficiency of asylum and return procedures, promoting solidarity and fair responsibility-sharing among member states, and strengthening partnerships with third countries (European Commission, 2020). These reforms collectively tried to create a more equitable, efficient, and unified asylum system within the EU.

These policies reflected the EU's attempt to balance humanitarian obligations with security concerns and the practical challenges of managing large-scale migration. However, their implementation has been fraught with difficulties, revealing deep divisions among member states and raising questions about the EU's capacity to respond effectively to refugee crises.

4.3.2. EU Response Mechanisms

The EU has implemented several response mechanisms to address the Syrian refugee crisis. These mechanisms aim to manage the influx of refugees, provide support to member states, and offer assistance to those affected by the crisis. The key EU response mechanisms include:

First: Relocation and Resettlement Programs

One of the EU's key strategies was the implementation of relocation and resettlement programs to alleviate pressure on frontline states. The Emergency Relocation Scheme, launched in 2015, aimed to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other EU member states (Dearden, 2017). However, the program faced significant challenges: First, low participation rates, From 2015 to 2018, only 34,500 refugees had been relocated (International Organization for Migration, 2021), falling far short of the initial target. Second, resistance from member states,

¹¹⁸ The name given to an informatic system, the purpose of which, via the collection, transmission and comparison of fingerprints, is to assist in determining which EU Member State is to be responsible pursuant to Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation) for examining an application for international protection lodged in a EU Member State by a third-country national or a stateless person , and otherwise to facilitate the application of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 under the conditions set out in the Regulation establishing Eurodac. For more information, see: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/eurodac_en

Several countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, refused to participate in the scheme, citing security concerns and cultural differences (Niemann & Zaun, 2017, p. 06).

The limited success of these programs highlighted the lack of solidarity among EU member states and the difficulties in implementing a coordinated response to the refugee crisis. Internally, the refugee crisis established deep divisions among EU member states in their approaches to handling the influx of refugees and asylum seekers, they were divided into three groups:

1. **Open Destination Countries:** Countries like Germany and Sweden adopted more open and welcoming policies, accepting large numbers of refugees and providing them with support and resources (Frank Jordansassociated Press, 2015). This approach was deemed the liberal response, characterized by welcoming Syrian asylum seekers and granting them protection. It was rooted in humanitarian principles and the normative view of the EU as a community founded on values (Hoel, 2015, p. 49).
2. **Closed Destination Countries:** Other member states, such as Hungary, Czech, and Poland, took a much more restrictive approach, implementing tough border controls and limiting the number of refugees allowed to enter (Kabata & Jacobs, 2022, p. 1223). The 2015 crisis put forced migration at the top of the public and political agendas in Poland and Hungary, leading both countries to refuse participation in refugee relocations, accelerate illegal push-backs at their borders, defund their asylum systems, and implement various illiberal reforms (Lukasiewicz & Matuszczyk, 2023). The restrictive response, driven by xenophobia and anti-immigration policies, was based on a pragmatic view of the EU. This perspective sees the EU as a problem-solving entity focused on promoting regional security.
3. **Frontline and Transit Countries:** Countries like Greece and Italy, which were on the frontlines of the refugee crisis, faced immense pressure and struggled to manage the high numbers of arrivals, often calling for more support and burden-sharing from other EU members (Bauböck, 2017, p. 25). This was seen as the moderate response, involving policies that relied on EU assistance (Hoel, 2015, p. 27). It encompassed aspects of both a pragmatic and a normative view of the EU.

Second: Border Management

The EU also focused on strengthening its external borders to manage migration flows. Key initiatives included:

1. Frontex expansion: The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) was given increased resources and a broader mandate to support member states in border control and return operations (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016, p. 02).
2. Partnerships with African countries: The EU established various cooperation frameworks with African countries to address the root causes of migration and improve border management, aiming to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea, increase the rate of returns to countries of origin and transit, and enable migrants and refugees to stay close to home, thereby avoiding dangerous journeys (European Commission, 2016, p. 06).

These measures reflected a shift towards externalization of border control and asylum processing, raising concerns about the EU's commitment to refugee protection and the for human rights violations.

Third: Financial Assistance

The influx of refugees placed immense pressure on the EU's asylum systems and exposed deep divisions among member states regarding how to handle the crisis. The EU responded by increasing its humanitarian aid and support for countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees, such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. The European Commission, in its 2015 report, emphasized the importance of providing humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of refugees and support host communities.

The EU has allocated significant financial resources to address the refugee crisis, both within its borders and in neighboring countries hosting large Syrian refugee populations (Savage & Siter, 2017, pp. 05-07). According to Savage & Siter, key funding mechanisms included:

1. The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)
2. The Internal Security Fund (ISF)
3. The EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (Madad Fund)

Between 2015 and 2017, the EU and its member states allocated over €10 billion to address the refugee crisis (p. 07). However, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of this funding and whether it reaches those most in need.

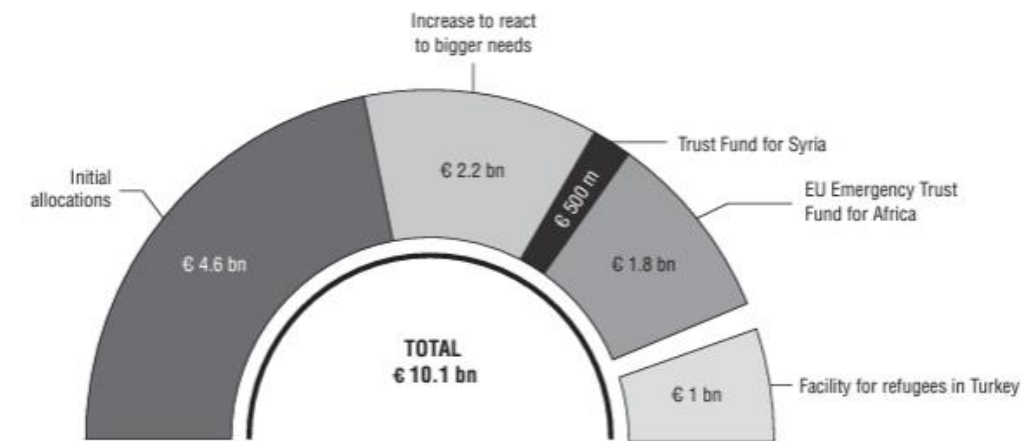


Figure 37 Migrant Arrivals in Greece, 2014-2020¹¹⁹

According to the European Commission and the Council of the EU (2024), the ongoing conflict in Syria has led to severe humanitarian challenges. Over 2 million internally displaced individuals are residing in camps or informal settlements. Of these, 85% are unable to meet their basic needs. Additionally, close to 5.2 million Syrian refugees are registered in the region. The overall displaced population, both internally and externally, accounts for half the country's population. In response, the EU and its member states have provided €33.3 billion in assistance since 2011.

Türkiye alone hosts over 3.1 million Syrian refugees as of 2024. This underscore the critical need for continued EU support and intervention to address the widespread humanitarian needs (European Commission, 2024; European Council).

Reviewing the Union's policy and response to the Syrian refugee crisis reveals a flexible and adaptive approach, distinct from its policy towards the conflict itself. This flexibility is evident in the modernization of immigration policies despite internal divisions, the successful integration of refugees into host communities, the launch of language education programs, and the facilitation of labor market entry. The Union's strategy aligns with the theories of social integration and multiculturalism, which advocate for incorporating diverse populations into society by promoting inclusivity and providing necessary resources. By focusing on long-term sustainability, the Union

¹¹⁹ Source: "The European Union budget and the European refugee and migration crises" (Savage & Siter, 2018)

ensured that refugees could contribute to and become part of the host society, enhancing social cohesion and economic productivity.

The Union's refugee policy reflects liberal theory through its emphasis on individual rights, international cooperation, and the role of institutions in managing the refugee crisis. By modernizing immigration policies, integrating refugees into host communities, and facilitating their entry into the labour market, the Union upholds the liberal ideals of inclusivity. These efforts promote social stability and economic growth, demonstrating a values-based approach to the refugee crisis that aligns with liberal principles.

On a related note, Türkiye faced significant challenges in integrating refugees, even though Syrians and Turks share cultural similarities that could have facilitated this process. The General Directorate of Migration in Türkiye was not established until two years after the Syrian refugees' arrival, and the Temporary Protection Law came three years later. Language education programs were inadequate and limited to formal education settings, and legal provisions allowing those with temporary protection status to work were only introduced in 2017, six years after the initial influx. Türkiye's shift from an open-door policy to a more stringent approach, particularly after the 2019 local elections, reflects a short-term, situational response. Theories of crisis management and migration policy suggest that a sustainable, comprehensive approach is essential for effective refugee integration. Although Türkiye provided substantial resources, adopting a policy based on long-term sustainability would have better addressed the ongoing challenges and facilitated smoother integration of refugees into Turkish society.

From a realist perspective, Türkiye's policies were driven by national interests and the need to maintain social and political stability. The shift from an open-door policy to more stringent measures reflects a realist approach focusing on the state's immediate security and economic concerns. This pragmatic response aimed to manage the refugee situation in a way that protected Türkiye's national interests.

Looking from other corner, Türkiye hosted approximately 4 million refugees at certain periods, while the EU countries collectively hosted about half that number. Despite this significant difference, the Union's financial aid to Türkiye was limited to 6 billion euros. Furthermore, the EU did not support Türkiye in securing its southern borders or in creating a safe zone to stem the flow of refugees. Instead, the EU adopted a contrary position, leaving Türkiye to shoulder immense burdens and adapt its immigration system to evolving ground realities. For instance, Türkiye's

military operations and the establishment of de-escalation zones effectively curtailed the flow of millions more refugees who might have otherwise moved to Türkiye.



CHAPTER FIVE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT ON TÜRKİYE-EU RELATIONS

The Syrian conflict has produced long-lasting and far-reaching implications, well beyond Syria itself. Those implications have been felt both for the actors involved with the conflict- with a decade and more passing, the repercussions continue to reshape regional dynamics, challenge established norms and laws, and test the resilience of international cooperation. The conflict goes down as one of the most consequential and complex geopolitical events of the 21st century. Quite simply, it has served as a catalyst: to highlight latent tensions in the relationship, and to develop at times unexpected areas of cooperation within relations between Türkiye and the EU.

This has holistically forced Türkiye and the EU to rethink strategic priorities, security imperatives, and humanitarian obligations in this imbroglio. At the same time, it has tested the limits of their partnership through issues of growing complexity associated with burden sharing, border management, and the interplay between national interests and collective action. It has underlined, in particular, how regional stability, migration flows, and domestic politics are interlinked, including the way in which events in one country can have solid and long-lasting effects on fellow states and international alliances. The Syrian conflict has also gradually come to be one of the key drivers of the development of relations between Türkiye and the EU, influencing everything from issues of accession negotiations to cooperative frameworks in the fields of security and migration management.

Consequently, this chapter seeks to summarize such conclusions made by the research and give proper review to its long-lasting implications. First, the chapter will generally summarize key findings from each section of the dissertation; second, it will analyze geopolitical and economic implications of the conflict on Türkiye-EU relations. Special attention is given to the refugee crisis, being one of the more important dimensions of change, by analyzing the implications for both Türkiye and the EU. The following sections wrap up the main findings of our research, based on the analyses carried out in the previous chapters. We thus outline what insights one can gain from our investigation of responses by Türkiye and the EU.

5.1. Discussion and Key Findings

The protracted Syrian conflict involves multiple levels of complexity, including a humanitarian crisis, proxy war dynamics, sectarian and ethnic divisions, and widespread destruction and displacement. These factors have not only shaped Syria's internal dynamics but also had significant impacts on regional and global politics.

The first is the protracted nature of the conflict, lasting over a decade, which makes it even more complex to study. Such a long time span has allowed multiple phases of conflict involving changes in power dynamics, alliances, and strategies by various actors.

Adding another level of complexity to the Syrian conflict is the involvement of a multitude of actors: from the local players, such as the regime and different rebel groups, to the regional and international ones like Russia, Iran, Türkiye, the USA, EU, and Gulf countries—all of these many players have different motivations and interests in the conflict that range from geopolitical influence to sectarian alliances. Also, the involvement of extremist organizations, more so that of ISIS, has further burdened the complication, attracting global powers on the pretext of fighting terrorism.

Probably one of the most vital sequel of this Syrian conflict has to do with the humanitarian effect. Millions of people in this conflict have either been internally displaced or fled into neighboring countries like Türkiye for shelter, and also further afield into the EU. It ensued in a refugee crisis unparalleled by any in history, putting host countries' resources to a tall order, and an unusual debate on immigration and asylum policies, more so in the EU. The humanitarian crisis, besides its immediate repercussions within Syrian society, has to necessitate a broader look into its future implications on international humanitarian law and refugee policies.

The conflict in Syria has equally been described by its proxy war configuration, where different regional and global powers have aligned themselves with different factions within this conflict. Russia and Iran have been staunch allies of the regime, while Türkiye, some Gulf countries, and several Western countries have backed various opposition groups. These dynamics of the proxy war have turned Syria into a playground for greater geopolitics rivalries, making it not only local or regional but also global. Research into these dynamics of proxy war showed how external powers are capable of influencing civil conflicts and changing their course.

Apart from that, sectarian and ethnic differences in Syria have been sharpened by the conflict, especially among Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds. These contrasts not only fed the violence within the country but also influenced the involvement of regional powers such as Iran, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia, all with interest in the conflict. Understanding these divisions will provide the key to broader social and political dynamics of the conflict and its possible resolution. Additionally, the conflict has brought in massive destruction and displacement. Entire cities and towns have been reduced to rubble, and millions of Syrians are displaced from their homes. Infrastructure destruction crippled the economy, and the people's displacement created long-term social challenges not only within the nation but also in host nations where Syrian refugees stayed.

The refugee crisis has been a key point of contention between Türkiye and the EU, with Türkiye hosting millions of Syrian refugees and the EU grappling with how to manage the influx of asylum seekers. Additionally, Türkiye's involvement in the conflict has influenced its relations with other regional and global powers, including the EU, making the Syrian conflict a critical factor in Türkiye's foreign policy. Given these factors, it becomes clear that the Syrian conflict is not just an internal conflict, but also an internationalized one that has significant implications for international relations, particularly between Türkiye and the EU.

5.1.1. Key Findings from the Syrian Conflict Analysis

First: Factors contributed to the Syrian Conflict

The complexity of the Syrian factors can be classified into three main categories, each playing a critical role in shaping the conflict.

1. Motivating Factors:

Motivating factors, in this regard, include long-standing issues that degraded the social fabric of Syria, setting the stage for revolution. These include: Authoritarian governance through the Ba'ath Party (Political Repression), economic hardships (Economic Inequality) and unrivalled corruption (Social Fragmentation).

- **Political Repression:** Whereas it might be true and perceptible that the uprising in Syria was due to many factors, the authoritarian rule of the Ba'athist Party was one of the most outstanding and influencing parameters that triggered this conflict. The reconstitution of authority by the regime through political repression, sectarian favoritism, and

systematic marginalization of large strata of society constitute the key finding of our research in chapter two and played a critical role in increasing tension and social unrest, breaking down social cohesion, and ushering in the violent eruption of conflict. This kind of authoritarianism also took a toll on the political consciousness of citizens who, before the conflict, were not allowed to engage in any form of political activities. Therefore, during the conflict, it became evident that opposition faced challenges in building a united political front representative of the popular will of the masses, hence further complicating the political situation.

- **Economic Inequality:** Among all factors, the economic one played a highly important role in the conflict. It became unmistakably apparent as time went by that the economic problems Syria had been experiencing over the period of time preceding the conflict provided considerable underpinning for unrest: high unemployment, especially among youth, widespread poverty, and growing inequality fueled public discontent. Both factors were further exacerbated by the mismanagement of the economy and rampant corruption by the regime, thus making the gap between the ruling elite and the rest of the population much greater. The inability of the regime of Bashar al-Assad to listen to economic grievances, particularly its marginalization of rural populations being hard hit by unemployment and poverty, was the decisive factor in triggering the conflict. Whereby, our research turned out that society almost split into two classes of rich and poor, with there being a thin middle class. Moreover, the protests started in those regions which had been badly hit by the drought and desertification in 2006, showing the extent to which, the economic crisis was dire. Furthermore, neoliberal economic reforms which favored the few elites alienated the masses even more and brought about mass outrage, hence boiling over into unrest.
- **Social Fragmentation:** Our research indicated that Syria reached the third rank among the most corrupt countries of the world and that corruption notoriously contributed to the conflict outbreak. Reliance on patronage networks, excluding wealth and power concentration in the hands of a small elite, alienated the rulers from the ruled and made grounds for public discontent. As a result of corruption, no meaningful political and economic reforms could be instituted. Corruption increased frustration among citizens. This finally led to the outbreak of the popular revolution as the opposition rose to power against the legitimacy that the regime was losing for its failure to curb rampant corruption. Corruption became a common practice in state institutions, openly

conducted in the pre-revolution period with public anger over this and deepening the crisis of trust between citizens and the regime.

Social fragmentation in Syria has been both a cause and a consequence of the conflict, which is intertwined with other related factors such as corruption, sectarianism, and economic discrimination. The division within Syrian society, wherein religious identities (such as Sunni, Shia, and Christian) and ethnic (such as Arab and Kurdish) groups, and economic gaps between the rich elite and poorer classes-have further heightened the fragmentation in society. This fragmentation in society tore it asunder, and it was mistrusting of each other, working against the unity of opposition to the regime. Further, the corruption and favoritism of the ruling elite institutionalized these divisions as resources and opportunities were given out on methods of loyalty or sectarian affiliation rather than merit.

As these grievances mounted, the perception that state benefits and protections marginalized certain communities in society thus fueled resentment. This was coupled with systemic neglect of certain communities that led to fractures in society, fueling this conflict even more and making resolution complicated. It became one of the major barriers, both in opposition to the regime and in working for a common future, wherein distrust became perpetual, with discord sown in Syrian society.

2. Timing Factor “The Arab Spring”:

Another important conclusion we have also reached is the role that was played by the timing factor as an actor for the Syrian conflict in detonating the already accumulating charge within Syrian society. It was a short-term factor, but it played a major role in sparking the revolution among the populace. The Arab Spring became the right timing that acted as the catalyst, inspiring Syrians to raise their voices towards political reforms and the abolishment of the autocratic rule under the regime of Assad. Though social and political issues were long been tamed in the state of Syria, the acclaim brought about by the Arab Spring throughout other nations made them convinced in regime change. But the violent regime response to peaceful protests transformed the popular uprising into an armed conflict and thus prolonged what had begun as a peaceful movement into a prolonged and bloody war. In this way, regional events—the Arab Spring—operated as a kind of timing driver, igniting revolution against the ruling regime and opening the gate to a wider conflict. As we discussed in the dissertation, even the word "Arab" in "Arab Spring" was an identity-based important factor, as Syrian society was

deeply influenced by Arab nationalism to the extent that, in its political history, a majority of the political parties focused on fostering Arab nationalist sentiment instead of Syrian nationalism.

3. Escalatory Factors:

Among them are the internal divisions of the opposition and the external interventions by regional and global powers that prolonged and intensified the conflict. Further, the internationalization of the conflict increased with the Rise of Extremist Groups.

- **External Intervention:** One of the major outcomes of this study has been the role of different external powers, each pursuing their strategic interests in the conflict. Right from the outset of the Syrian uprising, Iran and Russia had provided critical financial, military, and logistical support to the Assad regime. For Iran, this has been a calculated effort to retain its influence in Syria as part of its so-called "Axis of Resistance," which includes Hezbollah. Specifically, Russia's military intervention in 2015 decisively tipped the balance of power in favor of the regime and had protracted the conflict.

On the other hand, some countries like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Western nations supported different groups of opposition. Therefore, the government in Türkiye is extremely apprehensive about the rise of Kurdish forces in northern Syria, viewing them as a danger to its own national security. It was this very factor that motivated direct military intervention into this region by Türkiye. Any researcher into the Syrian conflict would be aware, with the evidence available, that Syria has in effect been a battleground wherein regional powers, but also Eastern and Western powers, engage their struggle, with alliances aligned in a pattern not so different from Cold War alignments.

The survival of the Assad regime depended on intervention by Iran, Hizbullah and Russia.

With the amount of military and financial support provided to the regime, resistance against opposition forces developed very easily, while control of key areas in Syria was regained. All this involvement by outside actors escalated the conflict and entrenched the position of Assad, thus making diplomatic solutions even more difficult. Intermittent intervention by Türkiye has been guided by geopolitical interests and domestic compulsions; more precisely, the rise of Kurdish autonomy in Syria has further complicated its relations with fellow conflict actors, especially the EU.

- **Internal Divisions of Opposition Forces:** This was also highly conducive to the escalation and prolongation of the conflict, having to do with internal division among the Syrian opposition forces. What started off fairly united quickly broke up into hundreds of military factions, many acting only in name under the Free Syrian Army umbrella. These were differing factions, however, in ideology as well as aims, and the struggle for foreign support weakened them by embracing the ideologies of their various supporters. Opposition fragmentation would thus play a significant role in escalating the conflict and its duration, with the lack of unity within it making any sort of cohesive front against the regime impossible. There was also clear political fragmentation; because of that, opposition political forces gained no popular support, and it is obvious that there was no strong link between political opposition and military factions. The lack of coordination and a unified strategy weakened the opposition's capability to confront the regime effectively.
- **Rise of Extremist Groups:** This situation was further complicated by the regime's weakening and the opposition's fragmentation, which created a power vacuum that extremist groups, such as ISIS, swiftly exploited. The violence perpetrated by such groups captured international attention and shifted the focus of international intervention from support of opposition groups to combating terrorism. Where extremist groups such as ISIS are concerned, the conflict is one in which counterterrorism is an added international issue. All resources and efforts were shifted from focusing on the overthrow of the Assad regime to the destruction of the terrorist menace that ISIS truly is. This has increased the level of complication in the conflict, turning also away various would-be international supporters of the opposition. The extremist elements reinforce the regime's narrative that it was fighting terrorist groups. The multitude of people who joined those groups saw, more or less, the continuity of the 1982 Hama massacre they had remembered and, even more importantly, an Islamic structure in which to organize and fight the regime. This perception turned out to be one of greater extremism with time, therefore contributing to the rise of even more radical factions. This historical memory of repression became a significant factor in shaping the motivations and actions of the extremist groups, further deepening the complexity of the Syrian conflict and making a political resolution increasingly difficult to achieve politically.

Second: Peace Initiatives: Successes, Failures, and Their Implications

The Geneva Process thus brought forth how tough the articulation of common ground between the regime and the opposition was. The preconditions on the removal of Assad by the opposition, in addition to the intransigence of the regime forbade articulation of a negotiated settlement. The involvement of external actors with their own sets of agendas further complicated the talks.

Contrary to the Geneva talks, the Astana Process did not target an inclusive political settlement but rather focused on local ceasefires. Also, while the Astana Process managed to reduce violence in some parts of Syria, it did so only for a short period of time and failed to establish lasting peace. The regime made use of such de-escalation zones in its favor to consolidate its power; because of short-term ceasefires, it was able to amass strength with the view to returning control of the key territories. Ultimately, the Astana Process had shown that in the Syrian conflict, regional actors were growing in influence but the West was not. Yes, the Astana process has lessened the intensity of the conflict, but the results of its actions have given areas de facto authority, which is perilous and can lead to dividing up. Even in cases when a central government is established later, and thereby UN Resolution 2254 would be executed, these areas could still effectively be ruled by local forces.

The specter of division loomed clearly over the Syrian landscape throughout the years of conflict, as sectarian and ethnic divisions, coupled with regional and international interventions, fueled this possibility. However, the fall of the Assad regime represents a turning point that could – even temporarily – dispel this threat and pave the way for a new phase of rebuilding Syria’s national unity. Overcoming the threat of division does not necessarily mean that Syria is now free from internal challenges. Key actors on the ground still retain their influence, and international competition over Syria is far from over. Yet, the absence of a regime that long exploited divisions as a tool for survival may create an opportunity for new leadership to reunify the country on more inclusive and just foundations. The critical question now lies in the ability of the new authority to craft a comprehensive social contract that addresses past grievances and lays the groundwork for political stability. This will be essential to overcoming the divisions that nearly fractured the nation.

Third: The Frozen Conflict and the Risk of Partition

As the conflict dragged on, and no military settlements of any kind became visible on the horizon, a de facto “frozen conflict” gradually emerged. Today, various actors in different parts of Syria have developed mechanisms of governance to consolidate control over sizeable pieces

of territory within the country. The Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria believe in an autonomous administration over large swathes of territory. While opposition factions supported by Türkiye hold areas in the northwest, the Assad regime retains most of the large cities in the country. As a result, this frozen conflict has shaped up as a very delicate and unstable balance of power, in which no actor is in a position to bring the conflict to an end but at the same time none has to concede defeat. That arrangement risks freezing territorial boundaries, with the prospect of partitioning Syria de facto in the long run. Indeed, we see elements of that already: the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria, thus the Syrian Temporary Government in northern Syria, a salvation government in Idlib, and the Assad regime is in Damascus. What confirms this is the fact that self-administration, so-called, announced holding elections in the east of the Euphrates.

Although they later announced the cancellation of the elections, it remains an option for them to carry out in the future if the situation continues as it is. Meanwhile, a member of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's leadership proposed creating a Shiite part in Idlib where it would be ruled with an authority similar to the one already existing there named the Salvation Government. Over time, the difficulty of bringing these areas back under a single Syrian state will only grow — especially if those powers want to maintain this partition for their own strategic purposes. The frozen conflict is a continuing problem for Türkiye and the EU. Since Syria remains unstable, millions of Syrian refugees in Türkiye and Europe are not able to go back home anytime soon. Additionally, especially in areas with little or challenged governance, the danger of more unrest and conflict remains.

5.1.2. Outcomes for Türkiye's Policy

The evolution of Türkiye's policy towards Syria has been marked by several key trends and developments that have broader implications for its policy, including:

First: Shift from "Zero Problems with Neighbors" to Active Involvement

The most significant shift in the foreign policy of Türkiye involves abandonment of the "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine in favor of assuming a more robust and interventionist posture in regional conflicts. It is a function of the compulsion of Türkiye to cope with increasingly complex dynamics in the Middle East, where regional instability has broadened over time and the influence of external powers-strong players such as the United States, Russia, and Iran-continues to grow. These have all contributed to various challenges that have forced

Türkiye at least partially to reconsider its foreign policy conduct in a more proactive direction, to protect its national interests.

The most striking example of such a change may be the role that Türkiye played in the Syrian conflict: given the rapidly deteriorating security conditions, the first option of Türkiye was non-involvement-always to seek speedy solutions via diplomatic means. But as the conflict dragged on, and the humanitarian situation grew increasingly desperate, it was clear that regional instability had consequences for Türkiye itself in the form of over 3 million arrivals of Syrian refugees within its borders, cascading security threats from Kurdish militias, and jihadi groups such as ISIS. Thus, Türkiye gradually shifted and directly entered the conflict by deploying its troops, along with several cross-border operations, to ensure that its borders would be secured, safe zones established, and political or military terms of the war determined.

The gradual move from a neutral diplomatic posture to military action is illustrative of a larger trend in Türkiye's foreign policy, sanctified by the structural shifts focused mainly on national security rather than just a simple desire to participate directly in an active conflict. The developments in the Middle East, especially Syria, made it imperative for Türkiye to move from being a passive onlooker and become more active as regional crises started having undeniable domestic implications. Thus, Türkiye positioned itself as a significant player in the determination of the future not only of Syria but of the wider Middle East as a whole.

Second: The Ever-Changing Policy of Türkiye towards the Conflict: From Proactive Engagement to Defensive Strategy

The involvement of Türkiye in the conflict once closely looked at, one can notice without a twinge of doubt that it has indeed oscillated between different stages of development in Syria, given the other regional and international different factors at play. The policy adopted by Türkiye can further be explained as one that goes through three phases: proactive, offensive, and defensive phases. These three phases reflect how Türkiye has managed to adapt its stance given the evolving events in Syria.

For the first years, the Syrian conflict the policy adopted by Türkiye was a proactive one, because it expected the Assad regime to be toppled after popular unrest and also due to the opportunity to project its influence by supporting the opposition. This involved the backing of the Syrian opposition on the assumption that the conflict in Syria would not last and, therefore, would bring about a friendly new government. During this period, the implicit policy

assumption in the case of Türkiye was that the Syrian conflict would be temporary and would not necessitate long-term strategies to address problems such as refugee management or other security risks emanating from the conflict. This expectation, however, proved misplaced as fighting continued with no political solution at hand.

When the Syrian conflict increasingly flared up and dragged on longer than expected, Türkiye shifted from a more diplomatic and supportive position to taking a more direct military engagement. It was increasingly a phase in which Türkiye showed much more concern over the YPG, which the country views as an extension of the PKK, already designated a terrorist organization by both Türkiye and many Western allies. The prospect of a Kurdish autonomous region to its south is what provoked Ankara into adopting a far more offensive posture: military operations, including Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, targeted both the YPG and northern parts of Syria. These zones were, somehow, to buffer the security of Türkiye and simultaneously facilitate the return of some of the millions of Syrian refugees it had hosted since the outbreak of the conflict.

By this moment, Türkiye reaches its goal of a safe zone; the creation of a YPG-controlled corridor, which connects the Kurdish regions to the Mediterranean-a nightmare scenario of a kind for the national security of the country-is thus effectively ruled out; an achievement that has been hailed many times by President Erdoğan. Furthermore, the country tried to show the power and unity of its military forces after the coup attempt by conducting its first military intervention in northern Syria just two months later. This move underlines two important aspects: the level of the crisis along its southern borders at that time and the necessity to rebuild the lost public confidence in the capabilities of its own armed forces.

As the conflict entered its later phase, the policy of Türkiye had increasingly gone along a defensive direction-a reset informed by lessons from previous phases. Following extensive military involvement and establishing strategic footholds in northern Syria, Türkiye shifted focus to interests' protection and securing borders rather than pursuing broader ambitions in Syria. Thus, among others, the primary goals of that period were to consolidate territorial advances of Türkiye, stabilize the 'safe zones,' and deter remaining threats against human life generated by Kurdish militias and remnants of extremist groups like ISIS.

The domestic political situation in Türkiye also started playing an important role in shaping its policy toward Syria. Economic pressures and the social effects of hosting more than

3.6 million Syrian refugees have become high-profile issues. The public discontent over the presence of the refugees continued to grow into vocal calls for their repatriation or relocation within the 'safe zones' established through Turkish military efforts. Meanwhile, all external pressures from the EU, Russia, and the United States made it necessary for Türkiye to adopt more cautious and strategic foreign policy toward Syria.

In that respect, the policy of Türkiye vis-à-vis Syria has indeed been marked by great flexibility and adaptability—from the proactive role of anticipation of a relatively quick termination of hostilities, through offensive military intervention out of security imperatives, to finally a defensive stand for the consolidation of territorial and security gains. During the early years of the Syrian conflict, it had underestimated a number of features including the long-term challenges on refugees and border security. However, during the course of conflict, Türkiye adapted by reinforcing military involvement with the interest of its national priorities.

Third: The Impact of Domestic Political Considerations

Another important finding is that domestic political factors play a leading role in Türkiye's foreign policy decisions with respect to the Syrian conflict. The conflict has influenced not only the regional strategy of Türkiye but also indirectly has an influence in the longer term on internal political processes, such as the refugee crisis and the Kurdish issue. Both challenges have had a deep impact so far on public opinion, electoral results, and the adjustment of the big government policy.

The refugee crisis, with many of its 3.6 million refugees seeking shelter in Türkiye, has made itself a core issue in domestic politics. While an open-door policy from the government won broad support for its humanitarianism, the honorable sentiment among the Turks gradually shifted as social and economic pressures related to hosting such large refugee populations mounted. The increasing dissatisfaction among so many Turkish citizens, especially with jobs and housing also including the integration of refugees demanding much more decisive action from the government, lays continually growing pressure on their government. The foreign policy of Türkiye vis-a-vis Syria, in particular, the 'safe zones' proposed to be established in northern Syria, was driven by the intent to extend help in addressing these domestic challenges and to provide a solution for refugee resettlement.

The Justice and Development Party has pursued politics in Syria in order to consolidate its gains in the strengthening of its political base. At the same time, though, the JDP had to

respond to the increasing domestic challenges of the conflict by trying to balance international pressures with citizens demands to deal with the refugee issue and the Kurdish problem. What has been done by the party so far shows an attempt to keep political stability considering both domestic preoccupation and external diplomatic complications.

In other words, Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria has been bound intrinsically with the domestic political schedule of Türkiye. Consequently, this will relate to anchoring the foreign policy of Türkiye to one that is more militarized in its intervention into the conflict, as the government tries to defend its political legitimacy against the complicated spillover consequences for Turkish society caused by the conflict.

Fourth: The Growing Importance of the Kurdish Issue

The Kurdish factor has been the most decisive element for shaping Türkiye's strategy and activity relevant to the Syrian conflict. One of the most serious concerns for Türkiye is a probable establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria, treated as a direct threat to its national security due to close ties between the Syrian Kurdish forces, especially the YPG, with the PKK. It is this preoccupation that has, until now, marked Türkiye's military interventions into Syria and operations like 'Euphrates Shield', 'Olive Branch', and 'Peace Spring' seeking to break the territorial stride of the Kurdish militia and halt in its tracks the crystallization of one continuous swathe of Kurdish-controlled territory across its southern frontier. On the other hand, by establishing 'safe zones' and calling for Syrian opposition groups to the north, Türkiye aims to secure its border and restrain the clout of Kurdish forces.

Thus far, the Kurdish question has strongly marked the relations between Türkiye and other regional and international powers-most recently the United States. Apart from the United States, against the backdrop of the Kurdish question, it also positioned itself variously vis-à-vis other key regional actors such as Russia, Iran, and even Syria itself. Through cease-fire and de-escalation agreements, Türkiye has been trying to find a balance between military priorities and geopolitical realities forged through regional power dynamics, sometimes pointing in directions of accord with or against various actors depending on their stance toward Kurdish autonomy.

Fundamentally, the Kurdish question remains one of the explosive and unresolved parts of Türkiye's foreign policy; it shapes not only Türkiye's military actions in Syria but also its broader approach in terms of regional security and diplomacy. The potential for a Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria makes sure that as long as this is a possibility, the conflict

will also involve Türkiye, for the sake of its own territorial integrity and to make sure the Kurdish groups do not get any more emboldened, feeding the separatist ambitions inside its borders.

Fifth: The Politicization of the Refugee Issue

Among the most critical challenges facing Türkiye, the refugee crisis has a high impact, both in the domestic landscape and in foreign policy. A large number of Syrian refugees started to pour in within a very short span, putting immense stress on the logistical capacities of Türkiye. Indeed, such an unprecedented influx of people was a big challenge for a country which did not have prior experience in handling such a large influx of refugees. It ranges from very basic tasks, such as education in the Turkish language and building refugee camps, up to activities of organizing their integration into the labor market. This is also evidenced by the fact that, before the Syrian conflict, there was no directorate for refugees in Türkiye-in fact, it was established only two years later, after the first wave of refugees entered the country.

This initial lack of infrastructure and experience in dealing with such issues was an immense internal social and economic pressure. For instance, the fact that the refugees were distributed uncoordinated across cities put a demographic strain on some major urban centers internally, therefore leading to tensions internally. The uneven concentration of refugees promoted increased job, housing, and public service competition, which further complicates the integration process for both the refugees and the local communities. These have caused social unrest in and fueled public discontent within those regions most affected by this demographic shift.

On the foreign policy level, the refugee crisis actually became a tipping point for Türkiye: very effectively, in its negotiations with the EU while trying to reach more cooperation and support. For example, under the 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee deal, it committed to stemming the tide of refugees into Europe in return for financial aid, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and the promise of progress in EU accession talks. Further, Türkiye has continued to use the refugee issue to frame its role as a critical gatekeeper preventing a larger migration crisis in Europe.

This dynamic has set the broader approach undertaken by Türkiye with respect to relations with the EU. The refugee crisis has given Türkiye the opportunity to articulate its strategic importance to Europe while drawing on the issue as a bargaining chip toward gaining other

interests, such as trade relations, security cooperation, and access to the EU. This became a source of tension, however, when Europe could not answer the demands of Türkiye in full and the latter voiced dissatisfaction with the EU, complaining of being treated unfairly regarding the burden sharing of refugees.

Furthermore, it was how Türkiye treated the crisis of refugees that influenced its wide-ranging foreign policy posture in balancing its geopolitical interests between the East and the West. At the same time that the refugee issue proved to be an advantage in interacting more deeply with Europe, Türkiye kept close relations with regional powers such as Russia and Iran, striving to position itself as an independent actor in Middle Eastern affairs. Hence, the refugee crisis has created a key factor in the domestic policy of Türkiye and linked it to a complex diplomacy with both Western and Eastern powers.

Sixth: Türkiye's Utilization of Lessons Learned and Evolving Relations with the EU

Türkiye has capitalized on experiences and lessons drawn from its intervention in Syria to inform the broader posture of its foreign policy. The Syrian conflict has presented Türkiye with a "toolbox" of strategies, capabilities, and insights that it has subsequently utilized in other regional conflicts-for example in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. It is because of the experiences in Syria that have driven Türkiye to military power, including drones, and an assertive foreign policy stance. These tools are reinforcing the position of Türkiye in the international arena with respect to the 2023 presidential election, where foreign policy achievements are of key importance.

Seventh: The Influence of Russia on Türkiye's Foreign Policy

Turkish foreign policy has been increasingly in accord, especially since the attempt at a coup in 2016, with the attitude of Russia. Perhaps the most concrete sign of rapprochement between Türkiye and Russia is their skepticism toward regime change intervention from outside-one which appeals to Moscow's traditional policy. In fact, the Turkish government has become increasingly resting on a top-down executive and closer affinity to Russian conceptions of multipolarity in the international order. This reveal increased Turkish alienation from the West and a reorientation of its priorities in foreign policy in a direction that could be described as more Eurasian. This new Turkish-Russian rapprochement has also been influencing once again relations between Türkiye and the EU.

Eightieth: Common Concerns and Divergences with the EU

The EU and Türkiye share common concerns about the impact of the Syrian conflict in particular on terrorism and the refugee crisis. Both actors hope for a quick end to it, as well as for the restoration of stability in the area. Nevertheless, there is considerable divergence of views over the fight against ISIS and the role of Kurdish groups. While the EU stresses the combat of ISIS, Türkiye puts a greater accent on countering the YPG - an arm of the PKK. This divergence has restricted the cooperation between otherwise two partners with many points of convergence on the resolution of the Syrian conflict.

Over the last decade, Turkish policies toward Syria saw many changes, with consideration for domestic and international diplomacy along with a complex webbing of regional dynamics. The fact that the policy has moved away from probable initial engagement to support for opposition groups towards direct military intervention itself speaks to the dynamism in Turkish foreign policy. While Türkiye is continuing to navigate the challenges of the Syrian conflict and its broader regional and international relations, its approach to Syria will be one of the decisive factors in shaping the course of its foreign policy trajectory over the next several years.

Drawing from the lessons learned in the process of being involved in Syria, it fit its foreign policy to be more assertive and revisionist, placing itself as an important player in regional and global affairs. This evolution underlines the importance of the Syrian conflict for shaping the foreign politics of Türkiye and its big strategic aims in balancing interests between the East and West in an increasingly complex world with growing multipolarity.

5.1.3. Outcomes on EU's Response

Our findings on the EU's response to the Syrian conflict have highlighted how such a response unfolded in a number of important steps, which have practically been dominated by internal and external geopolitical challenges. It would seem from this study that it was precisely the inability of the EU to forge a common position among its members that significantly weakened its potential role in this conflict. The division within the EU reduced any response to an often highly limited reactive one from it. Thus, this made sure that the Union did not come across as a powerful political actor for the trajectory of conflict in Syria. In this process, the conflict has bluntly exposed the fact that there are countries in the EU, which outweigh others on matters related to foreign policies.

It becomes clear that EU was fraught with internal problems, which plagued the efficiency of its response in the crisis. By examining the breakup in main phases, one sees how the policy

of the EU changed in response to the developments on the ground, though these changes did not result in any qualitative turning point in the overall strategy of the Union.

5.1.3.1. The phases of the Union's response to the conflict:

In the early period of the conflict, the main EU response focused on the situation within Syria itself, consisting of imposing sanctions against the Bashar Al-Assad regime, while condemning violence against peaceful protesters. In contrast, during this initial period, the response was characterized by a total lack of strategic foresight. The fragmentation of EU member states with respect to what to do in regard to the crisis brought about a response that was fragmented and incoherent. The events were far from being unified, which undermined any possibility of the EU influence on these events. The EU modestly kept itself from deeper involvement in conflict, which only weakened its position as an international actor in the early stages of conflict. A simple conclusion could be elicited-that at this stage, the EU was reluctant to assume more resolute positions that favored a politics of restraint, application of diplomatic means instead of direct intervention. Sanctions and calls for the resignation of Assad were symbolically important but did not bring about actual fruits on the ground.

The period between 2013 and 2014 saw a tremendous escalation in the Syrian conflict, especially in the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta and the emergence of ISIS. The EU response has been basically reactive during this phase, limited to condemnation of the attacks with chemical weapons and supporting international efforts for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. However, what arises from this analysis is the lack of any proactive intervention plan to deal with this growingly complex conflict scenario. The inter-EU debates became louder during these days, specifically over the possibility of military intervention. While some countries like France and the UK favored a much firmer military response, others like Germany and Italy favored giving a more diplomatic and humanitarian turn to the situation.

The 2015-2016 refugee crisis set one of the highest parallels of challenges that the EU had to face during the Syrian conflict. The gigantic inflow of refugees into Europe put immense political and humanitarian pressure on the Union. The 2016 EU-Türkiye deal on controlling the flow of refugees marked a pivotal moment within the crisis management strategy of the EU. The deal succeeded mainly in breaking the flow of refugees coming into Europe, but strongly attracts criticism because it shifts responsibility to the shores of Türkiye without dealing with the root causes that cause the exodus of refugees. In that period, analysis also points to the

impact of the military intervention by Russia in Syria, which fundamentally changed the balance of power in the conflict. The Russian intervention consolidated the Assad regime and drastically reduced the EU's leverage over the political and military course of the conflict. Without its military instrument, the Union was pushed more and more to the periphery of diplomatic actions.

Thus, the adoption of the new EU strategy on Syria in 2017 constituted an attempt to refocus attention on political solutions, underlining also support for the Geneva process and the implementation of UNSCR 2254. Indeed, this strategy underlined the commitment of the EU to a political solution; however, being unable to enforce it impaired its effectiveness. Of course, the actual capacity of the Union for shaping the political realities on the ground remained, for the most part, confined to humanitarian assistance and support to transitional justice. The Turkish military interventions in northern Syria during the reviewed period-operation "Euphrates Shield" and operation "Olive Branch"-furtherly complicated the EU approach toward the conflict. The analysis showed that the EU was seen to balance the recognition of the security concerns of Türkiye with the condemnation of the humanitarian fallouts of these operations. This balancing act has strained the relationship between the EU and Türkiye, especially on the Kurdish issue.

From 2020 to 2024, EU involvement in the Syrian conflict turned toward addressing the wider humanitarian effects of the conflict, particularly after the devastating earthquake in 2023. The Union then took the lead in providing humanitarian assistance to both Syria and Türkiye, though it remained tied in its capacity to affect military and political dimensions of the conflict. The Union continued to oppose normalization with the Assad regime, keeping sanctions in place, calling for refugee rights, but the impact was weakened because of the absence of a unified military/diplomatic thrust. Relations with Türkiye, however, started balancing in 2024 from its initially strained position, largely due to the cooperation on humanitarian efforts concerning Syria and reconstruction in Syria. Nevertheless, political tensions continued to persist, especially regarding policies in refugee management and the military actions of Türkiye in northern Syria. This phase underlines EU continuous commitment in humanitarian aid, pointing at the same time to its difficulties increasing its leverage on broader geopolitical issues.

5.1.3.2. Responses of the Institutional Bodies of the EU

The EU's institutional response to the Syrian conflict engaged not only its main bodies, such as the European Council and the European Commission, but also its so-called specialized

agencies, particularly the European External Action Service and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations.

The European Council played the leading role in drafting the EU's political response to the conflict: under the provisions for guiding the overall strategy of the Union, it set the course of sanctions against the Syrian regime and humanitarian aid. During the conflict, it regularly convened with the leaders of the Member States in order to set ways of how to handle the ever-growing spiral of violence and threats of terrorism. However, internal divisions within the member states on issues such as military intervention, in the context of relations with international actors such as Russia and Türkiye, often blurred clear decisions.

The conclusion, therefore, from all this goes to show that even though the Council was instrumental in setting the general policies of the EU, in reality, it was greatly limited by the requirement for consensus among its members. While countries like France and the United Kingdom pursued a more veneered attitude toward the Assad regime, calling as such for further action, others, like Germany and Italy, preferred diplomatic means and humanitarian interventions without military intervention. This divergence in national approaches had a consequence of slowing down the decision-making process and prevented the Council from acting promptly with a unified response to the evolving situation for a resolution in Syria.

Due to these internal disagreements, however, the Council's effectiveness as a coordinator of the EU's political stand was compromised despite its key role. Since decisions were usually by consensus, even critical decisions were often put off, and the Council could barely respond to the ever-changing dynamics on the ground. Primarily, however, the European Council was instrumental in setting the Union's response but remained still more a coordinating body than the one able to take bold, unilateral positions on military interventions.

In contrast, the European Commission was primarily responsible for implementing the decisions of the European Council, which were about sanctions and humanitarian aid coordination. As the executive organ of the EU, the Commission played a significant role in channeling funds to international and regional mechanisms that were mobilized to act on the crisis, especially in the areas of relief and refugees resettlement. Equally important, it helped pave the way for vital agreements, such as the 2016 EU-Türkiye deal on how to handle the refugee crisis.

It was quite effective in marshaling resources as well as organizing humanitarian efforts at the local level while having little influence on greater political and strategic decisions. Due to a lack of direct military or diplomatic power, the Commission could not shape big political changes on the ground. Although - at least - the Commission was able to form and consolidate cooperation networks with international organizations like the United Nations, in reality, this mostly represented a form of humanitarian assistance rather than a true effort to influence political dynamics or military action.

The Commission proved efficient in the management of sanctions and in organizing aid programs, while it was far less successful in influencing larger geopolitical decisions that would have brought the conflict to an end. Without military tools or direct political leverage, the Commission could not adequately respond to the ever-changing challenges on the ground. Its role was pivotal, nonetheless, in ensuring that the response from the EU was coordinated and effective at the humanitarian level, even when the broader political level remained limited.

Moreover, during the conflict in Syria, The European External Action Service was the lead agent of the EU's foreign and security policies. It follows from the analysis that the leading role of coordination played by the EEAS in the Union's diplomatic work was especially expressed in contacts with international counterparts such as the United Nations and the Arab League. At the same time, the EEAS was hindered because there was no uniform military course, since the EU's diplomatic efforts were not supplemented with appropriate enforcement instruments.

It was actively involved in the management of relations with the neighboring countries suffering from the impact of the Syrian conflict, among which Türkiye holds a leading position. Among other activities, DG NEAR designed and conducted programs of aid within the framework provided by the ENP for the stabilization of this region and support of refugee populations. Whereas the contribution of DG NEAR was important in view of the financial and logistic support provided, its influence could hardly reach beyond general political and military dynamics dominating the region.

5.1.3.3. Collaboration with International Organizations

It has been the intention of the EU to reinforce its response to the Syrian conflict in cooperation with several international organizations, namely the Union for the Mediterranean, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, and lastly, the United

Nations. This multilateral engagement has contributed a great deal in coordinating humanitarian aid, allowing relief, and furthering diplomatic efforts toward the continuous conflict with devastating humanitarian costs.

Through its partnerships, the EU has been in a position where it could mobilize and deliver considerable humanitarian assistance, addressing the needs of millions of displaced Syrians within and outside Syria. Working in close cooperation with the UN and regional organizations, the aspiration of the EU has been aimed at addressing the food, shelter, health, education needs among others. These alliances have also played a facilitating role regarding diplomatic efforts for a peaceful solution to the war through calling for peace talks and ceasefire agreements in rounds.

However, all these efforts have been hamstringing the political influence of the EU to engage in the conflict, largely due to the divergent interests and agendas of other key international players involved in Syria. The profound involvement of Russia and Iran, both of whom have supported the regime militarily and politically, brought about huge impediments to EU diplomatic initiatives. Its military support to the Assad regime, the interface of Russian interests, and Iran's strategic interests in the region have worked against European Union objectives in Syria time and again. These geopolitical complexities have confined the capability of the EU to exercise substantial political leverage to shape the outcome of the conflict.

5.1.3.4. EU Policy on the Refugee Crisis

Our reflections also bring forth clearly that the strategy of the EU relied primarily upon the containment of refugee flow through agreements, such as the EU-Türkiye deal, and financial support for those frontline states-most affected by the crisis, like Greece and Italy. While these relieved immediate pressures on EU member states, it is obvious that the response was highly reactive on the part of the EU. While the Union is indeed focused on the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis—housing, supporting, and resettling refugees—it basically leaves the root causes that led to displacement unaddressed.

Any long-term strategy of the EU that focused on these reactive measures left some serious gaps. The reliance on Türkiye to contain the flows was effective as a means of reducing the numbers arriving in Europe, but it shifted the burden from the Union to a non-member state and exposed the Union's dependence on third-party actors for crisis management. Moreover, the failure to engage comprehensively with political and security factors that have driven the

exodus from Syria—such as ongoing violence, instability, and governance collapse—meant the EU was not in a position to contribute to sustainable solutions that might have mitigated further displacement.

This becomes all the more strikingly limited when set against the wider geopolitical background: the EU had focused mainly on containment and short-term relief, failing to seize opportunities that could have impacted the political dynamics in Syria, which continued to feed the refugee crisis. Without any serious political approach that could have reached the very core of conflictive issues, such as promoting more intense peace negotiations or, in fact, any type of policy targeting the Assad regime, it substantially weakened the EU position as a key geopolitical actor. It is obvious that, even if humanitarian work by the EU had been very important, it required deeper engagement with the causes of displacement—a critical shortfall in the Union's approach to overall crisis management.

The difference shows that, although the EU has been quite active in handling the immediate consequences of the refugee crisis, essentially, it did not have any well-thought-out, long-term strategy to avoid recurrence in the future of such large-scale displacement. To address these lacunae, policies would need to shift away from being reactive and short-term towards more proactive durable solutions that go beyond humanitarian responses towards stabilization of the regions characterized by ongoing conflict through political and diplomatic means.

The EU's response to this conflict has been internally divided, low on military leverage, and largely reactive. While humanitarian aid along with refugee management had been some of the important focal areas for the Union, its input on the political and military dimensions of the same conflict remained limited. The EU's reliance on external actors—like Türkiye—for dealing with the most significant elements of the crisis underlined even further its limited foreign policy capabilities. The above analysis has therefore indicated that although the EU played an important and constructive role in response to the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, its ambition of shaping the overall geopolitical landscape of Syria was furrowed both by internal and external factors.

5.2. Long-term Implications for Türkiye-EU Relations

5.2.1. Realignment of Alliances and Geopolitical Shifts

The Syrian conflict has thus far brought some fundamental changes in the well-established course of Turkish foreign policy by reshaping its geopolitical alliances and position within both

regional and global frameworks. Historically, Türkiye had enjoyed close relations with Western institutions, including its NATO membership and its current bid to enter the EU. In contrast, the Syrian conflict has compelled Türkiye to rebalance its foreign policy in light of heightened security concerns, internal political imperatives, and greater geopolitical aims.

The relation of Türkiye with Russia was developed pragmatically during the Syrian conflict, though the rivalry between the two had been in place historically. The Astana Process, initiated in 2017 with the participation of Iran, represented effective cooperation on the Syrian crisis between Türkiye-Russia. The solution for the stabilization of Syria, as agreed upon by the two countries, was by sidelining Western powers that had failed to deliver. This feeling further intensified after it accused Western powers of involvement in the failed 2016-coup attempt and became frustrated over the western support of Kurdish militias in northeastern Syria. Cooperation became evident in the area of joint military operations and negotiations over Syrian de-escalation zones.

The acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2019 marked the point when things started to change-a strategic reorientation from relying exclusively on NATO for its defense needs. Thus, this move became the cause of strained relations between Türkiye and its Western allies, including the EU, since these countries were concerned about "levels of insecurity" in this strategic direction taken by Türkiye and the compatibility questions of its defense systems with NATO infrastructure. Simultaneously, the cooperation with Russia was not free of tensions. Such divergences became quite obvious in times of Türkiye military operations in northern Syria. The fact that Russia voiced an outright support for the Assad regime and had never expressed a full agreement with Türkiye ambitions in northern Syria created periodic frictions. Still, both sides continued to maintain a dialogue through tactical compromises.

This transformation in the relationship between Türkiye and Russia constituted a secondary but significant determinant in the relations of Türkiye with Europe. As relations with Moscow deepened, so did the suspicions of Europe about the drift in Türkiye away from European norms and values, further complicating the already stalled EU accession process of Türkiye. The long-term impact of the Syrian conflict on the relations between Türkiye and the EU gradually became clear, particularly in as much as military interventions by Türkiye in Syria, perceived by some European states as destabilizing, further strained foreign policy relations.

The Syrian conflict presented a direct threat to the national security of Türkiye, at least with regard to the strengthening positions of Kurdish YPG militias in northern Syria. From a realist perspective, one could explain that Türkiye would change its alliances and entertain new alignments, including rapprochement with Russia, in return for its security interests. Realism also expresses that an alliance between states is based on interests. In this respect, rapprochement between Türkiye and Russia is thus seen as a pragmatic alliance to fulfill short-term interests of Syria, given historical hostilities. The cooperation within the Astana Process with Russia just showcases Türkiye's effort not to be wholly dependent on the West in solving the Syrian conflict, focusing on immediate military and political gains.

Also, the strained relations between Türkiye and the EU can be contextualized through the prisms of clashing interests. The Western support of Kurdish militias in Syria made Türkiye follow more independent policies, further away from NATO and the EU. Its pivot toward Moscow reflected an effort by Ankara to find a new strategic partner that could help it secure gains on the ground in Syria-even if this means moving away from its traditional allies.

This strategic recalibration underlines the fluidity within the foreign policy of Türkiye, in which alliances are shaped by immediate security needs and political gains rather than by long-term ideological commitments. The findings underline the fact that growth in the relationship between Türkiye and Russia, deepening tensions with the EU, and military interventions in Syria all make them tools of the realist approach, prioritizing national security and influence over traditional alliance frameworks. This realignment presages a more far-reaching readjustment in the geopolitical position of Türkiye, which increasingly balances its relations with Eastern and Western powers for maximum strategic benefit.

5.2.2. Turkish Military Interventions and Their Diplomatic Implications

Military interventions by Türkiye, marked a turning point in the country's foreign policy and in its relations with the EU. The interventions mentioned above were indicative of the shift from acting within traditional alliances toward unilateral policies which put the immediate national interests of Türkiye first. This was all the more striking because these operations began just five months after the refugee agreement between Türkiye and the EU. Although it participated in the international coalition against ISIS, most of the military activity has been aimed at preventing an independent Kurdish entity along its southern borders, a prospect usually perceived by Ankara as a direct threat to its national security.

Most of the military operations of Türkiye aimed at the destruction of the YPG's power. In line with defensive realism, these interventions have been required in order to enhance national security and decrease the various external threats. Realists argue that states would like to maximize their security, and in the case of Türkiye, the threat of an independent Kurdish entity had shown itself as an existential danger for its territorial integrity. Indeed, for this reason, Türkiye did not hesitate to sacrifice coordination with its Western allies in order to achieve its security goals.

The interventions of Türkiye in Syria have increased tensions with its traditional ally, the EU. The said tensions have not been confined to military matters but have also extended to the diplomatic and political dimensions. Operation Olive Branch is against the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria in 2018, where sharp criticisms were raised by several European powers headed by Germany and France, feeling that such action taken by the Turkish government was destabilizing the region and further complicating the Syrian conflict.

This represented a divergence between Turkish national goals and European priorities. While Türkiye had to be concerned with securing its borders and preventing the establishment of a Kurdish state-that is, what it perceived as a threat to its territorial integrity-EU interest lay with regional stability that would reduce the plight of new flows of refugees. Further, this disparity increased the rift between Ankara and Brussels, the latter viewing the Turkish unilateral military interventions as a violation of international principles governing military action.

Military interventions by Türkiye in Syria could also be seen, from the perspective of offensive realism, within the context of a broader strategy of expanding its regional influence. That is, it was not only to secure its borders but also to reshape, in its favour, the regional balance of power. Only operations like "Peace Spring" (2019) were, above all, aimed at ousting the Kurdish forces and, at the same time, were an attempt to establish new spheres of influence in Syria that could serve as bargaining chips in possible future negotiations over the settlement of the Syrian conflict. According to offensive realists, one of the main goals of states in an anarchic international system is the maximization of an influence. Looked at from that perspective, Türkiye seemed to be in the process of creating new ground realities in Syria which would add more weight to Türkiye's voice in discussions on Syria's future and constitute positions of Türkiye as an indispensable power in the political settlement.

Moreover, military interventions by Türkiye express the very meaning of how national interests and alliance commitments sometimes move in opposite directions. This disappointment of Türkiye is rooted in a set of important issues, including the following references: It is true that Türkiye has repeatedly expressed frustration with what she feels is an inadequate display of support on the part of NATO and EU members to deal with terrorist threats from the PKK and affiliated groups. Yet, most European states have been reluctant to firmly stand behind the policies pursued by Ankara, in particular, regarding the Kurdish militias in Syria, such as the YPG, which some Western allies consider important partners in the fight against ISIS. Further, when the Syrian conflict escalated, Ankara was seeking NATO's backing for the creation of safe zones and the prevention of formations that constitute a threat to its security from becoming dominant in the area at its southern border. Yet, Ankara often felt it was left out in the cold-when its calls for action, or at least support from NATO allies, fell on deaf ears. In turn, this hounded the Turkish side into unilateral moves-most with a military flavor, like "Operation Euphrates Shield" and "Operation Peace Spring," designed to establish a security buffer zone north of Syria.

Moreover, Ankara is of the view that NATO and EU member states focus on a range of threats, such as Russian aggression or ISIS, while ignoring those that are most critical for Türkiye, such as Kurdish insurgencies or security risks emanating from Syria. This perception of double standards has fostered growing tensions and a distancing of Türkiye from its traditional Western partners.

The fact that Türkiye decided to use military force unilaterally, without considering traditional allies, made it crystal clear that alliances are neither permanent nor based on loyalty but rather on evolving interests. As a result, such interventions have come at a high diplomatic cost. The moment the growing rift started to appear between Türkiye and its Western allies, the nature of relationships from Türkiye with those partners began to be seen in a different light. Contrary to European powers, which relied on negotiation and diplomacy as the main method for the resolution of the Syrian conflict, for Türkiye, military intervention was the right way toward the realization of strategic interests. Military actions in Syria not only shaped its relations with traditional allies but also herein provided a new understanding in the position of the country within the international system. This strategy reflected the ambition of Türkiye to assume its place in the international system as a state that pursues its interests through both military and diplomatic means. Further, these operations underlined an independent regional

policy of Türkiye, anchored in the protection of its national security and regional influence, placing the country among the decisive actors of the future of Syria and the wider region.

It might be interpreted that military interventions by Türkiye in Syria were not some reactive behavior towards an urgent situation but were a part of long-term strategy for regional dominance, entwined with national security. The tendency to move away from traditional alliances and act unilaterally in order to pursue interests was shown in these interventions by Türkiye.

The diplomatic tensions that emerged between Türkiye and its Western allies, especially the EU, mirrored the strategic dissonance characteristic of the priorities of both parties. These interventions propelled Türkiye to the front-runner level on the international scene, whereby it gained the capability to use military power in view of reaching its regional objectives while maintaining its maneuvering capabilities between alliances for political and diplomatic advantages. Although this strained its relations with the EU in the short run, it gave significant leverage to Türkiye. Notably, after the 2023 elections, the EU invited Türkiye in 2024 to a High-Level Meeting of Foreign Ministers, which was joined by the Turkish Foreign Minister after five years.

5.2.3. Refugee Crisis: A Significant Factor in Türkiye-EU Relations

The refugee crisis has become a key factor in molding Türkiye-EU relations, especially due to the Syrian conflict. Until today, Türkiye has received more than 3 million Syrian refugees, the highest number of hosted refugees in the world. This is highly burdensome to the economy and social services of Türkiye but also serves as an important bargaining factor in the negotiations between Türkiye and the EU. The 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee agreement was the turning point in relations, as it allowed the EU to reduce the inflow of refugees, while Türkiye received financial aid and promises of relaxed visa restrictions for its citizens. That deal underlined how vital Türkiye was regarding the handling of migration flows toward Europe. It made Ankara an indispensable partner for the EU on that score. The agreement also touched upon the possible accession of Türkiye to the EU, particularly the promise of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The negotiation took place in a period of tensions between Türkiye and Russia because of the downing of a Russian jet, a fact that underlined how the refugee crisis had conferred a new dimension upon relations between Türkiye and the EU. Migration ceased to be an issue of humanitarian concern and became one of the most important elements of geopolitical bargaining.

With Türkiye's repeated threat of, whenever things get tough, opening the "gates of migration" to Europe, it really drove the point home that the refugee crisis is one big strategic tool in shaping its ties with the EU. Most profoundly, this was seen in 2020 when Türkiye made good on her threats after 33 Turkish soldiers were killed by Syrian regime forces. As a result, the refugee crisis has emerged in a dual role: in 2016 it was a key factor in rapprochement, while now, in 2020, it is a boosting element in the tensions.

This dynamic, from a constructivist perspective, reflects the constitution of identities and shared understandings through interaction. The refugee crisis has engraved policies and entrenched mutual dependencies. Probably the most constructive consequence of the refugee crisis has been the solidifying of Türkiye as a gatekeeper of migration flows into Europe, something both sides realize they need to cooperate on given the latent political differences between them. The crisis thus ultimately did the opposite: it cemented long-term interdependence between Türkiye and the EU, for which migration management remains the focus, even if political tensions remain.

It is the interdependence that became a product of the structural context of the refugee crisis, wherein Türkiye managed to transform migration into an influential factor within a greater geopolitical environment. While the EU's primary concern has to do with securing the borders and reducing flows of refugees, it also needs to find a balance between political concessions and measures of migration control in relations with Türkiye. The continuing task will be to carefully manage tensions along with forcing cooperation to take place, fully in knowledge that the refugee crisis has moved beyond humanitarian emergency to a core component of bilateral strategy deeply embedded within the developing construct of Türkiye-European relations.

While considering an analysis of the refugee crisis and its long-term implications on the relations between Türkiye and the EU, the wider implications of such a complex dynamic need to be pursued. The interplay of migration, political negotiations, and mutual dependencies signal a many-dimensional nature of the relationship, which has developed further since the Syrian conflict started. But as we go deep into the findings, it crystalizes how the refugee crisis shaped not only policies but also geopolitical strategies for both Türkiye and the EU. The set of key findings that follows gives insight into the far-reaching implications this crisis has for their relationship.

- **The Refugee Crisis as a Leverage Point:** It follows from Table 10 that the 2015 EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan gave the latter an especially bright bargaining position, thus introducing a number of incentives going beyond the specific Syrian migrant crisis. These included: rapid progress on the visa liberalization roadmap for the Turkish citizens; supporting efforts to modernize the Customs Union; and revitalizing the accession process of Türkiye toward the EU. In effect, the refugee crisis became one of the most driving factors for the course of the EU-Türkiye relations. It is obvious that as the largest receiver of Syrian refugees, Türkiye thus gained an upper hand in the negotiating process. This leverage is most clearly revealed in the EU-Türkiye refugee agreement, whereby the country managed to secure financial aid in return and the promise of eased visa restrictions. As President Erdoğan noted, "The surest path to achieving peace and stability runs through Ankara" regarding the Syrian conflict (Erdoğan R. T., 2021). This perspective underlines the critical role of Türkiye in both regional and global respects while navigating the different dimensions of the crisis. After all, the refugee crisis underlined not only the central role of Türkiye but also readjusted EU-Türkiye relations since Türkiye leveraged its position to gain concrete benefits and push its strategic interests within the EU framework.
- **Migration as a Geopolitical Tool (Politicization of migration):** At first, primarily presented as an issue with a humanitarian core; it has been transformed today into a prime quantitative ingredient of the geopolitical colloquy between Türkiye and the EU. What was earlier viewed as less than a purely humanitarian challenge-the refugee crisis-has now been molded into a strong bargaining tool, placing Türkiye as one of the key wardens for migration flows into Europe. As evinced in our analysis in Phase 2020-2024 of *The EU Response to the Syrian Conflict*, Türkiye's decision to open its borders served as a potent signal to European leaders, prompting the EU to reassess and reaffirm its partnership with Türkiye. This action underscored Türkiye's essential role within the EU's external strategy.

The neo-realist school would say, on the contrary, that this was the manoeuvring of its geopolitical position as leverage for Türkiye. Just by opening its borders, as any state would, in such a position, was thereby using the geographical advantage and the control over migration flows as pressure means concerning the EU to recognize the critical role played by it in regional stability. This calculated move underlined not only the central role of Türkiye in the refugee crisis but also how states could navigate the uncertainties of an anarchic international system to attain strategic gain. In this respect, the deft

management of migration flows by Türkiye allowed the latter to wield influence over the EU and solidify its standing within a geopolitically complicated landscape. In a nutshell, this positioning of the refugee crisis by Türkiye underlined the need felt by the EU for a greater responsibility to be undertaken vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict and the immense political potential of migration.

Although the crisis at the Turkish-Greek frontier in February 2020 had roots unrelated to the EU's action or lack thereof, Türkiye seized the moment to use the EU and exposed migration policy weaknesses. Such steps have allowed Türkiye to turn rising tensions to its advantage and to demonstrate flaws in the EU's migration architecture, making it an increasingly indispensable interlocutor on matters of regional stability and security.

- **Türkiye's Role in European Security:** Evident and suggested in our analysis, especially in the section on Institutional and Strategic Frameworks of the EU's Response in Chapter Four, the management of migration underlined the critical contribution of Türkiye to the safeguarding of European security. Indeed, it has become a keen partner for the EU in the domain of ensuring security and stability on the continent.

This partnership is particularly salient in the EU's resorting to the Common Foreign and Security Policy in operations such as Operation Sophia, which underlines how the EU needs Türkiye's strategic position to effectively control migration. Hence, Türkiye acts as a front line of defense vis-à-vis possible security threats due to uncontrolled migration, further strengthening its position within the European security framework. This interdependence has therefore positioned Türkiye as a crucial ally, underpinning its role with respect to security and stability across Europe.

- **Dual Role of the Refugee Crisis:** The refugee crisis has played a dual role in serving both as a factor for rapprochement and as a source of heightened tensions in relations between Türkiye and the EU. It was an incentive for closer cooperation in 2016 through the EU-Türkiye Deal for the management of migration. In contrast, by 2020 crises have become a source of friction because the parties disagreed on how to handle border policies and refugees.

The analysis of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on both Türkiye and the EU shows a dual character of that phenomenon, fully corresponding to the complex and poly-directional influence of the crisis on bilateral relations. Precisely this dynamic constitutes the heart of the hypothesis of this study, which assumes that common challenges, such as migration, might become at the same time a driver for cooperation and a source of friction in partnerships, especially given the ever-changing political

landscape and social pressures on both sides.

- **Long-Term Strategic Implications:** The geopolitical framework of the relationship between Türkiye and the EU has, therefore, deeply entrenched the refugee crisis, thus giving way to a significant turning point in their strategic landscape. It is crystal clear from our study that migration has turned into the top concern and defining factor in the relationship between Türkiye and the EU after 2014-15 with the Syrian conflict. As mentioned earlier, the rise of ISIS and the Russian intervention at that period were the primary triggers for an unexpected crisis that neither of the parties was anticipating. The consequences brought about by the refugee crisis have been enormous, with effects not confined to the short run. Migration became a topic right at the center of the talks between Türkiye and the EU, even influencing the general course of membership negotiations as a whole.

This is a constantly changing reality that corroborates the thought that both Türkiye and the EU must learn to live with tension and work in cooperation with one another, given that migration will be at the core of the strategic issues that shape the course of their bilateral relations for many years.

- **Clashing values:** The recent independent foreign policy of Türkiye often invoked through the prism of Muslim solidarity sometimes contradicts the EU's support for multilateralism and human rights. This has been perfectly brought out by the role of President Erdoğan rhetorically referring to Türkiye's position as "Ansar" - the Islamic historical name referring to solidarity and brotherhood, framing the refugees as a moral and religious duty on the part of Türkiye.

By contrast, EU policy on refugees is framed in terms of multilateral agreements and respect for human rights. The EU favors a common approach among its members, placing emphasis on securing borders, the acceptance of responsibility, and integration initiatives. This all too often translates into tortured bureaucracy and differential commitment by EU members themselves, which leads to inconsistent receptions and support for refugees across Europe.

It is this fundamental divergence in perspectives between Türkiye's emphasis on solidarity and the more structured and rights-driven approach of the European Union - that has triggered friction in bilateral relations. While Türkiye perceives its refugee policies within the context of a broader commitment to humanitarian and religious solidarity, the EU views refugee management as a challenge that needs to be addressed with due balance and in a collective manner. This divergence underlines deeper values

tensions, which reflect the complexity of aligning national interests with broader, often contrasting ideological frameworks in relations between Türkiye and the EU.

- **Rise of populism and Anti-Immigration Sentiments:** The refugee crisis has contributed noticeably to the revival of populist and antimigration attitudes in both Türkiye and EU member states alike, influencing internal politics and defining foreign policy axes. Clearly, the most salient reason for such animosity can be traced back to the unprecedented number of refugees crossing into recipient countries in the shortest time periods, instantaneous burdens on resources, infrastructure, and social systems.

Indeed, research has shown that the influx of refugees into Türkiye caused an eruption in employment issues, with the larger share of citizens in the country feeling threatened by competition from these refugees in the labor market, particularly in low-skilled and low-wage labor. On the other hand, tensions in logistics, housing, healthcare, and educational systems have resulted in a general public debate, shaping in turn the national policy and the people's view in common regarding the role of Türkiye in refugee support. This has highly amplified debates on immigration in the European Union, with this record number of arrivals. Because of this, there is a sudden rise in populist movements that take the EU to task for its no-border policy and push it to retreat from its commitments toward multilateral humanitarian responses. Economic issues highly include job competition and the costs associated with refugee integration as hot topics in most European countries. Logistic issues about housing, healthcare, and social services have increasingly contributed to the success of populist narratives, easing even the path to more restrictive policies and calls for tightened border controls.

This study underlined that the scale of refugee arrivals has long-lasting impacts on both domestic policies and foreign policy outlooks, above all in Türkiye and the EU. It also evidenced how managing migration in a manner which can balance humanitarian commitments with domestic stability and public opinion is enormously complicated and shapes the trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations within the context of migration.

At this juncture, the unparalleled refugee crisis has brought relations between Türkiye and the EU to a fever pitch. As tensions continue to rise, it is now more imperative than ever that policymakers and scholars alike find new ways of addressing a raft of challenges wrought by the migration phenomenon. This proposal, with liberalism and international cooperation in mind, identifies a number of key strategies toward the development of a system that is more

equitable and inclusive. Such strategies respect human rights, integration of refugees, and sustainability, long-term solutions to the crisis:

- **Burden-sharing:** Implement a system that is perpetuating a fair sharing of responsibilities across EU Member States without disproportionately weighting the crisis on the frontline countries. It would include resettlement to the EU and to major refugee-hosting countries, with financial and logistical support provided to countries of resettlement.
- **Strengthening the Common European Asylum System:** Ensuring that asylum procedures are fair, efficient, and consistent throughout the EU, leading to the same outcome regardless of the Member State in which the asylum seeker applies. This requires the harmonization of asylum policies and practices across EU Member States, along with increasing the efficiency of the asylum process.
- **Addressing root causes:** By diplomatic means, development assistance, and support for peacebuilding initiatives, determine and resolve the root causes of forced migration, such as conflicts, persecution, and economic instability (Vrânceanu, Dinas, Heidland, & Ruhs, 2022, pp. 16-18). An example of this is working on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 and Geneva Talks.
- **Promoting international cooperation:** To encourage cooperation among EU Member States and other countries, such as Türkiye, and international organizations, such as UNHCR, for comprehensive and coordinated responses to the refugee crisis.
- **Upholding human rights and the rule of law:** All the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, as acquired in accordance with international law, are protected in the asylum procedure, with liberal principles. This also includes the right to asylum, the prohibition of collective expulsions, and protection against removals to states where they may be persecuted or exposed to harm (Hafner, 2016, pp. 03-05).
- **Supporting integration and social cohesion:** Investment in programmes and policies that help to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are integrated into the host communities through language courses, vocational training, and education (Beirens, 2020, pp. 52-53). This would help to reduce social tensions and foster greater understanding and acceptance of refugees within host communities.
- **Combating human smuggling and trafficking:** Efforts should be reinforced in dismantling criminal networks involved in refugee smuggling and trafficking while opening ways for safe and legal pathways to protection (Vrânceanu, Dinas, Heidland,

& Ruhs, 2022). This could include expanding resettlement programs, humanitarian visas, and family reunification opportunities.

As discussed in these points, the relationship between the EU and Türkiye does indeed carry valuable insights for working out how these principles can apply and be adapted to the complex regional and global challenges it faces over time. It also underlines the importance of continuous dialogue, mutual understanding, trust, and commitment to shared goals and interests. The Syrian conflict is one case that reminds one of complex dynamics within international cooperation and a continued struggle toward a delicate balance between national interests, collective responsibilities, and shared values.

5.2.4. The Implications on the Membership Process

Aside from the political and economic pretexts, which changed every year, the accession of Türkiye to the EU was one of the most complex dossiers in international relations. In this respect, though, the Syrian conflict is one of the most powerful infection factors for these negotiations, bringing an unimaginable dimension to the relationship between Türkiye and the EU, and making it a hot topic in their discussions.

While the accession talks between the EU and Türkiye did involve the traditional set of issues like human rights, rule of law, democratic freedoms, and economic reforms until the beginning of the Syrian conflict, conditionality has been the policy the EU has relied on for a long time in urging Türkiye toward such reforms as part of the broader process of accession. Despite periodical rise of tension due to topics such as Cyprus and Kurdish issue the regional challenges at Palestine and Iraq, the dialogue between the two parties did have a constant dynamic.

This balance dramatically shifted with the eruption of the Syrian conflict; for Türkiye, security concerns and direct threats-both structural and physical-fomented by the Syrian conflict, including the massive flow of refugees, became a top priority. While the refugee crisis was a focal point of tension between Türkiye and the EU, military interventions by Türkiye in Syria-particularly those against the YPG, which the West supported-deepened the rift between them. In this respect, the Syrian file became a critical element in the relationship between Türkiye and the EU, influencing not only how they dealt with the humanitarian crisis but also the foreign policy course of Türkiye. Those developments contributed directly to the fact that the more Türkiye advanced in its military activity, the more incompatible these actions were

perceived with European values of peaceful conflict resolution by some EU countries.

Until 2018, Türkiye's negotiations for full EU membership had largely stalled, with internal political challenges and governance issues slowing progress. However, the freeze in negotiations was significantly influenced by external factors, particularly the Syrian conflict. Disagreements over Türkiye's military interventions in Syria and EU policies regarding Kurdish groups reached a peak in 2018, creating deeper rifts between the two sides. From 2018 to 2024, the Syrian crisis and its spillover effects on regional security became central to the growing tensions, overshadowing earlier concerns. During this time, the EU also observed Türkiye moving further away from the democratic standards required for membership, widening the divide and solidifying the freeze in negotiations. From the refugee crisis to the repeated military incursions into Syrian territory, it increasingly viewed Türkiye as moving away from democratic and human rights principles core to the accession process. Against the changing regional and political dynamics in 2024, a first ministerial-level meeting in five years was staged after stalled talks with Türkiye. While negotiations continued to move at a turgid pace, the Syrian conflict remained one of the unresolved issues still affecting the EU accession process of Türkiye. The EU continued to raise concerns over Türkiye's Syria policies, particularly over Kurdish rights and the constant military interventions. For its part, Türkiye continued to use the refugee crisis as a bargaining chip in the negotiations, arguing that its role in hosting millions of Syrian refugees should be factored into the accession discussions. This was far from enough in bridging the deep, politically and value-based divisions between the two sides, especially as the EU insisted on adherence by Türkiye to European standards as a basic membership condition.

Meanwhile, while analyzing the influence the Syrian conflict has had on long-term consequences in negotiating Türkiye's membership in the EU, it was clear that it had been one of the important factors that changed dynamics. Until 2011, negotiations focused on traditional political and democratic reforms. Yet, the Syrian conflict brought this front and centre, and it was apparent that the security and political challenges that were to arise from the conflict had redefined the negotiation agenda amongst Türkiye and the European Union.

With the addition of a realist and liberal perspective, respectively, emphasizing national interests and international cooperation, there is also a constructivist perspective on the Syrian conflict, wherein identities and values shape state behavior. Since the beginning of this conflict, the question of identity has formed the core of the relationship between Türkiye and the EU.

Until recently, particularly in the early years of Syrian refugee presence in Türkiye, the Turkish justification for hosting refugees fell within an Islamic and humanitarian framework. President Erdoğan refers to the Syrian refugees as "Muhajeer". But it was more than a political rhetoric, but one element of a more extensive process aimed at assuming Türkiye's identity as leading actor of the Islamic world and committed to intervene with its Syrian "brothers." By so doing, Türkiye framed a religious and cultural sense of obligation, thus aligning policy actions within a more comprehensive conception of Islamic solidarity.

On the other hand, identity also played an important role in shaping the response of the EU: it is based on legal principles and human rights; this, however, emanates from European identity. At the same time, Europe's identity is informed not only by its commitment to liberal values such as human rights, democracy, and secularism, but also by its longtime nation-state building, Christian heritage, and efforts toward cultural cohesion. In many ways, the refugee crisis really galvanized European concerns about social integration, cultural identity, and how large-scale migration may actually threaten European values and societal norms. This anxiety over the necessity of maintaining a European identity has fed both the political and public resistance to welcoming refugees, complicating any response from the EU, even though its official discourse is based on humanitarianism.

Hence, the tensions between Türkiye and the EU on the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis has been one of divergent national interests, but more so a deeper identity-based divergence: at one end, an attempt by Türkiye to reaffirm its Islamic identity and regional leadership, while at the other end, the legal and humanitarian discursive practice underpinned by cultural logic of the EU is linked to the preservation of a cohesive European identity instead. These are diverging identity stories that have deepened the divide between the two sides, with each seeing the refugee crisis through a different value prism, history, and cultural anxieties.

Correspondingly, this clash of identities served as the main reason for the freezing of membership negotiations, with Türkiye increasingly focusing on the strengthening of its regional and religious identity away from the alignment with European standards that once marked its accession process to the EU. On the Turkish side, however, clear signals were given in the aftermath of the 2023 elections to rebuild the relations with the EU. During all this time, and on many occasions, President Erdoğan explained that Türkiye would maintain a 'balanced' attitude, building relations both with the East and the West.

This often-contradictory direction reflects the new foreign policy strategy of Türkiye-following independent regional ambitions on one hand, and pragmatic engagement with Western institutions on the other. While over the past years, Türkiye has put further emphasis on the role it seeks to play in the Muslim world and its autonomy from Western influence, it is economically and strategically tied to Europe. Rebuilding relations with the EU is thus imagined as integral to: economic stability, access to European markets, and cooperation on migration and security. It allows Türkiye to mark its leadership in regional affairs while keeping open the avenue for re-engagement with Europe on terms that would be more flexible.

Due to these factors, the Syrian conflict was not only a regional crisis involving the security and stability of the region, but it also had long-lasting effects on Türkiye-EU relations, especially in terms of the membership negotiations of Türkiye with the EU. The Syrian issue became one of the problematic factors that hindered the progress of Türkiye toward EU accession, as the policies of Türkiye in Syria increased the rift between the two sides. Appreciating these dynamics from both the realist and constructivist perspectives, one realizes that the Syrian conflict essentially altered the course of land Türkiye pursued in its EU membership bid and further complicated the already complex and challenging accession process.

6. Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has profoundly tested Türkiye-EU relations, exposing underlying tensions, creating new challenges, and at times, fostering unexpected areas of cooperation. As the conflict has extended into its second decade, its long-term implications continue to shape the evolving dynamics of Türkiye-EU relations. Central to this has been the refugee crisis, which has transformed the nature of engagement between Türkiye and the EU, introducing new layers of interdependence and tension. While it has underscored opportunities for collaboration in addressing shared challenges, it has also highlighted the limitations of the current frameworks for partnership. The long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Türkiye-EU relations go beyond bilateral concerns, offering broader insights into regional stability, international cooperation, and the management of protracted crises in a globally interconnected world.

The dissertation clearly demonstrates that the Syrian conflict was not merely a regional event confined to Syria and its immediate neighbours but a transformative force that significantly influenced the alliances and relationships of major global actors. Among these, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU was profoundly affected. This dissertation addressed a complex and multifaceted issue by exploring the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on the foreign policies of both Türkiye and the EU and, consequently, their bilateral relations—whether at the security, political, social, or even economic levels. Through this research, we analyzed how the unfolding developments of the Syrian conflict, particularly the refugee crisis, reshaped the political dynamics between the two parties.

The study's central problem was rooted in the notion that the Syrian conflict, with its persistent escalation and military developments, had profound long-term repercussions on Turkish-EU relations, especially through the heightened security concerns and the unprecedented refugee flows. This dissertation sought to tackle this central question: how has the conflict left long-lasting implications on Türkiye's foreign policies and its relationship with the EU, particularly in the face of growing security threats and humanitarian challenges? By conducting a comprehensive analysis of Turkish-EU relations, the research examined the complex issues that emerged due to this conflict, such as refugee management, regional security, political pressures, and military interventions.

The core question guiding this research was: "What are the long-term implications of the

Syrian conflict on the security and foreign policies of both Türkiye and the EU? And how has the resulting refugee crisis shaped the dynamics of Turkish-EU relations from 2011 to 2024?" To answer this question, the study analysed key events in Syria and the policy shifts within both Türkiye and the EU. The focus was on how each side responded to the challenges stemming from the conflict, particularly concerning the refugee crisis. The findings of this study indicate that the refugee crisis was a central factor driving both Türkiye and the EU toward dialogue and cooperation in certain phases, as exemplified by the 2016 agreement. However, this crisis also exacerbated tensions at later stages, particularly during the Meric River crisis in 2020.

Regarding the question of political negotiations and discourses surrounding the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis, the study revealed that these negotiations were both exhaustive and complicated. Diverging interests among EU member states, and the differing perspectives on appropriate solutions, led to internal divisions within the EU regarding its approach toward Türkiye.

At the beginning of this research, we hypothesized that the Syrian conflict and the ensuing refugee crisis played a dual role in Turkish-EU relations. On one hand, the conflict was expected to foster cooperation in certain areas, such as the management of refugee flows, as evidenced by the refugees agreement, which aimed to regulate the refugee influx and prevent their movement toward Europe. On the other hand, the hypothesis suggested that this crisis would also heighten tensions, particularly regarding security policies and Türkiye's military interventions in northern Syria, which led to clear disagreements between Türkiye and EU member states. These disagreements were significant enough to halt Türkiye's EU membership negotiations. Through the analysis presented in this dissertation, the hypothesis was largely confirmed. The Syrian conflict indeed proved to be a significant event that intricately shaped Turkish-EU relations, with moments of cooperation being overshadowed by deep and persistent tensions.

The objectives of this study were centred on analysing the long-term implications of the Syrian conflict on Turkish-EU relations and understanding the role of the refugee crisis in shaping these dynamics. The dissertation met these objectives by thoroughly examining the political and security developments that influenced bilateral relations and by investigating how the refugee crisis, in particular, contributed to both cooperation and increased tensions between Türkiye and the EU.

In essence, it is evident that the Syrian conflict was not only a regional crisis, but also a significant factor in reshaping Turkish-EU relations. The impact of this conflict was

multifaceted, affecting security, political, and social dynamics between the two entities. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and researchers alike, shedding light on how regional conflicts can fundamentally alter international relations.

Through this comprehensive analysis, this dissertation contributes to the existing body of literature on the influence of regional conflicts on international relations and offers a framework for understanding how regional powers interact with common challenges. Moreover, the outcomes of this study open the way for future research on Turkish-EU relations and the evolving dynamics in the face of fast-changing geopolitical realities.

Looking ahead, Türkiye-EU relations are expected to remain complex and multifaceted. Although the prospect of Türkiye's EU accession has diminished, the strategic importance of maintaining a working relationship for both parties remains clear. Policymakers will face the challenge of navigating competing pressures—geopolitical realities, economic interests, security concerns, and normative values—all while attempting to find a sustainable path forward.

These discussions underscore the significant ways in which the Syrian conflict has reshaped Turkish-EU relations, illustrating how a regional crisis can influence international dynamics. Below is a detailed breakdown of what this entails:

Long-Term Implications of the Syrian Conflict

The long-term implications of the Syrian conflict reveal its transformation from a regional issue to an international one, significantly affecting Türkiye's international relations with the EU. What began as a localized conflict has had far-reaching consequences, impacting not only its immediate neighborhood but also the broader dynamics of Turkish-EU relations. Security concerns such as terrorism, border security, and the handling of radical elements resulting from the war have been both points of cooperation and sources of friction between Türkiye and the EU. Politically, the conflict has intensified debates over governance, democratic principles, and foreign policy alignments, testing the extent to which Türkiye and the EU can align on broader geopolitical issues.

The Role of the Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis has played a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics. It acted as a catalyst for action, compelling both Türkiye and the EU to work together on an unprecedented scale.

The 2016 EU-Türkiye refugee deal stands out as a significant example, aimed at normalizing the flow of refugees into Europe while pledging financial assistance to Türkiye for managing migration. However, alongside this cooperation, tensions have risen over issues such as the adequacy of EU funding, the equitable sharing of refugee burdens, and questions of human rights concerning Türkiye's policies. Additionally, the influx of Syrian refugees into both Türkiye and EU countries has had profound societal impacts, reshaping domestic politics and influencing public opinion and political discourse in both regions.

Key Findings

Key findings from the study underscore the duality of cooperation amidst tensions. While there have been ongoing conflicts over governance, economic aid, and divergent policy priorities, Türkiye and the EU have maintained close collaboration on mutual interests such as migration and security. At the same time, normative divergence remains apparent, as the refugee crisis has highlighted deeper divisions between the EU's emphasis on human rights and Türkiye's pragmatic, security-driven approach. Furthermore, the crisis has exposed shifting power dynamics. It has underscored the strategic importance of Türkiye to the EU, both as a buffer zone restricting migration and as a stabilizing force in the region, while also revealing the fragility of their partnership.

Implications for Policymakers and Researchers

For policymakers and researchers, the study provides valuable insights. It emphasizes the need for a nuanced policy framework that balances cooperation and tension, offering a foundation for future diplomacy and policy negotiations. Additionally, the findings suggest promising directions for future research, including the sustainability of refugee agreements, the extended influence of geopolitical changes, and the evolving dynamics within Turkish-EU relations in the context of a regionally turbulent environment.

Looking Ahead

1. **Less EU Accession Chances:** The full membership of Türkiye in the EU is very unlikely; the political, cultural, and governance gap between them is too great.
2. **Interdependence:** Both parties are aware of the strategic importance of one another on issues related to migration management, counter-terrorism, and economic trade.

3. Complex Relations: Such would be a mix of cooperation, competition, and conflict in the relation. Given below are some of the tough tasks the policymakers will face:
- Geopolitical Realities - Managing a relationship in the face of shifting alliances and regional instability.
 - Taking Care of Economic Interests: Ensuring mutual economic benefits despite the political challenges.
 - Security Concerns: Addressing shared threats like terrorism and instability in the Middle East.
 - Normative Values: Reconciling democratic principles with pragmatic policy decisions.

In essence, the analysis reflects the complexities of Turkish-EU relations as shaped by the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis. The Syrian conflict has acted as a game-changer, not just as a local or regional issue but as a conflict that significantly impacted Türkiye's foreign policy and its relations with the EU. This demonstrates how conflicts in one part of the world can have far-reaching effects, rippling through global diplomatic systems and altering established relationships.

The refugee crisis that followed has proven to be a double-edged sword in Turkish-EU relations. On one hand, it necessitated unprecedented cooperation, particularly in the areas of migration management and financial agreements, fostering collaboration on critical issues. On the other hand, it exposed deep divisions between the two, including mutual distrust and competing priorities, which have strained an already fragile partnership.

The policy implications of these developments are significant. Policymakers now face the challenge of dealing with a Türkiye that remains strategically indispensable but ideologically divergent from the EU. Additionally, the refugee situation has created a bond of necessity between Türkiye and the EU, albeit one characterized by unequal terms that continue to fuel tensions and complicate their interactions.

The impact of these dynamics on EU-Türkiye relations has been profound. Türkiye's prospects for EU membership have become increasingly unrealistic, even as collaboration on security and migration remains vital. Both parties find themselves in a state of mutual dependence, driven more by necessity than by shared values or aspirations, underscoring the pragmatic nature of their relationship.

Finally, this analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how regional conflicts can reshape international relationships. It provides a model for examining the interplay between local crises and global diplomacy, highlighting the interdependence of geopolitics, security concerns, and humanitarian issues in shaping the contours of international relations.

So, Why Does This Matter?

- **For Türkiye:** It underscores its importance as a key regional player that the EU cannot ignore.
- **For the EU:** It reflects the complexities of its external relationships and the need to balance its values with realpolitik.
- **For Researchers:** It opens up avenues for exploring how other regional crises might shape global partnerships.

The Syrian war has therefore dramatically changed the relationship between Türkiye and the EU into a difficult one, yet indispensable. Yet, although tensions persist, options for cooperation on common challenges like migration, security, and economic development are imperative. Revamping dialogues, updating frameworks, engaging civil society opens avenues to more depth in partnership and mutual benefit.

Ahead of these, Türkiye and the EU need to strike a delicate balance between the pressures on them from other quarters, without losing sight of their shared long-term stability and prosperity concerns. The root causes of regional instability will be treated as opportunities if solutions developed to resolve them are inclusive by nature. This report makes the case for adaptive policymaking and sustained engagement in the first instance and provides a framing for understanding how regional crises shape international relations. This can be attained through great, concerted efforts on both sides of the people in Türkiye and the European Union by venturing towards the diverse possibilities of a stronger and resilient partnership that is cooperative and can make a much greater difference in view of changing geopolitical realities.

The study is challengingly fraught and, at the same time, defined by strategic interdependence. Its findings are of relevance to comprehension, not only of the Turkish-EU relationship but also for understanding how such dynamics play out elsewhere in interface with regional instability and global diplomacy.

7. References

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