The EU's Approach to the Syrian Crisis: Turkey as a Partner?

Çiğdem NAS

Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Yıldız Technical University

The EU's Approach to the Syrian Crisis:
Turkey as a Partner?

Çiğdem NAS

Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Yıldız Technical University, İstanbul.
E-mail: cgdmnas@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyze the European Union (EU)'s approach to the Syrian crisis and to evaluate the role it attributes to Turkey. The EU's approach staggered between supporting transition in Syria to a post-Assad regime and the need to protect itself against spill-over effects of the conflict. Two issues emerged as urgent priorities that determined the EU's approach to the conflict. One of them was to control the outpouring of refugees fleeing war and oppression in Syria and the other was to deal with the growing threat of terrorism, mainly the ISIL threat. The influx of Syrian refugees through the Aegean and Balkan route to the EU surged in the summer of 2015 leading to practical and political problems for EU countries. In the meantime, ISIL related terror attacks in the EU created a major security problem and led several Member States to bring back border controls in the Schengen area. The EU turned to Turkey and sought Turkey's cooperation in controlling the refugee flow and also keeping away the ISIL threat. The article looks at cooperation between Turkey and the EU and also points of contention that created hurdles in this cooperation.

Keywords: EU Foreign Policy, Turkey-EU Relations, Syrian Crisis, Refugee Crisis.

AB'nin Suriye Krizine Bakışı: Türkiye Bir Ortak mı?

ÖZET

Makalede Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) Suriye krizine yaklaşımı ve bununla ilgili olarak Türkiye'ye atfettiği rolün analizi amaçlanmaktadır. AB'nin yaklaşımı Suriye'de Esad sonrası bir rejime geçişi desteklemek ile çatışmanın yayılan etkilerinden kendini korumak arasında gidip gelmiştir. İki konu AB'nin çatışmaya yaklaşımını belirleyen acil öncelikler olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bunlardan biri Suriye'de savaştan ve baskıdan kaçan mülteci akınını kontrol altına almak, diğeri ise büyüyen terörizm tehdidi, esasen IŞİD ile mücadele etmektir. Ege ve Balkan güzergâhı üzerinden AB'ye mülteci akını 2015 yaz aylarından itibaren hızla artmış ve AB ülkeleri için pratik ve siyasi sorunlara yol açmıştır. Bunun yanında, AB'de gerçekleşen IŞİD bağlantılı terör saldırıları temel bir güvenlik sorunu yaratmış ve birçok Üye devleti Schengen alanında sınır kontrollerini tekrar başlatmaya itmiştir. AB Türkiye'ye dönerek, mülteci akınının durdurulması ve IŞİD tehdidinin uzak tutulması için işbirliği talep etmiştir. Makale Türkiye ve AB arasındaki işbirliğini ele almakta ve bu işbirliğindeki uyuşmazlık noktalarını değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AB Dış Politikası, Türkiye-AB İlişkileri, Suriye Krizi, Mülteci Krizi.

The Syrian Crisis became a critical problem of strategic concern for both Turkey and the EU since 2011. Turkey, being a neighboring country to Syria and an aspiring regional power, became involved in the disturbances in Syria early on and reacted to the use of force by the government towards peaceful protestors. Turkey's stance has aimed to bring about a transformation in Syria's regime in favor of the opposition forces. While doing this, Turkey cut off ties with the Assad regime and increasingly adopted a critical approach condemning Assad of crimes against humanity.[1] The EU also started to implement sanctions against the regime in Syria and adopted an increasingly incriminating and strict policy against the Syrian regime.[2]

The Syrian Crisis was another major step in a series of events that shook the Arab world including Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Such an unexpected turn of events that embodied the promise of democratization, but also planted the seeds of further instability could be seen as a victory for EU values. EU values of democracy, human rights and freedoms laid at the basis of the EU's transformative power in its neighborhood.[3] However, the EU's increasing security consciousness led to a heightened sense of anxiety in the face of the impending situation in the Arab world and especially Syria. The EU was caught between the need to verify and act upon the normative aspects of its foreign policy actorness and the urge to protect itself against the threats that may emanate from a volatile region such as terrorism and migratory pressures.

Two important by-products of the Syrian crisis proved to be especially contentious in terms of Turkey-EU cooperation with regard to the situation: firstly, the increase in terrorist activity bred by the instability and chaos in the region and secondly, the movement of Syrians out of the country in pursuit of refuge in neighboring countries and Europe. While these two issues necessitated close cooperation with Turkey, they also created a tension in bilateral relations due to differences in approach to the Syrian crisis. The EU counted on the support and contribution of Turkey in dealing with the threat of foreign fighters travelling to Europe with the aim of instigating terrorist acts and averting refugee flows towards Europe. However, it was also critical of Turkey's regional aspirations, support to the Syrian opposition that also included radical Islamist elements and Turkey's use of refugees as a bargaining card against the EU.

While the EU mostly tipped towards pragmatism in dealing with the crisis, it had to sacrifice its normative stance especially concerning the refugee situation. In the process, the EU's approach to Turkey was also very much influenced by the challenges brought about by the Syrian crisis. The EU prioritized its need for securing Turkey's cooperation and overlooked Turkey's move away from EU political criteria in favor of a transactional relationship. The article aims to characterize the intricacies of the EU's approach to the Syrian crisis with special emphasis on the role Turkey played in this instance. While the main research question concerns the role, Turkey played in the EU's

---

1   For an account of Turkey's approach see Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Inflexibility of Turkey's Policy in Syria", *IEMED Mediterranean Yearbook*, Barcelona, 2016, http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2016/IEMed_MedYearbook_2016_keys_Turkey_Syrias_Policy_Benli_Altunisik.pdf (Accessed on 12 February 2018); Francesco D'Alema, "The Evolution of Turkey's Syria Policy", *IAI Working Papers*, 17/28, October 2017, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1728.pdf (Accessed on 12 February 2018).

2   Peter Seeberg, "The EU and the Syrian Crisis: The Use of Sanctions and the Regime's Strategy for Survival", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.20, No.1, 2015, p.8.

3   For an account of transformative power, see Tanja A. Börzel and Bidzina Lebanidze, "The transformative power of Europe Beyond Enlargement: The EU's Performance in Promoting Democracy in its Neighbourhood", *East European Politics*, Vol.33, No.1, 2017.

approach to the Syrian crisis, it is argued that as Turkey contributed to the EU's handling of the challenges emanating from the crisis, differences in outlook complicated and drew the limits of effective cooperation with Turkey. In the meantime, the EU's approach to Turkey as a candidate to join the EU was also challenged and underwent a transformation from a potential member state to a partner country.

The EU in the Mediterranean and its Policy towards Syria

The EU's approach to the Syrian Crisis can be analyzed in a systematic way within the framework of its overall perspective on the Southern neighborhood and the series of events called as the 'Arab Spring'. The EU began to shape its approach to the Mediterranean region as early as the 1960's, and especially the 1970's with the development of the Global Mediterranean Policy and the Euro-Arab Dialogue.[4] Although much of the interest was focused on the economic cooperation, the EC's approach to the region displayed the character of a region-building process. Together with the launch of European Political Cooperation mechanism, the EC increasingly sought to enhance its political presence in the world and matter in a region which was historically and strategically important for Europe and the World.

According to Bremberg, the EU and its Member States had already begun to experience a dilemma between whether to focus on stability or support for reform in their dealings with the region prior to the Arab spring[5]. Together with the entry of Greece, Spain and Portugal to the EC in the 1980's and fall of the Berlin wall, the EU's interests in region-building intensified. The Barcelona process of 1995 establishing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), targeted greater dialogue and integration between the north and south of the Mediterranean. The EMP reflected a continuation of the economic focus of the Union's previous outlook to the Southern Mediterranean, but also added political and security dialogue as well as social and cultural component based on civil society exchanges.[6]

The idea of an interdependence between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean was inherent in this attempt at region-building through closer economic and trade integration, political and social dialogue. As put by Bremberg, by the 1990's, "European diplomats and officials had … started to depict the geographical proximity and the 'closeness of all types of relations' between the member states and non-members around the Mediterranean basin as something that made the stability and prosperity of Europe ultimately dependent on the stability and prosperity of its southern neighborhood."[7] The EMP was adopted by the EU as a liberal idea that could trigger a process of interdependence, greater exchange between the two sides of the Mediterranean and hence a spillover of democratic and liberal values from the north to the South.

---

4   Even in the 1960's, the EEC displayed some interest in the Mediterranean towards engagement and cooperation and signed twelve agreements with the countries in the region. See Sally Khalifa Isaac and Haidi Esmat Kares, "The European Community Framing of the Mediterranean (1970-1990)", *Medreset Working Papers*, No.1, April 2017, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_wp_1.pdf (Accessed on 12 February 2018).

5   Niklas Bremberg, "Making Sense of the EU's Response to the Arab Uprisings: Foreign Policy Practise at times of Crisis", *European Security*, Vol.25, No.4, 2016, p.424.

6   See, the Barcelona declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference-27-28/11/95, https://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/pdf/policy/barcelona_declaration.pdf (Accessed on 12 February 2018).

7   Bremberg, "Making Sense of the EU's", p.428.

Prior to the Arab spring, the Member States of the EU together with 15 Mediterranean states as well as EU candidate countries in Western Balkans and Turkey initiated the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) process advocating an "enhanced partnership between the EU and the Mediterranean partner countries."[8] The UfM could be seen as a continuation of the Barcelona process and adopted a more down-to-earth and cautious approach incorporating the lessons of the EMP. The UfM mostly aimed at fostering regional cooperation and co-ownership and focused on support to projects aiming at the socio-economic development in the region.[9]

The Arab spring events starting in Tunisia and quickly spreading to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, caught the EU by surprise. Analysts studying the EU's foreign policy and effectiveness in its southern neighborhood evaluated the Union's stance *vis-a-vis* the 'Arabellions' and mostly came to the conclusion that the EU was unable to have a determining influence over events and that it was helpless in the face of crises taking place in its vicinity.[10] In a paradoxical way, the EU's aim of spreading its values such as democracy and human rights in its southern neighborhood and the engagement with political and civil society actors in order to facilitate a process of socialization into these values paid off and had an impact on the chain of events that led to the Arab spring. If Arab spring events could be evaluated as a series of uprisings triggered by the dissatisfied middle and lower-middle classes who were weary of their autocratic and corrupt leaders and demanded more voice, prosperity and freedom, then such a process would be the exact purpose and target of the EU's perspective on the region. However, since the EU was not prepared for the chaos that would ensue following the uprisings in the region, considerations of security and stability outweighed unconditional support for democracy.

Following the events triggered by the self-immolation of Muhammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton together with Commissioner responsible for the Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, Stefan Füle made a joint statement four weeks after the event expressing their concern about the disturbances in Tunisia and calling for dialogue between the government and protestors.[11] France's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Michele Alliot-Marie's unfortunate offer to send paratroopers to help Ben Ali repress the protestors in Tunisia[12] reflected this dilemma in Europe's outlook. She also authorized the shipment of tear gas grenades to Tunisia to be used against the demonstrators.[13] Despite the EU's self-declared values including democracy, human rights and fundamental freedom, a sense of unease and anxiety regarding the outcome and side effects

---

8   European Council conclusions, 10-11 December 2009, the Union for the Mediterranean was initiated on 13 July 2008 at the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean.

9   See Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean Paris, 13 July 2008, http://ufmsecretariat.org/history/ (Accessed on 15 February 2018).

10 See Bremberg, "Making Sense of the EU's"; Rosa Balfour, "EU Conditionality after the Arab Spring", *Papers IE Med*, No.16, June 2012, http://www.iemed.org/publicacions-en/historic-de-publicacions/papersiemed-euromesco/16.-eu-conditionality-after-the-arab-spring (Accessed on18.February 2018).

11 European Union, "Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the events on Tunisia", 14.01.2011, A016/11, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118865.pdf (Accessed on 11 February 2018).

12 David B. Ottoway, "Inside Tunisia's Power Struggle", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2017, https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/inside-tunisias-power-struggle/ (Accessed on 15 February 2018).

13 Kim Willsher, "French minister defends offer of security forces to Tunisia", *The Guardian*, 18 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/18/french-minister-tunisia-offer (Accessed on 25 February 2018); cited in Tobias Schumacher, "Conditionality, Differentiation, Regionality and the 'New' ENP in the light of Arab Revolts", Esther Barbe and Anna Herranz-Surralles (Eds.), *The Challenge of Differentiation in Euro-Mediterranean Relations: Flexible Regional Cooperation or Fragmentation*, Routledge, 2012, p.145.

of such volatile events were also felt. A joint statement by Ashton and Füle on the situation in Tunisia "reaffirm[ing] the EU's solidarity with Tunisia and its people" came only 3 days after President Ben Ali's fleeing the country on 17 January 2011.[14]

Despite an initial hesitation in the face of widespread demonstrations in the Arab countries, the EU eventually stressed the need for political reform and a democratic transition process and warned against the use of force against peaceful protestors. The EU noted in February 2011 that "the European Council saluted the peaceful and dignified expression by the Tunisian and Egyptian people of their legitimate, democratic, economic and social aspirations which are in accordance with the values the European Union promotes for itself and throughout the world." The Council also added that the EU would support dialogue and political reform and "lend its full support to the transition processes towards democratic governance, pluralism, improved opportunities for economic prosperity and social inclusion, and strengthened regional stability." The EU promised support to countries in a process of transition by means of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean initiative.[15]

The EU's response to the events unfolding in the southern neighborhood was outlined in a communication by the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy titled "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean".[16] The document advocated a differentiated and incentive-based approach towards the countries of the region since no one country was identical, and defined extensive support to those countries that showed a commitment to human rights, rule of law, democracy and good governance. The "more for more" principle would be employed by the EU meaning that those countries that went ahead in the process of political reform would be assisted and rewarded by the EU. It was stated that "A commitment to adequately monitored, free and fair elections should be the entry qualification for the Partnership."[17] The introduction of the communication also outlined the logic behind the EU's approach to the region reflecting a sensitive balance between support for democracy and stability:

> Movement towards full democracy is never an easy path - there are risks and uncertainties associated with these transitions. While acknowledging the difficulties the EU has to take the clear and strategic option of supporting the quest for the principles and values that it cherishes. For these reasons the EU must not be a passive spectator. It needs to support wholeheartedly the wish of the people in our neighborhood to enjoy the same freedoms that we take as our right. European countries have their own experience of democratic transition. The European Union has a proud tradition of supporting countries in transition from autocratic regimes to democracy, first in the South and more recently in Central and Eastern Europe. While

14 European Union, "Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the situation in Tunisia", 17 January 2011, Brussels, A 018/11, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118873.pdf (Accessed on 21 February 2018) commented by Schumacher, ibid.

15 European Council Conclusions, "Annex II: Declaration on Egypt and the Region", Brussels 4 February 2011, https://ec.europa.eu/research/era/docs/en/brussels-european-council-4-february-2011-presidency-conclusions.pdf (Accessed on 15 February 2018).

16 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean", Com(2011)200 final, Brussels, 08.03.2011, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0200&from=EN 23.02.2018.

17 Ibid. p.5

respecting what are primarily internal transformation processes, the EU can offer expertise - that of governments, the European Institutions (European Commission and European Parliament), local and regional authorities, political parties, foundations, trade unions and civil society organizations. There is a shared interest in a democratic, stable, prosperous and peaceful Southern Mediterranean.[18]

The EU also declared humanitarian aid to the region worth €30 million, and outlined a number of measures to support and stabilize the region, including consular cooperation and evacuation, €25 million in the framework of EU external borders fund and European refugee fund, support for democratic transition, political dialogue and support to civil society, conclusion of mobility partnerships with partner countries, and free trade agreements.[19]

The EU Approach to the Crisis in Syria

The EU signed a cooperation agreement with Syria in 1977 and drafted an Association Agreement in 2004 which was not signed by the parties. Although the EU expressed that it was planning to sign the Agreement in 2009, the Syrian government decided to look further to the Agreement and chose not to sign it.[20] The country strategy paper for Syria for 2002-4 was prepared within the framework of the Euro-Med partnership. The main aim in doing so was to provide for an analysis of the political and economic situation of the country in order to determine the priorities for financial assistance. The paper noted that the new President of Syria, Bashar Al-Assad, made some reforms to embrace market economy which were not matched by the political reforms. The paper described the main hurdles that may stifle development of the country as "diminishing oil reserves, rapid population growth, environmental degradation, and the military and political conflict with Israel."[21]

After a thorough description of the challenges and paradoxes facing the regime, the paper recommended five priority areas with regard to directing the EU's assistance to the country: Institution-building, Industrial modernization, Human resources development, Trade enhancement, and Human rights/civil society.[22] The paper also made an assessment of the risks facing Syria and despite the correct extrapolation of the poor shape of the economy and pressure from a rapidly increasing population and worsening environment, did not touch upon the internal strife or armed opposition as a risk facing the new regime of Bashar al-Assad. However, the paper did touch upon the consequences of the failure or non-implementation of political reforms.[23]

Syria Strategy Paper for 2007-2013 again dwelled upon "mutual benefit in a closer relationship between the EU and Syria" and noted the importance of Syria for the EU by emphasizing that "Syria is a key factor in regional stability and plays a pivotal role as a transit country between the EU and

---

18 Ibid., p.2.

19 Ibid.

20 Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, "The Role of the EU in the Syrian Conflict", Paper commissioned by the Human Security Study Group, SiT/WP/05/16, February 2016, London, p.6, http://www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/WP05_Syria_FinalEditedVersion.pdf (Accessed on 12 February 2018).

21 Euro-Med Partnership, "Syria Country Strategy Paper 2002-2006 and National Indicative Programme 2002-4", p.2, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/syria/csp/02_06_en.pdf (Accessed on 02 February 2018).

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p.20. The principal risk noted in the paper was the possibility of conflict with Israel.

the Middle East."[24] Since the EU-Syria Association Agreement concluded in 2004, had not yet been signed, the country could not enjoy benefits within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy. The paper evaluated the situation in Syria since 2000 as "politically and economically stable."[25] Yet it also noted that there was a backlog in political and economic reforms promised by Bashar Al-Assad at the beginning of his term in office.

The paper targeted three priorities for cooperation with Syria including political, administrative, economic and social reform with emphasis on modernization of the administration, rule of law and fundamental human rights.[26] It also noted that although the Association Agreement was not yet signed, the EU perspective and the priorities of the Association relationship provided "a reference for developing [the government's] reform agenda."[27] The European Commission in this paper also laid down internal and external challenges facing Syria. In a foresighted manner, it concluded that reform has become a 'strategic imperative' for the country.[28] Democratization, improving institutional governance and success in economic transition were designated as the leading factors in the reform process. The EU also alerted to the danger that with decreasing oil reserves, poverty and inequality may impede successful economic transition.[29]

Syria was included in the evolving Mediterranean policy of the EU, the Barcelona process of 1995 and the Union for the Mediterranean project. It was also part of the ENP until all EU cooperation was suspended in May 2011 due to the grave violations of human rights.[30] This action was followed by the suspension of Syria's participation in regional programs and all loans and technical assistance to the Syrian government by November of the same year.[31] Taking into account that the ENP's major aim was to spread the EU's values of democracy, rule of law, human rights and market economy principles, the failure of reforms in Syria and the deterioration of the internal situation due to a spillover of the Arab spring revolts shattered the EU's hopes that the country was on a positive course after the ascent of Bashar Al-Assad to power.

In the renewed ENP of 2011, the EU took care to differentiate between states on the basis of their progress or lack thereof in the adaptation to EU norms and values. A strategy of 'more for more' was accompanied by a strategy of 'less for less', meaning that the EU was prepared to step up its relations with countries proceeding on the reform path while it was also ready to diminish its relations with countries involved in violations of EU values, i.e. democracy, rule of law and human rights. The use of sanctions in addition to the use of incentives would be two important manifestations of this policy.[32] The EU displayed this approach towards Syria acting swiftly and imposing sanctions against the regime based on a UN framework.

---

24 European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, "Syrian Arab Republic, Strategy Paper, 2007-2013 and National Indicative Programme 2007-2010", p.4, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/csp-nip-syria-2007-2013_en.pdf (Accessed on 02 February 2018).

25 Ibid., p.2.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p.4.

28 Ibid., p.16.

29 Ibid., p.12.

30 European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, "Syria" https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria_en (Accessed on 02 February 2018).

31 Ibid.

32 European Commission, "A New and Ambitious European Neighbourhood Policy", Press Release, IP/11/643, Brussels, 25 May 2011, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-11-643_en.htm (Accessed on 11 February 2018).

The protests in North Africa quickly spread to Syria in March 2011 and assumed the character of anti-regime demonstrations. The EU swiftly condemned the repressive measures adopted by the Syrian regime and the use of force against peaceful protestors. In a declaration on 22 March, the EU called on the Assad regime to "refrain from using violence   and to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people and address them through inclusive political dialogue and genuine reforms...."[33] Failing to motivate the Syrian regime towards political reform, the EU took the decision to implement sanctions in May 2011, including an arms embargo, asset freeze and travel ban for Bashar al-Assad and all those involved in the crackdown on protests, and the suspension of EU-Syria cooperation programs.

Following the continuation in extensive use of force by the Syrian army against protestors, the EU called on Assad to leave his office and make room for an inclusive process which was expected to lead to an inclusive national government. Failing to get a positive reaction to these statements, and in the face of the worsening situation in Syria in August following the use of force by the Syrian army against civilians in Hama, Deir al-Zour and Latakia, the EU expanded the scope of sanctions against the Syrian regime by adding new names to the travel ban and asset freeze list, declaring an embargo on oil imports from Syria as well as investments in the oil sector, and suspension of the EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement.[34] Portela describes the sanctions employed by the EU against Syria as 'unprecedented' and notes that the Union "deployed the virtual entirety of measures in the sanctions toolbox within less than a year."[35] The EU declaration was made at the same time as calls by the US, Britain, France and Germany demanding Assad's resignation.[36]

In addition to the use of sanctions, the EU advocated action against the Syrian regime in international fora such as the UN Human Rights Council, Security Council, as well as the Arab League. It also engaged with civil society actors and Syrian opposition groups and supported activists struggling to topple the repressive regime in Syria. High Representative Ashton met with the Syrian National Council and supported the establishment of a united front aiming to facilitate a democratic transition in the country.[37]

The events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which led to the fall of autocrats and transfer of power in a matter of months if not weeks, created an expectation that Assad could not hold onto the power for much longer and would be forced to surrender and transfer power to the Syrian opposition in view of the ongoing protests and intensifying the international pressure. However, Syria's geopolitical position, its proximity to Iraq and Iran, and the support from Russia and China contributed to the unfolding of a completely different turn of events in the case of Syria. Syria became the theatre of a prolonged conflict involving regional actors, incessant fighting between the regime forces and non-state proxy groups and resulting in a humanitarian tragedy that led to the forced migration of 11

33 Declaration by High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the EU on the violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in Syria, Brussels, 22 March 2011, 8103/1/11 REV 1, PRESSE 78, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/120169.pdf (Accessed on 30 September 2017).

34 Council of the European Union, "Council strengthens restrictive measures against Syrian regime", Brussels, 1 December 2011, 17895/11 PRESSE 469, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/126501.pdf (Accessed on 23 February 2018).

35 Clara Portela, "The EU's Sanctions against Syria: Conflict Management by Other Means", *Security Policy Brief*, No.38, September 2012, http://aei.pitt.edu/39406/1/SPB38.pdf (Accessed on 21 January 2018).

36 Turkmani and Haid, "Role of the EU", p.9.

37 European Commission, "The EU's Response to the Arab Spring", Press Release Database, MEMO/11/918, 16.12.2011, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-11-918_en.htm (Accessed on 30 September 2017).

million Syrians both inside the country and to neighboring countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and caused 13.5 million Syrians inside the country in dire need of humanitarian assistance.[38]

In the initial years of the conflict, the EU's and particularly UK and France's efforts to seek a solution in the UN Security Council were thwarted by Russia and China. However due to their unconditional backing of the opposition forces, the UK and France weakened the efforts of international mediation which were based on a phased transition including some degree of compromise with the current regime. France, Spain and the UK followed by other member states recognized only the Syrian national coalition as the legitimate representative of the country. The EU's approach to the conflict was evaluated as "half-hearted" and with "little leverage among internal actors."[39]

The EU outlined a Syria strategy in 2013, two years after the initial statement was made. During this period, the EU persistently called for Assad's resignation, promising to provide support to Syria within the framework of a renewed partnership on condition that a democratic transition process starts in the country.[40] The EU recognized and referred to the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a legitimate interlocutor for Syria. The Foreign Affairs Council recognized the establishment of the SNC as a positive development and praised its "commitment to non-violence and democratic values."[41] Hence the EU was unable to make a difference either by supporting international mediation efforts or by giving strong support to the Syrian opposition forces in order to gain a decisive victory on the ground. The calls for Assad's resignation could not be materialized without a strong presence on the ground or coordination with other international and regional actors.

An EU official noted that the EU was aware of the seriousness of the situation in Syria and its propensity to turn into a prolonged war due to a "combination of complexity of conflict dynamics, intensity of violence, degree of human suffering."[42] Despite the fact that the EU became the biggest donor of the humanitarian aid, the lack of transparency and coordination with national development agencies and other international organizations was criticized by activists on the field.[43] Looked at from the EU's perspective, European officials had some difficulty in finding trustworthy interlocutors, NGO's with a legal identity which "do not carry out any armed activity."[44]

In line with the worsening crisis in Syria, increase in the number of refugees and the incessant violence the Union intensified its efforts to stress the need for a resolution of the conflict. However, the involvement of regional actors as well as the USA and Russia, support provided by Russia and Iran to the Assad regime and the limited effectiveness of the Syrian opposition to trigger a transition of power in the country also hindered the role of EU in the conflict.

---

38 European Union, "Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis", http://syrianrefugees.eu/ (Accessed on 25 February 2018).

39 European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013: Syria, European Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2013/mena/59 (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

40 Turkmani and Haid, "The Role of the EU", p.9.

41 Council of the European Union, 3117th Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 10 October 2011, p.10, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/125028.pdf (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

42 Lorenzo Trombetta, "The EU and the Syrian Crisis as viewed from the Middle East", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.49, No.3, 2014, p.28.

43 Ibid., p.29.

44 Ibid., p.31.

In the latest strategy adopted on Syria in April of 2017, the Council of the EU expressed its serious concern for the deterioration of the situation in Syria and called upon all parties, especially the Syrian regime and its allies including Russia "to ensure: a full cessation of hostilities; the lifting of sieges; and full unhindered sustainable country-wide humanitarian access."[45] The Council then went on to set out the six objectives which determined the EU strategy for Syria:

- a political solution to the Syrian conflict and end to fighting, through a negotiated settlement involving all the parties, 'committed to the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian state',

- promote a meaningful and inclusive transition in Syria...through support for the strengthening of the political opposition: In this vein, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) that represented the opposition in the UN-supported talks in Geneva will be taken as the primary interlocutor.

- improve the humanitarian situation by 'saving lives...in a timely, effective, efficient and principled manner'.

- support NGO's in Syria in order to 'promote democracy, human rights and freedom of speech',

- make sure that those accused of war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons are held accountable for their violation of international humanitarian law 'with a view to facilitating a national reconciliation process and transitional justice',

- 'support the resilience of the Syrian population and Syrian society...through the provision of education, job creation, support for local civilian governance structures.'[46]

After listing the priorities determining EU strategy in Syria, the council goes on to note that the EU will also be ready to support the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria "only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition...on the basis of UN Security Council resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communique" is being implemented. The Council also adds that the EU will continue to provide assistance to countries adjoining Syria such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey for hosting millions of Syrian refugees.[47]

The EU together with its Member States continues to be the leading donor for the international response to the Syrian conflict. It is reported that over €9.4 billion has been allocated by the EU for assistance to Syrians affected by war inside the country and in neighboring countries including €3.9 billion from the EU budget "in humanitarian, development and stabilization assistance."[48] Support has also been provided under the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) for supporting the resilience of the population, amounting to €233 million since 2011, by the commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and civil Protection (ECHO), the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI).[49]

---

45 Council of the EU, "Council adopts EU strategy on Syria", *Press Release*, 180/17, 03.04.2017, http://www.consilium. europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03/fac-conclusions-syria/pdf (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations: Syria", 06.12.2016, https:// ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria_ro (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

49 Ibid.

The Common Concerns of the EU and Turkey regarding the effects of the Syrian Crisis

Turkey and the EU shared a similar concern about the Syrian Crisis in that they both wished for its swift conclusion and the reestablishment of stability in the region. In addition to their stance against the Assad regime and support to democratic transition in the country, two issues of significance determined the approach of both the EU and Turkey to the conflict: The fight against terrorism and foreign fighters[50] and abating the refugee crisis and preventing a renewed exodus of refugees.

While for the EU and Turkey these were common concerns which assumed a priority regarding the ongoing Syrian conflict, the two actors also had important areas of disagreement. For the EU the most important threat was the ISIL terrorist group and the foreign fighters who travelled to and from Europe to fight in Syria. For Turkey despite its stance against terrorism, Sunni Islam was a factor that worked in favor of Turkey's influence over opposition groups in Syria, more specifically the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Kurdish militants organized under the YPG with close affinity to the PKK were viewed as the primary threat. Hence while the EU emphasized the fight against ISIL and urged Turkey to step up its struggle against this group, Turkey put emphasis on the fight against YPG and drew attention to its links with the PKK which is in the EU's list of terrorist organizations.

EU Member States were shocked by the terrorist attacks experienced in West European countries starting in 2014 including the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo magazine and Bataclan theatre in Paris, attacks at the Brussels and Istanbul Airports, and similar attacks in Germany and Britain. These attacks were related with the *Al-Qaedah* and especially ISIS terrorist organization that extended its presence in Iraq and Syria over a wide area by 2016. The foreign fighters from EU Member States such as France, Belgium and Germany that travelled through Turkey to join ISIS and later returned with the aim of inflicting damage on the European soil became a security priority for many member states and the EU. One of the most lethal terror attacks, the Charlie Hebdo incident in France was perpetrated by two brothers of Muslim descent born and raised in Paris with links to the *Al-Qaedah* network.[51] The terror attacks which followed in Nice, Belgium, Germany and other places in Western Europe heightened the sense of anxiety.

EU's counter-terrorism measures go back to the 1970's. However, security and counter-terrorism issues are generally within the remit of Member State competences while the role of the EU is complementary with the main focus on coordination of national measures.[52] The EU mostly coordinated national measures in the priority areas of "better understanding of the phenomenon,

---

50 Concept of 'foreign fighters' is defined as "individuals who join insurgencies abroad and whose primary motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial. See Thomas Hegghamer, "Foreign Fighters under International Law", Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014, p.5-6, cited in Piotr Bakowski, Laura Puccio, "Foreign Fighters: Member States' Responses and EU Action in an International Context", *European Parliament Briefing*, February 2015, p.2, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-548980-Foreign-fighters-FINAL.pdf (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

51 Angelique Chrisafis, "Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalised in Paris", *The Guardian*, 12.01.2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris (Accessed on 16.February 2018).

52 "According to one practitioner, around 90 percent of the counterterrorism activities in Europe take place at the national level, and less than 10 percent take place at the EU level". See Thomas Renard, "EU Counterterrorism Policies and Institutions After the Lisbon Treaty", *Policy Brief*, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, September 2012, p.2, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/153959/Renard_policybrief_1216.pdf (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

prevention of radicalization, the detection of suspicious travel, criminal justice response and cooperation with third countries."[53] The Justice and Home Affairs Council in October 2014 increased the remit of measures against foreign fighters, with a special focus on strict controls at external borders and the EU passenger name records (PNR) proposal which would create a system for the detection of all vital information regarding passengers flying to and from the EU[54]. EU's latest strategy paper in the area of foreign and security policy published in 2016, the EU Global Strategy, listed counter-terrorism as one of the main threats to European security the same way as the first strategy paper did in 2008.[55]

The EU framed the issue of foreign fighters travelling from Europe to join groups fighting in Syria as a potential threat for European societies. As the main country of transit for these fighters in their way to and from Europe, cooperation with Turkey acquired a new urgency. Turkey was criticized by EU leaders for not fighting effectively against ISIS while Turkey also criticized EU countries for failing to control the movement of these fighters travelling to Syria and for not sharing intelligence about them.[56] A member of the EP, noted in 2013 that he was shocked by the "intense passage of jihadists" from Turkey to Syria.[57]

The war in Syria proved to be a major attraction for aspiring fighters from Europe as well as other parts of the world. The ICSR estimated the total number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq in the latter half of 2014 to be more than 20 thousand, of which 19% came from Europe. The director of Europol gave the number of 3000 to 5000 foreign fighters from Europe in Syria and Iraq in 2015.[58] The problem of foreign fighters became a priority for the EU's counterterrorism efforts starting from 2013 as explained by the EU counterterrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove.[59] What was especially problematic about this phenomenon was that these individuals became further radicalized during their stay in war zones and later could return to their home countries with the intention of carrying out terrorist attacks. This threat necessitated effective intelligence sharing and judicial as well as police cooperation between EU and its Member States and Turkey in order to control the travel of such persons.

As the situation in Syria deteriorated and plight of the Syrian people, and ascendance of terrorist groups intensified, the EU felt the urgent need to establish a comprehensive and consistent strategy which would have a regional perspective. The Foreign Affairs Council of the EU came together in October 2014 and assigned the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini to come up with such a strategy.[60] The prepared regional

---

53 These priorities were proposed by the EU's Counterterrorism Coordinator and adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council of June 2013. See Bakowski and Puccio, "Foreign Fighters: Member States'", p.1.

54 Ibid., p.4.

55 European External Action Service, "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy", June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (Accessed on 15 February 2018).

56 Turkey's borders with Syria were regarded as porous. See Bakowski and Puccio, "Foreign Fighters".

57 Lorenzo Trombetta, "The EU and the Syrian Crisis as viewed from the Middle East", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.49, No.2, 2014, p.29-30.

58 Bakowski and Puccio, "Foreign Fighters", p.2.

59 Ibid., p.4.

60 Council of the EU, "Council conclusions on the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat", 16.03.2015, p.2, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/16/council-conclusions-eu-regional-strategy-for-syria-and-iraq-as-well-as-the-isil-daesh-threat/ (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

strategy for Syria, Iraq and the *Da'esh* threat was adopted in March 2015 by the Council of the EU.[61] This strategy was reviewed in May 2016 when the Council agreed to continue its implementation.[62] In the strategy, the EU noted the importance of the fight against terrorist groups such as ISIL/ *Da'esh* in parallel with the search for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. It was underlined that the EU "will use all its relevant tools to tackle the threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh and its violent ideology" which it saw as "a clear threat to our partners in the Middle East, a threat to wider international security and to Europe directly".[63] The Council made a call to all international actors, especially regional players such as Turkey to support the Global Coalition against ISIL/*Da'esh* and pointed out that it was supporting military action against ISIL/*Da'esh* but also other measures such as "stabilization, strategic counter-messaging, [fight against] foreign terrorist fighters, countering terrorist financing…"[64]

Turkey became an active member of the coalition against ISIL, justifying its operations in Syria starting with the *Euphrates Shield Operation* and continuing with the *Olive Branch Operation* as a defensive strategy against the growing threats of terrorist organizations for Turkey's stability. Turkey's Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım noted in a speech he made that Turkey is fighting the ISIL threat in a comprehensive manner. Yıldırım said that as a result of the *Euphrates Shield Operation,* "a total of 4,600 ISIL terrorists, of whom 3,800 in Syria and 800 in Iraq, were neutralized until today. No country shows the determination shown by Turkey in the fight against ISIL unfortunately."[65] While Turkish officials took care to underline Turkey's contribution to European security, the EU adopted a lukewarm attitude to Turkey's incursions into Syrian soil. The EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini called upon Turkey 'to show restraint' in its military operation in Afrin by referring to the loss of lives. It was noted that the focus of the operation should be fighting "Daesh and UN-listed terrorist organizations."[66] Turkey's focus on the PYD-YPG threat and equating these organizations with the PKK which is accepted as a terrorist organization by the EU contrasted with the EU's stance towards the political manifestation of the Kurdish cause. The spokesman for the President's Office, Ibrahim Kalın responded to Mogherini's expression of concern regarding Turkey's operation in Afrin in his twitter account and said "Turkey is decisively fighting against all types of terrorism including Daesh, PKK and FETO. When the issue concerns PKK/ PYD/YPG, some people's expression of 'concern' and falling back on 'anti-war' discourse are double standards and hypocrisy."[67]

---

61 Ibid.

62 General Secretariat of the Council, "Council conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Daesh threat", 23 May 2016, http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9105-2016-INIT/en/pdf (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

63 Council of the EU, "Council conclusions on the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat", p.12.

64 Ibid., p.3.

65 "Turkey 'most dedicated' in fight against ISIL", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 August 2017, http://www.hurriyetdailynews. com/turkey-most-dedicated-in-fight-against-isil--117026 (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

66 "Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the joint press conference with Ekaterina Zakharieva, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria", *European External Action Service*, 16 February 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/ headquarters-homepage/39951/remarks-hrvp-federica-mogherini-joint-press-conference-ekaterina-zaharieva-minister-foreign_en (Accessed on 03 June 2018).

67 TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü Kalın'dan AB Yetkilisi Mogherini'ye tepki , *Cumhuriyet*, 22 January 2018, ttp://www. cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/910932/Cumhurbaskanligi_Sozcusu_Kalin_dan_AB_yetkili_Mogherini_niye_ tepki.html (Accessed on 25 January 2018).

The other important issue that precipitated the need for Turkey and the EU to work together was the refugee crisis caused by the Syrian conflict. During the seven years since the start of disturbances in 2011, over 5.4 million left the country to seek refuge in neighboring countries while 6.1 million were internally displaced.[68] By 2015 Turkey became the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world. At the peak of the crisis in October 2015, about 10,000 refugees[69] crossed the Aegean in order to reach Greece creating an unmanageable backlog for the authorities for hosting, and dealing with asylum applications. The influx far exceeded the refugee reception capability of the EU both in terms of physical and administrative capacity and the political cost of receiving refugees. Germany's open door policy towards Syrian refugees created a considerable cost for Chancellor Merkel which could be discerned in the increasing votes for the ultra-right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) Party in the 2017 elections.[70]

Faced with an urgent need to control migration across the Aegean, the EU turned to Turkey with the aim of engaging in close cooperation on the issue. Turkey signed a readmission agreement with the EU in 2013. However, the agreement had not yet entered into force and was not applicable to refugees fleeing war and suffering. After intense negotiations, Turkey and the EU agreed on a joint action plan at a meeting of Heads of State and government with Turkey dated November 29, 2015.[71] The plan called for better coordination between the parties, Turkey's tackling human smuggling networks more effectively and engaging in cooperation with Greek and Bulgarian authorities to prevent irregular migration while the EU would provide financial and technical assistance for Syrian refugees in Turkey.[72] The deal struck with Turkey also included other targets with regard to Turkey-EU relations including 're-energizing' the accession process, organizing high-level dialogue meetings on the economy, energy and other issues, upgrading the Turkey-EU customs union and most importantly accelerating the visa liberalization process with a view to attaining visa-free travel for Turkish citizens by October 2016.[73]

The refugee flows across the Aegean continued at a high pace despite the action plan. Between 1 January and 20 March 2016, 147,437 arrivals to the Aegean islands were recorded together with 366 deaths along the route. This contrasted with the figure for 1 January-31 March 2015 period, which was a total of 10,535 arrivals. The EU's Area of Freedom, Security and Justice was under threat of collapsing as Member States one by one took decisions to re-introduce border controls. Member States such as Greece, Italy and Hungary bordering the migrant routes found it increasingly difficult to

---

68   UNHCR, "Syria Emergency", http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html (Accessed on 15 January 2018).

69   European Commission, "The EU and the Migration Crisis", July 2017, http://publications.europa.eu/webpub/com/factsheets/migration-crisis/en/ (Accessed on 14.February 2018).

70   Griff Witte, Luisa Beck, "German far-right leader says Merkel's refugee policy enabled his party's rise", *The Washington Post*, 23 September 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/23/german-far-right-leader-says-merkels-refugee-policy-enabled-his-partys-rise/?utm_term=.0bb44e9256f3 (Accessed on 23 February 2018).

71   European Council, "Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement", 29.November 2015, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/11/29/eu-turkey-meeting-statement/ (Accessed on 22 February 2018).

72   European Commission, "Fact Sheet: EU-Turkey joint action plan", 5 October 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5860_en.htm (Accessed on 22 February 2018).

73   European Council, "Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement", 29.November 2015, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/11/29/eu-turkey-meeting-statement/ (Accessed on 22 February 2018).

regulate the migratory flows. The EU was faced with resistance on the part of several Member States such as Hungary which objected to the acceptance of refugees based on a quota agreement reached in September 2015[74] and called for a national referendum on the issue.[75]

As the EU faced internal strife over its asylum and mobility policies, it could not find any alternatives to deepening cooperation with Turkey. Continuing negotiations at the highest level involving the Turkish government, European Commission, Germany and Presidency of the Council of the EU held by the Netherlands, resulted in a new deal, i.e. the Turkey-EU Statement approved on March 18, 2016. The Statement aimed to decisively put an end to the migrant smuggling across the Aegean Sea and decrease the number of arrivals to Greece. The Statement's most vital point was the so-called 1:1 formula whereby all irregular migrants would be returned to Turkey as of 20 March and for every Syrian being returned from the Aegean islands to Turkey, another Syrian refugee would be resettled in the EU.[76] At the same time, the target date for visa liberalization was brought forward to June 2016, the €3 billion allocated under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey would be speeded up and bolstered with an additional €3 billion by the end of 2018, and one more chapter would be opened in order to revitalize Turkey's accession negotiations.[77]

The plan produced the intended results. According to the first report on the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, arrivals to the Aegean islands decreased to a considerable extent, from 26,878 persons in the three weeks before the start of implementation of the Statement compared to 5,847 in the subsequent three weeks.[78] The urgency of the refugee issue brought about an intensive cooperation between Turkey and the EU with regard to migration management at the EU's borders. While the EU was faced with the fact that it needed to accommodate Turkey in order to receive its support in dealing with risks and threats to the EU, the relegation of political conditionality in the refugee deal reinforced a transactional approach for the future of Turkey and EU relations.[79] The sudden interest shown to Turkey from the summer of 2015, in parallel with the exponential increase in migrant traffic across the Aegean, increase in the number of high-level meetings between the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkey's Prime Minister Davutoğlu and the postponement

---

74 Ian Traynor, Patrick Kingsley, "EU governments push through divisive deal to share 120,000 refugees", *The Guardian*, 22 September 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/22/eu-governments-divisive-quotas-deal-share-120000-refugees (Accessed 20 February 2018); European Commission, "Refugee Crisis: European Commission takes decisive action", 09 September 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5596_en.htm (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

75 Jan-Werner Mueller, "Hungary's Refugee Referendum Is a Referendum on Europe's Survival", *Foreign Policy,* 29 September 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/29/hungarys-refugee-referendum-is-a-referendum-on-europes-survival-orban-merkel-eu/ (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

76 The formula was based on the Turkey-Greece Readmission Agreement which dated back to 2002 but had not been effectively implemented since then.

77 European Council, "EU-Turkey Statement", 18.March 2016, Press Release 144/16, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/ (Accessed on 20 February 2018).

78 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, "First Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", COM (2016), 231 final, Brussels, 20.April 2016, p.2, ttps://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160420/report_implementation_eu-turkey_agreement_nr_01_en.pdf (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

79 For an account of evaluations on the Turkey-EU Statement, see Lisa Haferlach, Dilek Kurban, "Lessons Learnt from the EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement in Guiding EU Migration Partnerships with Origin and Transit Countries", *Global Policy*, Vol.8, No.4, June 2017, p.85–93.

of the announcement of the European Commission's 2015 Report on Turkey till after the November 1 elections all attested to the EU's changing approach to Turkey. Relying on Turkey's support in averting the refugee crisis, the EU tended to adopt a more moderate and conciliatory stance towards the government.

Hence an issue related to the Syrian crisis which at first sight appeared to be of common concern to the EU and Turkey actually drew the parties further apart.[80] While the EU moderated its stance towards Turkey in order to acquire the government's compliance and cooperation with regard to the refugee issue, this did not mean that membership conditions were relaxed for Turkey. The EU noted that membership conditions remained firm and Turkey was "backsliding" in many areas. However, the same conditions for membership were not heeded in dealing with Turkey as a partner in managing migration flows towards the EU or fighting against terrorism. While the goal of Turkey's EU membership began to lose its relevance especially due to the conditions of the state of emergency declared following the July 15 coup attempt and the delay in democratic and judicial reforms following the termination of the state of emergency, the country's status *vis-à-vis* the EU drifted towards being a strategic partner in the EU's neighborhood and a bulwark against security threats. The November 29 Turkey-EU joint Action Plan and March 18 Turkey-EU Statement included other goals in addition to refugee cooperation such as visa liberalization and revitalization of accession talks. However, Turkey could not achieve progress in these areas. The goal of visa liberalization could not be attained by the expected date; no new chapters in the accession negotiations could be opened in the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt; and the slow pace of allocation and delivery of the promised €3 billion was criticized severely by the Turkish government.

The situation in Syria was a constant topic that came up in talks between Turkey and the EU especially as part of the high level political dialogue mechanism.[81] In the latest of the high level dialogue meetings, the joint statement commended Turkey's efforts in hosting "the largest refugee population in the world" and noted the Turkey-EU Statement of March 18, 2016 as a "unique model of cooperation". Both sides maintained their commitment to "an inclusive, credible and sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict" and "the need for a negotiated political transition in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254", and especially noted the importance of containing the inflammable situation in the Idlib region.[82] Preventing a military intervention in Idlib which could trigger a new refugee flow and negotiating a sustainable peace in Syria materialized as two common points between Turkey and the EU.

Cooperation for the reconstruction of Syria which according to an estimate by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia would require around 388 billion dollars[83], could also constitute another area for joint action. Russian President Putin called for the EU to assume its

---

80 For an account of the EU-Turkey Statement's effects on Turkey-EU relations, see Özgehan Şenyuva and Çiğdem Üstün, "A Deal to End "the" Deal: Why the Refugee Agreement is a Threat to Turkey-EU Relations", The German Marshall Fund of the United States, No.132, 05 July 2016, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/deal-end-%E2%80%9Cthe%E2%80%9D-deal-why-refugee-agreement-threat-turkey-eu-relations (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

81 Delegation of the EU to Turkey, "EU-Turkey High Level Political Dialogue", *Press Release*, 26 July 2017, https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/pr/eu-turkey-high-level-political-dialogue-1073 (Accessed on 01 December 2018).

82 European Union External Action, "Joint Statement following the High Level Political Dialogue between the EU and Turkey", Ankara, 22 November 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54285/joint-statement-following-high-level-political-dialogue-between-eu-and-turkey_en (Accessed on 01 December 2018).

83 Ömer Özkızılcık, "Sharing the Costs of Rebuilding Syria", *The New Arab*, 25 September 2018, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2018/9/25/sharing-the-costs-of-rebuilding-syria (Accessed on 01 December 2018).

share of the task of reconstructing Syria especially to facilitate the return of refugees.[84] While the EU and its Member States stressed the importance of a political solution under the UN auspices, the Istanbul Summit of 27 October 2018 was significant in bringing together Turkey and Russia with France and Germany. In the joint statement issued following the summit, the four parties shared common concerns regarding regional and global stability and stressed "their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (UN)." They also maintained the importance of coordination to bring about a resolution of the conflict and noted their determination to fight against terrorism and joint stance against the use of chemical weapons. They also voiced their "support for an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process that is facilitated by the UN and called for active participation in it of the Syrian parties."[85] The importance of a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict which seems to be a precondition for peace and stability in the region emerges as an issue that calls for joint action between Turkey and the EU. Turkey's operational presence in northern Syria and ability to reach out to multiple actors such as the EU as well as Russia and Iran increase its value as a partner for the EU. However, important points of contention among the interested parties to the conflict such as the presence of the YPG in Syria and the question of the future of the Assad regime persist.

Turkey and the EU during the Syrian Crisis: A Test Case for Cooperation or Conflicting Agendas?

The latest global strategy of the EU presented in June 2016 portrayed the Union's approach to its neighborhood and how it intended to deal with security threats. The approach of the EU in the CFSP realm was denoted with a new concept "principled pragmatism."[86] This concept brought together the EU's search for being a normative power and aimed to reconcile with the harsh realities of the current era. Underlying this new aim was a struggle to match interests of the Union with its values and principles. Yet it may also be interpreted as a strategy that downgraded the importance of the goal of spreading the EU's values in the neighborhood and upgrades the urgency of preventing threats from the neighborhood from infiltrating the EU. As noted by Lecha and Tocci, the word 'resilience' was used more than forty times in the text.[87] Resilience was given primary importance by the Union as a goal of EU strategy in contributing to effective statehood of countries in the EU's vicinity:

> It is in the interests of our citizens to invest in the resilience of states and societies to the east stretching into Central Asia, and south down to Central Africa. A resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development lies at the heart of a resilient state.[88]

---

84 Agence France-Presse in Berlin, "Putin urges Europe to help rebuild Syria so refugees can return", *The Guardian*, 18 August 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/aug/18/putin-urges-europe-to-help-rebuild-syria-so-refugees-can-return (Accessed on 01 December 2018).

85 BIA News Desk, "Joint Statement by 4 Leaders After Syria Summit in İstanbul", *Bianet*, 28 October 2018, https://bianet.org/english/world/202095-joint-statement-by-4-leaders-after-syria-summit-in-istanbul (Accessed on 01 December 2018).

86 European External Action Service, "Shared Vision.", p.8.

87 Eduard Soleri Lecha, Nathalie Tocci, "Implications of the EU Global Strategy for the Middle East and North Africa", *Future notes, Menara project*, No.1, July 2016, http://www.menaraproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/menara_fn_1.pdf (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

88 European External Action Service, "Shared Vision", p.23.

In the first year review of the EU Global Strategy, the Commission noted that two new priorities have been added for the implementation phase: "supporting global governance and the United Nations... support regional organizations and other forms of regional cooperation both within and outside Europe. The strategic environment of the EU was denoted as an environment where the EU "can no longer take ...[its] rules based order and shared values for granted" and under such conditions, regional cooperation which is described as "the DNA of the European Union" and support to international organizations was seen as an important priority for peace in the neighborhood. "Strengthening the resilience of partner countries-particularly in Europe's neighborhood" was again cited as a priority of EU action.89 Resilience was attributed a key value since it was concluded that only the existence of resilient states in the EU's neighborhood could fend of security threats that may destabilize Europe.

Analyzing both the EU global strategy and the first year implementation, one notices an EU that had come to terms with an increasingly hostile and dangerous environment and which minimized its goals of facilitating democratic transitions, peace and prosperity by diffusing its values and norms in the wider neighborhood in favor of more robust, i.e. resilient countries. In line with such a reading of the global and regional conditions, the EU's security concerns outweighed its ideals, hence the idea of 'principled pragmatism'. The hard power of the Russian Federation which is used by Kremlin to diffuse its hegemony in the Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Syria and the ambiguous and fluid threat emanating from violent non-state actors especially in Syria and Iraq have constituted determining factors for the EU global strategy and resulted in the EU's dilution of normative power projection in its neighborhood.

Turkey's increasing estrangement from the USA and the EU and rapprochement to Russia and Iran within the context of the Syrian conflict can be explained both by the developments in the strategic environment and the EU's changing policies with regard to its neighborhood in the meantime. As the EU's membership perspective for Turkey and concomitantly EU-induced reforms gradually faded after 2006, Turkey increasingly became absorbed by internal and external security concerns. The 15 July 2016 coup attempt could be seen as the climax of the crisis for Turkey and led to a serious questioning of its alliance with the USA. The ensuing period of the state of emergency which continued until after the 24 June 2018 presidential elections, limited fundamental rights and freedoms in the name of fighting against multiple terrorist threats and facilitated a transition to the executive presidency regime. Having in mind the multiple criticisms from the EU regarding rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, checks and balances and separation of powers in the new executive presidential system, Turkey moved further away from satisfying the EU membership criteria. In the meantime, its importance in the eyes of the EU as a vital security partner intensified further due to the need to fend off existential threats on the EU's doorstep.

Taking into account that the EU's security starts beyond its borders[90], Turkey's policy towards Syria had an important impact on EU security. However, while the EU's approach to the Syrian conflict was mostly based on a defensive strategy that aimed to protect the EU from refugee flows and threat

---

89 European Commission, "Implementing the EU Global Strategy: Year 2", 20 December 2017, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/news (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

90 European Commission, "A Europe that defends: Commission opens debate on moving towards a security and defence union", Press Release, Brussels, 07.June 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1516_en.htm (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

of terrorism, Turkey after more than five years since the start of disturbances in Syria adopted a more assertive stance. Turkish military intervened with a view to providing a secure zone along Turkey's border. Turkish decision-makers, reflecting a serious concern regarding the protection of territorial integrity, regarded the establishment of state-like entities such as Rojava autonomous region in the North of Syria as a threat for the Turkish State. The restart of the fight against the PKK from 2015 onwards exacerbated the sense of threat from Syria and the actions of the YPG.

It may be possible to arrive at the conclusion that while Turkey and the EU have complementary or intersecting interests in the Syrian conflict, their threat perceptions and degree of exposure was different. Turkey being a neighboring country experienced a more direct and imminent threat from the deteriorating conflict in Syria and the ascendance of violent non-state actors, especially ISIS and YPG. For the EU the threat was more indirect and could be handled by cooperation with transit countries such as Turkey. The tools used were also different. While Turkey by increasing engagement with local and international actors such as Russia and Iran intensified the scope of its involvement and leverage in the Syrian Crisis, the EU was mostly excluded from such a direct role in the conflict and limited its action mostly to sanctions and humanitarian assistance. The recent Istanbul Summit which brought together the Turkish, Russian and French Presidents and the German Chancellor together for the future of Syria raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict in the not-so-distant future despite of remaining differences. The reconstruction of Syria and refuge cooperation stand out as areas where Turkey-EU cooperation may continue to intensify.

In hindsight, together with the failure of Turkey's EU integration process, the EU also lost one of its few chances of making an impact on the Southern Mediterranean region after the Arab uprisings. If Turkey could have been successfully incorporated into the EU security community[91] by way of a gradual accession process, the EU could have been able to extend its values more successfully in its neighborhood. Such a turn of events could also have limited the assertive policies of Russia in the Caucasus, Ukraine and Syria as well.

Conclusion

The article argued that attaining Turkey's cooperation was vital for the EU in its approach to the Syrian crisis based on two important priorities: fighting against increased threat of terrorist attacks and abating Syrian refugee flows. While Turkey contributed to EU policies in this regard, points of contention were also apparent. The EU commended time and time again Turkey's role in hosting 3 and a half million Syrian refugees. However, the use of the refugee card as a bargaining tool against the EU caused resentment and apprehension in EU circles. In addition, the exchange of information and cooperating in depicting and preventing the movement of foreign fighters from Syria to EU countries proved to a point of contention between the Parties. A third issue that created a difficulty in cooperation was the different approaches to terrorist organizations operating in the region. While the EU suggested that Turkey should prioritize the fight against ISIL/*Da'esh*, Turkey especially in the recent period directed its actions towards the PKK-YPG-PYD axis. As Turkey was drawn to the Syrian conflict and the internal situation in the country deteriorated in terms of regression in democracy,

---

91 For an account of EU security community, see: Niklas Bremberg, "The European Union as Security Community-Building Institution: Venues, Networks and Co-operative Security Practices", *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 2015, Vol.53, No.3, pp.674-692.

human rights and rule of law standards, its status *vis-à-vis* the EU also underwent a transformation. Its failure to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria was implicitly stated in the European Commission's country reports which also meant that it was moving away from the EU accession path. When coupled with two other factors, the EU's perception of Turkey underwent a transformation from a candidate to a partner country: the increasing instability in the wider neighborhood as most severely experienced in the case of the Syrian crisis and Turkey's value as a bulwark against impending threats to EU's security; rising populism and anti-immigration approach in European politics and public opinion and growing opposition to the prospect of Turkey's membership. This transformation presented the EU with another dilemma: how to persuade Turkey to continue contributing to EU security and act as a bulwark against potential threats in the neighborhood without a realistic prospect of accession to the Union in the near future. The Istanbul Summit of 27 October 2018 which brought together Turkey, Russia, Germany and France raised hopes for a negotiated settlement of the conflict in the near future. A sustainable resolution of the Syrian conflict, reconstruction of Syria and return of refugees emerge as issues which call for intensified cooperation between Turkey and the EU despite the standstill in Turkey's accession process and general regression in Turkey-EU relations.