



# Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi

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Research Article

## Türkiye's and the EU's Coordinated and Divergent Approaches to the 2011 Syrian Crisis

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**Abstract:** This study examines Türkiye's and the EU's reactions to the Syrian civil war by using the concept of normative power. This conceptual framework is preferred to explain and evaluate whether Türkiye's and the EU's reactions to the Syrian crisis matched the value-based approach. The study argues that Türkiye and the EU have differences and similarities in their policies toward the Syrian crisis. It further posits that rather than taking an ally or value-based approach, Türkiye and the EU have decided to put their national interests in their reactions regarding the Syrian conflict in certain areas of war and some regions. Türkiye and the EU have suffered especially on security issues resulting from the Syrian crisis. Furthermore, the Syrian crisis led to economic difficulties, humanitarian traumas, and challenges for Türkiye and the EU in the social and political spheres. As a result, in certain areas of conflict and some issues, both Türkiye and the EU have attempted to prioritize their interest first. Therefore, these actors have not taken a value-based stance on some matters. Nonetheless, Türkiye and the EU offered massive humanitarian aid several times and desired the Syrian crisis to end.

**Keywords:** Syrian Civil War, Türkiye, The EU, The Responses of Türkiye and the EU to the Syrian Civil War

## Introduction

Syria became independent in 1946 due to France's withdrawal from its territory. Syria had military takeovers throughout the 1950s and 60s, and instability characterized Syria. The country was run by the Baath Party, which supported Arab nationalism, for forty years, beginning in 1963. Hafez al-Assad became president in 1971 and maintained an "authoritarian structure masquerading as democratic" during that time (Yeltin, 2018, p. 203). In 2000, upon Hafez al-Assad's passing away, his son Bashar al-Assad (Assad) took his position as president. When he assumed office, Assad gave the impression that he would adopt an approach of global participation; nonetheless, his reforms were modest. His authoritarian regime experienced protests in 2011 and it shortly turned to civil war. The "Arab Spring" protests that originated in Egypt and Tunisia early in 2011 significantly affected Syria. Syria on March 16, 2011, experienced the beginning of the nationwide protests by the Syrian people in Daraa, and as a result of the security forces'

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disproportionate use of force, Syria entered into a violent crisis (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a).

Since 2011, the Syrian crisis has become a crucial issue of strategic concern for both Türkiye and the EU (Nas, 2019, p. 46). Because Türkiye and the EU were right next door to the chaos and violence caused by the Syrian Civil War, these actors are the ones most affected by the Syrian conflict from a humanitarian, security, and political standpoint. They face dangers to their safety from radicalism, illegal immigration, foreign fighters, terror attacks, and other issues (Kızıllan, 2019, p. 322). In this context, this study examines Türkiye's and the EU's perspectives on the Syrian crisis by employing normative power. The concept of normative power can be considered as simply being relevant to EU policy, but as this study demonstrates, it can also be used in determining whether a nation's actions against another nation are driven by norms or by interests. In this study, the concept of normative power was employed to evaluate whether Türkiye and the EU's response to the Syrian crisis matched the value-based approach.

There are parallels and divergences between Türkiye's and the EU's approaches to the Syrian crisis. Türkiye and the EU urged the Syrian government to reform at the outset of the crisis, but the Assad regime ignored their requests. Türkiye and the EU have sharply denounced the military actions of the Assad regime. Following the outbreak of the civil war, Türkiye and the EU began to shift their positions on Syria and provide support to the opposition groups. Furthermore, both parties strongly supported sanctions on the Assad regime. In addition, Türkiye and the EU faced security and migration challenges and attempted to establish a somewhat coordinated policy on these matters. Both, Türkiye and the EU have been active in combating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).

Türkiye and the EU have also tried to support those fleeing the Syrian civil conflict. However, the EU wants to keep the migration crisis within Türkiye -in third countries- instead of experiencing migration movements. Furthermore, some EU's member states, such as Hungary and Poland, have securitized the migration issue. They consider immigrants as the most existential danger to their national and European identities, and these countries challenge the EU's mandatory quotas. Despite the EU's acceptance of a certain number of migrants and its global support for migrants, the EU's efforts to keep migrants in Türkiye contradict its normative power identity.

In addition, when looking at the several concerns about Türkiye and the EU's actions in Syria, it is found that the EU opposes two of thirds Türkiye's military operations in Syria (Operations of "Olive Branch" and "Operation Peace Spring"), and the EU supports organizations that Türkiye views as terrorists such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD). In addition, the EU denounced Türkiye for failing to secure its borders against foreign fighters and for opposing Türkiye's proposal to

establish a “safe zone” in northern Syria. These two issues highlight the divergent interests of the EU and Türkiye, but it’s crucial to remember that Türkiye is subject to further challenges due to its closeness to Syria.

### **Conceptual Framework: Normative Power**

A key component of the EU’s strategy for demonstrating its power internationally is the political discourse on normative power (Laidi, 2008, p. 42). Since Manners introduced the concept of normative power Europe, a significant amount of academic research in the fields of international affairs and European studies has been generated (Whitman, 2013, p. 171). When Manners (2008, p. 46) claims that the EU is a normative power in international politics, he emphasizes how the EU upholds a set of normative standards that are accepted as being universally applicable within the framework of the UN. Understanding normative practices and social diffusion is necessary to understand the theoretical concept of normative power (Manners & Diez, 2007, p. 179). The EU is described as a normative power using three different perspectives: normative (the EU should transfer its norms), positivist (the EU acts to change norms), and ontological (changing of norms in international politics) (Manners, 2011; Neuman & Stanković, 2019, p. 5).

One characteristic that seems to distinguish the EU’s implementation of its normative agenda is the EU’s endeavors to promote a multilateral, value-based global order (Metreveli, 2012, p. 9). Instead of relying on the hard power of its military presence, the EU has aimed for global soft leadership based on the strength of its norms and values (Ataç, 2008, p. 61). Europe has a major influence on international affairs as a normative and value-purveyor (Björkdahl et al., 2015, p. 11). Manners (2008, p. 45) states, “The creative efforts of the European integration process have changed what passes for ‘normal’ in world politics.” The foundational principles of international relations could be upended by the EU’s existence as a unique institution inside the world community of nation-states (Manners 2008a;2008b). Since the EU may influence international politics outside the boundaries of state-centricity, the EU is often regarded as a normative power (Manners, 2008).

Manners’ normative power Europe approach has been revisited and criticized in light of recent advancements (Smith 2011, p. 128). The criticisms of the European normative power are not discussed in length in this section. Nonetheless, it outlines the “norm-based” and “interest-based” approaches to comprehending Türkiye’s and the EU’s responses to the Syrian crisis. According to Ataç (2012, p. 5), as long as “norm-based” and “interest-based” patterns of behavior continue to compete, the EU’s normativity will remain complex and unreliable. Sjursen (2003) however, contends that the EU’s preference for advancing rules over interests is not a distinctive quality that distinguishes it from other actors in the world. Furthermore, Pollack (2020) believes that it is imperative to transcend the

oversimplified and idealized view of the EU as a just normative organization to properly harness the potential of the EU's influence for positive outcomes in the future. Instead, to fully comprehend the EU's commendable but insufficient attempts to advance its values on the international scene, one must have a comprehensive awareness of the complex interactions between material and normative variables and power dynamics (Pollack, 2020, pp. 9–10). Further, according to Tocci (2008, p. 25), if normative foreign policy is defined as the pursuit of normative objectives by normatively deployed tactics that result in a measurable normative impact, then the EU cannot always be regarded as a normative international actor. For instance, Tocci argues that the EU has responded pragmatically to Syria (“realpolitik”) (2008, pp. 66–67).

As is evident from the vast majority of studies on theories of regionalism, the application of the concept of normative power has remained Eurocentric (Futák-Campbell & Nolting, 2022, p. 3). However, the concept of normative power is not limited to the EU, despite its significant identification with the latter. Policy may vary on an individual basis owing to various conditions, but other actors can also pursue normative goals and means and, as a result, can accomplish normative results (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 9). For example, Türkiye has been inspired to pursue a foreign policy based on ethical standards, framing the country's role as the protector of oppressed peoples in the Middle East (Oktav & Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 411). In particular, Türkiye implemented several relatively normative policies toward Syria carefully and instrumentally (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 723).

Türkiye has been trying to reassert its normativity in the past several years by posing a serious normative challenge to Europe and advancing its normative agenda, which has occasionally resulted in norms that conflict with those of the EU. But even while the EU and Türkiye differ on how to define and uphold certain norms like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, a shared “normative” ground between Türkiye and the EU and the US has emerged as a result of the Arab Spring (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 719). While the AKP governments have worked to introduce European values throughout the Middle East and so help transform the region normatively, Türkiye has also adopted a justice discourse that accuses the West of applying a double standard when it comes to the international crises in the Middle East (Oktav & Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 418). Along with harshly criticizing the UN's current international conflict resolution framework and the West's “wavering” performance in Syria -doing virtually nothing despite labeling the Syrian regime as illegitimate- Türkiye's normative-intended foreign policy in Syria has also included these developments (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 723).

## **A Brief Overview of the Syria Crisis**

In December 2010, public protests started in Tunisia and swiftly spread throughout the Arab world, overthrowing the regimes of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Remember that protesters in Middle Eastern and North African countries shared similar concerns with authoritarian governments, an undemocratic political system, grave human rights violations, income inequality, and unemployment (Kadioğlu, 2020, p. 15). The fever entered Syria in March 2011 (Altundeğer & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 290). The Syrian crisis is one of the most devastating crises in the history of civil war. Syria's civil war is a complex, multifaceted struggle including militia opposition groups, proxies, regime forces, and evolving alliances (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 6). The opposition, influenced by the Arab Spring uprisings, began to demonstrate against the Assad regime in 2011. After receiving a severe military response from the regime, the initially nonviolent anti-regime protests in Syria escalated into an armed conflict (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 7). Put differently, the Assad administration turned weapons on its people in response to the democratic demands and aspirations that arose with the Arab Spring. This authoritarian attitude led to a crisis in Syria when protestors supporting and opposing the regime engaged in violent clashes (Altundeğer & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 216).

One of the two most notable effects of the ongoing civil war in Syria on the international system has been the rise in the number of civilians leaving the country to seek safety in neighboring countries in the region and Europe (Aşkar-Karakır, 2017, p. 135). The Syrian civil conflict has resulted in millions of people fleeing their homes, living through incredibly unpleasant experiences in different countries across the world, and countless deaths. The crisis has resulted in almost 500,000 Syrian deaths, 6.6 million internal displacements, and 5.6 million Syrians seeking asylum in neighboring and foreign countries. Today, almost 3.7 million Syrians are being hosted by Türkiye (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a). The other most notable effects of the ongoing civil war in Syria are suicide attacks by radical groups that have targeted cities in the region and Europe, using Syria as a base for their operations (Aşkar-Karakır, 2017, p. 135).

As a result of indirect conflicts over Syria between the interests of regional and global powers like the US, Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye, France, and the UK, the crisis has become unmanageable (Altundeğer & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 216). The Syrian civil war is still ongoing because of its intricacy. The US Administration quickly assembled the 83-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS after the extremist group took control of a sizable section of Syrian and Iraqi territory in 2014 (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 9). Following a string of defeats on the battlefield, Russia decided to launch a direct military intervention in September 2015. In addition to saving Assad, Moscow's move allowed the regime to progressively reclaim lost territory, which altered the direction of the war (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 9). Russia has always been among the Assad regime's most ardent backers. Russia has long been a significant armaments supplier to the Syrian government, offering military hardware, including cutting-edge weapons, military training, and technical and military support (Havlová, 2015, p. 77). Another country that has historically

supported the Assad administration strongly is Iran. Iran also has a strong relationship with Hezbollah, a group located in Lebanon that is widely regarded as Iran's Middle East proxy. Iran has given Assad military support, including large-scale financial and business help, crowd control equipment, Internet surveillance technology, and consultants for managing protests (Havlová, 2015, p. 78). Nonetheless, the EU, Türkiye, and other Arab Gulf countries including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, oppose the Assad government and back opposition parties. There will not be a complete discussion of Türkiye's and the EU's policy on the Syrian crisis here, as they are outlined below.

The international community, which included the US, the EU, the Arab League, and the UN, worked to find a solution to Syria's ongoing civil war. Most of these attempts, however, failed; these included the UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan's six-point plan to cease the violence, which was published in February 2012, and the most significant attempt, the Geneva I Conference on Syria, which took place in June 2012 (Havlová, 2015, p. 70). To advance a political settlement that is acceptable to the Syrian people and put an end to the terrible cycle of violence, the European Parliament asks that the EU actively support attempts to convene the Geneva II negotiations (Parliament, 2013). To achieve a global political settlement to the Syrian conflict, the European Parliament is persistent that the territorial integrity, unity, and sovereignty of the Syrian state must be recognized, together with full respect for the rights of all the ethnic and religious groups that constitute Syrian society. The 2012 Geneva Communiqué, which was prepared by the Syrian parties as part of the UN-led Geneva process, and UNSC resolution 2254 both support this and lay the foundation for a genuine political transition (Parliament, 2019a).

Politically, the "Euphrates Shield" made way for the Astana process, in which Türkiye and Russia attempted to work out a settlement in Syria. Later, Iran joined this endeavor, and in October 2019, Iraq turned into an "observer." (Parliament, 2019b). At their international summit in Kazakhstan on January 23 and 24, 2017, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran could strike a deal establishing "safe zones" in Syria, which may lead to peace implementation. However, some members of the opposition delegation rejected this agreement as it may jeopardize Syria's territorial sovereignty (Zahra, 2017, p. 35). The Astana process has contributed to a decrease in localized violence. But ultimately, it has strengthened intra-Syrian disintegration and heightened geopolitical rivalry by eschewing the US and the EU (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 11). As understood, to find a non-military solution, Türkiye used a range of institutional and normative tools within the confines of existing international law. This was evident in its prior efforts at the Geneva I conference as well as in its diplomatic engagement policies in regional organizations like the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which it pushed to use all diplomatic means for transition in Syria (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 723).



## **Türkiye's Approach to Syria**

Relations between Türkiye and Syria can be described as “enemy-friendly” (Zahra, 2017, p. 38). Bilateral relations between these two actors have experienced ups and downs. Türkiye recognized Syria's independence in 1946 when relations between the two nations started to improve after some time (Korgun, 2020, p. 4). Nonetheless, their ties were not friendly during the Cold War. Due to its association with the Soviet Union during the Cold War's polarization, Syria had issues with its neighbor Türkiye, which was on the Western side (Gürler and Yavuz, 2023: p. 211). After the end of the Cold War, the goal of Türkiye policy toward Syria, in particular, from the early 2000s to the 2011 regional turmoil was to revitalize the historical heritage (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Syrian Civil War has evolved, changing both the tactics and the instruments employed through the process (Kiraz, 2020, p. 108). The following are the fundamental tenets of Türkiye's Syria policy: safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity and unity, putting an end to the conflict, peacefully completing the political transition process to satisfy the legitimate demands of the Syrian people, and ensuring security by removing terrorist elements from the border region (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b). The bilateral relationship between Türkiye and Syria saw a significant uptick when their historical disagreements over water, land, and Syria's previous backing of Kurdish rebels were resolved (Phillips, 2012, p. 137). Relationships were elevated in 2000 when Ahmet Necdet Sezer, president at the time, attended Hafez al-Assad's funeral. The start of the Bashar al-Assad era in Syria in 2000 and the AK Party's “zero-problem policy” toward neighboring nations after taking office in Türkiye in 2002 brought about a significant shift in the two countries relations (Korgun, 2020, p. 9).

Türkiye and Syria started collaborating on the management of the water resources of the Euphrates. Along the Türkiye-Syrian border, they decided to build the Friendship Dam, a dam on the Asi/Orontes River (Altunışık, 2016, p. 57). Between 2006 and 2010, Türkiye exports to Syria increased fourfold, and joint cabinet sessions were held in place of visa restrictions (Phillips, 2012, p. 137). The families of Erdogan and Assad became good friends and even spent holidays. Türkiye made an effort to mediate a peace agreement between Israel and Syria (Altunışık, 2016, p. 57). Whether by sharing an anti-Israeli platform or acting as a trade channel to Arab states further south, Syria contributed to Türkiye's improved reputation among the Arab public (Phillips, 2012, p. 137).

As understood, before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, relations between Türkiye and Syria had improved between 1998 and 2011. According to Altunışık (2016), after the assassination of the former prime minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri, relations with Türkiye played a major role in helping Syria overcome its isolation. Syria has traditionally avoided depending only on Iran as part of its many alliances' policies, but the Assad regime's positive connections with Türkiye

prevented it from taking that stance. Considering the Assad regime's controlled economic liberalization, Syria also anticipated financial gains from this partnership (Altunışık, 2016, p. 57). In contrast, Syria was considered by Türkiye as a potential market and a point of entry into the Arab world, which meant that there were also obvious economic advantages. Moreover, Türkiye was worried about the Bush Administration's conduct in Iraq and elsewhere, thus engagement with Syria was also a part of the strategy to soft balance the US (Altunışık, 2016, p. 57; Phillips, 2011, p. 39). Furthermore, according to Özcan, Türkiye considered Syria as its entry point into the Arab world and the Middle East, while the Assad government considered Türkiye as a go-between for mending relations with the West (2017, p. 3).

Türkiye-Syria relations have been negatively impacted by the Syrian crisis. There are several aspects of the Syrian crisis's impact on Türkiye, including social, economic, security, and humanitarian problems. Türkiye initially supported the Assad government and made efforts to convince it to implement reforms, with a particular emphasis on democracy and a call for Assad to desist from using violence against his people. However, the Assad regime did not carry out any of the reforms that Türkiye had envisioned, so it did not validate Türkiye's identity as a normative power (Futák-Campbell & Nolting, 2022, p. 15). Türkiye, along with other Arab Gulf nations including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have provided support to the opposition. Over time, Türkiye has emerged as a hub for various forms of assistance, such as recruiting, financing, and arms delivery (Levallois et al., 2023, pp. 7-8). The Syrian troops targeted a Türkiye airliner on June 22, 2012. Türkiye abruptly and decisively changed its position toward the Syrian regime during this time, and it began to develop plans to bring an end to the Assad administration when five residents were killed by a bomb thrown on Akçakale by Assad forces (Yeltin, 2018, p. 205). A bomb assault occurred on February 11, 2013, near the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa and Cilvegözü, resulting in the deaths of seventeen people (Altunışık, 2016, p. 60). The Türkiye town of Reyhanli, which lies close to the borders, was the scene of a massive massacre and murder on May 11, 2013 (Zahra, 2017, p. 34). Türkiye aggressively exclaimed at a Syrian aircraft that had breached its airspace on May 16, 2015. At least thirty-two persons were killed on July 20, 2015, when a suicide bomber detonated himself in the town of Suruç, which is close to the borders of Syria and Türkiye (Zahra, 2017, p. 34).

In addition, Türkiye, is currently host to more than 3.7 million refugees, making it the most directly affected party in the Syrian conflict. Türkiye permitted refugees to gather inside its borders and welcomed them as they fled the Assad regime's persecution (Yeltin, 2018, p. 205). By utilizing its resources and enforcing an "open-door policy", Türkiye has been providing shelter to millions of Syrians since the onset of the conflict. There were 3.4 million Syrians registered in Türkiye as temporary residents as of 2023. The word "guest" was initially applied to Syrians



who migrated to Türkiye; they were seen as considered war victims. Later, in 2014, they were given temporary protected status due to their enormous population and lack of legal status (UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency). Türkiye made significant contributions to humanitarian relief efforts and successfully implemented a comprehensive policy to address the needs of Syrian refugees who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the war (Ataman and Özdemir, 2018, pp. 29-30).

By 2015, Türkiye faced significant security challenges at its doorstep, including the Russian incursion into Syria, ISIS rockets striking nearby towns, the flood of refugees, and the PKK's spreading offshoots (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 1). To create border security as well as internal security, Türkiye entered northern Syria. Türkiye initiated three significant military operations in Syria between the summer of 2016 and the fall of 2019. The first mission, "Operation Euphrates Shield," by a NATO member state involved the deployment of brigade-level conventional units to fight ISIS. The PKK-affiliated groups in Syria were the main targets of the second and third campaigns, "Peace Spring" and "Olive Branch", respectively (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 3). As per Türkiye's perspective, the establishment of Kurdish autonomy within Syria may pose a significant risk to the country's territorial integrity by inciting separatism among Kurds domestically and providing the PKK with more bases to attack Türkiye targets, alongside those in northern Iraq and Iran. In the long run, it may even be feasible to create a "Greater Kurdistan" that includes Kurdish regions in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria (Özer & Kaçar, 2018, p. 185).

### **The EU's Approach to Syria**

The autocratic administration of the Baath Party, its harsh regime, and the security danger posed by its weaponry have made Syria a "problematic country" for the region, viewed with distrust by Western nations, particularly EU member states (Özcan, 2017, p. 1). The European Community member nations did not have positive relations with Syria during the Cold War since Syria was perceived as a regional ally of the Soviet Union and as a backer of terrorism, specifically the extreme Shia organization Hezbollah in Lebanon (Havlová, 2015, p. 78). However, the EU and Syria signed a cooperation agreement in 1977, and 2004, the EU developed an association agreement that the parties chose not to sign. Despite the EU's 2009 declaration that it intended to sign the Agreement, the Syrian government chose not to sign it, citing other considerations (Nas, 2019, p. 50). Syria was a part of the Union for the Mediterranean project, the 1995 Barcelona process, and the EU's growing Mediterranean policy. It was also a part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) until May 2011, when serious human rights breaches led to the suspension of all EU cooperation (Nas, 2019, p. 51).

As early as March 8, 2011, the EU adopted a strategic response to the Arab upheavals. High Representative Catherine Ashton sent out a joint communication,

and the European Commission suggested “a partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean”. In this letter, the EU underlined that the EU adheres to universal ideals and shared interests and that it supports these countries’ claims for political participation, freedom, dignity, and employment opportunities. It emphasized the EU’s “more for more” policy, which grants partner nations who have made the greatest progress toward consolidating reforms access to the EU Single Market and increased financial support (Özer & Kaçar, 2018, p. 181).

The 2011 Syrian crisis predominantly affected the EU as well. Regarding Syria, the EU has tried to implement its norm-based strategy. The EU and its member states are the main international suppliers of humanitarian aid to Syria (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 3). Since the start of the protests, the EU has fiercely denounced the abuses of human rights and the rule of law by the Damascus dictatorship (Şahin, 2022, p. 335). At the outset of the Syrian crisis, the EU’s leaders and the member states requested that the Assad regime have greater reforms, and not use military actions toward its people. However, Assad ignored these requests and has tried to suppress protests harshly. As a result, the EU, and its member states publicly denounced and imposed sanctions in response to Assad’s ruthless suppression of demonstrators calling for increased liberties (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 3). The Assad regime’s earnings have decreased due to the sanctions, primarily from oil sales, although not significantly (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 18). However, the dynamics of the conflict on the ground and the actions of the Assad control have not been significantly impacted by the EU’s approach (Asseburg, 2020, p. 5).

In the post-2014 era, the Syrian issue has become a zone where the EU “exports migrants,” “destroys border security,” “generates threats,” and “threatens the security of its citizens.” (Özcan, 2017, p. 8). The EU has primarily faced security concerns because of the Syrian crisis. Following the assassinations of American and British journalists by ISIS in 2014 and the subsequent attacks in Europe, this threat escalated the Syrian crisis to a serious security concern for the EU (Özcan, 2017, p. 8). The terrorist attacks that began in 2014 in West European nations, including those that targeted the Bataclan Theater in Paris, Charlie Hebdo magazine, airports in Brussels and Istanbul, and comparable targets in Germany and Britain, horrified EU member states. By 2016, the terrorist group ISIS had spread throughout a large portion of Iraq and Syria, and these assaults were associated with it (Nas, 2019, p. 55).

Security issues have been brought about by the large increase in refugees brought about by the severity of the crisis, which has also had negative effects on the economy and society (Aşkar-Karakır, 2017, p. 136). Known as Europe’s worst humanitarian crisis since WWII, the “refugee crisis” in Syria forced the EU to act in 2015. By year’s end, the EU had received over a million claims for asylum, putting member states’ ability to manage a single asylum and immigration policy by both

international and European standards and regulations to the test (Saatçioğlu, 2022, p. 1). EU action was impeded by differences across member states. The conflict's aftermath and the ensuing refugee crisis for European nations made it much harder for the EU to formulate a political response, ultimately reducing it to little more than a humanitarian aid organization (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 3). The refugee crisis has demonstrated that EU members prioritize their strategically diverse national interests to guard their borders against the entry of refugees fleeing a serious external catastrophe (Saatçioğlu, 2017, p. 213). The principles of "solidarity, fair responsibility, and burden-sharing, freedom, equality, unity in diversity" outlined in the founding treaties of the EU were insufficient to keep the community united in the face of the refugee crisis (Keskin & Yanarışık, 2021, p. 67).

European Council adopted the EU strategy on Syria in 2017. This strategy outlined six responsibilities as part of a more detailed but generally generic framework for action. (1) Achieving a genuine political transition to end the conflict "in line with UNSCR 2254, negotiated by the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy for Syria and with the support of key international and regional actors; (2) Encouraging a meaningful and inclusive transition in Syria "in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué, through support for the strengthening of the political opposition."; (3) Save lives by ensuring the most vulnerable Syrians receive humanitarian aid; (4) Endorsing democracy, human rights, and free speech "by strengthening Syrian civil society organizations"; (5) Demanding that war criminals face consequences; and (6) Strengthening the resilience of the Syrian people and society (European, 2024; Levallois et al., 2023, pp. 15-16; Nas, 2019, p. 54). The council then goes on to outline the priorities that will guide EU policy in Syria and state that the EU will only be prepared to assist with post-conflict reconstruction in Syria "once a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition... based on UN Security Council resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué" is put into action (Nas, 2019, p. 54).

### **Türkiye's and the EU's Reactions to the Syrian Crisis: Coordinated and Diverse Approaches**

Türkiye and the EU have been severely impacted by the Syrian crisis in various aspects. Thus, Türkiye and the EU had to adjust their approaches to dealing with the Syrian crisis. However, it can be claimed that as actors in the Syrian war, Türkiye and the EU were unable to continue taking a united stance and coordinating their efforts (Kızıllan, 2019, pp. 332-333) to end the Syrian crisis. Firstly, the study argues that Türkiye and the EU are against the Assad regime in Syria, and they support the opposition groups. The European Council vehemently condemns the Syrian regime's ongoing use of heinous and inexcusable brutality against its citizens as well as its ongoing repression (Council, 2011). The European

Council, in its Conclusion of 2012 stated that “the European Union supports the Syrian opposition in its struggle for freedom, dignity, and democracy, recognizes the Syrian National Council as a legitimate representative of Syrians, and calls upon all members of the Syrian opposition to unite in its peaceful struggle for a new Syria, where all citizens enjoy equal rights...” (Council, 2012). Furthermore, Türkiye and the EU have imposed various sanctions on the Assad regime (Kızıllan, 2019, pp. 332–333). To project itself as a Middle East normative power, Türkiye-backed Western action to halt Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s persecution of people in Syria (Oktav & Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 412). Without a doubt, Türkiye’s involvement with the US and EU’s sanctions measures against Syria is normative. At the risk of worsening its trade ties with this country, Türkiye’s foreign policy was changed from “status quo-unintended” to “normative-intended.” (Parlar Dal, 2013, p. 723). In this situation, one could argue that at the outset of the Syrian crisis, the value-based strategy -which is consistent with the normative power approach- was prioritized by both Türkiye and the EU.

Secondly, Türkiye and the EU face a serious security threat as a result of the rise of ISIS and its numerous acts in Syria, Türkiye, and the EU. In this sense, both Türkiye and the EU placed a high priority on security and worked to put themselves in a position of safety. It is important to acknowledge that Türkiye is Syria’s neighbor, therefore, Türkiye perceives greater threats from the Syrian issue and must thus adopt an offensive approach to resolve it. Türkiye and the EU joined a coalition that was established to combat ISIS (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defence) The anti-ISIL coalition countries criticized Türkiye for its initial resistance to joining the coalition and for its tardiness in enforcing border controls. Rather, Türkiye persisted in lending support to anti-Assad Arab and Turkmen opposition groups, which are today widely considered a component of Syria’s radical Islamist landscape (Altunışık, 2016, p. 61). In the meantime, the PYD became more well-known because of its gains against ISIL and its ability to seize control of substantial areas of the country’s north (Altunışık, 2016, p. 61). On August 24, 2016, Türkiye began “Operation Euphrates Shield” under the authority of the right to self-defense granted by Article 51 of the UN Charter. The goal of the operation was to secure Türkiye’s borders and defeat terrorists operating in northern Syria, particularly ISIS, which posed a threat to the country’s security (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Defense). Considered to support US national security objectives, the US supported “Operation Euphrates Shield” against ISIS in the northern Aleppo area (August 2016–March 2017). Germany and France concurred, but Russia expressed displeasure (Al-Hilu, 2021, p. 2).

Thirdly, there is doubt about the effectiveness of Türkiye’s and the EU’s attempts to develop a coordinated policy in response to the Syrian refugee issue. However, in the areas of humanitarian aid and migration management, Türkiye and the EU work closely together and have significant cooperation (Republic of Türkiye

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The EU repeatedly praised Türkiye for taking in three and a half million Syrian refugees (Nas, 2019, p. 63). For example, the European Commission stated that “Türkiye is making commendable efforts to provide massive humanitarian aid and support to an unprecedented and continuously increasing influx of people seeking refuge from Syria” (Commission, 2015). European Parliament also welcomes Türkiye for “keeping the borders open for refugees” (Parliament, 2011). The Türkiye government opened its doors to a massive flood of Syrian refugees. The EU’s de facto closed-door stance toward refugees was clearly at odds with Türkiye’s open-door strategy (Oktav & Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 412). Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel led a strategy in 2016 to hold refugees and migrants in Türkiye to prevent them from accessing the EU through bloc members Greece and Bulgaria. In exchange, the EU decided to provide Türkiye, €6 billion for their maintenance (Dempsey, 2020). By “keeping Türkiye as a gatekeeper and a buffer zone,” the EU quickly became the strategic answer that brought the member states together that were previously divided. In response, Ankara agreed to stop transit migration to Europe via Türkiye in exchange for several concessions, which led to the EU-Türkiye “refugee deal” of March 18, 2016 (officially known as the “EU-Türkiye Statement”) (Saatçioğlu, 2022, pp. 1–2). As with past Readmission Agreements, the EU views a transnational approach as the best way to solve problems outside its boundaries, yet it is still plausible to argue that this policy reflects an “orientalist” and “otherizing” mindset (Akkaya, 2019, p. 359). The deal lessened EU influence by granting Türkiye the authority to regulate Syrian migrant patterns, but it was successful in halting the influx of refugees into EU nations (Levallois et al., 2023, p. 20). Furthermore, there was mistrust and anxiety in EU circles due to the use of the refugee card as a negotiating chip against the EU (Nas, 2019, p. 63). However, it should be noted that decision-makers have turned the deal from a chance for cooperation into a negotiating chip, a question of winning and losing. It is no longer about a humanitarian disaster but rather a Türkiye-EU dispute. It is no longer about refugees, for Turks or other Europeans, since it is connected to the easing of visa requirements for Türkiye nationals (Şenyuva & Üstün, 2016, p. 3). The EU may have breached its normative power standards by implementing this policy. The EU’s claim to be a democracy exporter is further called into question by its prioritization of security and halting illegal immigration from the south at the expense of human rights (Del Sarto, 2016, p. 218).

Fourthly, one of the main issues with relations between Türkiye and the EU has been the movement of foreign fighters from Europe and European nationals into Syria via various channels. At this time, EU representatives and the EU media asserted that Türkiye’s failure to secure its borders was a significant contributing factor to the EU’s growing security risks (Özcan, 2017, p. 8). The image was further exacerbated by claims that Türkiye was arming and supplying jihadist organizations with light weapons and ammunition, “and curing them at Türkiye

hospitals in Hatay (Oktav & Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 413). Türkiye and the EU were at odds on the sharing of information and working together to expose and stop the flow of foreign fighters from Syria into EU nations (Nas, 2019, p. 63). Following 2013, the EU's opinion of Türkiye's involvement as a threat shifted due to the growth of the terrorist group ISIS in northern Syria and the emergence of Salafist factions within various Syrian rebel groups. In the Western media, the issue "Is Türkiye supporting extremist groups?" has been debated, particularly since the latter part of 2013 (Özcan, 2017, pp. 8–9). Oktav and Çelikaksoy (2015, p. 419) argue that;

"Although Türkiye opened its doors to more Syrian refugees than all 28 EU member states combined, Ankara remained reluctant to collaborate with international bodies like the UNHCR. As a result, Türkiye's reputation in the West suffered, as did its capacity to exert normative power. Türkiye's humanitarian efforts were further undermined by Ankara's tilt toward the Sunnis, which led to allegations that it also supported jihadist groups such as Islamic State. The Türkiye government's welcoming attitude toward the Sunni Syrian opposition fighters and refugees has also created resentment among the Alawite-Arabs in southeastern Anatolia."

As understood, once more, security is a top priority for the EU, but criticizing Türkiye rather than working with it is not going to solve the issue. One significant feature in their pursuit of self-interest is the continued interaction between Türkiye and the EU.

Fifthly, while the EU focused on fighting ISIS and pushed Türkiye to intensify its efforts against the group, Türkiye focused on fighting the YPG (People's Defense Units). Türkiye called attention to its connections to the PKK, which is included on the EU's list of terrorist groups (Nas, 2019, p. 55). Ankara describes the PKK and all of its extends as terrorist organizations that, because of their existence and anti-Türkiye Kurdish nationalist actions in Iraq and Syria, represent an existential threat to Türkiye's national security. However, Brussels considers the PKK's allies, particularly the PYD, as vital allies in battling their main danger in Syria: ISIS (Palani et al., 2018, p. 21). Because they are concerned about offending Türkiye, some EU nations -especially Germany and Belgium- are hesitant to publicly interact with the PYD or give the YPG material support. But France has adopted a more encouraging stance, which has infuriated Türkiye. For example, Francois Hollande hosted the co-leader of the PYD and the commander of the YPG's women's battalion at the Élysée Palace in February 2015 (Özer & Kaçar, 2018, p. 186).

Türkiye and the West have significant differences particularly regarding "Operation Olive Branch" and "Operation Peace Spring" (Kasapoglu, 2020, p. 4). Washington, London, and Moscow supported "Operation Olive Branch", which was carried out from January to March 2018 against Kurdish fighters in the Afrin region. However, Paris and Berlin expressed concern about the operation's potential to undermine stabilization efforts in Syria and pointed to the Kurdish fighters'



achievements in fighting ISIS. Regarding the October–November 2019 “Operation Peace Spring” against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the border region between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, Russia accepted the operation, seeing it as a step toward weakening the SDF, which is allied with the West, while the US and EU both voiced opposition (Al-Hilu, 2021, p. 2). However, according to the EU, these operations are conducted to invade northern Syria (Parliament, 2019b). The European Parliament urges Türkiye to uphold the territorial integrity and sovereignty of every one of its neighbors (Parliament, 2017). Furthermore, the European Council strongly denounced Türkiye’s military operations in a united statement on October 14, 2019, stating that it was substantially compromising regional stability and security. EU members decided to stop selling weapons to Ankara, but they couldn’t agree on imposing an embargo on the entire EU (Del Torre, 2019, p. 1). In addition, in its official journal, the military operation by Türkiye in northeastern Syria is highly condemned by the EU. The EU claims that this is a serious breach of international law, threatening regional stability and security, inflicting more suffering on those already impacted by conflict, uprooting civilian populations in large numbers, and possibly fueling the resurgence of ISIS, which continues to pose a threat to security in Syria, Türkiye, the wider region, the EU, and the world. Additionally, it is impeding access to humanitarian aid (European Union, 2019). In addition, the EU urges Türkiye to promptly and completely cease its military operation in northeastern Syria and withdraw all of its forces from Syrian territory, stressing that the military operation would not resolve the nation’s fundamental security concerns. Additionally, it calls for the utmost observance of humanitarian law, which includes safeguarding civilians and granting domestic and international humanitarian organizations unimpeded access (European Union, 2019).

The European Parliament demanded in 2019 that the European Commission and EU Council halt negotiations on Türkiye’s EU membership. Türkiye’s incursion into northeastern Syria may further harm its prospects of joining the EU, bring about a fresh wave of internally displaced people and refugees, and create security risks associated with ISIS foreign fighters operating in Syria, despite the positive cooperation on migration and the EU-Türkiye agreement, which allocates a total of €6 billion for approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees (Parliament, 2019b). However, the EU ignored that the escalating crisis in Syria and the rise of violent non-state entities, particularly ISIS and YPG, posed a more direct and immediate threat to Türkiye as a neighbor. The EU could manage this issue, which was more indirect, by working with transit countries like Türkiye (Nas, 2019, p. 63).

Sixthly, Türkiye has backed the notion of creating a safe zone for Syrian refugees. This stance has not been supported by the US or the EU (Kızılkın, 2019, pp. 332–333). According to the EU, Türkiye President Erdogan’s goal to relocate Syrian refugees in Türkiye to the Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East

Syria (also known as “Rojava”) is improbable, as military activities are likely to increase the number of internally displaced people (Parliament, 2019b). The European Parliament is strongly against Türkiye’s plans to create a “safe zone” along the border in northeastern Syria. The European Parliament points out that forcing Syrian refugees or internally displaced people to relocate to this area would violate international humanitarian law, conventional international refugee law, and the principle of nonrefoulement. The European Parliament also stresses that, given the current situation, it is strictly prohibited for refugees to return, and that any such movements must be safe, voluntary, and dignified (Parliament, 2019a).

To summarize, Türkiye and the EU are not acting in their restrained normative manner in the Syrian situation but rather are responding to the crisis in self-interests. Despite the parties’ divergent policies, given that Türkiye serves as a major crossing point for both Syrian refugees escaping the conflict and ISIS fighters traveling to and from Europe, Türkiye’s cooperation is essential for the EU to defeating ISIS and establishing peace in Syria (Özer & Kaçar, 2018, p. 186). To combat the threat of foreign fighters coming to Europe to incite terrorist activities and stop the flow of refugees towards Europe, the EU relied on Türkiye’s assistance and commitment (Nas, 2019, p. 46). In short, Türkiye and the EU must collaborate to eliminate threats to their mutual security.

## **Conclusion**

The Syrian crisis is one of many foreign policy issues Türkiye and the EU have dealt with in recent years. Türkiye and the EU have faced challenges as a result of the Syrian crisis, particularly in the areas of economics, security, and humanitarian. The crisis caused one million people to migrate to Europe and about 3.7 million people to migrate to Türkiye. Furthermore, through the migration, a great number of people also died. In terms of security, several explosions that have killed people in Türkiye and other EU countries have been caused by ISIS and other terrorist organizations.

Türkiye and the EU criticized Assad for its repressive actions on its people. Türkiye and the EU also initiated the imposition of sanctions on the Syrian regime and developed a more stringent, accusatory stance against it (Nas, 2019, p. 46). In this phase of the war, Türkiye and the EU have reacted to the crisis in alignment with the value-based approach.

Türkiye has taken a posture that seeks to overthrow the Syrian government and give the opposition groups more power (Nas, 2019, p. 46). Türkiye and the EU have supported different opposition groups in Syria. While the EU supported the YPG, Türkiye supported the Syrian National Army. Keep in mind that Türkiye considered the YPG as the extension of PKK, which is recognized as a terrorist group by the EU itself. However, although they have been operationally and historically connected,

Western countries consider the PYD and the PKK as two legally separate organizations (Parliament, 2019b). Therefore, a conflict of interest has arisen between Türkiye and the EU over their support for various parties. Türkiye and the EU have suffered because of the threat posed by ISIS. After the ISIS bombs, many innocent civilians in Türkiye and the EU have died. Türkiye and the EU have started working together to develop a strategy to battle ISIS and it demonstrates once more how they prioritize their security. However, Türkiye received criticism from the EU for delaying its entry into the coalition against ISIS. Furthermore, Türkiye rejected and denounced the EU's dependence on the YPG in the fight against ISIS.

In the field of refugee issues, both Türkiye and the EU have a humanitarian sense and tried to help Syrian refugees. However, the EU's member states' policies towards refugee issues vary and they mostly do not want to be the host countries of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, some of the EU's member states securitized the migration issue. In addition, they have tried to solve this crisis by keeping refugees in third countries. The EU worries that Türkiye would exploit the millions of refugees living in Türkiye as a political tool. EU "deems it unacceptable that the Türkiye President Erdogan is weaponizing refugees and using them to blackmail the EU" (European Union, 2019). However, refugees' circumstances are harmed when the refugee crisis is viewed through the lens of boosting Türkiye-EU relations. In this context, the study maintains the EU's approach to migration issues contradicts the EU's normative identity.

The Syrian crisis is more of a threat to Türkiye than it is to the EU, hence Türkiye must adopt an offensive stance to protect its national security. Due to its security concerns, Türkiye carried out two military operations against the YPG in northern Syria. The EU criticized these military actions of Türkiye. While acknowledging that Türkiye has valid security concerns, the EU maintains that these should be resolved peacefully and diplomatically rather than militarily in compliance with international law, particularly humanitarian law (European Union, 2019). Furthermore, the issue of foreign fighters has been discussed between Türkiye and the EU. The EU criticized Türkiye as it does not protect its borders and thus foreign fighters use Türkiye as a transit country between Syria and European countries. Lastly, Türkiye maintained to open a "safe zone" for Syrian refugees in Syria, however, the EU has not supported this idea. However, to resolve migration issues and to develop a successful strategy against the terrorist group, the EU needs Türkiye's collaboration and coordination as a regional country bordering northern Syria.

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