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WAR, REFUGEES, AND STATE POLICY:
TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN
REFUGEE CRISIS THROUGH A REALIST
LENS

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, forced migration has become one of the most pressing challenges facing the international community. Even today, in 2025, many people are forced to leave their countries looking for a better life elsewhere. Most of these individuals come from states affected by different types of conflict, civil or international, mainly located in Africa or the Middle East. For people from these regions, reaching the European continent, or even finding a country where they can live safely and in full respect of their fundamental rights, remains extremely complex.

Two main perspectives must be considered in order to understand this phenomenon: that of the country of origin and that of the host country. The country of origin is often marked by wars that exacerbate poverty, hunger, the spread of disease and the scarcity of basic resources. In such circumstances, civilians rarely have the economic means or logistical capacity to undertake a safe journey. It is in this context that migrant smuggling by sea, land or air often becomes the only possible route.

The second perspective concerns the host countries, which are often reluctant to welcome new arrivals or do so under strict conditions. Not all migrants meet the required criteria, such as possessing valid identity or travel documents, which makes legal and safe access even more difficult. These combined factors show that forced migration is not only a humanitarian issue, but also the result of political, economic and structural imbalances that characterise the current global system of mobility and protection. Within this broader picture, the Syrian refugee crisis stands out as one of the most emblematic examples of the 21st century. However, this thesis is going to point out that forced migration cannot be understood only as a humanitarian emergency. In many cases, it also becomes a political and strategic issue. States do not respond only on the basis of solidarity, but also according to their security concerns and national interests. The Syrian crisis is clearly an example which illustrates this tension between humanitarian protection and state policy.

Against this background, forced migration has challenged not only human rights protection mechanisms, but also the political, economic and social stability of the affected

countries. The Syrian crisis, which broke out in 2011, has resulted in one of the largest and most severe humanitarian crises in recent history. With over five million refugees registered in neighbouring countries and over seven million internally displaced people, Syria has become a symbol of a prolonged and multifaceted crisis whose effects are still being felt more than a decade later. This massive displacement has reshaped regional balances and deeply affected neighbouring states.

Turkey is a prime example of how complex it is to take in Syrian refugees. With almost three million people registered on its territory, the country has had to face enormous challenges, providing assistance and protection, managing internal tensions and dealing with political and geopolitical pressures. The so-called 'Turkish model' has two sides: on the one hand, Turkey has welcomed refugees and introduced a 'temporary protection' regime; on the other, the arrival of so many people has created practical difficulties and social tensions which has led to adopt new policies. These policies reflect Turkey's intention to protect its national security and safeguard its own interests, showing that humanitarian action is intertwined with strategic considerations. In this sense, the management of refugees cannot be separated from broader concerns related to border control, regional influence and internal political stability. The Syrian refugee presence has progressively become part of Turkey's security agenda and foreign policy positioning.

This situation has led the country to interact extensively with the European Union, giving rise to policies and agreements, such as the one of 2016, which have influenced the lives of refugees and diplomatic relations. The management of the crisis has not been solely an internal matter. Behind political choices lie broader strategic and geopolitical considerations, including security concerns, regional relations and international positioning. Over time, migration has also become a bargaining tool within EU–Turkey relations, reinforcing dynamics of asymmetric interdependence. Yet, beyond these geopolitical calculations, the crisis has had profound social and human consequences for displaced populations.

This thesis argues that Turkey's response to the Syrian refugee crisis cannot be understood only as a humanitarian effort. While protection and assistance have played an important role, security concerns and national interests have consistently shaped state policies. Through a realist analytical framework combining structural and state-level perspectives, the study examines how war, refugee flows and state strategy have become interconnected. By analysing the evolution of Turkish policies from the early stages of the conflict to the institutionalisation of return and EU–Turkey cooperation, the thesis seeks to show how migration has progressively become embedded in broader dynamics of power, security and political leverage.

CHOICE OF TOPIC AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This thesis analyses Turkey's response to the Syrian refugee crisis within a broader political and legal framework, with particular attention to its relations with the European Union. The main aim of this thesis is to understand how the Turkish state has managed the migration phenomenon and the domestic implications of these policies. In addition, it examines how migration has shaped and transformed EU–Turkey relations, particularly in the field of migration governance. In particular, the research seeks to understand to what extent Turkey's refugee policies have been shaped primarily by humanitarian commitments or by security concerns and national interests. It also asks whether migration has progressively become embedded in broader dynamics of regional power and international bargaining.

Given the complexity of the crisis, the research also traces the evolution of the Syrian regime, from Hafez al-Assad's authoritarian consolidation to Bashar al-Assad's rule, to contextualize the origins of the 2011 uprisings and the subsequent civil war. This broader historical and political framework is essential to fully grasp the magnitude of the refugee crisis and the motivations behind Turkey's domestic and international policies. This historical reconstruction is not an end in itself, but provides the necessary background to analyse how war, displacement and state strategy became interconnected.

The choice of this topic stems from a deep academic interest in forced migration and the protection of human rights within migratory flows, an issue of great relevance in the international context. Three main factors guided the selection of this focus.

First, during the Erasmus program in France in 2025, the author attended the course *The Political Challenges for a Democratic Europe* at the Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne. As part of the course, a group project was conducted and presented in class, titled *La Politique Migratoire de l'Union Européenne: le Pacte sur la Migration et l'Asile*. The project analyzed the pact adopted on 14 May 2024, tracing the history of the European Union's migration policy and focusing particularly on the new agreement. Studying this pact highlighted the challenges faced by refugees and the growing externalisation of migration management by European states. This experience sparked the author's interest in contexts beyond Europe, leading her to focus on Turkey's role in managing migratory flows. This perspective made it possible to look beyond the European dimension and to examine how neighbouring states such as Turkey navigate the tension between humanitarian responsibilities and strategic interests.

Second, Turkey represents a particularly significant case in this context. Its geographical location, complex history, and internal political dynamics offer an opportunity to closely examine the challenges related to refugee management and the protection of their rights, as well as the broader international implications of these choices. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how state policies, humanitarian needs, and geopolitical pressures intersect in practice, providing a more realistic picture of the dynamics that characterize refugee reception. In line with these objectives, the thesis adopts a realist analytical framework, integrating structural constraints and domestic political dynamics, to analyse how Turkey has managed the Syrian refugee crisis. It argues that, although humanitarian protection has been officially presented as a priority, have increasingly played a central role over time role in shaping policy choices, both at the domestic level and in relations with the European Union. The analysis therefore examines the main policies adopted and shows how internal and external pressures have influenced their development and implementation.. Moreover, it considers how external factors, particularly the interests of the European Union, have influenced Turkey's choices. While

the broader implications for Turkey's foreign policy will be addressed later in the thesis, this initial discussion already points to the relevance of Turkey's internal and external strategies in shaping the reception and protection of refugees.

Finally, while the academic literature often focuses on specific aspects of Turkey's response, such as the legal framework, humanitarian policies, or political implications, this thesis aims to integrate them into a comprehensive analysis. The objective is to offer an overall view of the management of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey, showing how state policies, geopolitical considerations, and humanitarian needs intertwine. Particular attention is given to the protection of refugees' rights, the practical difficulties of their management, and the complexity of political choices, in order to provide a coherent picture of the challenges faced by the Turkish state and the consequences for the people involved. By integrating legal analysis, political developments and international relations, the thesis ultimately seeks to demonstrate that migration, in this context, has progressively become embedded in broader dynamics of power, security and strategic positioning.

SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The analysis of the Turkish case is particularly relevant for several reasons. Turkey played a central role as host country and geopolitical player in managing the Syrian refugee crisis. Its geographical position, bordering Syria, allowed it to exert a direct and immediate influence on the migration phenomenon, more quickly than other countries such as those of the EU or the United States could. Moreover, regional tensions, particularly with Iran, terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Al-Qaida, and the issue of Kurdish communities present along the borders, have made the management of migratory flows even more complex and strategically sensitive. Turkey has faced an unprecedented influx of refugees, developed new policies and changing the domestic legal framework in response to this prolonged crisis.

The country has also tried, according to some analyses, to use migratory flows as a foreign policy barometer, both towards its neighbours and towards the West, thus integrating the management of refugees into its diplomatic strategies. This makes the study of the

Turkish case useful for understanding how migration can be used as a lever of international politics and as a tool for internal negotiation. The humanitarian dimension remains central to this analysis, as it makes it possible to examine how refugee rights have been defined, applied and, in some cases, restricted within a context strongly influenced by security concerns. Looking at legal status, access to rights and living conditions helps to better understand the political choices discussed throughout the thesis. Studying how the rights of refugees were conceived, respected or violated constitutes an essential historical testimony. Understanding what legal status they have assumed, the difficulties they have faced, the paths they have taken to ensure their survival and the conditions in which they live today represents a central aspect of the humanitarian and political analysis of the crisis. The crisis cannot be attributed solely to Turkey, but must be understood within a broader regional and European framework. For this reason, while the primary focus remains on Turkey, the role of the European Union is also considered as part of a multilevel analysis.

From a scientific point of view, this research intends to offer an original contribution by filling some gaps present in the literature. Much of the existing literature has focused mainly on the humanitarian or legal aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis, while few have systematically integrated the political analysis, legal and humanitarian dimensions. The thesis, therefore, proposes a more integrated view of crisis management, showing how Turkish policies, regional dynamics and cooperation with the EU intersect. In this way, it provides the reader with a more comprehensive interpretative tool and by applying a realist theoretical framework to refugee governance, the thesis also contributes to broader debates on the relationship between migration, security and state power.

Moreover, the focus on the humanitarian dimension, that is, on the rights, difficulties and living conditions of refugees, also makes the research relevant as historical evidence of a phenomenon of global scope. Regarding legal analysis, although not specialized in jurisprudence, the research aims to clarify in an accessible manner the main normative aspects, contributing to a broader understanding of migration policies and refugee protection in the Turkish context.

Finally, Turkey's strategic role is further enhanced by the fact that the EU has chosen this very country to manage migration flows directed towards the European continent, implicitly recognising its geopolitical importance in the region. As one of NATO's member states in the Middle East, Turkey enjoys a position of weight that increases its influence and explains why regional and international actors have considered its involvement fundamental. Analysing Turkish policies in this context therefore allows us to understand not only the evolution of migration policies, but also the broader dynamics that link conflict, regional instability, human rights and international cooperation.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This research mainly adopts a qualitative and document-based approach, combining historical, political, and legal analysis. However, in addition to the qualitative approach, the research also includes limited use of quantitative data, mainly to provide a more complete picture of the scale of the crisis and its humanitarian implications. In particular, official statistics and data from institutional sources such as the UNHCR and other European and international reports will be used. These data will be used to complement the qualitative analysis, forming part of the triangulation approach.

The analysis will therefore be mainly descriptive and interpretative: descriptive because it aims to illustrate and contextualise the main historical, political and legal developments; interpretative because it aims to analyse in depth the motivations, dynamics and consequences of Turkish political and legislative choices, assessing their implications for domestic governance and for EU–Turkey relations in the field of migration.

From a temporal perspective, the research focuses primarily on the period between 2011 and 2024, while including a necessary historical background from the early 2000s in order to contextualise the origins of the Syrian regime and the outbreak of the civil war. Particular attention is devoted to the years between 2011 and 2021, during which the main legal and political transformations in Turkey's refugee governance took place. Developments after 2021, including recent dynamics related to institutionalised return

and regional shifts, are addressed to illustrate ongoing trends, without claiming to provide an exhaustive analysis of the most recent events, which remain complex and evolving.

Both primary and secondary sources were used to carry out this research, selected based on their reliability, relevance and ability to provide useful information for the analysis of the Syrian refugee crisis and Turkey's response. Primary sources include official data and documents, reports from international organizations and updated statistics on migratory flows. In particular, UNHCR data were used (Operational Data Portal – UNHCR, ed.), which provide quantitative information on the number of registered Syrian refugees, their distribution on Turkish territory and the main demographic characteristics. Another example is the Strategic Mid-Term Evaluation of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (2016–2019/20) report, which analyzes operational measures, projects and financing for refugees in Turkey. Secondary sources, however, include books, academic articles and reports on political, historical and legal analysis. Secondary sources are used to contextualise the Syrian crisis within its historical, political and humanitarian background, and to support the interpretation of the Turkish legal framework and the broader political and theoretical analysis developed throughout the thesis. They include, for example, the studies of Rabinovich (2021), which offer a detailed reconstruction of the Syrian civil war and its internal dynamics, Şahin-Mencütek et al. (2023), which analyze refugee reception and integration policies in Turkey, and others.

The methodology adopted in this thesis is grounded in triangulation, an approach that combines different sources and types of data to ensure a more comprehensive and robust analysis of the Syrian migration crisis. The quantitative data used are numerically lower, since the focus is on the description and interpretation of texts, books, reports and academic articles. Numbers and statistics are employed to complement qualitative analysis and to provide a more comprehensive picture of the Syrian migration crisis. Therefore, triangulation is useful in this case, as it allows us to take different perspectives and make the vision of the writer and the reader more complete regarding the Turkish response to the crisis. Three dimensions of the Turkish response are described in the following analysis:

1. the political dimension;
2. the humanitarian dimension;
3. the legal dimension.

These three dimensions are analyzed against the background of an accurate historical description and contextualization.

Alongside the historical, legal, and policy analysis, this thesis adopts a realist analytical framework, combining classical realism, structural neorealism and selected elements of neoclassical realism. The aim of this theoretical perspective is not to replace the empirical reconstruction of events, but to support the interpretation of the collected data and to explain patterns that emerge from the analysis. Realism and neorealism are used to examine state behaviour in contexts marked by conflict, security concerns, and strategic interests. These theories are particularly useful for understanding why international cooperation, despite being formally pursued through diplomacy and institutional mechanisms, often remains limited, selective, or fragile. The analysis therefore focuses on how national interests, security priorities, and power relations influence state choices and constrain collective responses.

The thesis deliberately relies on realist theories as its central explanatory framework. Structural neorealism is used to explain systemic constraints, power asymmetries and regional dynamics, while classical realism helps interpret state behaviour in terms of national interest, security and survival. In addition, elements of neoclassical realism are employed when analysing how domestic political factors, elite cohesion and leadership perceptions influence policy choices. This combination allows for a multi-level interpretation of the Syrian conflict and Turkey's refugee governance. Other theoretical approaches are not employed as alternative models of analysis but may be briefly referenced to highlight their analytical limits when applied to the dynamics under examination. This choice reflects the assumption that interest-based and security-oriented explanations offer a more convincing interpretation of the empirical evidence discussed in this study. The Syrian crisis provides a relevant case study to test this framework, as it illustrates how international cooperation is often constrained by conflicting national

interests and power asymmetries. Examples discussed in the thesis highlight how strategic calculations have shaped both regional dynamics and EU–Turkey relations.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the way Syrian refugees have been hosted across the region. Although several states have hosted Syrian refugees, the conditions in which they were received varied greatly, often creating additional social and economic pressures on host countries, and highlighting the absence of genuine, coordinated cooperation (Şahin-Mencütek et al., 2023).

Turkey’s approach further illustrates this dynamic: initially aiming to play a leading role in shaping the response to the Syrian crisis and securing a strategic position in the region, Ankara progressively transformed the humanitarian situation into a source of political leverage in its relations with the European Union.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is organised into four main chapters, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion. Each chapter addresses a specific stage in the evolution of the Syrian crisis and Turkey’s response, combining historical, political, legal and theoretical analysis.

The Introduction presents the research objectives, explains the scientific relevance of the Turkish case, and outlines the methodological and theoretical framework adopted, namely a realist analytical framework, combining structural and state-level perspectives to interpret state behaviour and policy choices.

Chapter I – The Origins of the Syrian Crisis examines the historical and political background of Syria, focusing on the al-Assad regime, the internal and external dynamics of governance before 2011, and the outbreak and escalation of the Syrian civil war. The chapter situates the conflict within a broader realist framework, highlighting systemic constraints, regional rivalries, power dynamics and the role of domestic political factors in shaping regime behaviour.

Chapter II – Turkey and the Syrian Refugee Crisis analyses the evolution of Turkey–Syria relations and the emergence of the refugee crisis in Turkey. It explores the transformation of Turkey’s migration governance, including the development of the Temporary Protection regime, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, and the socio-economic and political implications of refugee reception.

Chapter III – EU–Turkey Migration Cooperation and the 2016 Deal focuses on the development of EU–Turkey relations in the field of migration management. Particular attention is given to the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, the dynamics of cooperation and tension between the parties, and the role of borders, power and interdependence in shaping their interaction.

Chapter IV – From Precarious Permanence to Institutionalised Return examines the politicisation and securitisation of the Syrian presence in Turkey from 2019 to 2024. It analyses the impact of economic pressures, electoral politics and regional developments on Turkey’s strategic positioning and refugee governance.

The Conclusion brings together the findings of the four chapters and reflects on the broader implications of Turkey’s refugee governance for state policy, regional stability and the relationship between migration, security and power.

CHAPTER I. THE ORIGINS OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

1.1 The Arab Revolutions and Regional Instability

During 2011, a series of unprecedented popular movements shook the entire Arab world, leading to the fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and triggering waves of protests in numerous other countries. These events were triggered by a variety of factors: youth unemployment, widespread corruption, lack of civil liberties, political repression and structural economic crises. Added to these conditions was the growing influence of social media, which facilitated the mobilisation and spread of protests in real time.

The regional instability generated by the revolutions spread rapidly, highlighting the profound political and institutional fragility of Arab states and the lack of effective conflict mediation mechanisms.

The chaos following the Arab Revolutions has led to an almost inevitable choice between two options: on the one hand, military dictatorship, such as that of Al-Sisi's Egyptian state; on the other, the model of jihadist theocracy, whose extremism is represented by the “Caliphate”. Several scholars have argued that the rise of jihadist movements in the region cannot be understood as a direct consequence of the Arab uprisings alone, but rather as the product of decades of entrenched authoritarian rule, which suppressed political pluralism and limited ideological alternatives.

Political Islam, except for its role as a conservative political force in Tunisia and Morocco for about ten years, does not appear to have been a decisive factor. Instead, the notion of “restoration,” associated with the reappearance of new and old authoritarianisms, seems to have shaped the model of governance in the following years, first in Egypt and more recently in Tunisia.

Regarding the nature of these movements, although there has been long discussion on whether they should be classified as uprisings or revolutions, it is important to note that the absence of a strong ideology supporting the various political formations present in the

Arab squares, the so-called “revolutions without revolutionaries”, pushed them toward the former interpretation (Cremonesi, 2022). This was further reinforced by the limited results achieved. In countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the Arab revolutions instead led to civil conflicts that have lasted over a decade and are still unresolved. These conflicts did not remain confined to these three countries; given the strategic importance of their territories for energy issues (Libya) and regional hegemony (Syria and Yemen), they have involved direct or indirect intervention by local powers and global superpowers, as will be discussed later.

Among the various revolutions, the Syrian revolution will be treated in more depth as the consequences that will derive from it and that will involve neighbouring countries, but Turkey will be the main topics examined in the following document. Before addressing the various phases of the Syrian conflict, the situation in the country prior to this conflict will be described to better contextualize what would happen next.

1.2 The Al-Assad Dynasty

The current Syrian context finds its roots in the political history of the al-Assad dynasty, whose main figures, Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad, represent distinct but complementary models of authoritarian leadership.

In November 1970, Hafez al-Asad seized full power in a coup, which he called “the Corrective Movement” (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). This term was meant to signal that Syria’s new ruler intended to “correct” the deviations of the Neo-Ba’th, the faction to which he had belonged, and restore the party and its regime to their correct course. The Neo-Ba’th party was one of the two coalitions which were fighting each other in the internal struggles within the Ba’th regime in Syria in 1965 and which staged a coup and took control of the regime in 1966. It was composed of mostly Alawi and Druze army officers, along with the civilian party’s radical wing. The other coalition, generally known as the “Old Guard” or the “ Historical Leadership”, was led by the country’s president, the Sunni general Amin al-Hafez, along with the Ba’th Party’s historic civilian leadership and a supportive military faction.

However, “The Corrective Coup” of November 1970 led by Hafez al-Assad had been a major turning point in the history of the Syrian state, after which Hafez al-Assad has held onto power for thirty years, introducing profound changes in Syrian politics and society and turning the previously weak state into an important regional and occasionally international actor.

Dacrema (2013) highlights that Hafez al-Assad ensured Syria’s formal stability through centralised control, a strong cult of personality, and the systematic elimination of opposition. The massacres in Hama in 1982, reported by news agencies (ANSA 2024), further confirm the points highlighted by Dacrema. These events illustrate the harsh measures used to suppress dissent and consolidate the regime’s control.

Asad's strategy was to structure his regime in a series of concentric circles, where each circle represented a different level of authority. At its heart was a neopatrimonial regime centred on his immediate family, his Alawi clan, and, more broadly, the entire Alawi community, along with a select group of trusted advisors who were not necessarily Alawi. This central group was surrounded by larger circles including the institution of the presidency, the Ba'th Party, the Syrian armed forces and others.

In his final years, Hafez al-Assad focused on preparing his son Bashar for succession. He left a legacy of a relatively strong state and regional power, but its stability relied heavily on his personal skills. The system combined a family sectarian core with a complex web of institutions, yet corruption and inefficiency persisted, and long-term economic and political reforms were largely absent.

1.2.1. Bashar al-Assad’s Regime

When Hafez died in 2000, power was transferred to his son Bashar. Initially, he presented himself as a modern leader open to change, but the “Damascus Spring” of political openness proved short-lived, as conservative elites pressured him to halt the reform process (Dacrema, 2013). On the economic front, moreover, attempts at liberalisation proved contradictory and uneven. The reforms, characterised by a weak and limited structure, contributed to the formation of a new economic elite, closely linked to the

narrow inner core of power. However, these reforms did not have a significant impact on the statist economic system, nor did they contribute to reducing the level of corruption and inequality. Social inequalities have widened, particularly between privileged urban areas (such as Damascus and Aleppo) and increasingly marginalised rural areas, contributing to growing discontent among the poorest sections of the population.

This discontent culminated in the protests of 2011, which initially took the form of moderate demands for reform and greater openness. However, the regime's response was characterised by severe repression, marking a definitive break between the president and the segments of society that had placed their hopes in his promise of change.

Cataleta (2023), in her article *Siria, il lascito criminale di Bashar Al-Assad*, highlights systematic human rights violations by the regime, including the use of rape as a tool of repression, mainly perpetrated by regime-affiliated militias against perceived opponents between 2011 and 2013. Several women passing through these checkpoints were raped because they were considered members of the political opposition. Many other women were abducted with the aim of being sexually assaulted. Abduction was a tactic employed by the regime, although the rapes did not appear to be ordered from above. In fact, detention in Syrian prisons, such as the notorious Sadnaya prison near Damascus, was primarily intended to facilitate rape, which was used as a form of torture by the regime and as a means of revenge for the deaths of members of the Alawite armed forces. In such places, the security authorities, known as the *Mukhabarat*, subjected prisoners to torture during interrogations.

This violence aimed, on the one hand, to extract confessions and, on the other, to ensure submission to the regime, which thus appeared strong and unassailable. In these circumstances, it is difficult not to conclude that the orders did not follow an organisational hierarchy, given their systematic nature and widespread propagation. According to the testimonies collected, numerous cases of sexual violence were perpetrated at Mezzeh airport, where women were forced to undress in front of the police, or raped in detention centres. For the Assad regime, rape had a sectarian connotation, serving as a weapon of revenge for the Alawites against the Sunnis. According to the

article, it is estimated that between 5,000 and 13,000 detainees died without a fair trial in these detention centres. Torture and mass killings took place, which is difficult to interpret without considering a specific political and military strategy. Many men and minors, including those under the age of 13, have been detained and sexually abused, as documented in the Aleppo civil prison (Miñano 2017).

The sexual violence perpetrated during detention reflected a precise strategy of the regime, aimed at regaining control of entire neighbourhoods, frightening and annihilating the opposition. Men were separated from women and killed, while women were subjected to violence and, in many cases, were killed. In general, these crimes were characterized by an ethnic connotation, as they were perpetrated against members of the Sunni minority, thus recalling rape as a method of genocide. According to Miñano (2017), this is corroborated by the fact that such actions were often perpetrated by paramilitary forces of Shiite origin, such as the notorious *Jaych al-Chaabi*, a militia under the command of two Iranian generals: Qasem Soleimani, killed during a targeted operation led by the US, and Hossein Hamadani, head of the Al-Qods force, which included a brigade composed exclusively of women known as the *Bachar lionesses* (Miñano 2017). The Syrian regime has widely used sexual violence as a tool of terror, both inside prisons and during ground offensives. Moreover, similarly to the absence of global studies on the subject, there is no in-depth knowledge of the extent of the phenomenon in Syria, which remains largely submerged.

Bashar al-Assad's early rule combined internal repression with external challenges, reflecting the dual domestic and international dimensions of his leadership.

1.2.2. The Dual Dimension of the Regime: Internal and External Dynamics

After Bashar al-Assad assumed power, Syria's foreign policy faced new challenges, including a change in U.S. administration and setbacks in the Syrian-Israeli peace process under Ariel Sharon (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). Furthermore, the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 pressured Syria to support Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Israel retaliated against PIJ bases, while internal opposition, led by Rafiq al-Hariri, gained strength. Meanwhile, tensions with Saddam Hussein and the looming U.S. invasion of Iraq forced Bashar to secure Syria's eastern border cautiously. The consequences of the American invasion of Iraq were quickly felt in Syria. The fall of another Ba'athist regime encouraged Syrian opposition groups, who began to believe that a similar fate could befall their own government. Bashar feared that the U.S. President intended to bring Syria, as with Iraq, under American control to establish a new Middle Eastern order dominated by the United States. The Bush administration exerted pressure on Assad to refrain from interfering in American policy in Iraq and to dissuade support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Initially, Assad cooperated with the U.S., but this collaboration proved short-lived and inconsistent. Consequently, in 2003, the U.S. Congress passed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Act, denouncing Bashar's support for terrorist groups and introducing punitive measures such as sanctions, restrictions on Syrian diplomats, and trade prohibitions (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). Assad also allowed the safe passage of Islamic volunteers into Iraq through an infrastructure run by Syrian intelligence services.

Syria's role in regional politics was also marked by its controversial intervention in Lebanon. Disagreements over the re-election of Maronite President Emile Lahud fueled tensions, while the opposition led by Rafik Hariri collaborated with the U.S. and France to support UN Resolution 1559 (2004), which called for the withdrawal of foreign forces. Hariri's assassination in 2005, along with the mysterious death of Alawite officer Ghazi Kan'an, raised suspicions of Syrian and Hezbollah involvement, triggering mass protests. Facing popular mobilization, Bashar withdrew troops, marking a symbolic loss of prestige and altering the balance of relations with Hezbollah, now regarded as a true ally, while strengthening ties with Iran (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Domestically, Bashar faced opposition both from political groups and civil society. After neutralizing rivals such as Abd Halim Khaddam and launching a new five-year plan, opposition figures issued the "Damascus Declaration" in 2005, promoted by Michel Kilo and Riad Seif. It condemned the government as "authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish" and called for democratic reforms (Landis 2005). Despite internal resistance, Bashar

consolidated power and was re-elected in 2007. His position was further bolstered by regional and international developments. The first example is the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war which was widely perceived in the Arab world as a political victory for Hezbollah and, by extension, for Syria as its main supporter. Then, the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which renewed diplomatic engagement with Syria (The Iraq Study Group 2006; Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

By 2008, official invitations and mediation initiatives by France and Turkey highlighted the overcoming of internal and external challenges, allowing Assad to consolidate control over the country (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

1.2.3. The Need for Modernization and Political-Institutional Resistance

Bashar al-Assad inherited from his father a system which clearly needed profound reform. Syria's economy was marked by corruption, aging state industries, failing agricultural sector, lack of foreign investments, decreasing oil resources and an outdated educational system (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Although the new president expressed the intention to modernize the economic apparatus, his efforts encountered a strong resistance from the minoritarian coalition, composed of Alawite military and security officials, senior Ba'th Party cadres, and influential regime-linked families, which constituted the backbone of the Ba'th regime (Rabinovich 2021). The old guard feared that the adoption of new economic and political reforms would undermine its long-standing privileges, entrenched in a corrupted public sector which guaranteed its monopoly of power. This fear turned into antagonism towards the Syrian private sector which was instead asking for an economic liberalization. Bashar al-Assad not only proved to be unable but also reluctant to pursue a meaningful transformation to the structure of public sector and bureaucracy in favor of renovation. This reluctance stemmed from the fact he was himself a beneficiary of the same corrupted system which ensured his political survival (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Nevertheless, some limited reforms were implemented: the establishment of private banks in 2004 and the creation of holding companies in 2007 (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Moreover, by removing or sidelining several members of the old guard of the Ba'ath Party, Assad further consolidated his authority on the regime. He also appointed a new Deputy Prime Minister, Abdallah al-Dardari, who oversaw the economic reform and development program and launched the new five-year plan under the slogan “social market reform”. The choice of this slogan stemmed from the intention to combine gradual modernization and economic liberalization with the preservation of social welfare policies still in favour of the poorest strata of society (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

On the one hand, the innovations introduced, had a relatively positive impact as the private sector began to receive investment and expanded in subsequent years, and Syria's GDP grew thanks to this reduced and partial economic openness. On the other hand, such measures have significantly increased inequality between social classes. The poorest strata of population became even more marginalized and new economic elites took shape. These new elites became the principal beneficiaries of the president's policies, blocking some reforms threatening their interests and taking advantage of others to accumulate additional wealth on the other.

The book written by Rabinovich & Valensi (2021) also refers to a cable from the American Embassy in Damascus entitled “Syria's Corrupt Classes” from 2006 which confirmed that Syria continued to be dominated by corrupt classes who exploited their personal ties with the president's family and with Alawite military and security officials to gain a monopoly over certain branches of the Syrian economy and enrich themselves through them. As the authors report, *“Asads run Syria as a family business and the corrupt classes are the ones that make the business function”* (Alan George 2015 cited in Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The most negative aspect of this situation was the rapid spread of corruption, because when it originates in the highest echelons of society, it reaches all social, economic and political levels.

Furthermore, the relationship between the new corrupt economic elites and the Assad regime was symbiotic (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021). In other words, the former took advantage of their ties with the latter and vice versa, but at the same time there was a kind of interdependence between them: one could not survive without the other.

The impact of Assad's economic reforms has been very limited. However, the latter also had repercussions at the political strategy level. Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, had always based his power on support from the rural classes. Bashar al-Assad revolutionized this order and laid the foundations of his regime on the much more numerically limited support of the new economic elite, weakening the regime itself and popular organizations to implement his policies. This change led to an exponential weakening of the regime's ability to interact with and infiltrate society to guide it (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The standard of living of the people who made up society fell dramatically due to high inflation and a drastic reduction in subsidies. A factor that further aggravated the situation was the exponential population increase which, combined with a precarious standard of living, caused a significant migratory flow of the peasant masses to the cities, around which they formed veritable shanty towns (Rabinovich 2021).

According to Rabinovich & Valensi (2021), the regime underestimated the risks posed by the growing influence of radical Islamist movements. In fact, it indirectly contributed to their spread by allowing Islamist ideas from the Gulf to enter Syria as part of a pragmatic compromise with countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar in exchange for financial support and investment. This preference for Saudi-style Wahhabi influence over that of the Muslim Brotherhood's traditional rivals was not new, dating back to the time of Hafez al-Assad. Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic political-religious movement that aims to influence the state and society according to Islamic law, while Wahhabism is a conservative, orthodox and very strict form of Islam, widespread mainly in Saudi Arabia.

1.2.4. Internal Governance and Foreign Policy in Syria before 2011: A Realist Reading of the Assad Regime

The internal governance of Syria under Bashar al-Assad between 2000 and 2011 can be understood through the lens of classical realism, which as emphasized by Morgenthau and elaborated by Jackson and Sørensen (2013), identifies the pursuit, maintenance, and projection of power as the supreme interest of the state. According to Morgenthau, political leaders are expected to conduct both domestic and foreign policy on the basis of the *national interest*, understood primarily as the preservation of power and regime stability. Assad's decisions therefore do not appear guided by personal morality or the socio-economic needs of the population, but rather by the necessity of ensuring the survival of the regime and consolidating its internal legitimacy through a selective management of elites and institutions.

In the early years of his rule, Bashar initially appeared inclined to promote political and economic reforms. However, he soon entered into conflict with the so-called "Old Guard": a minority coalition composed of Alawite officials, military and security personnel, and regime-linked families. These elites represented the backbone of political stability, and their support was indispensable for the president's legitimacy (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021). From a realist perspective, Assad's decision to privilege the demands of the elites over those of the broader population was a rational choice, rooted in the recognition that regime continuity depended on their loyalty.

The repression of calls for change, along with the freezing of reformist initiatives, can thus be interpreted as a necessary instrument of statecraft, consistent with the realist view advanced by Morgenthau and Machiavelli that politics operates in a sphere autonomous from private morality. In this sense, Assad's political conduct fits within a tradition that places power at the centre of governance and views stability as a value superior to ethical considerations.

Assad's strategy clearly reflects the Machiavellian logic of the *lion* and the *fox*: the ruler must combine strength and cunning, adopting prudent decisions to protect his position

and the existing political order (Jackson & Sørensen 2013). As Jackson and Sørensen (2013) note, Machiavelli's metaphor captures the dual nature of political responsibility. On the one hand, the ruler must be a lion, because a state that does not appear strong becomes "a permanent invitation" for internal challengers or external predators. Strength is therefore essential to deter threats and to contain domestic pressures that may undermine the regime. On the other hand, the ruler must also be a fox, capable of acting with astuteness, and when necessary, ruthlessness, in pursuing the interests of the state.

Applied to the Syrian context, this framework helps to explain Assad's dual approach to internal governance. He deploys strength in dealing with the population, using repression to contain dissent and restricting political openings to avoid the emergence of destabilising pressures from below. Even the limited economic reforms introduced during his early years were designed not to redistribute power or liberalise the political system, but to alleviate short-term grievances while preserving the authoritarian core of the regime.

Simultaneously, Assad exhibits significant cunning in managing the elites. Although he portrayed himself as a reformer, he carefully avoided reforms that would undermine the privileges of the "Old Guard" aware that their support was fundamental to regime survival. His strategy consisted of a calibrated balance: offering minor signs of modernisation to avoid alienating civil society, while refraining from any transformative reforms that could trigger resistance within the ruling coalition.

In this sense, Assad's behaviour exemplifies the Machiavellian realist synthesis of strength and astuteness. His governance rests on a deliberate equilibrium between concession and coercion, limited economic adjustment and structural political continuity. This calculated blend allows him to maintain the architecture of power inherited from Hafez al-Assad and ensures that every decision, whether domestic or external, is subordinated to the primary objective of the regime survival.

Classical realism helps to explain the power dynamics of the Syrian regime and its strong commitment to maintaining control, highlighting how state survival lies at the centre of

political decision-making. However, this perspective is not sufficient to fully explain the origins of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The shift from rural consensus under Hafez al-Assad to the narrower support of new economic elites under Bashar, together with growing inequality and social discontent, shows that internal and domestic factors played a crucial role in the outbreak of the protests.

Neoclassical realism offers a more complete understanding of the Syrian case because it takes into account both power politics and domestic conditions, such as elite cohesion and institutional capacity. The state was weak: the bureaucracy and public sector were inefficient and affected by corruption and the regime struggled to manage the economic and social crisis. Drought and the deterioration of living conditions in rural areas increased popular discontent and played a crucial role in triggering the protests (Rabinovich 2021). The Alawite and military elite, closely linked to the Assad family, blocked meaningful reforms, while the emergence of a new economic elite connected to the regime benefited from the system and strengthened it at the same time.

These internal factors, combined with Bashar al-Assad's belief that every protest represented a threat or a conspiracy, accelerated the crisis. Weak elite cohesion, or, in other words, lack of unity and cooperation among political, military, and bureaucratic leaders, together with the regime's unpopularity among rural populations, who felt economically and socially marginalized, and the political exclusion of large segments of society from state decision-making, transformed the 2011 protests into a revolt that rapidly escalated into armed conflict.

The external dimension of Bashar al-Assad's rule can be analysed in continuity with the realist approach used to explain his internal governance. During the 2000s, Syria's foreign policy was led mainly by concerns over security and regime survival, instead of being based on ideology or moral values. Assad's main objective was to protect the regime and preserve Syria's autonomy.

This logic became clear after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime increased Assad's fear of external intervention. Cooperation with the

United States was used to lower short-term risks, while resistance emerged when international pressure threatened the regime, including continued support for Hezbollah and indirect involvement in Iraq. Syria's role in Lebanon followed the same logic. When international pressure and domestic protests made the Syrian military presence too costly, Assad withdrew troops in 2005. This decision did not signal a change in strategy, but a pragmatic adjustment. Syria later strengthened its alliance with Hezbollah and Iran to preserve regional influence and projection of power.

Several diplomatic initiatives, such as UN Resolution 1559 and mediation efforts by France and Turkey, reflected attempts to influence Syria through dialogue and international cooperation. However, these efforts had limited impact. Diplomatic pressure was often perceived as external interference and failed to alter the regime's core power interests.

Overall, the external actions of the Syrian regime reflect the logic observed in its internal governance. Alliances, strategic positioning abroad together with repression and elite management at home, were used to preserve power. In both dimensions, regime survival remained the central priority.

1.3 The Syrian Civil War and Crisis (2011–2016): focus on the developments leading to Turkey's involvement

1.3.1. Initial phase

The second part of Chapter I will describe the Syrian civil war and its phases, as an essential element for understanding the resulting migration crisis. At the beginning of the Arab revolutions, Bashar al-Assad sought to project the image of a strong, secure and untouchable country. In this sense, Rabinovich describes Syria as an “island of stability” (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021, p. 41).

The internal situation was very different: the population was in turmoil, many social strata were dissatisfied and wanted to express their discontent, demanding concrete reforms. Newspaper headlines mainly reflected Assad's rhetoric and not the reality of the situation.

In a 2011 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Bashar al-Assad stated (transcribed by the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews):

Why is Syria stable, although we have more difficult conditions? ... We are under embargo by most countries ... Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. ... It is not only about the needs ... It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have. (Centre for the Study of the Syrian Conflict 2018).

This statement demonstrates that Assad aimed to project an image of Syria as strong and stable, able to withstand economic difficulties and external pressures. He emphasized that stability did not depend solely on the material needs of the population, but also on shared values, ideological beliefs, and a common sense of purpose. However, this perspective contrasted with the internal reality, where much of the population was dissatisfied and demanded concrete reforms. This contrast between image and reality clearly shows how, despite the apparent security that the regime sought to convey, tensions and demands for change were already present and growing. Bashar clearly overestimated the sense of security of the regime.

Furthermore, he did not consider a fundamental element that would lead the initially rather moderate uprisings, far from major cities such as Damascus or Aleppo, to become much more violent and widespread: the spread of Islamic radicalism, which at the time had not yet radicalised and strengthened to the point of posing a danger. The protests began to spread as a means of expressing the discontent of the population due to various factors: demographic explosion, drought, the water crisis, impoverishment of the lower and middle classes by the transition to a partial neoliberal economy, factors which made the Syrian population less naïve, particularly in the countryside and in the outskirts (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The first riots broke out in March 2011 in the southern Syrian region of Houran, in the city of Da'ra, a Sunni city (like most of the cities where these demonstrations initially took place) (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). It is important to highlight the geographical area from which these uprisings spread, as Houran was home to most of the rural

population that supported the regime when Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, was in power. This highlights how the regime had changed. Support for the current regime came mainly from the new economic elites and a minority group of people in close contact with Assad and his family, and no longer from the masses of peasants, as previously noted.

As already mentioned, the uprisings were not particularly intense from the outset, as in other countries involved in the Arab revolutions. On the contrary, they developed gradually. Arrests, shooting at demonstrators and violent repression did not stop the protests from evolving; on the contrary, they inflamed them. At first, Alawites, Druzes and Christians took part in the anti-regime protests. Over time, the conflict turned into a clash between the Alawite regime and a Sunni opposition in the provinces (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The regime adopted a dual strategy, combining repressive harshness with limited concessions. The latter included the suspension, at least on paper, of the state of emergency in force since 1963, minimal economic measures such as reducing fuel prices, freezing electricity tariffs, creating a fund for the neediest families and launching initiatives to curb unemployment. Two weeks after the start of the mass protests, Assad made his first public speech. His words failed to meet the expectations of the population, who remained disappointed and continued to take to the streets. The regime displayed a two-pronged strategy: violent repression on the one hand, small concessions on the other. These included, at least on paper, the suspension of the state of emergency in force since 1963 and a few economic measures, such as reducing fuel prices, freezing electricity tariffs, setting up a fund for families in need and programmes to reduce unemployment (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The second speech brought no change. Assad decided to call in the army and, shortly afterwards, tanks, artillery, aircraft and helicopters were deployed against the demonstrators (Rabinovich 2021). In his third speech, Assad spoke of an alleged foreign conspiracy and presented himself as a defender of secular Arab nationalism, announcing more radical measures.

From May 2011, the opposition began to take shape politically, thanks to a network of Local Coordination Committees, whose main feature was the anonymity of their members. This aspect certainly made them more protected from the regime but, in the long run, it ruled out the possibility for the Committees to assume the status of real entities that could have constituted an alternative to the regime. Besides the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), the opposition included traditional civil society groups and Syrians living abroad who opposed the regime (Rabinovich 2021). The expatriate group organized a major meeting in Antalya, Turkey, marking a shift in Turkey's approach toward Assad after it became clear he had no plans for serious reforms (Rabinovich 2021). Assad responded with minor concessions, such as small institutional changes, establishing a committee for national dialogue, and offering pardons for political offenses. Some opposition members attended a meeting in Damascus, while others refused, considering the regime illegitimate. The discussion did not lead to any progress, and both the LCCs and external opposition criticized those who participated, accusing them of playing into the regime's hands (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

1.3.2. The Transition to a Full-blown Civil War (July 2011 - December 2012)

Between July 2011 and December 2012, a second phase began, characterised by the transition to a full-blown civil war (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). These were no longer simple protests; the citizens were probably also supported in their military operations by deserters from the Syrian army. Real military factions representing the opposition were formed, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main one, flanked by the Syrian National Council (SNC), which represented the pillar of the opposition from a political point of view. As Rabinovich and Valensi (2021) point out in their book, the FSA initially aimed to provide protection to peaceful demonstrators and had the political objective of overthrowing the regime. It subsequently became a real military force that occupied vast territories in Syria, opposing the regime. The Syrian National Council, on the other hand, aimed to unite and standardise multiple political factions to create a single political entity in conflict with the regime, but unfortunately failed in its intent. Consequently, in November 2012, a new political entity called the "Syrian National Coalition for Syrian

Revolutionary and Opposition Forces” was established by external supporters of the SNC: the United States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Rabinovich 2021). It operated in parallel with the Syrian National Council.

The FSA's military operations were hampered by the presence and activities of new militias, in particular Salafist militias. The Syrian Islamic Front, *Jaysh al-Islam*, and the Islamic Front are significant examples of Salafist militias that later merged into a single organisation: *Ahrar al-Sham*.

However, when we talk about the Salafist movement, what are we referring to? Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam that promotes a return to the origins of the faith, strictly following the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-sālih*). As Wiktorowicz (2006, pp. 207–239) points out, the movement is not monolithic, but it is divided into three main currents: the purists, who favour non-violent methods and religious education; the politicians, who seek to apply Salafi principles to politics; and the jihadis, who advocate the use of armed violence to overthrow regimes considered apostate and establish a state based on Sharia law. All currents share a common belief based on the concept of tawhid, the oneness of God, and the rejection of compromise with religious innovation (*bid'a*) and human reason. As noted by Hamid (2011, p. 1-20), Hegghammer points out that, despite being a religious movement, Salafism has influenced the political and militant sphere through transnational jihadist networks, and that radicalisation depends on the contextual interpretation of principles by jihadist leaders. This distinction between purist, political and jihadist Salafism helps to understand the behaviour of Syrian militias, highlighting that not all Salafis are directly involved in militant activities, even though they share a common ideological core.

In Syria, these differences are reflected in the type of militias involved. The Free Syrian Army represents a more local and moderate force, focused on the national conflict against the Assad regime, without pursuing a globalised religious agenda. Local Salafist militias, such as *Ahrar al-Sham*, apply Sharia law more strictly and seek to Islamise Syrian society,

while remaining focused on the national territory. In contrast, groups such as *Al-Nusra* and the Islamic State embody global jihad, pursuing transnational goals and seeking to establish a universal Islamic political order, extending the influence of Sharia law beyond Syria's borders (Wiktorowicz 2006, pp. 207–239; Hamid 2011, pp. 1–20).

The formation of these Islamist groups, which wanted to restore Islam and were fairly moderate, was subsequently influenced by the formation of radical jihadist groups (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). It can therefore be concluded that opposition to the regime was rather fragmented at the military level, which did not prevent these factions from occupying large areas of Syrian territory.

The regime suffered from mass desertions and an inability to manoeuvre and lead the army as it wished against the demonstrators because, even though the top security officials and generals were Alawites, the forces that were sent into the field were mostly Sunni (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The Sunni uprising against a regime dominated mainly by Alawites inevitably took on a sectarian dimension (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). Initially, the conflict between Alawites and Sunnis was not so obvious. The protests of the population (mostly Sunni) were aimed at fighting repression, corruption and the violation of their rights, not the sectarianism that characterised the regime. The decision to focus on this aspect was made by both sides. The regime sought to gain support from Alawite and other non-Sunni groups, while the opposition sought to unite Sunnis against the regime. This division inevitably led to a deterioration in relations between the two sides. One factor that had been underestimated by the regime but which played a key role in inciting the Sunni population to rebel, and in particular to rise up against the Alawites, was religious fanaticism (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

September 2011 saw a rapid intensification of military action by the opposition, mainly united under the FSA. Rebel units began to occupy various cities not far from Damascus, and the Syrian regime's army was forced to intervene with heavier weapons, to which the FSA obviously could not respond in kind. However, the FSA could rely on other

strategies, forcing the Syrian army to divide itself and fight in different locations in order to weaken it (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). One of the most significant fronts in this phase was Homs, which became a central battleground between late 2011 and early 2012. The city held both strategic and symbolic value for the regime, and the government reacted with massive force, using airstrikes, artillery, and armored units. Large parts of Homs were destroyed, and civilian casualties were extremely high. In February 2012, the FSA decided to withdraw to prevent further devastation, even though some districts remained under siege for years. The regime would only fully reconquer the city in 2014. Despite the loss of Homs, the opposition obtained victories in other areas, such as al-Qusayr and Saraqib, and managed to infiltrate several suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, even if the centers of these cities remained under regime control. In the following months, the rebels also advanced in the northeast, capturing al-Raqqah in September 2012 (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

These developments, together with growing pressure on the regime, opposition forces' control of cities such as al-Raqqah and other smaller areas, their ability to establish a foothold in the suburbs and rural areas of Damascus and Aleppo, and a series of defections within the Syrian leadership, contributed to changing the international perception of the conflict.

1.3.3. The International and Regional Dimension of the Conflict (2011 – 2012)

Between 2011 and 2013, the Syrian conflict also developed an important international dimension. According to Rabinovich & Valensi (2021), during this period, the ruling Ba'ath regime received strong support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Russia offered both diplomatic and military assistance, blocking every United Nations Security Council resolution aimed at condemning or sanctioning the Syrian government. China also supported the regime to a certain extent, mainly because it opposed any idea of “international intervention” in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, including Syria.

At the same time, Iran and Hezbollah, fearing that the regime could collapse, increased their involvement and began a series of military operations starting in 2012 (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). Their support played an important role in helping Assad maintain control over several strategic areas.

On the opposite side, the United States, European countries, and most Arab states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia etc.) strongly condemned the regime's repression of the protests. The first concrete international reaction came in May 2012, when U.S. President Barack Obama introduced sanctions against Bashar al-Assad and other key figures of the regime. The European Union soon adopted similar measures. (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Arab states also attempted several mediation initiatives, including a peace plan proposed by the Arab League, but all efforts failed. Turkey, which at first tried to maintain dialogue with Damascus, later joined the group of states opposing Assad. President Erdoğan, initially calling for reforms, saw his requests ignored. In June 2011, he condemned the repression as "savagery" and urged Assad to implement genuine reforms, including the dismissal of key figures responsible for violence, highlighting the urgent need to respond to the demands of the Syrian people (Black 2011). This lack of cooperation pushed Turkey to take a clearer position against Assad and support the opposition.

International criticism of the regime grew stronger throughout 2011 and 2012. A clear example is the speech delivered by President Obama in August 2011, in which he declared that "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way... For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.". (The White House 2011).

Following this statement, many countries decided to withdraw their diplomats from Damascus, further isolating the Syrian government on the international stage.

Meanwhile, the Syrian army was struggling to defend the capital and other strategic areas. Because of this weakness, the regime eventually prepared to use chemical weapons against rebel-held territories. This possibility was completely unacceptable for the

international community, especially the United States. In August 2012, President Obama warned that the use or movement of chemical weapons would represent a “red line”:

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation. (The White House 2012).

In 2012, the United Nations took measures such as sending observers to monitor ceasefires and calling for the protection of civilians, reflecting the gravity of the situation. At the same time, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned that “further militarization of this conflict will only perpetuate the devastation ... A sectarian civil war would also gravely imperil Syria’s neighbourhighlighting the risk that the violence could escalate into a wider civil conflict” (United Nations, 2012).

Accoridng to Rabinovich & Valensi (2021), on February 23, 2012, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Al-Arabi announced that former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan would become the special envoy for the Syrian crisis. Following his appointment, Kofi Annan sought to find a concrete solution to the complex situation in Syria. He drew up a six-point political plan, made public in August 2012, which represented the first realistic attempt to end the violence to which the Syrian population was subjected. It provided for the implementation of six measures of various kinds, such as the withdrawal of armed forces by the Syrian government and the cessation of the use of heavy weapons against the population. This project, like the one to create a transitional government composed of members of both factions, proposed by the group known as the Action Group for Syria (Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar) headed by Kofi Annan in June 2012, was unsuccessful, partly due to internal differences over the role that Bashar al-Assad would play. Subsequently, Allan Kofi decided to resign in August 2012 because neither the Syrian government nor the opposition were complying with the previously outlined peace plan, and he was replaced by Algerian diplomat Lakdhar Brahimi in September 2012. Brahimi's attempt in 2012 also failed quickly, as the proposed ceasefire was not respected by the parties (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

1.3.4. The Escalation (2013 – 2014)

Between 2013 and 2014, the Syrian conflict changed shape: the initial protests turned into a full-blown civil war. One of the main factors in this escalation was the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad's regime. The first accusations were made as early as 2012, and Syria itself acknowledged that it possessed some chemical weapons. During 2013, the use of these weapons became evident, with attacks causing many casualties, especially in the suburbs of cities such as Damascus (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The most serious case occurred on 21 August 2013 in Ghouta, with hundreds of deaths and injuries. According to the Comprehensive Report of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR, 2013), government forces carried out at least 25 chemical attacks in five provinces, causing dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries, based on testimonies from survivors, doctors and field hospitals (SNHR, 2013). Furthermore, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta and indicated the need to dismantle Syria's chemical stockpile (OPCW, 2013).

The United States, evaluating the evidence gathered by its intelligence services, considered that President Obama's "red line" had been crossed, but chose not to intervene militarily thanks to Russia's diplomatic mediation, which led to an agreement on the dismantling of chemical weapons. This episode represented a turning point in the conflict, highlighting the severity of the war and the limits of direct international intervention (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

A second factor was the intervention of new military actors and jihadist groups. The Syrian opposition became Islamised with the emergence of Salafist groups and the appearance of two main jihadist groups from Iraq: *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Islamic State (IS). *Jabhat al-Nusra* established itself in Syria, initially seeking to build alliances with other Islamist groups, and achieved several victories between 2012 and 2013, such as control of the city of al-Raqqa. It later broke away from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq. ISIS, on the other hand, separated from the original group in Iraq, fought

against *Jabhat al-Nusra* and managed to conquer vast areas along the Syria-Iraq border, proclaiming a caliphate with its capital in al-Raqqa. These developments led Syrian Salafist and Islamist groups to unite into two large coalitions: *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jaysh al-Islam*, gradually replacing the Free Syrian Army as the main opposition force (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

In addition to the jihadist groups, the Syrian Kurds, initially neutral, also intervened, entering the conflict under the leadership of the YPG (People's Protection Units), the military wing of the PYD, to defend themselves against the jihadists and conquer some strategic areas. At the same time, Hezbollah moved from limited involvement to direct participation alongside the regime, which was decisive in May 2013 for the conquest of the city of al-Qusayr (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

From a diplomatic point of view, the situation remained fairly static: all attempts at mediation failed, mainly due to the vetoes of Russia and China in the Security Council, which prevented the provision of a legal basis for Western intervention. The regime continued to ignore the opposition's demands, including Assad's departure and political and economic reforms, and despite attempts at mediation between the United States and Russia, no concrete results were achieved. The goal of a peaceful solution was therefore not achieved (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

1.3.5. The Syrian Conflict and Turkey's Emerging Role (2015 – 2016)

According to Rabinovich & Valensi (2021), the two-year period from 2015 to 2016 marked a decisive shift in the Syrian war, which went from being an internal and regional conflict to taking on a fully international dimension. In September 2015, Russia intervened militarily in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime, deploying fighter jets, support units and naval units from its base in Tartus. Moscow quickly became the dominant player in Syrian airspace and along the Syrian coast. In early 2016, Putin announced the withdrawal of troops, but in reality a significant part of the Russian forces remained on the territory, later reinforced by new contingents.

Thanks to Russian support, the regime recaptured several lost areas, at the cost of heavy bombing and numerous civilian casualties. At the same time, the entry of the Syrian Kurds as an increasingly important player changed the balance of the conflict. To counter IS, whose control over al-Raqqa was consolidating, the United States decided to collaborate with the Kurdish YPG militia, considered the most effective on the ground. To prevent this alliance from irritating Ankara, Washington promoted the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a broader structure that also included Arab groups and local minorities (Rabinovich 2021).

The growth of Kurdish influence in Syria and Iraq, combined with military cooperation between the YPG/SDF and the United States, was perceived by Turkey as a direct threat to its security interests, especially given the link between the YPG and the PKK. This deteriorated relations between Ankara and Washington and gradually brought Turkey closer to Russia.

On the ground, the most intense clashes involved the international coalition against IS, Moscow-backed regime troops and the increasingly fragmented opposition militias. The Free Syrian Army lost further ground, while Islamist militias such as *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (later *Fath al-Sham*) increased their influence, especially in the north-west. In the south, the opposition scored some successes in Dar'a, but the regime responded with indiscriminate attacks, including the use of barrel bombs (Rabinovich 2021).

On the diplomatic front, attempts at negotiation, from the Security Council Resolution 2254 to the fragile ceasefire of February 2016, proved ineffective. Despite agreements between the United States and Russia, the bombing of Aleppo continued unabated and in October 2016 Washington broke off dialogue with Moscow, admitting that it was impossible to contain the escalation. In this context, it becomes evident that the Syrian crisis has had repercussions beyond its borders, directly involving neighboring countries. Turkey, in particular, perceived the growing Kurdish influence and the evolution of the conflict as a threat to its security interests, initiating a complex course of political and, subsequently, humanitarian interventions.

Chapter II will therefore examine Turkey's role in the Syrian crisis by first addressing the historical evolution of Turkey–Syria relations and Ankara's security-driven involvement in the conflict. This includes Turkey's direct military interventions in northern Syria, such as Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019), as well as the Russian military intervention from 2015 onwards, which decisively reshaped the balance of power on the ground in support of the Assad regime. The chapter will then turn to the management of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey, analyzing reception and integration policies, the evolution of the legal framework, and the social and humanitarian implications. The objective is to assess how Turkey has balanced geopolitical calculations, international obligations and domestic pressures, thus shaping the so-called “Turkish model” of crisis management.

1.4 The Syrian Civil War through a Realist Framework: Systemic, Regional and State-Level Perspectives

1.4.1. Neorealism and Advanced Neorealism: Systemic Constraints and Proxy Warfare

The Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011, initially involved Bashar al-Assad's regime and protesters. The conflict was still essentially internal, characterised by moderate protests and demands for reform. Despite Assad's initial overtures, violent repression led to the emergence of armed groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). According to Waltz (1979), the international system is anarchic: there is no supranational authority that guarantees states' security, so each state must rely on itself. In such a context, every state tries to maximize its capabilities and protect its national interests, following the logic of self-help. The Syrian civil war provides a clear example of how these dynamics take place in international reality.

The intervention of external actors such as Russia, Iran, the United States, and Arab countries can be interpreted through the lens of balance of power: each state intervenes to rebalance regional power and prevent threats to its own security. Russia and Iran supported Assad's regime not only to protect a strategic ally, but also to prevent the fall

of the Syrian government from causing internal instability or similar challenges in their own territories, protecting their legitimacy. Furthermore, Iran probably aimed also to stop a Western intervention that could have reshaped the regional balance.

On the other side, the United States, Arab countries, and other external actors indirectly supported the rebels and local groups to contain the regime's expansion, safeguard their own security and influence, and tilt the situation in their favor. A concrete example concerns the United States: according to Posen's logic (2017), Washington prioritized support to the Kurdish militias and the Free Syrian Army through logistical aid, training, and air support, avoiding a large-scale direct ground intervention. This approach of indirect intervention allowed strategic objectives to be pursued: containing and fighting ISIS, limiting Iranian influence, and maintaining a regional balance favorable to American interests, while minimizing the political, economic, and human costs of a potential military involvement.

From the perspective of Posen's advanced neorealist theory (2017), what made the conflict particularly interesting at the international level was the logic of indirect intervention: the major powers and regional actors intervened mainly by supporting local proxies, without directly deploying troops on the ground. This approach, consistent with the principle of cost minimisation, allowed external actors to pursue their strategic and ideological interests while minimising direct risks and costs.

At this stage, Iran and Hezbollah intervened in support of the regime, motivated both by ideological reasons and by strategic considerations aimed at maintaining a regional balance favourable to the Shiite alliance. Russia provided indirect diplomatic and military support, blocking Security Council resolutions that could have legitimised Western intervention, while China opposed any form of direct international intervention, defending state sovereignty. On the other hand, the United States, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and some European countries indirectly supported the rebel groups. The United States provided weapons, training and logistical support to the FSA and the Kurds, subsequently promoting the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Turkey hosted logistical bases and facilitated the operational coordination of anti-regime rebels, while Qatar and Saudi Arabia financed Salafist and Islamist groups through regional intermediaries. European countries imposed economic sanctions, provided diplomatic support and, in some cases, selectively trained FSA members, while Jordan and the United Arab Emirates offered logistical and financial support.

Between 2013 and 2014, the conflict escalated further with the regime's use of chemical weapons and the entry into the field of transnational jihadist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (linked to Al-Qaeda) and ISIS. The Kurdish militias, initially neutral, entered the conflict to defend themselves against the jihadists and conquer strategic areas. Hezbollah's direct involvement in the conquest of al-Qusayr in 2013 demonstrated how even more active, albeit limited, interventions could influence the course of the conflict without changing the predominance of indirect logic. From 2015, direct Russian military intervention strengthened the regime, while the United States continued to indirectly support anti-regime forces, particularly the Kurds, creating a mosaic of local proxies and increasing the complexity of the war.

The indirect support of major powers and regional actors has therefore significantly influenced the duration, intensity and fragmentation of the Syrian civil war. Through local proxies: the FSA, SDF, Kurdish militias, Salafist groups or Hezbollah; external actors pursued their own objectives while minimising direct risks and costs. This allowed local groups to survive and proliferate, prolonging the conflict and encouraging internal fragmentation, with shifting alliances and territorial competition, thus increasing the intensity of the war and the complexity of the theatre of war.

In short, Syria became an emblematic example of how Posen's advanced neorealist theory explains the internationalisation of civil wars through the logic of cost minimisation, the use of proxies and internal fragmentation as a facilitator of external intervention, transforming an internal civil war into a complex and protracted proxy war. These internal weaknesses, such as the limited cohesion of the regime, the discontent of the population, and the rise of armed groups, made Syria vulnerable to external involvement, allowing

regional and global powers to support proxies and influence the conflict without directly intervening.

CHAPTER II. TURKEY AND THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

2.1 Historical and political background: Turkey-Syria bilateral relations

Turkey became one of the main actors in the Syrian civil war and the resulting refugee crisis. Unlike Iran, which has consistently supported Bashar al-Assad's regime (Hiltermann 2015), Turkey shares a long border with Syria, making it very sensitive to developments south of the border, especially regarding Syrian Kurds and the PKK, the main Kurdish party in Turkey. Moreover, as a Sunni Muslim state, Erdoğan's policies have often been influenced by Sunni Islamist movements similar to the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkish policies toward Damascus have therefore not been stable over time, changing according to the regional context and strategic priorities.

The tension between Syria and Turkey goes back to the Second World War. At that time, Syria, influenced by strong irredentist feelings, claimed the Alexandretta region, which had been annexed by Turkey shortly before the war, and supported radical elements of the Kurdish opposition in Turkey. During the Cold War, tensions remained: Turkey was part of NATO and the Western bloc, while Syria was allied with the Soviet Union. The 1990s were marked by growing tensions, mainly due to Syria's involvement in the PKK insurgency and disputes over the management of the Euphrates waters, controlled by Turkey (Hinnebusch 2015). In 1998, the situation reached a critical point: Turkey threatened to go to war unless Syria handed over PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Faced with this pressure, Syria complied, and Öcalan was later sentenced to death (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

In the years just before the Syrian uprising, relations between Ankara and Damascus improved. The Turkish government invested in Syria, gained the right to transport goods to the Arabian Peninsula through Syrian territory, started a joint management of the Euphrates waters, and demilitarized the borders. Furthermore, Turkey, Syria, and Iran formed an alliance to counter Kurdish irredentism and the destabilization caused by the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 (Hinnebusch 2015). This period of cooperation ended

abruptly with the start of the Syrian protests, marking a radical change in bilateral relations.

2.1.1. From rapprochement to tension (2011–2014)

When protests broke out in March 2011, Erdogan repeatedly tried to persuade Bashar al-Assad to adopt liberal reforms, take a more moderate approach to the population, share power with the Muslim Brotherhood movement and calm the protests in a more peaceful manner, offering various concessions in return. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, travelled to Damascus several times and Bashar promised to meet their demands. These demands were not heeded, and Bashar al-Assad maintained a rather opaque attitude. Davutoglu later stated: 'We wanted [al-Assad] to be the Gorbachev of Syria, but he chose to be Milosevic. That is a problem.' (Hürriyet 2012). When asked about his previously good relations with al-Assad, Davutoğlu said: 'Yes, we had good relations for nine years because then he wasn't fighting against his own people.' (Hürriyet 2012).

In May 2011, Turkey demanded Bashar al-Assad's resignation. Due to the regime's increasingly violent approach, many refugees sought shelter in southern Turkey. As the regime did not heed President Erdogan's appeals, Turkey became the main political and military support base for the Syrian opposition. In fact, the first meeting of the various Syrian political opposition groups was held in Turkey, which also hosted the external headquarters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to support its strengthening and subsequently hosted the leaders of the political opposition: the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Hinnebush 2015). Turkey, together with other countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, supplied weapons to the Syrian opposition to indirectly fight Bashar's regime. Furthermore, in 2012, it expressed its willingness to actively participate in the CIA-supported project to train and equip fighters from a moderate Syrian military force that could lead to a possible political overturn. This project remained exclusively on paper due to the US President's refusal to implement it. In 2013, Turkey, which had already been disappointed by President Obama's decision not to support the military training programme for Syrian fighters, was once again upset by President Obama's decision to

opt for a diplomatic solution proposed by Russia, even though Syria had crossed the now well-known “red line”. In 2014, which was an important year, full of significant events, the situation changed: the previously rejected project was launched, and the Pentagon took control of a training and military equipment programme specifically for Syrian fighters. At the same time, IS, the Islamic State, began to become increasingly influential and take control of a growing number of territories in Syria and Iraq. On the one hand, Turkey, a full member of NATO, immediately opposed the terrorist group, but on the other hand, it sympathised with that movement that was fighting against common enemies: the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, Shiite domination in Iraq and, subsequently, the Kurdish population (Rabinovich 2021). It is argued that there were several occasions when Turkey and IS collaborated. In fact, in 2013, Turkey became the main transit route for those from Europe and other countries who wanted to join the IS movement and made itself available to provide equipment and medical care to members of the terrorist group (Rabinovich & Valensi 2020). Obviously, Turkey denied any involvement. However, their relationship was not entirely solid: the possibility of the terrorist group acting as such was very high, and in fact this happened in 2016/2017 when it threatened Turkey with a terrorist attack.

The situation changed when Turkey joined the US-led coalition to fight IS after the latter demonstrated that there were several IS cells on Turkish soil and after the terrorist attack in Suruc in 2015 (Rabinovich 2021). The complexity of Turkey's approach to the situation in Syria was the result of another factor besides the presence of IS: the strengthening of Kurdish parties and the Kurdish presence in Syria, Iraq and Turkey itself. In Syria, there were the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and the YPG (People's Protection Units). After an important victory against the Islamic State, the PYD decided to reunite the three cantons along the Turkish border in Rojava. This aspiration represented a real threat to Turkey, not least because the Turkish Kurdish party, the PKK, was growing stronger and had gained representation in parliament for the first time in 2015 (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

2.1.2. From indirect involvement to security-driven escalation (2014–2015)

Starting in 2015, the strengthening of Kurdish actors in the region became one of the main concerns of Turkish foreign and security policy. The growing influence of Syrian Kurdish groups along Turkey's southern border was gradually perceived as a direct threat to national security, especially in light of the links between these groups and the PKK, which Ankara considers a terrorist organisation.

The same year marked a significant escalation of the Syrian conflict with Russia's direct military intervention in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime. According to Rabinovich & Valensi (2021), Turkey strongly opposed Russia's growing presence in what it considered its immediate strategic environment and expressed strong dissatisfaction with Russian control of Syrian airspace. Tensions reached their peak in November 2015, when the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border, an episode that led to the imposition of heavy economic sanctions by Moscow. Despite the seriousness of the incident, relations between Turkey and Russia changed rapidly, initiating a pragmatic rapprochement in the Syrian context. This strategic realignment took place against a backdrop of growing frustration with the United States.

The AKP, having lost patience with the Assad regime for not implementing Turkish proposals for democratization and adopting a softer approach towards the opposition, as part of Turkey's broader ambition to promote regional democratization, pushed not only for international sanctions against Syria but also for more concrete U.S. intervention. At the same time, Turkey advocated for the establishment of a no-fly zone and safe havens for Syrian refugees, aiming to protect civilians and contain the conflict (Rabinovich 2021).

However, Washington considered defeating the Islamic State the main priority and therefore chose to rely on Kurdish forces on the ground, avoiding direct intervention. This choice further exacerbated tensions with Ankara. The creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed coalition dominated by Kurdish forces but including Arab

and other local groups, was perceived by Turkey as a direct security threat. Turkey feared that the empowerment of Kurdish forces in northern Syria could encourage the PKK and destabilize its own southeastern regions, complicating Ankara's strategic calculations and pushing it toward a closer alignment with Moscow (Rabinovich & Valensi, 2021).

As a result, Turkey's approach to the Syrian conflict underwent further evolution during 2015. Ankara continued to support opposition forces intervening indirectly in the conflict, and it began to interpret developments in Syria primarily through a security lens. The centrality of the Kurdish question, combined with shifting alliances and the growing involvement of external actors, marked a turning point in Turkey's regional strategy and paved the way for direct military involvement in the following years.

2.1.3. Turkey's Strategic Consolidation in Syria (2016-2018)

In 2016, tensions were running high. Turkey perceived the strengthening of the PYD in northeastern Syria as one of the main threats to its security, opposed US support for the SDF, and showed a growing willingness to cooperate with Iran and Russia, a cooperation that already existed in part but became more evident at this stage. In light of this context, Ankara decided to intervene militarily south of its border, in northern Syria.

Two cross-border military operations were thus launched. The first, *Euphrates Shield*, was conducted between August 2016 and March 2017; the second, *Olive Branch*, took place in January 2018. Both were motivated primarily by border security needs and the desire to counter the influence of Kurdish groups affiliated with the PKK, particularly the YPG. *Euphrates Shield* aimed to expel ISIS from the Turkish-Syrian border area and prevent the union of Kurdish cantons along the Euphrates, involving local actors such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The Turkish army, operating alongside Syrian rebel groups under the FSA flag, thus managed to occupy part of the territory west of the Euphrates. (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). With Operation *Olive Branch*, Turkey conquered the city of Afrin, achieving its main goal: to prevent Kurdish territorial contiguity along the Turkish-Syrian border. To this regard, the United States maintained a rather moderate position and avoided direct intervention, suggesting that, at this point, the loss of some

territories in western Syria should be accepted as an inevitable outcome for the Kurds (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Turkey's operations attracted the attention of numerous international actors. Russia played a mediating role with Ankara to prevent escalation, while the Syrian government condemned both operations as violations of its sovereignty. Other actors, including the European Union, NATO, and the regional governments of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, also closely followed developments (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021). However, relations between the United States and Turkey remained tense: on the one hand, Ankara continued to criticize US support for Kurdish groups, while on the other, Washington viewed the growing cooperation between Turkey, a NATO ally, and Russia with concern (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

Starting in 2016, particularly after the recapture of Aleppo, the Syrian conflict began to show signs of abating. The Assad regime gradually managed to recapture territories previously controlled by the opposition thanks to the support of Russia and Iran. Rabinovich (2021) notes that, at the time of writing his book, the regime controlled about 60% of Syrian territory, while 30% was under the control of the US-backed SDF, prior to the Turkish invasion *Peace Spring* in October 2019; Idlib remained under the control of Turkish-backed rebels. The level of violence had fallen dramatically, but Syria's instability continued to affect both regional and international stability.

According to the European Parliament Research Service (2019), the EU interpreted *Peace Spring* as a highly destabilizing action, believing that the operation jeopardized the security of Kurdish forces engaged in the fight against Daesh and could lead to a new phase of instability in the region. In a speech to the European Parliament on October 9, 2019, High Representative Federica Mogherini stressed that Turkey's military action could undermine progress in the political process in Syria, including the launch of the Syrian Constitutional Committee established a few weeks earlier. The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, also condemned the operation, calling it a “violation of international law” and reiterating the EU's commitment to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The European Council took a similar line, denouncing Ankara's

unilateral action and stressing that it contributed to increasing humanitarian suffering, weakening the fight against Daesh, and threatening European security. Despite the absence of binding common sanctions, several Member States decided to suspend arms exports to Turkey, referring to Common Position 2008/944/CFSP on arms export controls (European Parliament Research Service 2019).

Domestically, Assad's main objective was to restore order, begin rebuilding the country, regain lost territories with the support of Iran and Russia, and reconsolidate his authority, while at the same time seeking to reduce the role of his allies, who had acquired significant influence, as well as that of Turkey, which had forces present in the north of the country. However, Assad showed no willingness to complete the regime's military victory through a final diplomatic solution, as Russia had hoped. He continued to reject any kind of reform, even the most limited, and to neglect regional issues, such as that of the approximately five million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021).

The evolution of the Syrian conflict and Turkey's progressive involvement can be interpreted through a realist and neorealist perspective on international relations. The realist approach, specifically that developed by Hans Morgenthau, places the state at the center of the analysis as the main actor and rational subject, primarily oriented toward protecting its national interests and survival in an international system that lacks a central authority and is therefore anarchic. In this context, the normative or humanitarian dimension tends to remain subordinate to the needs of security and power.

2.2 A Realist and Neorealist Reading of the Turkey's Involvement in the Syrian Conflict

The response of Bashar al-Assad's regime to the 2011 protests clearly reflects a logic of regime survival. Faced with a threat that jeopardized the regime's existence, the Syrian authorities favored the use of force and military repression over any reformist opening. This behavior is consistent with the assumptions of structural neorealism, developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979), according to which states, operating in an anarchic context, resort

to coercive instruments when their survival is threatened. The support provided by external actors such as Russia and Iran can be interpreted as a balancing strategy, aimed at compensating for the regime's internal weaknesses and preserving a balance necessary for the survival of states and favorable at the regional level.

As the conflict persisted, Syria has gradually become a theater of indirect competition between regional and global powers. According to a neorealist interpretation, this dynamic is the result of constraints imposed by the structure of the international system, which pushes states to maximize their security through alliances and indirect confrontations, as mentioned in the previous analysis, rather than through actual clashes. The absence of a higher authority capable of regulating the behavior of the actors has facilitated the internationalization of the conflict and the intensification of rivalries.

Within this context, Turkey's role has evolved because of predominantly security considerations. After an initial phase of diplomatic attempts and political pressure on the Syrian regime, Ankara adopted an increasingly national security-oriented approach. In particular, the emergence of autonomous Kurdish entities in northern Syria was perceived as a huge and direct threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and internal stability. This reaction can be understood taking into account the concept of “balance of threat” developed by Stephen Walt, according to which states do not react exclusively to the distribution of power, but above all to perceived threats in terms of geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and political intentions (Jackson and Sørensen 2016).

The military operations conducted by Turkey between 2016 and 2018, such as Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, do not represent a sudden break in the country's foreign policy, but the result of growing pressures related to national security. These interventions reflect a realist logic: Turkey has sought to maintain a balance of power along its southern border, a central concept in the realist theory developed by Hans Morgenthau. The aim was to prevent hostile actors, such as certain Kurdish militias or other local forces, from accumulating too much power in strategic areas, thereby jeopardizing the country's territorial integrity and security. In other words, Ankara wanted to reestablish a favorable

situation along the border, containing perceived threats and reaffirming the state's presence in areas considered crucial.

Added to this is a broader perspective on the meaning of borders, as Raffaella Del Sarto points out in her book *Borderlands. Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East* (2021). According to her analysis, borders are not just geographical lines to be defended, but real political and symbolic spaces. They represent territories where the state exercises its control, asserts the legitimacy of its authority, and negotiates security and influence with various actors. Borders thus become active instruments of foreign and security policy, spaces where power is built or maintained. In the case of Turkey, the southern border plays a dual role: on the one hand, it is a physical barrier; on the other, it is a strategic political area in which to prevent power imbalances, limit the expansion of actors considered hostile, and consolidate state sovereignty over territories perceived as fundamental to national security.

2.3 The Refugee Crisis

2.3.1. The Turkey–Syria border before 2011: border politics and state perceptions of threat and opportunity

Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the border between Turkey and Syria was not just a geographical line, but a political space whose degree of openness depended on the priorities of the Turkish state. Like many borders in the Middle East, the Turkish-Syrian border is the result of colonial agreements following the First World War and was drawn without taking into account local social and ethnic realities. As a result, the border regions have historically been inhabited by diverse populations, often linked by transnational relationships that crossed the state border (Aslin 2017).

This gap between state borders and local identities has posed a challenge for the Turkish authorities, who have traditionally conceived of the border as a tool for territorial control and the protection of national unity. In this context, the management of the border with Syria has been influenced mainly by two factors. On the one hand, the state of political relations between Ankara and Damascus, which are part of broader regional dynamics.

On the other, Turkey's concern for its internal security and the safeguarding of its territorial integrity, particularly in relation to the Kurdish question and the activities of the PKK along the southern border (Aslin 2017).

Over time, these perceptions have led to alternating periods of tight control and greater openness at the border. When bilateral relations were tense and dominated by a heightened perception of threat, the border was strictly controlled and militarized. Conversely, improved political relations and a growing perception of economic opportunities led to a gradual easing of controls. This change became particularly evident from the second half of the 2000s onwards, when the AKP government promoted a regional policy based on greater economic cooperation with neighboring countries, including Syria. During this phase, the border was gradually made more permeable through trade agreements and the liberalization of the visa regime. However, this opening was driven primarily by strategic and economic considerations, rather than humanitarian protection objectives (Aslin 2017).

2.3.2. Migration and asylum governance in Turkey before the Syrian crisis: a fragmented and selective legal framework

Alongside this flexible and politically oriented border management, Turkey's legal framework on migration and asylum prior to 2011 was fragmented and characterized by a selective approach. Legislation in this area developed over time through a stratification of primary and secondary law, but without giving rise to a coherent system of international protection. Since the founding of the Republic, Turkish migration policies have been influenced by a strongly centralized conception of the nation-state, in which migration was regulated primarily based on ethnic and cultural criteria. The main regulatory instrument in this area was the 1934 Law on Settlement, adopted to manage the settlement of populations considered ethnically and culturally similar to the Turkish state, particularly in the early years of the Republic. This law has long been the cornerstone of Turkish migration policy and has restricted access to migrant status and settlement opportunities to persons of "Turkish descent and culture" only. Despite the adoption of a new Law on Settlement in 2006, the basic approach remained largely

unchanged, continuing to favor ethno-cultural criteria and failing to explicitly address the right to asylum (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

Although Turkey ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, it maintained the geographical limitation, formally committing itself to recognizing refugee status only for those fleeing events that had occurred in Europe. For asylum seekers from non-European countries, alternative regimes and specific administrative provisions were applied, giving rise to a multiplicity of legal categories and a complex and opaque regulatory framework. On the eve of the Syrian crisis, Turkey therefore had neither comprehensive asylum legislation nor institutions fully equipped to manage large-scale refugee flows, leaving ample room for ad hoc and politically driven responses (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

2.3.3. Turkey's Shifting Immigration Context

The Syrian refugee crisis affected Turkey at a time when Turkish migration policy was undergoing significant change. The history between Turkey and migration flows is rather complex, and its role as a host country has varied over time. The population in Turkey has grown exponentially since 1923, the year the Turkish Republic was founded, to the present day. The history of the Republic is also a history of immigration: from the second half of the 19th century until the founding of the Republic, many people who fell into the category of “Turkish descent and culture” (1934 law) who were fleeing the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, i.e., Turks and Muslims (Circassians, Tatars, Bosnians, Albanians) immigrated because of the nationalist policies adopted by the Ottoman Empire. These flows were clearly encouraged by nationalist Turkish migration policies aimed at solidifying the process of Turkish nation building. (İçduygu 2015). Subsequently, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey began to welcome refugees from former Ottoman territories, such as the Balkans, and migrants who were neither of Turkish nor Muslim descent. (Salomoni 2016; İçduygu 2015). However, these refugees belonged to two different categories: the first were known as ‘muhacir’, a term which, according to the Koran, refers to the companions who followed Muhammad in his flight from Mecca to

Medina; and the second were known by the modern Turkish term *göçmen*, which means ‘migrant’ (Salomoni 2016).

As specified in the previous paragraph, whether or not it was possible to enter Turkish territory with “migrant” status depended on the Turkish law of 1934, which granted this status only to those who were descended from Turkish culture or were linked to the Turkish race, but from the 1980s onwards, the situation began to change. This change was clearly a consequence of the process of globalization, which had significantly increased global exchanges of people, ideas, technologies, goods, and finances, as well as the political and economic unrest that had affected the Middle East, prompting many people to seek a better life in Europe and to use Turkey as a transit country. Examples of important historical events that may have prompted people to seek refuge or work in Turkey include internal conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, which mainly affected minorities, the war between Iraq and Iran, the Gulf crisis, and the collapse of the Soviet Union (İçduygu 2015). Suffice it to say that between 1988 and 1991, despite initial resistance linked to security concerns, Turkey temporarily welcomed around 500,000 Kurds from Iraq onto its territory. In the following years, tens of thousands of Bosnian and Kosovar refugees were also welcomed, albeit with the more ambiguous status of *misafir* (guests), a sign of a gradual change in Turkey's approach to migration policy (Salomoni 2016).

In the early 1990s, a new innovative element was also introduced into Turkish migration policy: the “sticker visa” or a tourist visa automatically issued at the border, which radically changed the nature of Turkey's borders, which until then had been almost inaccessible. As also highlighted in the previous paragraph, "The Turkey–Syria border before 2011: border politics and state perceptions of threat and opportunity", this choice was mainly dictated by the idea that greater liberalization of both goods and people would have a positive impact on the country's economy, which for some years had been inspired by a free market economy and had set aside the autarchy that had preceded it. The introduction of the sticker visa led to an increase in arrivals in Turkey, especially of “suitcase traders” from the former Soviet republics, who bought goods in Istanbul to resell them in their countries of origin, generating a turnover of \$4-6 billion a year and then

finding work in various sectors thanks to the informal economy. At the same time, Turkey became a transit corridor for Iraqi, Afghan, and, to some extent, Iranian citizens. Initially, the authorities adopted a strategy of tolerance, but the growing presence of these groups prompted the country to review its refugee policy, while maintaining the geographical clause of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which excludes non-European citizens from recognition of refugee status. Since 1994, an amendment has allowed asylum seekers to remain legally in Turkey during the UNHCR process, until they are eventually relocated to a third country (Salomoni 2016).

In the 2000s, Turkey underwent profound political and economic transformations. The 2001 crisis brought the country to its knees and swept away the old political system, paving the way for Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002 and was able to revive the economy and strengthen Turkey's international integration. At the same time, migration flows, which had already been present in the 1990s, began to grow, although data was still fragmentary. In 2014, approximately 380,000 residence permits were issued, but only 70,000 were for work purposes, while between 2005 and 2013, nearly 400,000 irregular foreigners were detained and expelled. The migrants came from very different backgrounds. Romanians and Bulgarians, who had chosen Turkey in the 1990s, turned to European destinations after their countries joined the EU in 2007. Citizens of the former Soviet republics, especially those from the Caucasus and Central Asia, remained the main component of migrants settling in Turkey. Those from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were more heterogeneous: some were asylum seekers, others were headed for Europe, and a few aimed to settle in the country. Migrants from the Far East, such as Bangladesh or Myanmar, used Turkey only as a transit territory. In the last few years before the Syrian crisis, Turkish people born in Europe and African citizens joined them, many of whom were seeking to settle permanently. This growing diversity of flows prompted Turkey to develop increasingly structured migrant management policies, seeking to reconcile reception, border control, and international cooperation, particularly with the European Union. On the eve of the Syrian crisis, therefore, the country was already a central player in the management of complex and internationally relevant migration flows (Salomoni 2016).

2.3.4. Emergency phase: first refugee arrivals and management

Turkey became involved in the Syrian crisis very quickly and almost immediately took a position of opposition to the Assad regime. This position reflected Turkey's concerns about the future of Syria and its minorities, such as the Kurdish population and Turkish groups. On the other hand, Turkey wanted to use the Syrian crisis as a foreign policy tool to establish itself as one of the main players in the Middle East region (İçduygu 2015).

The Syrian civil war prompted many Syrians to seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and beyond. However, the initial flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey was rather limited: it began in April 2011, when the Syrian government began to violently repress demonstrations, and by July of the same year, around 15,000 Syrians had sought refuge in tents in the province of Hatay, on the border with Syria, of whom 5,000 returned to Syria at the end of the month when the situation temporarily stabilized. At the end of 2011, there were only about 8,000 registered refugees in Turkey. However, in 2012, with the failure of ceasefire attempts, arrivals grew rapidly: by March, there were an estimated 15,000 registered refugees in Hatay, with thousands more unregistered in other provinces. The Turkish authorities began building additional camps in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa. When ceasefire negotiations failed in mid-2012, arrivals exceeded 20,000 per month, and by the end of the year there were over 170,000 registered refugees. New refugees continued to arrive month after month, and by the end of 2014, the numbers had risen to 55,000 refugees per month. Conditions had worsened mainly due to increased violence in Syria and the presence of the terrorist group ISIS, which had occupied large portions of territory in both Iraq and Syria (İçduygu 2015).

To coordinate the emergency response, Turkey relied on AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency), created in 2009 to manage disasters and humanitarian crises. AFAD played a central role in registering refugees, building and managing temporary camps, and providing humanitarian assistance, working in collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and international organizations. The data collected by the agency made it possible to monitor flows, plan interventions, and assess the impact on host territories.

2.3.5. From the Open-door policy to securisation (2011-2013)

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Turkey managed the situation entirely on its own. Initial Turkish policies toward Syrian refugees were very generous. The Turkish government refused aid from international organizations and adopted an “open-door policy” that welcomed displaced persons as ‘guests’ rather than “refugees,” a detail that we will explore later.

On the one hand, there was a belief that this was a short-term situation, as Assad's fall was perceived as imminent; on the other hand, there was a desire to show Turkey's generosity and ability to cope with an international emergency. However, the collapse of these optimistic predictions coincided, from 2013 onwards, with a dramatic increase in the influx of refugees. Because of this increase, the Turkish authorities decided to opt for less formal approaches to limit new arrivals: the Turkish government provided support to NGOs managing camps on Syrian territory to help displaced persons in Syria, near the Turkish border, by providing water, survival kits, and other necessary goods. On the other hand, border controls were carried out according to the logic of “passage with careful control” to limit the number of refugees and prevent the entry of irregular refugees (İçduygu 2015).

Starting in 2013, the distribution of refugees in Turkey began to become clearer thanks to data provided by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). The 2013 report produced by AFAD explains that the camps were mainly concentrated in the southern and southeastern provinces of the country, along the border with Syria. Şanlıurfa hosted around 73,300 refugees, corresponding to 36.6% of the total in the camps, followed by Gaziantep with 32,700 and Kilis with 27,300 people. Hatay and Kahramanmaraş had 15,400 and 15,000 refugees respectively, while other cities had fewer than 10,000 per camp. In addition to the camps, many refugees lived outside official facilities: AFAD estimated that around 350,000 people lived in private homes or city neighborhoods, mainly in Hatay (60,000), Gaziantep (90,000), Şanlıurfa (45,000), and Mardin (35,000). In total, about 64% of refugees lived outside the camps, facing significant logistical, economic, and social difficulties (AFAD 2013). This is explained

by the fact that, starting in 2013, there was an exponential increase in the number of arrivals from Syria, which caused an increase in the number of people outside the camps, in urban centers and beyond. The same report describes the conditions of refugees inside the camps and their quality of life: according to data collected by AFAD (2013), later also taken up by UNHCR, living conditions in refugee camps in Turkey were generally better than those of refugees settled in urban areas.

The massive influx of refugees had a tangible impact on host cities. For example, Kilis, a city of 124,000 inhabitants, saw its population grow by 30% in just a few years, with obvious repercussions on housing, health services, schools, and the local labor market. This phenomenon did not only affect infrastructure: local communities were called upon to quickly integrate a large number of people, often with complex needs, including minors, women, and displaced families. It should also be noted that official figures probably underestimate the actual number of refugees, as many were living in Turkey without registration, either in camps or in private homes, making it difficult to estimate the total Syrian population in the country. At the beginning of 2014, at least half of the displaced population was living outside the camps, and by the end of 2014, that half had become the majority (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

2.3.6. Evolution of Turkey's Legal Framework and Temporary Protection Measures

Before the Syrian crisis, Turkey's legal framework on asylum was highly selective and geared towards European citizens. Pre-1994 legislation, such as the 1934 Law on Settlement, favoured the entry of persons of “Turkish origin and culture”, while the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol were applied with a “geographical limitation”, recognising refugee status only for European citizens. Non-European asylum seekers were considered irregular and could only access temporary forms of protection. It was only with the 1994 Regulation and the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which came into force in 2014, that clearer criteria for submitting applications were defined, while maintaining geographical restrictions, with some openings for integration and social rights during the assessment phase (Icydagı, 2015).

The start of the war in Syria in 2011 forced Turkey to quickly review its approach, combining an initially generous policy, the so-called “open door” policy mentioned above, with a gradual tightening of controls and the management of flows as a matter of national security, while still seeking to provide optimal humanitarian assistance. Until the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) came into force in April 2014, the only administrative tool available was the 1994 Regulation, which was insufficient to fully guarantee non-refoulement, humanitarian assistance and the recognition of refugees as required by the new needs. With the LFIP and the Temporary Protection (TP) Regulation of 22 October 2014, Turkey created a clearer and more structured system. This step marked the evolution from a selective and European-oriented regulatory framework to a more complex and flexible system capable of dealing with an unprecedented migration emergency (İçduygu 2015).

Ahmet İçduygu also highlights, in *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead* (2015), how the Turkish government's policy change was also a response to the multiple realities of incoming Syrian refugees and those already present in the country. The Turkish government, for example, had begun to focus more on the goal of “good governance” and “good conduct” for optimal management of the refugee crisis by involving international organisations and civil society organisations. It had begun to focus on a long-term crisis management programme rather than an emergency response, as it had become more aware, due to the continuous flow of refugees, that the crisis would not end anytime soon.

There are two representative examples that are useful for understanding the change in approach by the Turkish authorities. The first is the fact that, until then, the Turkish government had entrusted the management of the crisis to organisations working within the national perimeter, such as AFAD, whose objective was to manage emergencies through timely responses. Clearly, both the objective (managing emergencies with timely responses) and the crisis management bodies were subsequently changed in part. As mentioned above, the new objective was to create a long-term programme (İçduygu 2015) and enable “good management” of the crisis with the support of international organisations. The second consists of the creation of a General Directorate for Migration

Management: a demonstration of Turkey's willingness to move beyond emergency management and adopt a structural approach to the refugee issue.

Despite Turkey's extensive efforts to reorient its migration policies and adapt its legal framework on asylum and international protection through an accelerated reform process of partly existing regulatory instruments, significant shortcomings in the effective management of the refugee population have persisted. The Turkish authorities have invested considerable financial resources and technical expertise in building new institutional structures, including the Directorate-General for Migration Management, and in implementing new laws. However, the management of the crisis on the ground has been mainly delegated to national actors, in particular AFAD, resulting in a disconnect between institutional and regulatory reforms and their practical application, with consequent structural gaps in the response to the refugee crisis (İçduygu 2015).

2.4 The Protection Framework Introduced by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection

The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) was adopted in April 2013 by the Turkish Grand National Assembly, but it was not until 2014 that all relevant provisions came into force, including the first legislative designation relating to temporary protection (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

This represents a key step in the process of reforming Turkey's regulatory framework on migration and asylum. As highlighted by Esra Dardağan Kibar in the article “An Overview and Discussion of the New Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection” (2013), the law stems from the need to overcome a fragmented and obsolete system and to bring Turkish legislation closer to European Union standards. The LFIP codifies for the first time in a comprehensive text the provisions relating to the status of foreigners, systematically regulating entry, residence and deportation, areas that were previously governed by scattered rules and, with regard to asylum, exclusively by secondary regulations, such as the 1994 Regulation and administrative circulars.

According to the author, one of the most significant innovations is the legislative formalisation of matters that had previously been dealt with administratively, including the protection of asylum seekers and the status of stateless persons, which are recognised for the first time in domestic law. The LFIP also shows a clear influence of European Union law and the principles of international human rights law, in particular through the implicit reference to the principle of non-refoulement, which emerges in the provisions relating to the entry, stay and removal of foreigners. In particular, Article 4.1 on the principle of non-refoulement states:

“No one within the scope of this of this Law shall be returned to a place where he or she may be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment or, where his/her life or freedom would be threatened on account of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”. (Law on Foreigners and International Protection 2013, Art. 4.1).

However, as Dardağan Kibar (2013) emphasizes, the law was characterized by a strongly securitarian approach. While introducing greater procedural safeguards and a more detailed regulation compared to the previous framework, the LFIP granted wide discretion to the competent authorities. This aspect was particularly evident in the rules on entry and visa issuance, as well as in the mechanisms of entry bans and deportation. Therefore, the reform emerged as ambivalent: on one hand, a clear progress in terms of regulatory systematization and alignment with European standards; on the other hand, the continuity of an approach in which the protection of foreigners' rights remained subordinated to the state's public security priorities, the geographic requirement of belonging to certain countries, and descent from Turkish culture.

This law profoundly changed the way Turkey managed the entry and stay of foreigners, seeking to strike a balance between security and the protection of rights. It provided that those subject to an entry ban were informed of their rights and how to appeal, and it introduced for the first time humanitarian residence permits and permits for victims of trafficking, in line with international standards (Dardağan Kibar 2013).

The LFIP provided for three types of international protection: refugee (LFIP, art. 61(1))¹ granted to an Article 1(A) 1951 Convention-type refugee originating from Council of Europe Member State, conditional refugee (LFIP, art. 62(1))² granted to an Article 1(A) 1951 Convention-type refugee not originating from Council of Europe Member State, and subsidiary protection (LFIP, art. 63(1))³ based on the EU Qualification Directive's definition of "subsidiary protection status"⁴, which is granted to individuals who cannot return to their country of origin because of generalized violence, the death penalty, or torture, regardless of geographical limitations. These statuses are granted following an individual process called refugee status determination (RSD), managed by the Turkish

¹ Article 61(1) LFIP: A person who as a result of events occurring in European countries and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his citizenship and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it, shall be granted refugee status upon completion of the refugee status determination process.

² Article 62(1) LFIP: A person who as a result of events occurring outside European countries and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it, shall be granted conditional refugee status upon completion of the refugee status determination process. Conditional refugees shall be allowed to reside in Turkey temporarily until they are resettled to a third country.

³ Article 63(1) LFIP: A foreigner or a stateless person, who neither could be qualified as a refugee nor as a conditional refugee, shall nevertheless be granted subsidiary protection upon the status determination because if returned to the country of origin or country of [former] habitual residence would: (a) be sentenced to death or face the execution of the death penalty; (b) face torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; (c) face serious threat to himself or herself by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or nationwide armed conflict and therefore is unable or for the reason of such threat is unwilling, to avail himself or herself of the protection of his country of origin or country of [former] habitual residence.

⁴ Article 2(d) and 15 Qualification Directive.

migration agency established by the LFIP, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM).

In addition, the LFIP introduced the concept of temporary protection, which would be defined in more detail in 2014 by the Temporary Protection Regulation, as will be discussed in the following paragraph (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023). Article 91(1-2) states that:

“Temporary protection may be provided for foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and temporary protection”. (LFIP 2013).

From this definition, it is clear that this type of protection is given to groups of people in situations of mass migration, when it is difficult for the authorities to evaluate each individual case.

However, if we look at the function of the LFIP, the focus is predominantly on “international protection”, which covers asylum seekers who arrive individually from other countries (not Syria). The LFIP therefore establishes a new procedure for the recognition of refugee status under international protection. In Turkey, for these individual asylum seekers, UNHCR plays a parallel and supportive role. The agency assesses individual cases in accordance with its mandate and may issue recommendations or propose resettlement to a third country, but binding and legally relevant decisions on international protection status are taken by the DGMM. In practice, UNHCR complements the Turkish procedure by providing assessments and assistance, but it does not replace the national authority. In this way, the LFIP establishes an individual international protection system, distinct from the Temporary Protection regime, which will be examined in the following section and instead concerns groups of people in situations of mass influx, such as Syrian refugees (AIDA 2015). To help the reader better understand the system, the book *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Between Reception and Integration* by Şahin-Mencütek, Gökalp-Aras, Kaya, Rottmann 2023), on page 40, shows a table (Table 1) that illustrates the complexity of the categories and the “double lines” of

the system: the first distinction is between European and non-European asylum seekers, the second between people under international protection and temporary protection. The table also provides the number of people displaced with these statuses as of September 2021, but for now we are only interested in it as a visual framework to understand the overall structure of the system.

The LFIP also established cases where a permit could be refused, not renewed or revoked, taking into account factors such as family, length of stay and child welfare, and recognized that some persons could not be expelled, for example those facing torture or the death penalty in the country of destination, who had serious health problems or who was a victim of violence or trafficking. In this way, the law clearly showed how Turkey sought to protect the most vulnerable, while maintaining a focus on security and public order, marking an important evolution compared to the

The table also reports the number of displaced persons holding these statuses as of September 2021 (Table 1). Although the table refers to data from 2021, it is used here mainly as a schematic tool to clarify the overall structure of Turkey's protection system, rather than to provide a temporal analysis of later developments. In particular, it helps to visualise the dual and stratified nature of the system introduced by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP).

Table 1. *Turkey's Structure of Protection* from the book “*Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Between Reception and Integration*” (Şahin-Mencütek, et al. 2023)past.

International protection			Temporary protection
Individual-based status determination			Group-based status determination
European	Non-European		As of October 2021, only Syrians
Refugee	Conditional refugee	Subsidiary protection beneficiary	Temporary protection beneficiary
LFIP, article 61(1)	LFIP, article 62(1)	LFIP, article 63(1)	LFIP, article 91(1–2) and the temporary protection regulation
Estimated around 70 people ^a	330,000 ^b	No data available ^c	3,710,497 ^e
	The top three nationalities are afghans, Iraqis and Iranians ^d		Only Syrians

This dual nature refers, on the one hand, to the differentiation between European and non-European asylum seekers, resulting from Turkey's geographical limitation under the 1951 Convention, and, on the other hand, to the parallel existence of international protection statuses and the temporary protection regime within the same legal framework. Refugee status within the Turkish system is grounded in Turkey's obligations under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which constitutes the primary legal source governing the definition of refugee status indicated in Article 1(1)⁵ and (2)⁶ of the Convention (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

⁵ Article 1(1)(A): For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who: (1) Has been considered a refugee under the Arrangements of 12 May 1926 and 30 June 1928 or under the Conventions of 28 October 1933 and 10 February 1938, the Protocol of 14 September 1939 or the Constitution of the International Refugee Organization.

⁶ Article 1(2)(A): For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who: (2) As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

According to Şahin-Mencütek, Gökalp-Aras, and Kaya (2023), in practice this means that only European asylum seekers may be granted full refugee status in Turkey. Individuals from non-European countries who meet the refugee definition are instead given conditional refugee status, which does not provide long-term integration prospects, family reunification rights, or permanent residence, and allows them to stay in Turkey only temporarily while awaiting resettlement to a safe third country.

The LFIP also introduced subsidiary protection for those who do not qualify as refugees or conditional refugees but would face serious harm if returned to their country of origin, such as the risk of death, torture, or indiscriminate violence due to war or internal conflict. Overall, this framework shows the dual and layered nature of the Turkish protection system, within which temporary protection functions as a distinct and parallel regime.

While Table 1 helps to clarify the overall structure of Turkey's protection system, a more concrete picture of how the temporary protection regime was applied in practice emerges from data collected shortly after its implementation. In this regard, a table (Table 2) included in the AIDA Country Report on Turkey (2015) shows the number of Syrians granted temporary protection status in the first phase following the entry into force of the regime.

Table 2. *Syrian nationals under temporary protection as of 1 April 2015 from AIDA (2015)*

	Registered Syrian nationals	Percentage
Total number	1,757,262	100%
Outside temporary accommodation centres (camps)	1,502,581	85.55%
In temporary accommodation centres (camps)	254,681	14.45%
<i>Breakdown by temporary accommodation centres (camps)</i>		
Hatay	15,210	0.86%
Gaziantep	41,483	2.36%
Kilis	36,797	2.09%
Şanlıurfa	99,355	5.65%
Kahramanmaraş	17,277	0.98%
Osmaniye	9,200	0.52%
Adıyaman	9,897	0.56%
Adana	10,961	0.62%
Mardin	6,689	0.38%
Malatya	7,632	0.43%

The following section will provide a detailed examination of the temporary protection regime and its application to the Syrian refugee crisis. Its evolution will be analyzed throughout the several/following sections of the thesis. This will allow us to connect the legal framework to the broader societal and strategic implications discussed in Chapter IV.

2.5 Temporary Protection Regulation

2.5.1. Introduction

Before the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) came into force in 2014, Turkey provided a form of temporary protection based on discretionary political choices, as the very concept of “temporary protection” was not yet codified in domestic law. Temporary protection in Turkey emerged in the early stages of the Syrian crisis, when arrivals were classified as a mass influx and managed outside the ordinary individual asylum procedures. In this context, the political discourse gradually shifted from the notion of “guests” to that of beneficiaries of temporary protection (İçduygu 2015). The government's response was based on the adoption of an open-door policy, a ban on forced returns, and the guarantee of basic humanitarian assistance, in a framework initially characterized by flexible and as yet unformalized management (AIDA 2015).

The TPR is the continuation and development of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which came into force on April 14, 2014, and does not elaborate on the rights and procedures of the Temporary Protection regime. The definition of reception, residence, rights, and duties related to temporary protection status is initially provided by a legislative act of the Council of Ministers⁷ (AIDA 2015). Subsequently, on October 22, 2014, the Regulation on Temporary Protection was published, which came into force immediately and filled the gaps left by the previous law. Among other things, it defines the concept of temporary protection and its main elements, the procedure for activating

⁷ Article 91(2) LFIP.

and terminating the regime, the eligibility criteria, the procedure for obtaining status, procedural guarantees, the relationship with international protection, and the obligations of beneficiaries. These aspects will be analyzed in more detail in the following paragraphs, as the Regulation still represents the fundamental regulatory framework for temporary protection in Turkey, confirming its importance in the management of Syrian refugees.

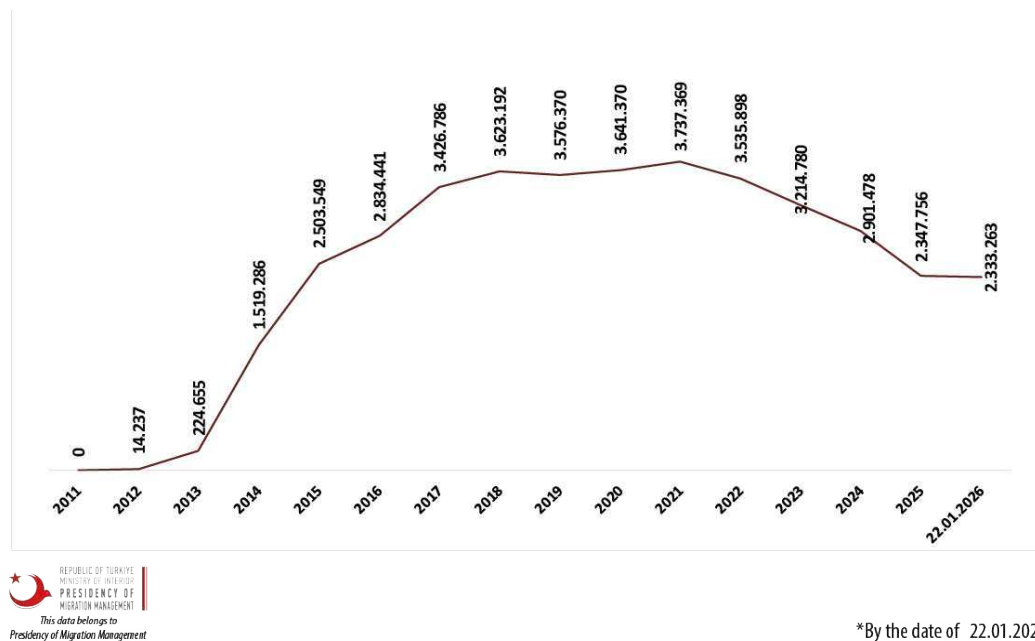
The Temporary Protection Regulation does not merely provide a legal basis for an existing practice with regard to Syrian refugees, but constitutes the main regulatory framework for the management of temporary protection in Turkey. The introduction of this regime excludes beneficiaries from the ordinary international protection system, placing Syrians in a separate category from individual asylum procedures. The Turkish government has retroactively formalized the protection already in place through Provisional Article 1 of the Temporary Protection Regulation, which identifies the categories of persons eligible for the regime and regularizes situations prior to the entry into force of the TPR.

In general terms, temporary protection is therefore based on the presumptive recognition of the possibility for Syrian refugees to stay temporarily in Turkey, as provided for in Article 1 of the Regulation, which we will analyze in the following paragraph, “Scope and Legal Basis.” However, there are some exceptions: persons who fall under the grounds for exclusion indicated in the Regulation are not eligible for such protection. Article 8 of the Regulation lists exceptions, including: those who are considered guilty of serious acts under the 1951 Geneva Convention, those who have committed cruel acts outside Turkey, those who have participated in armed activities in their own country without permanently ceasing them, those involved in acts of terrorism, or those who pose a threat to public safety or national order, and others (TPR 2014).

The progressive consolidation of the temporary protection regime is clearly reflected in empirical data. As shown in Figure 3, the number of Syrians registered under temporary protection rose sharply following the outbreak of the conflict, reaching approximately 1.5

million individuals by 2014, before increasing to over 2.5 million in 2015 and exceeding 3.4 million by 2017. These figures illustrate how the Temporary Protection Regulation, which entered into force on 22 October 2014, responded to an already massive and protracted displacement rather than a short-term emergency. Faced with the impossibility of maintaining an ad hoc approach, Turkey developed a structured policy framework aimed at managing large-scale refugee flows while preserving state control and safeguarding national interests. Finally, this regulatory choice reflects the Turkish authorities' intention to manage the Syrian displacement through a flexible and executive-driven framework, capable of responding to large-scale arrivals while avoiding the structural implications of long-term integration under the ordinary asylum system.

Figure 3. *Distribution of Syrians under TP by year from Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior by the date of 22.01.2026*



2.5.2. Scope and Legal Basis of the Temporary Protection Regulation

The scope of the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) is limited to situations of mass influx, where the high number of arrivals makes the individual assessment of international protection applications impracticable. According to Articles 1 and 3 of the TPR,

temporary protection applies to foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return, and have arrived at or crossed the Turkish borders in large numbers seeking urgent and temporary protection (TPR, 2014). In these situations, protection is granted on a collective basis, without carrying out individual asylum procedures.

From a legal point of view, temporary protection is not considered a form of international protection under Turkish law. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) recognizes only three international protection statuses: refugee status, conditional refugee status and subsidiary protection. Temporary protection is regulated separately and is conceived as an exceptional and complementary regime, activated only in emergency situations of mass displacement (LFIP, Art. 91; AIDA, 2015).

The legal basis of the TPR is Article 91 of the LFIP, which allows the adoption of special measures in cases of mass influx. As a regulation adopted based on this provision, the TPR constitutes secondary legislation and must remain consistent with the general framework established by the LFIP. At the same time, it grants wide discretionary powers to the executive authorities. The decision to activate, extend or terminate temporary protection belongs to the Council of Ministers, upon the proposal of the Ministry of Interior (TPR, Arts. 9–10). The Regulation does not set a mandatory maximum duration for temporary protection, allowing the regime to continue if it is considered necessary (Bastaki 2018).

Regarding its material scope, the TPR does not provide an exhaustive list of the reasons that may justify temporary protection. Unlike the 1951 Geneva Convention, which links refugee status to specific grounds of persecution, the Turkish regulation adopts an open formulation. This allows temporary protection to cover persons fleeing armed conflict, generalized violence or other exceptional situations that prevent a safe return to the country of origin (TPR, 2014; UNHCR, 2015).

However, access to temporary protection remains subject to exclusion clauses, like those applicable to international protection, as provided for in Article 8 of the TPR.

At the international level, temporary protection is generally understood as an emergency mechanism aimed at providing immediate protection in situations of large-scale displacement. Both the EU Temporary Protection Directive and the UNHCR Guidelines describe temporary protection as an exceptional response designed to ensure access to territory, protection from refoulement and minimum treatment standards, pending durable solutions or access to individual asylum procedures (Council Directive 2001/55/EC; UNHCR 2012/2013). In the Turkish system, however, applications for international protection are not processed during the implementation of temporary protection (TPR, Art. 11). As noted by AIDA (2015) and Bastaki (2018), this feature reinforces the temporary and discretionary nature of the regime, while raising concerns regarding access to long-term protection solutions.

2.5.3. Eligibility criteria and access to temporary protection

Access to temporary protection under the Turkish Temporary Protection Regulation is based on broad and flexible eligibility criteria, reflecting the collective and emergency-oriented nature of the regime. According to Article 7⁸ of the TPR, temporary protection is granted to foreign nationals who have been forced to leave their country and cannot return, who arrive at or cross Turkish borders during a situation of mass influx, and for whom it is deemed impractical or unnecessary to conduct individual international protection status determination procedures (TPR, 2014; AIDA, 2015).

In practice, the Regulation does not introduce additional individualised inclusion criteria, as eligibility is presumed once a temporary protection declaration is adopted. As a result,

⁸ Article 7 (1), TPR: Temporary protection shall be granted to foreigners who were forced to leave their countries and are unable to return to the countries they left and arrived at or crossed our borders in masses to seek urgent and temporary protection and whose international protection requests cannot be taken under individual assessment. (2) Temporary protection shall not cover persons who arrived our country from the country or region, where events constituting a basis for the temporary protection announcement take place, prior to the effective date of temporary protection announcement, unless the Council of Ministers decides otherwise. (3) Persons benefiting from temporary protection shall not be deemed as having been directly acquired one of the international protection statuses as defined in the Law.

all Syrians, as well as stateless persons and Palestinians previously residing in Syria, are considered eligible for temporary protection in Turkey (AIDA 2015). This presumption-based approach highlights the administrative and collective logic of the regime, aimed at managing large-scale displacement rather than assessing individual claims.

At the same time, access to temporary protection is subject to exclusion on individual grounds. Article 8 of the TPR provides that persons may be excluded where there are serious reasons to believe that they have committed serious crimes, acts of cruelty, terrorist activities, crimes against humanity, or where they are considered a threat to national security, public order or public safety (TPR, 2014). Exclusion assessments are conducted by the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and may take place either at the time of registration or at any moment after the granting of temporary protection status (AIDA, 2015). This combination of broad inclusion criteria and individualised exclusion mechanisms illustrates the dual nature of the Turkish temporary protection regime: while access is facilitated at the collective level to ensure rapid protection in situations of mass influx, the authorities retain significant discretionary powers to limit or withdraw protection on security-related grounds. Such a structure reinforces the temporary, conditional and state-controlled character of the regime.

2.5.4. Limitation, Suspension and Termination

The declaration and activation of the regime are carried out by a decision of the Council of Ministers, upon proposal of the Ministry of the Interior, which defines the beneficiaries, the duration of the regime, any extensions or terminations, the geographical scope, and measures relating to the limitation or suspension of protection. Implementation is entrusted to the Migration Policies Board and relevant government agencies, including the DGMM and AFAD, while the DGMM takes individual decisions on beneficiaries (AIDA, 2015).

The termination of temporary protection may also be decided by the Council of Ministers (Art. 11 TPR, 2014) and may involve different scenarios: the suspension of protection and the repatriation of beneficiaries, the collective granting of international protection

status or the individual assessment of applications, or the possibility for beneficiaries to remain in Turkey under conditions defined by law. The legislation also provides for the individual termination of temporary protection in cases where: beneficiaries leave the country voluntarily, obtain protection in a third country, are transferred for humanitarian reasons, or die (Art. 12 TPR, 2014). In the event of the return of persons whose protection has been terminated, the DGMM decides on a case-by-case basis whether to reapply the regime (Art. 13 TPR, 2014).

In addition to termination, the Council of Ministers may order the restriction or suspension of temporary protection without a formal decision to terminate it, if threats to national security, public order, or public health arise (Art. 15 TPR, 2014). In such cases, the authorities establish the conditions for existing beneficiaries and new applicants, and may also enlist the support of international organizations to manage mass arrivals. Individual applications for international protection are not processed during the implementation of the TPR in order to ensure the effective implementation of emergency measures (Art. 16 TPR, 2014).

To sum up, these measures highlight the temporary, emergency, and discretionary nature of the TPR, underscoring how the Turkish regime seeks to strike a balance between immediate humanitarian needs, national security issues, and political strategies.

2.5.5. A Realist Reading of the Temporary Protection Regime: a Strategic and Security Management Tool

The introduction of the temporary protection regime in Turkey must be analyzed taking into account not only its legal basis, but also the political and security context in which it developed. Although the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and the Temporary Protection Regulation represent a significant step towards greater structuring of migration governance, the logic underlying them reflects an approach attributable to realist thinking, in which migration management is closely linked to the protection of the sovereignty and internal stability of the state.

In the realist perspective, as elaborated by Morgenthau, sovereignty and control remain central elements of state action. The choice to adopt a collective and temporary protection mechanism allows the state to respond to massive population flows without assuming the long-term obligations typical of ordinary asylum systems. In this sense, temporariness is not only a legal qualification but also has a strategic function, allowing the authorities to maintain a wide margin of flexibility in a context characterized by high uncertainty and regional instability.

The discretionary powers provided for by the temporary protection regime further reinforce this interpretation. The possibility of limiting, suspending, or revoking protection for reasons related to public order or national security highlights the conditional nature of the protection offered to refugees. This approach is consistent with Waltz's neorealist approach, according to which the survival of the state and the preservation of internal order prevail over other considerations in an anarchic international system.

This evolution can also be understood through the concept of securitization (, developed by the so-called Copenhagen School, in particular by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. Securitization describes the process by which a phenomenon is progressively represented as a threat to security, thus legitimizing the adoption of exceptional measures outside normal political procedures. In the Turkish context, the progressive linking of refugee governance and national security has contributed to framing the massive arrival of Syrian refugees not only as a humanitarian challenge, but also as a potential risk to public order, social cohesion, and state stability.

The temporary protection regime thus lies at the intersection of humanitarian obligations and security logic. While guaranteeing forms of assistance and protection to Syrian refugees, it remains structured in such a way as to preserve state control over borders, length of stay, and access to rights. From this perspective, temporary protection can be interpreted as a tool for strategic migration management.

2.6 Socio-Economic and Humanitarian Effects of Turkey's Temporary Protection Regime

The legal framework for temporary protection has been analysed in the preceding paragraphs up to 2014. This analysis is necessary because Turkey continues to rely on this legal basis, consisting of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR), and because it is preparatory to understanding the laws and regulations that will be applied subsequently. However, to fully understand subsequent legal and political developments, it is also necessary to consider another central dimension of the presence of refugees: that of integration. It is necessary to analyse the social, economic, and humanitarian effects that the massive arrival of Syrian refugees has had on Turkish society, as well as the living conditions of those who lived under temporary protection status.

In this sense, the report “Effects of the Syrian Refugees on Turkey,” produced by the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) in collaboration with the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in January 2015, together with other sources that will be referred to in this chapter, is a particularly useful tool. The data collected, dating back to November 2014, provides an insight into the situation immediately following the adoption of the Temporary Protection Regulation. The report highlights, first, that more than half of the Syrian refugees outside Syrian territory were children and young people under the age of 18 and that most of them lived in particularly difficult conditions outside the reception camps. With specific reference to Turkey, there is a clear need to distinguish between refugees housed in camps and those living outside them. The former enjoyed relatively easier access to essential goods and services, organized forms of assistance, and greater protection of their rights. In contrast, refugees living outside the camps often found themselves in extremely precarious conditions, despite being in possession of identification documents certifying their temporary protection status.

Added to this is a further structural element linked to the legal status of refugees in Turkey. As is well known, the country ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and its

Protocol, while maintaining the so-called “geographical reservation.” As a result, Syrian refugees were not classified as refugees under the Convention but benefited only from temporary protection. Even those residing in camps therefore had a more limited set of rights than beneficiaries of international protection, with significant implications for social integration and access to services.

According to the ORSAM report (2015), in November 2014, approximately 85% of Syrian refugees lived outside reception camps and were mainly concentrated in the southern provinces of Turkey and in major urban areas. The border provinces, often characterized by a conservative socio-cultural context and limited economic resources, were particularly sensitive to the sudden demographic changes caused by the massive arrival of refugees. In this context, integration was a complex process from the outset, influenced not only by the large number of new arrivals but also by the structural characteristics of the host communities (ORSAM 2015).

As highlighted by Ferris and Kirişci (2016), the Turkish government's initial political response was also strongly influenced by the expectation that the Syrian crisis would be temporary. The belief that the conflict would end relatively quickly and that refugees would be able to return to their country of origin contributed to delaying the development of structured integration policies, favoring an emergency approach rather than long-term planning. However, as the conflict dragged on and a large population under temporary protection stabilized on Turkish territory, the authorities gradually began to adapt their strategy.

According to the World Bank (2015), starting in 2014–2015, the Turkish government began a gradual transition from emergency management to more long-term planning. While in the early stages the response was mainly entrusted to actors such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent Society, over time a growing number of public institutions became involved, with the aim of adopting a more coordinated and holistic approach. At the same time, the government intensified its cooperation with international organizations and civil society, recognizing the contribution of actors with experience in managing protracted migration crises (World

Bank 2015; İçduygu 2015). This framework includes, for example, collaboration with the UNHCR to strengthen the capacities of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and to develop a new asylum system, as well as the role played by local non-governmental organizations in providing legal assistance, translation, and psychosocial support services.

Another important aspect concerned the use of technological tools to improve the management of the population under temporary protection. In 2015, most Syrian refugees were registered using biometric data under the coordination of the DGMM, while the introduction of digital systems such as the Temporary Protection Module within the GöçNet platform and the Elektronik Yardım Dağıtım Sistemi (EYDAS) aimed to facilitate coordination between the various institutions involved and make the distribution of aid more efficient (World Bank 2015). Despite these institutional efforts, the daily experience of refugees was often far removed from what was envisaged at the regulatory and administrative level. As emerged from the workshops held by Saferworld (2016) in Ankara and Gaziantep, many refugees under temporary protection continued to encounter significant difficulties in dealing with the Turkish authorities. Participants highlighted the lack of effective communication channels, a lack of clarity about their legal status, and limited knowledge of how the bureaucracy works. In the absence of easily accessible official information, many refugees relied on informal networks and information obtained through personal contacts, which had a direct impact on their ability to find their way around and integrate into the host society. This gap between policy and reality contributed to a widespread sense of precariousness and exclusion.

These difficulties were also reflected in the survival strategies adopted by Syrian families, particularly in urban areas. High social vulnerability and the lack of stable opportunities encouraged the use of informal employment, sometimes involving minors. In this context, child labor emerged as a direct consequence of social marginalization and insufficient access to protection and support mechanisms, rather than as an isolated phenomenon (ORSAM 2015; Saferworld 2016). At the same time, limited access to basic public services, including education, was an additional factor of fragility for many refugee families, affecting their chances of integration in the medium and long term.

Taken together, these social dynamics contributed to making coexistence between Syrian refugees and the local population particularly complex, especially in areas already characterized by economic and social difficulties. The accumulation of situations of vulnerability and marginalization fostered the spread of negative perceptions of refugees, laying the groundwork for tensions and polarization processes.

The prolonged presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey has gradually affected perceptions of security and social dynamics, contributing to polarization between the local population and refugee communities. Initially, the arrival of Syrians was largely welcomed, partly due to a political narrative that presented them as “temporary guests.” However, as their presence became more established and awareness grew that temporary protection was not a temporary measure, public opinion began to change. Fears emerged about competition for jobs, changes in social and family dynamics, and daily coexistence in urban areas, fueling a climate of widespread mutual distrust (Saferworld 2016).

In this context, the issue of Syrian refugees has become part of a political environment already characterized by strong divisions, contributing to accentuating polarization processes. Perceptions of refugees have often been influenced more by political discourse and ideological preferences than by direct experience of contact, with the result that hostile reactions have spread even in areas without significant interaction with refugees. Isolated incidents of tension and violence in some border towns have been interpreted as signs of potential security risks, reinforcing the portrayal of refugees as a possible source of instability, regardless of their actual responsibility (ORSAM 2015).

These negative perceptions are further amplified by the visibility of marginal phenomena, such as refugees begging on the streets of western Turkish cities, and isolated incidents of violence, which fuel the belief that Syrians are associated with crime and moral degradation (Ferris & Kirişci 2016; Erdoğan 2014). A survey conducted in 2014 showed, for example, that over 62% of the Turkish population believed that refugees were involved in crime and responsible for the increase in crime, with even higher percentages in the border provinces (M.M. Erdoğan 2014). However, these perceptions contrast with the observations of local authorities and civil society organizations, which report

surprisingly low levels of crime and a significant capacity among Syrian community leaders to prevent tensions and conflicts (Ferris & Kirişci 2016). At the same time, surveys among refugees show a more positive picture of relations with the local population: in the city of Gaziantep, 66% of respondents said they had a good or excellent relationship with the host community, and only 20% reported social problems with Turks, while 37% said they had Turkish friends (World Bank 2015). These data suggest that, despite the widespread perception of threat, daily coexistence between refugees and Turks is largely peaceful, at least on a relational level.

However, difficult socioeconomic conditions and the concentration of refugees in marginalized urban neighbourhoods have complicated integration processes, fostering spatial and social segregation. The prolonged management of the emergency, combined with the lack of a structured integration strategy, has made tensions more persistent, while the perception of insecurity, fuelled by incomplete or distorted information, has reinforced prejudice towards refugees. In this sense, although most Syrians are not involved in criminal activities, the possibility of an increase in crime rates remains real in such a fragile context, especially if the lack of accurate information continues to prevail. The polarization between local communities and refugees, therefore, stems more from perception and social tensions than from actual threats, creating fertile ground for social and security controversies that have gradually gained prominence in Turkish political and public debate (ORSAM 2015; World Bank 2015).

The massive influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey has had a significant impact on access to and functioning of public services, particularly in the areas of health, education, and municipal services, especially in urban areas and border provinces. Refugees under temporary protection who were duly registered had free access to basic and emergency health services at public facilities, both inside and outside the camps (ORSAM 2015). The Turkish government has made significant efforts to provide assistance, including health information programs, the adaptation of Syrian doctors to Turkish protocols, and rapid interventions such as vaccination campaigns in the most affected districts (ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016). In 2014 alone, approximately 250,000 refugees received hospital care, more than 200,000 patients underwent surgery,

nearly 150,000 births took place, and over six million medical consultations were carried out (World Bank 2015).

Despite these achievements, the high number of beneficiaries has put significant pressure on healthcare facilities, particularly in hospitals in border towns. The 30-40% increase in patients has led to longer waiting times, staff overload, and difficulties in managing emergencies (World Bank 2015; ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016). Some refugees, especially those who were not registered, initially had access only to emergency care and were subsequently invited to register in order to obtain ongoing access to services (ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016). However, many families encountered language barriers, which made it difficult to communicate their health problems and obtain appropriate medication, sometimes forcing them to resort to translators or self-medication (World Bank 2015). This situation had not only practical consequences, but also perceptual ones. The local population, despite making marginal use of the health services intended for refugees, has often perceived competition for resources and privilege for Syrians, contributing to feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction. Some Turkish citizens even reported having to “pretend” to be refugees in order to gain access to healthcare, highlighting how social perceptions can amplify tensions even when actual data indicate a balanced distribution of services (ELIZABETH FERRIS & KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016).

The education sector has also been deeply affected by the presence of Syrian refugees. Formally, all children under temporary protection were eligible to attend Turkish public schools or Temporary Education Centers (TECs), facilities run by the Turkish Ministry of Education with Syrian teachers and a curriculum adapted from the Syrian system (Saferworld 2016; ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016). Despite this, only a fraction of children were actually enrolled and attending school. The limited availability of TECs, language barriers, logistical difficulties, and the mobility of the population significantly reduced school attendance, especially in urban and rural areas outside the camps (ORSAM 2015; Saferworld 2016).

Inside the camps, enrollment rates were higher, around 86%, thanks to a relatively structured organization of educational pathways (ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016). Outside the camps, however, many children did not attend school regularly: according to some estimates, only one-third of school-age children were actually enrolled in regular education (M. M. Erdogan 2014). The main difficulty was learning Turkish, a language different from Arabic, and adapting to educational systems that were formally different from those in Syria, which hindered school and social integration. The shortage of schools and places available in TECs created a significant gap, with the real prospect of a ‘lost generation’ if education policies were not strengthened and sustained over time (Saferworld 2016; ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016).

In addition to healthcare and education, refugees have had a significant impact on municipal services. Local administrations, responsible for waste collection, public transport, water supply, urban maintenance, and city security, have had to cope with a sudden increase in the population served without a corresponding adjustment in financial and infrastructural resources (ORSAM 2015; World Bank 2015). Since municipal budgets are calculated on the basis of the officially resident population, many cities have had to provide essential services to a larger number of people than expected, creating obvious difficulties, especially in border provinces and densely populated urban centers. The increase in demand has contributed to perceptions of competition with refugees, with local citizens sometimes feeling that Syrians were receiving preferential treatment, even though data indicated that access was distributed in a regulated manner (World Bank 2015; ELIZABETH FERRIS and KEMAL KIRIŞCI 2016).

The issue of public services, while central, anticipates another crucial aspect of the crisis: the economic burden that hosting refugees places on the state and local families, and the economic difficulties encountered by Syrian refugees once they arrive in Turkey.

When analyzing the effect of the arrival of Syrian refugees on the Turkish economy, it is clear, as ORSAM researcher Oytun Orhan points out in “Effects of the Syrian Refugees on Turkey” (2015), that it is necessary to take into account both the positive and negative

aspects of this change, as their settlement has contributed significantly to the local and national economy.

The first visible and most widespread effect of the arrival of the new population, according to the ORSAM report (2015), is the increase in the inflation rate. Prices had risen significantly as market demand had increased. Specifically, both the cost of living and rents had become higher than previously recorded values. The increase in rents had created considerable tension between the local population and the Syrian community: landlords preferred to rent apartments or houses to Syrians because they were generally willing to pay higher rents. This benefited the landlords and affected those who already had difficulty paying rent due to low wages. In addition, landlords preferred Syrian families because they were larger, and a larger number of members meant greater profit, even though these families were often forced to live in very small spaces for the number of people they consisted of. There was even talk of landlords sometimes evicting Turkish families to make room for Syrian ones because they would clearly profit from it.

Another aspect mentioned in the same report is certainly that of low-cost and illegal labor in the industrial sectors. Many Syrians agreed to work for very low wages, even if they were not legally employed, so the spread of low-cost and illegal labor was considerable. Public opinion often believed that, given the precarious conditions that Syrians were willing to accept, they were the main cause of the loss of their jobs. A survey conducted by the same Research Center (ORSAM), which explores the economic effects of the arrival of Syrian refugees on Turkey, unfortunately highlights that “40% to 100% of the people who lost their jobs in border cities believe that they lost their jobs because of the Syrians.” In support of this finding, it is equally important to cite the study entitled “Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration,” which we mentioned earlier, conducted between January and October 2014 by Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Murat ERDOĞAN with the support of Hacettepe University, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Turkey, and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung-Turkey. The study states on page 28 that 70.7% of respondents expressed the opinion that the Turkish economy had weakened due to the presence of Syrian refugees. In addition, 67.2% of the population said they were opposed to providing aid to Syrians in a situation where poverty persisted within Turkey.

These figures highlight widespread opposition among the Turkish population to the economic resources allocated to refugees. Here is a table showing the previous results:

Table 3. *Public opinion on the economic impact of Syrian refugees in Turkey (Erdoğan, 2014)*

Propositions	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither Agree Nor Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Turkish economy suffers from taking care of this many refugees.	29,0	41,7	7,8	17,2	4,2
When there are so many citizens in need of help in Turkey, I oppose my taxes being spent on Syrian refugees.	26,7	33,5	11,5	23,4	5,0

The same study, when discussing the right to work, highlights how public opinion was divided on whether Syrian refugees should be given the opportunity to obtain permanent work permits. In October 2014, Turkey adopted additional legal guidelines for foreigners under temporary protection, which guaranteed Syrians under temporary protection access to the labor market. However, as the World Bank (2015) points out, in 2015 the directive that would have allowed access to the labor market through work permits was still awaiting approval by the Council of Ministers and would only be approved at a later date. In the absence of this legislation, only Syrians with a residence permit could afford to work regularly, and residence permits were very difficult to obtain (World Bank 2015). Many Syrians, initially supported by donations or their own resources, had tried to enter the labor market to become self-sufficient, especially as their stay was prolonged. However, without a work permit, they had to settle for working mainly in the informal sector and in low-skilled jobs. There have been reports of Syrian refugees under temporary protection working in precarious conditions in the informal sector: they were often exploited, had to work long hours, with no guarantees of safety at work and no certainty of receiving the agreed wage. A survey cited by the World Bank (2015) shows that the average wages of refugees were 5.6 TL per day in Hatay and 14 TL per day in Urfa, while another study reports an average monthly income from work in Gaziantep of

406 TL. By comparison, the minimum wage in Turkey is 1,000.54 TL per month. Added to these difficulties is the language barrier, which further limits the integration of Syrians into the labor market.

This desire to integrate into the labor market has generated considerable tension, especially in the border provinces, where local workers, as already mentioned, feared competition from cheap labor. In some cases, the discontent of the population resulted in protests or attacks. A survey highlighted in the study in question on the perceptions of the Turkish population shows that 56.1% believed that “Syrians are stealing our jobs,” while 30.5% disagreed. In the border provinces, this opinion rose to 68.9%. About half of those interviewed (47.4%) expressed a negative opinion about refugees working. The population tended to be more favorable if there were limits on the type of work or the duration of the permit. Only 5.4% accept that refugees should be able to work in any profession without restrictions. Among the border provinces, 44% opposed granting work permits, while in the inland provinces the percentage rose to 48%; consent to work without restrictions was 2.1% in the border areas and 6.1% in the more inland provinces. In addition to the fear and belief that Syrian refugees were stealing jobs from the local population, there was another factor that had significantly increased tension: the lowering of wages for both Turks and Syrians.

However, to avoid jumping to conclusions, it is important to consider the other side of the coin. Although there are conflicting views on the role of Syrian refugees in the Turkish labor market, surveys conducted by ORSAM (2015) show that many local employers struggle to find people willing to work in factories or agriculture, sectors where there is a real need for labor. As a result, Syrian refugees are not taking jobs away from Turks but are filling unskilled roles that would otherwise remain unfilled. However, the perception of the local population remains negative and contributes to social tensions, even though the real reasons for job losses may stem from other factors.

The massive arrival of refugees soon made it clear how difficult the situation had become to manage socially and economically. Many refugees worked informally, often in precarious conditions, with exploitation, long hours, and wage uncertainty. Despite this,

their presence has had positive effects on the local and national economy. Turkish companies, especially in border towns, provided a significant portion of the humanitarian aid destined for refugees and sent to Syria, creating new business opportunities and increasing demand for goods and services. This stimulated production and, in some cases, helped to recover export levels, which had fallen dramatically due to the Syrian conflict. For example, Turkish exports to Syria rose from \$133 million in 2011 to \$278 million in 2013 (Butter 2015).

At the same time, the arrival of refugees has encouraged the opening of small businesses, shops, and commercial activities, especially in cities such as Gaziantep and Mersin. Some Syrian entrepreneurs from Aleppo brought capital and skills, contributing not only to local trade but also to the creation of economic networks linking Turkey to the Middle East. These activities have had positive effects on the development of the textile and agricultural sectors and have attracted investment, creating job opportunities that would not otherwise have existed (ORSAM 2015).

In conclusion, although the arrival of Syrian refugees has brought about several difficulties, especially as perceived by the local population, they have also contributed positively to the Turkish economy. However, the need to regulate access to the labor market had become increasingly apparent. Refugees had begun to understand that Turkey could not guarantee them an adequate standard of living, both because of the high number of foreigners in the country and because permanent residence was unlikely: Turkey wanted to be seen as a temporary host country, with the aim of providing humanitarian assistance and playing a central role in managing the Syrian crisis and the Middle East region. In this context, many Syrians began to look for ways to reach Europe, which they perceived as a safer place with better working conditions, protection, and freedom. On the other hand, since 2015, there have also been cases of illegal detention and deportation involving Europe, highlighting the critical issues of international migration management.

The following paragraphs will therefore examine key issues such as the evolution of the legal framework for work permits, the agreements between the European Union and Turkey on migration, and human rights violations. However, before addressing these

issues, it is necessary to carry out a realistic analysis of what has been described so far, assessing the political, economic, and social dynamics that have influenced both the choices made by the Turkish state and the strategies adopted by refugees in their migration journey, in order to understand the interactions between humanitarian needs, national interests, and pressures.

2.6.1. The 2016 Work Permit Regulation as a Policy Response to Labour Market Pressures

Faced with growing difficulties in accessing the labour market and the widespread presence of informal work among Syrians under temporary protection, in January 2016 the Turkish government adopted the *Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection*. From the very first lines of the text, it is clear why this regulation was introduced. Article 1 states:

“The objective of this Regulation is to determine the procedures and principles related to employment of foreigners under temporary protection pursuant to Article 91 of the Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection dated 4/4/2013.”

(Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection, Art. 1)

Immediately after, Article 2 clarifies that the regulation is based on existing legal provisions:

“This Regulation is prepared on the basis of Article 29 of Temporary Protection Regulation, which entered into force with the Article 91 of the Law No. 6458 and Council of Ministers Decision No. 2014/6883.”

(Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection, Art. 2)

This shows that the regulation did not appear suddenly, but was built on an already existing legal framework. Its aim was to make access to employment clearer and more concrete. In practice, the Turkish state felt the need to better organise labour market

access, because the situation had become difficult: many Syrians were working informally, without contracts and with very low wages.

The 2016 regulation allows Syrians to apply for a work permit six months after their registration under temporary protection (İçduygu & Şimşek 2016). However, this right is subject to specific conditions:

1. the applicant must hold a temporary protection ID card with a number starting with “99”;
2. the person must have been registered for at least six months;
3. in each workplace, Syrians under temporary protection cannot exceed 10% of Turkish employees;
4. the person can only work in the province where they are registered;
5. the application must be submitted online by the employer through the e-devlet system.

The regulation also states that workers cannot be paid less than the legal minimum wage (İçduygu & Şimşek 2016). This point is important because it aims to prevent Syrians from being used as cheap labour and to reduce unfair competition.

On paper, therefore, the system appears clear and structured. There are defined rules, a guaranteed minimum wage, and a formal procedure. However, in practice, access to regular employment has remained very limited.

The data clearly show this gap. Between 2011 and 2016, a total of 20,981 work permits were granted to Syrians (İçduygu & Diker 2017, based on Ministry of Labor and Social Security data). Considering that more than 1.7 million Syrians in Turkey were of working age, this represents only about 1% of the active population. This is a very small proportion. As shown in Table 4, the number of work permits remains extremely limited compared to the size of the working-age population:

Table 4. *Work Permits Granted to Syrians (2011–2016) (İçduygu & Diker 2017)*

Year	Number of work permits
2011	105
2012	231
2013	794
2014	2,538
2015	4,015
2016	13,298
TOTAL	20,981

Even in 2016, the year the regulation was introduced, only a few thousand Syrians obtained a permit during the first months of implementation. The reform was important from a legal perspective, but it did not immediately change labour market realities.

There are several reasons for this situation. According to the International Crisis Group (2016), the procedure is demanding and requires employers to apply on behalf of the worker. Formal employment means paying the monthly minimum wage, which was around 400 USD at the time, as well as social security contributions and taxes. For many employers, this makes formal hiring more expensive than informal arrangements. As a result, informal employment often remains the easier and cheaper option.

From the workers' side, there are also serious concerns. Many Syrians fear that asking for formalisation could lead to dismissal. As İçduygu and Diker (2017) explain, there is a real concern that insisting on a legal contract may result in losing the only available job. For families that depend entirely on that income, the risk is too high. In this context, informal work becomes a survival strategy rather than a free choice.

Estimates confirm the scale of the issue. According to the International Crisis Group (2016), between 300,000 and 500,000 Syrians were working informally in 2016. Other estimates suggest even higher numbers, ranging from 500,000 to 1,000,000 people (İçduygu & Diker 2017). This means that, despite the existence of a formal legal

framework, informal employment remains the main form of labour market participation for Syrians in Turkey.

For this reason, several reports underline the need for stronger incentives. The International Crisis Group (2016) argues that inspections and fines alone are not enough. Increasing controls without offering alternatives could deprive many Syrians of their only source of income. Instead, formalisation should be encouraged through practical measures such as reducing work permit fees, offering temporary tax exemptions, or easing social security contributions. Simplifying procedures and improving access to information would also make the system more realistic and accessible for both employers and workers.

Without such incentives, the regulation risks remaining largely symbolic. Legal access to work does not automatically lead to real integration. When job opportunities are limited, costs are high, and risks are perceived as too great, informal work becomes the most immediate and practical solution.

In the end, the persistence of informal employment did not only affect living conditions inside Turkey. For many Syrians, the lack of stable and secure work became one of the factors that influenced their decision to move onwards. As movements towards Europe increased, migration gradually became a central issue in EU–Turkey relations. This marked the beginning of a new phase of cooperation, mainly focused on managing migration flows and stabilising the situation.

CHAPTER III. EU–TURKEY MIGRATION COOPERATION AND THE 2016 DEAL

3.1 Introduction: The Syrian Conflict and the Migration Crisis

Since 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the issue of migration has played a central role in relations between the European Union and Turkey. The war in Syria has generated one of the largest waves of forced migration in modern times. In this context, Turkey has gradually become the main host country, reaching the highest number of refugees in the world in 2015, largely Syrian refugees benefiting from the temporary protection regime discussed in the previous chapter (Nas 2019; Benvenuti 2017).

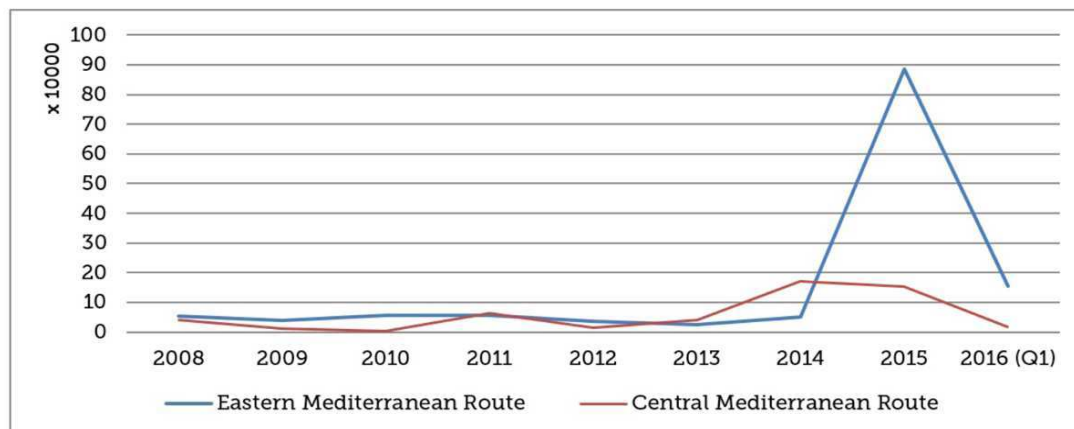
At the same time, the increase in flows to Europe put pressure on the EU's migration and asylum system. During 2015, the eastern Mediterranean route, which passed from Turkey to Greece and continued through the Balkans, became the main route of access for those fleeing conflicts in the Middle East. At the peak of the influx in October 2015, around 10,000 people a day were crossing the Aegean Sea, creating an emergency situation for the Greek authorities, who naturally did not have the capacity to handle such many arrivals and asylum applications (Nas 2019; Benvenuti 2017).

Below is a graph based on the following sources: Bianca Benvenuti's study “The Migration Paradox and EU-Turkey Relations” (2017), produced in collaboration with the Institute of International Affairs (IAI), and the Frontex (European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union) Annual Risk Analysis (2016) for 2016, clearly shows the exponential increase in flows along the Eastern Mediterranean Route in the years 2014–2016. Therefore, it was no coincidence that during this period the European Union felt the need to re-establish relations with Turkey and to move closer to it, especially after 2013 and 2015.

The intensity of these flows clearly revealed the limits of the European legal framework. The Dublin Regulation and the Schengen system began to show strong signs of crisis,

while Member States faced evident difficulties in reaching an agreement on the treatment and redistribution of asylum seekers.

Figure 4. *Irregular migration, Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, 2008-2016*



Countries more exposed to migration flows due to their geographical position, such as Greece and Italy, were placed under serious pressure. At the same time, other Member States reacted by reintroducing internal border controls, putting at risk one of the essential components of European integration (Nas 2019).

In addition, political divisions within the Union were becoming more radical, as shown by the opposition of some governments to the relocation mechanisms adopted in 2015. In this context, the refugee crisis significantly influenced the domestic political landscape of several Member States. In Germany, for example, the open-door policy adopted by Angela Merkel's government carried a considerable political cost and contributed to the growing support for far-right political forces such as Alternative für Deutschland, which achieved significant results in the 2017 elections (Nas 2019). Migration management thus became not only a humanitarian and administrative issue, but also a deeply political one.

Faced with this situation, the European Union did not have the capacity to manage the crisis only through internal instruments or with the support of its Member States. As a result, it increasingly moved towards a strategy of externalising migration control. It was in this context that an indispensable partner emerged: Turkey, with which the European

Union sought to cooperate to protect its internal security and its borders. These borders cannot be understood simply as “lines drawn in the sand” or as mere physical limits, but rather as a projection of the European Union’s authority. This concept of borders will be further explored in the theoretical analysis of this chapter, as it is essential for understanding the relations between the European Union and the Middle East, and in particular with Turkey.

It should also be noted that, already in 2013, the two parties had signed a Readmission Agreement, followed by the launch of a visa liberalisation dialogue. However, this agreement had not yet fully entered into force and was not designed to respond to a refugee influx of such magnitude (Benvenuti 2017; Nas 2019).

3.2 EU–Turkey Migration Relations before the 2016 Deal

Before the signing of the EU–Turkey Deal in March 2016, cooperation between the European Union and Turkey in the field of migration developed gradually and was often uneven. This process brought to light the ambiguities and tensions that had long characterised, and still characterise, the relationship between the two sides.

For a large part of the 2000s, migration was not yet a central issue in EU–Turkey relations. The agenda was mainly focused on the accession process and, therefore, on the political and institutional reforms that Ankara was expected to implement in order to move closer to EU membership. Migration was present, but it was not the main priority. However, this framework gradually began to change, especially when Turkey stopped being perceived only as a country of emigration and started to play an increasingly important role as a country of transit and, to a growing extent, as a country of reception (Benvenuti 2017). In particular, what raised concern within the European Union was the fact that Turkey had become the main and most accessible transit country for Syrian refugees travelling towards Greece and then onwards to the rest of Europe.

In the context of the pre-accession process, Turkey started a series of reforms in the field of asylum and migration with the aim of moving closer to the European legal framework. This process, commonly called the *Europeanization* of migration policies, developed

through the adoption of new laws, action plans and administrative structures inspired by the *acquis communautaire*, which refers to the legal and regulatory framework of the European Union. However, as Alpan (2021) explains, this process of europeanization was neither linear nor uniform over time. Instead, it gradually became more selective. It was increasingly influenced by domestic political interests rather than by a real commitment to fully align with European standards (Alpan 2021). During this period, the European Union slowly lost its central role as a political and legal reference point. Instead of being a model to follow, it became a source from which Turkey could selectively take certain tools, rules and practices. There were clear reasons for this change. The selective nature of europeanization was closely connected to the uncertainty about the future of Turkey's accession process to the European Union.

There was a growing perception in Ankara that the European Union was not genuinely interested in integrating Turkey. This perception strongly influenced the Turkish government's willingness to engage in long-term and structural migration projects. A particularly clear example of this distrust is Turkey's decision to maintain the geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which restricts the recognition of refugee status only to people coming from Europe. As Benvenuti (2017) explains, the decision to keep this limitation reflected the fear that, without a concrete perspective of EU membership, full alignment with European standards, especially with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), could turn Turkey into a stable destination country for refugees and asylum seekers, rather than a country of transit or temporary protection (Benvenuti 2017). In other words, Ankara feared that migration cooperation could result in a form of externalisation of European responsibilities, without Turkey receiving tangible benefits in return.

A key moment in this phase was the *Readmission Agreement* signed in December 2013. The agreement required Turkey not only to readmit its own citizens who were irregularly present in the EU, but also third-country nationals who had crossed Turkish territory before reaching Europe (Benvenuti 2017; Nas 2019). This point is particularly important: Turkey formally accepted to take on a direct responsibility in controlling migration flows towards the European Union. In exchange, the European Union launched a visa

liberalisation dialogue, presented as a political incentive for cooperation. The process required Turkey to fulfil 72 criteria, including measures related to document security, border management, public order and fundamental rights (Nas 2019). However, the issue of visas quickly became a source of tension. For Turkish public opinion, visa liberalisation represented one of the few concrete benefits that could be obtained from relations with the EU. For several EU Member States, however, it remained a sensitive issue, as it raised concerns about possible new migration flows.

This asymmetry in perceptions strengthened the idea that the power relations between Turkey and the European Union, largely shaped by the EU, were clearly unbalanced. The benefits that Turkey would gain from the agreement were seen as significantly lower than those that the European Union would obtain. These perceptions also reinforced the belief, already widespread in Ankara, that the EU was applying a double standard towards Turkey, especially when compared to the Western Balkan countries, which had obtained visa liberalisation more quickly (Benvenuti 2017).

As migration flows along the Eastern Mediterranean route intensified, the interdependence between the two sides increased further. From the perspective of the European Union, cooperation with Turkey became increasingly urgent, particularly considering the rise in irregular crossings reported by Frontex along the eastern route. Because the EU was unable to reach a shared solution among its Member States, it began to move towards a more external and shared management of migration flows. It was in this context that, in November 2015, the *EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan* was adopted (Nas 2019). The plan provided for stronger operational coordination, greater Turkish efforts to combat migrant smuggling, and closer cooperation with Greece and Bulgaria to prevent irregular departures. In return, the European Union committed to providing financial and technical assistance for refugees in Turkey. It also promised to relaunch broader political objectives. These included reopening certain chapters of the accession process, accelerating the visa liberalisation roadmap, and intensifying high-level dialogue. This high-level dialogue consisted of political meetings between European leaders and the Turkish government on issues such as the economy, energy and security. The aim was to

restore a stable channel of communication after years of stagnation (Nas 2019; Benvenuti 2017).

On the financial level, the European Union announced the allocation of 3 billion euros through the *Facility for Refugees in Turkey*, a financial instrument created by the European Union in 2015 to coordinate and fund support for refugees in Turkey, in particular Syrian citizens under temporary protection. These funds were intended to support projects in the fields of education, healthcare and humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees living on Turkish territory (Nas 2019). However, in the months that followed, tensions emerged regarding the procedures and timing of the disbursement of the funds, which increased frustration on the Turkish side, as the delays did not meet the initial expectations (Nas 2019; Benvenuti 2017).

In the first months of 2016, it became clear that these instruments were not sufficient to contain the high migration flows nor to stabilise the European political context. The *Readmission Agreement* was not yet fully operational and the visa liberalisation process remained blocked, even though it had been presented as a central incentive of cooperation (Benvenuti 2017). This combination of interdependence, political tensions and mutual dissatisfaction created the conditions for the adoption of a more binding and structured agreement, which would take shape in March 2016 with the *EU–Turkey Deal*.

3.3 The EU–Turkey Deal of March 2016 & the One-To-One Mechanism

The *EU–Turkey Deal (2016)* of March 2016 represents a turning point in the relations between the European Union and Turkey in the field of migration. After months of growing pressure on the EU's external borders and deep internal divisions among Member States, the agreement was presented as a concrete response to the so-called “refugee crisis” that had affected Europe. Its main objective was to reduce irregular crossings in the Aegean Sea and to restore a certain level of control over the European asylum system (Nas 2019; Benvenuti 2017).

The process that led to the Deal took shape during 2015, when it became clear that the instruments adopted up to that point, such as the *EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan* of November 2015 and the *Readmission Agreement* (2013), had not been effective in containing the flows. In the first months of 2016, the situation remained critical: between 1 January and 20 March, more than 147,000 arrivals were recorded on the Greek islands, and 366 deaths were reported along the Aegean route. These numbers were significantly higher than those recorded during the same period the previous year, when 10,535 arrivals were registered between 1 January and 31 March 2015 (Nas 2019). In response to this critical situation, the European Union intensified its dialogue with Ankara, recognising Turkey as the only actor capable of changing the situation in an immediate way.

On 18 March 2016, the *EU–Turkey Statement* was adopted, defining the terms of the agreement between the two sides. The core of the Deal was based on an exchange mechanism built on reciprocal commitments, which were strongly unbalanced regarding the control of irregular migration flows. According to the agreement:

“All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. This will take place in full accordance with EU and international law, thus excluding any kind of collective expulsion. All migrants will be protected in accordance with the relevant international standards and in respect of the principle of non-refoulement. (...)”.

(European Council 2016)

As highlighted above, this principle applied both to Syrian nationals and to nationals of other third countries, since the declared objective was to stop irregular crossings and dismantle human smuggling networks (European Council 2016).

Alongside returns, the agreement introduced the so-called “one-to-one” or “1:1” mechanism. For every Syrian national returned from Greece to Turkey, another Syrian refugee was to be legally resettled in the European Union directly from Turkey, up to an initial ceiling of 72,000 persons (European Council 2016). However, from the very beginning, a strong imbalance emerged between the number of people returned and the

number actually resettled, which remained significantly lower than the initial targets (Nas 2019).

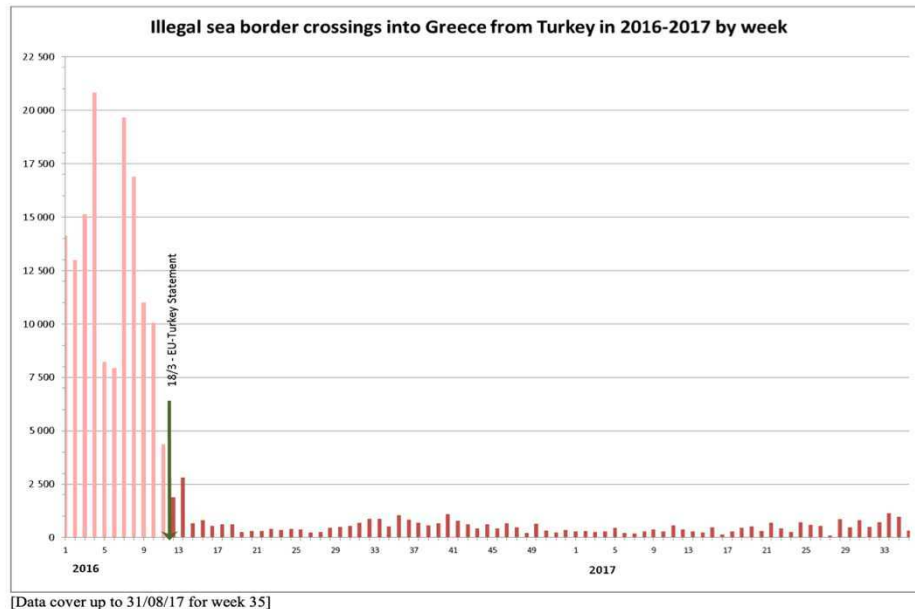
On the financial level, the European Union committed to supporting Turkey through the *Facility for Refugees in Turkey*, initially providing 3 billion euros, with the promise of additional funding by the end of 2018. Financial support was one of the central elements of the agreement and reflected the EU's intention to externalise part of the management of refugees by delegating it to a third country.

Beyond the aspects directly related to migration management, the Deal included several political commitments of a broader nature. Among these was the acceleration of the visa liberalisation process for Turkish citizens, conditional upon meeting 72 criteria, and once again the relaunch of the accession process. The agreement also provided for the strengthening of high-level political dialogue between the European Union and Turkey (European Council 2016; Nas 2019).

From an operational point of view, the *EU–Turkey Deal* produced immediate results in terms of reducing irregular crossings. In the months following its entry into force, the number of arrivals on the Greek islands decreased significantly, as shown in the first reports of the European Commission on the implementation of the agreement (European Commission 2016). Below, Figure 5 highlights some of the results presented in the “Seventh Report on the Progress made in the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement” (2017).

Figure 5. *Illegal sea border crossings into Greece from Turkey in 2016-2017 by week from the European Commission (2017)*

The



Seventh Report on the implementation of the *EU–Turkey Statement* (2017) shows that, between 9 June 2017 and 31 August 2017, 7,807 arrivals from Turkey to the Greek islands were recorded, with a daily average of around 93 people. Although the daily number of arrivals had increased compared to the period immediately before the summer, it still remained significantly lower than the month preceding the entry into force of the March 2016 Statement.

However, behind these quantitative results, a series of problems quickly emerged. Various international organisations and civil society actors raised doubts about the compatibility of the agreement with international refugee law and with European asylum standards. In particular, the definition of Turkey as a “safe third country” was questioned, as this legal assumption was fundamental to justify the collective returns from Greece (Benvenuti 2017). Criticism also focused on reception conditions and on the effective protection of refugees’ rights in Turkey, challenging the official narrative of the agreement as a balanced and rights-respecting solution.

On the political level, the implementation of the Deal also contributed to increasing tensions between Ankara and Brussels. Relations between the two sides became more complicated for several reasons: the failure to meet the deadlines for visa liberalisation,

delays in the disbursement of the promised funds, and the domestic political situation in Turkey following the attempted coup of July 2016. The European Union was concerned about the authoritarian response adopted by the Turkish government after the coup attempt (Nas 2019). Despite repeated threats by the Turkish government to suspend the agreement, the Deal has remained in force, confirming the strong interdependence between the EU and Turkey in the field of migration. These two key aspects, namely the use of the migration crisis as a tool of political power and the interdependence between the two sides, will be further explored in the final theoretical analyses of this thesis.

Overall, the *EU–Turkey Deal* of 2016 represents a turning point in the European management of migration. The agreement significantly reduced irregular crossings along the Eastern Mediterranean route, but it also strengthened a model of cooperation based on the externalisation of border control and on an exchange of interests between the parties. While this approach responded to an immediate need to contain flows, it also raised several important questions, particularly regarding the protection of refugees' rights, the long-term political stability of the agreement, and the broader nature of relations between the European Union and Turkey. These aspects will be analysed in greater detail in the following sections.

3.4 A Realist Reading of EU–Turkey Relations: Borders, Power and Interdependence

The following analysis uses a realist lens to interpret the relations between the European Union and Turkey. It is divided into two connected parts. In the first part, some key theoretical concepts developed by Raffaella A. Del Sarto in her book *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East* (2016) are explained. In this work, the author describes the European Union as a normative empire and analyses the way in which Europe constructs and manages its borders, the process of Europeanization, power relations, and the dynamics of interdependence with countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. These concepts provide the necessary theoretical basis for the analysis that follows.

In the second part, these concepts are applied to the case of Turkey. The aim is to understand, through a realist approach, how EU–Turkey relations can be interpreted as asymmetric, while at the same time characterised by strong interdependence, especially in the field of migration. In this way, cooperation between the two sides is not examined only as a technical response to the crisis, but as the result of interests, power relations and mutual needs.

3.4.1. Theoretical Framework: Borders, Normative Power, Interests and Interdependence in the Study of Raffaella Del Sarto

Before applying a realist lens to the relations between the European Union and Turkey, it is necessary to clarify some key theoretical concepts that derive from Raffaella A. Del Sarto's study *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East* (2016). This step is not only introductory, but also methodologically necessary. It allows us to understand the European Union not only as a normative actor, but as a complex political entity, involved in asymmetric power relations and characterised by a specific way of managing its borders. Without this theoretical basis, there would be a risk of interpreting EU–Turkey cooperation in the field of migration as an isolated or purely emergency-driven phenomenon, without recognising its structural and strategic dimension.

One of the central concepts in Del Sarto's study is that of borders. The European Union cannot be analysed through the classical Westphalian state model, which assumes fixed and clearly defined territorial borders. Instead, the European space is characterised by a plurality of territorial and functional regimes that do not fully overlap. The Internal Market, the Schengen area and the Eurozone are concrete examples of this “variable geometry”: not all Member States participate in all these areas in the same way, and the borders of these spaces do not fully coincide with the political borders of the Union. European borders are therefore not simply geographical lines, but mobile, differentiated and often overlapping constructions.

This aspect becomes even more relevant when considering that the progressive removal of many internal borders, especially in relation to the free movement of people and goods,

has led to a strengthening and transformation of the external borders. The management of the entry of migrants and refugees has made the external border increasingly securitised, but at the same time flexible and “projected” outward. Del Sarto uses the term “barricade” to describe the impenetrable yet unstable nature of European borders, whose role is externalised through cooperation with third countries based on agreements and common practices, as well as through the work of agencies such as Frontex. In this sense, the European border does not necessarily coincide with the EU’s geographical line, but can be moved and reorganised. This understanding of borders is essential for explaining, in the following section, the role of Turkey in managing migration flows towards Europe, since Turkey can be seen as an extension of European borders, as part of its Southern Neighbourhood and as a key actor for their management.

A second key concept developed by Del Sarto is that of normative empire. The author highlights the debate on Normative Power Europe, according to which the European Union exercises influence mainly through the promotion of norms and values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights. However, Del Sarto proposes a different, well-argued and less idealised interpretation. The Union can be understood as a particular form of empire, not in the traditional sense of the term, since it does not have a common army and does not invade neighbouring territories, but rather as a normative empire. This concept describes the European Union as an entity that does not share all the characteristics of traditional empires, but that projects its influence through the transfer and diffusion, often through consent, of its own norms and practices. This entity is characterised by:

1. A vast territory composed of different and unequal elements involved in power relations: a centre, or multiple centres, and peripheries that do not have the same political influence or economic power as the core areas;
2. A tendency towards territorial expansion in order to integrate new members, which has made borders relatively unstable and variable over time;
3. A self-perception as a “normative power” that exports democratic and liberal values, based on the rhetoric of “fostering economic interdependence to prevent the recurrence of war”, which is still present today;

4. Asymmetric relations with countries whose borders do not necessarily coincide with the EU's peripheries, together with an expansion of its norms and standards beyond its formal borders;
5. The use of local political structures and elites in the borderlands as a way to project European order beyond its own borders.

From this list, it is possible to deduce that historical empires did not have rigid borders, but rather transition zones and spaces of influence often called “buffer zones”. In a similar way, as highlighted in points 4 and 5, the EU extends its legal and regulatory order beyond its formal borders through neighbourhood policies, trade agreements and mechanisms of conditionality.

It is here that an important point for the realist analysis emerges. The transfer of norms and practices towards the borderlands is not a purely altruistic process, as it is sometimes described in colonial or imperial narratives. According to Del Sarto, the export of rules and standards aims to guarantee stability in the neighbourhood, in order to ensure security for Europe and to protect its economic interests. As the author underlines, the European Union has not always been consistent in promoting democratic reforms in its relations with third countries. On the contrary, in several cases, the EU and its Member States have prioritised cooperation with governments showing authoritarian tendencies and have tolerated human rights violations in the name of stability, security and economic interests. The diffusion of European norms and standards can therefore be interpreted as a tool through which the Union affirms its influence and protects its strategic interests. Within the EU's framework, norms and interests are not in contradiction, but often reinforce each other.

In this context, the concept of Europeanization is also relevant. It is traditionally understood as a process through which candidate or partner countries adapt to EU rules. However, in Del Sarto's study, this concept is described in a more complex way. According to the author, the transfer of norms is often “selective, gradual and differentiated”. Borderlands may be integrated in certain sectors, such as trade, technical regulation or border control, without being fully included in central decision-making

processes, as in the case of Turkey. This mechanism strengthens the central position of the Union and creates unequal power relations.

Another element that makes Del Sarto's study particularly useful for this thesis concerns the relationship between interests, power and interdependence, especially in the creation of asymmetric power relations. As mentioned earlier, within the EU framework, behaviour based on European norms and behaviour based on EU interests can coexist and often reinforce each other. European policies towards the neighbourhood are not always purely value-driven, but they are also not based only on material interests. Instead, they result from a combination of both. The EU may act in line with its *acquis communautaire*, while at the same time pursuing strategic objectives such as regional stability, migration control, energy security or economic advantages. Regarding the concept of *interdependence* between the European Union and its Southern Neighbourhood, there are clear asymmetries from a power perspective. At the same time, growing interdependence makes these dynamics more complex. It does not eliminate asymmetry, but makes it less linear. Actors that are weaker in terms of overall power relations may gain room for manoeuvre in specific areas, such as migration management or security cooperation, and this inevitably has an impact on the Union.

In light of this discussion, it becomes clear why these concepts must be explained before applying them to the case of Turkey. The realist analysis proposed in this thesis does not consider the European Union as a purely normative actor, but as a political entity operating within power relations and interdependence. The concept of borders as something mobile helps to explain how the EU has shifted part of the management of its borders towards Turkey. The idea of normative empire allows us to interpret the transfer of rules and practices not only as cooperation, but also as an extension of European influence. The notion of selective Europeanization helps to understand why integration has been partial and asymmetric. Finally, the reference to power and interdependence makes it possible to analyse the EU–Turkey relationship as unbalanced, but not unilateral.

This perspective allows us to interpret European policies not as exceptions or contradictions, but as the normal behaviour of a political actor that, like any other,

prioritises and pursues its own interests within power relations. This theoretical framework is particularly useful for analysing migration policies and border management, where elements such as interests, security, norms and interdependence are closely connected. It is within this framework that the case of Turkey must be examined.

3.4.2. Application to the Turkish Case from a Realist Perspective

This section aims to show how migration cooperation between the EU and Turkey is mainly structured around the management and control of borders and represents a space in which both sides exercise power within a relationship that is asymmetric but interdependent.

If we adopt the perspective proposed by Raffaella Del Sarto in *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East*(2016), Turkey represents a particular case within the Southern Neighbourhood. It is not just any peripheral state, but an “outlier”, meaning a country with a much higher level of economic integration compared to other countries in the MENA region. Turkey is a member of the World Trade Organization and maintains very deep trade relations with the European Union. In 2021, more than 70% of foreign direct investment in the country came from EU Member States (Del Sarto 2021).

This data is important because it shows that economic integration implies both connection and dependence. Turkey is strongly integrated into the European economic order, but it does not fully participate in the decision-making mechanisms that regulate that order. The Customs Union between the two sides is the clearest example of this. It is modelled on EU rules and requires Turkey to apply the EU’s common external tariff to the products covered by the agreement, even though Turkey has no vote in EU trade decisions. This situation clearly reflects the core–periphery structure described by Del Sarto and highlights the logic of the EU as a normative empire, in which the centre extends its rules outward without fully sharing decision-making power.

Through Del Sarto’s analysis, it is possible to understand that the process of Europeanization towards Turkey became particularly intense after the launch of accession negotiations in 2005. During that period, Ankara began an important reform process with

the aim of adopting the *acquis communautaire*, supported by EU funding and technical cooperation programmes. Turkey also participated in several EU programmes without being a full member. However, this integration remained incomplete and conditional. Accession negotiations were later suspended, and despite the high level of regulatory alignment, the prospect of full membership became increasingly distant. This shows that Europeanization was selective and produced asymmetric relations. Turkey was progressively integrated into the European order through the adoption of EU norms and practices, but without obtaining full political participation.

If we now shift the focus from trade to migration and security, the logic described by Del Sarto becomes even clearer. As she explains, especially from the 1990s onwards, and more strongly after 11 September and after the 2015–2016 crisis, the European Union progressively securitised migration. Cooperation with countries in the Southern Neighbourhood increasingly focused on border control and the fight against irregular migration. Within this framework, Turkey became part of a series of agreements aimed at moving the control of people considered undesirable further south. These agreements were largely based on a strategy of utility maximisation to protect the EU's security, stability and interests, rather than on a purely cooperative approach towards Turkey.

The *Readmission Agreement* of 2013, the *EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan* of 2015 and finally the *EU–Turkey Deal* of 2016 all fit within the border externalisation strategy described by Del Sarto. Through these instruments, control over migration movements was gradually transferred beyond the formal territory of the Union and placed directly within Turkish territory. In this sense, the European border no longer coincides only with the geographical line between Greece and Turkey, but becomes a functional regime aimed at control that extends inside and beyond Turkish territory. This reflects the process described by Del Sarto as “moving and multiplying Europe's external borders”.

Migration cooperation can therefore be interpreted as a concrete example of the creation of a *buffer zone* around the Union. Through funding, operational coordination and agreements, the EU has sought to transform Turkey into a space of containment for flows directed towards Europe. This dynamic is consistent with the logic of the normative

empire. The Union exports rules, practices and responsibilities to the periphery in order to guarantee stability and security at the centre.

However, this relationship is not based only on asymmetry. Over time, a strong interdependence has developed between the EU and Turkey, especially in the field of migration. Once the containment of flows became a priority for the Union, Turkish cooperation became indispensable. This means that, although Turkey is in a weaker position in economic and institutional terms, it has nevertheless gained leverage precisely because of its role in managing refugees on its territory. The possibility of strengthening or loosening border controls has shown that Ankara can exercise political pressure on the European Union. This element demonstrates that the relationship is asymmetric, but not unilateral. Migration therefore becomes a tool of political power.

Another important aspect that emerges from this dynamic concerns the progressive subordination of political conditionality to security needs. As Del Sarto explains, in EU policies towards the southern periphery, stability and control have gradually taken priority over objectives such as democratisation and the protection of human rights. This phenomenon became particularly visible during the 2015–2016 migration crisis.

Although the official discourse of the Union continues to refer to respect for international law and fundamental rights, in practice the main objective has been to reduce arrivals and close the Eastern Mediterranean route. The *EU–Turkey Deal* is a clear example of this. The agreement was presented as shared cooperation in line with international obligations, but its primary function was to contain flows towards Europe.

In this sense, cooperation with Turkey strengthened a pragmatic and control-oriented approach, in which border stability took priority over concerns about Turkey's internal democratic situation or about the conditions of refugees. This aspect will be further examined in the next section, which focuses on the social and political effects of the Deal.

CHAPTER IV. FROM PRECARIOUS PERMANENCE TO INSTITUTIONALISED RETURN: THE POLITICISATION AND SECURITISATION OF THE SYRIAN PRESENCE IN TURKEY

The reduction in arrivals to Greece after the *EU–Turkey Statement* has often been presented as the main indicator of its success. However, if we look at the broader picture, the data show not a resolution of the crisis, but rather a structural transformation of it. The decrease in crossings did not reduce the number of Syrian refugees overall. Instead, it consolidated their presence in Turkey. By the end of 2017, Turkey was hosting more than 3.4 million Syrians registered under temporary protection, with less than 7% living in camps and the vast majority residing in urban areas (AIDA 2017 Update; DGMM statistics cited in AIDA). This means that the crisis was not solved, but geographically and administratively shifted as European Union Deal carefully planned.

The legal framework governing Syrians in Turkey remained the Temporary Protection Regulation. As already discussed, temporary protection does not grant refugee status under the 1951 Convention, nor does it provide access to long-term residence or automatic access to citizenship (AIDA 2017). Article 25 TPR clearly excludes temporary protection beneficiaries from long-term residence rights. Even in case of termination of the regime, access to individual international protection is not guaranteed but remains subject to governmental discretion (AIDA 2017). In this sense, temporariness became prolonged but without legal stability. The status allowed presence, but not secure belonging.

This situation has been described by Ahmet İçduygu as a form of “pseudo-integration”, a condition in which refugees remain in the country for years, participate in the labour market and local society, but without full legal or political inclusion (İçduygu, 2016). Syrians are neither short-term “guests” nor fully integrated members of society. They are structurally present but institutionally precarious. While some policy developments point towards gradual settlement and even naturalisation in selected cases, these processes remain selective and politically framed rather than rights-based (İçduygu, 2016).

Socio-economic conditions further reinforce this precariousness. Although the Regulation on Work Permits for Temporary Protection Beneficiaries entered into force in 2016, access to formal employment remains limited in practice. By the end of 2017, only a small fraction of working-age Syrians had obtained work permits, and informal labour was widespread (AIDA 2017). Many Syrians continued to work in low-paid and insecure sectors such as agriculture, construction and textile production. This confirms that legal access does not automatically translate into effective socio-economic integration.

Human rights concerns, also challenge the narrative of Turkey as a fully “safe third country.” Amnesty International reported continued difficulties in access to livelihoods, housing, education and health care for refugees, as well as cases of forced returns and restrictions on humanitarian organisations (Amnesty International, Report 2017/18). At the same time, the broader human rights situation in Turkey deteriorated after the state of emergency, with widespread dismissals, arrests and restrictions on freedom of expression (European Parliament Resolution 2018). While these developments concern Turkish citizens as well, they affect the overall democratic and legal environment in which refugees are expected to find protection.

Moreover, the legal nature of the *EU–Turkey Statement* itself remains controversial. As underlined by Yılmaz-Elmas (2020), the agreement was announced as a press release and was later considered by the Court of Justice of the EU as not formally attributable to the EU as an institution. This limits parliamentary scrutiny and judicial review, raising questions about accountability and legal safeguards. In this sense, the deal reflects a form of crisis-driven and intergovernmental governance rather than a fully institutionalised EU external migration policy (Yılmaz-Elmas, 2020).

Finally, while crossings in the Eastern Mediterranean decreased, deaths at sea did not disappear. According to UNHCR data, thousands of refugees and migrants continued to lose their lives in the Mediterranean in the following years, demonstrating that deterrence policies do not eliminate risks but often displace them (UNHCR Italia 2019).

For these reasons, the *EU–Turkey Statement* did not resolve the Syrian refugee crisis. It transformed it. Movement was reduced, but permanence was made structurally precarious. The crisis shifted from visible border pressure to long-term social and political tension within Turkey. As later developments would show, this structural imbalance would contribute to renewed political tensions and a gradual change in Turkey’s position towards the deal.

4.1 Economic crisis, external conflict and renewed political confrontation (2019-2021)

Between 2019 and 2021, the refugee crisis in Turkey did not disappear, but it changed form. It was no longer only a humanitarian issue linked to hosting millions of Syrian refugees, but it gradually became a matter of domestic politics and regional security. The management of refugees took place in a new economic context, which was already fragile and unstable before the pandemic.

From an economic point of view, Turkey entered 2019 in an already critical phase. After the financial turbulence of 2018, economic growth had slowed down, inflation remained high, and the labour market showed serious difficulties. Between May 2018 and May 2019, the economy lost around 840,000 jobs, and the unemployment rate increased from 10.6 percent to 14 percent (World Bank Group 2019). Real wages also decreased by 2.6 percent between 2017 and 2018 (World Bank Group 2019).

To this already fragile situation, the COVID 19 pandemic was added in 2020. The World Bank observed that the arrival of the virus stopped the slow recovery that had started in mid 2019, causing a sudden contraction of economic activities between April and May 2020 and a significant reduction of reserves, which increased financial and market pressures on the country. Employment decreased by around 2 million jobs, and labour market participation fell by 1.9 million people (World Bank Group 2020).

In 2021, even if there was strong GDP growth of 11.7 percent on an annual basis, the World Bank underlined the presence of high inflation, the depreciation of the Turkish lira, and increasing macroeconomic instability (World Bank Group 2021). In addition, poverty

increased from 10.2 percent in 2019 to 12.2 percent in 2020. In other words, even if there was economic recovery, the social situation remained very difficult.

This situation inevitably influenced the lives of Syrian refugees who, during this period, were more than 3.6 million and lived under temporary protection (ICMPD 2021). Many of them worked in the informal sector and were particularly exposed to the effects of the crisis. Kirişci and Erdoğan (2020) in the article “Turkey and COVID-19: Don’t forget refugees” underlined that the pandemic disproportionately affected refugees and migrants, many of whom lost their income or were forced to leave their jobs.

At the same time, social tensions increased. Data from the Syrians Barometer 2019 showed a significant change in Turkish society’s perception of Syrians. In 2017, 57.8 percent of respondents described them as “victims of war”, while in 2019 this percentage fell to 35 percent. On the contrary, answers expressing perceptions of threat increased. 42 percent defined Syrians as “dangerous people who will cause problems in the future”, 41.4 percent as “people who did not defend their homeland”, and 39.5 percent as “a burden for us” (Erdoğan 2020).

The report also highlighted growing social distance. Respondents tended to avoid positive adjectives such as “trustworthy” or “kind” and used more negative labels, showing greater distrust compared to the past (Erdoğan 2020). Overall, the feeling of compassion that had characterised the first years seemed to be gradually replaced by anxiety and frustration.

This climate developed in the context of the municipal elections of March 2019, when the AKP lost symbolic cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. The analysis by Sahin Mencütek and Kayaoglu showed that, in this period, the political narrative on immigration became increasingly central and an object of competition between parties (Sahin Mencütek and Kayaoglu 2025). The CHP, in particular, widely used the narrative of “burden”, underlining competition in the labour market and the economic costs of hosting refugees, and proposing return as the main solution (Sahin Mencütek and Kayaoglu 2025).

The AKP, which in the first years had built its narrative around hospitality and Muslim brotherhood, gradually began to emphasise more frequently the theme of return and the temporary nature of the Syrian presence (Sahin Mencütek and Kayaoglu 2025). After 2018, and especially after the 2019 elections, official speeches increasingly referred to the number of returns and to the need to create conditions for repatriation. In this sense, the transformation of political discourse appeared linked both to electoral pressure and to growing social discontent.

The issue of return became closely connected to foreign policy and the security dimension. In 2019 and 2020, Turkey consolidated control over some areas in northern Syria, presented as “safe zones”. Adar underlined that the Turkish concept of safe zone was not limited to a temporary protection measure, but was designed as a project of stable resettlement of part of the refugees in territories under Turkish control (Adar 2020). The author also highlighted concerns related to security, the real voluntariness of returns, and possible effects on the demographic composition of the area (Adar 2020).

Regarding data, differences emerged between official Turkish statements and international figures. In 2020, Turkish authorities spoke of more than 414,000 cumulative voluntary returns. However, UNHCR registered 16,805 returns from Turkey to Syria in 2020 and 5,124 in the first months of 2021 (EASO 2021). Amnesty International also documented cases of forced deportations and denounced pressure on some refugees to sign “voluntary return” documents (Amnesty International 2019; 2020).

Concerning the intentions of Syrians, the Syrians Barometer 2019 showed a more complex situation. A significant part of respondents expressed the desire to return to Syria, but only under certain conditions, such as the end of the war or political change in the country. At the same time, many underlined that in Syria “nothing was left”, that cities were destroyed, or that they had already built a new life in Turkey (Erdoğan 2020). This indicated that return was not a simple or immediate choice for a large part of the Syrian population.

Overall, between 2019 and 2021 the refugee crisis in Turkey transformed but did not disappear. The economic dimension, the pandemic, the increase in social tensions, and internal political competition contributed to shifting the public discourse from a mainly humanitarian logic to a more politicised and securitised one. The issue of return became central, both in the rhetoric of the government and of the opposition, while crisis management became increasingly linked to foreign policy and military operations in northern Syria.

4.2 Institutionalised Returns, Safe Zones and Electoral Politics (2022–2024)

According to the AIDA Country Report 2022 on Türkiye, the year 2022 marked an important change in the management of temporary protection. After 2019, when Turkey had started to strengthen return policies and the containment of irregular arrivals, and after 2021, which had been characterised by increasingly visible anti refugee rhetoric, in 2022 the situation changed mainly in practice. Several stakeholders reported police operations, mass arrests, and deportations to northern Syria. Many Syrians reportedly signed “voluntary return” forms before being transferred, often under pressure or without fully understanding the consequences (AIDA 2022). At the same time, the policy of “deconcentration” continued in major cities, with the aim of reducing the Syrian presence in urban areas more exposed to social tensions(AIDA 2022).

In August 2022, the Turkish government declared that 517,000 Syrians had voluntarily returned to Syria in safe conditions, and also stated that a large number of beneficiaries were ready to return. However, UNHCR stated that mass returns were unlikely to occur in the short term. In the same year, the number of registered beneficiaries decreased from 3,535,898 to 3,373,967, and access to registration became more difficult, with concrete effects on access to services (AIDA 2022).

A particularly relevant aspect concerned address verification. The Ministry of Interior declared that 122,000 Syrians were not found at their registered address, and Syrian organisations estimated that around 150,000 identity cards had been cancelled by April

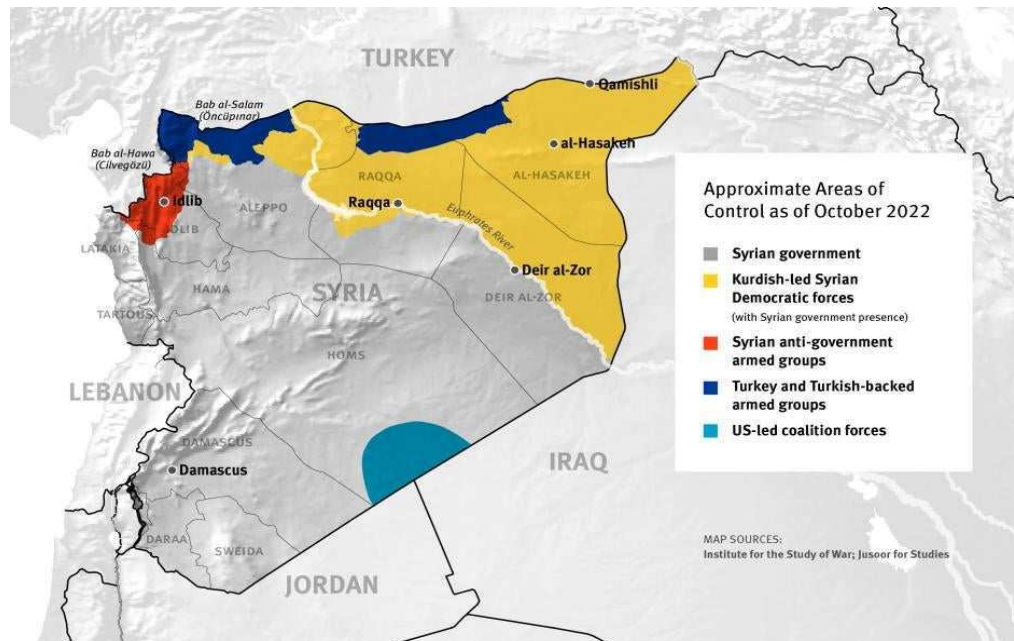
2022 (AIDA 2022). Formally, the cancellation of the ID did not mean the definitive end of temporary protection, but in practice it made access to rights and services almost impossible (AIDA 2022). In many cases, the only way to reactivate the document was to go to the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management, which was not always easy. The criterion of voluntariness in returns was also not clearly defined (AIDA 2022). In theory, a commission should verify that the decision was truly free, but in practice this control appeared limited.

Information collected by Human Rights Watch in its report of 24 October 2022 confirmed and expanded what had already emerged regarding the increasing pressure on Syrian refugees during the year. Interviewed persons stated that they had been arrested at home, at work, or in the street, detained in poor conditions, and forced to sign “voluntary return” forms before being transferred to the Syrian border. People interviewed in the 2022 report said that they had been deported or had witnessed mass deportations, often without the possibility to read or understand the documents they signed. Some reported being transported for many hours, handcuffed, to the Öncüpınar Bab al Salam or Cilvegözü Bab al Hawa border crossings, which lead to areas of Syria not controlled by the central government. According to UNHCR, in June 2022 15,149 Syrians had voluntarily returned to Syria (Human Rights Watch 2022, citing UNHCR), while Turkish authorities spoke of more than 500,000 cumulative returns, showing a significant difference between official estimates and those of international organisations. Human Rights Watch (2022) also underlined that Syria continued to be an unsafe country for returns, even in areas not controlled by the government in Damascus, and that many returnees came from areas under government control where human rights violations persisted.

In the same context, during 2022 there were signals of a possible change in Turkey’s position toward Syria, with the possibility of rapprochement and normalisation of relations with President Bashar al Assad. In May 2022, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the intention to resettle up to one million Syrian refugees in northern Syria, in areas not controlled by the central government (Human Rights Watch 2022). The project was presented as a structural solution to the prolonged stay of refugees in Turkey.

However, the overall situation in Syria remained characterised by territorial fragmentation, instability, and persistent human rights violations.

Figure 6. *Approximate areas of control as of October 2022 from Human Rights Watch report “Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria” (2022)*



Even if refugees had managed to return to their areas of origin, they would have gone back under the authority of the same regime that had produced millions of refugees during the conflict (Human Rights Watch 2022). The deportations and pressures documented during the same period were therefore part of a clear tension between Turkey’s role as the world’s largest refugee hosting country, with a number of refugees higher than any other state and return practices that raised doubts about the real voluntariness of these returns. This contradiction raised concerns about the qualification of Turkey as a “safe third country” within the framework of cooperation with the European Union, especially considering the principle of *non-refoulement* (Human Rights Watch 2022). The plan for the creation of a safe zone for the return of Syrian refugees to Syria, announced in May 2022 by the Turkish government and launched in 2023, mainly concerned areas in northern Syria under Turkish influence or control. These areas had been affected in previous years by military operations and interventions promoted by Ankara.

Important events marked the year 2023. Strong earthquakes hit both Turkey and Syria in February 2023, and presidential elections took place shortly after. These events made internal social tensions related to the presence of refugees even more visible.

In 2023, the issue of Syrian refugees became one of the main factors of political mobilisation in Turkey. The 3.7 million Syrians living in the country represented not only a structural demographic reality, but also a source of strong social tension. The worsening economic conditions and the perception of competition for jobs and public services increased public dissatisfaction across political groups (Tahiroğlu 2022). According to several analysts, the management of refugees, together with the economy, significantly influenced the electoral outcome (Donelli 2023).

In February 2023, powerful earthquakes struck south eastern Türkiye and northern Syria, causing massive destruction in both countries. According to UNHCR, more than 9.1 million people were directly affected in Türkiye, including around 1.7 million Syrian refugees, while another 8.8 million people lived in the most affected areas in Syria (UNHCR 2023). Therefore, the disaster affected not only the Turkish host population but also a very large refugee community that was already living in vulnerable socio economic conditions.

The earthquake also aggravated existing social tensions. Resentment toward Syrians, which had already been present before 2023, became more visible in some affected areas. According to Reuters, anti Syrian slogans spread on social media, and some refugees reported being accused of looting or being excluded from emergency shelters (Gebeily, Kucukgocmen and Chacar 2023). In this context, the humanitarian emergency interacted with pre existing political and social tensions related to the refugee presence.

During the electoral campaign, almost all major political forces promised the return of Syrians, although with different approaches. The opposition led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu proposed to normalise relations with Bashar al Assad in order to facilitate returns within two years, presenting this objective as necessary to restore economic balance and reduce social tensions (Tahiroğlu 2022, Donelli 2023). Other opposition parties also supported

direct dialogue with Damascus and greater international coordination to organise returns. At the same time, nationalist parties such as the Victory Party based their political image on openly anti refugee rhetoric, pushing the debate toward stricter positions (Yıldız 2023).

The government bloc led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan formally maintained the formula of “voluntary and dignified return” but progressively strengthened the link between return and national security. In this context, the strategy of the so-called safe zones in northern Syria became a fundamental element of its electoral narrative. Erdoğan repeatedly underlined the objective of facilitating the resettlement of refugees in areas under Turkish influence, presenting the plan as a structural solution to internal pressure and to limit and prevent new migration flows. According to the International Crisis Group 2023, Turkey had deployed around 10,000 troops in different areas of northern Syria and considered the creation and maintenance of a security belt extending 30 kilometres along the border as a priority, both to contain the Syrian Democratic Forces and to ensure stability for possible returns (International Crisis Group 2023). The safe zone was therefore not only a humanitarian or reintegration project, but also part of Ankara’s security doctrine.

The plan announced in 2022 for the resettlement of one million refugees was fully integrated into the 2023 campaign. The construction of housing units in areas under Turkish control and the strengthening of military presence were presented as necessary conditions for a proper return. However, as several observers underlined, large scale repatriation depended not only on Turkish political will, but also on an agreement with Damascus and on broader geopolitical balances involving Russia and the United States, which were both involved in the Syrian conflict (Donelli 2023, International Crisis Group 2023). In this sense, the electoral promise faced limits linked to Syria’s territorial fragmentation and the continued presence of the Assad regime.

The elections of 14 May 2023 confirmed the high level of political polarisation in the country. In the first round of the presidential elections, Erdoğan received 49.52 percent of the vote, while Kılıçdaroğlu received 44.88 percent, and the nationalist candidate Sinan Oğan obtained 5.17 percent (Al Jazeera 2023). Voter turnout was very high, reaching 88.84 percent (Al Jazeera 2023). Since no candidate obtained an absolute majority, a

second round took place on 28 May 2023, in which Erdoğan won with 52.2 percent of the vote (Dierks 2026). Parliamentary elections held at the same time showed a strengthening of nationalist forces, the AKP obtained 267 seats, the CHP 130, the MHP 50, and the İYİ Party 44 (IPU). In percentage terms, the MHP reached 10.1 percent and the İYİ Party 9.7 percent of the vote, confirming the relevance of nationalism in the political landscape (Yıldız 2023).

Erdoğan's re-election implied substantial continuity in policy towards Syria. Although contacts with Damascus were maintained, Ankara seemed determined to preserve its military presence in northern Syria and to avoid situations that could generate new migration flows toward Turkish territory (International Crisis Group 2023). In this framework, the safe zone remained a key political instrument, on one side it was presented as an opportunity for return, on the other side it functioned as a mechanism of deterrence and territorial control.

Between 2023 and 2024, the management of the Syrian presence in Turkey progressively moved toward a strategy more focused on return. Turkish authorities continued to present returns as "voluntary, safe, dignified and orderly" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior 2025), while at the same time strengthening internal control mechanisms, increasing deportations, and expanding the capacity of removal centres. According to the Ministry of Interior, in 2023 and 2024 there was a significant increase in deportations and an extension of Mobile Migration Points in major cities (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior 2025). The Türkiye Report 2024 of the European Commission confirmed the expansion of removal centres and highlighted difficulties in access to legal protection (European Commission 2024).

At the same time, the strategy of the so-called safe zones in northern Syria became a central element of government narrative. The housing construction project in areas under Turkish influence, announced in 2022 and relaunched in 2023, was presented as a structural solution to internal pressure and as a tool to support the resettlement of up to one million Syrians (ANSA 2024, see also Human Rights Watch 2024). However, several international organisations underlined that humanitarian conditions in these areas

remained fragile and that many returns classified as voluntary took place in a context of strong administrative pressure or detention (Human Rights Watch 2024, Lighthouse Reports 2024).

In 2024, after the collapse of the Syrian regime in December 2024, the Turkish government introduced the “go and see” policy, which entered into force in January 2025. This policy allowed one member per household to carry out temporary visits to Syria in order to assess conditions before deciding on a possible permanent return. The declared objective was to allow an informed choice and to formally maintain the principle of voluntariness (Kadkoy 2025). However, the same author underlined that security, economic and infrastructure conditions in Syria remained extremely fragile, with high levels of poverty and severely damaged public services.

At the European level, cooperation with the Union remained central. The Facility for Refugees in Turkey continued to finance projects in education, health and local infrastructure (ECA 2024). The European Court of Auditors recognised that the mechanism provided relevant support to refugees and host communities, but it also underlined limits in cost assessment, in the measurement of the real impact of projects, and in their long-term sustainability, especially in the education and socio-economic sectors (ECA 2024). At the same time, the Türkiye Report 2024 of the European Commission stated that serious concerns remained regarding fundamental rights, conditions in removal centres, and effective access to procedural guarantees (European Commission 2024).

Overall, between 2022 and 2024 there was a progressive shift in the management of the Syrian presence in Turkey. Without formally ending the temporary protection regime, authorities strengthened control tools, administrative checks and return mechanisms, while political discourse increasingly focused on return and national security. The 2023 elections showed how central the refugee issue had become in public debate, in a context marked by economic crisis and growing social dissatisfaction. Turkish migration management therefore consolidated as a strategy oriented toward containment and return,

within a framework still characterised by tensions concerning rights and the real sustainability of returns.

4.3 Turkey under Structural Pressure: Survival, Leverage and the Politicisation of Migration

4.3.1. State Survival and the Securitisation of Migration in Turkey

The evolution of the way in which Turkey has managed the Syrian presence did not occur suddenly, nor can it be explained exclusively as the result of a purely strategic attitude of the Turkish state towards the Syrian issue. As described previously, Turkey initially adopted the so called “open door policy” towards asylum seekers coming from Syria. However, the situation later became increasingly unsustainable due to the excessive number of refugees present in Turkey, a growing economic crisis and constantly rising internal tensions, which led Turkey to change its approach.

As Adar (2020) underlines, from 2015 onwards the Turkish approach became increasingly securitarian, particularly in relation to containing both the Kurdish presence in northern Syria and the PKK, considered by Turkey as a destabilising element of domestic peace. This approach was later extended to the internal migration issue concerning Syrian refugees, as it had come to be perceived as a real threat to internal order. It forced Turkey to face serious economic, political, social and humanitarian difficulties. In this context, migration was no longer only a humanitarian issue, but progressively became intertwined with national security.

From a realist perspective, this shift can be linked to the centrality of state survival in an anarchic international system, as described by Waltz (1979). When the state perceives its internal stability as threatened, on the economic, political and social level, security tends to prevail. The securitisation of migration therefore appears, at least in an initial phase, as a response to structural pressures rather than as a fully planned and pre designed strategy.

The local elections of 2019, marked by the loss of symbolic cities such as Istanbul and Ankara by the AKP, represented a particularly significant moment in this evolution. They

made clear that the management of the Syrian presence was no longer only an administrative or humanitarian issue, but a central theme of domestic political competition. The “temporary” presence of refugees had by then turned into a structural and visible reality, capable of concretely influencing political balances and electoral consensus. In this context, the migration issue progressively became a factor of internal political pressure, contributing to the redefinition of the state’s approach.

Reversed Dependence and the Leverage of the Gatekeeper

If structural pressure helps explain the beginning of the shift, it is not sufficient to explain the subsequent evolution of Turkish policy. Here, Del Sarto’s analysis in *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East* (2021) offers a particularly useful interpretative key.

As already discussed in Chapter III, Del Sarto describes the relations between the European Union and its southern borderlands as structurally asymmetric, characterised by economic dependence, selective integration and relational inequality in terms of power. However, in the field of migration and border control, a partial reversal of dependency relations occurs. Through the externalisation of its migration policies, the European Union has increased its vulnerability in favour of neighbouring states, including Turkey, which have become indispensable in the management of migration flows. In this sense, migration becomes one of the main areas in which states in the region, in this case Turkey, can exercise leverage vis à vis Europe (Del Sarto, 2021).

Aslin and Zaragoza-Cristiani (2016) refer to this dynamic as “gatekeeper leverage”, highlighting that Turkey’s bargaining power does not derive from structural superiority over the EU, but from its strategic position as a transit and containment state. Turkey has hosted the highest number of refugees in the world, and for this reason it has become a gatekeeper. According to Del Sarto’s logic (2021), although Ankara remains economically and commercially dependent on the EU, it has acquired significant power in the migration sector. Leverage does not eliminate asymmetry, but partially rebalances it within a specific field, in this case migration.

The 2016 EU–Turkey Agreement is a clear example of this dynamic. On the one hand, it reduced irregular arrivals to Europe, on the other, it strengthened Turkey’s negotiating position. The repeated threats to “open the borders” demonstrated how migration management has become a political resource. The Union externalised its borders and transformed Turkey into a de facto “external border”, and for this reason it exposed itself to a form of structural vulnerability.

Migration, from a burden, thus becomes leverage.

4.3.2. Migration as a Domestic Instrument of Power

What makes the Turkish case particularly interesting is that, in this context, leverage has not been used only at the external level, but has progressively been integrated into the domestic sphere as well.

From 2019 onwards, the refugee issue became increasingly part of the political arena. The rise in social tensions and the use of the migration issue by the opposition to gain greater support from a population that had grown tired pushed the government to modify its narrative. The initial emphasis on hospitality and religious brotherhood gradually gave way to a discourse centred on return, which became particularly evident during the 2023 presidential elections.

As discussed in Chapter IV, return was presented as “voluntary, safe and dignified”. However, the line separating voluntariness and consent from administrative pressure often appeared blurred and unclear. In this phase, humanitarian language did not disappear, but was progressively reformulated.

Here, Hans J. Morgenthau’s reflections in *Politics Among Nations* (1965) appear particularly relevant. If, as he argues, politics, both international and domestic, is ultimately a struggle for power, then migration management can also be read through this lens. Political action is guided by the national interest defined in terms of power; moral principles do not disappear, but they are subordinated when the stability of the state is perceived as threatened. In this sense, the priority given to security and the preservation

of internal order does not imply the explicit abandonment of normative language, but rather leads to its gradual reformulation.

The constant reference to the voluntariness of returns allows the government to maintain, at least formally, a certain consistency with the international normative framework and to avoid an explicit breach of the principle of non refoulement. At the same time, several independent reports, including those by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have highlighted a gap between the official narrative and practice, raising doubts about the effective voluntariness of these returns and the conditions under which they have taken place and continue to occur. A tension thus emerges between formal legitimacy and the substantive management of security, reflecting a dynamic typical of power politics.

At the domestic level, the reformulation of the migration narrative aims at preserving political support and maintaining legitimacy in a context characterised by growing economic difficulties and increasing polarisation. Migration is no longer only an international, external, administrative or humanitarian issue, it becomes a space in which internal political stability and security are negotiated, and where the state seeks to reaffirm and maintain its control.

Leverage, therefore, is not only a negotiating tool vis à vis the European Union, it also becomes an instrument of domestic political consolidation.

4.3.3. Safe zones: Buffer Zones and the Prevention of Future Threats

The so-called safe zones in northern Syria fully fit into this broader evolution. As Adar (2020) points out, Turkey's motivations have progressively shifted towards containing the YPG/PYD and preventing a territorial continuity of Kurdish-controlled areas along the Syrian border. While maintaining a humanitarian narrative, the project goes beyond simple temporary protection: there is a strategy whose ultimate objective is power projection disguised as humanitarian intervention. Large-scale resettlement plans, the construction of infrastructure and governance practices in the controlled areas suggest a broader design of territorial influence (Adar, 2020).

From a realist perspective, safe zones can be interpreted as:

1. instruments of regional security;
2. mechanisms of influence projection;
3. means of externalising internal migratory pressure.

Firstly, safe zones can be considered instruments of regional security. The main objective appears to be countering the Kurdish threat along the Turkish-Syrian border and preventing a possible territorial continuity of the YPG/PYD, which Ankara considers closely linked to the PKK. In this sense, the creation of buffer zones fits into a broader strategy already initiated with the military operations launched from 2016 onwards and culminating in Operation Peace Spring in 2019. These interventions allowed Turkey to obtain direct control over parts of northern Syrian territory in a complex regional context marked by US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces and Russian influence in favour of the Assad regime. The decision to stabilise and consolidate these areas through safe zones therefore responds to the need to safeguard national security and prevent possible future threats.

Secondly, safe zones can be interpreted as mechanisms of regional influence projection. The management of territory beyond national borders, the construction of facilities, governance initiatives and support for local leadership groups favourable to Ankara show an attempt to organise the regional area in a way that is more aligned with Turkish interests. According to Mearsheimer, in an international system lacking a higher authority, states tend to strengthen their relative position and prevent the emergence of threats in their strategic surroundings when they have the opportunity to do so. In this sense, the Turkish presence in northern Syria does not appear to serve only a defensive function, but also to consolidate a stronger regional position.

Finally, these dynamics are intertwined with the domestic dimension. Moving returns beyond the border also involves the externalisation of migratory pressure that had reached an increasingly high domestic political cost. Safe zones therefore become buffer zones

not only with respect to external threats, but also in relation to internal social and political tensions, contributing to reducing discontent and stabilising the balance of the state.

4.3.4. From Precarious Presence to Institutionalised Return

Overall, the management of the Syrian presence in Turkey has progressively transformed: from a prolonged condition of precariousness to an increasingly institutionalised approach to return. Without formally abolishing the Temporary Protection regime, the authorities have strengthened control measures, administrative checks and return mechanisms, as discussed in Chapter IV.

This evolution cannot be understood solely as an emergency response to changing circumstances. Over the years, migration has gradually been integrated into a broader strategy, involving domestic political survival, negotiation with the European Union and the management of regional security. The refugee issue has therefore ceased to be exclusively a humanitarian matter and has become a space where strategic interests, political balances and power dynamics intersect.

In line with Del Sarto (2019), the leverage acquired by Turkey in the field of migration has not eliminated the structural asymmetry with the European Union. However, it has expanded Ankara's room for manoeuvre, allowing it to use migration management as a tool of negotiation and political leverage. At the same time, as security and stability became increasingly central, normative considerations gradually lost weight, especially when they appeared to conflict with the need to maintain internal order or regional balance.

The Syrian presence, initially conceived as a temporary emergency, has thus turned into a space of political competition, strategic negotiation and power management. The crisis has not been resolved; it has changed its form.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian civil war has been one of the worst conflicts of recent years. Its effects have not been limited to Syria, but have extended to the entire region and to the international context. In particular, the arrival of a large number of refugees in neighbouring countries, especially in Turkey, has transformed this humanitarian crisis into a political, social and strategic issue that will have long-term consequences. This study has sought to analyse how Turkey has responded to the Syrian refugee crisis, considering both humanitarian reasons and security and national interest considerations.

The analysis shows that humanitarian assistance has certainly been present. Turkey has hosted millions of refugees and adapted its legal framework by creating a specific regime, such as the Temporary Protection regime, in order to provide them with a status and access to certain rights. However, over the years, the political choices made by the Turkish state have increasingly appeared linked to issues of internal security, border control, political stability and regional positioning. From the early stages of the Syrian conflict, the management of refugees became intertwined with other sensitive issues, such as security along the Syrian border, the presence of armed groups and the Kurdish question. This demonstrates that migration policy was not developed in isolation, but within a more complex context of regional tensions and rivalries.

Over time, the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey became structural and no longer a temporary emergency. Economic difficulties, social tensions and changes in domestic politics made the migration issue increasingly central in public debate. In this context, cooperation with the European Union, particularly through the 2016 agreement, reinforced the strategic dimension of migration management. Migration progressively became an element of negotiation between Ankara and Brussels, contributing to a relationship characterised by interdependence, but also by asymmetries and tensions. In this sense, the refugee crisis was not only a humanitarian challenge, but also a factor that influenced diplomatic and political dynamics.

The most recent developments, especially between 2019 and 2024, show a further shift. The growing politicisation of the Syrian presence, electoral promises related to returns and the creation of so called “safe zones” in northern Syria indicate a phase in which refugee management has become an integral part of state strategy. In this phase, migration appears increasingly connected to objectives of internal stability and the strengthening of Turkey’s regional position. This does not mean that the humanitarian dimension has disappeared, but rather that it has progressively become intertwined with power and security considerations.

Through the application of a realist and neorealist perspective, this thesis has sought to show that in an international system characterised by competition and diverging interests, states tend to prioritise their own stability and strategic objectives. The Turkish case confirms that international cooperation, although formally based on principles of solidarity and shared responsibility, is often shaped by political calculations and national priorities. In conclusion, Turkey’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis can be interpreted as the result of a complex balance between reception, security and geopolitical interests. The Syrian crisis has demonstrated how migration, in contexts of prolonged conflict, can transform from a humanitarian emergency into a structural component of state policy, confirming the importance of power dynamics in the analysis of contemporary migration policies.

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