

Business

SYRIA- AN INTERNATIONAL BATTLEGROUND

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THE Syrian civil war was initially analyzed within a framework of ethno-religious conflicts with Sunni Arabs protesting the Assad regime, identifying itself as belonging to Shiite, and Kurds in the north demanding rights along with other ethnic groups including the Druze, Assyrians, and Yazidis. But until when the civil war in this country was a sectarian conflict or was it ever truly rooted in such dynamics?

From the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, the Syrian business community had undergone a process of high stratification along economic and political lines which formed a symbiotic relationship with the regime and led a large portion of the society into precarious positions. "The state's retreat from a robust socialist distributive role subjected millions of Syrians to the dictates of market fluctuations without any corresponding increase in salaries and wages," Samer Abboud claimed in his article "The Economics of War and Peace in Syria."

The decline of oil production, which reached its peak in the 1990s and hit 677,000 barrels per day (b/d) and hovered around 380,000 b/d in 2010, and long years of drought that preceded the outbreak of war had caused many Syrians to immigrate to cities where they can escape the poverty and a precarious life due to the government's failure in its distributive role, endemic youth employment and meager income per capita. The situation in the end created frustrated and disenchanted groups of people ready to protest.

From the very beginning of the clashes, the Syrian civil war has never been entirely ethnicity or religion-based. Nor has it been entirely a matter of Syria's interior affairs.

The escalating armed conflict had weakened the Assad regime in the fourth year of the civil war with control over only 19,000 square kilometers. The involvement of Iran, Iran supported Hezbollah and Russia has however enabled Assad to seize control over a large part of Syria, which is located on an area of 185,000 square kilometers, up to 80,000 square kilometers. But until Russia and Iran militarily involved launching airstrikes on rebel groups and fighting side-by-side with the regime forces, voices from Europe and another side of the Atlantic, mainly the U.S., already rose, sometimes with a high pitch.

Early in 2011, then-U.S. President Barack Obama called upon Assad to step down and issued sanctions on Syria. Obama reiterated his call later and announced that the use of chemical weapons was a "red line." The U.S. president sought congressional approval for military intervention after Assad regime forces used chemical weapons in Damascus in 2013. Yet, that approval never received. His iterative call was echoed in EU countries when German Chancellor Angela Merkel, then-U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron and then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy also urged Assad to resign. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar also harshly opposed Assad and called for a change in the regime that is still in the hands of Assad and his allies.

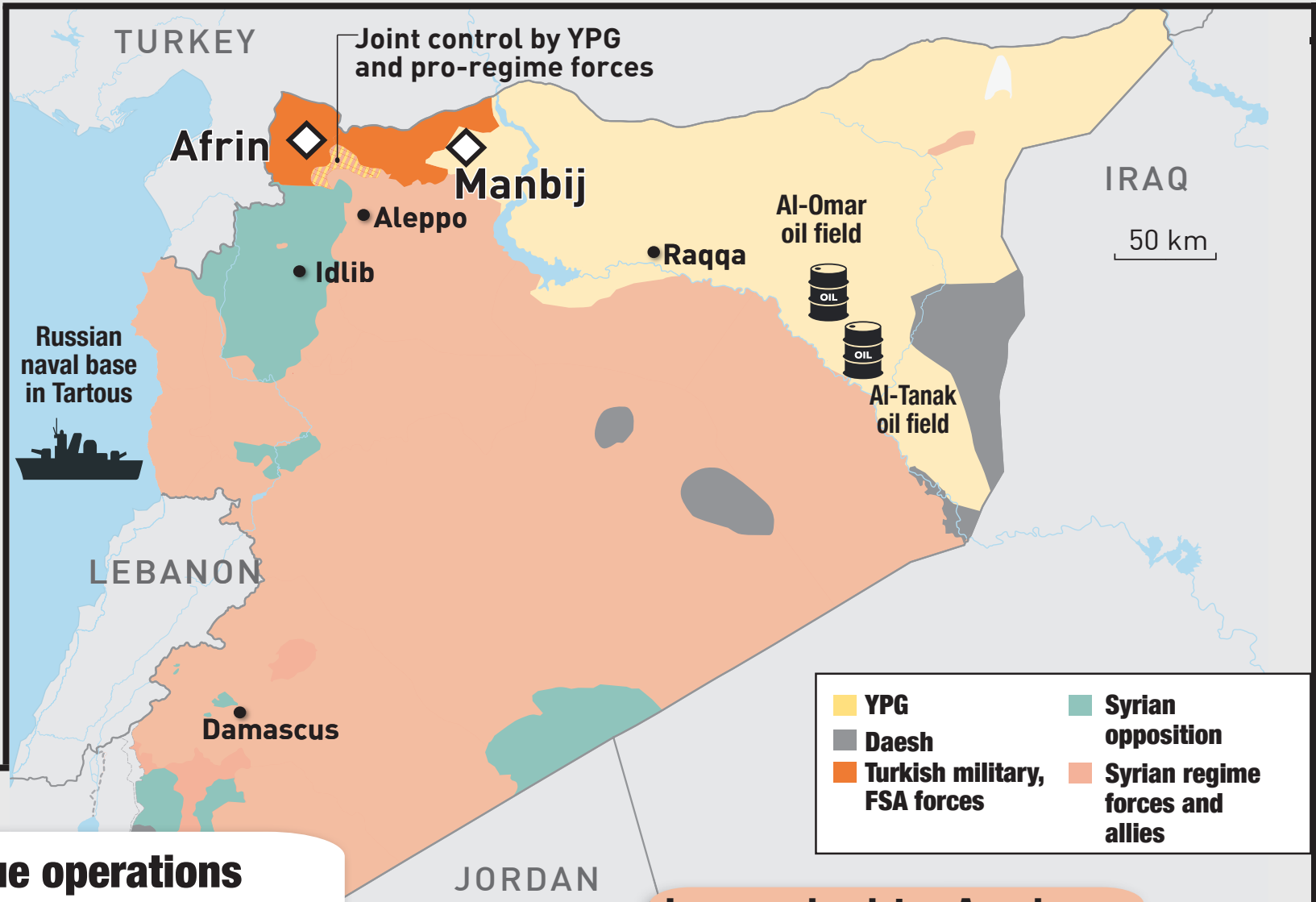
All these international diplomatic interventions later morphed into military interventions as Russia and Iran reinforced their foothold in Syria. While the U.S. approved the allocation of military and financial resources to rebel groups in Syria, Turkey allied with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the emergence of Daesh, which seized the regions that were swept into a vacuum after Assad lost control, led international forces to form a coalition against the terror organization as it posed great dangers to the national security of Turkey, European states and the U.S. with bomb attacks that claimed the lives of hundreds of people.

It is never possible to comprehend the Syrian war without analyzing the involvement of international actors, which indeed reshaped and framed the conflict itself, Christopher Phillips argues in his book "Battle for Syria." "External actors also helped prolong the war through intervention. Past conflicts have shown that while intervention on one side can hurry a conflict's end, a 'balanced intervention,' when actors intervene on each side, lengthens wars by creating a stalemate," he wrote, and the latter was certainly the case for Syria.

"Foreign involvement in the civil war first took the form of diplomatic support, then it was economic support, then it was material support for fighters, then it was fighting themselves directly [...] And I don't see why that shouldn't continue," Phillips later told The Atlantic, referring to step by step transformation of the Syrian civil war into the Syrian from Yet, the question remains: Why has Syria been transformed into an international battleground? Joshua Landis,

Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, told Daily Sabah in an email exchange that the reason why Syria turned into an international war was that the country has many important neighbors and occupies an important strategic position. Landis' argument was echoed in theories explained by Phillips and claiming that "civil wars are more likely in states neighboring recent civil wars that share ethnic ties with people in those previous conflict zones. Syria neighbored and shared ethnic ties with three states with recent civil wars: Lebanon, Iraq and the Kurdish-populated region of Turkey, meaning that weaponry and weapon supply networks were easy to come by." This theory proves the involvement of PKK in Turkey in its Syrian-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed People's Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria, as well as the Hezbollah's support for Assad regime as the two, are described as Shiite allies.

The intervention of Russia and the U.S., however, is hard to explain with the "neighbor with recent civil war" theory. When Landis said, "Everyone wants leverage in Syria," he truly meant everyone. While Russia aimed to reassert itself as a regional and global player and reinforce its presence in Eastern Mediterranean with naval forces in Latakia, the U.S. did not want to let Iran and Russia become the regional power players. Controlling Syria or having a stake in Syria means controlling the axes of power in a global political and economic area as the country is positioned on a gateway into the Eastern Mediterranean with opulent natural resources and to strategic countries in the Middle East. When Phillips said, "The decision-makers are now not really Syrians, perhaps with the exception of Assad," he emphasized the truly bescenic nature of the internationalization of the Syrian civil war. For all actors involved, the Syrian war is more than a mere influence contest but offers a tremendous opportunity to reinvent their position in the international hierarchy and demonstrate leadership in the Middle Eastern quagmire. It seems, however, that the position can be secured via the control of resources of economic value as they have changed hands between Assad regime under Russian control or other proxy networks such as Daesh and the YPG, which use these resources to finance their war or as a bargaining chip with the regime.



Despite ambiguity, US fully involved in Syrian war

SINCE the beginning of the armed conflict between the Assad regime and rebel groups, the U.S. vouched for the latter with diplomatic support in the first place. Until September 2014, the U.S.' involvement in Syria continued in a diplomatic line with President Obama's calls to Assad to step down and warning against the use of chemical weapons, "which was a red line for the U.S." When Congress approved a plan to arm and train rebel groups in Syria to fight against Daesh, the country formed a coalition against Daesh and launched airstrikes against the terror group.

When the armed conflict between Daesh and the YPG, the PKK's armed wing in Syria, escalated in Apr al-Arab (Kobane) in the fall of 2014, the U.S. increased its military support by providing heavy weaponry and giving support with airstrikes. From that moment on, the U.S. provided continuous support for the YPG with the allocation of \$500 million per year from the Pentagon's budget and the country also set up numerous bases around regions controlled by the YPG. However, the U.S. alliance with YPG has strained relations with Turkey since the terror group poses threat to Turkey's national security along its Syrian border. Moreover, a Kurdish armed group with access to the Eastern Mediterranean via northern Syria is another threat to Turkey's security.

Moreover, when it came to April 2017 and Assad forces killed dozens of people in a chemical attack, breaching a 2014 treaty which guaranteed that all chemical weapons

arsenal safely removed from Syria, the U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the launch of airstrikes on regime forces.

The brief history of how the U.S. got involved in Syria cannot explain its continued presence even after Daesh was defeated to a large extent. With the trauma of Afghanistan and 2003-2011 Iraqi war, it was difficult for the U.S. to form a public opinion for a military intervention in Syria with many opposing voices among Republicans and Democrats. But Syria was too important to let other power players like Russia and Iran take the stage. With relatively limited military action but large sums of financial and military support to its proxies like YPG as well as diplomacy traffic, the U.S. inserted its claim in the country. Nevertheless, despite the Daesh defeat, the country does not cease its support for its allies and continues to establish new military bases. International media outlets reported late March that the U.S. set up a new military base near the al-Omar oilfield in southeastern Deir ez-Zor in Syria to support combat against the Syrian regime forces. Syria's biggest oil field, al-Omar is located on the east bank of the Euphrates River. In Nov. 2017, U.S.-backed YPG also took control of the Syria's second largest oil field, al Tanak oil field located in the northeast of Deir ez-Zor. Again, these forces also captured the country's largest gas plant Conco located in the same province in Sept. 2017.

When asked about why the U.S. is remaining in Syria, professor Landis said,

"The U.S. is remaining in Syria in order to roll back Iran and hurt Russia," to thwart any claim of power by its two regional rivals.

"Washington policy leaders believe that by denying Assad 50 percent of Syria's resources such as oil, water, agriculture, it will retain leverage and be able to turn Syria into a quagmire for Iran and Russia," Landis told Daily Sabah. This policy does not only target the Assad regime which will remain poor and weak, Landis argues, but U.S. rivals Russia and Iran will have to continuously subsidize the regime in Damascus and limit their gains. Because of its history in the region, the U.S. may have avoided any extensive military engagement in Syria, however, the rising foothold of Iran and Russia, which struck deals worth billions to reconstruct the country's energy industry, have prompted the U.S. to use economic means of war by obstructing Assad regime and its allies from accessing large resources like oil fields and fertile agricultural lands in the east bank of the Euphrates river. Moreover, if the U.S. continues to stay in the country, it will be to limit Iranian gains and support its regional allies like Turkey, Israel, Jordan and Iraq, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institute argued. Despite the ambiguous position of the U.S. or its late involvement in the war vis-à-vis Russia and Iran, the country does not seem to be leaving Syria any time soon for the leverage is high with everyone seeking political and economic gains with ambitions to exercise influence over the entire Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite all conditional changes, FSA remains to be Turkey's major ally

TURKEY's main ally in the region, the FSA, was founded in 2011 by former officers from the Syrian Armed Forces who opposed the use of violence by the Syrian government. It is a military network that consists of many Arab, Turkmen and Kurdish subgroups and ultimately aims to bring down the Syrian regime. Despite being formed by former soldiers, before long, the group expanded with the inclusion of civilians, reaching the number that is estimated to be more than 25,000. It also quickly gained strength and international support for its fight against regime forces, becoming the main, legitimate, opposition group in the country. The group differentiated itself from other opposition groups by saying that it is a "more moderate and stronger alternative." In development of the group, Turkey's support has become quite effective. Members of the group are initially trained by the Friends of Syria Group, which was formed to find a solution to the Syrian civil war. It was composed of 11 countries, including the U.S., U.K. and Turkey. Former President Barack Obama's administration particularly supported opposition groups against the Syrian regime since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 via the CIA - the FSA was the main opposition group that was supported. The FSA was again the main group that was trained in the train and equip program that was launched by the CIA to fight against Daesh in 2014. However, in 2015, things started to change with the U.S.' policy shift. The country changed the focus of the program and started to train and equip the PKK's Syrian armed wing the YPG instead, supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following the U.S.' cut of support and the rise of the SDF, the FSA went into decline in 2014. However, in 2016, with the support of Turkey, the group regained its force, which also has become the beginning of its joint actions with the Turkish military. Operation Euphrates Shield was launched in August 2016 by Turkey alongside the FSA. Following the operation, the Syrian National Army was founded in December 2017, consisting of approximately 30 subgroups that were linked to the FSA to protect the area that was liberated in Operation Euphrates Shield and defend civilians against the Syrian regime and groups like Daesh and the YPG. Free Police Forces were also established from FSA fighters in the liberated regions to provide security and according to Anadolu Agency (AA), almost 4,000 free police trained by Turkey started duty. On Jan. 20, Turkey and the FSA launched another operation, named Operation Olive Branch against the YPG in northern Syria's Afrin region. According to the Turkish General Staff, the operation aims to establish security and stability along the border and in the region as well as to protect Syrian people from the oppression and cruelty of terrorists.

Turkey determined to continue operations in Syria until all terrorist elements cleared

TODAY, Turkey is one of the most active and critically important actors of the Syrian civil war. However, the country was not always closely involved with the crisis despite being clear about its stance over the issue from the very start. Although Turkey had quite a close relationship, both economically and politically, with the Syrian regime before, as soon as the crisis broke out in 2011, the country did not hesitate to express that it is siding with the Syrian opposition while condemning the regime for its brutal actions against its own people. Alongside with the U.S. and some other regional actors like Saudi Arabia, the country started to support the FSA in its fight against the regime. In 2013, with the emergence of Daesh, Turkey has become a part of the international coalition that is led by the U.S. against the terrorist organization. However, the real direct military involvement of the country to the conflict came in 2016 with Operation Euphrates Shield, when Turkey decided to ensure its border security by eliminating all terrorist elements, particularly Daesh and the PKK's Syrian wing the YPG, from northern Syria alongside the FSA. It is followed by another operation named Operation Olive Branch toward Afrin in 2018.

Turkey's main aims in involving itself in the Syrian war are eliminating threats to national security and strengthening its influence in the region. These are the political aims of the country, which are quite apparent. However, there are also motives that are more economic concerns and endgame. According to Defne (Sadakda) Arslan, director and Istanbul Summit and representative in Turkey at the Atlantic Council, all that is happening in Syria is a power game, energy resources play a major role, and Turkey is one of the critical players. Mainly, securing the Turkey-Qatar pipeline and preventing the PKK/YPG from controlling the oil resources of northern Syria that Turkey needs. In accordance with these aims, the country's main enemies in the region are Daesh, the YPG and regional terrorist regime. However, although being the main enemy at the beginning of the crisis, as other threats like the

terrorist organizations emerged, the Syrian regime seem to be remained in the background. However, when it comes to the allies of Turkey, the picture is not as clear as it is with the enemies, except the FSA and Qatar, which are the closest and clearest allies of the country since the beginning of the war.

Turkey, a NATO ally, is also supposed to be a natural ally of the U.S., which seemed to be the case at the beginning of the war. However, the alliance started to shatter in 2017, when the U.S. decided to arm the SDF, which is an organization that is dominated by the YPG, against the Daesh, despite Turkey's objections. Although the country now and then announces that it stopped its support to the SDF and sees Turkey as a critical ally, with the conflicting statements from the U.S. departments on the issue and Turkey's operation to Afrin, the tension between the two countries is still not being completely removed. Besides, Turkey is getting closer with the Russia also led to alienation of the country from the U.S. This closeness with Russia is actually quite a surprising development at first glance since the country is the biggest ally of the Syrian regime. The all alliance between the two countries started to be built following the plane crash crisis when a Russian war plane was shot down by Turkish forces in 2015. Although the side effects of the crisis affected the relationships deeply for quite a time, before long the countries started to develop strong ties, even initiated Syrian peace talks in Astana in May 2017 with the participation of Iran as well. The main reason behind this convergence is mainly the natural gas that is provided by Russia and vital for Turkey. However, Arslan refused the argument that Turkey is getting closer to Russia and Iran. "Let's not forget that all these three countries are neighbors and dependent on each other, but at the same time Russia and Iran are historical rivals of Turkey," she said. "Turkey is also a NATO ally, and despite the current issues, an EU accession country. So, Russia and Iran will be stronger in their actions, if they can keep Turkey closer," she added.

Iran spends a lot on Assad, now seeks to protect investment

IRAN appeared as the staunchest backer of the Assad regime from the beginning of Syrian civil war, since it conducted an extensive and very costly effort to keep Assad in power as long as possible in order to protect its regional interests. While Tehran has great leverage on four Arab capitals, Damascus, Sana'a, Baghdad and Beirut, analysts argue that the country has already established a "Shiite Crescent" from Iran to Lebanon and go to great expense to protect its line, which is bringing great advantage to Tehran in pursuing its regional goals. Iranian military support varies from security to intelligence, which has been assisting Assad regime. Under this context, al-Quds Forces, intelligence services, law enforcement, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Forces and Shiite paramilitary groups named the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU) have a large existence in Syria to a great extent. The troops are stationed almost in every part of Syria, but intensified especially around Aleppo, Damascus and near Lebanon's border. Tehran's military entities were sometimes targeted by Israeli airstrikes, which see Tehran as the staunchest enemy in the region. Research has revealed how vital Iranian support is to sustain the Assad regime. According to the recent reports, while the military of the Assad regime has fewer than 50,000 men, Iran has deployed more than 70,000 Iranian and non-Iranian forces in Syria. The estimations on Tehran's spending in Syrian civil war also vary. In spite of real numbers are not known, the country is considered to spend tens of billion dollars so far, and the number could reach to \$100 billion according to some reports.

The weakness of Assad regime already has already constrained Iran's influence in Syria. Tehran tries to prevent Israeli aggression to northern Syria, but at the same time it also seeks ways to curb Turkey's operations in northern Syria due to the concern of Ankara's growing influence in the region. It also has an inner-conflict with Russia for the leverage on Damascus. Having spent many times more than Moscow for keeping Assad regime alive, Tehran does not want to lose its well-deserved position and wants to become the first actor for the rebuilding process of Syria, and also wants to get ahead of Russia in energy deals.

Although not directly involved in the conflict, Gulf states have both geopolitical and sectarian aims in Syria

ALTHOUGH they may seem like they are among the more silent actors of the conflict, the Gulf states have actually been the players of the Syrian War since the very beginning with probably the most rooted and clear aims. The main aim of the whole Gulf states is to overthrow the Syrian regime. However, the reason behind this aim is not the brutality of the regime, but the sectarian differences. The Gulf states want a Sunni Syrian regime because they want the country to get away from Shiite Iran and get closer with the Gulf so that the Gulf countries can get strengthen in the region. Yet, for Hussein Ibish, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, the sectarian causes of the Gulf were not the only reason behind their interest to the conflict. It was also a geopolitical one. Will Toddman, an associate fellow in the CSIS Middle East Program, also said the Gulf states' involvement in the Syrian conflict is motivated by strategic interests rather than sectarian politics. For all these reasons, since the beginning of the war, all of the Gulf states supported the Syrian opposition. "The reason they were involved was opposition to the Assad regime and an effort to prevent increased Iranian influence in the Arab world," said Ibish while adding that this effort of theirs did not succeed, at least not yet. However, in time, there have been some differences among the states in terms of how to support which groups and why. Qatar remained as somewhat of an active actor with Saudi Arabia in the region while the other countries like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) chose a path in which they play a diplomatic role and focus on humanitarian aid. Kuwait, on the other hand, chose the middle way because of the Shiite merchant families that are arbiter in the parliament. Saudis supported more radical opposition groups while Qatar supported more mediator ones like the FSA. As a matter of fact, relations between Qatar and Syria were quite good until 2011 because of the South Pars/North Dome pipeline, which is the primary wealth source of the country and is shared with Iran, whose only Arabic ally country was Syria. However, for Ibish, this is about the regional strategic landscape, and advantages and disadvantages that greatly transcend money. In Ibish's opinion, either changing the leadership in Syria or changing Syria's foreign policy under the same leadership remains a crucial goal for these countries. For Toddman, however, smaller Gulf states (Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE) stopped calling as vocally for Assad to be overthrown in 2015 and 2016 as the focus shifted to combating the Daesh while Saudi Arabia and Qatar continue to support opposition groups in Syria and to oppose the regime. "But," he added, "given the opposition's battlefield losses, including most recently in Eastern Ghouta, their ability to shape the outcome of the conflict is severely diminished."

Diplomatically absent EU looks to partake in reconstruction of Syria

SINCE the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the EU has repetitively called on Assad to step down and indulged in an incorrect assumption that the Assad regime would soon fall out of power. However, the involvement of Russia and Iran invalidated the EU's political calculations. The diplomatic dialogue between the U.S. and Russia during last year have also put the union in a second-tier position, most analysts argue. Out of all the foreign actors, EU remains the only one that has least shaped the turn of events in the country's seven-year war. European military involvement against Daesh in Syria came mostly from France, whose air force complements U.S. operations. The U.S. and France were supported directly or indirectly by Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the U.K. and Belgium. Despite the inaction, the EU has been one of the countries that has been most affected by the Syrian war. The influx of refugees, albeit relatively small compared to other countries like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, has turned the internal dynamics of domestic politics upside down in major EU countries like Germany and France, leading to the rise of far-right ideologies. The threat of Daesh has also hurt major cities in these countries with serial bomb attacks taking the lives of hundreds of people. The EU's overall role has however unfolded in the humanitarian field as the member states have seen the influx of refugees. The union and its member states have allocated a total of 5 billion euros in assistance to Syrian refugees from 2011 to mid-2016 and pledged an additional 3 billion euros at the Supporting Syria conference in London in February 2016. Absent from

the diplomatic process that shaped the course of events in Syria, EU now aims to reconfigure its policy of Syria via humanitarian aid, development aid, supporting reform, NGO funding, coordination capacity, and a political-military role in a future settlement. "The EU has an enormous interest in rebuilding areas in Syria where violence has been de-escalated. By facilitating a return to normal life in these areas through immediate humanitarian assistance, economic development, and eventual reconstruction, the EU could encourage refugee returns and contribute to the stabilization of the region," Emily Burchfield of Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for Middle East told Daily Sabah in reference to EU's changing attitude to fine-tune its policy in the war-torn country. The EU's impetus in rebuilding Syria is not purely altruistic, but driven by the desire to mitigate the threat the refugee crisis poses to European security and solidarity," she added. Burchfield, however, noted that the EU can provide technical and financial support to rebuilding efforts outside of the regime control as the EU has concerns that funds allocated for reconstruction in Assad's Syria would almost certainly be siphoned off to benefit the regime, enriching the very parties responsible for Syria's destruction, emphasizing that Assad will clearly retain the control of much of the Syria. The allocation of resources to areas outside of the regime control is critical, Burchfield argued, remarking that "the lions share of reconstruction contracts for projects in regime-controlled areas are likely to go to firms from Iran and Russia, rewarding those who had a direct hand in destroying Syria in the first place."

12 Million people displaced

6 Million Syrian refugees

3.5 Million refugees in Turkey

More than 465,000 lives lost

\$226B Cumulative loss in Syrian GDP from 2011 to 2016

Syria war timeline

2011		2012		2013	2014		2015		2015		2016		2017		2018	
● February	● March	● May	● July	● February	● January	● September	● January	● September	● August	● December	● February	● April	● January	● March		
	Protests break out in Daraa	Tensions during protests escalate	Assad regime and opposition engaged in armed conflict	Opposition takes control of Aleppo	Iran-backed Hezbollah intervention	March 2014 Daesh attacks northern cities	2014 U.S.-led coalition airstrikes against Daesh	March 2015 Daesh attacks strategic cities	Russian military intervention	Turkey launches Operation Euphrates Shield against Daesh	Regime forces seize Aleppo	Turkish forces establish control in al-Bab	U.S. launches airstrikes on Assad forces	Turkey and FSA launch Operation Olive Branch in Afrin	Turkey and FSA take control of Afrin	

DESIGNER: BÜŞRA ÖZTÜRK