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Reconstructing Syria:

What the EU's Refugee Facility in Turkey Can Teach Us



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Abstract

The European Union (EU)'s resilience-building policies on migration and forced displacement have been extensively examined, particularly following the Syrian refugee crisis. Numerous studies have analyzed the factors contributing to the effectiveness of these policies in the EU's southern neighborhood. However, less attention has been given to the implementation of the EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), the largest humanitarian relief program, especially as Turkey's status as an official EU accession country has added political complexity to the situation. This policy commentary delves into the FRIT mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the EU's resilience-building strategies in refugee governance. This analysis is

particularly relevant now, as the possibility of refugee returns to Syria has gained traction following the regime change in December 2024. As a result, key principles of EU interventions such as legitimacy, efficiency, transparency, and inclusiveness have become even more critical in fostering local ownership and building community resilience and self-reliance. We conclude with policy insights derived from the case of Turkey to shed light on how the EU, a major partner and aid provider for refugee governance in Turkey, can revisit its resilience-building strategies to endorse effective and sustainable policies in Syria in the long term.

Introduction

With the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024, a new era has begun for Syria where discussions around its post-conflict reconstruction are gathering momentum. Reconstruction in Syria has been portrayed as the new front of the conflict, a continuation of the struggle by different means (Hinnebusch, 2020). The role of the EU as a resilience builder in these efforts will be paramount, and it should adapt its approach to align better with the current realities and challenges on the ground (Asseburg, 2020). Even before the fall of the regime, the EU was already advised to particularly target humanitarian aid more effectively, dismantle certain sectoral sanctions, and support the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure for a more effective contribution to improving living conditions and avoiding further erosion of public services (Asseburg, 2020, p.6) Within the new situation, we argue that the EU's resilience-building policies geared towards the governance of the Syrian refugee crisis can inform its approach to Syria's reconstruction.

Since 2011, the civil war in Syria has caused unprecedented human displacement and infrastructural devastation. Subsequently, more than 12 million Syrians were forced to leave behind their homeland, with a refugee population of 4.2 million by mid-2015 (UNCHR, 2025). Although many made the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to reach Europe, most refugees remained in Syria's neighboring countries, notably Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The EU's policies during the Syrian refugee influx were criticized for externalizing border controls to non-EU states and shifting the responsibility to the refugee-hosting countries to prevent migrants and refugees from setting foot on EU territory (Pacciardi & Berndtsson 2022; Moreno-Lax and Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Curzi 2016). There is

also a growing scholarship addressing the EU's resilience-building policies and humanitarian policies in refugee governance, especially in areas of limited statehood and contested orders such as Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen (Magen & Richemond-Barak, 2021; Stollenwerk, 2021; Huber & Woertz, 2021; Özçürümez, 2021; Okpanachi & Kanuert, 2023) Yet, in the case of Turkey, which is the host of the largest Syrian refugee population, the academic and policy debates remain limited to the political factors since Turkey is also an official EU accession country (Lehner, 2019; Saatçioğlu, 2019; Sönmez & Kırık, 2017; Ulusoy & Battjes, 2017; Üstübici, 2019).

This policy commentary instead draws insights from the EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) which is largest humanitarian relief program of the EU in its history. It explores how FRIT supports Syrian refugees' self-reliance while alleviating Turkey's hosting burden. The analysis focuses on key aspects of refugee governance, legitimacy, efficiency, transparency, and inclusiveness as defined by Stollenwerk et al. (2021). By translating lessons from FRIT's implementation into actionable recommendations, it offers guidance for the EU's role in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction. The next section presents our method and approach. Then we underline the relevance of the EU's resilience-building strategies for promoting the self-reliance of refugees in hosting countries. The third part presents our empirical results focusing on the FRIT mechanism and discusses the challenges in the implementation phase. To conclude, we make recommendations for the EU to address these issues in building effective, inclusive, and sustainable policies in the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria.

Method and Approach

This study draws on a qualitative, multi-method approach that integrates insights from first-hand observations, desk research, and informal conversations with stakeholders involved in migration governance in Turkey. As academic researchers based in Turkey, the authors have closely followed the evolution of FRIT-funded projects and their implementation. The observations presented here stem from direct engagement with policy frameworks, civil society initiatives, and fieldwork interactions that provided nuanced insights into both the operational challenges and the broader political context of the EU–Turkey partnership. Our desk research involved reviewing reports, academic theses, and policy documents produced by EU institutions, international organizations, and civil society actors, which allowed us to identify recurring themes, challenges, and policy gaps. Complementing this, we conducted informal conversations between 2021 and 2023 with approximately a dozen stakeholders: four experts, six NGO practitioners, and two policymakers/administrators. While not structured as formal interviews, these exchanges nonetheless provided valuable ground-level perspectives that are often absent from official documents. By combining observational data, desk research, and stakeholder insights across this period, the study adopts a holistic lens to critically analyze the strengths, limitations, and unintended consequences of FRIT.

The EU's Resilience-building Strategies in Refugee Governance

For a long time, democracy promotion and state-building were considered the main remedies for tackling governance problems in the EU's near abroad (Barques & Morillas, 2021). This approach has by now been debunked as both ineffective and illegitimate (Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2019; Bieber, 2019; Mendelski, 2015.) In the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016, resilience building has been presented as a new approach to the EU's crisis management policies (Stollenwerk et al., 2021; Barbé & Morillas, 2019; Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020; Tocci, 2020). The EUGS defines resilience as the "ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EUGS 2016, p. 23). It emphasizes the "local" and the 'person' on inside-out processes of learning and capacity-building" (Korosteleva & Flockhart, 2020, p.158). Resilience puts societal actors, domestic communities, and even individuals front and center of the strategy and emphasizes local ownership and tailor-made approaches in capacity building (Juncos, 2017).

The resilience building has been to build or strengthen the capacity of local institutions to reduce needs, vulnerabilities, and risks in the long term. The EU recognizes "the importance of working closely with local communities, civil society, local authorities, research institutions, and the private sector" in building resilient societies (Council of the European Union, 2013; European Commission, 2013). In the area of migration and forced displacement, resilience has become a commonly used concept (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020). The EU has placed "[a] special focus in [the] work on resilience...on origin and transit countries of migrants and refugees" (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 27). The EU's resilience-building strategies have been well explored during the Syrian civil war that started in 2011 causing a massive refugee flux to Europe. Some EU responses to recent migration-related challenges have been ad hoc, driven by security concerns, and paving the way for greater emphasis on control-oriented responses than on people's humanitarian or protection needs (MEDAM, 2022). Several scholars have criticized the EU for putting the responsibility on the refugee-hosting states and jeopardizing their stability instead of developing their capacities for promoting effective migration governance (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Fakhoury, 2019; Scott-Smith, 2018). Yet, the EU has also contributed to the development of sustainable policies to address humanitarian needs in the hosting societies. Social trust within societies and communities, legitimacy of (state and non-state)

governance actors and institutions, and effective, fair, and inclusive governance institutions were defined as

conditions under which the EU's resilience-building policies can promote more effective results. Scholars explored these conditions, especially in areas of limited statehood and contested orders in the EU's southern neighborhood such as Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen (Magen & Richemond-Barak, 2021; Stollenwerk, 2021; Huber & Woertz, 2021; Özçürümez, 2021; Okpanachi & Kanuert, 2023). However, these strategies have not been thoroughly examined in the context of the EU's FRIT in Turkey.

The FRIT was established in 2016 as a result of the EU-Turkey Statement which aimed to curb irregular migration to Europe by enhancing Turkey's capacity to host refugees. Notably, the deal solidified Ankara's commitment to take back irregular migrants attempting to enter Greece. In exchange, the EU agreed to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey on a one-to-one basis and pay €6 billion in aid to Turkey for Syrian migrant communities under FRIT. Later, an additional aid was added outside the framework of the Facility including € 345 million in refugee assistance mobilised between 2011 and 2016, € 535 million in bridge funding in 2020, €3 billion in 2021-2023, €520 million in 2024 and an additional € 2 billion until 2027. European Commission (2024) reports that total EU assistance allocated to refugees in Türkiye since 2011 amounts to €12.5 billion.

Scholars turned to political factors related to the EU's policies geared towards an accession country to explain the limited impact of the EU in creating predictable and reliable migration governance (Lehner, 2019; Üstübici 2019; Saatçioğlu, 2016; Sönmez & Kırık, 2017; Ulusoy & Battjes, 2017). EU's policy that associates Turkey's EU accession process with its success in ending the refugee flows to Europe rather than complying with the EU's liberal democratic membership criteria overshadowed the EU-Turkey deal (Ulusoy 2025; Sert, 2022; Ariner & Kader 2022; Saatçioğlu 2019). In this regard, the EU-Turkey deal was very much criticized as a tool of externalization that enabled Brussels to solve the migrant crisis in the EU outside of its borders (Ulusoy et al 2025; Pries & Zulfikar Savci 2023; Casaglia & Pacciardi 2022; Afailal & Fernandez, 2018; Üstübici and İçduygu. 2018).

The deal also increased the EU's dependence on Turkey for the management of the refugee crisis and resulted in the

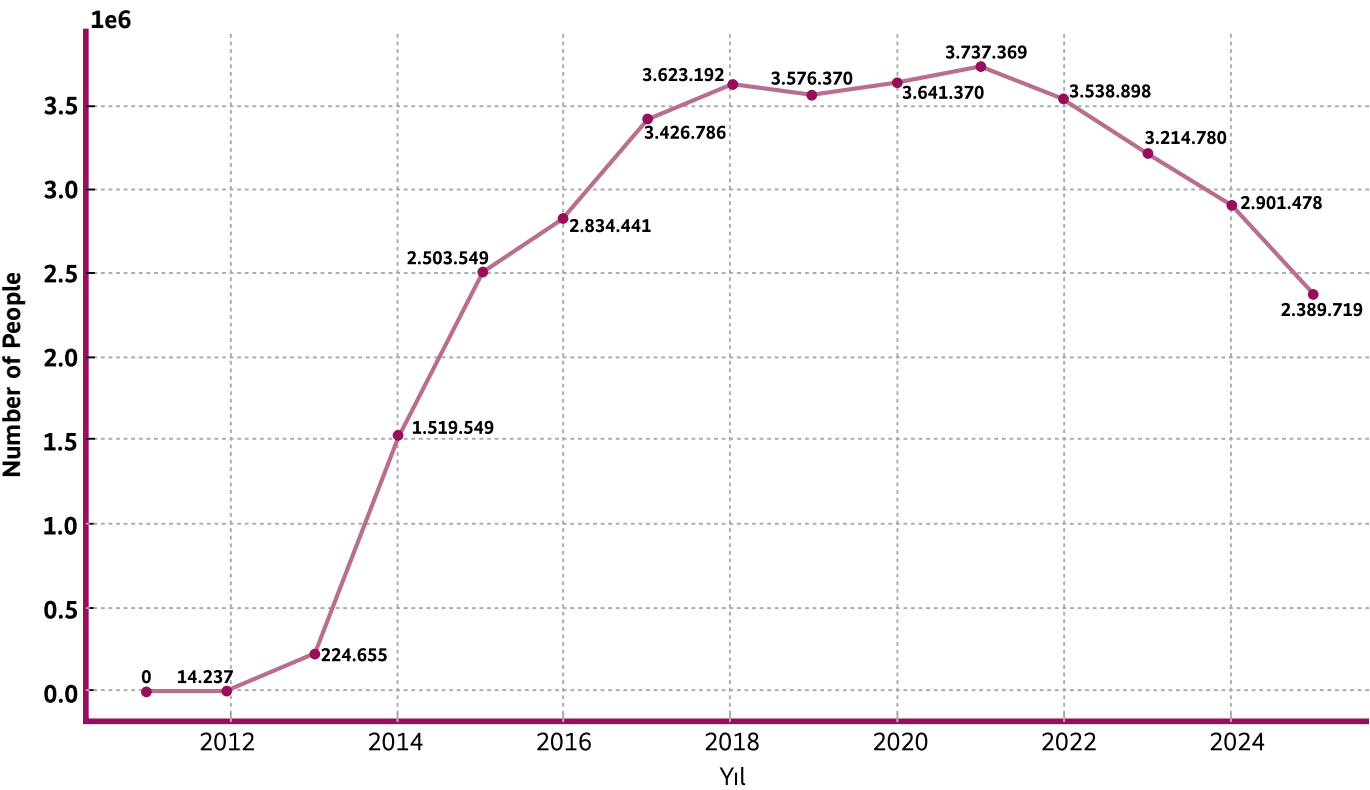
politicization of the process. The Turkish government often used its bargaining leverage to extract concessions and further promises from Brussels (Soyaltin-Colella et al 2022; Dempsey & McDowell, 2019) and promote its geopolitical agenda in the Middle East. For example, in 2019, the Turkish government pressured the EU by threatening to open its borders, allowing Syrian refugees to migrate to Western countries unless a safe zone was established in Syria. Following the creation of so-called safe zones near Idlib and in areas secured by the Euphrates Shield Operation, the government claimed that over 500,000 refugees had voluntarily returned to Syria (Anadolu Agency, 2022). However, reports indicate that Turkish authorities have detained and forcibly deported hundreds of Syrian refugees to unsafe conditions in Syria (Human Rights Watch 2022). In its ruling in Akkad v. Turkey, the European Court of Human Rights criticized the policy of returning migrants held in Removal Centers to Syria, despite the potential risk of refoulement (Ovacik et al. 2024). This practice is viewed as mirroring the EU's

externalization policies, even though the Turkish government has accepted the role of being the guardian of Europe's externalized borders (Sert & Alparlan, 2022).

It is also important to note that the EU-Turkey migration deal yielded some positive outcomes, as it is believed to have significantly curbed irregular migration across the Aegean Sea (Muftuler-Bac, 2022; Mandiraci, 2020; Albanese, 2021). Under the readmission scheme, 37,743 Syrians have been relocated to EU countries by 2023 (ASILE 2024). However, this number remains insignificant compared to the 4 million forcibly displaced people, including 2.4 million Syrians (as of October 2025, see Graph 1) holding temporary protection status in Turkey. Despite the FRIT mechanism's goal of improving living conditions for Syrians in Turkey, its effectiveness remains largely underexplored due to the highly politicized nature of the EU-Turkey Deal.

Syrians under Temporary Protection Regime (2011-2025)

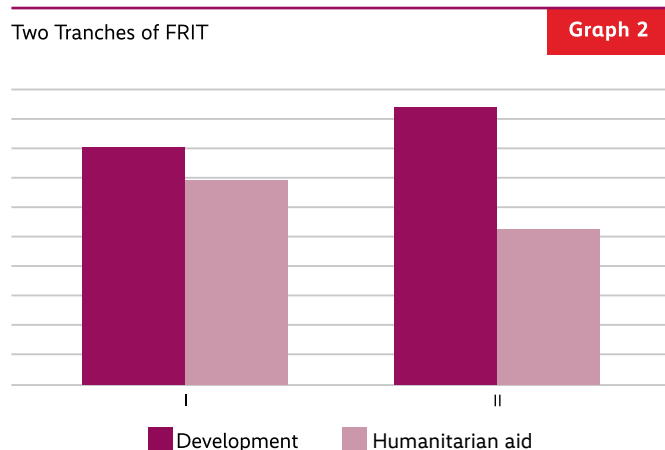
Graph 1



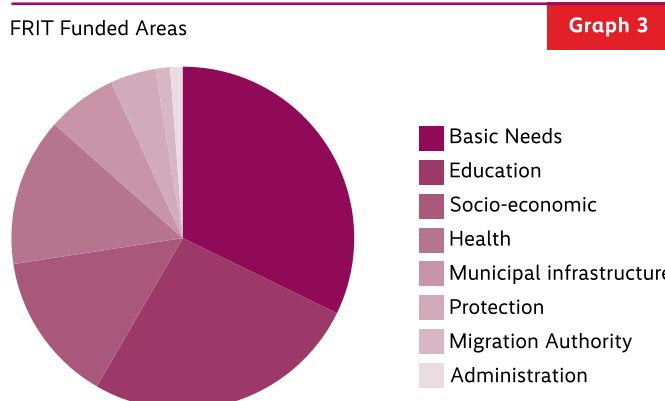
Source: Presidency of Migration Management (2025)

The ‘FRIT’ Under Spotlight: Legitimacy, Efficiency, Transparency, and Inclusiveness

The FRIT’s main objective was to address the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey and promote their self-reliance with a total of €6 billion in financial support. The initiative aimed to provide humanitarian relief and development assistance, with projects focusing on education, healthcare, social integration, and infrastructure.



The funds were disbursed in two equal tranches. The first tranche, totaling €3 billion (with €1 billion from the EU budget and €2 billion from member states), was contracted by the end of 2017 and allocated across humanitarian and development projects during Phase I. This tranche was set to be implemented by 2021, but the timeline was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian aid, amounting to €1.4 billion, focused on basic needs support through programs like the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE). Health and education access were also central to these humanitarian actions. Meanwhile, €1.6 billion in development funding supported the construction of schools and health centers, as well as vocational training and skills development to enhance refugees’ capacity (European Commission 2024).



The second tranche of €3 billion, approved in July 2018 and committed by the end of 2019, shifted the emphasis further toward development-focused actions. €2 billion was allocated to projects aimed at improving refugees’ socio-economic, educational, and employment prospects, with the remaining €1 billion reserved for humanitarian assistance. Phase II seeks to promote sustainable livelihoods, reflecting a shift from immediate aid to long-term integration (European Commission 2024). In total, 105 projects were funded under the FRIT framework, 62 were categorized as “humanitarian” and 43 as “development.” These projects were set to conclude by 2025 (European Commission 2025). FRIT projects encountered several significant challenges throughout both the planning and implementation phases, limiting the effectiveness of the EU’s policies aimed at governing refugees in Turkey. We summarize them in four points.

1. Short-term solutions and weak legitimacy

First, the FRIT mechanism aimed to balance humanitarian relief and development in refugee governance. During Phase I of FRIT, the focus was on emergency relief, while Phase II shifted towards development. This transition, however, faced resistance due to a reduced emphasis on direct cash support. The transition from Phase I to Phase II of FRIT illustrated a strategic pivot from humanitarian relief toward development initiatives. While the intention was to foster self-reliance and resilience among refugees as promoted by the EU policies, the reduction in humanitarian aid raised concerns about the legitimacy and adequacy of basic needs support. Due to decreasing levels of direct aid to Syrians, programs like the ESSN offered minimal financial support, forcing many refugees to rely on family abroad or informal work. The shift to development, employment, and integration challenges also remained unaddressed, and many refugees lacked economic opportunities and legal protections despite efforts (Petillo, 2023). The hesitancy to provide long-term solutions such as formal labor market access weakened the impact of these efforts in enhancing the refugees’ living conditions and access to public services (Akçapar & Simsek, 2018; Aras & Duman, 2019; Baban et al., 2017; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017). On the donor side, while the EU sought to provide short-term cash assistance to the refugees in Turkey through FRIT projects, it put forward conditionalities that influenced refugees’ labor market participation and social inclusion, aligning humanitarian aid with political and economic interests.

For example, the ESSN program, a cornerstone of the EU's FRIT largely focused on budget efficiency, overhead costs, and market-driven practices rather than long-term solutions (Küçükkaya, 2024). The EU's cash-based aid offered immediate relief, yet it was short of promoting social cohesion and sustainable integration. This practice failed to contribute to the long-term societal sustainability and even created new vulnerabilities for refugees and perpetuating the structural inequalities they aimed to address. In a personal correspondence, a Turkish official likened FRIT to "Belgian fries": "It makes you feel stuffed but does not feed you".

2. Fragmented governance and inefficiency

Second, FRIT's implementation relied on a complex network of international and domestic actors, including UN agencies, INGOs, Turkish NGOs, and local government institutions. There are also other organizations such as UNCHR, IOM, WHO, and World Bank and local NGOs integrated into a dense network to coordinate their activities related to legal aid, independent monitoring, and policy feedback loops. Over 35 organizations managed nearly 2,000 projects across 172 sites (Landell Mills 2021; Pries & Zülfikar Savci, 2023). While this diversity aimed to enhance efficiency and address the varying needs of refugees, it resulted in the duplication of tasks and complexity (Erdogan, 2017; Baban et al., 2017; Zihnioğlu & Dalkıran, 2022; Kayaoglu, 2020; ASILE 2022). The existence of numerous intermediaries between the donor (the EU) and local recipients also increased delays and mismanagement. More importantly, much of the funding went toward administrative costs, creating what some call an ecosystem of inefficiency (ASILE, 2022).

3. Opaque fund allocation and low transparency

Third, the opaque nature of fund allocation remained a major challenge in FRIT's implementation. Only select parties were informed about specific projects, and funding allocations were predetermined by the agency (ASILE 2022, p.36). Agreements are often implemented without open debate, parliamentary oversight, or clear accountability. While project preparation improved in the second tranche, fund allocation remained opaque, with financial data requests frequently denied by Turkish authorities (ASILE 2024, p.6). There is no publicly available data exist to evaluate FRIT's impact (European Court of Auditors 2024, p.42). The extent to which funds have directly benefited refugees remain unknown.

4. Shrinking civic space and inclusivity

Fourth, since 2018, the operational space for NGOs in Turkey has significantly shrunk due to new laws that restrict the autonomy of civil actors. Under the pretext of counterterrorism and financial regulation, many independent NGOs were subjected to audits, losing their permits, or facing deportation of Syrian aid workers (Boztaş, 2019; Longton, 2017). Police surveillance of NGO staff and work permit checks further illustrated the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. International NGOs were gradually replaced by state-affiliated organizations, reflecting the Turkish government's increasing control over migration governance. Unequal access of various civil actors to public collaboration or resources hindered the inclusion of local agencies in governance processes. Concerns about equity, diversity, and inclusiveness in Turkey's refugee governance have become increasingly significant as the EU moves toward transferring project responsibilities to Turkish authorities at a time rising authoritarianism triggered an overall backlash on civil society in Turkey.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This policy brief analyzed refugee resilience-building instrument FRIT. These insights underscored the complexities in balancing humanitarian aid, integration policies, and political strategies, revealing that EU aid, while helpful, remained insufficient to address these multi-layered challenges fully. Thus, FRIT's ambition to provide both humanitarian aid and long-term development achieved mixed results. While infrastructure projects such as schools and hospitals have shown promise, employment, and socio-economic integration efforts have lagged. The lack of transparency, coupled with limited local ownership, has further eroded trust between refugees, civil actors, and state institutions. All these factors lead to several lessons which could be used towards future resilience-building contexts such as Syria.

The context of Syria's reconstruction presents a different, but not entirely dissimilar, set of challenges. Unlike Turkey, Syria is emerging from a prolonged conflict that has severely weakened state institutions. The Syria Joint Damage Assessment (DA) (World Bank 2022) provides an analysis of the damage caused by the Syrian conflict. Covering 14 cities and 11 sectors, the report estimated total damages to range from \$8.7 to \$11.4 billion. The most affected sectors are physical infrastructure (68% of total damage), social sectors (30%), and cross-cutting sectors (2%). The agriculture sector (50% of physical infrastructure damage) suffered the most, particularly due to irrigation system damage, followed by the transport sector (22%), and electricity (18%). Within social sectors, housing (86%) accounted for the largest share of damage, followed by health (13%) and education (1%). The environment sector bore 97% of cross-cutting sector damage, with significant costs linked to debris and e-waste management. The cities with the highest levels of damage were Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, and Ar-Raqqa, with housing and electricity suffering the most destruction. Damage to roads and other transport infrastructure led to limited access to essential services, while severe environmental impacts included deforestation, rubble accumulation, and pollution. The DA highlighted the urgent need for repair and recovery in essential sectors, especially housing, healthcare, and education, to support displaced populations and improve welfare. Thus, the EU as a major donor has a large role to play in Syria albeit complicated by geopolitical contestations and the presence of multiple actors with competing interests.

1. As the EU prepares for its role in Syria's rebuilding, adopting a "lessons learned" approach can enhance

its legitimacy, efficiency, and capacity to foster sustainable change. We therefore recommend the following policy points:

2. The EU should ensure a gradual shift from emergency relief to sustainable development, avoiding abrupt changes in aid modalities. A hybrid model that blends humanitarian relief with development initiatives can create a smoother transition, supporting both immediate needs and long-term stability and promoting legitimacy.
3. The EU should streamline coordination among its implementing partners and establish clear roles and responsibilities in Syria. A centralized coordination body could facilitate information sharing and reduce administrative burdens, ensuring more cohesive and efficient implementation of reconstruction efforts.
4. The EU's funding mechanisms should adopt transparent governance frameworks that allow for public scrutiny. Establishing mechanisms for real-time tracking of funds and conducting independent third-party audits can increase trust among stakeholders and ensure transparency and accountability.
5. The EU should prioritize local capacity-building and the involvement of Syrian local authorities and NGOs in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of reconstruction projects. An aid ecosystem that offers civic space to local stakeholders could ensure inclusiveness and community trust.

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The European Union (EU)'s resilience-building policies on migration and forced displacement have been extensively examined, particularly following the Syrian refugee crisis. Numerous studies have analyzed the factors contributing to the effectiveness of these policies in the EU's southern neighborhood. However, less attention has been given to the implementation of the EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), the largest humanitarian relief program, especially as Turkey's status as an official EU accession country has added political complexity to the situation. This policy commentary delves into the FRIT mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the EU's resilience-building strategies in refugee governance. This analysis is particularly relevant now, as the possibility of refugee returns to Syria has gained traction following the regime change in December 2024. As a result, key principles of EU interventions such as legitimacy, efficiency, transparency, and inclusiveness have become even more critical in fostering local ownership and building community resilience and self-reliance. We conclude with policy insights derived from the case of Turkey to shed light on how the EU, a major partner and aid provider for refugee governance in Turkey, can revisit its resilience-building strategies to endorse effective and sustainable policies in Syria in the long term.

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