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Abstract

*During Europe’s migrant crisis beginning in the 2010s, both the European Union and Turkey sought to renegotiate their respective responsibilities to take in Syrian refugees, and came to an agreement in March 2016 over the admittance of asylum seekers to the E.U. and irregular migrants to Turkey. Both have been accused of leveraging massive numbers of migrants for political gain during that negotiation process. This research analyzes coercive migration, or the use of migrants as a powerful bargaining tool for states to make political gains. Current scholarly conceptions of coercive migration do not offer insight on coercive migration working in two directions within one migration event, especially when the states involved are asymmetrically balanced in their abilities to use coercive migration. In this small-n qualitative case study, I compare the negotiating strategies of the E.U. with those of Turkey leading up to the 2016 E.U.-Turkey agreement, and show how coercive migration theory can be refined to provide understanding of more complex cases. Specifically, I use process tracing to understand how factors of forewarning and perceptions of state capacity influenced the negotiations and the use of coercive migration leading to the 2016 E.U.-Turkey agreement. Analysis of this very recent case provides insight to the development of coercive migration as a viable tool for international actors, which has important implications at a time when tens of millions of people are displaced around the world and are thus vulnerable as potential pawns for coercive migration.*

Keywords

Migration, coercion, European Union, Turkey, Syria, refugee, negotiation, bargaining, deterrence, case study, process tracing

People as Pawns

Leveraging a Migrant Crisis

**Introduction**

For the past six years, international news media reported on the “Syrian conflict” and the “European migrant crisis” with no clear end in sight. When the Assad regime violently quashed protests against the Syrian government during the Arab Spring beginning in 2011, rebel groups arose and clashed with the government, starting the Syrian Civil War. The government committed extreme violence against its own citizens as it pursued destruction of the rebels, and five million Syrian civilians began to flee the country.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some traveled to Jordan or Lebanon, while others joined migrant flows from other parts of the Middle East and North Africa as they moved through Turkey. Many of them traveled further to Europe, both by land and by sea, contributing to what has become known as the “migrant crisis.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In 2015 alone, at least one million migrants crossed into Europe, with countries such as Germany, Hungary, and Sweden each receiving asylum applications in the hundreds of thousands.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although it has not received even the majority of the refugees fleeing from Syria or from other parts of the world, the European Union’s institutions are stretched thin working to process and place these migrants. Conflict has erupted within the EU over whether to accept these migrants or deport them, as well as how to stop the flow of migrants, with fears that the institution and its member states will be overwhelmed.[[4]](#footnote-4) In March 2016, the European Union reached a deal with Turkey on a plan of action to resettle Syrian migrants, but that deal came after long negotiations and significant concessions, especially on the part of the EU. Both sides have been accused of unscrupulously using the plight of those migrants for political gain. More specifically, observers argue that the deal is the result of coercive migration—states using migrants as a bargaining tool to reach other goals. This is a fairly novel concept; often, coercion is considered a tactic used in warfare between states that are clearly belligerent. Applications of theories of coercion rarely extend beyond traditional conceptions of state power, which creates not only a gap in academic knowledge but a gap in functional knowledge that states should be able to use to prevent and alleviate humanitarian crises. While it may seem a cold and calculating strategy, and rightfully so, coercion can also leverage soft power, using incentives other than weapons to force another state’s hand. Soft power coercion in general and coercive migration in particular are insidious and difficult to prove. Therefore, they are also much more difficult to combat or deter. However, they may be predictable and even preventable. If states are aware of their own vulnerabilities and the interests of competing states, they may be able to evade coercive migration.

Throughout the negotiations between the EU and Turkey on the migrant crisis, the main underlying themes of international news media coverage were the unexpectedness of the crisis and the question of whether either actor could sufficiently respond to the crisis. To understand how factors of forewarning and perceptions of state capacity influenced the negotiations and the use of coercive migration leading to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement, I take a Neopositivist approach and conduct a single-case study comparing the negotiating strategies of the EU with those of Turkey leading up to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement. [[5]](#footnote-5) The case is bounded in time between the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the 2016 agreement between Turkey and the EU. To contextualize my analysis, I discuss the scholarship of several subfields of conflict studies, including the topics of state-compelled migration, the coercive tactics of compellence and deterrence, migration as a policy tool, and state decisionmaking. From that scholarship, I have drawn the variables I will use for analysis, which are based on understandings of successful and failed deterrence, states’ level of forewarning about coercion, and their belief in their capacities to accept or move migrants. A close analysis of Europe’s and Turkey’s responses to the recent massive influx of migrants will help determine which of these variables is most important to (or indicative of) the successful use of coercive migration, and to help recognize specific characteristics of impending coercive migration in the future.

Before I begin my analysis, I would like to offer a note on the scope of this project as it relates to the humanitarian side of the migrant crisis. This project is meant to examine the dynamics between state actors as they negotiate a highly contentious and consequential issue, focusing on factors of power, capacity, and credibility. As my title suggests, however, the leveraged pieces in these negotiations are not goods or weapons, but very real people. Many academics and activists have contributed to scholarship on the realities migrants and refugees face, including in today’s heightened climate of violence and fear surrounding newcomers, and that scholarship does important work framing new understandings of the challenges confronting these people. While my research does not directly address the human/humanitarian impact of coercive migration, it is important to bear in mind the fact that these negotiations involve bargaining with the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people. Even as we analyze the affairs of global actors, we must be cognizant of the effects of these phenomena and even related scholarship on the people they affect.

In examining existing literature on topics related to coercive migration, I have identified two main schools of thought that can provide frameworks for explaining how coercive migration becomes an effective strategy for reaching a given state’s goals. The first group I call diplomacy theorists, including those who examine coercion and state decisionmaking. The second I call migration analysts, who focus on the effects of migration on sending and receiving countries. Both fields offer variables that appear to be pivotal in understanding coercive migration.

**Defining “coercive migration”**

“Coercive migration” in this project refers to tactics like those Kelly Greenhill outlines: “the use of migration and refugee crises as instruments of persuasion,” for which a country engineers or takes advantage of a migration flow to threaten other countries.[[6]](#footnote-6) Greenhill is the scholarly pioneer of this concept of coercive engineered migration (CEM), which she more specifically defines as “those cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated by state or non-state actors in order to induce…concessions from a target state or states.” In her recent work, Greenhill has determined that the case of the EU-Turkey deal was indeed an instance of a Turkey acting as a CEM opportunist because it leveraged the migration of Syrian refugees to gain political and economic concessions from the European Union. Greenhill posits that threats of CEM are “as much a matter of perception as of objective reality,” and that they often leave target states to choose between making very costly concessions or taking no action at all against the impending migrant flow.[[7]](#footnote-7) Tennis, another migration scholar, studied the decisions of partner states (that is, sending and transit states) to sign bilateral migration control agreements, including those resulting from CEM. She found that while “international factors and power dynamics played an important role” in spurring these negotiations to begin, “partner states’ institutions played an important role…by shaping the ways that international and domestic factors could influence” the trajectory of those negotiations.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both Greenhill and Tennis draw heavily on Putnam’s theory of the two-level game, in which international negotiations depend not only on international consequences but also on domestic interests in and repercussions from those negotiations. Essentially, a politician at the negotiating table must keep in mind not only their country’s foreign policy goals but also their constituents’ reactions to the negotiations.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Coercion and its forms**

Most international relations scholars agree with Thomas Schelling’s classic definition of coercion: the “use of power to hurt…the very exploitation of enemy wants and fears” to achieve a goal.[[10]](#footnote-10) Traditionally, coercion is based on military power, but scholars have increasingly recognized other sources of coercive power. Most scholars tend to accept Schelling’s definitions of the two categories of coercion as well. Compellence is coercion with a definite timeline that causes the target to change its course of action, and deterrence is coercion with an indefinite timeline that convinces the target to maintain its course of (in)action.[[11]](#footnote-11) In general, individual scholars focus on either compellence or deterrence, not both, in their projects (though both concepts often go hand-in-hand in real-world situations).[[12]](#footnote-12) Scholars in this field are especially concerned with the tactics states use to make their coercion credible—the manipulation of sovereignty or legitimacy, reactions to other states’ coercive behavior, or other methods.[[13]](#footnote-13) A test of credibility as a variable in the EU-Turkey case is rooted in each actor’s perceived capability for responding to the migrant crisis, and will show how the EU and Turkey each worked to demonstrate their capability for carrying out coercive migration against each other, or for deterring the other’s attempt at coercive migration.

Scholars who study forced migration focus primarily on compellence, as governments threaten migrants and force them to move to a different place, usually permanently.[[14]](#footnote-14) Compellent forced migration is further categorized in terms of which state is interacting with migrants. Sending countries compel migrants to leave, though some scholars study what agency migrants do have to choose between fleeing and accepting the consequences for staying.[[15]](#footnote-15) Other scholars argue that receiving countries use compellence against migrants by enforcing borders and criminalizing irregular migration.[[16]](#footnote-16) To be clear, my analysis focuses not on Syria as a sending country, but on Turkey as a transit state and the European Union as a receiving “state.”[[17]](#footnote-17) I will determine whether the EU or Turkey used forced migration to influence the eventual agreement by playing to their respective levels of credibility to each other and to their constituents.

Deterrence theory is applied prominently to nuclear coercion—essentially, states coerce each other into maintaining a status quo by reminding targets of their capability to send nuclear missiles. Deterrence scholars are generally more concerned with the implications of nuclear coercion than the harm of a state carrying out a nuclear threat, because detonating nuclear weapons of mass destruction is a dire and devastating choice that is unlikely to actually happen.[[18]](#footnote-18) This mindset of focusing on implications is helpful in terms of understanding coercive migration, because nuclear coercion scholars work to understand all the possible outcomes of coercion besides nuclear war. Those coercion outcomes, and the elements that precede them, could be applied to coercive migration to develop a set of theoretical situations in which the migration is not executed. Perhaps a set of circumstances exists in which all players view coercive migration as the worst possible outcome, and therefore create a sort of cold war over migration. In the case of the EU and Turkey, “going nuclear” would involve increasing the flow of migrants one way or another across the border, and as the following analysis shows, this was a threat at some points in the negotiations. For both sides, forcing migrants to move would represent a blow to their credibility as humane and humanitarian actors, hurting their ability to be respected at the domestic and international levels.

Still other coercion scholars concentrate on how states must use coercion to successfully reach a goal, especially during crises. They focus on the disparities between states whose coercive strategies are effective or not, with special attention on the diplomacy between asymmetrically-balanced powers including the manipulation of information gaps and credible signaling.[[19]](#footnote-19) This coercion scholarship shares frameworks with the field of crisis mediation, including the assumption that any disagreement between rational actors must have some solution that satisfies both parties in some way. Success may be binary or gradated depending on the type of crisis and the perceptions of those observing or participating in the diplomacy.[[20]](#footnote-20) The two fields also share the assumption that coercion and negotiation can be secret and subliminal, or very public and forthright; these characteristics are pivotal as they change the parties’ strategies and the possible sets of outcomes.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, coercion scholars show that the relationship and the comparison between the negotiating parties is especially important to the outcome of coercion. The following analysis demonstrates that these variables of relative power influenced the negotiations between Turkey and the EU, and that a binary conception of success can be appropriate for understanding coercive migration outcomes.

**Decisionmaking**

Another prominent school of thought in diplomacy scholarship is on state decisionmaking, and studies in this school usually segregate and compare regimes’ decisionmaking tendencies based on categories of democracy and autocracy/non-democracy. Trumbore and Boyer, however, assert that it is more accurate to place regimes on a spectrum of democracy, and they find that democracies and non-democracies behave similarly in crisis situations; both democracies and non-democracies move toward closed decisionmaking systems “as crises become more intense and triggers are more violent.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Additionally, a great deal of scholarship on decisionmaking is grounded in environmental policy. In a survey of industrialized countries’ decisions on international environmental issues, factors based on pressure (from potential effects of failure, or from reputation among states and civil society) are especially important to making those decisions.[[23]](#footnote-23) These factors are relevant to the EU-Turkey negotiations, as the EU is a democratic organization comprised (mostly, depending on the definition used) of democratic countries and Turkey is nominally a democracy but is becoming progressively more authoritarian.[[24]](#footnote-24) As explained above, Tennis finds that regime type helps determine whether sending states and transit states will cooperate on bilateral migration control agreements in particular. Regime type matters to coercive migration because it determines how much public opinion on migration and humanitarianism matters to the governments threatening or being threatened by coercive migration.

**Migration policy as a development tool**

Analysts of governments’ stated and demonstrated (im)migration policies have extensively investigated migration as a tool of development. Traditionally, migration is viewed as beneficial for the sending country only through remittances, and otherwise as detrimental because of issues like brain drain.[[25]](#footnote-25) Understandings of migration’s effect on receiving countries’ development used to be based on labor issues, such as migrants’ skills fitting in the receiving countries’ job markets.[[26]](#footnote-26) Some scholars are now concerned with migration’s effects on public health, as well as human security changes in receiving countries who take in large numbers of migrants over time.[[27]](#footnote-27) Countries can manipulate migration patterns to benefit their economy or society more generally by choosing through selective admittance of migrants and treatment of received migrants. Some scholars study the ethical implications of using migration to shape development patterns, especially since migrants are not necessarily willing subjects, and with whether using migration as a development tool fits states’ ideations of neoliberalism.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Understandings of migration and state-to-state coercion have only been combined in Greenhill’s work on categorizing coercive migration situations.[[29]](#footnote-29) I work to unite them more completely by working to understand how states enact and respond to coercive migration in a close study of the EU-Turkey deal, combining knowledge of states’ perceptions of migration as a tool with theoretical understandings of coercion and decisionmaking to achieve this goal.

**Methodology**

I have chosen to use process-tracing to study the single case of what has been dubbed the EU-Turkey deal, and the factors and strategies that led to coercive migration in the process of negotiating that deal. Analyzing EU and Turkish statements on the agreement as well as other open-source documents about related negotiations, I determine how forewarning and perceptions of state capacity influenced the causal process of the agreement, thus clarifying some of the specific attributes that make coercive migration an effective strategy.

A single-case study gives the opportunity to examine as many variables as possible to find the best explanation for the EU-Turkey agreement to shed light on variables that might not be immediately evident as important factors in coercive migration responses. I acknowledge Gerring’s concerns about the “ambiguities” affecting case studies, and to avoid them I have specified and clarified my methodological choices as much as possible.[[30]](#footnote-30) My case is limited to the events directly spurring the negotiations and subsequent agreement in March 2016 between the European Union and Turkey on the admittance and resettlement of irregular Syrian migrants (many of whom sought asylum). It is based on data from EU and Turkish statements, statistics reported by international institutions such as the United Nations, and international news coverage, all created during and after the negotiations. This analysis involves some aspects of discourse analysis, as I pull widely-used conceptions of the migrant crisis into my analysis of perceptions and credibility. Van Evera explains that process-tracing “offers strong tests of a theory,” and the theory I test is the existing understanding of coercive migration.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Coercive migration is the dependent variable in this study. How did Turkey and the European Union leverage migration as a coercive tool in an attempt to manipulate the terms of the agreement, and what affected their respective abilities to use coercive migration? Coercive migration refers to the state-to-state coercion that occurs when a sending or transit state threatens potential receiving states with vast migration flows. A conceptualization of coercive migration requires a discussion of general types of coercion, methods of mobilization (engineering the migration versus taking advantage of an existing migration, etc.), the influence of EU perceptions of immigrants and levels of successful coercive migration. For types of coercion, Schelling’s work provides the foundational concepts (deterrence and compellence), and scholars such as Ellerman and Kurizaki provide clarification on coercive strategies and negotiation counter-strategies.[[32]](#footnote-32) For methods of mobilization, Greenhill’s definitions and examples of coercive engineered migration and opportunistic coercive migration clarify the means by which states enact coercive migration and for which ends they do so.

Working backward, a factor that affects the outcome of effective coercive migration is deterrence. Deterrence is a type of coercion that results in changing an adversary’s intended course of action.[[33]](#footnote-33) Evidence of attempts at deterrence by a target state indicates that coercive migration was at play, but determining deterrence attempts in the case of migration threats is difficult. Deterrence can mean preventing all bad outcomes that an adversary has threatened (migration, destabilization, giving financial/military aid, etc.), but it is also possible that the target state is still practicing deterrence when it accepts that a migrant flow is coming its way. The literature is split on this front (theoretical literature leans toward the former, more absolute definition), but for the sake of a more nuanced understanding of the case at hand, I am interested in modifying the first definition to allow for the possibility that the EU was prepared or had the capacity to prepare sufficiently to meet the needs presented by the mass migration, and thus did not face major hardship in accepting the Syrian migrants.

Variables that would affect attempts to implement or deter coercive migration include forewarning of coercion, the EU’s and Turkey’s respective capacities to deal with massive migration, their beliefs in their respective capacities, and the effects of those factors on each actor’s credibility in threatening coercive migration or vowing its ability to deter coercive migration. By tracing conversations over these variables through time, I analyze not only the actors’ initial understandings of their situation, but also the change in those understandings over time. In doing so, I can identify key factors that led to the creation of the March 2016 agreement and identify the factors that made coercive migration a viable and ultimately successful tactic for one side, or the other, or both.

This single-case study research is not as generalizable as research involving several cases. However, at the very least, this research will help determine whether the variables I have chosen are important to enacting or deterring coercive migration. This small-n analysis allows me to draw conclusions not just about correlations, but about causes, and this sort of deep analysis of a case still offers the opportunity to contribute to broader theory about coercive migration, as well as to explore new concepts that may emerge.[[34]](#footnote-34) As Gerring notes in his critique of small-n analysis, my chosen methodology makes this research more prone to falsification.[[35]](#footnote-35) In terms of internal validity, I am very careful in analyzing the causal links between the variables (if any exist) and make sure that they are in the order best supported by the evidence. To make this research reliable, I am transparent in explaining the methods and, throughout the analysis, the causal logic I use so that someone can replicate this analysis or critique it.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Analysis**

The European Union’s migration situation evolved into what politicians began calling a “crisis” in 2015, when more than one million migrants arrived across Europe, many of them undocumented, seeking asylum, or both. The majority of those migrants (and of those that followed in months to come) came from Syria, and the majority of Syrian migrants to Europe moved through Turkey to reach the Mediterranean Sea or the Balkan Route.[[37]](#footnote-37) They overwhelmed the European structure for processing migrants because of their sheer number and the rate at which they crossed into Europe.[[38]](#footnote-38) As more and more migrants arrived, tensions in Europe rose along partisan lines, and the issue of whether to accept migrants became a complex political issue that tangled domestic and international spheres. The European Union was not the only region struggling to respond effectively to the migrant crisis; by the end of 2015, Turkey alone received 1.5 million Syrian migrants (according to official estimates by the United Nations), compared to the one million migrants spread across Europe.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The European Union needed some new way of responding to the massive influx of migrants. Little could be done to stop migrants from leaving Syria, and indeed, several EU member states are also signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares the right to freedom of movement. Thus normative pressure, besides political and logistical realities, meant that physically preventing all Syrians from entering Europe, or enforcing mass deportations to Syria, were not viable options.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, the European Union found an option in enlisting the help of Turkey.

Since 1997, Turkey has been eligible to join the European Union, but for the past twenty years, negotiations have not been successful in leading to accession. Membership would grant Turkey a great deal of legitimacy and political sway in Europe and around the world, but the EU has stalled negotiations, officially citing Turkey’s refusal to acknowledge Cyprus as an independent state as one of the main roadblocks.[[41]](#footnote-41) However, talks of accession reopened when it became clear that Turkey could help stem the flow of migrants into Europe.

Negotiations for an EU-Turkey “deal” on migrants began in the summer or early autumn of 2015. After many setbacks as well as threats from Turkey to walk away from the talks, the European Union and Turkey came to an agreement on March 18, 2016. The European Union announced the non-binding agreement, which neither party had officially signed, as a renewal of a shared commitment to “the joint action plan activated on 29 November 2015” and a decision “to end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU.” In order to do so, both countries agreed that for every irregular Syrian migrant returned to Turkey, the EU would resettle a Syrian migrant from Turkey through the legal immigration process, capping the swap at 72,000 migrants to Europe. In exchange for preventing further irregular migration, Turkey stood to receive up to €6 billion in aid, and the European Union would reexamine visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, a significant step in the process to potential EU accession for Turkey that the EU promised would be “re-energise[d]”.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Although this deal certainly signified progress toward stemming the migrant-based strain on the European Union’s institutions and infrastructure, Turkey got more out of the deal. According to the deal, each side was to have a net gain of zero migrants officially crossing the border from Turkey to Europe and vice versa. Europe also gained Turkey’s promise to secure its border with Greece, thus preventing more irregular migrants from crossing into Europe (though it is difficult to determine whether the decrease in the migrant flow after the deal was announced was a direct result of increased border security or other geopolitical factors). However, the deal did not lead to a decrease in the number of Syrian migrants already in Europe, and since Europe’s immigration infrastructure was already overwhelmed before the deal took place, the deal would not alleviate that situation. Turkey, on the other hand, gained a great deal of money that it could put toward building infrastructure for responding to the migrants within its borders (and the European Union, of course, lost that money), as well as the legitimacy that came from holding the upper hand in a negotiation with a powerful world actor and being seen as a state contributing to the humanitarian cause of providing shelter for refugees.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The following analysis examines factors of forewarning, perceived state capacity, credibility, and the effects of the two-level game on negotiations between the EU and Turkey leading to the March 2016 “deal.” Forewarning and perceptions of capacity directly affected each side’s success in managing Putnam’s two-level game and its credibility in committing to the deal or, on Turkey’s part, meting out consequences if a deal was not reached.

While it is certainly difficult to measure the amount of forewarning a government had about a given crisis, documents published by the European Union are actually quite illustrative of just how little advance notice the EU had about the possibility of a massive influx of migrants. In the October 2015 pamphlet entitled “Ten Priorities for Europe,” the Directorate-General of Communications for the European Commission explains: “The sudden rise in the number of people who are forced to flee their homes to escape violence and seek refuge, in their own countries or abroad, is a test for the European Union. Europe's response has been comprehensive and decisive in the past months…”[[44]](#footnote-44) The timing of the migration and Europe’s response are marked with a sense of surprise in this document that is supported by the numbers of migrants crossing Europe’s borders over time. If the European Union only began responding in “past months” to the threat of a migrant crisis, it must not have deemed migration to be a threat, or even known that such a threat was a real possibility, until very recently. The Syrian Civil War began in March 2011, along with many other changing political situations that came as a result of the explosive and rather unexpected Arab Spring, though the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (commonly called Frontex) did not detect a significant increase in illegal border crossings by Syrian migrants until August 2011. In June 2012, fewer than 900 Syrians crossed into the European Union illegally; in July 2012, more than 2000 Syrians arrived; the flow leveled or slowed for several months; and in September 2013, more than 5000 Syrian migrants were detected by Frontex. The number of irregular Syrian migrants very suddenly surged to 10,000 in April 2015.[[45]](#footnote-45) Although some of the variation in the trend was due to winter weather prohibiting migration, the European Union had little statistical indication that the migrant flow would continue at any steady rate. Between the unanticipated political unrest and the inconsistent migrant flow, the European Union had very little empirical forewarning of an impending Syrian migrant crisis. Because the European Union was surprised by the migrant crisis, there was no time to construct a measured and confident narrative like Turkey did. Instead, the construction of the European response made the EU out as being out of control and panicky. The EU blamed its inability to respond to the migrant crisis, even with its massive institutions and infrastructure, on its lack of forewarning.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Turkey had much more forewarning of the migrants that would sweep into, and eventually out of, its borders. As a neighbor to states involved in the Arab Spring, the Turkish government was aware that the unrest and rising violence in Syria would lead to massive migrant flows.[[47]](#footnote-47) Headlines from the from The Daily Sabah, the state-supported news publication, read:

“Ankara holds ‘refugee’ summit” (April 30, 2011)[[48]](#footnote-48)

“Erdoğan says Turkey will not close borders to Syrians” (June 9, 2011)[[49]](#footnote-49)

“Over 1,000 Syrians flee to Turkey in 24 hours” (June 9, 2011)[[50]](#footnote-50)

“Ankara on alert for next three critical months along the border” (June 9, 2011)[[51]](#footnote-51)

“Turkey braces for thousands more fleeing Syria” (June 11, 2011)[[52]](#footnote-52)

These headlines were published mere weeks after the Arab Spring reached Syria. Clearly, the second week of June 2011 was a pivotal point for the Turkish government. Erdoğan and his administration realized that the relatively small but intense flows of migrants had the potential to grow, and acted accordingly. By April 30, 2011, the Red Crescent had already begun setting up camps in the Turkish district adjacent to Syria. Civilians saw Turkish troops transporting Syrians from the border to the camps in June, and Turkish police guarded the camps.

Thus, the narrative in Turkey is not one of surprise as in the European Union but one of a humanitarian duty that will not go away. Four years into the migration flow, both government-affiliated and independent newspapers published news articles and editorials emphasizing the horrors that Syrian refugees have endured both in Syria and in their search for safe places to live, and focused on Turkey’s successes in meeting the needs of migrants instead of its lack of preparedness or the unforeseen nature of the migrant flow. Headlines from the Daily Sabah read:

“Turkey opens its doors to Syrian refugees fleeing Tal Abyad fighting” (June 14, 2015)[[53]](#footnote-53)

“Turkey’s contribution commended on World Refugee Day” (June 20, 2015)[[54]](#footnote-54)

“Turkey helps Aleppo evacuees find shelter from freezing cold” (December 21, 2016)[[55]](#footnote-55)

Turkey clearly did not have the resources to support all of the migrants coming from Syria, as many are currently housed in insufficient refugee camps or homeless altogether.[[56]](#footnote-56) Despite not having the capacity to adequately respond to the needs of migrants and refugees, with forewarning, Turkey was able to create a narrative in which the government was heroic for giving what it could to support refugees. Because the Turkish government had a high level of forewarning of an impending migrant crisis, the government did not blame the lack of precedent for its inadequate response and chose instead to construct a narrative of strength and resolve—a narrative that would later prove quite useful in negotiations with the European Union.

Forewarning and the subsequent narratives that the EU and Turkey created surrounding their respective abilities to respond to the migrant crisis did not end with on-the-ground aid. These factors also contributed to each side’s process of building credibility, and thus their ability to claim that they could coerce each other with migration. Despite not being as materially wealthy and lacking the political legitimacy of the European Union, Turkey’s head negotiators managed to credibly demonstrate that Turkey was in a position to essentially control the flow of migrants to Europe—something the European Union perceived as desperately necessary. In November 2015, according to documents leaked from those negotiations, Turkey threatened to send migrants by bus and plane to Europe if the European Union did not agree to a deal that was quite beneficial for Turkey.[[57]](#footnote-57) Europe’s bargaining chip was to maintain visa restrictions and prevent Turkey from accession, but those threats were already essentially in place before the migrant crisis, so they did not change Turkey’s payoff structure at all. Also, because the deal offered little new incentive, and because €6 billion in aid was certainly a costly commitment but not one that would likely significantly hurt the European Union (which appropriated more than €155 billion for its 2016 budget), the EU’s contribution to the negotiation did not hold the same amount of credibility.[[58]](#footnote-58) Turkey, however, changed the European Union’s payoff structure by threatening to allow the flood to continue, by demanding more aid money, and even by playing on Europe’s fears of more terror attacks like the one in Paris earlier that month.[[59]](#footnote-59) Realistically, Turkey could choose whether to let large numbers migrants into Europe or not, and the European Union anchored itself to the need for the migrant flow to end. Twenty-eight member states were at the mercy of a candidate member.

In addition to Turkey’s anchoring, the negotiation process was also very difficult, perhaps most markedly, because of the European Union’s need to meet the demands of public opinion. As Tennis and Putnam note, negotiations often matter to states on two levels: the domestic and the international.[[60]](#footnote-60) For the EU, the mass migration and the EU’s response became a deeply divisive issue. Some European citizens implored their national governments as well as the greater European Union to accept migrants, especially Syrians, out of humanitarian duty; others were adamant that Syrian migrants presented a serious threat to the stability and security of the EU. Both sides were (and continue to be) very strong contingents within the EU, albeit at varying levels within each member state. The polarization of the politics of migration across the European Union led some member states to be significantly more willing to accept migrants than others; while Germany agreed to take in the lion’s share of migrants to process asylum claims, other countries such as Hungary chose to reject all migrants and even seal their borders with fences and guards to prevent migrants from traveling further.[[61]](#footnote-61) As Brussels is consistently a scapegoat for large-scale grievances in the European Union, pinning the repercussions of migration on the institution was an easy step for national governments and citizens alike, and a dangerous threat to the EU itself, which was in the midst of several countries warning that they might leave the EU. Thus, arriving at a deal that would satisfy the diverse member states of the European Union as well as Turkey was a daunting but necessary task.

Turkey, on the other hand, did not have as much of a challenge playing the two-level game. According to the Freedom in the World 2017 report, authoritarian tendencies had been rising in Turkey since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidency in 2014.[[62]](#footnote-62) In a government leaning toward authoritarianism, Erdoğan did not require public approval in the same way that the European Union did. Furthermore, Erdoğan’s government could influence public opinion in a way that the EU could not: via headlines. As discussed earlier, Turkish newspapers consistently ran stories sympathetic to Syrian refugees, focused not on the state response and its potential inadequacy but on Turkey’s achievements instead. Some of this may have been the result of government influence; especially since the Turkish government has been threatened by unrest and coups, it has worked to mold the press coverage in its favor.[[63]](#footnote-63) Though it is difficult to know how reflective of public opinion the press may be, the headlines at least provide a glimpse into the information available to the public—and in this case, the information is only positive. Perhaps most obviously, Turkey and Syria share a religious culture, meaning that Turkish people are less likely to fear the lifestyles and values of Syrian migrants. Syrian culture does not threaten Turkish institutions, because they are built on similar understandings. Thus, the Turkish public has little reason to reject Syrian migrants on cultural grounds. In stark contrast, the European Union has strongly Christian roots (even if the direct influence of Christianity on European society is waning). The European public has much greater reason, however unrealistic or discriminatory, to believe that Syrian migrants do not share their values and thus to fear the influx of Syrian migrants as a threat to the European way of life.

Furthermore, and contrary to the traditionally realist expectations of negotiation literature, Turkey was in a position of power. In some ways, Turkey was anchored to its need to make a deal with the European Union. Its proximity to Syria, its weak immigration system, and its relative lack of resources for handling such a migrant flow made it all the more necessary to relieve the pressure somehow. In the European Union, Turkey had the opportunity to either gain resources to deal with the migrant situation or to wash its hands of a large number of migrants by allowing, and even physically moving, those migrants into Europe. Because Turkey lacked the capacity to meet the needs of the migrants without jeopardizing funding for other domestic interests, Turkey was paradoxically in a strong bargaining position.

Europe, on the other hand, was in a weak bargaining position because it did not anticipate that the migrant crisis would happen in the first place, or that its lack of preparation made it vulnerable to coercive engineered migration. Without forewarning, the European Union had no opportunity to plan a strong bargaining position and demand concessions from Turkey as a transit state. The surprise of the migrant crisis fomented more fear than compassion for the migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe, and the EU was unable to construct an image of its capacity to respond to the crisis as effective or adequate. It also could not portray itself as having the capacity to move migrants back to Turkey or Syria by force, because doing so would have been contrary to the espoused values of the European Union and would have seriously damaged the EU’s reputation as humanitarian and democratic. When it became clear that Turkey actually had the upper hand in these negotiations, Erdoğan began to repeatedly threaten to withdraw from negotiations and allow more migrants to flood into Europe if the EU did not agree to Turkey’s terms.[[64]](#footnote-64) The confluence of forewarning and perceptions of capacity to receive or move migrants, as well as its ability to play the two-level game, enabled Turkey to bolster its credibility when using coercive migration against the EU to obtain political and economic gains. These factors also disabled the EU in its attempt to credibly deter Turkey’s use of coercive migration, whether deterrence meant refusing both Turkey’s terms and an influx of migrants, or choosing to accept migrants and deny Turkey’s demands.

**Conclusions**

The process of the negotiations leading to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement on Syrian migrants demonstrates that, as other negotiation and diplomacy scholars have found, power asymmetry does not always work in favor of the traditionally powerful actor.[[65]](#footnote-65) It also confirms the strong influence of the two-level game, as well as the concept that the story a coercer tells about a threat—like Erdoğan saying that he will allow migrants to flood Europe—is in some ways more powerful than the reality of the threat.[[66]](#footnote-66) Perhaps more importantly, though, the negotiations show that capacity can be constructed paradoxically, and that the methods actors use to anchor themselves to their positions can be quite unexpected. This case shows that there are two possible constructions of inadequate preparation: Turkey told a story of being unprepared to respond to migrants but doing its best anyway, with a sense of duty, whereas the EU told a story of being unprepared and not expecting to make any sort of dent in the problem it faced. By showing hope, Turkey anchored itself to being able to take in migrants if it received aid from the EU; by showing hopelessness and fear, the EU became open to any sort of solution, even one that did not really meet its needs.

The negotiation process between the EU and Turkey demonstrates several other concepts. First, a novel threat of coercive migration is a strong threat. Because the EU was surprised by the sheer size of the influx of migrants, and thus scrambled to respond without a methodical plan, Turkey was able to exacerbate the panic by threatening more migrants and thus induce the EU to seek a solution that would stem the flow. Second, coercive migration intensifies the two-level game. Refugees as a political issue are incredibly polarizing: some people feel great compassion for them and would prefer for their government to take a humanitarian position, while others feel great fear at the thought of strangers changing their way of life and would prefer for their government to protect its own citizens. Migration is a much more personal issue than other two-level issues like trade deals and climate agreements, because the repercussions of migration are as immediate as new people suddenly moving in next door. Balancing these visceral public reactions with foreign policy needs is a difficult task for governments. Third, this case demonstrates that entire blocs of states can be threatened by coercive migration at once. Though in this project I have examined the European Union as a unitary actor, the fact that most of a continent can be destabilized by a migrant crisis, which is then exacerbated by a country that has relatively little power, is quite consequential. As an event that has lasted six years as of March 2017 and has involved millions of migrants, the migrant crisis in Europe is a demonstration of coercive migration in a massive, sustained crisis. Turkey’s success in leveraging a migration with such magnitude against the European Union could be motive for two actions in the future. States in positions of relative weakness and even fragility, like Turkey, could use this case as inspiration to be more opportunistic and leverage migrations, especially those as refugees, in similar ways against powerful states, as violent crises today are increasingly protracted. Traditionally powerful states in different regions could also look to this case as a reason to see possibilities of coercive migration as significant threats to national security and thus choose to create and implement infrastructure that will bolster their credibility to deter such threats in the future. Such deterrence could be as simple as signaling, as the European Union failed to do, that the actor is prepared to build up its institutions for immigration if a massive migration is on the horizon. We see, however, that deterrence of coercive migration risks going too far. If the EU had decided to buck international norms and deter Turkey’s threats by physically sending migrants back to Turkey, it would have faced a great deal of domestic and international outcry because doing so would probably be seen as an outright act of aggression. Coercive migration is a powerful and viable tool for states that have run out of other options, or wish to maintain an alliance but want better terms. The process of negotiations between the EU and Turkey over Syrian migrants may mark a new era in leveraging ever-larger numbers of migrants for political gains while avoiding international reproach. However, knowledge of the ways states engineer, manipulate, and deter migrations, especially in the twenty-first century, may help lead to a reliable process for predicting both vulnerable populations and potential target states in the future. Further research is necessary on which factors are most important for states to be capable of threatening and mobilizing coercive migration, as well as which factors states can change to make themselves less vulnerable to coercive migration. Such foresight may allow the international community to take steps toward preventing coercive migration from being an effective weapon between states, and thus toward averting migration-based humanitarian crises.

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   As of this writing, the violence continues but the migrant flow from Syria has slowed significantly, as more than half of Syria’s population is internally or externally displaced. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The European Union Explained: Migration and Asylum* (Brussels: European Union, 2014); *The European Union Explained: Ten Priorities for Europe* (Brussels: European Union, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I am choosing to conduct a single-case study so that I can devote time to examining as many variables as possible to find the best explanation for the EU’s failure, and to shed light on variables that might not be immediately evident as important factors in coercive migration responses. I acknowledge Gerring’s concerns about the “ambiguities” affecting case studies, and plan to avoid them as much as possible by making my case and my assumptions as specific and clear as possible (Jonathan Gerring, “What is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?” *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (May 2004): 341-354.). I may choose to include Schengen Area member states as part of the body (for lack of a better term) of the European Union because the free movement of migrants within the Schengen Area is an especially contentious issue in Europe and has contributed to tensions between EU member states. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), accessed 17 February 2016, http://site.ebrary.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/lib/wrlc/detail.action?docID=10457705. p. 12

   I chose to use “coercive migration” and omit “engineered” in the bulk of my project because Turkey did little to change the flow of Syrian migrants, and instead made any action on its part contingent on the agreement and concessions from the European Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. K. M. Greenhill, "Open Arms Behind Barred Doors: Fear, Hypocrisy and Policy Schizophrenia in the European Migration Crisis," *European Law Journal* 22, no. 3 (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12179. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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10. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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13. Abizadeh; Bloom. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. Bartram. Ester Serra Mingot and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, "The Asylum-Migration Nexus: Can Motivations Shape the Concept of Coercion? The Sudanese Transit Case," *Journal of Third World Studies* 30, no. 2 (2013-11-30 2013), http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/1462044219?accountid=8285. Sanjula, Susan, and Abbie. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Morales; Bloom. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tennis.

    In this research, I do not focus on Syria’s role in influencing the migration of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe. Though it is a sending country, the Syrian government was not involved in the negotiations between the EU and Turkey. In this case, Turkey is in some ways the sending country, or at least an intervening country. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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    This is not to say that blocking or deporting migrants would have objectively been the right decision; I am merely presenting options that would address the European Union’s issue of being overwhelmed by the number of migrants, and in a very realist sense, would achieve the EU’s goal of ending the crisis on its hands. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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47. Some observers say that Russia also saw an opportunity in the unrest in Syria. General Philip M. Breedlove, then Commander of USEUCOM, told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee that he believed Russia was purposely militarizing the Assad regime in Syria to foment violence with the expectation that the resulting migrant flow would destabilize the European Union (Philip M. Breedlove, *United States European Command*, *United States Senate Committee on Armed Services* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate on Armed Services, 2016). While that is an investigation for another day, the possibility that multiple actors could be leveraging one migrant crisis is a potentially very powerful concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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65. As mentioned earlier, this concept of asymmetry is discussed quite extensively in negotiation scholarship. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
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