

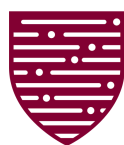


Syria at the Crossroads of Trade and Geopolitics

Sumru Altug

Majdy Barakat

Research Report



ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

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INTRODUCTION

As former rebel forces quickly moved to capture Damascus in December 2024 and to consolidate power throughout the country, the downfall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime signaled a new era between Syria and its neighbors. This shift in political authority has immediately revived discussions about Syria's regional reintegration as well as its potential role in reshaping trade and investment dynamics in the Middle East.

Recently, the *Atlantic Council* provided a comprehensive commentary on the future of Syria-Türkiye relations in the new era, stressing the economic ties that had existed prior to Syria's civil war that began in 2011.¹ The gradual removal of sanctions that had crippled Syria's economy in the past is leading to the announcement of new investment projects sponsored by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.² Saudi Arabia, for example, has announced a \$7.5 billion package of investments spanning energy, aviation, real estate and telecommunications, including a \$2 billion outlay for the construction of two airports in Aleppo. Türkiye has indicated its intention to provide hands-on expertise and operational capacity, particularly in construction projects, while European and Arab states have pledged to provide financing for the development of energy and infrastructure in Syria.

At the same time, a growing strand of literature situates Syria within broader geopolitical competition, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the evolving US-China rivalry in the Middle East.³ Syria's reconstruction and reintegration thus intersect not only with regional economic interests but also with shifting global strategic alignments.

In this article, we provide a novel analysis of Syria's recent experience and prospects through the lens of bilateral trade ties with several regional and international partners during the period 2001-2023. We consider a heterogeneous group of trading partners - Lebanon, Egypt, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and China. These countries represent a group that has had important relations with Syria and with each other, both individually and through the dynamics of regional relations.

We consider the role of bilateral trade with Lebanon because developments in Syria have significantly impacted Lebanon, not only because the two countries are neighbors but also due to the 29-year presence of Syria in Lebanon (1976-2005). Before the war, the land routes through Syria represented an important channel for Lebanon's trade with the broader region, including the Gulf countries, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye. Syria and Egypt were previously part of the United Arab Republic (UAR), a political union that lasted from 1958 to 1961. At the time of its inception, this union was viewed as the first step towards a pan-Arabic state. Türkiye's ties with Syria are built on historic, geographic, demographic, economic, and political relations. The UAE represents a different type of partner. It is a dynamic economic and political entity in the greater Middle East region through which much trade passes. Dubai, in particular, has emerged in recent years as a major regional re-export hub, with goods shipped from other major producers (e.g., China, Europe) being imported into the UAE and then reexported to destinations throughout the Middle East.⁴ Finally, we consider the role of bilateral trade with China, given its massive export-driven economy and its expanding economic footprint, which have made it a central actor in regional trade dynamics. As Baysoy and Altug (2021) show, the Chinese economy has been the main source of growth spillovers in the region through trade.⁵

Together, these bilateral relationships provide a structured lens through which we can understand how Syria's trade orientation evolved over time and how it can reposition itself at the crossroads of regional and global economic forces in the future.

¹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-a-new-era-of-turkey-syria-economic-engagement-on-thehorizon/>. Accessed February 24, 2026.

² <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-announces-major-new-syria-investments-2026-02-07/>. Accessed February 24, 2026.

³ <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/Syria-at-the-Margins-of-the-Belt-and-Road-Rivalry>. Accessed February 8, 2026.

⁴ <https://www.clarionshipping.com/blog/uae-role-in-re-export-trade-why-dubai-leads-the-world/>. Accessed February 19, 2026

⁵ The Forum - Economic Research Forum (ERF) Policy Portal, September 14, 2021, <https://theforum.erf.org/eg/2021/09/13/trading-china-implications-growth-mena-countries>. Accessed February 12, 2026.

TRENDS IN REGIONAL TRADE

The historical record suggests that Syria was always part of the great trade routes that connected the Mediterranean with the Gulf countries and the Indian Ocean. As part of its *Silk Road* Programme, UNESCO states that “Aleppo has stood at the crossroads of trade routes across Syria since at least the third millennium BC...”⁶ The city prospered in periods of rule under the Ayyubid dynasty in the early 12th century, but it achieved prominence in the 16th and 17th centuries when it became the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire. During this period, it boasted an extensive network of *souks* and *caravanserais* and conducted trade with Venetian, Dutch, and other European merchants.

In describing the fate of Aleppo during Syria’s civil war, Hassan Hassan, a resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, states that “Before independence, Aleppo was integrated into its natural hinterland of eastern and northern Syria, as well as southern Turkey and northern Iraq ... The company overseeing commerce between the Ottomans and the British, known as the Levant Company, had its headquarters in Aleppo until the 18th century.”⁷ Palmyra, another great trading city, is located in an oasis in the middle of the Syrian desert, 134 miles northeast of Damascus and 110 miles southwest of the Euphrates River. In documenting ancient cities along the Silk Road, Albert Bien, a scholar from Stanford University, describes Palmyra as a “caravan city”.⁸ During the Roman Empire, Palmyra became the main channel for trade in silks and spices from India and China up to the Persian Gulf and was known for its great wealth.

Fast forward to the 21st century and Syria lies in ruins, devastated by a decade of war, but also standing on the cusp of change. The Western Asia Commission (ESCWA) in 2025 examines the trajectory of economic decline and possible recovery for Syria, together with an analysis of its humanitarian challenges and regional impact.⁹ The ESCWA report examines Syria’s trade with the world for the period 2008–2023, and compares Syria’s performance with those of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya in this respect. The report argues that the geographical composition of Syria’s trade has changed from the European Union, which represented 50% of its trade before the civil war, to Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Lebanon. The report also documents the sanctions imposed against Syria between 2010–2024 in terms of export measures such as export incentives, subsidies, bans, taxes, licensing requirements, quotas, trade finance, and financial assistance in foreign markets and import measures such as import tariffs, bans, licensing requirements, and import-related non-tariff measures.¹⁰

Data

Next, we describe the data used in this analysis in more detail. All data used are from the UN Comtrade database and are denoted in millions of US dollars. The UN Comtrade database provides exports and imports for each country with their individual trading partners. Syria stopped reporting these statistics after 2010. However, more importantly, there are significant discrepancies between, say, Syria’s exports to Türkiye and Türkiye’s imports from Syria, which should conceptually be identical. One reason for this may be that imports are recorded as CIF (cost, insurance, and freight) and exports are recorded as FOB (free on board). Although this may lead to CIF values that are typically 5–15% higher than FOB values, the differences between Syria’s reported trade values and their corresponding “mirror” statistics are often substantially larger. A second reason for the differences may arise from re-exports and transshipments. As an example, Syria records the destination to which it ships; Türkiye records only the goods that clear Turkish customs.¹¹

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/aleppo>. Accessed February 8, 2026.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/18/aleppo-elegy-for-doomed-city-syria-assad>. Accessed February 24, 2026.

⁸ See the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, Silk Road Seattle, University of Washington. <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/syria/palmyra/palmyra.html>. Accessed February 12, 2026.

⁹ See the report entitled “Syria at the crossroads: Towards a stabilized transition.” Report No. E/ESCWA/CL6.GCP/2025/TP.2.

¹⁰ See Figure 4, p. 13 in the UN ESCWA (2025) for further details.

¹¹ Thus, a large share of what Syria reports as “exports to Türkiye” may never enter Turkey as Turkish imports because goods shipped through Turkish ports may be destined for third countries or goods may enter free zones (which are recorded by Syria as exports to Türkiye but were not cleared into Türkiye’s customs territory). Alternatively, these goods can transit through informal transit routes through Türkiye. These points may also affect the trade statistics of the remaining countries.

A third important reason is that the UN Comtrade database does not control for differences in customs systems. Thus, classification and reporting practices can differ between countries, with different treatment of returned goods, repairs, military items, or confidential trade. A fourth source of discrepancy may arise from border trade and shuttle trade, in which case Syria records the export; a country such as Türkiye never records the import (or records a much smaller value). The reasons for these discrepancies can affect the recorded trade statistics in relation to other countries that we consider aside from Türkiye. These reasons may be especially relevant during the period 2005-2010, when Syria changed its trade practices through trade agreements and border liberalization.¹²

In what follows, we discuss the trade statistics reported by Syria during the 2001-2010 period together with the trade statistics reported by the five countries in relation to Syria over the period 2001-2023. Both sets of statistics provide information about the nature of Syria's bilateral trade and the geopolitical factors that underlie it. Recently, Stahiv (2026) used similar data from UN Comtrade to model the relationship between trade dependence and interstate conflict, with a focus on the Russia-Ukraine, Russia-Georgia, Afghanistan-Pakistan, China-India, Rwanda-Uganda and Syria-Türkiye.¹³ In the study by UN ESCWA (2025), the bilateral export and import figures are normalized by their values in 2008. Following their approach, for the sample between 2001 and 2010, we normalize the export and import values by their 2001 values as EX_t/EX_{2001} and IM_t/IM_{2001} . For the sample between 2001 and 2023, we normalize the export and import values by their 2008 values as EX_t/EX_{2008} and IM_t/IM_{2008} .¹⁴ We also report on the import-export ratio IM_t/EX_t at each date for both samples as a measure of the trade balance. A value of IM_t/EX_t less than one implies a trade surplus and a value of IM_t/EX_t greater than one implies a trade deficit.

Syria's Bilateral Trade, 2001-2010

Panels (i) and (ii) of Figure 1 show the evolution of Syria's exports and imports with Lebanon, Egypt, Türkiye and the UAE relative to their 2001 values. Panels (i) and (ii) of Figure 2 show, respectively, the ratio of imports to exports at each date for the four countries and the evolution of Syria's imports from China. This figure only displays Syria's imports from China because Syria's exports to China are dwarfed by its imports. One finding that immediately emerges from Figures 1(i)-1(ii) is that Syria's exports and imports relative to their values in 2001 decline abruptly in 2005-2006 and remain low for several years thereafter. One reason for such a decline may be the most intense drought that Syria experienced in its history between 2006 and 2011. This drought resulted in widespread crop failure, increased food prices, and a mass migration of farming families to urban centers.¹⁵ Although some have claimed that climate change and the ensuing drought also created conditions for Syria's civil war, other factors such as mismanagement of water resources, lack of political freedom, corruption, a widening urban-rural divide, among others, have also been cited in explaining the civil war that erupted in 2011.

In terms of individual countries, Syria's recorded trade statistics suggest that it maintained a positive trade balance with Lebanon throughout the period between 2001 and 2010, in that the ratio IM_t/EX_t is always less than one; see Figure 2(i). A similar trade surplus in Syria's trade with Türkiye is reported for the period prior to 2005. In contrast to its trade with Lebanon, Syria has a trade deficit with Egypt and the UAE for almost the entire 2001-2010 period. The sharp drop in both imports and the import-export ratio for the UAE in 2008 is due to the fact that there is no recorded import figure for the UAE at that time.

¹² According to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2006, Syria had participated in Arab regional trade liberalization frameworks, particularly the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) and earlier the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA), which tended to encourage greater intra-regional trade during this period. <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2006/295/article-A004-en.xml>. Accessed February 8, 2026.

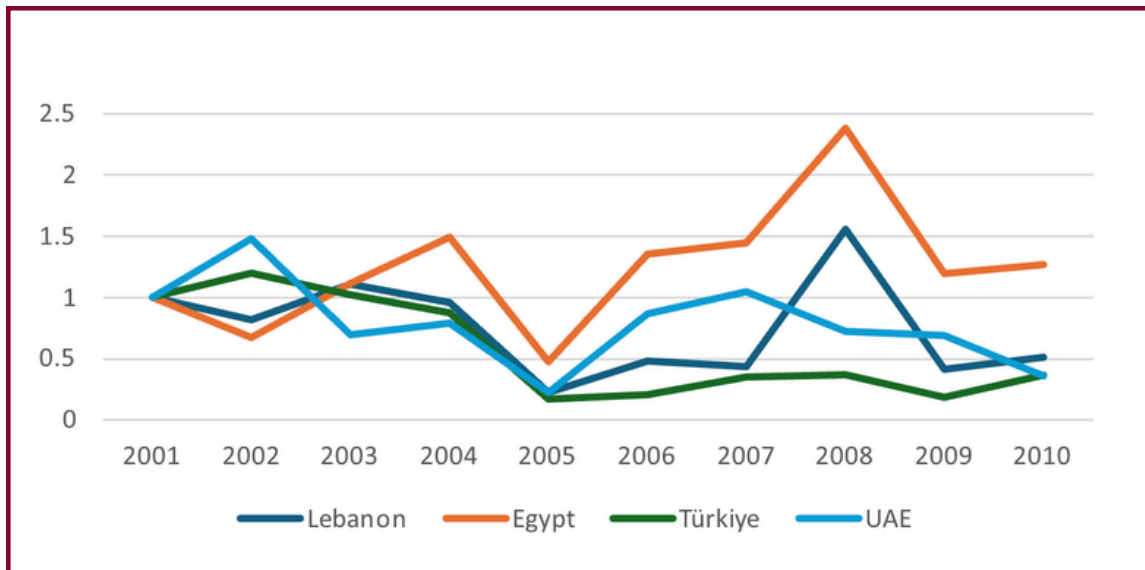
¹³ See Stahiv, Solomia (2026). "The Role of Trade Imbalances and Asymmetry in Interstate Wars," Masters Thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

¹⁴ We use these quantities to provide a visual representation of each country's export and import behavior. We use different years as the reference years when normalizing the data for the sample between 2001-2010, and the sample between 2001-2023 because using a single reference year, say, 2001, obscures relevant movements at the beginning of the sample for the sample between 2001-2023. A formal econometric analysis would require accounting for stationarity issues in these variables explicitly.

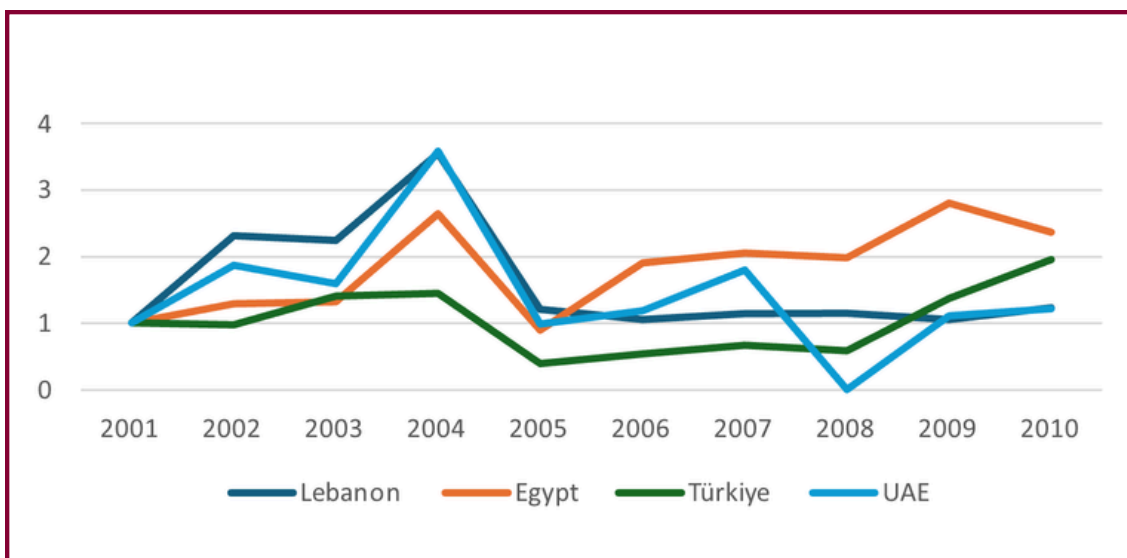
¹⁵ <https://climate-diplomacy.org/new-climate-peace-syria>. Accessed February 10, 2026.

Figure 1: Syria's Exports and Imports, 2001-2010

(i) Syria's Exports to 4 Trade Partners



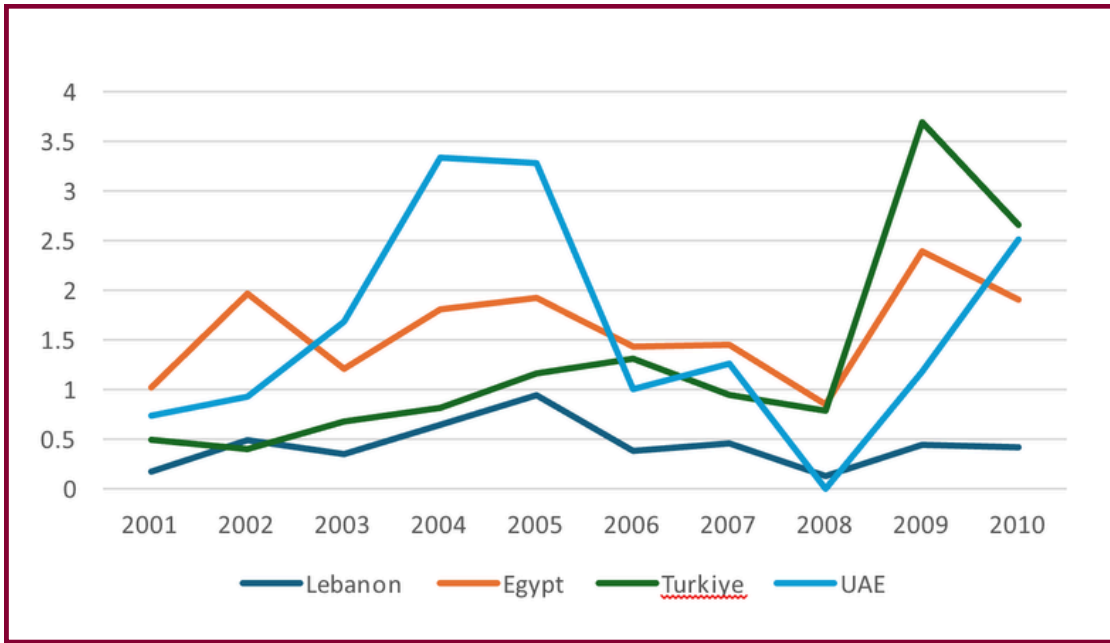
(ii) Syria's Imports from 4 Trade Partners



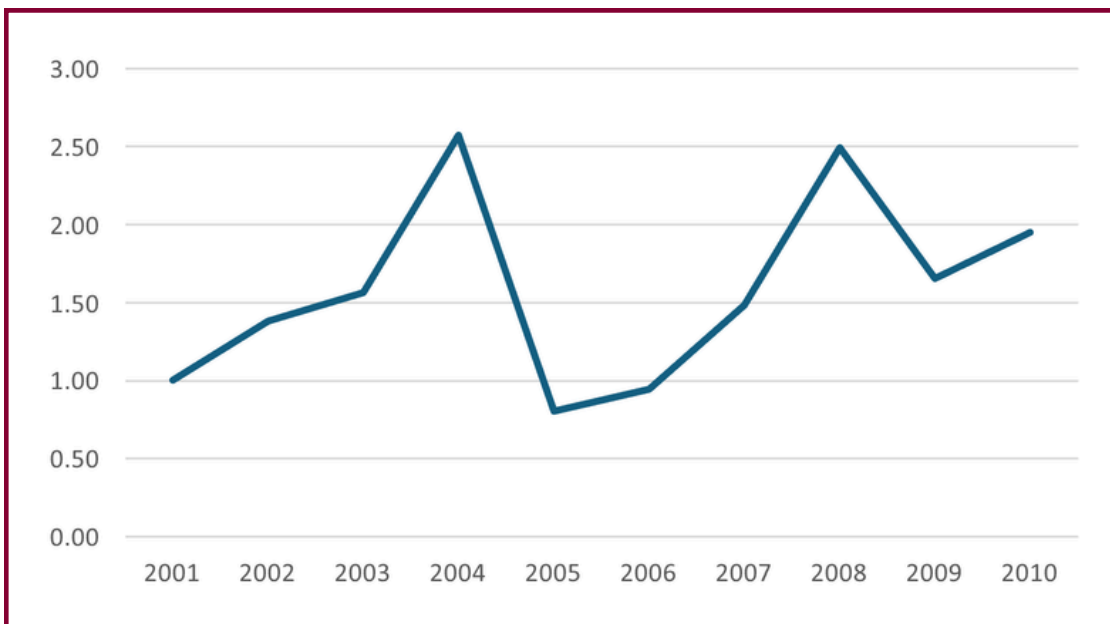
Source: UN Comtrade. Export and import values are normalized by their corresponding value in 2001.

Figure 2: Syria's Trade Balance and Imports from China, 2001-2010

(i) Syria's Trade Balance with 4 Partners



(ii) Syria's Imports from China



Source: UN Comtrade. The trade balance is the ratio of imports to exports each year. China's imports are normalized by its value in 2001.

Figure 1(i) shows that there is a large increase in exports from Syria to Lebanon in 2008, with exports increasing to 1.5 times their value in 2001 and reaching \$1.34 billion by 2008. This may correspond to the two countries establishing formal diplomatic ties in October 2008 for the first time since their independence (including opening embassies). Such relations facilitated cross-border trade, encouraged business confidence, and reduced administrative or unofficial barriers. The increase in exports to Lebanon also reflects the demand for building materials, food and agricultural products, and energy goods by Lebanon in its recovery and reconstruction efforts after the 2006 war with Israel. The undervalued Syrian pound may also have contributed to the export boom, making Syrian goods relatively cheap in Lebanon.

In other findings, Syria's trade deficit with both Egypt and the UAE increases around 2004, with Syria's imports from Egypt rising to nearly double the value of its exports to Egypt and its imports from the UAE rising to nearly three and half times its exports. According to the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Egyptian rice exports to Syria increased in 2004, primarily as a result of a barter trade agreement that Egypt signed with Syria in 2003.¹⁶ Syrian bilateral trade with Egypt continued to increase after 2005, although Syria's trade balance remains negative with Egypt throughout this period. The increase in imports from the UAE around 2004 has been attributed to a variety of factors. According to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2006,¹⁷ Syria had been participating in Arab regional trade liberalization frameworks, particularly the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) and earlier the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA), which tended to encourage greater intra-regional trade. Finally, re-export activity through cities like Dubai in the UAE likely contributed to an apparent increase in trade flows between Syria and the UAE prior to 2006. These factors made it easier and often cheaper for Syrian merchants to source goods through the UAE and other Gulf markets.

After 2008, Syria's imports from Türkiye increased to three and a half times the value of its exports, suggesting that Syria began running a large trade deficit with Türkiye after this date; see Figure 2(i). Similarly, we observe that China's exports to Syria are two and a half times their initial value in years 2004 and 2008; see Figure 2(ii). Syria's imports from China increase from a value of \$795 million in 2001 to \$2.040 billion by 2004 and to \$1.978 billion by 2008. These findings suggest that Türkiye and China are Syria's two most important trading partners during this period. Finally, although we did not graph imports from China to Syria, they averaged about \$48 million during the 2003-2010 period, implying that Syria's trade deficit with China throughout this period was massive.

Regional trade with Syria, 2001-2023

We now turn to a discussion of Syria's bilateral trade using trade statistics reported by its trading partners. Figure 3 shows the evolution of bilateral exports and imports reported by Syria's trade partners.¹⁸ Figure 4 shows the trade balance that each of the four countries had with Syria¹⁹ and the evolution of China's exports to Syria between 2001 and 2023.

Lebanon

Figure 4(i) shows that Lebanon has a trade deficit with Syria for the period 2001-2012, mirroring the trade surplus that Syria had with Lebanon for the period 2001-2010. However, Lebanon's trade balance with Syria reverts to a surplus after 2012. As Figure 3(i) shows, there are two episodes in which Lebanon's exports to Syria increased substantially, in 2013 and 2022, respectively. The increased exports from Lebanon to Syria around 2013 were mainly in the beverage

¹⁶ https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=Rice+Update+Cairo_Egypt_09-08-2004.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2026

¹⁷ <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2006/295/article-A004-en.xml.%20Accessed%20February%202010,%202026>.

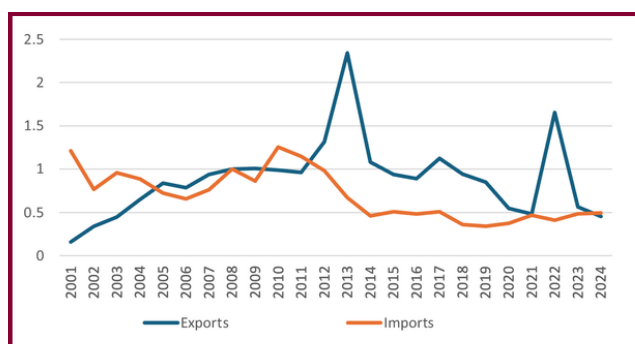
¹⁸ While we graph the series EXt/EX2001 and IMt/IM2001 in the same graph in Figure 3, panels (i)-(iv), the difference between these series cannot be interpreted as the trade balance of each country with Syria, because the export and import figures are normalized by different values.

¹⁹ We display the trade balance figures for 2002-2023 because Lebanon had an outlier value in 2001.

and tobacco sector, and, to some extent, in food products, replacing part of the production lost in Syria due to the ongoing civil war. For example, wheat exports to Syria increased 14 times between 2011 and 2013.²⁰ By contrast, the increase in exports to Syria in 2022 is due to the increase in exports of a single commodity, polyethylene, a commonly produced plastic, which comprises 74% of Lebanon’s exports to Syria in that year.²¹

Figure 3: Bilateral Tradewith Syria, 2001-2023

(i) Lebanon Exports and Imports



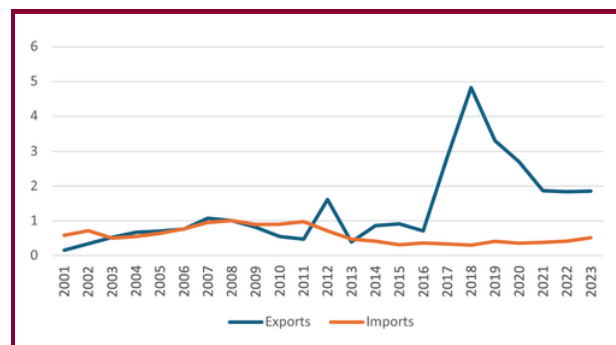
(ii) Egypt Exports and Imports



(iii) Türkiye Exports and Imports



(iv) UAE Exports and Imports



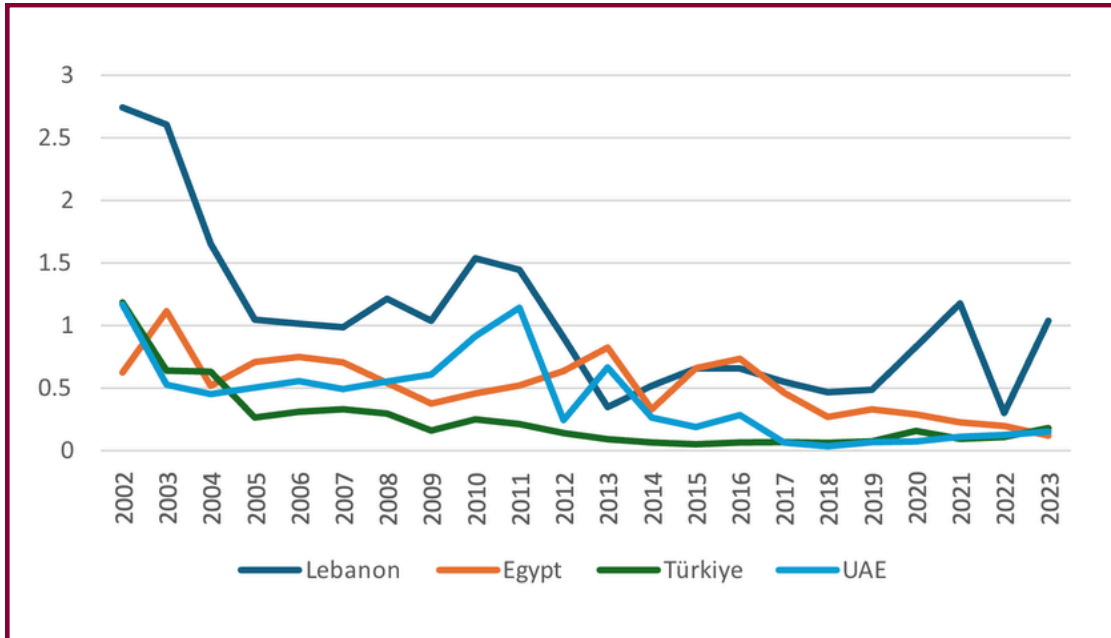
Source: UN Comtrade. Export and import values are normalized by their corresponding value in 2008.

²⁰ See Cali, Massimiliano; Harake, Wissam; Hassan, Fadi; Struck, Clemens Christian. “The impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanese trade” (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, April 2015. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/908431468174247241>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

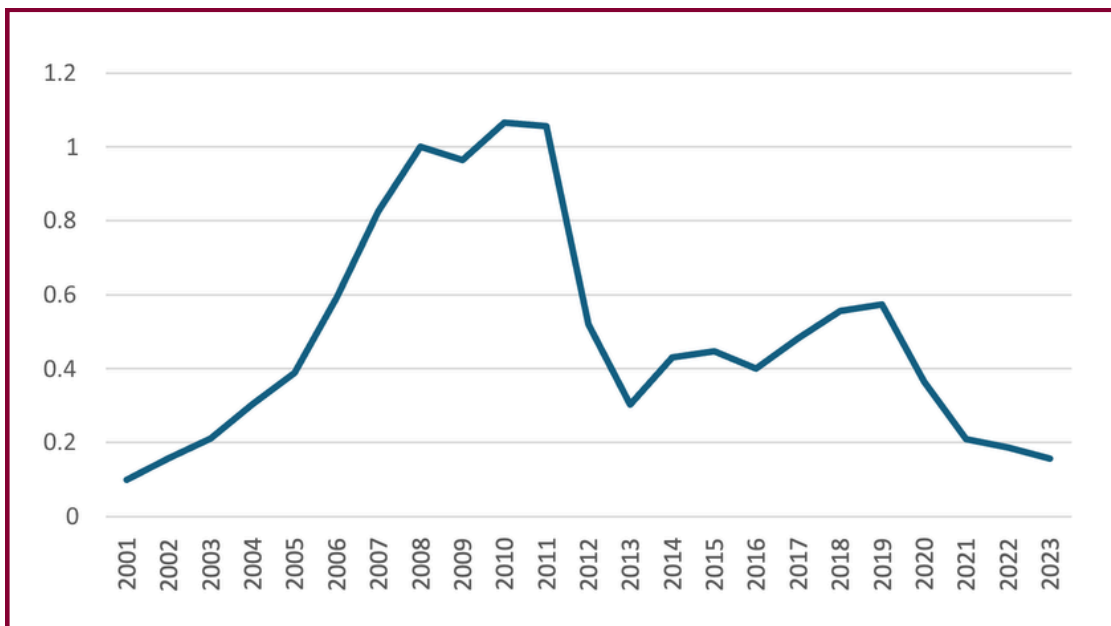
²¹ <https://syria-report.com/lebanons-exports-to-syria-rose-by-nearly-300-percent-in-2022/>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

Figure 4: Trade Balance of Partners and China's Exports to Syria

(i) Trade Balance of Partners, 2002-2023



(ii) China's Exports to Syria, 2001-2023



Source: UN Comtrade. The trade balance is the ratio of imports to exports each year. China's imports are normalized by its value in 2008.

Egypt

Egypt's trade with Syria shows a positive trade balance in favor of Egypt throughout the sample period; see Figure 4(i), mirroring the situation in Figure 2(i). This trade balance widened in 2010, as Egypt began to liberalize its economy. The *Atlantic Council* report published in 2016 credits Egypt with reducing its tariff rate to 10% on all goods and to 8% on manufactured goods. Because of these policy changes, Egypt's imports increased from \$23 billion in 2004 to close to \$60 billion in 2009-2010. This trade liberalization also led to an increase in Egypt's exports from \$23 billion in 2004 to approximately \$50 billion in 2009-2010.²²

Figure 3(ii) shows that Egypt's trade with Syria exhibits similar characteristics, as both imports and exports increase from 2007 onward. Exports in 2010 increased 1.4 times relative to their value in 2008, to more than \$850 million by 2009-2010, while imports increase 1.2 times their value in 2008 by 2012. However, these increases start to revert to lower values around 2012. Exports fall to \$180 million by 2016 and imports also fall to an average value of \$135 million for the period 2014-2016. The reason behind both developments lies in the Arab Spring protests that erupted across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2011. This led to the slowing and stalling of the reform process in Egypt in 2011, when the Tahrir Square demonstrations and other political events began to dominate the country's agenda. Furthermore, to ease pressures on its balance of payments, Egypt imposed new protectionist measures that increased tariffs on a variety of goods after 2016. The deteriorating situation due to the civil war in Syria is another reason for the decline in bilateral trade. Consequently, imports from Syria show a clearly declining trend after 2016 until the end of the sample. Exports from Egypt to Syria show some tendency to recover after 2016, but do not reach their earlier levels.

Türkiye

As Figure 4(i) shows, Türkiye has a positive trade balance with Syria for most of the sample period, as in the case of Egypt, but this trade balance is substantially greater. Exports of Türkiye increase rapidly until 2010, show an initial decline in 2011, and then drop drastically in 2012. The evolution of its imports during the same period shows a similar pattern. As many commentators have noted, 2012 was an especially fraught year in Türkiye's relations with Syria. After years of tense relations, Türkiye and Syria had been seeking to promote trade liberalization and regional cooperation in the 2000's (Stahiv, 2026). A bilateral Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2007, and visa-free travel was approved in 2009. By 2010, officials were expressing hope that bilateral trade between Türkiye and Syria could reach \$5 billion.

The beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, followed by some of the worst excesses of this war in 2012, such as the summary execution of 108 civilians in Houla and the offensives conducted by various extremist groups in Syria, brought Türkiye-Syria relations to a new low in 2012. Exports to Syria fell to \$497 million in 2012 after achieving a value of \$1.844 billion in 2010. Imports also fell to a value of \$67 million in 2012 after reaching a value of \$452 million in 2010, nearly equal to their value in 2001. By 2014, exports from Türkiye to Syria had recovered to a value of \$2.336 billion, accompanied by reports of unregistered trade by Syrian businessmen who established companies in Türkiye to export vitally needed goods to Syria, such as wheat, flour, potatoes, onions, pasta, gas bottles and diapers.²³ After 2014, exports show a downward trend until 2020, when they start to climb again.

The UN ESCWA report for 2025 notes that between 2021 and 2023, imports from Türkiye represented 45% of imports to the Syrian Arab Republic. Figure 3(iii) shows that imports from Turkey to Syria began to increase after 2021. Although we lack data for 2025, there are preliminary reports that Türkiye's exports to Syria jumped by 70% following the ouster of the Bashar Al-Assad regime in late 2024.²⁴

²² <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-return-to-trade-protection-in-egypt/>.

²³ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-trade-shrinks-with-war-torn-neighbors-iraq-and-syria-71682>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

²⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-s-exports-to-syria-surge-nearly-70-in-2025/3809059>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

The southeastern province of Gaziantep was responsible for \$652.9 million of exports, Istanbul came second with \$381.9 million, followed by Ankara \$281.7 million. For historically intertwined regions such as Gaziantep and Aleppo, these new relations could lead to a rejuvenating effect of regional trade (Altug, 2010).²⁵ More importantly, the path of bilateral trade between Türkiye and Syria is a witness to the growing involvement of Türkiye in the region, both economically and politically. According to the International Catholic Migration Commission, Türkiye hosted 3.7 million Syrian refugees in 2022.²⁶ Of this number, more than 500,000 are believed to have returned to Syria, according to a UNHCR report.²⁷ It is also reported that 14,000 formal businesses owned or co-owned by forced Syrian migrants have been registered in Türkiye since 2011.²⁸ We will return to Türkiye's role and involvement in Syria and the surrounding region in the discussion below.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE established diplomatic relations with the Syrian Arab Republic in 1972. However, relations between the two countries remained muted and bilateral trade did not exceed \$250 million throughout the period 2001-2011. In 2011, there was a further decline in exports from the UAE to Syria, as the UAE broke diplomatic relations in February 2012 following the nationwide suppression of protests that led to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. However, despite these developments, there is a slight increase in exports to Syria around 2012. By 2016, UAE officials were voicing opinions about normalizing relations with the Bashar Al-Assad regime to counter the influence of Iran (and Türkiye) in the region.²⁹ The UAE finally opened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018, with various bilateral relations occurring throughout the following years. Figure 3(iv) shows that UAE exports to Syria reached nearly five times their value in 2008, achieving a value of \$1.2 billion in 2018 alone. Although this momentum has not been sustained in recent years, exports since 2021 have exceeded their values in the period before 2018.

China

The last country we will examine is China. At its highest point, China's exports to Syria were approximately \$2.44 billion in 2011, exceeding the export values of each of the other countries we considered. However, China's exports show a declining path after 2011, when the Syrian civil war began. This decline lasts until 2014, after which there is an increase, but export volumes after 2014 do not reach the volumes achieved in 2010 or 2011.

In summarizing our findings for the different countries, one observation we can make regarding the trade behavior of the different countries is that for Lebanon, Egypt, and China, the trade volumes attained between 2012 and 2013 are not reached again in the later years of the sample. This is like the behavior exhibited by Syria's overall trade with the world, as exhibited in the UN ESCWA (2025) report, which shows declining imports and export volumes for Syria since 2012. On the other hand, Türkiye and the UAE exhibit trade volumes that increase in the last part of the sample period studied. For example, the total trade volume of Türkiye and the UAE with Syria in 2023 was \$2.62 billion and \$527.3 million, respectively, while China's total trade had decreased to \$375 million and Egypt's to \$32.5 million. Such differences in the observed trade performance likely reflect divergent policy orientations, economic links, and strategic priorities across these countries, and provide indications about how bilateral relations in the region may evolve.

²⁵ <https://tusiad.org/en/news-events/item/5111-tusiad-article-series--2010---05---historical-trade-routes--is-this-the-road-to-regional-development>

²⁶ <https://www.icmc.net/2025/11/26/how-many-syrian-refugees-are-in-turkey>

²⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/news/press-releases/unhcr-historic-return-displaced-syrians-presents-opportunityand-urgent>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

²⁸ <https://theconversation.com/syrian-forced-migrants-in-turkey-have-built-businesses-despite-challenges-heres-whathas-helped-them-succeed-267901>

²⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria-UnitedArabEmiratesrelations>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results we have described up to this point motivate us to ask the following question: Who would have thought that bilateral trade behavior could be laden with so much geopolitical meaning? It is well known that Türkiye has been actively involved in Syria in both military and political terms since the civil war in Syria began. These include military forays into Syria since 2016 that have been well documented. At the time of its writing in 2019, a briefing written by the European Parliament viewed these events as evidence of a “further de-coupling from two of its [Türkiye’s] allies, the EU and the United States”.³⁰ However, this assessment by the European Parliament might be premature, as the events in Syria have been developing in ways that arguably align more closely with Türkiye’s strategic interests. Recently, Chatham House argued that the developments in Syria constitute a victory for Türkiye, which must now use its influence to promote an inclusive future in that country.³¹

Based on some of our findings, we could also ask if Türkiye is beginning to take some of the economic space that was previously occupied by other economies. As we discussed above, China’s bilateral trade appears to have leveled off during Al-Assad regime’s later years, though this may also be due to the weakened state of Syrian demand during that period. China has yet to recognize the new government in Damascus, citing security concerns.³² Will China return to this void or will its place increasingly be taken up by Türkiye and the Gulf states? Our discussion of the UAE’s trade with Syria seems to suggest that it has also chosen to engage with Syria at the expense of countries that it perceives as its regional rivals. Specifically, its bilateral trade choices seem to be aligned with its rivalry with Iran, which has been considerably weakened in recent months, and with Türkiye and one of its close allies, Qatar, a tiny gas-rich enclave with the fourth highest GDP per capita in the world. Furthermore, there is a growing rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as they compete for economic opportunities in the region and ally with opposing groups in Yemen and Sudan.³³ These developments suggest that the new era for Syria and the region will witness more competition and struggle for influence, with bilateral trade as one of the instruments.

In our discussion of the recent experience involving bilateral trade in the region, we did not dwell on the issue of climate change and climate diplomacy. Yet the severe drought that Syria faced in 2005-2006 has been cited as one of the reasons for the protests that erupted in many rural communities in 2011. The issue of climate change that is increasingly causing extreme weather patterns in the region is being actively discussed when analyzing the developments in the region, including the geopolitics of water use.³⁴ As we discussed in our Introduction, a new era has certainly arrived with the ouster of the Al-Assad regime, heralded as one that will allow for a rejuvenation of trade routes and a new period of prosperity. However, this new era is also home to many new geopolitical risks and rivalries. Navigating these risks seems crucial for countries in the region, which have prospered from their mutual trade conducted along great rivers and well-trodden land routes for millennia.

³⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2019\)642284](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2019)642284). Accessed February 23, 2026.

³¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkey-has-emerged-winner-syria-must-now-use-its-influence-help-buildpeace>. Accessed February 21, 2026.

³² <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/why-china-hesitant-support-syrias-new-government-al-sharaa-facescrucial-month>. Accessed February 21, 2026.

³³ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-growing-rift-between-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae>. Accessed February 18, 2026.

³⁴ <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/turkey-syria-and-iraq-conflict-over-euphrates-tigris>. Accessed February 14, 2026.



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