

AN ARAB PERSPECTIVE ON TÜRKİYE'S CONTESTED REGIONAL POWER ROLE UNDER THE AKP'S RULE

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ABSTRACT

How would a state's regional power role be impacted by foreign leaders? Building on the national role theory's interactive approach, this study argues that Arab countries have contributed to the concretization of Türkiye's regional power role in the Middle East before the Arab uprisings and its marginalisation following their eruption in 2011. While national role theorists have underlined the potential rise of disagreements among ruling elite members in national role formulation, they overlooked the impact of foreign leaders on the formulation and crystallisation of this role. Relying on the triangulation of three qualitative research methods, findings support the significant impact of external actors on the formulation and concretization of a state's national role, taking as a case-study Arab countries' perceptions of and reactions toward Türkiye's power role before and after the Arab uprisings, from 2002 until 2021.

Keywords: *National role theory, Turkish foreign policy, Turkish-Arab relations, Middle East politics*

INTRODUCTION

Former Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, conceived Türkiye as a regional power in the Middle East in light of its geography and history (Davutoğlu, 2001). This role was to be concretized through economic interdependence, mediation, multilateralism, and normative leadership among neighbours. The longevity of the Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) rule and the abrupt shifts in Turkish policy in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings raise questions about Arab countries' perceptions of Türkiye's regional power role and their impact on its formulation and operationalization.

While copious studies have examined changes in Turkish foreign policy since the AKP's rise to power in 2002, they have strictly focused on the internal decision-making process, the AKP leaders' characteristics, and conservative business actors' and NGOs' involvement in the formulation and implementation of Turkish policy (Cuhadar et al., 2017; Taner, 2015; Altunışık and Cuhadar, 2010). Arab countries' perception of and reactions toward the AKP's role in the Middle East were left unaddressed.

Also, International Relations scholars have highlighted an existing gap between external actors' and national leaders' expectations from a country's foreign policy without addressing the factors underpinning this gap (Thies, 2010 and 2014; Brummer and Thies, 2014). National role theory, being a derivative of foreign policy analysis middle range theories, sheds light on the interaction between a wide range of interests and worldviews among national elites during national role formulation. Being the expression of a state's function and position on the regional and international levels, on the basis of its material assets and rulers' perception of its image and interests, national role is believed to rely on two main pillars: role expectations and performance (Holsti, 1970). However, by solely limiting their analysis to that state's ruling elite's bargaining processes and disagreements, national role theorists have overlooked external actors' divergence over a country's national role and their contribution to that state's foreign policy formulation and manifestation. This study fills a theoretical and empirical gap by addressing Arab countries' perceptions of and reactions to Türkiye's power role in the Middle East before and after the Arab uprisings in order to identify how they contributed to its foreign policy formulation and implementation.

In answering this question, the study argues that, similarly to the local state elites (Malici and Walker, 2014), external actors do not just accept a country's national role as structured by its central leadership and foreign policy elites but develop calculated perceptions and reactions towards it that express their expectations and conditions for accepting such a role—thus contributing to its formulation and implementation. Accordingly, since 2002, Arab countries' different positioning toward Türkiye's power role in the Middle East has variably impacted its implementation through reactions ranging from support, to resistance, to opposition. Although the AKP has conceived Türkiye as a regional power, this conception was differently perceived by Arab countries due to an existing gap between Arab leaders' and Turkish elites' expectations. This resulted in a variety of reactions that have either contributed to the concretization of a Turkish regional power role, or to its deemphasis and marginalisation. While Arab and Turkish elites' expectation differences were minimal before the Arab uprisings, they became irreconcilable from 2011 onwards, thus overshadowing Türkiye's role as a regional power and limiting its foreign policy visibility as such. The study relies on the triangulation of data obtained from three qualitative research methods. It utilises a rigorous text analysis of Arab scholarship on Türkiye's role in the Middle East before and after the uprisings, has recourse to 20 extensive open-ended and semi-structured expert interviews conducted by the author with Turkish officials, businessmen, and NGOs' activists from 2010 until 2012, and carries out a systematic analysis of the AKP leaders' speeches, notably those of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and former President Abdullah Gül, between 2002 and 2012.

CONTESTED ROLES: TÜRKIYE'S NATIONAL ELITES' AND EXTERNAL ACTORS' EXPECTATIONS

This study borrowed Cantir and Kaarbo's concept of 'contested roles,' conceiving roles as a changing dynamic that is neither predetermined nor preconceived, to unveil external actors' impact on a

country's external role formulation and implementation due to the latter's irreconcilable expectations with those of that state's national elites (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2016: 23). While Cantir and Kaarbo used this concept to examine local elites' bargaining processes during national role formulation, this study will employ it to highlight divergences dividing national and external actors in order to examine their impact on national actors' role formulation and concretization. In this respect, the study examines the positive impact of Turkish leaders and Arab countries' reconcilable expectations on Türkiye's regional power role in light of Arab countries' supportive reactions, with few exceptional cases of resistance, before the Arab uprisings of 2011. In the same vein, it shows how a growing gap between Turkish and Arab expectations regarding Türkiye's external power role after 2011 has limited the latter's regional room of manoeuvre and prompted it to take an increasingly aggressive attitude in the region.

In other words, external actors' expectations are a primordial component in national role formulation. Unlike in the original theory, therefore, in this study, actors' expectations do not only emanate from the national level but also from the external level (Harnisch, 2012). In line with this rationale, a country's national role on the regional and international levels is negotiated in a bargaining process involving local and external actors, which can lead to either congruence in national role conception, or resistance, rejection, coercion due to conflicting expectations (Bengtsson and Elgstrom, 2012). While external actors' clashing expectations and reactions toward the local elites' role conception might lead to regional instability, the conciliation of both parties' perceptions in role conception can promote cooperation (Barnett, 1993; LePestre, 1997). By disaggregating external actors in function of expectations and reactions toward a state's national role as a foreign policy actor, this study sheds light on the Turkish elites' strategic mobilisation of their national discourse in justification of Türkiye's external role representation

directed not only towards its own population, but also towards neighbours in order to achieve a wider recognition (Aras and Görner, 2010).

This interactive dimension paves the way for an in-depth analysis of external actors' perceptions of and reactions toward Türkiye's external national role and allows to make some realistic assessments regarding their contribution to its national role formulation and implementation. To do so, this study employs the interactive school's constructivist dimension, which perceives external national roles as a means for states' adaptation to the global order's exigencies, a tool for ensuring their structural and normative survival, and an expression of their identity through the adoption of a set of behaviours and attitudes toward external issues (Wendt, 1992; Adler, 2000).

Furthermore, this study relies on the triangulation of three qualitative research methods: discourse analysis, text analysis, and expert interviews held by the author from 2010 to 2012. As for the first method, this study considers AKP leaders' speeches and statements on Turkish policy toward Arab countries from 2002 until 2012, focusing on Erdoğan, Gül, and Davutoğlu's speeches about Türkiye's external power role based on their perception of geography and history and its operationalization through economic interdependence, mediation, multilateralism, and normative leadership.

This analysis depicts the pillars of AKP's strategic policy in the Middle East, its formulation process, and its implementation geared towards the concretization of a concrete and coherent Turkish external power role. Furthermore, this study relies on a rigorous text analysis of Arab scholarship on Turkish foreign policy from 2002 until 2021 to determine Arab leaders' perceptions of, expectations of, and reactions toward the AKP's policies in the Middle East. It tracks keywords related to economic interdependence, mediation, role model, and multilateralism, throughout academic and journalistic writings addressing Egypt, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Emirates' leadership perceptions of and reactions toward Türkiye. Finally, it draws on the author's 20 in-depth open-ended and semi-structured expert interviews conducted

with Turkish officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Prime Minister's Office (PM), and Ministry of Economy (ME), in addition to conservative business associations and NGOs.

ARAB COUNTRIES' EXPECTATIONS AND REACTIONS TOWARD TÜRKIYE'S POWER ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST BEFORE THE ARAB UPRISINGS (2002-2010)

Findings from a rigorous text analysis of Arab scholarship and open-ended expert interviews on Türkiye's external power role before the Arab uprisings revealed conciliatory expectations among Arab and Turkish leaders and, subsequently, supportive reactions toward the concretization of its role with only few exceptions. This data was verified based on a meticulous examination of leaders' speeches and official statements about Türkiye's regional power role manifestations through mediation, economic interdependence, multilateralism, and normative leadership. Building on the national role theory, this analysis showed how convergent expectations between Türkiye and Arab countries resulted in positive reactions that supported the formulation and implementation of Türkiye's power role in the Middle East before the Arab uprisings.

Normative Leadership

Building on Türkiye's common historical and cultural heritage with Arab countries, the AKP perceived Arab countries as constituting a central pillar in the conception of Türkiye's regional role model. This perception rallied extensive support from Arab leaders, especially in Syria, Palestine, the Gulf countries, and Libya. Leaders of both Türkiye and Arab states were convinced that Western powers' negative view of the latter as countries that condoned terrorism, conjoined with Türkiye's institutional ties to the West, paved the way toward the concretization of a Turkish regional model by securing ample Arab support for the AKP's efforts to facilitate mutual understanding with the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) (Magued, 2010-2012). The AKP's promises of integrating Arab

countries into the global order, its call for their ideological moderation and democratisation, and its emphasis on the West's history of injustice and colonialism convinced Syrian, Palestinian, Gulf and Libyan leaders of Türkiye's ability to secure their demands and to alleviate the global order's inequalities they had incurred for decades.

In particular Syria, being internationally and regionally isolated, supported the Turkish regional role model in light of the AKP's promises of integrating Arab countries into the global order during political and economic summits. Being negatively perceived by Western countries, Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, capitalised on Turkish strategic ties with the US and the EU in facilitating mutual understanding (Akram, 2010). The AKP's self-portrayal as 'conservative democrats' and 'moderate secularists' convinced al-Assad that it was the most suitable partner for Syria's reconciliation with Western powers and its consequent elimination from the list of countries that support terrorism. Syria's rapprochement with Türkiye was believed to boost its regional legitimacy and international profile in addition to conveying a positive message about al-Assad's ruling regime in light of the US conception of Türkiye as an example to follow towards democratisation, economic development, and social integration.

Unlike the majority of Arab leaders, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did not positively perceive the AKP's normative leadership due to its promotion of Islamic ideals, provision of an example for Islamists, and takeover of Egyptian traditional leadership in the region (Magued, 2016). The Turkish role model revived Mubarak's concerns over historical and ideological ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamist opposition group in Egypt, dating back to former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's nationalist view, Milli Görüş. Constituting the AKP's ideological benchmark, the Brothers' intellectual writings enriched Milli Görüş's normative foundations and enabled the mobilisation of notions like the Islamic state, the Muslim nation

(Ummah), and the Islamization of the nation-state (Ayyash, 2020). A natural relationship and a shared sentimentality were crystallised during regular conferences that were attended by AKP leading figures. Coated into a universalistic language, the AKP's worldview echoed the Brothers' transnational Islamic solidarity in the Arab and Muslim world. Similarly to the Brothers, Erbakan himself developed his vision of Islamic transnational outlook and slogan of Just Order (Adil Düzen), while Davutoğlu established his worldview of an Islamic civilizational space where Türkiye would act as a central state through an active engagement and mediation between the North and the South, in an attempt to rectify the global order's premises (Al-Labbad, 2011). In other words, the AKP's normative leadership in the Arab and Muslim world mirrored the Brothers' resentment toward Western injustice vis-à-vis Muslims and visions of Islamic solidarity that bypassed nation-states.

Qatar did not express concerns over the AKP's ideological credentials since it had exceptionally embraced its Islamist opposition, favouring a positive reception of Turkish normative leadership (Kawtharani, 2011). In contrast with Egypt, who perceived the AKP as a means for Islamists to criticise the regime's corruption, negligence of citizens' welfare, and alliance with the West, the Qatari regime perceived the AKP as an ally and regional partner (Magued, 2020). To the Qatari government, Islamists' sociopolitical integration was a step forward toward a credible and visible regional role, to be obtained in coordination with the AKP. In this perspective, the Qatari regime successfully mobilised its media infrastructure in portraying the AKP as a role model for Arab and Muslim countries on TV shows, news' reports, and al-Jazeera Center for Studies (Noureddine, 2003).

Arab countries supportive of Turkish normative leadership have contributed to the crystallisation of its role model in many instances. Within the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, Arab countries took part in boosting Turkish goals of rapprochement among

nations, tolerance toward cultural difference, and the fight against stigmatisation. Türkiye's co-leadership with Spain dwelt on the former's representation of the Arab-Muslim world as part of its efforts to ensure its integration into the world order exigencies. Turkish representation role and mediation between the West and the Arab world was concretized through an inter-civilizational dialogue based on regular meetings and summits within the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League. Following the US war on Iraq in 2003 and the Madrid bombings in 2004, Arab countries supported the AKP leaders' dissociation of Islam and resistance against occupation critiques of the global order's perpetuation of injustice, prejudices, and anti-Islamic feelings on the one hand, and terrorism on the other (Magued, 2010-2012). Arab countries convened in 2006 at the Arab League summit in Khartoum and supported the Turkish-Arab forum's initiative where Erdoğan (Erdoğan, 2006) adopted a critical discourse toward the West's discriminatory practices against Muslims. In reaction to the Danish cartoons that negatively portrayed Prophet Muhammad, Qatar hosted the Alliance's second meeting in 2006 and contributed to workshops for promoting inter-civilizational dialogue and disseminating educational programs on civilizations at schools and universities. In response to Turkish calls for Arab countries to play an effective role in the Alliance, Egypt hosted the World Economic Forum in Sharm el-Sheikh in 2006, where Gül and Erdoğan urged other countries to help the Alliance spread international awareness about its principles. Similarly, the African Union invited Erdoğan in 2007 to its summit, in preparation for his public address about the initiative.

In the same vein, the OIC unanimously adopted in 2004 the 'Istanbul Declaration' that reflected the AKP's call for democratisation in the Arab world. The AKP, acting as a credible reference for its Arab-Muslim neighbours in line with global exigencies, underlined that the difference between civilizations lied in their normative and practical evolution toward democracy. According to Davutoğlu (2010), Arab and Muslim countries' support enabled Türkiye to play the role of a regional referee in guaranteeing stability

and managing intra-regional interactions. This role continued for a short period following the 2011 uprisings. Following Mubarak and Ben Ali's overthrow, Türkiye had recourse to public diplomacy with Egypt and Tunisia by organising national and regional meetings, conferences, and discussion panels within the framework of the Arab-Turkish Congress of Social Sciences in order to address a wide range of audiences. The AKP aimed to induce rapprochement with Arab countries, correct mutual historical prejudices and stereotypes, and exchange intellectual and academic views through scholarships for Arab students as well as the inauguration of an Arabic speaking media (Magued, 2010-2012).

In addition, Türkiye's sending of humanitarian convoys to Syria since the uprising in 2011, Palestine from 2008 onwards, and Somalia during the famine of 2010-2011, induced Arab countries to trust the AKP's conciliatory character in defending and supporting them against perceived international injustices. On multiple occasions before 2011, the OIC and the Arab League supported Erdoğan's criticisms of Israeli violations of Palestinian rights, as well as the Turkish Mavi Marmara Convoy's humanitarian trip to Gaza in defiance of the Israeli blockade. The Sudanese and Syrian regimes developed personal ties with AKP leaders on the background of the latter's support before Western powers. In addition to the initiation of economic and commercial ties with Former Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, Erdoğan refused his prosecution by the International Criminal Court over charges of ethnic cleansing in Darfur (Magued, 2010-2012). Similarly, Erdoğan pleaded for Syria's removal from the list of countries that support terrorism.

Mediation

The AKP has successfully appealed to Arab countries by referring to its mediation role as that of a fire brigade (*itfaiye*) that puts down fires within 'wooden houses': a reference to the perturbed regional countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It has also capitalised on its cultural Ottoman

heritage and historical archives as supportive tools in the resolution of the Palestinian issue. A wide range of Arab leaders, notably former Libyan President Muammar al-Qaddafi, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) President Mahmoud Abbas, supported the AKP's prioritisation of justice over order in its regional policy and criticism of Western countries' double standards toward the region. On the other hand, while the AKP came up with the slogan 'we talk to everyone in order to come up with suitable and inclusive solutions for all parties', Egypt expressed reservations over the AKP's inclusion of Hamas into peace talks, supportive stance toward Iran, and sponsorship of Islamic civil society organisations such as the İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri Vakfı (Magued, 2010-2012).

The Syrian regime welcomed Turkish mediation with Israel and Lebanon. In light of the rise of international and regional pressures on the al-Assad regime to initiate significant political reforms toward democratisation, withdraw its troops from Lebanon, keep distance from Hezbollah, and resume peace talks with Israel, Türkiye represented a significant support for the regime by providing al-Assad regime indirect means of engagement with Western powers and neighbours (Abul-Fadl, 2013).

On the contrary, in light of the AKP's facilitation of the Palestinian reconciliation in Doha and intervention in the Iranian nuclear program's negotiations with the European Troika, Mubarak had particular concerns over Türkiye's takeover of the Egyptian traditional mediation role in the Palestinian question (Magued, 2010-2012). Although the PLO had always perceived Egypt as the main guarantor of its security and a credible supporter of the Palestinian cause, Egypt had in fact adopted a passive attitude by confining its regional role to limited manoeuvres, in line with the US regional directives for Mubarak's rule consolidation (Helal, 2008). Following the Israeli refusal to cooperate with the PLO leader Yasser Arafat, the former Head of Egyptian Intelligence, Omar Soliman, had

coordinated direct talks with Israel since 2004. Yet, Egypt failed in convincing the parties to conclude a reconciliation proposal because of Mubarak's attempts to sideline Hamas during negotiations (Shama, 2013). This stance, together with the detention of Hamas leaders, the closure of common borders and strains in the relations with the Brothers, limited the prospects for an effective Egyptian mediation.

Willing to boost their regional profile and international visibility, the Saudi and Qatari regimes endorsed Turkish mediation for solving regional crises. Unlike the Mubarak regime, embarrassed to see the AKP taking over its role, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar capitalised on Turkish initiatives and Western ties, thus vicariously contributing to mediation efforts in the peace process since 2004, and in the Lebanese crises of 2005 and 2008 (Abul Gheit, 2020). Alongside Syria, they appreciated Turkish innovative tools of mediation, such as the structural prevention and the socio-psychological conflict transformation. Therefore, the AKP successfully initiated political and legal actions in managing and solving conflicts through the construction of social capital and the creation of a suitable environment for antagonistic parties. In addition, it introduced inclusive mechanisms for conflict transformation, such as facilitation, interaction for pacification, conflict resolution training, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine validated Turkish regional perception as a mediator by inviting Turkish officials to intervene in the resolution of bilateral and internal crises. In 2005, former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki invited Davutoğlu in order to convince Iraqi Sunnis to participate in parliamentary elections and urge Iraqi Shiites to consider the former's rights. Following the assassination of former Lebanese President, Rafik al-Hariri, in 2006, coalitions' leaders endorsed the AKP's initiative for convincing Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon and persuading the Lebanese leadership to trust the international tribunal's investigations. In the aftermath of the 2006

Israeli war on Lebanon, the latter supported the renewal of Turkish troops' mandate in United Nations International Forces In Lebanon (Magued, 2010-2012). In the same vein, during the 2008 presidential crisis in Lebanon, Doha cooperated with Türkiye in the proposition of a three stage plan for national reconciliation, the organisation of presidential and parliamentary elections, and the definition of a common vision for Lebanon's political future. Saudi Arabia brokered an agreement between Fatah and Hamas, which resulted in the conclusion of the 2007 Unity Government Agreement in Mecca. Relying on its economic largesse, central position as a regional hub, and media infrastructure, Qatar shed light on the success of Turkish mediation between the Lebanese warring factions toward the conclusion of the Doha Agreement in 2008 and contribution to the Syrian-Lebanese reconciliation.

The PLO similarly endorsed Turkish inclusive and innovative mediation initiatives in the resolution of the Palestinian question by upgrading its relations with Türkiye to the ambassadorial level in 2003. According to respondents in the MFA, the PLO welcomed the AKP's socio-economic and institutional plans of structural prevention that were based on the deployment of material resources and the creation of new development projects. In 2005, Erdoğan concluded agreements for Turkish economic construction of Gaza following the withdrawal of Israeli forces. In addition to the organisation of the International Donor Conference for Palestine in 2007, Türkiye provided 7.7 billion dollars in support for development and reform plans in Palestine, the initiation of institutional reforms in support for the PLO and the Palestinian civil society, and the reconstruction of infrastructure in the Palestinian territories. Also, the Turkish International Cooperation Agency inaugurated a Palestinian Coordination Office for Economic and Social Collaboration in the West Bank in 2008 and initiated the Eretz Industrial Regional Project toward the development of Palestinians' economic and social capacity and the transformation of the conflict into a

potential cooperation.

During peace negotiations, Türkiye's President sought Arab countries' support by referring to the latter's initiatives and road maps underlying the principle of land for peace and by visiting Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia in preparation for the Annapolis conference in 2007. Following the 2009 Israeli Cast Lead Operation in Gaza, Türkiye made diplomatic visits to Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia and met Abbas in order to solve the Gaza crisis and ensure a ceasefire and rapprochement among Palestinian factions under a two-tier plan (Magued, 2010-2012). The AKP took the initiative to organise platforms for facilitating talks between Fatah and Hamas through meetings in Cairo and Damascus in 2007 and called for taking pragmatic steps toward Israel and the PLO, initiating dialogue, preventing violence, and launching a Palestinian constitutional process. Also, Davutoğlu facilitated indirect talks between Syria and Israel in 2008 by securing a place for dialogue, transferring messages, and participating in observation missions. In line with an international recognition of Turkish facilitation in preparation for the World Leaders' Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, the Arab League acknowledged Türkiye's 'honest' and 'reliable' mediation role, in contrast with Western powers (Magued, 2010-2012).

Multilateralism

In examining Arab countries' engagement with Turkish multilateralism, Arab scholars pointed at the AKP's openness toward dialogue, cooperation, and mutual trust, in addition to its adoption of a positive-sum logic toward national and regional issues (Mouawad, 2011). In this vein, Syria welcomed the AKP's reconciliatory attitude toward Syrian demands of increasing its share in the Euphrates and Tigris water in order to end bilateral conflicts over water partition, hence satisfying the principle of ensuring zero problems with neighbours. Similarly, Gül's (2004) speech in Kuwait was cheered by Gulf leaders who endorsed the AKP's new conception of national interest on the basis of equidistant relations with the Muslim world and the West within a multilateral

framework (al-Labbad, 2011). Syria and Libya applauded the AKP's third-worldist discourse in support for the development of regional initiatives independently from the West and in counterbalance to Israel. Also, Gulf countries were enthusiastic toward the AKP's vision of containing the Iranian and Israeli influences by including the former into Iraq's Neighborhood Initiative and condemning the latter for its Palestinian policy at the Davos Economic Forum in 2008 and the United Nations (UN) in 2010 (Erdoğan, 2008a; Ilyas, 2016).

Syria has also perceived the AKP's multilateralism as a means for solving its longstanding conflicts with Türkiye over the Hatay/Iskenderun region, the Kurdish separatist groups, and the Tigris and Euphrates water distribution (Mahfoud, 2012). In this sense, the AKP's attempts for reconciling Turkish and Arab positions on regional issues were perceived as a hope for addressing stagnant conflicts, including the particularly thorny issue of water distribution.

For their part, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have positively perceived Turkish multilateral initiatives as platforms for extending their political and geostrategic influence, economic investments, and markets toward Europe. The AKP's conciliatory character, combining modernity and tradition, attracted both regimes, but especially the Saudi, to take part in Turkish multilateralism in order to boost their profile as reformist regional actors before the West (Ghanim, 2003). Although Iran's inclusion raised some suspicions from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, the AKP successfully capitalised on its profile as a Sunni leader to politically contain Iran within the region's moderate camp.

In contrast to most Arab countries, Egypt limited its multilateral engagements with Türkiye to regional issues that touched upon its alliance with the US. Mubarak's conservative, cautious, and non-confrontational character confined Egyptian foreign policy into a reactive mode and a static style, which was manifested by its reluctance toward attempts for improving the regional order (Shama, 2013). Mubarak refused to acknowledge the Turkish regional role and the decline of its own influence

within the Arab League, the main Arab diplomatic forum. Türkiye's rising influence and the consequent relevance of Sunni Muslims could contribute to explain why, following the 2003 US war on Iraq, the new Iraqi government resisted the Arab League's mediation during the rise of inter-confessional strife; the fear of incurring a 'Sunni' pressure that would tilt the balance of power in favour of Sunni Iraqis (Ghali, 2005) could have acted as a deterrent. On the other hand, Kurds questioned the Arab League's intentions in light of the latter's support for Arab regimes' repression of their ethnic minorities across the region. The same predicament was reproduced during the Lebanese presidential crisis in 2006, where Egypt was not able to intervene among Arab countries that exchanged accusations of bias for either one of the conflicting Lebanese parties, the March 14 and March 8 groups, over the selection of the State's president.

Türkiye's Arab neighbours took part in its multilateral initiatives toward the mutual goal of becoming a substitute for the US and EU intervention in the settlement of regional crises. Turkish multilateralism was based on the AKP's notions of regional ownership against foreign intervention and development of common visions about regional issues. According to respondents at the MFA, the wider the cooperation with Arab countries, the more active Turkey was in the region due to the former's accumulated knowledge and experience in solving regional problems (Magued, 2010-2012). In addition to its OIC membership, Türkiye concluded a partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), created free economic zones with Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Jordan, established consultation mechanisms within the OIC, and obtained an observer status in the Arab League. Following the signature of a Framework Agreement and the creation of a Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum, annual expert meetings were scheduled on the ministerial level in Istanbul (2008 and 2010), Damascus (2009), and Morocco (2011) and ended with declarations and joint recommendations for further cooperation.

According to a former Arab League representative in Ankara, Türkiye and Arab countries shared a vision of regional integration based on the formulation of common projects and the achievement of political and economic interdependence (Magued, 2010-2012). Political interdependence emphasised the reconciliation of Turkish and Arab positions on regional issues and encompassed the development of a strategic partnership in order to overcome common disputes. In this vein, Türkiye's vision of economic interdependence consisted of the development of regional synergies through the diffusion of cooperation mechanisms by means of different levels of interaction.

According to Turkish diplomats, in January 2003, Türkiye launched the Iraqi Neighborhood Initiative in order to develop a common vision about its future and preserve regional stability (Magued, 2010-2012). In order to avoid the outbreak of the war against Iraq, Ankara tried to convince former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to comply with UN Resolution 1441 of 2002 in terms of disarmament. This initiative rallied Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Türkiye, Iraq, and Iran for the formulation of a common regional vision for Iraq's territorial integrity. From 2003 until 2009, the initiative organised nine official and three unofficial summits at the foreign ministers' level in addition to five meetings at the level of ministers of interior, and 3 meetings in Egypt (2007) and Kuwait (2008) that included OIC and Arab League representatives. The initiative's meetings proposed collective projects, such as the railway route between Türkiye and the Gulf countries on one hand, and between Türkiye and al-Aqaba City on the other, for the facilitation of movement of people and goods, as well as an energy pipeline project connecting the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Europe (Magued, 2010-2012).

The Turkish High-Level Council for Strategic Cooperation with Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan reflected an additional framework for cooperation based on the elimination of visa requirements and the conclusion of Free Trade Agreements. These councils managed Turkish water disputes with Syria

and Iraq as a technical issue. They introduced mechanisms for sharing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers' water, such as a systemic and tripartite water needs assessment on the basis of the area of agricultural land and irrigation methods and the development of common mechanisms toward an efficient, optimal, reasonable, and fair use of water (Magued, 2010-2012). In 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for water management and a trilateral agreement established the Joint Technical Committee in order to exchange information on water, manage hydraulic resources, modernise irrigation systems, prevent water loss, and obtain hygienic water.

As for Türkiye's territorial conflicts with Syria and Iraq over the Hatay/Iskenderun region and the Kurdish issue, the three countries concluded Free Trade and visa cancellation agreements in order to bypass the negative effects of the arbitrary process of borders' demarcation, reconsider borders' functions, and alleviate their psychological burden by opening them with neighbours (Erdoğan, 2009). By allowing the free movement of people across borders and the development of twin cities projects and border trade, these multilateral agreements created shared spaces for cooperation across borders in consideration of divided ethnic groups such as the Kurds. In this regard, the Syrian regime ceased claiming Hatay by recognizing Great Britain and France's historic responsibility for regional disintegration through the imposition of artificial borders after World War I (Magued, 2010-2012).

Economic Interdependence

Unlike other tools, economic interdependence rallied an Arab consensus around Türkiye's regional role, bypassing political and ideological differences. The interconnectedness of economic ties with mediation efforts has facilitated an overall Arab acceptance, recognition, and engagement with the Turkish regional power role in the Middle East. The AKP, in fact, met its Arab neighbours' economic expectations through the establishment of economic arrangements that also facilitated the resolution of

regional conflicts, alleviated Iran and Syria's recalcitrant stances vis-à-vis the West, ensured regional integration into the global order, and generated a regional synergy that paved the way toward mutual understanding and cooperation (Erdoğan, 2008b).

Analysts underscored Arab leaders' admiration of the Turkish economy, which has successfully expanded its market and increased its commercial ties through multilateral engagements and agreements and the inclusion of conservative businessmen in decision-making processes (Noureddine, 2009 and Ghanim, 2009). Turkish progress in the EU accession negotiations, adoption of legal and socioeconomic harmonisation packages, and support for professional business associations boosted the AKP's credibility as a reliable economic partner.

Even Egypt started to positively perceive Turkish economic initiatives in support of its own, lagging economy. Suffering from substantive economic crises since the 1990s, Cairo capitalised on Egypt's low cost production and commercial ties with Western and regional partners to conclude economic treaties and trade agreements with private Turkish investors and companies (Magued, 2010-2012).

Trade relations constituted the main pillar of Turkish economic ties with Arab countries. Since 2002, among Turkish National Flight Company's 58 routes, 14 were assigned for the MENA region. From 2002 to 2009, the share of Turkish exports to the Middle East increased from 9% to 18% and reached 30 billion dollars in 2011 while its share in Turkish foreign trade increased by 27% in 2008 and reached 3.1 billion dollars in 2009. Turkish exports to the GCC went from 2.1 to 8 billion dollars between 2002 and 2009 (Magued, 2010-2012). According to respondents at the Ministry of Economy, in May 2005, a MoU was signed between Türkiye and the GCC for developing economic relations, exchanging expertise in technology and information, and establishing free trade areas. Gulf countries designated Türkiye as their economic mediator in

2004 with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU and strategic partner in 2008 in addition to the conclusion of another MoU for the creation of regular consultation mechanisms on economic, political, and security matters.

Iraq and Syria were the main Arab partners in the crystallisation of Turkish economic interdependence efforts in the Middle East. From 2002 to 2009, Syria's trade with Türkiye increased from 773 million to 1.8 billion dollars in addition to the conclusion of 48 investment agreements in real construction, the service sector, and textiles in bordering regions (Magued, 2010-2012). In the same vein, Iraq concluded 40 investment agreements for railways and oil/gas pipeline construction. Iraq's Kurdish Autonomous Region witnessed Turkish investments in construction and infrastructure that constituted 50% of total foreign investments in Northern Iraq in light of truck-based relations, border trade in the service sector and textiles, continuous flights, and Turkish business associations' ties with Kurdish leaders (Magued, 2010-2012). Iraq imported 24% of its needs from Türkiye and established 10% of its economy on Turkish investments in energy and construction in Erbil and Basra.

Starting in 2005, Egypt multiplied its trade relations with Türkiye. Following the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement in 2007 and the creation of the Common Economic Commission, the Turkish-Egyptian Business Forum, and the High Level Trade Advisory Council, bilateral trade steadily increased from 1.5 billion dollars in 2007 to 2.5 billion dollars in 2008 and 3 billion dollars in 2009 with 44%, 50%, and 115% growth rates (Magued, 2010-2012). In 2008, Egypt approved the 5 billion dollars investments of 300 large and medium-sized Turkish companies. Also, it allocated seven million square metres of land for Turkish textiles companies affiliated to two commercial and business associations with close ties to the Turkish government (Massicard 2014, p. 15), TÜSKON (Türkiye İş Adamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu - Turkish Confederation of Industrialists and

Businessmen) and MÜSIAD (Müstakil Sanayıcı ve İşadamları Derneği - Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association), with an investment value of 338 million dollars (Magued, 2010-2012).

ARAB COUNTRIES' EXPECTATIONS AND REACTIONS TOWARD TÜRKİYE'S REGIONAL POWER ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ARAB SPRING REVOLUTIONS (2011-2021)

While Arab leaders' expectations coalesced with the AKP's regional initiatives before the Arab uprisings, disagreements have emerged following Erdoğan's explicit stances and varied reactions toward public unrests across Arab countries. In light of the concept of contested roles, national roles are both conceived and successfully implemented through a bargaining process among elites in disagreement (McCourt, 2012; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2016; Aggestam, 1999; 2006; Wish, 1980). According to these assumptions, external actors would only engage in the concretization of a country's regional and/or international role provided the latter meets their expectations as it does for the ruling elite members. Following the Arab uprisings, Türkiye's ambiguous and varied reactions toward public calls for political change antagonised Arab leaders, notably in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, by threatening their ruling regimes' political legitimacy. Divergence between Arab and Turkish leaders' expectations has reversed Arab countries' positive reactions toward Türkiye's power role and limited the AKP's regional margin of manoeuvre. The uprisings marked an inflection point leading to the re-emergence of Turkish-Arab tensions, which have distorted the interactive dimension of Turkish power role in the Middle East in light of swift shifts in Arab countries' perception of the AKP's regional engagements. Also, the AKP's staunch support for Islamists in Egypt, Libya, and Syria incited Arab countries to boycott Turkish regional initiatives, which has narrowed Türkiye's regional power role since 2012.

Unlike Erdoğan's supportive position of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, he expressed an understated opposition to public revolts in Libya, Bahrain, and

Oman, in addition to a gradual endorsement of Libya's unrest based on the Turkish regime's interests with each of these countries. While the AKP had limited interests in and ties with the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes, it developed extensive investment and economic projects with Syria, Libya, and the Gulf countries. Most Arab leaders perceived negatively the AKP's positions toward the uprisings—with Egypt as a temporary exception. The Brothers' success in parliamentary (2011) and presidential elections (2012) introduced a short-lived phase of sociopolitical revival in bilateral relations between Cairo and Ankara. From 2011 until 2013, the AKP's and the Brothers' leading officials exchanged multiple visits and concluded extensive economic agreements toward a political partnership based on a shared vision of regional ownership of the Palestinian question and of economic relations (Magued, 2020; Mouawad, 2011; 2014; al-Labbad, 2011).

Egypt's military establishment, however, remained suspicious toward this rapprochement, especially in light of Erdoğan's and Gül's statements calling for the end of Mubarak's authoritarian rule and power transition to a civil authority. The AKP leaders' regular meetings and provision of financial support to the Brothers' Freedom and Justice Party within the framework of the Turkish-Egyptian High-Level Council for Strategic Cooperation further alarmed the Egyptian army, fearing a strong Turkish influence on national politics (Mouawad, 2014). This suspicion turned into public animosity following the Brothers' ouster in 2013, as exemplified by the AKP's portrayal as a national enemy throughout extensive Egyptian media outlets. As a reaction, the AKP leadership launched a staunch attack against the military coup on international media of communication, openly supported the exiled Muslim Brothers, and legally and financially sponsored television channels that acted as opposition tribunes in Istanbul. The AKP has also supported the Brothers-affiliated former Egyptian President, Mohammed Morsi, and called on the international community to impose sanctions on the new President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi rule in 2014,

which resulted in the downgrading of diplomatic relations between Egypt and Türkiye to the level of *chargés d'affaires* (Magued, 2018).

Gulf countries have followed suit. Under a Saudi-Emirati leadership, the GCC declared its support for the Egyptian military coup, politically boycotted Türkiye and provided Egypt hefty financial packages for revitalising its economy (al-Jarrah, 2020). Gulf countries perceived the Brothers' accession to power in Egypt as an instigation for an Islamist rebellion, as was manifested during the uprisings in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain. Together with the al-Sisi regime, they listed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group and perceived the AKP's harsh criticism against the new Egyptian President as an illegitimate intervention in Egyptian internal affairs. Gulf countries' solidarity with Egypt put remarkable pressure on the AKP's regional credibility and success, especially considering Türkiye's large economic investments in the GCC. On the other hand, Davutoğlu's frequent pressure on the al-Assad regime for introducing gradual political reforms and satisfying public demands were not only overlooked but also ignited waves of animosity between both regimes (Magued, 2020). By hosting the Islamic opposition and welcoming their political meetings in Istanbul, Türkiye officially declared its opposition to al-Assad's rule, thus marking the end of the Turkish-Syrian friendship.

In addition to the AKP's ambiguous position toward the uprisings, which discredited Türkiye's credibility among Arab countries, Turkish national politics prompted the former to resort to power politics (Magued, 2022). The Arab uprisings coincided with increased turbulence in Turkish national politics. Between 2007 and 2017, the Turkish General Prosecution embarked on a series of investigations over charges against highly-ranked military officials for plotting against the ruling regime and engaging in illicit activities, known as the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer affairs. Also, the regime launched a systematic purge of opponents from administrative and educational institutions in the aftermath of a failed military coup in 2016. Following the Gezi Park

protests in 2013 (the year that witnessed its ally's ousting in Egypt) in contestation of the party's decision of turning a public park into a commercial business project, this coup resulted in the intensification of the AKP's sweeping arrests campaign against opponents and censorship over freedom of expression. In order to tighten its grip on power, the regime disrupted its alliance with a grassroots Islamic philanthropic group, known as the Gülen movement or Hizmet, and broke its truce with Kurdish militants by launching repressive military campaigns against Kurdish cities and villages. Starting in 2018, this national instability had a spillover effect on Turkish regional policy that condoned a rising nationalist tone within the ruling coalition, which included the Nationalist Movement Party (Milli Hareket Partisi).

Türkiye's recourse to military power in response to the Arab uprisings' massive externalities that threatened Turkish regional interests dissipated the possible persistence of a consensual power role in the Middle East with the support of Arab countries (Mouawad 2014; Emirates Policy Center, 2020). Partly as a result of the narrowing of its room for manoeuvre as a regional power following the rise in tensions between it and many Arab countries following the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions and partly for internal political reasons, Türkiye adopted starting in 2013 a regional policy based on antagonist adventurism and interventionist moves. This resulted in a vicious circle of further sharp decline in the AKP's popularity in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as revealed by the Arab Barometer's survey about Turkish perception in Arab countries (Ceyhun, 2018). The lack of control on common borders, the surge of Syrian and Turkish Kurd demands for regions with autonomous administration similar to the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, and the Islamic State's establishment of a self-styled 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq and its ongoing exploitation of refugees' dire conditions for recruiting members incited the AKP to abandon soft-power tools and develop irreconcilable expectations and interests with Arab leaders. This

normative and operational shift in the foundations of Türkiye's regional policy has entrenched a gap between the AKP and Arab leaders' expectations of a Turkish power role in the Middle East on the basis of a normative leadership, economic interdependence, multilateralism, and mediation.

As a result, coercion has regionally isolated the AKP and strained its relations with Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf countries (Magued, 2018). Turkish frequent military excursions into Syrian and Iraqi territories, such as the Euphrates Shield Operations in 2016 and the Olive Branch Operation in 2018, have interrupted bilateral relations with Syria and instigated Iraq's reservations over the AKP's financial and logistical support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the Islamist faction of al-Nusra Front (Louis et al., 2018). The AKP's raids against al-Assad controlled territories in Syria, opposition to the Iranian and Russian pro-Assad policies, and security coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government in managing Kurdish insurgents contrasted with Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki's support for al-Assad, tight relations with Iran and Hezbollah, and opposition to the presence of Turkish intelligence in Northern Iraq. Similarly to his predecessor, Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kadhimi expressed his concerns over Turkish military incursions in Northern Iraq and attacks against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK), which spurred tensions in Turkish relations with the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi Central Government (Magued, 2021). Iraqi officials condemned the resulting civilian death toll, the frequent visits of Turkish officials, and presence of military bases in Northern Iraq where PKK fighters were still active. Similarly, the al-Assad regime perceived the AKP as an interventionist and pro-Western agent conspiring against Syria's national unity and territorial integrity (Khakani, 2017).

The AKP's military support for Fayez al-Sarrag, the Islamist leader of the Tobruk House of Representatives, over the military-backed Presidency

of Khalifa Haftar in Tripoli, through the dispatch of troops and Islamist fighters undermined Turkish investments in Libya and strained its relations with Gulf countries and Egypt. Turkish ties with al-Sarrag antagonised Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Egypt who, in line with their fight against terrorism and the rise of Islamist regimes, cooperated with Haftar and supported the deployment of Egyptian troops in Libya in case of Turkish intervention (Emirates Policy Center, 2020). In response to the AKP's signing of two naval and security MoUs and a maritime demarcation deal with al-Sarrag in November 2019, Haftar approved the dispatch of Egyptian troops to Eastern Libya in 2020 (al-Salibi, 2020).

In light of Turkish ties with radical mercenaries in the region, Egypt endorsed Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kadhimi's proposition of quadrilateral coordination involving Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria for maintaining regional stability vis-a-vis Türkiye's regional excursions (Magued, 2020). Turkish unilateral exploitation of gas fields in the East Mediterranean zone prompted Egypt, alongside Greece and Cyprus, to initiate the East Mediterranean Forum encompassing neighbouring countries in addition to international and regional observers in October 2018 (al-Desuqi, 2020). Acting as the moderator of a regional platform, Egypt signed a separate maritime demarcation deal with Greece in August 2020 in the aim of protecting mutual rights of gas exploitation vis-a-vis what they perceived as Turkey's violation of their maritime borders.

CONCLUSION

By over-emphasising disagreements and divergence among national elites over a country's external role formulation, the national role theory's interactive approach has overlooked external actors' influence on a state's national role conception and crystallisation. Unlike the existing literature's focus on the national dimension, this study addresses convergence and disagreements between a country's national elites and external leaders in the formulation and implementation of that state's

national role on the global stage. To do so, it relies on the triangulation of the results obtained by applying three qualitative research methods: the text analysis of Arab scholarship addressing Türkiye's foreign policy, the author's open-ended and semi-structured expert in-depth interviews with Turkish officials, and the analysis of the AKP leaders' speeches between 2002 and 2012. Combining the influence of local elites and external leaders' disagreements in expectations and reactions on role formulation and manifestation, this study argues that a state's regional role cannot be conceived and concretized without the conciliation by a state's foreign policy elite of external leaders' expectations, in order to receive a supportive reaction from them. Borrowing Cantir and Kaarbo (2016)'s contested roles framework, this study argues that the convergence of Turkish and Arab leaders' expectations from Türkiye's regional power role contributed to its successful formulation and implementation in the Middle East from 2002 until 2010, whilst the surge of disagreements following the Arab uprisings of 2011 narrowed Türkiye's room of manoeuvre as a regional power role and undermined the credibility of its soft power tools, such as mediation, normative leadership, economic interdependence, and multilateralism. Before 2011, in spite of Egypt's opposition to Türkiye's regional power role, the conciliation of Arab and Turkish leaders' interests and expectations from the AKP's regional initiatives and projects had incentivised the former to eventually take part in them and, thus, entrenched a regional recognition of Türkiye's role as a mediator, economic initiator, multilateral player, and regional leader. The AKP's involvement of Arab leaders and the latter's positive reaction have not only endorsed Türkiye's position as a regional power but also nullified Egypt's reticence toward Ankara's gradual takeover of its traditional leadership role. Yet, the eruption of Arab revolts in 2011 have challenged the normative foundations of Türkiye's emerging regional role in light of its ambiguous positioning toward the different uprisings in function of common interests and its unilateral pursuit of security interests with military force. In line with the

contested roles concept, the growing gap between Arab and Turkish leaders' regional expectations and interests has abruptly ended the conciliation period and underlined mutual tension as a major hurdle toward the crystallisation of a Turkish regional power role. Arab leaders' changing perception of the AKP's regional intentions and interests in light of its varying stance toward the different uprisings, support for Islamists' ascendance to power, and pursuit of security interests with military means have discredited Türkiye's external power role and prompted Arab countries' rejection of the AKP's tools of action, perceived as violations of their countries' sovereignty and right of self-determination.

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