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Türkiye’s Middle East Engagement: Analyzing the “Protector of the Oppressed” Role Conception

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Abstract

This article focuses on the impact of the Arab uprisings on Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East. It examines Türkiye’s assumption of the “protector of the oppressed” role and how this has affected the country’s engagement with the regimes and peoples of the region. Employing content analysis, the article identifies an increasing reference to the “protector of the oppressed” role conception in the post-2010 period. We argue that the “protector” role has been present in Turkish foreign policy since the 1980s, especially towards the Turkic states; however, after the Arab uprisings, its content and scope transformed into the “protector of the oppressed” role. To clarify and illustrate our findings, we look at Türkiye’s management of the mass migration from Syria. First, we review the chronology of events in the region and Türkiye’s stance. Second, by utilizing computer-assisted content analysis of the Turkish leaders’ speeches, we explain how the “protector of the oppressed” role affected Türkiye’s approach to the issue of migration. Finally, while synthesizing our findings, we overview recent developments in Turkish foreign policy and discuss the implications of the “protector of the oppressed” role for the potential future of Türkiye’s engagement with the Middle East.

Keywords

Arab uprisings, Turkish foreign policy, Middle East, role theory, Syria

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Introduction

The uprisings that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and quickly spread across the Middle East marked a major turning point for the region. The so-called Arab Spring challenged the existing political structures, leading to regime changes in some cases, and instability and violent conflict in others. However, the impact of the Arab uprisings was not limited to domestic politics. At the same time, the uprisings reshaped how other states approached the region.

Türkiye was also affected by the events as it had strong stakes in the region due to its proximity and historical, cultural, and economic ties. Before this wave of uprisings, Türkiye had already built close relations with many Middle East regimes. Cross-border trade, investment, and growing people-to-people contact had strengthened Türkiye's presence in the Middle East. The uprisings disrupted some of these ties, but they also opened new spaces for Türkiye to act. The moment offered an "opportunity" to connect more directly with the region's societies and rethink the country's regional posture considering shifting dynamics. During this period, Türkiye emphasized the legitimacy of people's demands in the region. Policy statements highlighted the need for governments to respond to popular expectations. In this period, normative themes gained more ground in Türkiye's foreign policy discourse. In the aftermath of the uprisings, the idea of "standing with the oppressed people" became a repeated theme in the speeches of policymakers. Rather than an occasional rhetorical device, the idea began to take shape as a more consistent foreign policy role.

This article explores how the idea of being a "protector of the oppressed" emerged as one of the central expressions of Türkiye's evolving normative foreign policy stance. It argues that the "protector" narrative—traditionally tied to Türkiye's connections with the Turkic world and its historical identity—went through a transformation during this period. The article suggests that the "protector" role can be seen as a normative extension of this older identity, now applied beyond its original scope and shaped by regional crises such as the Arab uprisings.

Like elsewhere in the region, the uprisings created new pressures for Türkiye. Security threats, mass displacement, sectarian polarization, and regional power rivalries all emerged or intensified.

Role theory provides the analytical lens for this study. In foreign policy research, role theory helps explain how states act based not only on structural pressures, but also on how they see themselves and what responsibilities they assume.¹ Role theory shows how foreign policy behavior is often shaped by ideas, identity, and values—factors that shape how a country defines its place

in the international system.² An analysis of the key foreign policy speeches of the time shows that several role conceptions were in play in Türkiye's approach to the Middle East before and after the Justice and Development Party (JDP) period. This observation is widely supported in the literature.³ Yet, only a few studies have explicitly identified the "protector of the oppressed" as one of those roles. To date, no research has focused on how this role developed during the Arab uprisings or how it reshaped Türkiye's identity in the region. This article addresses this gap. Like elsewhere in the region, the uprisings created new pressures for Türkiye. Security threats, mass displacement, sectarian polarization, and regional power rivalries all emerged or intensified. These developments have already been well covered in academic work. This article offers an original contribution by focusing on how Türkiye's role conception—as an actor that is self-defined as a normative actor taking responsibility for the vulnerable—emerged in this context.

The article follows a discourse-centered research design grounded in role theory. It relies on two original datasets, namely TFPRED (Turkish Foreign Policy Roles and Events Dataset) and MIGSTR (Migration and Security in Türkiye), to trace how the "protector of the oppressed" role was constructed over time. While TFPRED offers a systematic mapping of foreign policy roles based on the speeches of key leaders between 2002 and 2014,⁴ MIGSTR extends the analysis into the post-2014 period by coding President Erdoğan's migration discourse from 2014 to 2020.⁵ In addition to these datasets, the study incorporates speeches and op-eds by Foreign Ministers Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Hakan Fidan, as well as official policy documents published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the most recent statement titled "National Foreign Policy in the 'Century of Türkiye.'"⁶ Taken together, this approach allows for a deeper reading of how the protector role has moved from being a rhetorical marker to an institutionalized identity across governments and foreign policy instruments.

In presenting the argument, the article first briefly outlines how the uprisings affected multiple states in the region and explains Türkiye's position in relation to these developments. The second section focuses on how the concept of "protection" evolved after 2011 from a role linked to identity politics in limited geographies to a broader narrative of protection across the region. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of leadership speeches, the article identifies when and how this role was used. The article then illustrates how this transforming role affected Türkiye's migration management practices as part of its broader foreign policy orientation. The conclusion reflects on the current state of Turkish foreign policy in the region and how the identity of a protector continues to shape Türkiye's diplomatic vision today.

The Arab Uprisings and Türkiye

The uprisings that changed the MENA's political landscape started in late 2010 in Tunisia and caused a series of revolts in multiple countries in the region. Popular movements gained momentum with the overthrow of Ben Ali of Tunisia that was followed by the resignation of Mubarak of Egypt and the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya with the involvement of NATO. While Saleh had to resign in Yemen, movements in Syria rapidly turned into a prolonged civil war that lasted more than a decade and ended up with the death and displacement of millions of Syrians. By 2013, while crises like the use of chemical weapons in Syria made headlines in the international community, terrorist organizations such as DAESH emerged and created major instability in both Iraq and Syria. The optimism that dominated the first years of the uprisings eventually gave way to regional chaos as democratic transformations slowed down, authoritarian powers were restored in many countries and civil wars continued.⁷ The chaos in the region provided a conducive setting for terrorist organizations such as DAESH and the PKK, which increasingly concerned the policymakers of Türkiye in terms of the security of borders.

Before the Arab uprisings, Türkiye had developed friendly relations with the states in the Middle East due to the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) foreign policy vision of "zero problems with neighbors." The policymakers pursued a multidimensional diplomacy based on soft power and economic integration, leading to a rapprochement with Egypt, Libya, the Gulf states, and Syria. However, after the outbreak of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Turkish policymakers immediately sided with the opposition groups and local societies, welcoming political transformations in these countries. Erdoğan was the first foreign leader to visit Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt after the uprisings.⁸

Yet, it is significant to note that the Turkish government appeared to favor a more cautious approach in the beginning by not openly supporting immediate regime changes in the region. For instance, when it joined the international coalition, Türkiye opposed a NATO intervention in Libya until the Gaddafi government started to use force against civilians.⁹ Similarly, in Syria, it first tried to play a mediator role to communicate with Assad; following Assad's rejection of these demands, the Turkish government adopted a more confrontational approach, demanding resignation. As such, Türkiye soon abandoned its cautious stance from the initial period of the uprisings and explicitly stood by the opposition groups and peoples of the Middle East. Its position was substantiated by a series of diplomatic initiatives, "entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy" and aid, as well as military operations and security strategies.

Throughout the Arab uprisings period, Türkiye provided diplomatic support to many states in the region. Following 2011, it established high-level contacts with the new governments of multiple states, aiming to integrate them into the international society. For instance, it became the first government to recognize

the National Transition Council of Libya, while Erdoğan and Davutoğlu gave Türkiye's support messages during high-level visits to Tripoli, Tunisia, and Cairo. Türkiye also played an active role in the international attempts to create pressure on the Assad regime and acted as a spokesperson in international organizations and platforms such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation for the protection of the Syrian people, the defense of the Palestinian cause, as well as other communities regarded as oppressed such as the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.¹⁰ These initiatives are in line with Türkiye's strategy of being a humanitarian actor¹¹ and the "protector of the oppressed" in the region and elsewhere.

Following 2011, Türkiye has defined a significant pillar of its foreign policy as "entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy." Then Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu officially declared Türkiye's humanitarian foreign policy vision in 2013, after which this discourse has been emphasized by other bureaucrats and policymakers.¹² Türkiye's foreign aid and development initiatives have become a central aspect of its global image. Especially with the crisis in Syria, the country's foreign aid increased significantly, surpassing two billion dollars spent after mass migration from Syria. The JDP government emphasized that these practices had been realized with a sense of historical responsibility toward the peoples living in regions that are part of the Ottoman legacy.¹³ This framework is a sign of the government's attempts to align the state's interests with humanitarian ideals.

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Türkiye has also not hesitated to use its military power in response to security issues and humanitarian crises.¹⁴ The first concrete action occurred in response to the Syrian civil war, manifested in the form of terrorism affecting Türkiye. The first military operation, Operation Euphrates Shield, was realized in 2016 in Syrian land to

clear ISIS from Türkiye's borders and to stop the YPG's march towards the West.¹⁵ Following that, in 2018, the Afrin region was taken from YPG forces through Operation Olive Branch. Then, in 2019, Türkiye started Operation Peace Spring to create a safe zone in the east of the Euphrates, along the Tel Abyad-Rasulayn line.¹⁶ These operations were premised on the fight against terrorism and the efforts to establish border security while, at the same time, Ankara hoped to build safe zones in northern Syria for civilians fleeing the conflict and to create areas within their homeland where Syrian refugees could find shelter. Indeed, after Operation Peace Spring, President Erdoğan shared the news with the international community that some of the Syrian immigrants in Türkiye could be resettled in these safe zones.¹⁷ Furthermore, when a new civil war broke out in Libya in 2019, Türkiye signed a defense cooperation

agreement with the UN-recognized government of Tripoli and provided it with military consultancy, UCAVs, and equipment support, thus de facto influencing the course of the conflict. All these interventions show that Türkiye tends to use its military power when necessary for the sake of regional stability and the protection of the oppressed. The Turkish government maintains that humanitarian causes are behind these operations; for example, the government explained that the operations in Syria served the mission of both preventing terrorism and massacres, and protecting civilians.

Türkiye's "Protector of the Oppressed" Role in the Middle East

In a study focusing on the JDP era, Sula presents a content analysis of 87 speeches delivered by Erdoğan, Gül, Babacan, and Davutoğlu between 2003 and 2014 to examine Türkiye's foreign policy role conceptions, building the Turkish Foreign Policy Roles and Events Dataset (TFPRED).¹⁸ The dataset and subsequent analysis give information on the patterns of continuity and change across Turkish leaders and governments. TFPRED is further developed by the author offering a comprehensive and replicable methodological framework for examining foreign policy rhetoric through the lens of role theory.¹⁹ It is possible to identify the relationship between the "protector of the oppressed" role and Arab uprisings in these studies.

The increasing relevance of the "protector of the oppressed" role has been emphasized in earlier literature as well. Özdamar et al. were among the first to draw attention to this emerging role conception in the Turkish case.²⁰ They argue that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu consistently framed Türkiye as a "protector of the oppressed" in the Middle East. Building on this earlier insight, Sula defines the "protector" role in analytical terms and codes it within the TFPRED dataset as one of the 22 national role conceptions (NRCs).²¹ With TFPRED, Sula empirically confirms the increasing emphasis on this role in JDP leaders' speeches and partially attributes this pattern to Türkiye's reaction to the Middle East regimes during the Arab uprisings. Taking a closer look at this empirical and theoretical groundwork, we decided to revisit the TFPRED dataset with a particular focus on the "protector of the oppressed" role conception. We aim to clarify further its meaning, usage, and strategic implications in the JDP's foreign policy discourse and practices.

We refer to TFPRED to show why we think the "protector of the oppressed" role, among others, deserves significant attention in understanding the impact of Arab uprisings on Turkish foreign policy under JDP governance. The dataset lists national role conceptions (NRCs) and each role is coded according to its frequency and regional direction. In addition to discourse analysis, the dataset includes more than 20,000 foreign policy events extracted from international news sources. It aims to compare Türkiye's rhetorical commitments (words) with actual foreign policy behavior (deeds). This model provides a falsifiable and

replicable framework for identifying patterns of continuity and transformation in Turkish foreign policy across successive governments.²² TFPRED spans the period from the establishment of the first JDP government in late 2002 (58th government) to the end of the 61st government in 2014, when Erdoğan assumed the presidency. Over these twelve years, Turkish leaders have referred to 22 distinct role conceptions in their public discourse.²³ Based on the data over the twelve years between 2002 and 2014, role conceptions that appeared in the leaders' speeches are listed in the following table.

Table 1: TFPRED: NRCs in JDP Leaders' Speeches (2003-2014)²⁴

	ROLE	Y/N	F#
R1	Global system collaborator	58	169
R2	Defender of peace & stability	75	378
R3	Trading state	49	146
R4	Protector of the oppressed	42	159
R5	Central/pivotal country	45	114
R6	Mediator	28	55
R7	Peacemaker/problem-solver	55	148
R8	Independent	24	44
R9	Active independent	71	241
R10	Rising power	30	55
R11	Bridge across civilizations	36	54
R12	Regional subsystem collaborator	68	249
R13	Western country	55	123
R14	Eastern country	12	15
R15	Bridge across continents	4	8
R16	Faithful ally	36	82
R17	Model country	11	14
R18	Developer	51	165
R19	Energy-transporting country	27	42
R20	Good neighbor	58	146
R21	Regional leader	15	26
R22	Regional power	42	97
	TOTAL	892	2,530

This is an excerpt of the dataset compiled from publicly available data in existing literature by the authors. For a detailed review and definitions of TFPRED see Sula 2019 and Sula 2017. The dataset's codebook can be found in Sula 2017, Appendix.

The data we derived from TFPRED includes two key indicators: “Y/N” which captures the number of speeches in which a role is mentioned (indicating speech-level coverage) and “F#” which reflects the total frequency of references to that role across the corpus (indicating discursive intensity). Together, these metrics help us compare how widely and how intensely each role was employed by various JDP leaders and governments.

While a range of roles appear prominently in the dataset—such as “defender of peace and stability,” “regional subsystem collaborator,” and “active independent”—one of the most frequently cited and widely referenced roles is the “protector of the oppressed.” As seen in Table 1, the “protector of the oppressed” role conception is listed as the fifth most frequently referred role conception among others across twelve years. Unlike more cooperative or peace-oriented roles, the “protector” carries a distinctly ideational and normative character which reflects Türkiye’s self-ascribed humanitarian and moral responsibility in foreign policy.

The dataset also includes data on how role conceptions have differed from leader to leader and from one government to the other. TFPRED offers a comprehensive overview of all foreign policy role conceptions articulated during the JDP era; however, in this article, we will focus specifically on the “protector of the oppressed” role. Aiming to understand the relevance of this role conception and illustrating why we think the role deserves specific attention, we wanted to show how its usage changes from one government to the other. We focus on this role because it has a marginally limited use until 2011 by the 59th (2003-2007) and 60th (2007-2011) governments while references suddenly and dramatically rise during the 61st government (2011-2014). In contrast to other frequently cited roles that demonstrate continuity across different periods, the “protector” role remained largely peripheral until the final term analyzed. As shown in Table 1, the role is referred to 159 times in total and appears in 42 different speeches, placing it among the top five most cited roles overall. Table 2 highlights this increase, showing that 115 out of 159 references (approximately 72 percent) occurred during the 61st government. This underscores how the “protector of the oppressed” role became a dominant conception in Türkiye’s foreign policy discourse during the later stages of the JDP era.

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Table 2: TFPRED: Government-Based Role Reference Frequencies (Ranked)

	59th Government (March 14, 2003 – August 29, 2007)		60th Government (August 29, 2007 – July 6, 2011)		61st Government (July 5, 2011 – August 29, 2014)	
Rank	Role	F#	Role	F#	Role	F#
1	Defender of peace	203	Defender of peace	115	Protector of the oppressed	115
2	Active independent	118	Regional subsystem collaborator	81	Developer	75
3	Regional subsystem collaborator	116	Active independent	67	Trading state	69
4	Peacemaker	91	Global system collaborator	54	Defender of peace	60
5	Global system collaborator	82	Regional power	47	Active independent	56
6	Good neighbor	82	Developer	40	Regional subsystem collaborator	52
7	Western country	75	Good neighbor	39	Global system collaborator	33
8	Central country	56	Central country	36	Good neighbor	25
9	Trading state	51	Peacemaker	35	Peacemaker	22
10	Faithful ally	51	Mediator	32	Central country	22
11	Developer	50	Western country	27	Western country	21
12	Regional power	35	Trading state	26	Regional power	15
13	Independent	30	Faithful ally	26	Rising power	12
14	Bridge across civilizations	29	Energy-transporting country	20	Mediator	9
15	Rising power	28	Bridge across civilizations	19	Energy-transporting country	8
16	Protector of the oppressed	26	Protector of the oppressed	18	Bridge across civilizations	6
17	Mediator	14	Rising power	15	Independent	5
18	Energy-transporting country	14	Regional leader	13	Faithful ally	5
19	Eastern country	12	Independent	9	Regional leader	5
20	Model country	11	Bridge across continents	3	Eastern country	3
21	Regional leader	8	Model country	1	Model country	2
22	Bridge across continents	5	Eastern country	0	Bridge across continents	0
	TOTAL	1,187	TOTAL	723	TOTAL	620

Data extracted from TFPRED. All three governments were under the premiership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

When we looked closer at the TFPRED data, we saw that although the role was occasionally utilized in response to specific humanitarian events before the 61st government period, it remained significantly less prominent compared to other roles in both frequency and speech-level coverage. The government-based role comparison reveals that the “protector” role only became significantly dominant in Turkish foreign policy discourse during the 61st government—an era that, notably, overlaps with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings across the Middle East. The rise of the “protector” role is not coincidental, but rather reflects a discursive shift towards a normative stance in Türkiye’s foreign policy self-conception.

A comparison of the top five most frequently cited foreign policy role conceptions across the 59th, 60th, and 61st JDP governments reveals a clear shift in narrative priorities over time. During the 59th government, the discourse was primarily dominated by the role conceptions of “defender of peace” (203 references), “regional subsystem collaborator” (116), and “active independent” (118). These role conceptions indicate a strong emphasis on regional stability, regional-institutional cooperation, and a cautious autonomy. This trend was mainly transferred into the 60th government where “defender of peace” (115) and “regional subsystem collaborator” (81) remained central, although roles like “global system collaborator” (54) and “regional power” (47) started gaining visibility. This shift in the 60th government indicates an emerging interest in broader systemic engagement and an ambition to become a significant regional power and leader.²⁵

However, in the 61st government, we observe a significant shift in role hierarchy as “protector of the oppressed” rose to the top, followed by “developer” (75) and “trading state” (69), both of which signal a growing interest in economic outreach and development diplomacy, particularly in regions such as the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. The traditional emphasis on peace and institutional cooperation decreased as the “defender of peace” role dropped to fourth place (60) and “active independent” was pushed down to fifth (56).

This transformation suggests a discursive reorientation from cooperative and stabilizing roles to more normative, assertive, and interest-driven conceptions of Türkiye’s regional and global presence. The “protector of the oppressed” role’s sudden prominence coincides with the Arab uprisings and reflects a shift toward moralized and, arguably, more interventionist rhetoric. It also reinforces the argument that this role emerged as a

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strategic narrative tool in response to regional instability, allowing Türkiye to position itself as a normative actor in defense of vulnerable populations. It indicates that Türkiye has sought to establish itself as a regional moral authority, committed to defending people under authoritarian regimes. In this period and the following years, JDP leaders aligned Türkiye with broader humanitarian and Islamic solidarity narratives.

The prominence of this role conception also marks a departure from previous governments' emphasis on more cooperative or technical positioning required by the "defender of peace" or "regional subsystem collaborator" roles. The "protector" role implies a more assertive, potentially confrontational foreign policy orientation—one that positions Türkiye as a regional moral authority willing to risk diplomatic friction to advocate for vulnerable populations. This shift may indicate a broader transformation in Türkiye's strategic self-perception: from a peace-oriented regional stabilizer to an active and interventionist protector of regional victims of authoritarianism.²⁶ The role encompasses a mission-driven approach whereby Türkiye frames itself as a defender of people suffering under oppressive regimes.²⁷ In this sense, the role of the "protector of the oppressed" becomes not only a reflection of the government's values-based rhetoric but also a legitimizing narrative for a more risk-prone and morally charged foreign policy agenda.

This transformation is substantiated by systematic empirical research. Özdamar et al. argue that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have consistently framed Türkiye as a "protector of the oppressed," particularly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.²⁸ The authors highlight how Turkish leaders, in response to violent government crackdowns on protestors, began to stress the indivisibility of regional integration from political stability and human security. Notable examples include Türkiye's open support for the Syrian people against the Assad regime and its vocal condemnation of Israel's blockade on Gaza, both of which are presented as manifestations of the "protector" role. These discursive moves underscore the extent to which Türkiye's foreign policy narratives increasingly merged moral positioning with strategic regional engagement during the post-uprisings period.

In the following terms of the JDP government when Erdoğan became the president of the country, we observe that the "protector of the oppressed" role was not just a shift in discourse, but gradually turned into a foreign policy orientation that shaped both how Türkiye framed itself and how it acted in response to regional crises. In other words, this transformation did not stay at the rhetorical level but found concrete reflection in key foreign policy choices in the following years. One of the most striking examples where this role conception became visible in practice is Türkiye's response to the issue of migration from Syria.²⁹ The case effectively illustrates how discourse and strategy were aligned in the post-Arab uprisings context.

Erdoğan's speeches during the early and mid-years of the Syrian conflict consistently framed Türkiye's migration policy around civilizational values and humanitarian responsibility.³⁰ This political discourse, rooted in the "protector of the oppressed" role, was not only sustained in rhetoric but also reflected in policy practice. Despite frequently highlighting the financial and social burden of hosting millions of refugees, Turkish leaders continued to emphasize moral obligation and historical duty.³¹ For a considerable period, Türkiye maintained an open-door policy and constructed its migration governance in a way that aligned closely with the values and imagery embedded in the "protector" narrative. Rather than undermining the discourse, the references to cost and burden were used to reinforce the country's self-ascribed mission and leadership in the region.

In their analysis, Lülecı-Sula and Sula identify four main themes in Erdoğan's migration-related speeches: migration as a burden, as a responsibility, as a justification for transborder operations, and as a fault line in Türkiye-EU relations.³² Between 2014 and 2016, the themes of "burden" and "responsibility" were most prominent. This framing directly resonates with the "protector of the oppressed" role conception, where Türkiye assumes moral and civilizational responsibility for those fleeing oppression. Erdoğan's frequent references to the country's duty to "host the oppressed" despite limited resources were not framed as complaints, but rather as expressions of ethical leadership. The authors developed the MIGSTR Dataset, which is based on the content analysis of President Erdoğan's speeches between 2014 and 2020 and identifies key patterns in Türkiye's migration discourse.³³ We took a deeper look at MIGSTR, which is publicly available through Harvard Dataverse, and demonstrated the impact of the "protector of the oppressed" role in Türkiye's official discourse and policies on migration in the post-2010 period. Despite repeated references to the financial cost and lack of international support in sharing the "burden," Türkiye maintained a migration strategy that was largely consistent with the normative claims embedded in this role conception. In this sense, the "protector" role did not remain limited to discourse, but functioned as a central component of Türkiye's foreign policy practice during the conflict in Syria.

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Despite repeatedly underlining the financial and logistical burden of hosting millions of displaced people, President Erdoğan consistently affirmed that

Türkiye would maintain its open-door policy. His statements regularly emphasized that Türkiye had taken this responsibility not because it received support from others, but despite their inaction.³⁴ Even after it became evident that the EU states and the broader international community would not provide the assistance Türkiye expected, this commitment largely remained unchanged. In Erdoğan's discourse, this policy was not framed as a security necessity but as a moral and civilizational duty rooted in Türkiye's values. He often used religious and cultural references, calling Turkish society "ensar" (helper) and describing the refugees as "muhacir" (emigrant), reinforcing the normative framework behind this position.³⁵

Building on this discursive foundation, Erdoğan also framed Türkiye's cross-border military operations—particularly those launched in northern Syria—not as conventional security actions, but as humanitarian missions aiming to protect displaced Syrians and eventually resettle them in secure areas within their homeland.³⁶ In this way, we observe that the "protector of the oppressed" role, previously prominent in rhetoric, gradually became embedded in Türkiye's actual foreign policy practice. Rather than remaining symbolic, this role helped shape Ankara's regional engagement strategy after the Arab uprisings. Türkiye's aspiration to act as the protector of the oppressed thus evolved into a consistent foreign policy orientation, both discursively and operationally, especially in relation to the issue of mass migration from Syria.

The TFPRED and MIGSTR datasets allow us to trace the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy discourse between 2002 and 2020. What is more, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's public speeches and policy articles reinforce the persistence and institutionalization of this role. Particularly during his second term (2015-2023), Çavuşoğlu repeatedly echoed the normative outlook present in Erdoğan's rhetoric, framing Türkiye's regional diplomacy in terms of moral responsibility, humanitarian concern, and civilizational duty. His emphasis on "entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy" not only aligned with the "protector of the oppressed" role, but also served to operationalize it across various foreign policy platforms.³⁷ As our findings on Türkiye's migration management policy suggest, this role gained increased reference both in presidential speeches and within Türkiye's broader diplomatic language. Çavuşoğlu's discourse mirrors this pattern, positioning Turkish foreign policy as both strategic and principled, seeking to maintain stability while upholding normative commitments.

Framing Türkiye's diplomacy as both "entrepreneurial" and "humanitarian," Çavuşoğlu consistently stressed that Turkish foreign policy aimed to protect the vulnerable while defending national interests.³⁸ In an article titled "The Search for Peace Requires an Entrepreneurial Foreign Policy," Çavuşoğlu emphasized that Türkiye's cross-border interventions were about national security and

relieving humanitarian suffering, pointing out that “Türkiye is currently the largest host country for refugees in the world.”³⁹ This alignment of strategy and compassion further reinforced the “protector” role not as mere discourse but as an operating logic of foreign policy.

In a 2019 *New York Times* op-ed, Çavuşoğlu once again presented Türkiye’s military interventions as part of a normative mission. “We believe that we have created the grounds for the voluntary and safe return of Syrian refugees to their homes,” he wrote, suggesting that humanitarian protection was not an afterthought but an integral reasoning for Türkiye’s foreign policy in Syria.⁴⁰ Similarly, in a 2020 *Financial Times* article, he harshly criticized the EU’s apathy toward refugees, asserting that “people fleeing for their lives cannot be stopped by building castles.”⁴¹ Even when left to bear the burden alone, Türkiye’s conduct remained grounded in a normative claim of moral responsibility. This emphasis is echoed in official domestic statements as well. In his 2021 budget speech, Çavuşoğlu described Türkiye’s foreign policy as “human-centered, respectful of universal values, protective of the innocent and the oppressed, and balanced in its use of hard and soft power.”⁴² This statement ties into the moral and political imperatives that underpin the “protector of the oppressed” role and confirms that this identity was not confined to rhetoric but manifested across platforms and institutions.⁴³

Finally, in a 2023 panel of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Budapest, Çavuşoğlu articulated Türkiye’s regional role as one of “joint ownership” and “sincere initiative.” He argued that crises in the surrounding regions could not be solved unilaterally and emphasized that Türkiye’s commitment to regional mechanisms and humanitarian diplomacy was not only strategic but also ethical in orientation. Çavuşoğlu stated, “Some crises can only be resolved through joint regional ownership, and Türkiye’s role is to lead these efforts with sincerity and initiative.”⁴⁴ This statement once again illustrates how Türkiye’s normative foreign policy vision has been consistently echoed by senior officials, aligning with our argument that the conception of the role of “protector of the oppressed” has shaped both discourse and practice.

Conclusion

While the “protector of the oppressed” is commonly linked with the JDP’s foreign policy discourse, the idea itself is not new. It reflects a much older political imagination that has surfaced at different moments in Türkiye’s modern history, and at times has been tied to Ottoman traditions or broader civilizational narratives. During the twentieth century, Turkish foreign policy occasionally positioned itself as a voice for Muslims, oppressed peoples, and victims of imperialism, mostly symbolically, rarely operationally. What makes the JDP period different is not the existence of the idea, but how visibly and

consistently it has been turned into a foreign policy framework. Especially after the Arab uprisings, the "protector of the oppressed" role has become a central theme—albeit not the only one, but one that has shaped both rhetoric and action. This role, as the study has shown, moved beyond discourse and became a normative anchor, particularly in the context of Syria and migration governance.

This orientation remained strong throughout the late 2010s. At its center stood President Erdoğan who consistently emphasized moral responsibility in foreign policy. In many of his speeches, he has described Türkiye as a nation "standing by the oppressed," insisting that "we cannot turn our backs on those who look to us with hope." His references to the Syrian people as "brothers in faith and fate," and to Turkish society as today's "ensar," have not been just symbolic gestures, but have pointed to a deeper civilizational reading of Türkiye's international role. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu also adopted and amplified this message. During his time in office, "entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy"

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became the signature label of Turkish foreign policy. In articles and speeches, Çavuşoğlu echoed Erdoğan's framing and spoke of Türkiye as a country "on the side of the innocent and the oppressed." His emphasis on balancing power and principle helped give institutional consistency to this foreign policy identity. As a result, Türkiye positioned itself both as an assertive regional actor and as a country that saw moral responsibility as part of its strategic outlook.

In June 2023, with Hakan Fidan taking office as foreign minister, the official framing of Turkish foreign policy

changed. The motto "Entrepreneurial and Humanitarian Foreign Policy" was removed from the ministry's website and replaced by "National Foreign Policy in the 'Century of Türkiye.'" This shift signals a reframing of priorities, but it is not a break as the updated vision builds on the foundations of the previous decade. According to the ministry's new outlook, Türkiye's foreign policy aims to "strengthen regional peace and security, expand institutional frameworks, foster economic growth, and contribute to the transformation of the global system," while protecting national sovereignty and strategic autonomy.⁴⁵ In this sense, the "Century of Türkiye" (*Türkiye Yüzyılı*) framework seems to scale up, rather than abandon, the normative direction of earlier years.⁴⁶

Within this new vision, the legacy of the “protector” role continues, though with more calibrated language and institutional structure. References to regional ownership, mediation, and equitable burden-sharing remain central, especially in zones like Syria. The emphasis on civilizational solidarity and human dignity is still present, but is now embedded in a wider agenda aimed at expanding Türkiye’s diplomatic reach and institutional depth. If the 2010s gave us a morally assertive Türkiye, the *Türkiye Yüzyılı* aims to project that assertiveness into a more stable and structured global presence.

Looking ahead, Turkish foreign policy during Foreign Minister Fidan’s tenure will likely bring both opportunities and challenges.⁴⁷ On the opportunity side, Türkiye’s normative identity—combining humanitarianism with strategic autonomy—offers a comparative advantage. In a world marked by polarization, de-globalization, and diplomatic fatigue, Türkiye’s ability to engage across regions and speak with both moral clarity and strategic calculation increases its leverage. From climate diplomacy to post-conflict reconstruction, from energy transit to migration governance, this hybrid posture gives Türkiye room to maneuver, especially in Muslim-majority and postcolonial geographies.

But this identity also brings risks. One of the main concerns is the credibility gap, especially if moral claims are not matched by consistent actions. Erdoğan’s strong narrative on refugees has been praised globally, but has also faced criticism over securitization, EU tensions, and contradictions in conflict zones like Libya or the Caucasus. The line between principled foreign policy and power projection can become blurred. Moreover, Türkiye’s ability to lead with values may face growing competition in the Global South, where countries like China, India, and the Gulf states are pushing different models of international engagement.

To conclude, this study has traced the rise and transformation of the “protector of the oppressed” role from discourse to practice in JDP foreign policy. Based on information from original datasets (TFPRED and MIGSTR), we have showed how a symbolic narrative gradually became part of Türkiye’s foreign policy identity, especially in response to the Arab uprisings and the Syrian crisis. We also examined how this identity gained continuity through the discourse of Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and how it is being recalibrated under the *Türkiye Yüzyılı* vision. Whether seen as a moral compass, a strategic tool, or a political narrative, the “protector” role continues to shape Türkiye’s foreign policy imagination—rooted in history, driven by leadership, and adapted to a world where moral legitimacy and power politics increasingly overlap.

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