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Understanding Türkiye's Changing Role Based On President Erdoğan's Post-2014 Narrative

Since the establishment of the Republic, the role conceptions of Türkiye had largely remained unchanged until 2011 and Turkish foreign policy has been based on these roles. However, after the beginning of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye's role conceptions have changed. The aim of this article is to explain the reasons of these policy changes by examining President Erdoğan's statements.

According to the findings of the study, during Erdoğan's prime ministry and presidency until 2022, by which this study was conducted, Türkiye's role conceptions and foreign policy choices based on these conceptions can be divided into four categories, two transition periods and two main periods. Türkiye is in the middle of the second transition period. Especially the war between Russia and Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis strengthened Türkiye's position as a mediator and a trading country even further, and accelerated the second transition process.

Keywords: Role Theory, Türkiye, Turkish Foreign Policy.

Türkiye'nin Değişen Rolünü Erdoğan'ın 2014 Sonrası Söylemine Bakarak Anlamak

Cumhuriyetin kuruluşundan bu yana, 2011 yılına kadar Türkiye'nin rol anlayışları büyük ölçüde aynıydı ve Türk dış politikası bu rollere dayanıyordu. Ancak Arap Baharı ve Suriye İç Savaşı'nın başlamasının ardından Türkiye'nin rol anlayışları da değişim gösterdi. Bu makalenin amacı, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın konuşmalarını inceleyerek bu politika değişikliklerinin nedenlerini anlamaktır.

Elde edilen bulgulara göre, Erdoğan'ın başbakanlık ve cumhurbaşkanlığı döneminde Türkiye'nin rol anlayışları ve dış politika tercihleri iki geçiş dönemi ve iki ana dönem olmak üzere dört kategoriye ayrılmıştır. Türkiye, şu anda ikinci geçiş döneminde bulunuyor. Özellikle Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı ve ardından gelen enerji krizi, Türkiye'nin arabulucu ve ticaret ülkesi rollerini daha da güçlendirmiş ve ikinci geçiş sürecini hızlandırmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rol Teorisi, Türkiye, Türk Dış Politikası.

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1. Introduction and Methodology

Türkiye's role in the Middle East is hotly debated among international relations scholars. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish republic found itself in a very hard situation. Because of the endless wars during the late Ottoman era and the Turkish War of Liberation, the country was poor, and it did not have the capacity to project power in former Ottoman territories. Therefore, Turkish government pursued a passive foreign policy with a focus on maintaining friendly relations with neighboring countries and building regional alliances such as the Saadabad Pact and the Balkan Entente.

Türkiye had other reasons to pursue a peaceful foreign policy. Sandıklı (2007:44) emphasizes the importance of comprehensive domestic reforms undertaken by the Atatürk administration, showing the focus on domestic politics instead of international relations and the fact that Türkiye became a neighbor of several European powers after the Lausanne agreement, including Britain, France, Italy and the Soviet Union.

The traditional roles that the Turkish administration gave to itself were based on the assumption that Türkiye is a civilizational bridge between the Eastern and Western worlds and therefore it can use this position to connect the two regions, Middle east and Europe.

While Türkiye had a Western-oriented foreign policy during the early years of the republic and tried to become a part of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the EU (European Union) after 1945, it also strived for improving its relations with the Middle East (Akbaba and Özdamar, 2019:95)

However, the role conception of Türkiye has went through a radical change during the Erdoğan administration as will be explained in this article.

Akbaba and Özdamar (2019:98-99) argue that the Turkish foreign policy and national role conceptions underwent a change after the Arab Spring which started in December 2010. According to them, Türkiye forced to change its traditional non-interventionist foreign policy after 2011.

They mention that while Türkiye's policy roles before the Arab Spring were "Defender of Regional Peace and Stability", "Regional Subsystem Collaborator", "Good Neighbor", "Mediator", "Bridge across Civilizations" and "Trading State", after the Arab Spring they become "Regional Leader", "Protector of the Oppressed", "Leader of the Muslim World", "Rule maker", "Central Country" and "Active Independent" (Akbaba and Özdamar, 2019:100).

In this paper, how the role of Türkiye has changed during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency using the analysis of presidential speeches and statements.

Texts on Turkish foreign policy can come from different sources, such as official declarations, presidential speeches, and foreign policy documents. This paper focuses on presidential speeches and statements from the Erdoğan era. There are hundreds of speeches and statements from this period but only the most relevant and important ones are selected to feature in this paper.

Lene Hansen (2006:85) mentions three criteria to classify the genres that can be used in discourse analysis. These criteria are articulation of identity/policy, the degree of formal authority and the extent to which the texts are read and attended to. Using Hansen's typologies, we can compare three types of documents that have high formal authority. According to her,

parliamentary debates articulate both identity and policy and has a high degree of formal authority. However, they are not widely read and attended to. On the other hand, official declarations and foreign policy documents can be widely read and they also carry a high formal authority. Nevertheless, these documents cannot be enough to articulate identity. Other types of documents with a high formal authority are political speeches. These speeches meet all of Hansen's criteria because in addition to having a high formal authority, they articulate both identities and policies well as well as reaching a wider audience. Therefore, choosing presidential speeches as the documents to analyze is the most suitable option.

The research questions of this paper are "how the Turkish government's perception of its own role and identity changed during Erdoğan's presidency?" and "which event or events caused this change?"

2. Discourse Analysis and Role Conception

2.1 Discourse Analysis

As a multifaceted term, "discourse" has many different definitions, varying from one scholar to another. As a popular research method, discourse analysis is used in various humanities and social sciences, ranging from linguistics to sociology. Thus, every scholar has its own understanding of this method, depending on their field of research. In the field of international relations, it is often linked with the constructivist and critical approaches (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili, 2019:285). Although international relations scholars started to adapt the discourse analysis method in the 1980s it became more mainstream in the next two decades (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili, 2019:286).

According to Potter and Wetherell, discourse analysis can be defined as the study of social life, understood through the analysis of language (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

Holz states that "in its essence, discourse analysis is an engagement with meaning and the linguistic and communicative processes through which social reality is constructed. Discourse can therefore be defined as, basically, the space where intersubjective meaning is created, sustained, transformed and, accordingly, becomes constitutive of social reality" (Hölscheiter, 2013).

Some of the definitions of discourse are so broad that they claim, 'there is nothing outside discourse' (Campbell, 2005: 4 in Carta and Morin, 2013:297).

This discourse analysis will be a descriptive analysis, rather than a critical discourse analysis. Norman Fairclough uses the term descriptive "primarily to characterize approaches to discourse analysis whose goals are either nonexplanatory, or explanatory within local limits, in contrast to the global explanatory goals of critical discourse analysis" (Fairclough, 1985:753). In this paper, discourse analysis will be used to discover the changing role of Türkiye.

2.2. Role Theory Approach On Foreign Policy

Role is how the agents act based on their social position (Thies, 2003). An actor in the social environment would be aware of its position, situation and behave "properly" in order to respond to others. Constructed by language and actions, the agent learns how to perform its role through lots of given role conception (Holsti, 1970:238-9; Bengtsson et al., 2012:94). Also, state has its own role based on its social position in the international system and expectation both from other states and its own citizens. As decision-makers of foreign policy, they have to interact with different domestic and international actors (Harnisch et al. 2016:10). They do not only fulfill their "self" through "other's eyes", but also establish their own confidence or even construct the "imaging self" with the outsider's expectation to persuade those domestic actors who might not

agree to their policy. Under the process from contradiction to stability, the new state role might come out to be new domestic expectation (Klose, 2020:855-7). In sum, there are two factors affecting the role performance: role expectation from outsiders and the role conception of state, or the leader's "self image" presenting to the world (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2019:685).

Through a new expectation of role from other states, the decision-makers need to adjust their original standpoint which might contradict with their role conception of how the state should act in the bilateral or multilateral aspect. Then, the decision makers have to decide whether following their traditional mode of behavior or changing their behavior according to other's expectation. This is what Harnisch (2012) called "role learning process". However, he did not have a clear-cut theory of role learning which needs more case studies. (Harnish, 2012:65).

Therefore, relations among national role conception, role expectation, role performance, role conflict, and role maker are quite important (Ovalı, 2013:2).

National role conception also derives from the strategic culture or tradition. Role expectation is the conglomeration of behavior himself/herself and others expectation. Leaders always need to conduct coping behavior under certain pressure and circumstances. Unless the leader is very decisive, or he/she will normally follow others' expectation or tradition. However, if behavior decides to adjust its role, it will sometimes even affect the entire international system (Campbell, 2018).

Decisions are made by decision-maker who is confined by the expectation by others and his/her own role conception. World order can play as the role location process and mechanism to institutionalize and restrain power (Kaarbo, 2018:6). Every actor in the international system might have its own role from self and others, such as regional coordinator and power. Huang (2020) proposed that there are two 'roles' of the decision makers (or states): Role-taking and role-making. Role-taking decision makers care outsiders' expectation and their own reputation. On the contrary, role-making decision makers care more on their recognition or conception where outsiders can hardly affect their decisions (Huang, 2020: 527).

Furthermore, the decision makers deal with other actors in the domestic realm, for example: parliament's check and balance or election campaign. However, as it is hard to observe the real decision-making processes of foreign policy in some authoritarian regimes, some role theory scholars would focus on domestic politics or the characteristic of leader (Kaarbo, 2018:2). At the domestic politics level, how the domestic institution affects the policy? Would it be different from foreign policy under parliamentary system or presidential system? Some scholars focus on the individual level of analysis and how changed ideas disseminate through the state or organizational apparatus, or contributes on agents (leadership, epistemic communities) and processes (orders of learning, framing), they hardly touch upon interaction between agent and structure in the respective cases (Harnisch, 2012:47).

Decision makers' subjective recognition and their ability to mobilize will have impact on whether foreign policies will continue or change (Rose, 1998:167; Schweller, 2004:169). Hence, among the domestic factors like institution, norm, strategic culture and leader, analysis on leaders' characteristic and their belief is the most important (Tziarras, 2019:56). How leader interprets the world order? Did he/she learn something from different events? Is he/she motivated by belief, emotion and need when making a decision? (Kaarbo, 2018:4; Ziemer, 2009:32). Emphasis on leaders not only because they represent the public opinions, but they compete/compromise with each other in the decision-making process which might lead to new national role (Melo, 2019: 227). Therefore, analyzing leaders' discourses might be beneficial for us to understand states' conception of role and how decisionmakers respond to global events.

3. Analyzing Türkiye's Role Change Through Erdoğan's Speeches

The strategic importance of Türkiye for NATO and the US has been established after the World War II. During the Cold War, the US administration considered Türkiye as the protector of NATO's southern and eastern flanks and a bulwark against the spread of communism. While also seeing Atatürk's "peace at home peace in the world" policy as a guideline, Turkish policymakers accepted this role because they feared the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye's strategic importance in the eyes of its Western allies declined.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the Turkish Prime Minister in March 2003. His first government was considered a somewhat liberal, pro-EU and pro-Western government (Doğanay, 2007:67-69). In 2000s, Türkiye's role is constructed according to this reality. Although Turkish Parliament's decision to not allow US forces to use the Turkish territory during the Iraq War further deteriorated the already strained relations, Erdoğan managed to align Türkiye with the West during the first decade of the 21st century. However, this was still not enough to give Türkiye back the role it played during the Cold War.

The election of Barack Obama and his policy of model partnership with Türkiye sparked hopes again until the Arab Spring. In April 2009, US President Barack Obama made one of his international first trips to Türkiye. In a speech delivered to the Turkish parliament, he emphasized Türkiye's role of being a bridge between civilizations and a model country for the Middle East:

"I know there are those who like to debate Türkiye's future. They see your country at the crossroads of continents, and touched by the currents of history. They know that this has been a place where civilizations meet, and different peoples come together. They wonder whether you will be pulled in one direction or another. But I believe here is what they don't understand: Türkiye's greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide -- this is where they come together" (Obama, 2009).

After his meeting with Erdoğan, Obama described the relationship between Türkiye and the US as a *model partnership* (CNN, 2009). Erdoğan also said Türkiye, and the United States has a model partnership, and his administration was eager to play the role of a *model country* which was also what the US administration wants (Cömert, 2009).

The Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian Civil War affected US-Türkiye relations and Türkiye's role conception in different ways.

First, the events of Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War and then the 15 July 2016 coup attempt eroded Turkish influence in the MENA region. Governments that had warm relations with Türkiye are either toppled, such as the Gadhafi administration in Libya and Mursi government in Egypt or their relations with Türkiye deteriorated over time, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE (United Arab Emirates) and the Assad Regime in Syria, because of Turkish government's support of popular uprisings in the region. Turkish media accused the UAE for funding the putschists perpetrated the coup attempt (Acet, 2017) and Turkish authorities even issued a red notice for Mohammad Dahlan, an advisor of Mohamed bin Zaid Al Nahyan, the president of the UAE (Anadolu Agency, 2020). In a region filled with turmoil and beset by civil wars, Türkiye's previous role as a trading nation and a civilizational bridge had little use.

This forced Turkish administration to adopt a new, more aggressive foreign policy and embrace what former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu calls *valuable loneliness* (Hürriyet, 2013). As the regional conflicts intensified, Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbours" policy also became unsustainable (Aras, 2014:405). After the Arab Spring, Türkiye began making use of gunboat diplomacy, using military as a means to fulfill its foreign policy objectives by sending drillships to the contested waters of East Mediterranean to explore the seabed in the region (Amerika'nın Sesi, 2019). Blue Homeland exercises conducted in 2019 and 2021 can also be given as examples of Türkiye's gunboat diplomacy in recent years.

In June 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who was the Prime Minister of Türkiye for the last eleven years and leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party, won the first popular presidential election in modern Turkish history and inaugurated on August 28, 2014 (Habertürk, 2014). He won his second term in an early election in June 2018 and he is the president ever since. In this chapter, Erdoğan's speeches on Turkish foreign policy will be analyzed to understand how the Turkish administration constructed its identity and its role in the Middle East and the world in a time of political change.

After becoming president, Erdoğan made his first foreign trip to Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a country that is only recognized by Türkiye (Anadolu Agency, 2014). It should be noted that the previous president Abdullah Gül also made his first trip to TRNC (Yeni Şafak, 2007). Because of the very friendly relations between the two countries, it is easier to organize a trip to TRNC.

After Erdoğan became the president, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu appointed as the new prime minister. Davutoğlu had a big impact on decision making when it comes to foreign policy, starting from 2003 when he became the chief foreign policy advisor to the Turkish Prime Minister (Başer, 2015:293).

According to him, traditionally in the eyes of the Turkish foreign policymakers Türkiye is seen as a bridge between Asia and Europe, the East and the West. However, he is against giving this role to Türkiye and he conceptualized it by stating that "the only role of a bridge is to link two different entities and transporting one side to the other so it cannot be seen as an actor that has its own independent identity" (Davutoğlu, 2004). Hence, he uses the term "central country" to define Türkiye's role in the new world order that started after the 9/11 attacks. He mentions that being a bridge affects Türkiye's relations with both Middle Eastern and European countries badly and being a central country will give Türkiye an advantage when dealing with both the East and the West (Davutoğlu, 2004).

However, this role changes from being a bridge to becoming a central country did not happen overnight. It can be said that the period between 2011 and 2016 was the transition period. Erdoğan's speeches from first and second years of his presidency focuses more on liberal values such as human rights and democracy and relations with the West. Most prominent examples of this are seen during Erdoğan's visits to foreign countries.

One of the first countries that Erdoğan made a trip after becoming the president was Latvia (Hürriyet, 2014). In his joint press conference with Latvia's then-prime minister Andris Berzins, president Erdoğan mentioned that the relationship between Türkiye and Latvia is based on "common universal and democratic values" (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2014a).

When he visited the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) he stated that the problems of the region [of Middle East] can only be solved by a fair, inclusive and unifying approach (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2014b).

This shows that even though there is a rift between Türkiye and the West, President Erdoğan continued his liberal democratic pro-Western discourse long after the Arab Spring. Hence, while Türkiye's own role conception started to change around 2011, it was not solidified until around 2016.

2014, 2015 and 2016 are crucial years for the Turkish foreign policy. Alongside Davutoğlu's doctrine, the events that happened in these years caused Türkiye to end its non-interventionist policy and adopt new national roles. In 2014 ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) emerged in Iraq and expanded into Syria. By 2014, ISIS occupied large chunks of territories that belonged to Turkish-backed Syrian rebels including some provinces neighboring Türkiye (Al Jazeera Türk, 2014). This caused Turkish government to focus on its borders and neighboring Syria.

Türkiye and the West having different priorities when it comes to Syria also accelerated the changing of Türkiye's role conceptions. While the US prioritized the fight against ISIS, Turkish administration focused on toppling the Assad regime. Moreover, American, and European support for the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), a non-state armed actor which includes the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel-People's Protection Units), cause the relations between Türkiye and the West to deteriorate further. YPG is the Syrian wing of the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê-Kurdistan Worker's Party), a non-state armed group that is considered as a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and Türkiye. While the US administration was concerned about an ISIS resurgence in northern Syria, Turkish administration is concerned about a potential resurgence of the PKK as much as a resurgence of ISIS. Despite Erdoğan's efforts to persuade the US and the EU countries to end their support to the YPG-led SDF, the West continued to support the SDF instead of Türkiye-backed opposition (Hoffman, 2021:33). This isolated Türkiye even more and became another reason for Türkiye's changing of roles.

Emergence of ISIS and internal strife in Iraq and Syria triggered a refugee crisis in 2015 (Pimiento, 2015). Because Türkiye is located between the Middle East and Europe, Syrian and Iraqi refugees who escape conflicts and persecution saw Türkiye as a transit country to help them to flee into Europe and even sometimes a target country for migration. This refugee crisis, alongside the expansion of ISIS also caused Turkish administration to change its priorities to external threats.

The bloodiest coup attempt in the history of modern Türkiye happened on July 15, 2016, halfway during Erdoğan's first term. Putschists inside the army kidnapped the Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar and attacked the Turkish National General Assembly. Later the putschists are identified as members of an Islamist organization called Gülenists who infiltrated the Turkish army (Hürriyet, 2016). The coup was not in line with the military hierarchy but instead it was perpetrated by a small group of Gülenists within the army. Moreover, the police force and the majority of the people also resisted the coup attempt and sided with the government. Therefore, the coup attempt was not successful and military commanders who perpetrated it were eventually surrendered.

Right after the failed coup attempt, Gülenists were declared as a terrorist organization and Erdoğan administration started to arrest the soldiers who were a part of the coup attempt and dismiss the bureaucrats and public officials who are affiliated with the Gülenists (Habertürk, 2017). However, the leader of the Gülenists, Fetullah Gülen continued to live in the United States and the US administration's decision to not extradite him caused Turkish-US relations to deteriorate (Baykan, 2020). Just like ISIS' expansion inside Syria and the refugee crisis, this was an important moment for the Turkish foreign policy as dismissing Gülenists from the army and the bureaucracy reduced one of the biggest internal threats for the Turkish administration and therefore provided an opportunity for the Turkish government to focus more on external threats.

One of the most important pieces of evidence of this is the Turkish military operation called "Euphrates Shield", which was a cross-border operation against ISIS conducted in August 2016, only a month after the failed coup attempt (TRT Haber, 2021). Although ISIS was occupying Syrian settlements just across the Turkish border since 2014, the Turkish military operation only came after the Turkish army removed the Gülenist groups who infiltrated the army after the coup attempt. Hence, Turkish administration only attempted to conduct a military operation in Syria after reducing the internal threat of Gülenist groups.

After he became the president for a second term in 2018, Erdoğan increasingly adapted a more humanitarian narrative. Instead of talking about universal democratic values, he started to talk about "civilization" and instead of emphasizing Türkiye's shared history and values with the West, he highlighted the inequality between states by saying that "the world is bigger than five" (Anadolu Agency, 2019). This narrative, which is focused on opposing the dominance of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, is aimed at weaker countries that feel disappointed by the current world order.

As a president of a Muslim majority country, Erdoğan's speeches during the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings are particularly important. In 2015, Erdoğan made a speech during the conference of the Parliamentary Union of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Member States (PUIC) which he criticized the West for Islamophobia and applying double standards against Muslims, while also highlighting the terms that makes the West and the Muslim countries closer, such as the "alliance of civilizations" (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2015). However, Erdoğan's newer speeches reflect his disappointment with the world's order.

On 25 August 2021, in his video message to the Islamic Cooperation Youth Forum (ICYF)'s 4th General Assembly, President Erdoğan mentioned the injustice that the Muslims in Europe and in whole world have faced while mentioning "while Muslims are struggling with conflicts, migration, poverty, and diseases across a wide region from Syria to Afghanistan, they are also forced to combat Islamophobia and cultural racism, which are on the rise, particularly in Western society. Almost every day, we hear of brothers and sisters who have been harassed and discriminated against because of their religious beliefs, headscarves, or clothing in countries that claim to be the cradle of democracy. Similarly, our hearts break for the oppressed who died in the desert or at sea while migrating due to the instability in their countries. This unjust order, in which hunger, war, and extreme poverty exist on the one hand, and luxury, debauchery, and exploitation exist on the other, cannot last any longer" (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2021a).

In this speech Erdoğan tries to connect Türkiye with the global south especially Muslim countries and gives Türkiye the role of "the protector of the oppressed". It can also be seen as an attempt to improve Türkiye's image inside the Muslim countries and cement Türkiye's leadership position in the Middle East.

Erdoğan's focus on Turkish defense industry can also be attributed to the changing role of Türkiye. While he does not highlight the issue self-sufficiency of the defense industry in his first years of his presidency, he started to focus on this issue more especially after the coup attempt in 2016. Deteriorating relations with the United States and the West in general caused the Turkish administration to feel a threat and therefore the self-sufficiency of defense industry became much more crucial. In a speech in 2019, he underlines the importance of self-sufficiency while stating that his administration reduced the foreign dependency of Turkish defense industry from around 80% to around 35% (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2019a). In another speech in 2019, he also stated that in the next three years Türkiye will become a global power in defense industry (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2019b).

Addressing the AK Party's provincial heads 24 August 2021, Erdoğan said "we have carried Türkiye to the next level by providing 5-10 times more services than that had been done in the history of the Republic. We have established the superiority of the national will by fighting against all the enemies of our freedom and future from tutelage forces to terrorist organizations, from putschists to economic hitmen. Today, Türkiye is one of the few countries in its region and the world that can truly exercise their sovereign rights" (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2021b). By stating that Türkiye can exercise its sovereign rights, he means that Türkiye no longer accepts the role of a bridge or a regional leader that is given by the West but instead it is now pursuing its own goals.

However, there are signs that Türkiye's role conceptions are changing again. When it was first started, Türkiye's gunboat diplomacy and the Blue Homeland Doctrine created a rally around the flag effect that made Erdoğan consolidate his voter base and even get some support from the opposition. However, as these policies continued for longer and longer Turkish people's weariness started to grow larger. The economic crisis Türkiye is going through right now strengthened this weariness, causing people and the opposition speaks more and more about the economy instead of foreign policy.

These reasons caused Erdoğan to make efforts to reconcile with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. First, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Türkiye in March 2022. This was the first trip of an Israeli President to Türkiye since 2008 (Al Jazeera, 2022). In June 2022, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Türkiye for the first time (Gritten, 2022).

Another reason for a potential role change of Türkiye is the Russia-Ukraine war. Before 2011, Erdoğan administration strived hard to make Türkiye a mediating country that solves regional disagreements. In 2008, Türkiye even became the mediator between Syria and Israel (CNN Türk, 2008). However, as Türkiye supported NATO's military intervention in Libya and picked sides during the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, it became impossible for Erdoğan to continue the role of the mediator in the region. Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided Türkiye with an opportunity to return back to its old mediator role. As a country that has friendly relations with both of the warring countries, Türkiye gained importance after the start of the war. Erdoğan refused to join the sanctions against Russia while continuing to sell military equipment to Ukraine. As Renaud Girard mentions, it made Türkiye a peacemaker in the eyes of the world (Girard, 2022).

Another result of the Russia-Ukraine war is making Türkiye an important partner for the West against Russia. In recent years, the US administration started to see Greece as a more strategic partner than Türkiye as evident from signing the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) with Greece and upgrading its military base in Alexandroupoli near the Turkish border (Kokkinidis, 2022). After the Russian invasion, however, the West. In March 2022, several weeks after the war began, US President Joe Biden made a phone call with Erdoğan and expressed appreciation for Türkiye for its mediation between Ukraine and Russia (AFP and TOI Staff, 2022). This may result in further easing Türkiye's isolation which was one of the most important reasons of Türkiye's changing roles after the Arab Spring.

Another example of Türkiye returning to the role of a mediator is the implementation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. In July 2022, Türkiye, Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement to ensure the safety of Russian and Ukrainian grain exports to world markets and a Joint Coordination Centre has been established in İstanbul. (UN News, 2022) Türkiye convincing Russia to stop its blockade on Ukrainian ports is interpreted as Ankara's growing influence over Russia (Prokopenko, 2022).

Therefore, it can be said that Türkiye entered a transition period around 2011 with the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War that saw its roles change to new ones. This transition is completed in 2016 after the emergence of ISIS and the coup attempt of July 15. This period continued until 2022. While it is too early to make predictions, 2022 may be the beginning of a new transition period that will see Türkiye to revert back to its pre-2011 roles. The table below shows the different time periods according to Türkiye's own role conceptions and important events. First and second periods can be likened to solid objects. On the other hand, transition periods blur the line between the period before them and the period after them. In this sense, they can be likened to liquid objects.

Timeline	Erdoğan's First Period 2002-2011	Transition Period 2011-2016	Erdoğan's Second Period 2016-2022	Second Transition Period 2022-?
Türkiye's Roles	-Civilizational Bridge -Mediator -Trading Nation	-Protector of the Oppressed -Regional Leader -Central Country -Leader of the Muslim World	-Protector of the Oppressed -Regional Leader -Central Country -Leader of the Muslim World	-Civilizational Bridge -Mediator -Trading Nation
Important Events	-Iraq War -EU Reforms -NATO Operation in Libya	-Arab Spring -Syrian Civil War -Emergence of ISIS -July 15 Coup Attempt	-Syrian Civil War -Covid-19 Pandemic -Economic Crisis -Tensions in East Mediterranean	-Russia-Ukraine War -Economic Crisis -Energy Crisis

Table 1. Timeline of Türkiye's changing role conceptions

4. Conclusion

After becoming the Turkish Prime Minister in 2003, Erdoğan continued the traditional Turkish foreign policy based on the roles of civilization bridge, mediator and trading state until around 2011. However, the Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian Civil War affected Turkish foreign policy in different ways. They created a rift between Türkiye and the West and also between Türkiye and the Middle Eastern allies of the West, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. While Türkiye was more supportive of the Islamist opposition movements that gained more prominence with the Arab Spring, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the mentioned countries saw these movements as threats that need to be eliminated. While Israel was against their religious and pro-Palestinian views, monarchies in the Gulf region opposed their popular democratic and anti-monarchic stance.

When the speeches of Erdoğan from 2014 and 2015 are analyzed, it can be seen that the tough, aggressive and humanitarian rhetoric that is used in recent years is not present in these speeches. On the contrary, Erdoğan and Turkish administration still saw the US and the EU as allies and have a softer stance against them. Therefore, the real breaking point that caused Türkiye's role in the Middle East to change is not 2011 but rather 2016. The expansion of ISIS, the coup attempt of 15 July and the Syrian refugee crisis had three crucial consequences.

First of all, before the coup attempt while there were problems in US-Turkish relations such as the Kurdish armed groups in Syria, these problems were manageable. However, after the coup attempt the relationship between the two countries deteriorated greatly. This was because the leader of the perpetrators of the coup attempt was residing in the United States. Some officials of the ruling Justice and Development Party even openly accused the US administration with siding with the putschists.

Second, after the coup attempt members of the Gülen organization that infiltrated the army and bureaucracy are removed from their posts. Hence, the Turkish government dealt with the biggest internal security threat, giving it the opportunity to deal with the external security threats.

And finally, the expansion of ISIS into Syria and the Syrian refugee crisis that intensified in 2015 and especially 2016 forced Türkiye to involve in Syrian affairs more and to become more aggressive to protect the country from the internal strife and sociological problems that was caused by the migrant waves.

Hence, while the Erdoğan administration gave Türkiye a more passive role that is focused on building bridges and mediating before the 2014-2016 period, the government is focuses more on Türkiye's autonomy within the international system and sympathizing with the Third World instead of the West. Before the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 we can define Türkiye's role as a "bridge" and "mediator". However, after this period Turkish administration started to define itself as the "central country" which has its own identity and the "protector of the oppressed" to connect Türkiye with the global south. This can be seen in Erdoğan's discourse. Therefore, the five-year period between 2011 and 2016 can be defined as a transition period for Turkish role in the Middle East and in the world.

In conclusion, Türkiye's transition from a bridge and mediator to a central country and protector of the oppressed started after the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The events happened during the 2014-2016 period, which saw a coup attempt, expansion of ISIS and a Syrian refugee crisis further strengthened this role change. After 2016, Türkiye's new role conception was solidified.

However, Türkiye's new roles and the new proactive foreign policy of Türkiye was not sustainable. As the economic crisis become more serious and rally around the flag effect started to diminish, Turkish government began to face difficulties continuing the same foreign policy and explaining Türkiye's new roles to its people. This caused Türkiye to reconcile with the other powers in the Middle East such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Russian invasion of Ukraine also has two consequences that may result in a potential change of roles for Türkiye. The war gave Türkiye the role of the mediator again after a long time and increased Türkiye's importance for the West as a bulwark against Russia. We are still in a transition period, and it is too early to say if this role change will happen or not. Furthermore, the next general election in Türkiye is scheduled to June 2023. The result of this election may accelerate or decelerate the speed of this transition.

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