

Role Conceptions and Leadership Rivalry in the Middle East: Transforming Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Gulf Relations

Muhammed Yakup İnan *

Abstract

In recent years, the Middle East has often been the subject of foreign interventions and the interests of superpowers. The effect of internal dynamics was pushed to the background in regional developments due to this situation. It is vital, however, to analyze the Middle East by understanding the power struggles between the regional powers Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. This article examines the leadership struggle and role conceptualizations between the regional powers of the Middle East with a focus on the relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It argues that Turkey is not a rival to Saudi Arabia's national role conceptions in the Gulf region but rather a favorable partner in Gulf security and economic relations. Relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia will follow a positive course with mutual normalization steps and Turkey's export-led growth and regional cooperation strategies.

Keywords: Gulf Region, Middle East, Role Conceptions, Turkish Foreign Policy.

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Ortadoğu'daki Rol Anlayışları ve Liderlik Rekabetleri: Dönüşen Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan ve Körfez İlişkileri

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Öz

Ortadoğu son yıllarda sıkça dış müdahalelere ve süper güçlerin çıkar ilişkilerine maruz kaldı. Bu durum, bölgesel gelişmelerde iç dinamiklerin etkisinin arka planda kalmasına yol açtı. Halbuki, Ortadoğu'nun bölgesel güçleri konumunda olan Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan, Mısır ve İran arasındaki bölgesel güç mücadeleleri ve bu ülkelerin rol savaşları bölgeyi anlamak için oldukça önemlidir. Bu makale Ortadoğu'nun bölgesel güçleri arasındaki liderlik mücadelesini ve rol kavramsallaştırmalarını Türkiye ve Suudi Arabistan ilişkilerine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Bu makale, Türkiye'nin Körfez bölgesinde Suudi Arabistan'ın ulusal rol kavramsallaştırmalarına bir rakip değil, Körfez güvenliği ve ticari ilişkileri açısından elverişli bir partner olduğu argümanını savunmaktadır. Türkiye ve Suudi Arabistan ilişkileri, karşılıklı normalleşme adımları ve Türkiye'nin ihracata dayalı büyüme ve bölgesel işbirliği stratejileri ile olumlu bir seyir izleyecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Körfez Bölgesi, Ortadoğu, Rol Kavramsallaştırmaları, Türkiye Dış Politikası.

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1. Introduction

The modern history of the Middle East demonstrates that regional developments are shaped mainly by major regional power centers: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. This argument does not minimize the impact of foreign actors and global powers on regional affairs. It rather underlines the importance of domestic balances and power struggles in the formation of regional developments and relations. The new millennium began with a shock when the World Trade Center in New York suffered suicide attacks by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. The attacks caused the death of more than 3000 people, at least 6000 injuries, and many human tragedies. It had a huge impact on the Middle East as it is easily possible to name that the beginning of a new era.

The first and most significant impact was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the United States of America. The invasion created many concerns for the region and new regional perceptions as well. Turkey has faced very critical challenges at its borders. Turkish foreign policy has been obliged to be deeply interested in the region to ensure its border security, good relations with neighbors, and regional stability. Saudi Arabia held responsible for spreading global Islamist terrorism in the world, had to prove and sustain its loyal regional partnership with the USA. The situation was even more complicated for Iran. The military invasion of Iraq by the USA was a threat and had more dangerous potential. However, it could be turned into an opportunity and advantage. This also put Egypt in a difficult predicament. It attributes the role of the ideological and political center of Arab nationalism to itself. Meanwhile, it also has been accused of spreading radical thoughts and global terrorism worldwide. America's declaration of a "global war on terror" affected the regional countries' reaction to the invasion. Considering all these, it can be argued that the invasion of Iraq significantly changed the balance in the region and attributed new roles to the regional powers.

The other turning point of the last decades for the region was the Arab Spring in 2011. The Arab Spring also could be named the beginning of a new era as the uprisings caused many unforeseen social and political

changes. It has transformed the domestic balance and internal dynamics in the region and even created a new regional order.¹ One of the most prominent major players, Egypt, has suffered a lot and lost its major role in the region due to domestic and regional challenges. However, it still wants to dominate the region. Iran has taken advantage of the uprisings and expanded its regional power. The Arab uprising located Turkey and Saudi Arabia into two different camps though they cooperated at some stages, such as the Syrian conflict and Iranian expansionism. The first camp is between Turkey and Qatar alliance, and the other is Saudi Arabia-led United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and partially Egypt. If we ignore the outside effects and factors, these two poles between regional powers have played significant roles in regional developments.²

The 2017 Gulf Crisis emerged as these two camps struggled to gain supremacy and prevail over the other in the regional rivalry. The Saudi-led camp of UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt declared a statement that cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and blockaded it until their demands were satisfied. The statement involves 13 demands that are quite interesting in the regional context. Some of these demands directly targeted Qatar's relations with Turkey and Iran. Saudi Arabia considers Qatar a member of the GCC, under its influence sphere and security guarantee. Qatar's interaction and relations with other regional powers to such a later stage have been perceived as a security threat to Saudi Arabia and its policies toward the region.

This paper attempts to analyze the role conceptions and leadership rivalry in the Middle East by focusing on Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf relationship in the last decades and comparing its transformation from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the Gulf Crisis in 2017. Firstly, we shed light on the role theory and the major role conceptions in the Middle East. The role theory provides a theoretical explanation of regional power's foreign policies considering their regional positions and historical and

¹ Gonul Tol, *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, ed. David Dumke (The Middle East Institute and The University of Central Florida, 2020).

² Tol, " *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals*".

geopolitical importance. Secondly, we give a brief history of the region's internal dynamics and the major role conceptions of regional powers. Thirdly, we examine the changing role conceptions in the region shaped by the invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the Gulf crisis. Lastly, we analyze the transformation of Turkey and Gulf relations considering the last decade's developments, especially by focusing on Turkey Saudi Arabia relations and leadership rivalry in the region. This article argues that Turkey's transforming foreign policy toward the region consolidated Turkey's position in the region, especially in the Gulf. Turkey Qatar alliance strengthened the role perception of Turkey as a security provider and regional collaborator. Military involvement of Turkey in the Gulf crisis supporting Qatar created a potential threat to Saudi's role in the Arabian Gulf. The paper argues that the role of Turkey in the Gulf is to ensure the security of the friendly countries and sustain its economic interests rather than competing with Saudi Arabia to dominate the region.

2. Role Theory in the Middle East

States play roles and occupy positions in international relations. Role theory explains the sources of states' national role conceptions in their foreign policies based on different varieties such as national interests, state functions, beliefs, and identity, etc. The term is first used in the field of foreign policy by K.J. Holsti.³ Holsti's definition of national role conceptions gives credit to the country leaders' own perceptions of their state's functions and commitments:

“A national role conception includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems... Typical national role conceptions would be regional defender, with the function of protecting other states in a defined area, or mediator, with the continuing function of assisting in international conflict

³ K. J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 1970): 233–309.

resolution. National role conceptions are, in short, an important aspect of the total intellectual setting in which day-to-day decisions on foreign policy are made.”⁴

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran are comparatively the most capable and potential candidates for regional leadership in the Middle East. They are also competing actors in the region, as a matter of course. Meanwhile, they have shared interests in regional stability and security. Their ideational and material sources of role conceptions that are formed in historical experience, complicated social and political relations, power balances, etc., locate them in positions in regional affairs. Egypt is the historical home of Arab nationalist ideology, and the center of Sunni thought. Iran is the protector of the faith, Shiite expansionist, and anti-imperialist power of the region. Saudi Arabia is the defender of the faith, a “big brother” for the Gulf countries promoting the Islamic monarchical model, and a loyal partner of the USA in the region.⁵ Turkey is a bridge between continents and civilizations, respectively Asia and Europe and the East and the West, a liberal democratic model for the Middle East and Muslim world, and a security collaborator.⁶ The national role conceptions of the mentioned states are not restricted to those counted above. There always has been a transformation and new perceptions in the region. The sophisticated and complicated structure of the region and national role conceptions make it necessary to examine domestic dynamics and role conceptions of the regional powers.

⁴ Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, 245–46.

⁵ Luíza Gimenez Cerioli, “Saudi Arabia’s National Roles Conceptions after the Arab Uprisings,” in *The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Realities – Opportunities and Perils*, ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib and Maziad, Marwa, 1st edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 181–202.

⁶ Özgür Özdamar, B.Toygar Haliştoprak, and İ. Erkam Sula, “From Good ‘Neighbor to Model’: Turkey’s Changing Roles in the Middle East in the Aftermath of Die Arab Spring,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 11, no. 42 (2014): 93–113.

3. A Brief History of National Role Conceptions of Turkey and Saudi Arabia

3.1. Turkey

Turkey was alienated from the Middle East for a long time due to Republican foreign policies and the Westernization process. However, it has never been wholly disengaged from the region thanks to its strategic geopolitical location and deep historical ties. Turkey has located itself as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The role of bridge assumption has been understood by the Turkish diplomats to gain credit in relations with Europe from the very beginning years of the Republic until today.⁷ Turkey also has the role of being a model for Middle Eastern countries in terms of democratization and liberalization. Turkish modernization experience has been considered a success story by the Arab nationalists and Shah's Iran.⁸ Turkish foreign policy has always been toward a secure and stable Middle East. Turkey prioritized regional stability and territorial integrity with the intention of its border security and advancing trade and economic relations in the region. This attitude attributed the roles of security and regional integrity demander to Turkey.

Turkey has not involved in the domestic issues of the region until the Middle Easternization of foreign policy in the new millennium. The invasion of Iraq constructed a new regional order. Turkey has faced challenges in its border and the region. Two main points shaped Turkish foreign policy in the post-2003 era. The first is to ensure border security. Instability and the invasion have endangered Iraq's unity and caused the rise of Kurdish nationalist movements that are potential threats to Turkey. The second is to have good relations with neighbors and ensure regional security and stability. The new era of Turkish foreign policy required proactive policies and a more engaged Turkey with the region.⁹

⁷ Tarik Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 7.

⁸ Basheer M Nafi, "The Arabs and Modern Turkey: A Century of Changing Perceptions," *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 1 (2009): 68.

⁹ Bilal Yıldırım, "Türk Dış Politikasında Yeni Tarz-ı Siyaset: Ortadoğu'da Çok Boyutlu Politikadan Asabiye Politikasına," *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2014): 57–79.

Turkey has attributed new role conceptions to itself due to the new regional order. These are zero problems with neighbors, soft power and diplomacy, regional collaborator, and security demander and provider. The main turning points of the last decades, which are the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arap Spring, and the Gulf crisis in 2017, have transformed Turkey's role conceptions and regional policies, as we will analyze in the following sections.

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¹⁰ Tarik Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy:," 7.

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Turkey. The second is to have good relations with neighbors and ensure regional security and stability. The new era of Turkish foreign policy required proactive policies and a more engaged Turkey with the region.¹² Turkey has attributed new role conceptions to itself due to the new regional order. These are zero problems with neighbors, soft power and diplomacy, regional collaborator, and security demander and provider. The main turning points of the last decades, which are the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring, and the Gulf crisis in 2017, have transformed Turkey's role conceptions and regional policies, as we will analyze in the following sections.

4. Changing Role Conceptions and Regional Rivalry in the Middle East: Effect of Turning Points on Turkey and Saudi Arabia's Relations and Foreign Policies

The invasion of Iraq created a new regional order. The change has affected relations between the regional powers and transformed their foreign policies and roles. The transformation of foreign policy is not just related to international developments. Domestic issues and changes have always been determinant issues for the bilateral relations of the leading regional powers in the Middle East. Therefore, the invasion of Iraq has caused not just instability and domestic changes in Iraq, but it had regional effects also. Altunışık focuses on how the invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring affected Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt.¹³ She emphasizes that these three states compete for regional leadership cause of checking other's domestic and international affairs. JDP's rise to power, regime changes in Egypt, and the rising power of Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia have affected bilateral relations and foreign policy directions. Altunışık argues that Iraq War had impacted Turkish foreign policy in two ways. Firstly, Turkey's relationship with the United States has worsened due to its hesitation to

¹² Bilal Yıldırım, "Türk Dış Politikasında Yeni Tarz-ı Siyaset", 57–79.

¹³ Meliha Altunışık, "Turkey's Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: From Hopes of Cooperation to the Reality of Conflict," in *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, ed. Gonul Tol and David Dumke (The Middle East Institute and The University of Central Florida, 2020), 17–39.

support the invasion. Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East aims to ensure regional stability and security, especially in its neighboring countries and borders. Turkey's hesitation to support the invasion was prompted by security concerns at its borders and an unstable environment that compromised its national interests. The second related to the first is the rise of Kurdish nationalist movements in Iraq. Turkey has perceived that as a potential threat to the future.¹⁴

Regional developments have forced Turkey to change its foreign policy direction. Turkey was obliged to be more involved in regional affairs to protect its national interests and ensure regional stability. This paradigm shift attributed new role conceptions to Turkey in the region. Middle Easternization of Turkish foreign policy was realized through two dimensions: the first is trading state, and the second is zero problems with neighbors. According to Kirisci, the AKP government's zero-problem policy with neighbors could be seen as the blueprint for a foreign policy of the trading state."¹⁵ Ahmet Davutoglu considered economic interdependence as a tool of solving conflicts, ensuring stability, and achieving a new transforming regional order in the Middle East.¹⁶

Özdamar et al. identify new national roles of Middle Easternized Turkish foreign policy as "mediator, regional subsystem collaborator(OIC, BSEC), good neighbor, a bridge across civilization, and trading state".¹⁷ They argue that Turkish foreign policy's roles, from JDP's rise to power to Arab Spring are built on soft power instruments and diplomacy. Soft power instruments have, however, given way to hard power instruments since the Arab Spring. This change caused the decline of some role conceptions such as "mediator" and "good neighbor". They were replaced with role conceptions such as "central/pivotal country" and "protector of the oppressed". It indicates that Turkish foreign policy has transformed and pursued more active, engaged, and involved methods in

¹⁴ Altunışık, " Turkey's Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia", 19.

¹⁵ Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40 (ed 2009): 42.

¹⁶ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, (Küre Yayinlari, 2009).

¹⁷ Özdamar, Halistoprak, and Sula, "From Good 'Neighbor to Model.'"

the region after the Arab Spring.

Gulf Crisis in 2017 had a significant effect on Turkey and GCC relations. Saudi Arabia has always viewed Turkish involvement in the region as a threat. The regional rivalry between both sides has been experienced within the boundaries of the Gulf for the first time. The Arabian Gulf must be under the sphere of Saudi influence and domination according to Saudi regional design. Therefore, any outside factor that endangers its position and authority in the Gulf has been perceived as a threat. Saudi and Iranian conflict could be the best example of that. Saudi's national role conceptions and its relationship with other regional powers are open to transformation due to this reason.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy attaches great importance to regional stability. This importance attributes the roles of "stability guarantor" and "spokesman of the status quo" to Saudis. Cerioli underlies the critical importance of the USA and the Arabian Gulf monarchies on the Saudi regional design. She uses the term "encirclement syndrome," meaning a regime in which its security depends on maintaining regional stability.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia considers the United States a guarantor of regional stability. It presents itself as a loyal partner and ally of the United States and so, assumes the role of guarantor of regional order.

The stability of the Saudi regime and security is closely connected with regional stability. This assumption directed Saudi reaction to the Arab Spring. The Arab uprising developed gradually and had a knock-on effect in the Arab countries and eventually in the Gulf. It has revived the Saudis' role of protecting Gulf monarchies and ensuring regional stability. Saudis give particular importance to preventing a regime change in troubled Bahrain and other Gulf monarchies. Saudi Arabia promoted Islamic solidarity messages in the Arab world as well and made generous financial aids to Egypt, Oman, and Yemen to tackle the uprisings.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cerioli, "Saudi Arabia's National Roles Conceptions after the Arab Uprisings," 197.

¹⁹ Cerioli, "Saudi Arabia's National Roles Conceptions after the Arab Uprisings," 191–92.

Saudi Arabia pursued the possibility of counterrevolution in the uprisings. The Arab Spring consolidated monarchies in the region under the leadership and protection of Saudi Arabia. Arab Spring strengthened the role of GCC as the leading party of the Arab world, and it increased the group sense of Gulf monarchies as regional partners and allies. GCC has invited Jordan and Morocco, as Sunni monarchies in the Middle East, to participate in the Council. Saudi Arabia shined out once again as the leader and protector of monarchies in the Gulf and the Middle East.

The Gulf is the heart of the Saudi's leadership and protector role of monarchies. The 2017 Gulf Crisis demonstrated that there is no absolute unity between Gulf monarchies. The Saudi-led camps of UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt have blockaded Qatar by highlighting its relations with terrorist groups like Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, and Turkey. The first and second demands of the thirteen demands list required Qatar to end diplomatic and military ties with Iran and close the Turkish military base.

5. Effect of Gulf Crisis on Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and GCC Relations

5.1. Turkish Qatari Alliance

Turkey and Qatar have invested in common policies over the last two decades. JDP government has been ideologically close to the Islamist movements in the region and instrumentalized soft power instruments and diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy. Similarly, Qatar has hosted the leaders of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood for many years. It also pursued diplomatic ways for regional solutions. Turkish Qatari alliance did not start as a result of the Gulf crisis. They shared many common policy directions and features during the Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Qatar-Turkey Supreme Strategic Committee was established in 2014, and both sides signed a defense agreement that enables the military presence of Turkey in the heart of the Gulf.

Qatar traditionally balances its dependency on its partners, especially in security-related issues. Qatar, as a small state, could not balance the regional powers and its neighbors with its power. Therefore, good

diplomatic relations and reliable alliances are critical for Qatari foreign policy. Qatar considers Iran a threat as it is a Gulf monarchy, and Iran's sectarian policies preclude a sustainable reliance. Qatar conflicts with Saudi Arabia in terms of regional politics and independence as well. Saudi's guarantor role in the Gulf does not cover Qatar's concerns. Qatar has pursued opposite policies to Saudi Arabia in the Arab Spring and the general regional strategies such as supporting Islamist groups. The most obvious example could be their different approach to the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatari and Saudi relations indicate a deep intra-GCC rivalry which includes other members as well. Kaddorah argues that USA's position supporting the blockade deteriorated Qatar's reliance on USA's security guarantees. He says, "Qatar, it seems, no longer feels that the American military bases are enough to guarantee its security".²⁰ This situation consolidates Turkey's position in the Gulf and in the eyes of Qatar. It also can be argued that Turkey gets Saudi's share as the guarantor of a Gulf monarchy in the heart of the Gulf.

5.2. Gulf Crisis

The Gulf crisis has damaged or consumed the solidarity and group senses of the GCC and proved the competition between GCC states in the region. It could be argued that the blockade has outside factors and is not just restricted to the Saudi-led camp's concerns about Qatar.²¹ Saudi Arabia's regional security perception does not accept the military existence of any regional power in the Gulf. Gulf's security is controlled by Saudi Arabia and its partnership with the United States. In that sense, Turkey has a potential threat to Saudi national roles. The Gulf region is historically consolidated against the Iranian threat. However, Turkey is a relatively new actor in the region and has the potential to transform regional balance. Gulf Crisis could be considered as a clash between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in terms of their regional order perceptions and

²⁰ Emad Y. Kaddorah, *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey: Convergent and Divergent Regional Agendas* (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2021), 38.

²¹ Esra Çavuşoğlu, "From Rise to Crisis: The Qatari Leadership," *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi* 7, no. 1 (June 30, 2020): 81–110.

role conceptions.²² Turkey and Saudi Arabia had opposite policies during and after the Arab Spring. However, bilateral relations have been maintained in mutual suspicion. The Saudi-led camp's demand to target the Turkish military base in Doha is a direct attack on Turkish interests and existence in the region.

5.3. Turkish Saudi Relations in the Aftermath of the Gulf Crisis

It is argued that Turkey's existence in the region is based on economic interests. Moreover, Turkey attributes the roles of security provider and regional subsystem collaborator to itself. It is essential to analyze the clash between Turkey and Saudi Arabia regarding their changing and transforming national roles in the region for a better understanding of how regional developments affect bilateral relations. Saudi Arabia maintains its leadership role perception in the Gulf, even though the sense of solidarity and cooperation was damaged after the Gulf Crisis. The Gulf countries still share many common features and geopolitical interests that would be doubled in a cooperation environment. Saudi Arabia does not seem to give up its "big brother" role in the Gulf in the view of a cooperated Gulf against ongoing regional threats like Iran.

The regional polarization became more apparent in the Gulf crisis. Saudi-led camp's aggressive blockade against Qatar pushed Turkey to protect its ally in the Gulf. Qatar approached Iran at that time to avoid possible threats of the blockade. It could be argued that Gulf Crisis is, to large extent, connected with outside regional developments and relations. Turkish and Saudi relations experienced important challenges after the Gulf Crisis. Kaddorah argues, "Turkey has been observing Saudi Arabia's attempt, since the beginning of 2017, to consolidate its position in the Muslim world by forming new regional arrangements away from Ankara or giving it a lesser role in Saudi-led alliances".²³

Saudi Arabia became a more prominent actor in Trump's era. It has been argued that the murder of Khashoggi in the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul

²² Kaddorah, *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey*, 125.

²³ Kaddorah, *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey*, 126.

demonstrated the inefficiency of Saudis leadership in the Middle East.²⁴ It also caused more deterioration in Turkey and Saudi relations. However, Turkey was able to instrumentalize the occasion to fix bilateral relations with the Saudis. The Turkish minister of foreign affairs, Çavuşoğlu said, “Saudi Arabia made the case (Khashoggi affair) into a bilateral problem. Actually, this was not a bilateral issue. It was a search for justice for the deceased.” in March 2021, after three troubled years of relations from the murder.²⁵

Turkey, as a trading state and security provider in the region, has considered the Gulf region an important destination for economic and political reasons. This attitude made it necessary to balance bilateral relations. Therefore, Turkey prioritizes diplomacy and soft power instruments if hard power is not inevitable. Turkey and Saudi relations can be considered regarding clashes in regional interests and domination. In that case, the roles and interests may differentiate in the Gulf and the broader Middle East. The main point that causes conflict between both sides is possible regional domination and leadership in the Gulf region. They share common features and policies in the Middle East. However, it has its limits when it comes to the Gulf, which is the sphere of influence for Saudi Arabia.

6. Conclusion

Regional developments and conflicts in the last decades triggered regional competition and leadership rivalry among regional powers in the Middle East. This competition emphasized the importance of national role conceptions while transforming them accordingly with national interests and foreign policy strategies. The paper examined the main turning points in the Middle East by focusing on the domestic dynamics of Turkey and Gulf relations. The first milestone is the invasion of Iraq and its regional and global effects. It created a new order in the region. Turkey has been more involved in the Middle East, assuming new national role conceptions; the bridge role phenomena, regional stability

²⁴ Kaddorah, *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey*,126.

²⁵ Kaddorah, *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey*,128.

and integrity, security demander, soft power, and zero problems with neighbors. The invasion consolidated the Saudi roles of the loyal partner of the US, regional stabilator, and defender of Sunni identity. The second, Arab Spring, created new challenges and threats for both sides. Turkey pursued an active foreign policy by supporting its potential partners, especially in Egypt. Turkey also transformed its soft power and diplomacy-based foreign policy to hard power instruments in the aftermath of the uprisings; central-pivotal country, independent foreign policy, and security provider. The Arab Spring endangered Saudi's regional design. Saudi Arabia strongly supported monarchies in the region and consolidated its position as a leader of the Gulf, protector of the monarchical model, regional stability, and guarantor of regional order. Turkey and Saudi Arabia's regional rivalry has become more prominent due to the Arab Spring. This rivalry is reflected in the regional polarization between the Saudi-led camp of UAE and Egypt and the Turkish-Qatari alliance.

The last is Gulf Crisis deepened the polarization and bilateral problems in the region. Turkish military presence in the heart of the Gulf is a direct threat to Saudi's regional domination and leadership. However, Turkish policy toward the Gulf is mainly related to economic concerns and the protection of its regional partnerships. Even though Turkey and Saudi Arabia are competing countries for regional leadership, the Gulf region is not such a destination for Turkish aspirations. The paper argues that the transformation of Turkish Saudi relations and regional rivalry is, to large extent, related to the regional developments in the broader Middle East, such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Turkish foreign policy still implements soft power instruments if hard power is not inevitable.

Three arguments cause me to argue that Turkish Saudi bilateral relations will stabilize. The first is that the Gulf countries resolve their intra-regional diplomatic relations, so Qatar is no longer under threat in the short run. It will throw out of focus the role of Turkey as a security provider and its employment of hard power tools. The second is the Gulf and Saudi Arabia's huge potential for Turkish trade and business, making good relations necessary for the Turkish side. Turkish businesses have a

number of opportunities in the Gulf that highlight the importance of being a trading state. The third is that by striving to develop better political ties, such as with Egypt, the regional disputes between Saudi Arabia and Turkey appear to be resolved. At the World Cup 2022 opening ceremony in Doha, Turkish President Erdogan and Egyptian President Sisi first had a face-to-face encounter. By pursuing a flexible foreign policy rather than carrying out military operations and hard power instruments, it reveals Turkey still tends to follow the role of a supporter of soft power and diplomacy.

As a result, this paper argues that Turkey's role conceptions of trading state, soft power, regional collaborator, and good relations with neighbors will gain importance in the following years. Turkey and Gulf relations will continue to normalize for the benefit of Turkish export-led growth and regional collaboration strategies.

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