

Research Article

AN EVALUATION OF POST-2010 GRADUATE THESES ON THE REGIONAL ROLE OF IRAN

Asena BOZTAŞ

Profesör., Sakarya University of Applied Sciences

aboztas@subu.edu.edu.tr

orcid: 0000-0002-3216-3010

N. Ceren TÜRKMEN

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Sakarya University of Applied Sciences

turkmencer@gmail.com

orcid: 0000-0003-2173-0144

Dilşad TÜRKMENOĞLU KÖSE

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Sakarya University

dturkmenoglu@sakarya.edu.tr

orcid: 0000-0003-2363-3639

Bucan TÜRKMEN

PhD.,

bucan.turkmen@isbank.com.tr

orcid: 0000-0001-9938-3459

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Abstract

This research examines how Iran's regional role in the Middle East has been addressed in post-graduate theses in Türkiye in the post-2010 period. Turkish academic literature generally analyses Iran's regional influence within the framework of security threats, strategic cooperation, economic interdependence, sectarian conflicts, and ideological dynamics. The present study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by conducting a bibliometric analysis of theses and dissertations on Iran-Türkiye relations. This analysis will provide a classification of existing academic studies and offer alternative perspectives for future research. The literature review reveals several problems, including data access difficulties, a lack of theoretical diversity, and methodological limitations in Iranian studies in Türkiye. It was also found that identity and ideology-based approaches, interdisciplinary analyses, and social dynamics are not sufficiently examined. The study thus offers a series of recommendations for the advancement of Iranian studies in Türkiye, including the promotion of theoretical diversity, the facilitation of comprehensive data access, and the encouragement of interdisciplinary approaches. It is anticipated that these recommendations will significantly contribute to the development of Iranian studies in Türkiye.

Keywords: Iran's Regional Role, Türkiye-Iran Relations, Security Policies, Foreign Trade, Economic Dependence

Introduction

The year 2010 signalled the commencement of a pivotal era in the Middle East and North Africa, characterised by the emergence of social movements and the onset of the 'Arab Spring'. This period culminated in political upheaval and the overthrow of numerous Middle Eastern regimes. In response, regional powers such as Iran recalibrated their political agendas (Fırat, 2013, p. 29). Iran has assumed an active role in regional conflicts, notably the Syrian Civil War and the Yemen crisis, and it has established regional alliances, termed the Shia Axis, to expand its regional sphere of influence (Ehteshami, 2017). These developments have exerted a direct influence on Türkiye's foreign policy in the region, necessitating a re-evaluation of Iran's regional role.

Historically characterised by both competition and cooperation, the relationship between Türkiye and Iran has been marked by common interests, particularly in the domains of energy and trade, while concurrent sectarian differences have, on occasion, given rise to discord in their foreign policy orientations (Hunter, 2010, p. 118). While Türkiye has pursued a Sunni-oriented foreign policy, Iran has sought to consolidate its leadership in the Shiite world (Larabee & Nader, 2013, p. 43). A review of the extant academic literature on Türkiye reveals an increasing number of studies on Iran's strategic role in the region and different aspects of Türkiye-Iran relations.

The present study aims to examine how Iran's regional role is addressed in postgraduate theses published in Türkiye after 2010. This is because in the academic literature on Iran in Türkiye, the significance of Iran's foreign policy for Türkiye has been discussed within the framework of security, economy, and sectarian dynamics (Gürbüz, 2017). Consequently, analyzing the approaches to Iran's regional role in Turkish academic studies is imperative for comprehending Türkiye's strategic perspective on Iran and the prevailing trends in the academic realm (e.g. Akbaş & Baş, 2013; Birdişi& Gören, 2017; Yüksel, 2019). A thorough examination of the academic literature in Türkiye reveals that, in addition to security policies and economic dependency relations in Türkiye-Iran relations, factors such as non-governmental organisations, sectarian conflicts, and regional power struggles are also studied. However, it is noteworthy that approaches based on identity and ideology, interdisciplinary analyses, and social dynamics are comparatively underrepresented in Iranian studies.

The present study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of graduate studies in Türkiye on Iran's international policies towards becoming a regional power. The study's primary research question is as follows: "How is Iran's regional role addressed in post-2010 theses in Türkiye?" To answer this research question, it is aimed to analyse the general trends, main themes and different academic approaches to Iran's regional role in Turkish theses. This analysis of master's and doctoral theses in the Council of Higher Education (YÖK- COHE hereafter) Thesis Center was conducted through content analysis. Thus, by examining the perspectives offered by the Turkish academic perspective on Iran's regional policies, the prominent themes in the theses were identified and categorized.

The post-2010 period is noteworthy as a period in which regional security balances underwent significant transformation, Türkiye's foreign policy orientations underwent notable shifts, and Iran's influence in the Middle East region increased visibly. Consequently, an analysis of dissertations conducted in and after 2010 provides a valuable framework for understanding academic studies on Iran's contemporary role and trends in Türkiye (Sinkaya, 2019). The findings of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to understanding the influence of academic literature on Türkiye's relations with Iran, in particular shedding light on future studies by showing how foreign policy interactions and regional strategic approaches between the two countries are addressed in academic studies in Türkiye. The theoretical background is given first, and then a bibliometric analysis was conducted within the scope of "content analysis", which was determined as the method of the study. The subsequent subheading is

the analysis part, and the third part of the study presents the findings obtained from the analysis.

Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Regional Power and Iran

A concise theory section is indispensable in a bibliometric study of International Relations because theoretical paradigms do not merely decorate scholarly work; they organise research questions, delimit what counts as evidence, and channel methodological choices. Without briefly signalling the principal lenses that dominate the field, patterns in thesis topics and methods risk being read as raw frequencies rather than as outcomes shaped by the discipline's internal logic. In this sense, a short theory section functions as an interpretive key. Moreover, there is a well-established two-way link between world events and academic agendas. Shifts in sanctions, negotiations, energy markets, or regional conflicts also alter the salience of research problems and the concepts they consolidate.

Against this background, the concept of regional power, as employed in the field of international relations literature, denotes the political, economic, military, and cultural influence of states that are geographically dominant within a specific region (Lemke, 2002, p. 47). Regional powers wield a substantial influence at the regional level, capable of exerting their authority over neighbouring countries. Beyond the assurance of their security, such states tend to address environmental concerns, expand their spheres of influence, and export a particular ideological or political model (Fawcett, 2013, p. 25). Iran can be characterised as a regional power, both in terms of its historical past and its current political engagements.

The positioning of Iran as a regional power has been facilitated by a combination of historical, ideological, and strategic factors. The legacy of the Persian Empire and its claim to Shiite leadership provide Iran with a strong ideological foundation across the region (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 283). In the post-Islamic Revolution era, Iran's foreign policy of exporting the revolution has increased its regional influence and enabled it to exert significant influence over the Shiite communities in neighbouring countries (Hunter, 2010, p. 156; Navazeni, 2010, p. 137–138). By forging strategic alliances with Shiite groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, Iran has been able to both defend its interests and spread its political discourse in these countries. This approach demonstrates that Iran utilises its ideological power as an important factor of influence in addition to its military power (Hunter, 2010, p. 156).

Iran's assertion of regional preeminence is further substantiated by military and economic strategies. Iran's military is distinct from those of other countries in the region, and it possesses the capacity to expand its sphere of influence through its conventional army and specialised military units, such as the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force (Terrill, 2011, p. 54). The Quds Force is particularly effective in foreign operations and can influence regional dynamics through allied groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. This strategy enables Iran to transcend conventional alliance systems in the region, thereby establishing a more flexible, demilitarised power structure. Furthermore, Iran's nuclear programme has contributed to its strategic ascendancy by augmenting its deterrence capacity in the region (Krause, 2012).

From an economic perspective, Iran is consolidating its regional influence through the utilisation of its energy resources. With one of the world's largest natural gas reserves, Iran can utilise these resources to enhance its strategic importance regionally and globally. The country's energy resources serve not only as a means of economic empowerment but also as a means of foreign policy implementation. Specifically, the relationships cultivated regarding oil and natural gas enable the strengthening of economic ties with neighbouring nations (Shaffer, 2013, p. 76). However, when confronted with constraints imposed by international sanctions, Iran has historically sought to substitute these losses by forging peripheral alliances (Shaffer, 2013, p. 76). For instance, difficulties in energy trade due to sanctions have prompted Iran to increasingly rely on countries within its own alliance bloc.

Another factor that supports Iran's position as a regional power is its ideological influence. By positioning itself as the leader of Shia Islam, Iran has gained significant influence over Shia communities throughout the region. This ideological link enables Iran to be perceived not only as a military and economic power but also as a cultural centre of influence. The deepening of ties with the Shiite population in countries such as Syria and Lebanon are an important

component of Iran's regional strategy and helps to secure Iran's interests in the region (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 87). In this context, understanding Iran's role in the Middle East requires an analysis of military or economic factors, as well as historical and ideological factors. With its historical heritage, ideological strength, and military capacity, Iran tends to maintain its influence in the Middle East as a regional power (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 124). This multifaceted regional power and Iran's strategies are frequently analysed in Turkish studies, which expand the theoretical debates on Iran's role in the region and help us better understand the strategic dimensions of relations between the two countries.

The two geographically proximate countries perceive each other as influential actors in the Middle East whilst simultaneously recognising the necessity of cooperation for the advancement of common interests. The dynamics of security and economics have been identified as the predominant determinants of Türkiye-Iran relations. Periodically, both countries have engaged in the development of rapprochement or distancing strategies, considering their threat perceptions and regional interests (Sinkaya, 2019, p. 18-23).

The security relations between Türkiye and Iran have been shaped by a number of factors, including regional conflicts, the threat of terrorism, and the competitive environment brought about by sectarian differences. The desire of both countries to protect their border security, regional stability, and national interests is a factor that encourages security cooperation. However, the two countries' opposing positions in regional crises and their rival power structures have deepened the rivalry (Aras & Polat, 2008, p. 495).

The shared objective of combatting terrorist organisations such as the PKK has been a notable catalyst for enhanced security cooperation between Türkiye and Iran. In instances where regional groups, such as PJAK, have posed a threat to border security in eastern Iran, the two countries have collaborated on developing joint security strategies. However, the implementation of these strategies has been constrained in instances where the interests of the two countries have not been fully aligned. This discord has been particularly evident in regional crises such as the Syrian Civil War and the conflicts in Yemen, where the two countries have taken divergent positions, thereby engendering tension in the security dimension of their relations (Middle East Eye, 2019; Wilks, 2019). In the case of Syria, for instance, Iran has provided support to the Bashar al-Assad regime, while Türkiye has backed opposition groups, resulting in a divergence of policies aimed at increasing their respective influence in Syria. Additionally, Iran's policy of establishing Shiite alliances in the region has been identified as a contributing factor to Türkiye's concerns regarding its national security (Hunter, 2010, p.201). Consequently, the ideological and sectarian differences between the two countries have been noted as a potential risk factor for heightened tensions in the security sector. Furthermore, the rivalry between Türkiye and Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, on the other, also exerts an influence on the security policies of both states, resulting in divergent positions being adopted by the two countries about this rivalry.

The economic sphere is indicative of a more cooperative aspect of the relationship between Türkiye and Iran, with the latter's vast energy resources rendering it an important energy supplier for the former (Shaffer, 2013, p. 128). Türkiye has sought to strengthen its economic ties with Iran to meet its growing energy needs, with natural gas and oil imports being the main factors driving an increase in the volume of trade between the two countries. However, the imposition of international sanctions against Iran and the embargoes imposed by the United States has, at times, created difficulties in Türkiye-Iran economic relations (Sinkaya, 2012, p.141).

Despite the restrictions stemming from these sanctions, Türkiye has developed various strategies to maintain its trade relations with Iran, including the use of local currencies in trade between the two countries (Kirişçi, 2009, p. 43). Nevertheless, due to the repressive policies implemented by the US, Türkiye has felt the need to diversify its energy imports and has

turned to other energy suppliers, which has led to fluctuations in the volume of trade between the two countries and uncertainties in the sustainability of economic relations.

Despite these challenges in economic relations, Türkiye and Iran have established various mechanisms to enhance mutual trade. The establishment of institutions such as the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council has been instrumental in fostering increased trade volume between the two countries, thereby facilitating significant progress in strengthening their economic ties. This framework has initiated border trade and transportation projects to enhance economic integration between Türkiye and Iran (Köse, 2019, p. 92).

Another dimension of economic relations is Iran's strategy of opening up to the West through Türkiye, which is facilitated by Türkiye's geographical proximity. In this context, Iran both uses Türkiye as a transit point and seeks to access European markets through Türkiye, thus demonstrating the importance of this strategic orientation in boosting Turkish-Iranian economic cooperation. Concurrently, the opportunities extended by Iran to Turkish investors, alongside Türkiye's openness to economic reforms in Iran, serve to reinforce the economic ties between the two nations (Ebrahimi, Yusoff & Jalili, 2017, p. 5).

The security and economic dynamics between Türkiye and Iran mirror the intricacy and multidimensionality of their relations. Türkiye's energy requirements and Iran's concerns regarding regional security are factors that, at times, impede or transform the two countries' relations. A substantial body of literature has been dedicated to these intricate relations and dynamics within the context of Turkish academic discourse. In navigating its relationship with Iran, Türkiye employs a pragmatic approach, seeking to balance cooperation and competition.

To comprehensively interpret Iran's strategic objectives and regional policies, it is imperative to explore diverse international relations theories. Theorising the foreign policy behaviour of states is an essential endeavour for understanding the regional influence of states like Iran, which pursue complex foreign policy strategies. This chapter will examine Iran's role in the Middle East through the lenses of realism, neoliberalism, and constructivism.

By the precepts of realism, states are inclined to maximise their power to ensure their survival and security, a tendency that is attributable to the anarchic nature of the international system (Waltz, 2012, p. 88). In this context, from a realist perspective, Iran's regional role in the Middle East is perceived as an endeavour to secure itself and tilt the balance of power in its favour. In pursuit of this objective, Iran has diversified its military and strategic instruments, formulating a policy of deterrence against potential threats within the region. Notably, Iran's nuclear programme is regarded from a realist perspective as a means of altering the balance of power in the region (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 33).

From a realist standpoint, Iran's endeavours to develop nuclear armaments are perceived as a method of bolstering its national security and augmenting its deterrence capacity. This is indicative of Iran's aspiration to mitigate threats to its security and to counter pressure from external actors in the region (Walt, 1987, s. 79). The presence of external powers, such as the United States and Israel, in the Middle East has been identified as a contributing factor to Iran's heightened security concerns. In this context, Iran seeks to enhance its regional and international standing. From a realist perspective, Iran's nuclear program and its policy of increasing its military power can be interpreted as an effort to restructure the balance of power in the Middle East.

The theoretical underpinnings of neoliberalism posit that the enhancement of interstate cooperation and economic integration within the global system can serve to mitigate the prevalence of conflict and thereby augment security measures (Keohane, 2005, p. 104). Within this theoretical framework, the regional role of Iran is predicated not solely on security concerns but also on considerations about its economic and commercial interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran leverages its substantial energy resources as a regional instrument of influence, seeking to fortify its position within the regional context through the cultivation of economic ties

with neighbouring nations. In this context, its economic cooperation with Türkiye can be evaluated within the framework of a neoliberal approach.

By exporting its natural gas and oil reserves to neighbouring countries, Iran not only gains economic benefits but also strengthens its political relations with these countries (Shaffer, 2013, p. 128). This approach reflects Iran's effort to contribute to regional security through economic cooperation and to reduce the economic isolation caused by international sanctions. From a neoliberal standpoint, Iran's energy collaborations with Türkiye and China are regarded as a mechanism that can enhance regional stability by fostering interdependence (Shaffer, 2013, p. 128). Consequently, Iran's energy policies and economic cooperation are components of its strategy to expand its sphere of influence in the region from a neoliberal perspective.

Constructivist theory accentuates the significance of social factors, including identity, ideology and culture, in comprehending the foreign policy conduct of states (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). From a constructivist standpoint, Iran's role in the Middle East is noteworthy as a foreign policy strategy imbued with ideological components. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran utilised its Shiite identity as a unifying factor over other Shiite groups in the region and established a regional network designated as the "Shiite Axis". This network enables Iran to expand its regional influence by increasing its ideological power (Hunter, 2010, p. 118).

From a constructivist perspective, the Shiite identity in Iran's foreign policy and the ideological legacy of the Islamic Revolution play an important role in the country's regional strategies. Through its relations with Shiite communities in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, Iran reinforces its ideological discourse in these countries and increases its regional influence. In this context, Iran's foreign policy can be evaluated as positioning itself as a protective power for the Shiite communities in the region and providing legitimacy through this identity (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 283).

To comprehend Iran's regional strategies, it is necessary to analyse them through a constructivist approach to understand how the country can exert influence not only as a state but also as an ideological movement. The strategy of expanding its sphere of influence by sharing its Shiite identity with other actors in the region has become a decisive element in Iran's regional role. This suggests that Iran's foreign policy is predicated on the construction of a sectarian identity, which is strategically utilised to enhance its regional power (Terrill, 2011, p. 92).

These theoretical approaches offer a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's role in the Middle East by examining it from different perspectives. While the realist approach emphasises Iran's security and deterrence policies, neoliberalism emphasises economic cooperation and energy policies. Constructivism, in contrast, provides an ideological and identity-based analysis, facilitating comprehension of Iran's regional strategies within the context of its Shiite identity. In academic studies in Türkiye, Iran's regional role is examined through these theoretical approaches, and the primary dynamics in Türkiye-Iran relations are analysed through these frameworks.

Literature Survey

Bibliometric analysis has increasingly become a method for researchers, enabling them to systematically map academic trends, identify research gaps, and understand the evolution of literature on specific topics, regions, or countries. The bibliometric methods in IR studies allow researchers to provide data-driven insights into how specific topics, theories, regions, or countries are represented in related literature. This literature review part examines the application of bibliometric methods in political science research, with particular emphasis on studies addressing Iran.

Özçelik (2022) conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of 1,209 studies on "Political Islam" from the Web of Science database (1980-2021), demonstrating how bibliometric mapping can reveal dominant research themes, author networks, and institutional contributions in politically sensitive research areas. His study identified key clusters around concepts such

Asena Boztaş
N.Ceren Türkmen
Dilşad Türkmenoğlu Köse
Bucan Türkmen

as Islamism, democracy, Arab Spring, and Middle Eastern politics—themes highly relevant to understanding contemporary Iran.

Naghdinegad et al. (2022) focused specifically on scientific productions by Iranian researchers themselves in political science, analyzing 368 documents indexed in WoS between 1990 and 2020. Their study revealed minimal growth till 2016. The research identified Islamic Azad University, University of Tehran, and Shahid Beheshti University as the leading Iranian institutions. Critically, they found that while some Iranian scholars were highly prolific, few produced high-quality, high-citation articles—a finding suggesting structural challenges in Iranian political science research infrastructure.

Sadeghi (2022) conducted a scientometric study specifically examining world political science research on Iran, analyzing 2,837 documents from Web of Science between 1975 and 2020, related to Iran in political science journals. The analysis revealed three distinct thematic areas: (1) foreign policy, relations with major powers (Russia, China), nuclear issues, revolution, and Islam; (2) Middle East regional dynamics including relations with Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring, and Persian Gulf affairs; and (3) U.S.-centric analyses addressing Israel, Iraq, Türkiye, Syria, Afghanistan, and terrorism. Sadeghi found that American researchers dominated this field, accounting for 31% of all publications, followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. The study demonstrated two distinct waves of increased scholarly attention: 2005-2010 and 2015-2020, corresponding to major geopolitical events affecting Iran.

While bibliometric studies specifically addressing Iran's political science or international relations remain relatively scarce, existing studies from other disciplines provide important contextual insights.

Khodabandelou et al. (2019) conducted a pioneering bibliometric analysis of 3,812 educational research documents produced by Iranian scholars between 1990 and 2018, indexed in WoS. Their study revealed explosive growth after 2016, with Iranian researchers demonstrating increasing international engagement, particularly with scholars from the United States, Malaysia, and Australia. The study combining VOSviewer visualization with thematic clustering has identified three major research clusters: technology and learning, policy and strategy, and language learning. Importantly, their findings highlighted that while Iran showed strong quantitative growth in scholarly output, citation impact remained relatively limited, suggesting potential quality concerns—a pattern that may extend to political science research as well.

Mohammadian and Haji-Yousefi (2022) analyzed Iran's foreign policy from a sociohistorical perspective, proposing models for understanding state-society relations across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras. While not pure-bibliometric, their systematic review of literature identified significant gaps in identity-based and interdisciplinary approaches to Iranian studies.

Similarly, Sutikno (2024) employed bibliometric analysis of 345 articles (1990-2023) on UN Security Council sanctions, revealing that sanctions research frequently focused on Iran and it constitutes a multidisciplinary field with growing scholarly attention, particularly after 2018.

To sum up, although the bibliometric research is expanding, gaps still remain in understanding Iran's representation in international political science literature. First of all, while bibliometric studies (Naghdinegad et al., 2022; Sadeghi, 2022) on Iran's political science production exist, analyses specifically examining how Iran's regional role is addressed in a country with geographic proximity, complex historical relationship with Iran, and shared regional interests such as Türkiye remain entirely absent.

Secondly, yet theses represent formative academic training, emerging research agendas, and often address localized policy concerns that may not yet appear in international journals, making them invaluable for understanding national academic priorities, existing bibliometric studies on Iran tend to emphasize journal publications (WoS and/or Scopus) rather than

master's and doctoral theses. From another point of view, while previous studies have analyzed Iran through various lenses such as education (Khodabandelou et al., 2019), political sciences (Sadeghi, 2022), and sanctions (Sutikno, 2024), none of the studies systematically examine how Iran's regional influence are addressed in national academic context over an extended period.

Finally, language barriers represent a persistent challenge. As Naghdinegad et al. (2022) noted, the overwhelming dominance of English-language publications at WoS or Scopus databases (was 99.5% in their sample) may obscure important local perspectives.

Therefore, our study addresses all these gaps by analyzing post-2010 Turkish graduate theses on Iran's regional role, a period encompassing the Arab Spring, Syrian Civil War, nuclear negotiations, and regional realignments. In addition to this, by analyzing Turkish theses, this study captures academic discourse that might not reach international databases, thus providing a more complete picture of how regional neighbors conceptualize Iran's role.

Methodological Framework of The Study

The principal objective of this research is to examine how Iran's regional role is addressed in post-2010 master's and doctoral theses in Türkiye. To achieve this objective, the study employs a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis. This methodology entails the systematic review and evaluation of documents to elicit meaning and identify patterns within textual data (Bowen, 2009). Given that graduate theses constitute the primary data source, document analysis provides a fitting framework for accessing and interpreting the academic discourse embedded within them.

The document analysis was conducted in two sequential phases. The initial phase involved data collection and filtering through a systematic literature review. This process provided a rigorous and replicable protocol for identifying, selecting, and retrieving the relevant theses from the Council of Higher Education (COHE) Thesis Center database. The implementation of a systematic method with predefined keywords and explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria, as detailed in Table 1, ensured the comprehensive and minimally biased selection of documents, thereby establishing a reliable corpus for subsequent analysis (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The subsequent phase focused on data examination through qualitative content analysis of thesis titles. Following the establishment of the final sample of 79 theses, a thematic analysis approach was applied specifically to the titles of these documents. Thesis titles were taken as a key unit of analysis, as they concisely represent the core focus and thematic orientation of each academic work (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical procedure involved identifying and categorizing the central concepts and keywords present in the titles. The recurrent themes—such as "security policies," "sectarian dynamics," and "economic interdependence"—were systematically extracted and classified. This classification facilitated the creation of a word cloud (Figure 1), which serves as a visual representation of the most prominent themes and academic trends in the studied literature.

The selection of this two-phased document analysis methodology is justified by its capacity for the systematic examination of a substantial corpus of academic data. This approach enhances the study's reliability by providing a transparent audit trail from data collection to interpretation. By integrating the methodological rigor of a systematic review with a focused content analysis of thesis titles, this framework is strategically chosen to efficiently map the overarching thematic landscape and identify the primary focal points of Turkish academic research on Iran's regional role.

The analysis identified a set of recurring themes—most notably Iran's political and military influence, economic relations, energy policies, sectarian dynamics, and regional security. These themes were examined in detail through the lens of the perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and perceptions adopted in Turkish scholarship. By comparatively assessing both the substantive findings and methodological orientations of the theses, the study aimed to determine whether a coherent consensus on Iran's regional role exists within Türkiye's academic community or whether diverse and sometimes competing approaches prevail. This comparative evaluation not only highlighted the dominant lines of inquiry but also illuminated the broader intellectual tendencies shaping Turkish analyses of Iran.

The population of the study consists of master's and doctoral theses prepared in universities in Türkiye and published in the COHE Thesis Center between 2010 and 2024. The year 2010 marks both the beginning of the regional effects of the Arab Spring and a period when Iran's role in the region became more salient for Türkiye. This historical limitation positions the study within a more contemporary framework, thereby facilitating the examination of emergent trends in academic literature.

A purposive sampling method was employed for the selection of the sample. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting cases that can provide the most information on a particular topic (Patton, 2002). In this context, a purposive selection of dissertations on Iran's regional role in Turkish universities was conducted, focusing on those that directly addressed the research question.

Data Collection and Filtration Process

The main data source used in this study is the COHE Thesis Center. This database, which includes master's and doctoral theses completed in Türkiye, was considered a fundamental reference point for a systematic literature review.

The data collection process was carried out on November 26, 2024. Theses were searched using keywords such as "Iran", "Middle East", "regional power", and "Türkiye-Iran relations". The search term "Iran" yielded 1,595 theses, while the search term "regional power" yielded 36 theses. In the process of identifying the theses that were considered in this study, certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Criteria for Including and Excluding Graduate Theses

Theses Included	Excluded Theses
Theses published between 2010-2024	Theses published before 2010
Theses written in the fields of International Relations, Political Sciences and Economics	Theses written in fields other than social sciences
Theses on Iran's regional role, Türkiye-Iran relations and regional power dynamics	Theses focusing on different topics such as Iran's domestic politics, cultural studies or industry
Theses whose full text can be accessed	Theses whose full text cannot be accessed

Note. COHE Thesis Centre, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp>

A total of 1,631 graduate theses were reviewed, with those published after 2010 being filtered to determine those that met the study's scope (1,290 theses). Subsequently, a further filtration process was conducted to identify theses related to the research area, with those written in the fields of International Relations, Political Science, and Economics being retained for further analysis. This filtration process resulted in a preliminary corpus of 610 theses.

To conduct a more systematic content analysis of the identified theses, they were classified under general categories such as year, thesis type (master's/doctorate), university distribution, and language of publication. This classification process was carried out to reveal the general pattern of academic studies on Iran in Türkiye.

Following this classification, a detailed content analysis of the theses was conducted according to their titles. This analysis focused on the thematic area covered by the research, and 79 theses that directly contributed to the purpose of the research were selected for the final, in-depth thematic analysis. In these theses, approaches, theoretical justifications, and analyses on Iran's role were evaluated within a systematic framework. In the selection of theses, studies that specifically address Iran's influence in the Middle East and examine this influence from the perspective of Türkiye were prioritized.

Research Questions

The present study aims to analyse how Iran's regional role is addressed in master's and doctoral theses published in Türkiye after 2010. In order to achieve this objective, the study seeks to answer the following questions: which theoretical approaches are prominent in the theses, which topics are covered more intensively, and how has the academic literature in Türkiye shaped the perspective on Iran's regional role? The main research questions identified within the scope of the study are presented below.

- In which years has the Iranian thematic area been studied more in master's and doctoral theses conducted in Türkiye after 2010?
- In which academic disciplines are the theses on Iran's regional role concentrated?
- In which universities and institutes were these theses prepared?
- Which theoretical approaches to Iran's regional role have been used in the Turkish academic literature?

The theses were analysed according to the following headings: security policies, economic relations, sectarian dynamics, and so forth. The study also examined how Iran's relations with Türkiye were covered in the theses and identified any gaps or omissions in postgraduate theses on Iran's regional power.

Limitations

There are certain limitations inherent in the systematic literature review and content analysis methods. Firstly, the study exclusively analysed theses from the COHE Thesis Center; consequently, academic studies conducted outside of Türkiye were not included. Secondly, the study focused exclusively on theses written between 2010 and 2024; as a result, theses written outside of this period were excluded. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study aims to systematically analyse academic studies on Iran's regional role in Türkiye and thereby make an important academic contribution by identifying trends in the literature.

Iran's Regional Role in Academic Studies in Türkiye

The table below (Table 2) indicates the tendency of academic theses in Türkiye to focus on Iran's regional role between 2010 and 2024.

Table 2. Distribution of Graduate Theses Written in Türkiye in the Thematic Area of Iran between 2010-2024

Thesis Type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
PhD	4	4	1	5	3	4	4	12	8	10	13	17	14	11	7	117
Master's Degree	19	21	18	24	25	26	31	40	35	65	45	50	40	33	21	493
Total	23	25	19	29	28	30	35	52	43	75	58	67	54	44	28	610

Note. COHE Thesis Centre, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp>

According to Table 2, a higher proportion of master's theses were produced compared to doctoral dissertations (493 master's theses versus 117 doctoral dissertations). This finding suggests that the subject has garnered academic interest at the graduate level; however, doctoral studies that employ in-depth theoretical frameworks and original contributions remain comparatively scarce.

A further examination of the distribution by year reveals a notable surge in both master's and doctoral theses commencing from 2017. A particularly pronounced escalation is evident between 2018 and 2021, with the number of master's theses increasing from 40 in 2017 to 65 in 2019 and 50 in 2021. This increase indicates that post-2010 regional geopolitical developments (e.g. the Syrian Civil War, the rise of Iran's regional influence, transformations in Türkiye-Iran relations) have aroused academic interest.

Table 3. Distribution of Graduate Theses Written in Türkiye in the Thematic Area of Iran between 2010-2024 by universities (simplified)

University	University Type	PhD	Master's Degree	Total
Marmara University	Public University	14	40	54
Middle East Technical University	Public University	8	29	37
Sakarya University	Public University	8	21	29
Gazi University	Public University	7	21	28
Istanbul University	Public University	11	17	28
Ankara University	Public University	8	12	20
Bahcesehir University	Private University		16	16
Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University	Public University	6	10	16
Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University	Public University	5	9	14
Atilim University	Private University	-	13	13
Beykent University	Private University	-	12	12
Istanbul Aydın University	Private University	-	12	12
Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University	Public University	2	9	11
Karabuk University	Public University	-	10	10
Kocaeli University	Public University	2	8	10
Hacettepe University	Public University	3	7	10
Bursa Uludağ University	Public University	5	5	10
Istanbul Bilgi University	Private University	-	8	8
Necmettin Erbakan University	Public University	-	8	8
Horizon University	Private University	-	8	8
Van Yüzüncü Yıl University	Public University	-	8	8
Istanbul Medeniyet University	Public University	1	7	8
Karadeniz Technical University	Public University	1	7	8
Akdeniz University	Public University	2	6	8
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University	Private University	-	7	7

Note. COHE Thesis Centre, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp>

As illustrated in Table 3, Turkish universities have made a substantial contribution to academic studies on Iran's regional role. To elucidate the scope of the study, a ranking was conducted of the universities based on the total number of theses produced, with the 25 institutions that contributed the most theses being included in the list. Marmara University (54 theses), Middle East Technical University (37 theses), Sakarya University (29 theses), Gazi University (28 theses), and Istanbul University (28 theses) are among the universities producing the most studies. This finding indicates that particularly large and well-established public universities make significant contributions to academic production in this field.

Among the foundation universities, Bahçeşehir University, Atilım University, Beykent University, and Istanbul Aydın University are noteworthy for their 16, 13, 12, and 12 theses, respectively. Given the limited doctoral programmes available at foundation universities, it is

notable that almost all of these theses are at the master's level. The preponderance of universities based in Ankara and Istanbul is striking. Well-established institutions such as Marmara University, Istanbul University, Gazi University, Middle East Technical University, and Ankara University play a central role in academic studies and make significant contributions to academic production in this field.

A focus on doctoral dissertations reveals that Marmara University (14 dissertations), Istanbul University (11 dissertations), and Middle East Technical University (8 dissertations) are the institutions with the highest number of doctoral-level studies. This finding suggests that these universities are the most comprehensive and in-depth producers of research on Iran's regional role.

In general, public universities dominate thesis production. Türkiye's most prominent and research-oriented public universities are at the forefront of academic research in this domain, playing a pivotal role, particularly at the doctoral level. In contrast, some foundation universities also demonstrate notable productivity, especially at the master's level. This distribution underscores the concentration of academic circles in Türkiye around large-scale and research-oriented universities in terms of research on Iran's regional policies. It is noteworthy that universities with strong academic staff, especially in the fields of regional studies, international relations, and political sciences, produce more theses in this field.

Table 4. Language Distribution of Graduate Theses Written in Türkiye in the Thematic Area of Iran between 2010-2024

	PhD	Master's Degree	Total
Arabic	-	2	2
English	20	119	139
Turkish	97	372	469
General Total	117	493	610

Note. COHE Thesis Centre, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp>

The following table illustrates the distribution of theses according to language preferences. The vast majority of theses were written in Turkish, indicating that the topic is primarily addressed and analysed in the local language in academic circles in Türkiye. Notably, the number of theses written in English is particularly noteworthy at the doctoral level. The data reveal that 17% of doctoral theses and almost 24% of master's theses were written in English, indicating a notable emphasis on contributing to the international literature on Iran's regional policies, particularly at the master's level. The high proportion of English theses suggests that Turkish academics and researchers are actively engaging with the international academic community. In contrast, the number of theses written in Arabic is very limited, and these were at the master's level. This low rate suggests that academic studies on Iran in Türkiye are less informed by Arabic sources or that researchers have a limited tendency to write in Arabic.

The theses demonstrate that the majority of academic work in the field of Iranian studies in Türkiye is produced from a local perspective, with English theses showing particular potential to make an international contribution to the academic literature. The relatively low use of English in doctoral dissertations suggests that studies at this level are mostly produced in a local context; however, the use of English in doctoral research should be encouraged to increase international visibility.

Contextual Characteristics of the Theses

The present study analyzes graduate theses to reveal the extent of interest in Iran's regional role in Turkish academic circles. This interest has increased over the years, especially in the post-2010 period. This is due to a combination of political events in the Middle East, the rise of Iran as a regional power, and the security concerns this situation has created for Türkiye.

Consequently, there has been an intensification of studies on Iran in the academic literature. To understand how Iran's regional policies are addressed in Turkish academic circles, it is important to examine the distribution of theses and dissertations by departments. The majority of studies are prepared in the departments of International Relations, Political Science and Economics, which are the academic disciplines that allow for the analysis of Iran's regional policies from a multidimensional perspective. The focus of studies undertaken in departments specialising in International Relations is generally on Iran's strategic objectives in the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on the analysis of regional security policies and the role of Türkiye-Iran relations within the broader international system. Within these theses, the examination of Iran's influence in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen is conducted in meticulous detail, with a concomitant focus on the analysis of its impact on Türkiye's security policies (Yüksel, 2019).

The focus of theses in Political Science departments is on Iran's ideological and sectarian-based foreign policy strategies, the effects of these strategies in the Middle East, and the political dimension of its relations with Türkiye. A frequently analysed topic in this context is Iran's strategy of building a Shiite axis in the region. Within the purview of Political Science departments, studies delve into the intricacies of Türkiye's response to Iran's sectarian policies, emphasizing the role of sectarian balance in shaping Türkiye-Iran relations (Deniz, 2020).

Conversely, theses in Economics departments address subjects such as Türkiye-Iran economic relations, energy security, and trade dependency. Given Türkiye's substantial reliance on Iranian energy resources, these studies meticulously analyse the repercussions of economic interdependence on Türkiye's foreign policy decisions. A notable body of research in this area has focused on the economic ramifications of the US sanctions imposed on Iran, with particular attention to Türkiye's alternative trade strategies in response to these sanctions (Kibaroglu, 2016, p. 31). These studies assess how economic interdependence influences Türkiye's policies towards Iran and its potential as a stabilising factor.

96 A close analysis of the theses written in the post-2010 period reveals a predominant focus on regional events, such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War, and the Yemen Crisis. This focus is indicative of a shift in academic discourse, with researchers increasingly exploring the impact of geopolitical developments on regional dynamics. The ongoing political turbulence in the Middle East has prompted Iran to intensify its efforts to expand its influence in the region, a development that has given rise to new security concerns for Türkiye. Consequently, the preponderance of these is formulated within the context of contemporary events, with a significant proportion focusing on Iran's role in the Middle East in the aftermath of significant developments in the post-2010 period (Sinkaya, 2019). This phenomenon signifies a discernible escalation in the level of interest within Turkish academic circles concerning Iran's regional influence, underscoring its perceived significance in the context of national security.

A cursory review of postgraduate theses reveals a tendency to concentrate on specific regional events or themes and to evaluate the factors affecting Türkiye's foreign policy strategies. Iran, as an actor that directly affects Türkiye's position in the Middle East, constitutes a multifaceted field of study in Turkish academic circles; it is analysed from a broad perspective within the framework of political, economic, and sectarian dynamics. This multidimensional nature of Iran studies in Türkiye offers various academic contributions at both theoretical and practical levels and contributes to the creation of a rich literature on Türkiye-Iran relations.

Figure 1. Prominent Themes in Academic Studies on Iran's Regional Role in Türkiye

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The field is characterised by an absence of interdisciplinary approaches, with analyses predominantly conducted within the frameworks of International Relations and Political Science rather than incorporating sociological, cultural, and economic perspectives (Kibaroglu, 2016, p. 105). Furthermore, the focus of research topics fluctuates with regional dynamics and crises, resulting in a short-term focus rather than a continuous, in-depth examination.

To facilitate the advancement of Iranian studies in Türkiye, there is a necessity to develop several research areas:

-Identity and ideology-based analyses to facilitate a more profound comprehension of Iran's Shiite identity, post-revolutionary ideological structure, and regional influence strategies (Hunter, 2010, p. 156).

Social structure and cultural dynamics research should be undertaken with a focus on youth movements, women's rights, education, and cultural transformation in Iran. Detailed economic interdependence analyses are required, extending beyond energy dependence and including Türkiye's strategies for maintaining economic relations despite sanctions (Kibaroglu, 2016, p. 105).

Interdisciplinary approaches incorporating sociology, economics, environmental sciences, and cultural studies are required to address Iran's internal dynamics, environmental problems, and technological adaptation (Shaffer, 2013, p. 165). Systematic analyses of regional power struggles are also necessary, examining Iran's rivalries with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other regional actors, and Türkiye's balancing position (Aras, 2017, p. 116).

Advancing these research areas would enable a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's multidimensional nature and Türkiye-Iran relations, contributing original perspectives to the academic literature.

Conclusion and Evaluation

This study sets out to examine how Iran's regional role has been addressed in academic theses in Türkiye in the post-2010 period. In this context, the main topics under discussion are security, strategic cooperation, sectarian and ideological approaches to Iran's regional influence in the Turkish academic literature, and the limitations and shortcomings of Iranian studies in Türkiye. While the analysis of Iran's regional role in academic theses in Türkiye encompasses various thematic areas, it remains constrained within a specific framework.

The majority of studies on Iran's regional influence in Turkish academic literature are focused on security threats and military power. Iran's military activities in regions such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon directly concern Türkiye's security and are a recurring subject in academic discourse. In particular, Iran's military capacities and nuclear programme have been evaluated as the main threats to Türkiye's security policies.

Elements of economic cooperation have been frequently emphasised within the framework of energy dependence and trade relations between Türkiye and Iran. The theses emphasise Türkiye's efforts to establish sustainable trade ties with Iran to ensure energy security and that these relations play a balancing role in Türkiye's foreign policy. However, this area needs a broader perspective analysis.

In the context of Iran studies in Türkiye, the discussion surrounding Iran's sectarian and ideological policies is of particular interest, particularly when considered within the broader framework of the nation's strategic endeavours to establish a Shiite axis. The analysis reveals that Iran's sectarian connections with Shiite communities are recognised as a pivotal balancing factor in Türkiye's regional relations with its Sunni allies. This observation underscores the significance of sectarian dynamics in shaping the complex Türkiye-Iran relationship.

The role of Iran in the regional power struggle and its rivalry with countries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel are considered to be among the determining factors in Türkiye-Iran relations. The theses emphasise that Türkiye is attempting to pursue a policy of balance in the face of Iran's regional power struggle, and in this context, it tends to develop cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni allies. The future of Iranian studies in Türkiye can be viewed from a broader perspective through comprehensive and theoretically diverse research in this field. Iran's regional influence is not confined to military and economic power; it also has the

potential to create ideological, social, and cultural transformation. In the Turkish academic literature, Iran studies are mostly based on security and economic foundations. However, there is a need for more studies that analyse Iran's regional policies in terms of identity, ideology, and social structures. To understand Iran's role in the region, more comprehensive analyses from constructivist, identity-based, and sociological perspectives are required. Such theoretical approaches will allow us to understand that Iran's influence in the region is shaped not only by military and economic power but also by ideological and cultural factors.

An interdisciplinary approach to Iranian studies is recommended to analyse Iran's multidimensional structure more comprehensively. It is suggested that studies which bring together different disciplines, such as sociology, economics, environmental sciences, cultural studies and political science, will provide a more robust analysis to understand Iran's internal structure and regional implications. In this context, interdisciplinary studies on topics such as Iran's social structure, environmental problems, and technological developments are to be encouraged.

The enhancement of the quality of studies in this field can be facilitated by the provision of more comprehensive and reliable data on developments in Iran by Turkish academia. The facilitation of researchers' access to primary sources in Iran and the provision of more reliable results can be achieved through collaboration with universities and research centres in Iran. The encouragement of field studies, data obtained from Iran, and international academic collaborations in Iranian studies in Türkiye is recommended. The following academic and practical suggestions can be made for the development of Iran studies in Türkiye. These recommendations are intended to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of the multidimensional nature of Türkiye-Iran relations and to assess Iran's regional influence from a broader perspective.

Iran's strategy of building a Shiite axis, identity politics, and ideological influences must be given wider coverage in the Turkish academic literature. Turkish academics should produce more identity and ideology-based analyses of Iran's regional role, as this would contribute to a better understanding of the sectarian and ideological dynamics in Türkiye-Iran relations. Such studies could also provide more information on how Türkiye should strategise its relations with other Sunni allies in the region.

In this context, Iranian studies in Türkiye should examine the effects of sectarian dynamics with greater precision and analyse the impact of Iran's relations with Shiite communities in the region on regional policies. Such studies can facilitate a more profound comprehension of how Iran's sectarian strategies are reflected in Türkiye-Iran relations and how Türkiye pursues a balancing policy against these strategies. Furthermore, alternative trade and energy strategies should be developed for Türkiye to manage its economic relations with Iran sustainably. In particular, there is a need for studies to be conducted on the impact of US sanctions on Iran on Türkiye and on new trade strategies that Türkiye can develop in the face of these sanctions. In this context, alternative methods such as trade in local currency and joint projects with third countries should be explored to sustain Türkiye's trade relations with Iran.

A more robust programme of interdisciplinary studies on Iran's social and cultural structure has the potential to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of Iran by Türkiye. Such research, which examines Iran's internal social structure through issues such as women's rights, youth politics, and cultural transformation, could offer Türkiye a more comprehensive knowledge of Iran's internal dynamics. Furthermore, it could contribute to the development of strategic recommendations on the use of cultural diplomacy in Türkiye's relations with Iran.

The development of international academic collaborations in Iranian studies in Türkiye is recommended as a means of enhancing the quality of research on Iran. Collaborations with universities, research institutes and international think-tank organisations in Iran have the potential to address issues of data access and enable researchers in Türkiye to conduct more reliable analyses on Iran.

Theory, interdisciplinary research, and improvements in data access in Iranian studies in Türkiye will improve the quality of studies in this field and contribute to a broader perspective

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and multidimensional analysis of Iran in Türkiye. In line with these suggestions, new contributions can be made to the academic literature on Türkiye-Iran relations, and the relations between the two countries can be addressed more comprehensively.

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